The Art Of Administrating

A Handbook for Waldorf Schools.

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Chapter 10

THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

What functions does a board serve? Why have one? How should a board be related to the College of teachers and faculty in a Waldorf school? What are typical patterns of development, and frequently encountered difficulties? How can we improve communications, reduce potential conflict and misunderstanding? What should be a board's composition? Who should serve on one?

In this chapter we will explore these and related questions which surface time and again in Waldorf schools. Given the astonishing variety of people and organizational arrangements in the schools, it should be clear from the outset that there are no "right" answers. Each school must sort these things out in light of its own particular circumstances. Moreover, as a school grows and evolves, so will its board's functions and its relationship to the organism as a whole. For these reasons, those hoping to find in these pages a "formula" they can apply to their schools are likely to be disappointed. Although we will offer numerous suggestions along the way, our goal is not to present a static picture. Rather we hope to bring the issues into focus in a way that will contribute to more productive discussion among schools' faculties and boards, where the final responsibility rests.

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What Functions Does a Board Serve?

Why have a board in the first place? If the school is "faculty run" is there any need for one? If so, what is its role, other than to rubber-stamp decisions of the faculty and college (if there is one)?

At one extreme are schools where the board is seen as a somewhat awkward appendage, maintained because articles of incorporation require that there be one. Its function is to serve as the school's legal face to the world, to provide official signatures and approve policy set elsewhere, but it has no real part in making policy or running the school. In effect, the faculty or college exercise the real powers which by law are assigned to the board.

For a board to be so completely disempowered is uncommon; yet, fairly frequently one encounters, in the midst of a board-faculty conflict, indignation on the part of faculty members at the board's "presumption" to tell the faculty what to do. On the other side, among non-faculty board members, one encounters feelings of discomfort at being legally responsible for the school's actions while having little or no real voice in the decisions. Mindful of the fact that the legal authority (to hire, fire, and dispose of the school's assets, among other things) still rests with the board, some schools "protect" against the board's exercising this authority (and avoid potential conflicts with non-faculty board members) by filling all positions with faculty members or with anthroposophists who can be counted on to go along with the will of the faculty.

If all one wants of a board is to fill the legal shell, the above solution is reasonable. In most cases, however, schools are in fact asking that their boards serve other functions for which one needs the time and talent of non-faculty members. Fundraising and developing community connections are obvious tasks frequently asked of boards. Expert advice in legal or business matters is often sought for "free" by bringing on members with experience in those areas. The more talented, dynamic and committed to the life of the school these individuals are, however, the less likely they are to accept a role of "rubber-stamping" decisions made elsewhere. A tension can develop, a tug-of-war between board and faculty; where does the buck finally stop?

At the other end of the spectrum are those schools, frequently in their infancy, where the board exercises the primary responsibility for school governance; hiring and firing teachers, setting salaries, deciding budgetary issues including what positions will be funded, thus what curriculum will be offered. This is often the case with schools just getting started; a parent group takes the initiative, forms a non-profit corporation and advertises for a teacher. The teachers, fresh from training (or with no training!), have their hands full mastering their classes; the parent-run board must carry the school's administration and financing, and must continue to evaluate the new teachers and the evolving pedagogical work for some time.

While there may be good reasons a school would tend at one time toward the purely faculty-run model or at another time to the board-run model, it seems the long-term health of a Waldorf school is best served if there is a balance, a sharing of responsibility between the board and the college/core faculty. One approach, frequently used, is to divide the responsibilities: the board deals with legal and financial matters; the college/core faculty with pedagogical concerns (including staffing issues).

In the last analysis, there is no such thing as a pedagogical issue that doesn't have potential financial and legal implications, and there is no financial or legal decision that doesn't ultimately affect the pedagogy. There are inevitably areas of overlap: Can the school afford to make crafts a full-time position? How many hours of teaching will be compensated at full-time rates? What are the legal implications of the college's decision to deal with a complaint about corporal punishment in a certain way? There is a dynamic tension and the necessity for accommodation among the responsible groups.

Rather than viewing this "tension" as a problem, it can in fact be seen as an extremely valuable aspect of the life of a school. The board and the college/core faculty engage in a healthy dialogue in which each, by sharing different perspectives, keeps the other "conscious."

