



THE Trustee's LETTER

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Trustees as the Leading Learners

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Schools often refer to faculty as their community's leading learners. What if we extended that concept to trustees? And what if board meetings allowed trustees to experience the sort of lively classrooms we want throughout our schools? At St. John's Episcopal School, posing such questions led us to re-create how our board operates. Simultaneously, we have transitioned from traditional strategic planning to more strategic thinking.

Before this shift, we had a solid board. We suffered none of the horror stories that make for case studies, trustees were earnest stewards of the school's mission and resources, committees met regularly and reported out, we had a matrix identifying strong candidates for service, and meetings were orderly and efficient. Since the board and school were humming along, we could have been content. Yet despite progress, we felt a bit stuck. That sense discomfited a board dedicated to steady improvement for the school and itself.

To emphasize not only a vision for modern education, but also better practices in board work, we envisioned how to align the two realms. To shift board practices, we drew from three primary sources: the work of governance expert Cathy Trower, whom we heard at an Independent Schools Association of the Southwest workshop; Bob's experiences as a researcher and entrepreneur with a heavy preference for strategic, generative thinking; and Mark's pedagogical expertise and creativity.

Early on we guided the board through a collaborative ideal trustee exercise, which emphasized the desired mindset. We added various workshop-style activities into our meetings. We revamped the agenda so it includes an apropos quotation, an affirmation by a trustee, a consent agenda, clear objectives, and essential questions. Busy work happens at the end so we tackle knottier items when people are fresh.

The atmosphere is more active, much like an ideal modern classroom. Trustees often sit in Node chairs and move around into changing groups, with posters and Post-it notes lining the walls. We've even played strategic games related to school issues. Of course, sometimes more traditional presentations or discussions happen when necessary. The point is that while we maintain common elements in every meeting, each may vary quite a bit from the last, depending on the purpose.

The evolution has made a difference beyond the increased energy. The varied activities and approaches help some trustees, depending on their perspectives and personalities, feel they contribute more. Committees and task forces feel more empowered because everyone has entrusted them to do the heavy lifting in their assigned areas. Those task forces usually are created in response to an idea from the more generative work.

Of course, such an approach demands trustees prepare well for meetings by carefully reviewing their packets, thinking deeply about important issues, and engaging fully. And our meetings often last longer than they had (but no one has complained).

It's also paid off in concrete ways. The depth and breadth of the ongoing conversation reminds the board constantly—in ways subtle and overt—of our mission, core beliefs, vision, and purpose. That makes us more resolute. This then makes us more nimble and responsive. In one example, after considering classroom redesign as essential to modern education, the board re-allocated funds to purchase excellent new furniture.

Strengthened clarity on our Episcopal identity helped us negotiate a new governance structure with our founding church because we could make certain commitments. Currently we are in the early stages of a marketing campaign, in which we're using three companies for different parts of the work. When we engaged the consulting firm, we'd already clarified a great deal of brand identity and direction through all our generative work. The firm could thus move to positioning language rather quickly.

From there we jumped quickly into a logo refresh with another group and website design with another. The coherence that quickly emerged is rooted in the board's transformational work. We're enjoying the same experience as we reconsider our existing master plan, done six years ago, and prepare for a potential capital campaign.

By gaining some sense of what it's like to be a student at St. John's, our trustees developed an even greater appreciation for what happens here. It also deepens the communal sense of responsibility for the experience of each child. Perhaps more than anything, this transformation has heightened our sense of possibility—and isn't that really what meaningful education should be about?