



Principals and School Boards: Who Does What?

One of the strengths of our ACT education system is that parents, teachers and students participate in making decisions in a school through the school board. The board has a major role in the running of a school, but how does this affect the relation between principal and board?

Briefly, the board is responsible for deciding on school policies within the Department's guidelines. The principal is then responsible for implementing those policies, as well as for the day to day running of the school. The board can be thought of as the Board of Directors which is responsible to the shareholders of a company, with the principal as the Chief Executive Officer who makes things happen.

The board provides a formal mechanism for parents, staff and students to have their views taken into account when decisions are made. Equally important is the oversight or accountability function of the board, which checks that decisions were implemented in the way that the board decided. Although the principal attends meetings of the Parents and Citizens Association, it is important for parent representatives on the board to report back to their community and to raise any concerns with the board and principal.

The principal is one of the members of the school board, but is not eligible to be chairperson. It is usually the principal who informs the board of Departmental policies and priorities. As an employee of the Department of Education, the principal has ultimate legal responsibility for making sure that the school follows correct procedures laid down by the regulations. Provided that they have acted in good faith, board members are not subject to legal liability arising from board actions.

One of the board's functions is to determine the purposes for which funds made available to the school are to be expended. The board decides the school's educational priorities.

The board is responsible for the School Development Plan and the overall direction of the curriculum, subject to government priorities such as improved literacy and numeracy. It is then the job of the principal and teaching staff to prepare programs to meet board objectives. Board members do not usually become involved in this, unless they have expertise in a particular area. The principal is also required to report to the board on how the students as a group performed on system wide literacy tests.

It is the principal (and not the board) who plays a major part in appointment, transfer and promotion of staff. However, the board decides some of the selection criteria for the principal's position. The board chair speaks informally to applicants, and is a member of the selection panel that chooses a new principal.

It can be seen that in practice there are a number of requirements that affect the relation between principal and board in the running of a school, even if the relation is not spelt out formally. Wisely, the regulations emphasise transparency and accountability. In most schools the shared role works well because there is openness and trust, and board and principal have confidence in each other. The board chair and principal speak regularly and informally about matters affecting the school, and work together to address community concerns.

Occasionally the relationship between principal and board breaks down. Misunderstandings and lack of communication usually occur when proper procedures for openness and accountability have not been followed. Problems can arise if board members with strong personal views seek to unduly influence the day to day running of a school, or conversely if a principal regards the board as just a "rubber stamp" for his or her decisions.

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