The Truest Believers: What Boards Get Right and Where They Go Wrong

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A few years ago, I sat in a boardroom at a boarding school I was visiting as part of an accreditation team. It was one of those sessions I had conducted many times: a structured conversation with trustees designed to assess governance health, board composition, and strategic alignment. I had learned to come in with reasonable expectations. Most of these conversations are fine. Occasionally they are very good.

This one was different.

When I asked the board how they viewed their role within the school, the chair leaned forward and spoke without hesitation. The board, he said, saw themselves as stewards of the school for the next generation, and as the true believers, charged with setting an example for everyone else in the community.

He described their work as threefold. First, to support the head of school, fully and without reservation, in the work of leading the institution. Second, to safeguard and strengthen the school's financial health: not passively, but actively, including and especially through their own philanthropic commitment. Third, to model the kind of engagement every community member should aspire to: giving generously, speaking positively, and resolving concerns internally rather than airing them publicly.

"If there's something we don't feel right about," one trustee added, "that's a conversation for this room. Not for the cocktail party or the ballgame."

I sat with that for a moment. Then I looked around the table and noticed something else, something that explained, I think, everything that had just been said.

There were almost no current parents on this board.

The Parent Problem

That observation deserves to sit uncomfortably for a moment, because I know how counterintuitive it sounds. Parents are passionate, invested, and deeply connected to a school's mission. They care. And yet, in nearly every governance challenge I have witnessed or helped navigate (as an Associate Head, as a Head of School, as a consultant, and as an accreditation reviewer), the tension has been most acute where current parents hold the most board seats.

This is not a character flaw. It is a structural one.

When a trustee's child is enrolled in the school, the parent hat is always within reach. NAIS board expert Jan Abernathy, reflecting on her own evolution from longtime trustee to school administrator, put the challenge plainly: she had weighed in on teachers' working conditions and admissions practices without truly understanding what it takes to run a school day to day. The expertise that earns a trustee their seat (in law, finance, real estate, communications) does not automatically translate to sound governance judgment when the subject is a school you are also a customer of.

What the boarding school board had (and what so many day school boards struggle to cultivate) was the power of perspective. Removed from the daily emotional orbit of campus life, those trustees could govern from a higher altitude. They were not asking about carpool logistics or AP course offerings. They were asking about mission, sustainability, and what kind of school they wanted to hand to the generation after their own.

What Happens When Boards Drift

I have seen what happens when that altitude drops.

Board members begin managing rather than governing. They call directly on administrators, bypassing the head, to raise concerns about a particular teacher, a specific policy, a scheduling decision. They share boardroom deliberations with parent friends over dinner, not out of malice, but because the boundary between their two roles has grown unclear even to themselves. They begin to see the head not as someone they have hired and are responsible for supporting, but as someone accountable to them individually.

What follows is predictable: the head feels undermined. The administration loses confidence in the firewall that governance is supposed to provide. The community senses a lack of unified direction, even if it cannot name exactly what it is sensing. And word spreads, quietly and persistently, in ways that erode institutional trust far more than any single decision ever could.

Abernathy captures the stakes well. When administrators walk into a boardroom, they are not seeing colleagues. They are seeing their boss's bosses. That power differential carries enormous responsibility. A trustee who buttonholes a senior administrator in the parking lot to express frustration about a policy is not engaging in helpful feedback. They are, however unintentionally, exercising institutional authority in a way that damages both the administrator and the school.

Strong boards understand this. They establish clear lanes, hold each other to them, and trust the head to manage what the head was hired to manage.

Word of Mouth Is a Governance Issue

Here is something that often gets left out of governance training: what board members say about the school outside the boardroom is not a communication issue. It is a governance issue.

A school's word of mouth is its brand. And no constituency's word carries more weight, or gets more scrutiny, than the board's.

Foundations sizing up a grant. Major donors deciding whether to step up. Families hovering at the edge of enrollment. Alumni considering whether to re-engage. All of them are watching. And when they hear a board member express doubt, frustration, or skepticism about the school's direction, even casually and well-meaningly, it registers in ways that no marketing campaign can undo.

The boarding school trustees I met with understood this viscerally. They knew that their words were not private opinions. They were institutional signals. And they had made a collective commitment to speak with one voice in public, while reserving honest disagreement for the room where it could actually produce something constructive.

This is not performance. It is discipline: the kind of discipline that defines organizations that endure.

"They were stewards, not managers. They were ambassadors, not critics. They were the school's most visible believers, and they acted like it."

When I reflect on the most resilient advancement programs I have been part of or observed, they share a common thread: a board that is relentlessly positive in public, ruthlessly honest in private, and clear about the difference between the two. Donors do not give to institutions that seem uncertain about themselves. They give to communities that project shared conviction.

The Head of School Relationship

If I had to identify the single greatest predictor of a healthy head of school tenure, it would not be the head's strategic vision or their fundraising ability or even their rapport with faculty. It would be the quality of their relationship with the board.

More specifically: whether the board is genuinely behind them.

This is not about blind deference. Boards must evaluate heads, hold them to goals, and sometimes make the difficult decision to part ways. That is governance. But there is a vast distance between that kind of principled accountability and the death-by-a-thousand-cuts dynamic that plays out in so many schools: where trustees relitigate decisions in hallways, where the board chair receives calls from parents who are also board members airing grievances about the head, where board meetings become venues for performing dissent rather than doing the work.

Abernathy describes the board chair role as one of the hardest in independent school life: fielding daily contact from the head on sensitive matters, managing the full range of board relationships, and holding the institution together across all of it. The last thing a chair needs is trustees who bypass protocol, share board business indiscreetly, or expect special treatment because of their position.

What the head needs, more than anything, is to know that the board is with them. Not uncritically, but genuinely, publicly, consistently.

The schools I have seen thrive are the ones where that relationship is treated as sacred. Where the board chair sets the tone from day one: *There will be no daylight between us in public. Whatever we work through, we work through together, and we present a united front.* That commitment protects the head. It protects the institution. And it frees everyone (board, administration, faculty, families) to do the work that actually matters.

What Good Looks Like

I want to return to that boarding school boardroom, because I think it deserves its proper place as a model, not a curiosity.

What made that board exceptional was not some unusual collection of talent or wealth. It was clarity. They had done the work of defining what they were there for, and they held each other to it with remarkable consistency.

Every school community takes its cues from those it considers the true believers. Parents watch what board members do at giving time. Faculty observe how trustees speak about the head at public events. Alumni notice whether board leadership appears confident or fractured. None of this is lost on anyone.

The greatest gift a board can give a school, more than any individual gift and more than any strategic initiative, is alignment. An aligned board that stays out of the weeds, supports the head, raises money, and speaks in one positive voice is the foundation on which everything else gets built.

I have seen what schools can accomplish when that foundation is solid. I have also seen the cost, in leadership turnover, enrollment instability, and donor fatigue, when it is not.

The line between engaged and overreaching is not always obvious. But the most effective trustees I have ever encountered all share one habit: they ask themselves, consistently, whether the move they are about to make is in service of the institution or of themselves. The honest answer to that question is usually enough.