

Keeping Parent Complaints From Interfering With the Strategic Functions of the Board

As Chair of the Committee on Trustees (COT),¹ you will be called on to take the lead in assisting your colleagues in dealing with one of the troublesome facts of private-independent school life: parental complaints made directly to Board members. Many parents think of their school's Board of Trustees in the same way that they think of their local public school board. And, if that were true, their complaints would not violate that model, i.e., *the public elects a public school board to represent their interests.*

Your school's Board of Trustees (regardless of the label it chooses for itself) is a self-perpetuating governing body charged with defining the school's mission and developing its strategic and financial future in ways consistent with that mission. That being the case, new Board members must be educated carefully as part of their new-Trustee orientation on how to handle the inevitable complaining phone calls, emails, texts, and parking-lot conversations from their friends and acquaintances. Teach them how their personal relationships may be tested once they accept a position as a member of your school's Board.

As Chair of the COT, consider developing a set of guidelines that can be placed in front of your colleagues not only during each year's new-Trustee orientation,² but during Board retreats and, at times, in routine Board meetings throughout the year. (Parent complaints often spike at the end of grading periods, but can develop at any time.)

ISM suggests that you speak with your committee members about each of the following ISM-endorsed guidelines and that you modify them, as needed, to conform to the culture within which your Board operates. Present your committee's finished guidelines to your Board President for subsequent full-Board consideration and adoption.

1. Adopt a concise, easily-remembered Board-level mission statement. Not to be confused with the institutional mission statement, a Board-level statement should speak in terms of the Board's essential reason-for-being. A sample ISM-endorsed statement might read: *Our Board's purpose is to chart the strategic and financial future of our school in order that the institutional mission may be delivered to this and to future generations of students.*

2. Adopt also a concise, easily-remembered formula-statement regarding parent complaints. A readily cited formula statement gives each Trustee a response framework on which to rely, whether fielding a complaint face-to-face, voice-to-voice, or by email or text. An ISM-endorsed sample formula-statement on this topic might read: *I'm sorry, but our Board's job is strategic financial planning and policy-setting. I'll have to ask you to work on this at the level where it occurred. As a last resort, of course, you may request a meeting with our Head.* Thus, your Trustees will have a formula from which to work in making their specific oral or written responses:

- regret;
- our Board's purpose; and
- our Board-endorsed approach.

3. Consider giving your Head Support and Evaluation Committee (HSEC) an appellate function.³

If such a step seems an appropriate one in your school's culture, develop and publish a policy saying that, if a parent has followed the ladder from point-of-complaint up through School Head and still wishes to take another step, the parent may summarize the complaint on (no more than) two pages, sign, date, and submit to the HSEC Chair. The policy must make clear the School Head will be present when the complaint is read by the HSEC. A response is promised, but nothing else.

4. Role-play appropriate responses to parent complaints in your annual Board retreat.⁴

The COT should prepare sample complaints and test the response formula (see No. 2, above) in the retreat setting. Since Trustees seek to be helpful whenever they can, a formulaic response to a parent complaint—especially with a friend—is not easy to master. The complaining parent may well be confused or even offended that the Trustee responds in a way the parent did not expect. Practice can help.

5. Begin a regular Board of Trustees' column in the school newsletter or on your school's website.

Use this communication vehicle as a teaching device to help your constituents understand the differences in an elected public-school board, on the one hand, and a self-perpetuating Board of Trustees, on the other. Explain why trusteeships have few, or no, educators among their members, but, rather, individuals with experience in finance, real estate, construction, marketing, fundraising, and the like. The *teaching* function is carried out by the faculty and overseen by the academic administration and the Head. The HSEC forms the linking unit between governance and operations (see No. 3, above). Educate your parent body systematically about the Board's proper role.

To operate without a well-considered Board-level policy on handling parent complaints is likely to:

- subvert (unintentionally) your School Head's authority as chief executive;
- place your teachers in untenable situations in which they must guard the integrity of their classrooms and their own professional integrity when faced by a parent they know to be a Trustee; and
- result in unfairness to individual Trustees, who will be confronted with the need to invent responses to parent complaints on a case-by-case basis, often impromptu.

As COT Chair, urge your Board President and your Board colleagues to adopt guidelines that strengthen the positions of the School Head, the faculty, and their roles as Trustees.

¹ See "The Committee on Trustees and the Leadership Funnel," *Ideas & Perspectives*, 40-9-33.

² See "New-Trustee Orientation," *IS&P*, 43-5-20.

³ See "The Head Support and Evaluation Committee: An Update," *IS&P*, 42-8-29.

⁴ See "Your Summer New-Trustee Orientation and Planning Session," *IS&P*, 41-4-13.