

Establishing a Board

by Rick Hall, Westminster Academy

Establishing a board for a classical and Christian school is the most important decision that the founding families will ever make. The board will set the vision and direction of the school for years to come. This does not mean that board members must be experts in classical and Christian education, but they must be committed to learn and to grow in their understanding. They must have a clear vision of the direction they intend to lead the school. Because they are attempting to impart a love of learning, they should be

lifelong learners themselves. The board will set the tone for the school and as such, board members must be committed individually and corporately to “repairing the ruins of our first parents.”

Determining who will serve on the board and how they will be chosen is of utmost importance. The school’s founding families should resolve this issue early in the process of establishing the school. Those involved will quickly learn that God brings different people with different gifts and backgrounds together. Some will have a better understanding of what a classical and Christian education is than others. Some will be better read than others. Some will have a better understanding of biblical worldview than others. Some will be more gifted in financial matters. The founders must recognize the different gifts that God has brought together and utilize them to the fullest without compromising on principle.

Hopefully, all of those chosen to serve on the board share the same philosophy of education and commitment to biblical principles.

As the founders begin discussing the formation of the school board, there are several questions that should be answered regarding who will serve and how they will be chosen. Will the members be

that the original board members faced in determining a statement of faith, the bylaws, policies, curricula, etc. Again, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but the founding families should consider these issues in the beginning with the understanding that these procedures will be harder to change

once the school has been established.

Another question that should be answered is whether or not women should serve on the board.

The Bible gives clear instruction on women in leadership in the

church but does not address school boards. However, there are certain principles to think about. Women see things that men have difficulty seeing. Many times, especially if they have homeschooled, women know what curricula are better than others and may have a better understanding of what makes a good teacher. At the same time, God made men and women different. Because women tend to be somewhat more emotional than men (a gift from God), the sometimes volatile nature of board meetings could affect them differently than men. Women’s feelings tend to get hurt more than men’s. At least one ACCS school has couples serve on its board with only one vote per family. Theoretically at least, husbands and wives discuss issues before board meetings and resolve them within the context of the family.

Once the board has been established, it will need to make decisions on a number of different items. One of the first decisions that a board should make is how

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it will make decisions. A board may require a simple majority, a supermajority, or a unanimous vote. Certain types of decisions may be determined by a simple or supermajority while others, such as a change in the statement of

and curriculum will require the most energy. The board should consider seeking input from other ACCS schools regarding both. However, the policies and curriculum of one school might not work as well for another. Most

to be reinforced and encouraged over and over again by the board throughout the school is outlined in Matthew 18:15–17. If a dispute or misunderstanding of any kind occurs between two parties, the grieved party must approach the other party with the goal of resolving whatever conflict or misunderstanding occurred. If the grievance cannot be resolved, the grieved party can appeal to the next highest authority with the final arbiter being the board. There will be times when the grieved party for whatever reason does not first approach the other party but rather comes to a board member and expresses his or her concern. The board member must be careful to refer the grieved party back to the person with whom the misunderstanding or dispute occurred. In many instances when the grieved party is a parent, the information comes from his child. In most cases, a child's understanding of the particular situation is tainted from his own point of view. Most disputes or misunderstandings can be cleared up if handled in this biblical fashion. The ACCS encourages each member school to have a policy regarding conflict resolution based upon the principles in Matthew 18:15–17.

A potential trouble spot for young and old schools is making decisions based on pragmatism and expediency versus principled action. Our American culture developed the religion of pragmatism and it has infiltrated the church. We know how to make things work. We have an entrepreneurial spirit that leads us to want to make things happen. We need to be careful that this entrepreneurial spirit does not cause us to violate principled action. Sometimes this might

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faith and bylaws and the hiring of a headmaster and faculty, may require a unanimous vote.

Another item that needs to be addressed early is establishing the school's statement of faith. At a minimum, the school's statement of faith should fall within Christian orthodoxy. Many classical Christian schools have included a Reformed soteriology and other Reformed distinctives in their statements of faith. Remember that the more narrow the statement of faith, the more difficult it will be to maintain as there will be opportunities to compromise along the way. However, a school's statement of faith should be set in stone and not easily changed. The board should require its members, the headmaster and all of the faculty to subscribe to and support the school's statement of faith.

