

Governing in and through a Pandemic

By Cathy A. Trower and Peter D. Eckel

The pandemic is wreaking havoc in our professional and personal lives as well as in boardrooms as schools find themselves facing a maelstrom of issues. Enrollment and financial uncertainty; systemic racism and social injustice; generational divisions; insufficient technology and online learning; and individual and institutional safety and wellbeing are just a sampling of the challenges facing schools and their boards. Many boards and school leaders were ill-equipped to deal with this list before the pandemic—let alone now when they must meet and govern virtually.

Takeaways

- Governance that adds value matters more than ever. School leaders are facing a plethora of issues for which there are no easy or right answers, in a chaotic environment, against a backdrop of political and social unrest, where the stakes have never been higher.
- Good governance requires boards to recognize and name the key challenges they face as partners in leadership with the head, including striking a balance between immediate and the future demands and fiduciary oversight and generative insight; the force of entrenched governance habits; virtual rather than face-to-face meetings; overwhelming data on multiple operational issues (but a paucity of reliable information upon which to draw about student, faculty, and staff health and safety); asynchronous rhythms and fluid landscape; worries about how best to engage with and help the head; and numerous individual stressors amongst trustees.
- Even as the odds seem insurmountable, the demands of governing in and through a pandemic present opportunities for boards to learn, grow, and govern better including appreciating that these times place a premium on how boards think and the questions they ask (that will ultimately lead to better decisions) and to find, frame and prioritize what matters most. Boards should rethink their meetings and committee work to focus on today's priorities even as they keep an eye on the future. By prepping differently, having different conversations with the head, and candidly naming blindspots, boards will govern better now and into the future and help their school emerge from the pandemic better and stronger.

Challenges Governing

Boards find themselves facing a host of challenges as they work to fulfill their fiduciary roles in the pandemic.

Finding a Balanced Focus. Many boards are unsure of how to strike the right balance between the urgent issues of the day and the important ones for tomorrow. The demands of potential enrollment shortfalls, fiscal uncertainty, campus reopening plans, risk and its mitigation, and scenario after scenario planning require significant board time and energy. Even in the best of times boards must work hard to keep an eye on the future while addressing current, demanding problems. It is the board's job to think

about and attend to the long-term—especially important given the attention campus leaders must give to the present. Boards must keep a dual focus and ensure that today's decisions lead to a healthy future not just solve an immediate problem.

A second part of finding the right balance is addressing operational issues with generative ones. The pressures on schools, and thus on boards, have the propensity to elevate the urgent over the important. Many issues that need to be addressed in the boardroom today have an operational framing but really are about the school's values, its commitments, and what it can and should be. Deciding enrollment and financial aid strategies or discussing the role of athletics, for example, are actually value-laden discussions. The risk is that the pressure to act robs issues of their long-term salience. Boards are well served by seeing the opportunities of today's pressures to discuss the core principles that will serve the school well in the long run.

Being Constrained by Habits. Much of what boards do is ritualized and routinized and thus becomes habitual. In worse-case scenarios the board governs on auto pilot. What happens in the boardroom, in many instances, is simply too rote and thus not responsive to the school's needs and changing circumstances. In normal times, boards benefit from breaking routines. The pandemic has caused many boards to do just that by holding virtual meetings. However, for some, having virtual meetings only gives the illusion of doing things differently. They simply move the typical six-hour meeting to video conference!

Furthermore, the pandemic is amplifying some of the bad habits that some boards already had. These boards have meeting agendas that don't focus on meaningful issues; individual trustees who dominate discussions (often without really saying much); school heads who don't share needed information or provide opportunities for actual governing; or powerful executive committees that decide in private without engaging the full board. Although the saying is that necessity is the mother of invention, in times of stress, individuals revert to old familiar patterns of acting and deciding rather than embarking on something new and untested. Board culture reinforces how things are done. For boards that have bad habits those simply perpetuate.

Meeting Virtually. While it is possible to have effective virtual board meetings, the reality is that such meetings are often not as effective (or nearly as satisfying) as face-to-face meetings. There is limited opportunity for deep discussion and exploration; technological delays and relays may negatively impact trust and candid exchange; individuals may be especially self-conscious of speaking too much (although not necessarily a bad thing for some loquacious trustees); there are few social cues to ensure comprehension across the group; and for large boards there are simply too many tiny boxes on the screen to make sufficient eye contact. Furthermore, all that important sensemaking that went on in the hallways or during happy hour and dinner is lost. In ambiguous and uncertain times, the ability to make shared sense and find common understanding is especially important. Furthermore, newcomers to the board have not yet become enculturated members of the family and cannot do that easily virtually. This can affect how cohesive and collegial the board is and, thereby, impact how well the board governs.