The board can be pictured most usefully, not as a board of "directors," but as a board of "trustees." The board holds a trust. Its primary task, in this light, is to see that the school fulfills its mission, and to keep it on course over the long

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haul. The college of teachers (or the core faculty, if there is no college) has the same responsibility. Both groups are ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school's life; the college/core faculty entrusts the board to carry the primary burden of financial and practical matters, while the board entrusts the college/core faculty to carry the primary pedagogical focus. Each is responsible for communicating and listening to the other in carrying out its primary trust. Some suggestions to facilitate this process of communicating and listening are presented later in this chapter. But more important than any specific technique is keeping alive the recognition that this shared trust exists, with the sense of mutual responsibility and mutual gratitude that it implies.

Phases in the Evolution of the Board-Faculty Relationship:

As mentioned above, a frequent pattern in the life of a school is for it to start as an initiative of parents who form the corporation, become the founding board and hire the school's first teachers. At this point in a school's life the teachers are generally happy for any and all help they can get, and the fact that the board is in charge of most of the school's affairs is not an issue. In fact, without constant involvement and tremendous sacrifices on the part of founding board members, most schools would have a hard time surviving their pioneering years.

As the school grows it becomes impossible for everyone to do everything, as was done in the pioneering days. Hopefully, the faculty is growing stronger and taking on a greater share of the school's day-to-day administration (eventually with the help of a business manager or administrator), as well as taking primary responsibility for the integrity of the teaching in each class and in the school as a whole. Ideally, as a core of dedicated teachers forms, a transition is made to the forming of a College of Teachers; even where this step is not taken, informal or formal structures evolve through which a "core group" begins to take the reins.

Often this is a time where problems crop up. Either the board is reluctant to let go, and a tug-of-war develops; or it backs out or is pushed out too soon, leaving overwhelmed and inexperienced teachers to struggle with things such as fundraising and financial planning for which they have neither the training nor the time. The ideal situation is one where a gradual shift occurs towards a sharing of

responsibilities as the college/core faculty becomes stronger. Obviously this requires maturity, tact and constant communication. The alternative, however, is that the board ends up in a power struggle with the faculty. Whichever group "wins," the school loses. Nearly as problematic for the school is the situation that emerges not from confrontation but from avoidance: where neither the board nor faculty feel they have the power to act, areas of responsibility are poorly defined, and no one knows "who's in charge."

Though less common, it can also happen in the life of a school that it finds itself with a weak or non-existent board (or one consisting of only faculty) and sets out to recruit new board members who can bring outside perspectives and exercise leadership in non-pedagogical areas. The issues are the same as above but in reverse, with the college/core faculty needing to make the transition to shared governance as the board becomes more capable.

In fact, it may happen during the full term of a school's life that at one time the board is stronger and more active, at another time the faculty carries more of the responsibility. Let us take as our starting point that both groups are in fact mutually responsible for all aspects of school life, trusting one another to assume the primary burden in one area or the other; then it stands to reason that if, for whatever cause, significant weakness exists in either the board or the college/core faculty, the other group will tend to step into the void. This could happen if there were a substantial loss of key faculty over a short period, requiring replacement with relatively inexperienced teachers; or, it could happen that for one reason or another many key board members step down, leaving mostly faculty board members still serving. In such cases (and they do happen) it is appropriate that the stronger group assume some of the duties normally falling to the weaker group, for the health of the school. What is most important, however, is that this be seen as a temporary situation, with the goal always to return to a condition of balanced sharing of responsibility.

The Composition of a Board:

Who should sit on a board depends in part on what you want the board to do – and on whom you're able to attract. Our discussion has mostly been concerned with the typical "working" board in which all members generally have duties as chairs or members of board committees, or provide specialized advice to

the board in areas of their expertise. There are, of course, also "advisory" boards which tend to meet one or two times a year over dinner, hear speeches about the work of the organization and pull out their checkbooks. Their purpose is to give and raise money, or to lend prestige to the undertaking by virtue of associating their names with it. They might or might not have a "legal" existence via the organization's bylaws; if they do have more than ceremonial functions, these are generally handled by a smaller executive committee which actually governs. Such boards can be very useful to a school. However, the issues involved in recruiting, holding and getting the most out of such groups are very different from the ones typically faced by a working board for a Waldorf school, which are addressed here.

