

Board Retreat Template

By Barbara Aaron Rosston

Purpose of a Board Retreat - Most boards hold a retreat at the beginning of the school year, although some choose to schedule one during the middle or end of the year. Reasons to have a board retreat include:

1. To remind board members of their roles and responsibilities
2. To take time to delve deeply into one issue from the school's strategic plan or to create goals around the many issues identified in the strategic plan
3. To create a bond and constructive working relationship between board members

Questions to Consider When Planning a Retreat

1. Should you have a facilitator? You don't always need one. Facilitators free up all trustees and any staff present to fully participate in the day. You can certainly hire someone for part of the retreat. An outside perspective, or someone to deliver the difficult messages (often around fundraising), is especially useful.
2. Where to have your retreat? Often, board chairs believe having an off-site retreat will provide the space necessary to truly concentrate on the material at hand. For some boards, this is the right solution, however, there are extra costs involved to hold a meeting off-site. For most, having the board retreat at the school, where you can offer tours during downtimes, can highlight some of the issues you may be discussing. Board members do not generally work at the

school, so giving them the opportunity to explore the site more fully can be informative.

3. Half day, full day or multiple day? Timing is critical! Think in advance how much time you need to cover what you'd like to accomplish. Remember that board members have busy lives; it may be difficult to get everyone's participation if the retreat is too long (i.e. multiple days). Set clear expectations at the beginning of the year for participation in board retreats and regular board meetings to maximize their effectiveness. Sometimes, two half day retreats at different times of the year can be as effective as one, day-long retreat. In terms of length, 3-6 hours is ideal on a day when nothing else is scheduled (preferably not on a workday).
4. Should there be time to socialize? YES! For boards to do their best work, it is important members have a chance to get to know one another. Whether you offer breakfast/coffee before the retreat begins, allow time for an unstructured lunch period, or have some sort of reception after the board retreat, this is often amongst the most valuable periods of the day.

Some Final Thoughts...

1. Collaborate with the Head of School – Make sure to carve out adequate time to plan the retreat with your Head of School. There should be a shared understanding of the purpose of the retreat, along with the goals and schedule.
2. Scheduling – Maximize your school site! Are there school events, such as a play, concert, or fair that board members could attend as part of the retreat?
3. Alignment – The purpose of the retreat should closely align to the school's vision and mission, as well as the strategic goals.

4. Norms – Be clear about the norms for the retreat, as well as subsequent board meetings. This is critical to supporting a positive board culture!

Sample Retreat Agenda

1. Welcome by Board Chair and Head of School

Set expectations/norms for the day, which may include topics to be covered, goals of the day, use of electronics during the sessions, and engagement of entire board in discussions.

2. Introductions and Ice Breakers

Introductions are particularly important, especially if you have new board members. Give people an opportunity to share why they joined the board or what they hope to contribute during their board service, and what will make the retreat a success.

3. Roles and Responsibilities of Independent School Boards

This review should happen every year. It's a chance to remind board members of their individual and collective responsibilities —NAIS has a good list. This is also a good time to engage in board education. This can include a case study for board members to analyze and discuss. Remember, every part of the agenda should be driven by the strategic plan and aligned to the vision and mission.

4. Big Picture Topics

There are multiple “big picture” issues to tackle, and they depend on your specific school context and what is important at the moment. Most often these can include, but are not limited to:

- *Strategic Planning* - work on creating your plan, re-examine your plan, or work on one aspect of your plan
- *Fund Raising* — educate your board on a capital campaign and their participation, create a culture of philanthropy, review basic fundraising
- *Master Planning* — Examine your site, consider changes needed during the next 3-5-10 years. Include a tour of the school with your trustees. This is the time to thoughtfully plan for the next decade. Do we grow? Relocate? Redesign space?
- *Finances*: Finance 101—educate your board regarding school finances, issues pertaining to financial sustainability (tuition, attracting great faculty, HR review, etc.) Have the school’s finance officer present, if possible.
- *Head of School Transition*—If you know a transition is on the horizon, take time to figure out what you want in a new head, what changes your school may need to make to attract the best candidate, and what the parameters of your search will be. NAIS has good resources, including the Board Search Handbook.

An Important Note About Big Picture Topics: These topics are best discussed in ways that are interactive. For example, if you choose to have an expert come and talk about an issue, or if you have a staff member or board member present, make sure the follow-up discussion includes *all* board members. Having break-out groups where everyone’s voice can be heard is often a good way to accomplish this. If you have multiple break-out sessions within a board retreat, make sure to change up the groups so that board members interact with

different people each time. This is a great way to promote positive board culture as well.

5. Board Committee Goals for the Year (optional)

Some boards use part of their retreat for committees to meet and discuss their board goals for the year (based on the school's strategic plan). The committee chairs then share their goals with the whole board. This can be effective for boards whose members live far apart or who have not had a chance to meet.

6. Board Meeting (optional)

For some boards, it is necessary to conduct business for a short portion of the retreat. While the hope is that the retreat stands alone, this may not always be possible. Try to keep the board business short (have a set time limit), and only have verbal reports (rather than written reports) on those topics that demand immediate discussion or a vote.

7. Wrap up

It is as important for the Board Chair to have a wrap up to the day as it is to have the welcome portion. This is the opportunity for the board chair to summarize what has been accomplished, and what follow up items will need to be addressed by committees and the board as whole. It is also a good idea to have a brief retreat evaluation, such as an "exit ticket" for members to complete before adjournment.

Barbara Aaron Rosston is a strategic consultant for independent schools and nonprofit organizations. She has spent more than 20 years as a trustee of independent schools, including serving as board chair at Keys School and Castilleja School in Palo Alto, CA. She was instrumental in leading both schools through strategic planning processes and campus expansions. She serves on a variety of nonprofit boards including Challenge Success and the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank. She previously worked as an attorney and a linguist for the U.S. government. She is a graduate of Vassar College and the University of San Francisco School of Law.