

Effective School Governance

Principal Sabbatical Leave

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Acknowledgments

The Ministry of Education for approving my sabbatical and to the Hororata Primary School Board of Trustees for allowing me the time away from school

I would like to acknowledge those principals, Boards of Trustees and parents who contributed to this study, for their time, honesty and willingness to share their governance journey with me.

Executive Summary

The focus of this sabbatical was to discover what the school community's perception and expectations are of the Board of Trustees; to learn strategies to successfully induct new members to the Board and build a team ethos within the group; to establish networking links with other schools identified in the project and to undertake an honest appraisal of how Boards interact with each other and how effective meetings are, in terms of making a difference in the lives of the children in their schools... has this meeting added value to our school?

Key Inquiry Questions

- i. What do school communities perceive as being the key function of the Board of Trustees?
- ii. What criteria do parents use to select parent representatives for the Board of Trustees?
- iii. How do schools manage board transition and induction?
- iv. How are Governance and Management roles defined for different Boards of Trustees?
- v. How well are Boards of Trustees networking with other schools/boards for professional development or to solve common problems?

Rationale

Motivated by the induction of a relatively new and inexperienced Board of Trustees and feedback from the Education Review Office re Governance and Management roles within our school, I was prompted to investigate different school governance models. This investigation kindled a real interest in how Boards of Trustees are elected, function as a group, manage change and sustain strategic momentum.

My provisional research into governance in both the commercial and educational sectors found that both sectors place a great deal of emphasis of the concept of "team" as being an important ingredient in the development of a common vision, shared goals and a strong sense of strategic direction. I am interested in how school boards successfully function as a team and address the challenges of being thrown together as individuals, elected by parents. It is apparent that unlike a rugby team, where each individual is selected for their skills, boards are often thrown together as individuals and expected to form a team from what they are presented with... how do successful boards achieve this?

With the rugby team metaphor in mind, I am also interested in what criteria communities use to select parent representatives, what criteria boards use to delegate responsibility within the board and how different boards work to build team spirit and maintain a school's vision.

As a principal, I am also interested in the governance and management relationships between Principals and Boards, in particular how Principals work with Boards or conversely Boards with Principals whom for many of them, were not part of the Principal's appointment process.

Methodology

To successfully undertake this research project and answer the Key Inquiry Questions, I worked with parents, principals and Board of Trustees in a cohort of primary schools from across Canterbury.

Confined by time, the initial group representing three sectors of education i.e., early childhood, primary and secondary, was redefined to include only primary schools.

The composition of the cohort was structured to enable me to make comparisons between rural and urban schools (observing regional city boundaries), and comparisons of schools from different socio economic backgrounds (decile rating). The group included: three rural schools i.e., S.1^{D10}, S.2^{D8}, S.3^{D5}; two urban schools – S.4^{D2}, S.5^{D1}; one rural secondary school (Yrs 7-13)– S.6^{D8}.

The project involved me visiting each of the cohort schools, surveying parents, interviewing boards and observing monthly board meetings.

The School Governance Survey used to survey parents looked at the Board election process, motivation to vote or not to vote, and parent expectations of the board and principal. Ten surveys were distributed to parents in each school.

Another important element of this research project was the opportunity to research professional reading produced by NZEI, NZSTA, NZPF, the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office re effective governance. The purpose of this was to explore a shared understanding and expectations of Governance and Management roles and to reflect these expectations on what is actually happening in the boardroom.

Findings

70% (42) of all surveys distributed were returned and have been analysed. Although return rates vary between schools, all schools in the cohort are represented.

Q.1 Did your school have a Board of Trustee election?

- 12% of respondents indicated that their school did not have an election. This represents one school within the cohort.
- When questioned as to why their school did not hold an election, 60% of the respondents indicated that there was not enough candidates to hold an election, while the remaining 40% indicated that they did not know the reason for not holding an election.

Q.2 Did you vote in the recent Board of Trustees election?

- 62% of respondents who indicated that their school held an election, indicated that they had not voted in the election. Not knowing the candidates and "other" were significant reasons for not voting (re Table 1.)