Other items that need to be addressed before a school opens are bylaws, policy manuals, curriculum, etc. These all take a good bit of time, thought and effort and should not be taken lightly. Like the statement of faith, the bylaws should be rather permanent and not easily changed. Establishing the school's policies

schools, as issues arise, make changes and additions to their policies. At the same time, a school should constantly examine its curriculum to determine if what is being offered best accomplishes the goals and objectives of the school.

It is important to remember that the board should act and speak as a unit, not as a collection of individuals. After the board has made a decision, each board member should support that decision even if the decision did not go his or her way. If a particular board member was on the minority side of an issue, he should be careful not to undermine that decision by questioning the decision in public. At the same time, individual board members should be careful not to speak authoritatively on an issue if the board has not made a decision regarding that issue. In the early days of a school's life, there will be many questions asked of individual board members that the board has not addressed. The temptation is to answer the question rather than wait until the board has decided upon that issue. Board members should only speak for the board when they have delegated authority from the board.

Another principle that needs

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require the board to be patient and wait for God's leading. We need to make decisions based upon biblical principles rather than our preferences or what we know works. A school is not a democracy so we should not bow to opinion polls. We need to stand on the promises of God's Word and trust Him for the consequences.

If you were counseling a newly forming board as to what areas they should focus their attention on in the early years, what would your counsel to them be? Once the school has been operational for a few years, what should they focus their energies and attention on? As soon as the school has acquired the status of "well-established," what will be their danger spots? What safeguards should be built into each development plan that will keep each school from becoming "just another Christian school?"

This is a very multi-faceted series of questions, some of which demand more attention than I can adequately give here. But for the sake of the readers, I will try to address a couple of central points regarding school boards, new or experienced. Boards, being in the authoritative position they are, are like fathers in a family. No one else holds the same level of ability to do great good or great harm to the members of the family or the school. Whenever I have heard of serious problems in schools, classical or "just plain" Christian schools, I am not surprised anymore to hear that the board has stumbled in some manner. Rarely can a single teacher, or even an administrator, have the devastating impact on a school that a board can. I realize this all sounds very negative, but we need to start somewhere and I like to get the bad news

out of the way or at least know what the dangers are up front.

First and foremost, boards, (I am assuming a classical, Christian context in all this) must be agreed in writing as to the primary philosophy and purposes. That is the cement footing upon which everything is built. Far too many beginning schools, for the sake of numbers, try to wrap their philosophical arms around almost everybody that wants "in." Can you spell d-i-s-a-s-t-e-r? Better two or three people putting their hearts and heads together in unity than a dozen, highly diverse individuals, no matter what their individual strengths, banging away. So, once again, we need to believe that ideas have consequences. Boards need to agree on the ideas, very completely.

Secondly, and last for now, boards need to understand, and agree upon, their own nature and structure. Sounds boring, doesn't it? It stops being boring when it's ignored. Tempers flaring, people leaving the school in sin, parents wondering what will happen next—that is the alternative. Questions the board must ask itself and answer clearly (in writing) would include:

1. When does the board exercise its authority?

The board can exercise its authority only in an agenda-set meeting.

2. Do individual board members have authority outside of a board meeting?

The members have authority only insofar as the board has appointed them to a task.

3. Who is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school, in

most scenarios?

The board is ultimately responsible.

4. What qualifications should we have for board members?

Board members should meet biblical and practical qualification.

5. How are board members elected?

A popular vote has its shortcomings.

6. Should husbands and wives serve together on a board?

No, avoid this if possible—husbands are preferred. Whenever possible, male leadership is a good watchword.

7. How will board members demonstrate their understanding of and commitment to the school's philosophical base?

Reading is a must!

8. Which board members are indispensable to the future of the school?

No board members are indispensable, if it's planned well.

These are just some conversation starter questions. We didn't touch on the role of the board to the administrator or parents at large. But if school boards take the above seriously, there is hope that the school will not crash and burn in its second or third year, or worse . . . continue to exist but lapse into the coma called the "typical Christian school-itis."