Being Overwhelmed by Detail. Given the complexities of responding to the pandemic, many boards are finding themselves immersed in the details of campus operations, policies, and procedures. The particulars of reopening that have worked their way into board discussions can be overwhelming to trustees who don't work in the independent school world. Boards have been forced to become familiar with the complexities and nuances of facility air circulation exchange rates, campus health center

capacities, and student enrollment behaviors, to name a few. The details are making some trustees feel like they are clearly outside of their depths of knowledge and comfort. In some cases, trustees withdraw from discussions believing they have little to add. In other instances, the details are seen as invitations to micromanage and second-guess the hard work and expertise of administrators and faculty.

Working Outside Traditional Rhythms. The pandemic is fluid with many factors beyond the control of anyone, forcing management to make a variety of plans and adapt to outside factors in real time, and often in double time. The context is constantly changing, and information is in flux. Because governance for most independent school boards traditionally has been conducted on a set schedule—three or four times a year—and conducted in face-to-face meetings often in the same physical place, pandemic-driven flux means that governance needs to happen with a different rhythm. The fluidity of schedules, the type of decisions and the pace of those decisions, and the amount of detail to comprehend means that board members cannot prepare for meetings the same way. This demands different communication with staff about necessary, timely information to ensure neither too little nor too much (both are unhelpful for different reasons) or too early or too late, and a commitment by board members not to put off preparing until the night before (or morning of) the board meeting. In fact, preparing for board work may be a constant task rather than an episodic one. Governing well is now *ad hoc* and dynamic in ways it hasn't been, and without the typical structures of time and calendar. The board may be called upon to pitch in and step up quickly and sometimes without much notice when the head or chair calls.

Engaging with the Head. To oversimplify, there are three head leadership scenarios playing out across campuses. The first is that the head has a firm handle on the pandemic and school responses (although the work is difficult and time-consuming). The board says, “the head’s got this,” and steps back to watch things unfold. The second situation is at the other end of the continuum, in which the head, according to the board, “clearly doesn’t have this,” and feels that the head and the school are floundering. Thus, the board jumps in. A third scenarios is one in which the head is barely hanging on—making progress, but with challenges and substantial risk of backsliding—leaving the board wary and unsure. The challenges of the first occur if the board becomes too hands off and the head would benefit from the advice and counsel of trustees. The second runs the risk of ineffective leadership in which the board actively engages, raising seemingly constant questions of when and how and reaching out to various staff members other than the head, or to each other. The third scenario may be the most challenging for the board given the fluidity of the situation. What is the board to do? And when? Regardless of scenario, the pandemic is asking boards to engage differently with their heads.

Working under Individual Duress. Finally, it is important to remember that *everyone* is stressed by the pandemic on a personal as well as professional level, and that means trustees, too. Governance takes more and not less time during a pandemic. More time, more attention, more collaboration, more flexibility, more knowledge, and more preparation. And we are asking trustees to do this when they are facing their own stressful situations as their organizations are under threat, dealing with similar uncertainties and ambiguous situations. Because of their own stressors—personal health concerns, worries about family members (especially elderly parents and out-of-school children and grandchildren), and job pressures—trustees might be less focused on campus issues or have too little time to fully engage. Or, in the case especially of parent trustees, they may be overly involved and overly invested in particular decisions and lacking objectivity.

Opportunities to Do Better and Different

The challenges of the pandemic may provide opportunities to evolve governance in ways beneficial for the long run. We seek to offer some guidance that isn't simply pandemic specific but might also serve boards and their schools once through the crisis.

Get the Mind-Set Right and Appreciate Complexity. The pandemic is forcing trustees to approach their work differently. Central to doing things different is thinking about them differently. For example, boards will be well served to give up insisting on certainty and thinking they can dictate most outcomes. Trustees, like most everyone else, prefer certainty over uncertainty, clarity over ambiguity, answers over questions, and solutions over problems; and many prefer decision-making over sensemaking. Complex environments mean that cause and effect is unknown and there rarely are right answers. If the pandemic has taught us anything it's that many unknown unknowns (and in this case, many unknowables) exist. Complexity demands different ways of thinking and operating that may be foreign to some boards less poised to operate in this environment because of routines, habits, and boardroom cultures reflective of the way things used to be, not how things are now. Some trustees will be nostalgic and stuck in old routines; some will be seeking overly simplistic answers to complex questions; and some will be resistant to the demands of governing in this complex environment. Boards must be able to open up discussions, generate ideas, and allow the administration to lean into emergent practices (rather than rely on best practices of the past).