Table 1. *Reasons for not voting in the election*

I did not know about the Board of Trustees elections	17%
I did not understand what the Board of Trustees elections were for	3%
I did not know any of the candidates standing for the Board of Trustees	33%
I did not think that my vote was important	7%
Other	40%

- Of those respondents selecting 'Other' as a response, five identified losing the forms as being a significant reason for not voting (out-of-sight, out-of-mind).
- 45% of respondents who indicated that they had voted in the school election, indicated that knowing the candidate personally was significant in the criteria used to select a candidate. 27% reported that they had heard comments about the candidate from other people, influencing their selection.
- No respondents reported considering how well a candidate would work with other people. (re Table 2.)
- Respondents from one school in the cohort reported that they had based their votes on the agenda of a particular candidate who was outspoken about a particular aspect of school management.

Table 2. *Criteria used to select which candidate to vote for*

I knew the candidate personally	45%
I had heard comments about the candidate from other people	27%
I read the candidates profile and made my decision based on what I read	18%
I considered how the candidate would work with other people	0%
I considered the candidates reputation in the community	9%
Other	0%

Q.3 What do you believe is the role of the Board of Trustees in your school?

A significant theme in response to this question was that respondents thought of the Board of Trustees as the decision makers and the guardians of the principal and school.

Notable Comments:

- They are the decision makers.
- I believe that it is wrong to expect "parents" to run a 100 staffed business.
- The Board of Trustees should have a say, but not the final say.
- They are the people behind the scene that give the go ahead on what can and cannot better the school.
- To ensure that the staff and principal of the school are carrying out their duties in the best possible way. To make sure children are learning, growing and are safe at the school. To make sure that decisions made are the right decisions

Q.4 What do you believe is the role of the Principal in your school?

A significant trend in responses to this question was that the principal's role was to manage the day-to-day running of the school, and act as the liaison between the stakeholders in the school.

Notable Comments:

- This person is employed to represent the MOE within our school and guide our school towards the best possible outcomes utilising his/her professional knowledge/skills.
- To ensure day to day management is taken care of and to ensure teachers/pupil/parent relations are functioning normally.
- He/she liaises with pupils, parents, teachers, board of trustees, staff, with everyone.
- To keep the school operating with the set guidelines of the Education Board and to unite a happy motivated staff within a good learning environment.

- To oversee the entire school, to make sure teachers are the right ones for their school, that the school is a safe place for children and that children are achieving at the level they should be. Principals should be a good role model in the school and community.
- The principal is the go-between for the school i.e., links the trustees & teachers; pupils & teachers.
- To support, encourage, enthuse and listen to staff. To provide guidance for all staff. To bring the school up to speed in all aspects of the running of the school; to guide staff in all new updates pertaining to classroom teaching.
- Oversee teaching staff and administrative staff. Leader within school. Dealing with day to day issues. Checking curriculum and performance of school and staff.

Supporting Information

- A majority of candidates elected onto Board of Trustees had a visible presence in the school and community and held multiple roles in other community groups before the election.
- Within the cohort of schools studied, only two schools actively recruited members to their Board by shoulder tapping and direct invitations to parents to attend Board meetings.
- Two schools reported that board members who intended to stand down from the Board of Trustees at the end of the previous tenure, returned due to the low number of candidates and concerns over board continuity. Low candidate turn-out for this round of Board Elections was a trend observed across all schools in the cohort.
- The recruitment of new Board members based on their skills and ability to complement the existing board structure was not widely evident, with the one exception of a low socio economic school who hand picked their board members due to a low turn-out of parent representatives.
- There was no significant difference observed between rural and urban schools, when focusing on the voter responses to survey questions, secondment of expertise to the Board or relationship between the Board and Principal.
- Board Chairpersons reported that they relied heavily upon the Principal to guide and induct new boards members. The Governance Management model was largely dictated by the principal via the induction Programme. The most common model observed in this cohort was that of the Principal holding a CEO like position communicating primarily with the Chairperson and secondarily with other members via the monthly meeting.
- Three of the six schools in the cohort reported attendance of some form of professional development e.g., conference, webinars, STA training or private agencies. One of the three schools reported the involvement of the principal in this professional development.
- Boards reported time and cost as being the most significant reasons for not participating in professional development.
- Most professional development undertaken by Boards focused on Board knowledge, specifically governance roles. There was little or no evidence of any deliberate team building development occurring at the timing of this project.
- At the time of research project, no boards reported having networked with other Boards for professional development or problem resolution. When questioned as to whether they would consider networking with other schools, one principal cited the competitive environment that exists between schools within his immediate network as being the most significant barrier. He did see merit in combining with Boards of Trustees beyond his immediate network.

