

# THE ART OF BOARD VISITATION

*by Douglas Wilson, Christ Church*

---

An elementary mistake that is often made by boards of classical Christian schools has to do with the nature and the extent of their involvement in the day-to-day operations of the school. This mistake frequently comes in the form of two possibilities, comparable to a ditch on either side of the road. The mistakes are either total involvement, or almost complete abdication.

When board members of classical Christian schools go astray, it is either because they are, as the saying goes, down in the weeds, or they have removed themselves to such a distance that they scarcely know what is happening in the hallways of their school at all.

Schools at their founding are often dependent on high-energy founder types, who make the school a success with their time, money, ideas, dedication, vision, and zeal. Naturally, once the school is up and running, they continue to care about what is happening in the hallways and classrooms, and this sometimes translates into a board that treats the superintendent like he was their own personal sock puppet. They try to run the school, down to every detail, through their Diligent

Oversight.

Then sometime later, perhaps after a board meeting that went to 2 a.m. because of strong disagreements over the toilet paper roll rotation processes, the lights come on and the board members discover the loveliness of delegation. Find a man you trust, tell him what the vision of the school is, give him his executive limitations (the basic things he is not permitted to do), and evaluate him on that basis. The board meetings are now a monthly affair, and the board meetings mysteriously got a lot shorter.

Some readers may recognize that in this previous paragraph I have briefly outlined the Carver governance model. The board evaluates the superintendent, and they steer the school through the direction they give to that superintendent through their approved policy manual, after which they evaluate his job performance based on a reasonable interpretation of what they told him to do, and what they told him to avoid doing. The mission or vision of the school is outlined and described, and that is what they tell him to do. The executive

*Douglas Wilson is the minister of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. He is a founding board member of both Logos School and New Saint Andrews College, and serves as an instructor at Greyfriars Hall, a ministerial training program at Christ Church. He is the author of numerous books on classical Christian education, the family, and the Reformed faith.*

limitations are spelled out as the things he is not to do, whatever happens. Both educational institutions that I am associated with (Logos School and New St. Andrews College) operate under the Carver governance model.

The reason I bring this up is that both of these boards also conduct a school visitation in the course of their annual duties. These visitations include classroom observations, interviews with students, parents, and faculty. The question naturally arises—how do such visitations fit with a governance model that seeks to keep the boards, as boards, out of the weeds?

The answer has to do with what board members do with information they gather from various sources, and not at all with whether or not they gather such information. In most cases, board members gathering information is inescapable. The mark of an informed board member is how he puts that information in play.

Say that a board member is an experienced teacher himself, and during the course of one such classroom visitation, he notices that a first-year teacher is struggling. He sees that with his own eyes, and can tell that the back third of the class is not paying any attention at all. He also knows, from conversations with his own kid, a junior at the school, that the student opinion of that teacher is low, with some kids just being mean about it, and other kids wishing her well, but thinking that she is plainly not going to last.

If the board member goes in to the superintendent and demands that the teacher be fired, then that board member is way out of his lane. First, he is just one board member, not the entire board. As just one board member, he carries no authority whatever. Second, he is trying to act as though he does carry authority, even though the board did not commission him to do anything. Third, he is assuming that he has the full story when he is not there every day, while the superintendent is. It is not his job to have the complete picture, and it is the job of the superintendent to have a complete picture. He needs to understand his limitations.

So why bother having a board visitation at all then?

The answer lies in the fact that the extra eyes and ears of all the board members visiting can be extremely helpful—if what they see is processed properly. The authority of the board is *corporate*, and so when they speak it should be after they have consulted with one another. Let us say that after seven board members spent the day at the school, five of them noticed that classroom discipline had deteriorated from previous years. They discover this by comparing notes, and they make an observation that is based on more than just one snapshot from one board member. It is an observation that would be accurate across various classrooms. And so they include this item on the superintendent's evaluation, noting that classroom discipline seems to be getting a little raggedy, and that they would like him to address it.

The board doesn't address it at the school. The board doesn't do the job evaluations of the teacher who was being too lax. The board doesn't try to do an end run around the superintendent. They confer with one another, and if they agree, they tell the superintendent what they saw, and what they would like not to see next time. The board has one direct report, and that one person is the superintendent. The board talks to the school through the superintendent. The school talks to the board through the superintendent.

And if the board is going to lead and direct the school, it is crucial that the individual board members have the opportunity to learn a little bit about what they are talking about. If the board members all lived in another city, and were simply dependent on the reports that the superintendent gave them, it could be very difficult for them to know exactly how accurate the reports were. At the same time, a board member needs to realize that his own personal observations might also be limited and inaccurate. That is why he should filter any critical input through the board.

There is one other way that a board member can approach this. If an individual board member, without

acting like he has any authority at all, gives a responsible heads up to the superintendent (as they are friends), this could be mightily appreciated. He might say something like, “Hey, I think you’ve got a situation developing in the third grade. You might want to check in there.” “Thanks, man,” comes the reply. This is fine because the board member is just being a friend, and he left his board hat at home.

But when it comes to board visitations, I highly commend the practice, and strongly encourage boards to adopt it. At the same time, I would want to make sure the board understood fully how such visitations were supposed to fit in with their governance of the school.