In the working Waldorf board, as in other non-profit boards, there is a mix of qualities one is hoping to assemble. There are various formulations of this, such as the "3 W's" of Wisdom, Wealth or Work. Board members should be people who bring at least one of the above with them: individuals who have a demonstrated involvement in the life of the school (on committees, fairs, etc.) and a willingness to work, those bringing specific wisdom in the form of special skills (lawyers, bankers, real estate brokers, etc.), and others with recognized stature and community standing, who lend the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" and can help open doors to those with influence and wealth in the community.

Every school dreams of recruiting the local equivalent of the Chairman of General Motors, or the wife of the head of the Kellogg Foundation. The reality, however, is that board formation is very much a bootstraps operation. Teachers poor as church mice and mothers working on the bazaar committee don't always have ready access to the Chair of General Motors. Rather, the initial pool of available talent consists of the parents of children in the school, the local anthroposophical community and the teachers. These are also, obviously, the groups who should form the core of any board, being most committed to and most knowledgeable about the school's mission and the impulses standing behind Waldorf education. If major foundation chairs are not among them, so be it. However, it is possible for this initial group to begin a process of reaching out to others whom they know, who might then bring on others whom they know, and thus eventually attract individuals with high visibility and community standing. This is and should be a gradual process, as those recruited should truly become

familiar with the school and committed to it before becoming part of a working board; they may, of course, be recruited for an advisory board using less strict standards.

Do all board members need to be anthroposophists? Or is it sufficient if they are just decent folk of good will? This question has been debated and answered in any number of different ways. Different circumstances may call for different answers. In general, though, it seems best not to tie the board's hands when it comes to recruiting qualified members. Clearly, not all the parents at the school are anthroposophists, nor necessarily are all those most involved and supportive of the school. What is necessary, though, is that all Board members recognize the Anthroposophical foundation of Waldorf Education and do not have any problems with this reality.

How should membership be divided among parents, college/core faculty and community members? Again, there are no hard and fast answers. Still, as a general principle, it would be best not to overload the board with any one group, nor to underrepresent any of them. Each brings valuable insights and different perspectives to the work of the board. Especially important, as mentioned earlier, is that there be college members (or core faculty) who participate fully in the work of the board and who carry the board work back to the college and faculty. Many schools use as a rule of thumb the principle that one third membership each be drawn from the teachers, parents and friends in the community.

One of the concerns that often stands behind the above questions has to do with protecting the fundamental Waldorf impulse, of avoiding the prospect that a board majority may form which chooses to change the school's mission in significant ways. Such "take-overs" have occasionally happened. It is prudent, therefore, when setting up the bylaws, to build in mechanisms to prevent this.[1] A common approach is to establish an "executive board" of college/core faculty board members and additional anthroposophist board members. This "board within a board" would be self-perpetuating, and would have veto power over acts

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[1] See **Economic Exporations**, Mitchell and Alsop, AWSNA Economic Committee, Wilton, NH, 1988.

of the full board. Such an executive committee may be deemed unnecessary if the board itself is established as self-perpetuating and consists of no more than 12 to 15 members. The key to avoiding serious difficulties is to make the board self-perpetuating rather than elected by a general membership. Another important aspect to preserving continuity is to establish fixed terms (of 2 - 5 years) and to stagger their termination dates. Clearly, there should also be provision for replacement of board members who are consistently absent.

Avoiding Micromanagement and Other Pitfalls:

As was indicated earlier, the primary task of the board is to see that the school fulfills its mission, and to keep it on course over the long haul. The college or core faculty, as a governing organ, has the same responsibility, but with a pedagogical focus. Both groups, in fact, hold a trust.

One of the most common dangers for non-profit boards (and also for the college/core faculty) is overinvolvement with day-to-day affairs. This may come about as a result of a special interest a board member has in a particular area, or it may come as a kind of habit, or it may result from not having clearly defined levels of policy. The board (and the college) should be involved in the highest levels of policy; the board should concern itself with the big picture. It should avoid the temptation to meddle in the details of the administrator's job, or the job of committees or individuals with a mandate. Its concern should be in setting basic plans and policies, and in evaluating the results of plans and policies that have been implemented. The actual implementation, and the subordinate policies and procedures required for implementation, the details of how a task is carried out, should be left to those charged with the responsibility. The effectiveness of their work can and should be subject to periodic review, but not to day-to-day scrutiny and interference.

