

Information Sheet No.32

Principals and Boards: Who does what?

One of the strengths of the ACT education system is that parents, teachers and students participate in school decision-making through the school board. 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 board accountability which ensures, through checking, that decisions were implemented in the way that the board determined.

The board is responsible for deciding on school policies within the Department's guidelines while the principal is responsible for implementing those policies, as well as for the day to day running of the school.

The principal acts as the board executive officer following up matters and being responsible for the administrative functions of the board. The principal informs the board of Departmental policies and priorities. The principal has ultimate legal responsibility for making sure that the school follows the procedures laid down by Departmental regulations. Provided that they have acted in good faith, board members are not subject to legal liability arising from board actions.

Another board function is to determine the purposes for which school funds are to be expended based on the school's educational priorities. The principal or finance committee prepares an annual budget in line with those priorities; the previous year's budget is usually the starting point. The budget must be put to the board for approval, and made available to the school community. At each meeting the board considers a finance report which lists income and expenditure. Any amendment to the budget must be submitted for approval. The principal signs the school's half yearly financial statements to certify that they are correct while the board chair signs a statement that he or she has seen them.

The board is responsible for the School Development Plan and the overall direction of the curriculum, subject to departmental priorities such as improved literacy and numeracy. The principal and teaching staff then need to prepare programs to meet the board's objectives. Each year the board must present an annual report to the Department and the school community. Usually, the principal and board chair collect information and compile the report on behalf of the board.

It is the principal (and not the board) who plays a major part in appointment, transfer and promotion of staff. However, the board decides 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 is important to remember that the board is not just a "rubber stamp" when it comes to decision-making. The board chair and principal should speak regularly and informally about matters affecting the school and work together to address community concerns. In most schools, the shared role works well because there is openness and trust, and board members and the principal have confidence in each other. ★