



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide
LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

WHAT DID WE FORGET AND WHY? THE CONSEQUENCES OF RAPID BOARD TURNOVER

Posted on August 24, 2023

Most nonprofit independent and international school boards suffer from the loss of institutional memory due to the turnover of board members. Board turnover usually results from these factors:

1. Failure to make clear to board members that service to the school is critical and rapid board turnover is dangerous to school stability
2. Failure to persuade active and strong board members to continue their service
3. Term limits that encourage a board composed of current parents only, as wise board members who no longer have children in the school are asked to leave
4. Term limits that are too short.

This Consultant recently preceded a board governance workshop by asking the board members the following questions:

Who were the prior two board chairs?

What is the name of the head of school's partner?

What are the names of the head's children and what grades are they in at the school?

Unfortunately, most did not know the answers to these questions. They were all relatively new board members. But how would the head of school feel?

There is an absolute correlation between board health and school health and between board and chair turnover and head turnover. It takes up to 5 years to cement in the minds of stakeholders a head's ability to lead with credibility. When head tenure is only 3 to 7 years, heads do not leave legacies, but instead leave power vacuums that board members, teachers, parents, and alumni fill.

With frequent head turnover, there is little consistency of programs and discipline and little continuity of systems. When a school's mission keeps being reframed with the arrival of a new head, faculty, being unsure of which version of the mission it should follow, tend to form their own interpretation of the mission. Often lower enrollment and higher staff attrition occur, and fundraising suffers as well.



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide
LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

How Do Schools Build Greater Institutional Memory on the Board?

1. Have in place a strong functioning Committee on Trustees/Nominating/Governance Committee that undertakes the 8 key functions we have outlined before (see our articles at www.JLittleford.com).
2. Consider eliminating term limits or extending the length of terms IF substantive annual board evaluation exists.
3. Consider offering a very few board members the status of emeritus trustee. They would not be voting members, but they can attend board meetings and participate in conversations.
4. Consider allowing officers to “time out” of their term while serving as officers.
5. Consider having an advisory board that meets twice a year.

What Should Be the Composition of the Board?

1. At least 50% but no more than 80% of day school boards should be current parents.
2. Try to ensure that all day school boards have a healthy dose of alumni parents i.e., past parents or even grandparents on the board.
3. For boarding schools, the mix is usually 60/40 in terms of alumni /parents on the board

What Occupations Do You Need on the Board? None.

That seems strange but while we would all appreciate board members with a background in a range of occupations such as finance or the law, the most important trait in a board member is previous board experience and wisdom, wisdom, i.e., the ability to avoid overreacting to a crisis and to encourage reflection within the entire board.

A board made up of too many attorneys tends to be risk averse; a board made up of too many entrepreneurs tends to be too risk oriented; and board made up of too many financial types, tends to dig too often and too deeply into the numbers to the detriment of the big picture. We need all these professions but most of all a balance. We should be looking for diversity of race, ethnicity, occupation, personal style, and experience on other boards. Most important we should be looking for those who can see the big strategic picture and not become a board member who is always wearing the parent “hat.”

Many parent dominated boards believe that their role is to represent the current parents. That is not true. Their proper role is to represent and protect the school’s mission embodied in its past present and future.

The key to good and healthy governance is length of board service. This assumes, of course, that the board does its proper job, through the Committee of Trustees, of evaluating board members



Management Consulting to Independent
and International Schools Worldwide

LITTLEFORD & ASSOCIATES
—GLOBAL ISSUES | LOCAL SOLUTIONS—

Board Governance | Head Compensation | Mentoring Heads | Faculty Compensation & Evaluation | Fundraising | Leadership Transitions
Safe Harbors Compliance | Executive Searches | Financial Management | School Climate & Morale Issues | Marketing | Strategic Planning

thoroughly, especially when their terms are up for renewal. This Consultant has seen that some of the strongest schools in the world with the fewest crises, are those with a substantial number of long term, wise, thoughtful trustees/governors. They have seen it all before and know that no school can move forward if it reinvents the same crises repeatedly and keeps reacting in the same way because no one remembers how it managed the same challenges before.