Appreciating the complexity of the day may allow boards to ask novel questions and explore long-held assumptions in ways they didn't before. It can unlock new curiosities that create fresh thinking and lead to novel solutions. The conversations needed now are far more generative than fiduciary. Instead of encouraging the board to plunge head-first into operational solutions to the issues education is facing now, open up the dialogue to encompass core values the school wants to preserve (e.g., inclusive excellence; equity; community); the criteria by which the board can decide an issue (e.g., risk; speed/ease of implementation; cost; ROI); and the trade-offs demanded (e.g., tradition and history v. change and the future; financial health v. student/faculty/staff health; shared governance v. fast decisions; short-term gain vs. long-term impact). In short, we realize that decisions need to be made, but spend more time sensemaking first.

Focus on Priorities. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's about the need to focus on top priorities. This should be a wake-up call for boards to be more intentional about the focus of their work. Set goals for each meeting with specific outcomes and keep the agenda tightly tied to those goals. Being intentional about what the board needs to address and why is essential right now. The board should not limit its focus only to the problems at hand. Elsewhere, we suggest that boards can benefit by thinking of their work spanning three categories: oversight, problem-solving, and strategy (see Eckel & Trower <https://styluspub.presswarehouse.com/browse/book/9781620368398/Practical-Wisdom>). The pandemic has likely pushed most board work into the problem-solving category; however, boards should be sure to also include some discussion of the other two categories. How well is the school doing and what evidence supports that assessment? What does the future possibly hold and how can we best position the school for that future? What do we want to be out in front of and what should we wait and see about? What is within our control and how can we leverage those things? As an example, the board might charge a small working group to look at acquiring real property or making needed campus improvements given the low cost of credit. This is a future-focused acquisition and one that while possibly challenging to think about right now might pay off handsomely in the future.

Rethink Meeting Time and Structure. Why do boards meet on a calendar-driven and not issue-driven cycle? One answer is that humans like routines and there is a reassuring ritual with board work (for both trustees and management). Boards (and particularly board committees) might be better served to be topic-driven with some regularly scheduled meetings to discuss those items on a fixed schedule, such as budgets or audit reports. They can supplement with a more flexible approach as board and school leadership mandate. While many bemoan Zoom, Webex, and other virtual platforms and their shortcomings, they do offer some additional opportunities that might be useful. The polling function is one element. Polls can be used not only for voting but also to frame and seed discussions. Short-answer questions, word clouds, and other tools are either built into these programs or supplemental to them (Mentimeter and Poll Everywhere are examples.). Finally, a reminder about consent agendas as ways to shorten and streamline board meetings and ensure focus on what matters most rather than minutiae.

Recast Committee Work. Many, but not all boards, use their committees well. Committees are a way to add depth to board work, extend capacity, and limit burdens on volunteer trustees (because work is delegated to a few and committees may have non-trustee members). Consider breaking large committees into smaller more nimble task forces to go deeper on specific issues within the committee's purview. For example, break committees into two—one focused on immediate challenges and concerns and the other on long-term implications and actions. Another idea is to have subcommittees working on different issues within their purview. For example, a faculty affairs committee might examine three things: (1) the effect of COVID on faculty work, (2) what faculty are learning about student outcomes in a remote environment, and (3) how the pandemic is impacting the research and tenure files of junior faculty. The student life committee might examine: (1) ways to help students practice, cope with, and enforce social distancing; and (2) the effect of new practices on various student groups (e.g., students of color, international students). Boards may create new task forces as well. For instance, a board might create a Re-opening Campus Risk Working Group to examine minimizing the risks associated with a safe return to campus. If they didn't before, ensure that these task forces and working groups include faculty and outside experts when helpful.

Prep Differently. Given the changed pace of work, depth, and complexities of the issues, and the salience of their decisions, boards need to ensure that their members are well prepared. The stakes are too high to ignore board portal content or for trustees to be unfamiliar with necessary data. Time is too precious to be spent listening to long reports. Board leaders need to secure a commitment from individual members to do their homework. Agendas can be created not with topics, but with questions to consider before people enter the (virtual) board room. The polling and answering questionnaires can occur before meetings to get the pulse of the board so that meeting time can be spent unpacking the responses and making decisions.