Implications

The findings of the research project confirm the need and importance of succession planning. Board of Trustees need to plan well in advance for personnel change on the Board. The recruitment of potential board members needs to be undertaken early in each Board's tenure and not left until the last minute.

Boards need to better identify their strengths and weaknesses as a group/team and recruit or second members to complement/strengthen the team, reflecting the Board's strategic direction and attritional needs.

Normally the Board would second or appoint Board members to fill a vacancy. A great deal of thought and planning is invested in this to ensure the right person is appointed to the position. In the election process this is very much thrown to the wind and the appointment of the right person is largely by good luck, not necessarily good practice.

Boards need to be more involved in this process, better engage the parent community and publicly disclose what the board needs to continue functioning successfully, be it personality traits, skill or practical knowledge.

Benefits

Faced with the changing educational climate in regard to the introduction of the New Zealand Curriculum and National Standards and the significance of 2010 in terms of the Board of Trustees election cycle, this leave application is timely not only for the collection of data to support my research, but also as a professional development tool to guide the induction of new board members and as a measure to strengthen our existing governance model.

The benefits to governance and management practice are evident in the following strategies introduced as part of our induction process:

- As part of the initial induction of the Board, we defined strengths and weaknesses within our board and subsequently developed strategies and protocols for managing these, including the recruitment of expertise to address immediate concerns.
- We introduced a buddy system where all board members are encouraged to bring a buddy to each meeting. This is designed to increase the profile of the board in the eyes of the parent community and as a succession strategy to replace Board members who have indicated their intention of not returning after the next election.
- When reflecting on the relationship I have with my board, I found that there was little or no relational trust between myself and my new board members. As my new Board was not involved in my initial appointment, they had little or no knowledge of my experience, qualifications and areas of expertise. To establish this, I found it necessary to "re-apply" for the Principal's position. This was administered as part of the induction process.

Conclusion

This study confirmed my assumptions, that the Board election process is less about what a candidate brings to the Board table and more about a candidate's community profile.

Candidates are predominately voted for as individuals with little or no reference made to the ability of a candidate to work together as a member of a team. Voters largely based their opinions on personal experience with candidates and/or word of mouth.

As detailed in the Implications section, more effort needs to be invested by boards as part of their strategic planning to ensure continuity of governance.

The study confirmed a shared understanding of governance and management held by the education agencies, parents and boards. The general consensus is that Board of Trustees are or should be the decision makers in the school, responsible for setting and monitoring a school's operation and performance expectations. The principal's role is to manage the day-to-day running of the school, observing the Board's operation and performance expectations.

The study also confirmed my assumptions over relationships between the incumbent principals and new Board members. It is evident that for many Principals their job description is rewritten after every Board election. The principal's control of the Board induction process maintains some stability over governance and management expectations.

Although Boards seemed to be open to professional development as a concept to improve practice, there was a distinct resistance to networking with other boards to solve common problems. Concerns over the competitive environment created by enrolment zones, time and purpose were main issues for many Boards. Boards preferred to source targeted support focusing on specific needs rather than seeking advice and guidance from other Boards who have had similar experiences.

With the exception of one school in the cohort, Board meetings appeared very informal. Given that schools are comparative in size, staff and budget to a small to large business it intrigues me as to how casual boards are, both in how they conducted their meetings, correspond with each other and monitor school practice.

Boards appeared to place little or no importance on professional development around the concept of 'team building' within a Board. In defining team building I refer to the practice of analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of a group and up-skilling or seconding expertise to meet the needs of the group. More emphasis was given to the social engagement of board members e.g., drinks, social evening etc as team building.

It is evident, that boards best learn by doing, they are very much thrown in at the deep end and respond to needs as they arise. Effective boards are proactive and have good understanding of strengths and weakness within the group. They have a clear vision of the future and have sound succession planning in place. Boards focusing on the now appear to be more reactive in nature, address matters as they arise, have little buy-in to the school beyond their tenure on the board and rely more heavily upon the Principal.

This research has confirmed many of my assumptions around governance and management, and highlighted to me the role of the principal in setting a platform for successful governance. I believe that governance teams are predominantly built around what the principal brings to the table, rather than complementing the principal's skills and expertise. Furthermore I believe that in many instances the Principal is not part of a team, they are the team and that many Boards are mere spectators of the governance and management of their schools. The question boards need to ask of each other is ... do we add value to our school?

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