Have Different Conversations with the Head. The pandemic is difficult for all, and it is particularly challenging for heads. They know where the buck stops. They feel responsible for the short- and long-term success of their schools. The pandemic is putting tremendous pressure on heads to get things right and to do this in an environment in which the information is fleeting and the mileposts changing. They are putting novel demands on their senior teams, asking them also to do things differently. And heads need to lead in the context of shared governance, attending to faculty who understand what is at stake

and the complexities of the situation as well as those who don't. Many heads are used to being out and about, engaging a wide range of stakeholders. They, like most others, are confined to their homes and, if able, their offices. A once-expansive world is reduced to a Zoom screen. A job widely understood to be lonely is being carried out these days in even more isolation. So, it is important that trustees recognize that they need to have different types of conversations with the head and to focus on what the head *most* needs at each meeting (and the next one, too). These needs are definitely institutionally focused, but there are personal dimensions to leading well in the pandemic. To be most effective, set specific goals for each virtual meeting and listen carefully to what the head is asking for and saying, and listen for what the head isn't saying. Be mindful of the head's time and attention. And watch for signs of stress and burnout. The pandemic is both a series of sprints (of varying lengths) without time to rest in between and a marathon.

Call Out Blind Spots. A particular role the board can play is helping call attention to potential head and leadership blind spots. Since no one has a crystal ball, a good role for the boards is to ask the questions that help heads envision what they might not otherwise see with so many decisions on their plate. Although in the not so distant past, many heads had the luxury of being externally focused (on fundraising and relationship-building off campus), boards should recognize that heads now are deeply immersed in day-to-day operations. One result is that they may "lose sight of the forest for the trees" and may be less aware of biases, patterns, and blind spots. Furthermore, leaders have the tendency to create and adopt certain language in times of ambiguity and uncertainty that is helpful to them. The language becomes a relied upon shorthand for insiders but has the potential to be misinterpreted by stakeholders. Trustees can ask about interpretations and help recast potentially problematic language (program revitalization versus program review). Finally, trustees also bring to board work experience and understanding from different sectors and industries and different places of work. Simply being a stranger in a strange land can lead to insights and questions that add clarity, surface assumptions, challenging outdated or habitual norms and ways of thinking, and lead to better outcomes.

Conclusion

The pandemic is creating more than the traditional challenges facing schools and boards. It is asking boards and school leaders to govern differently. As we've seen repeatedly, tested solutions don't often exist in times like these, and the questions are often unclear too. Each school and each board is feeling out the way forward. The pandemic is asking everyone to be flexible, including boards. Thus, it is essential for the head and the board to adopt a learner's mindset.

Essential to this mind-set is the capacity to be reflective. Boards, while being pushed by the pandemic to be responsive, must carve out the time for discussions about what they are doing and how well they are governing. Governance is a thinking person's game. What are the ways in which a board's previous strengths will continue to serve it well and what are the ways in which it must adapt with the times? It is always good practice for boards to be intentional, deliberative and reflective about their work (but that does not mean they always are). The pandemic, though, means that they must be. They must ask what's working? What's not? Why? And they must stop to ask these questions even when short on time.

Boards also must be wise in understanding that some new approaches will serve them well into the future, but others must be revisited and rethought, if not discarded, once through the pandemic (being

careful here not to say “return to normal”). Approaches that work under one circumstance once enculturated can become the new bad habits when context and expectations change.

Much of what is happening across the education sector is unpredictable and outside our control, but that does not mean that we succumb to fear and immobility, or does it support rash decision-making. Now, perhaps more than ever, all stakeholders are looking for thoughtful, competent leadership not just from the head but from all quarters—faculty, staff, students and, very much, from boards.

Further Reading

“Board Meetings: Moving from Face-to-Face to Virtual,” by Cathy Trower, www.nais.org.

“What Boards Are Missing: Curiosity,” by Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower, in *Inside Higher Ed*, May 15, 2017, online at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/05/15/boards-need-be-more-curious-be-effective-essay>.

Practical Wisdom: Thinking Differently About College and University Governance, by Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower, Stylus Publishing, 2018.

Cathy Trower, PhD, serves as president of Trower & Trower, Inc. a governance consulting firm. She chairs two boards: BoardSource and at RiverWoods Continuing Care Retirement Community. Email: catrower@trowerandtrower.com.

Peter Eckel, PhD, serves as senior fellow and director of leadership programs at the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy in the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. He codirects the Penn Project on University Governance. He is a trustee at the University of La Verne. Email: eckelpd@upenn.edu.

They coauthored *Practical Wisdom: Thinking Differently about College and University Governance* (Stylus Publishing, 2019).

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