A test of this is how frequently the board finds it necessary to meet. A board that is meeting more than 4 or 5 times a year in full session is either doing too much direct administering, or enjoys its social interaction. Such a board might do better to limit its official meetings and schedule more social events. A related test for a college or core faculty group is to ask what portion of its time is devoted to deepening the pedagogical work in the school, as opposed to time spent on immediate concerns. For both the board and college, the effective

functioning of a committee or mandate structure is essential if they are not to be buried under the length of their agendas.

It should be noted, however, that both the board and college/core faculty will be involved in management at times of crisis. Such crises inevitably come in the life of a school. There are external threats, such as lawsuits over liability issues; and there are internal crises, such as the sudden loss or necessary dismissal of key faculty or staff, serious enrollment shortfalls, etc. In such cases, everyone gets involved and everyone pulls together. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that once the crisis is past, the board and college/core faculty should pull back. Normal operations should be restored as quickly as possible.

In addition to micromanagement, another common pitfall is the failure to properly educate new board members, especially about the significant differences in the way a Waldorf school's board works. In particular, the fact that school governance is a matter of shared responsibility between the board and the college/core faculty (assuming the school has matured to this point) is something that needs to be spelled out, ideally before a new member joins. Clear expectations and a delineation of the role of a board member, and of the board itself in relation to other bodies within the school, need to be communicated. One effective way to accomplish this is to prepare a handbook for board members (as there should be a handbook for faculty members). Among the things this handbook should contain is a well-written history of the school (kept up-to-date); a statement of the school's mission; and a statement of the school's vision of the future, in its most recent formulation. This should not simply be handed to an individual; someone should go over it with new board members as part of an "initiation."

In many cases, of course, new board members are drawn from the ranks of those who have had an involvement with the school over time, as parents, helpers, and committee members. Such experience with the school is more valuable than any handbook; but the handbook is nevertheless an important resource, and useful when recruiting board members from the community who do not have long experience with the school.

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Reducing Conflict and Misunderstanding by Improving Communication:

Let us assume the presence of capable and dedicated college/core faculty members and equally capable and dedicated board members, and a general agreement that both groups will participate as partners in charting the school's course. Will all go well? What are the pitfalls that can trip up the most promising beginnings, and how do we avoid them?

Much has been said of the importance of gaining clarity about which group has primary responsibility for a given class of decisions; for example, that the board should have responsibility for general administrative functions, the college/core faculty for pedagogical matters. This has been extended, rightly, to defining and creating job descriptions or "mandates" for any number of specific areas of responsibility: with faculty committees, board committees, faculty-board committees, mandate groups, etc. This is all necessary and can help to alleviate much frustration among those charged with the various responsibilities while freeing up the general faculty meeting (and board meetings) for dealing with the big issues rather than every niggling detail. Traditionally, Waldorf faculties get bogged down with everyone wanting to be in charge of everything, and the establishing of clear mandates is a necessary step in overcoming this problem.

But mandates alone are not enough. Necessary though they are, by themselves they can promote a tendency towards fragmentation and "turf battles" and can generate as much frustration as they are intended to relieve. This is because, in fact, very few of the big issues are cleanly defined and limited in scope. There are frequently areas of overlap. This is especially true, in the case of overlapping board and faculty responsibilities, and in matters affecting the budget. Many other areas are also of intense concern to both board and faculty, such as the presentation of the school's image to the public; compliance with governmental regulations concerning pedagogical matters such as qualifications of teachers, and legal issues arising out of discipline policies. If decisions on such issues are made by one group in isolation, without involving other concerned parties, all kinds of problems can arise. How can we avoid this and at the same time provide for effective division of responsibilities?

Most important, perhaps, is to cultivate a healthy attitude: the recognition that the college/core faculty does have a legitimate interest in many issues which

have been entrusted to the board, and vice versa (this applies to committees, mandate groups, and administrators as well). In fact, as was stated earlier, both groups can be seen as co-responsible for the entire life of the school. Such an attitude can help to promote communication and cooperation among groups.

Second, the above attitude can be embodied in our procedures. Specifically, it should become routine to ask the following three questions about any issue which is to come before the board (or faculty, or committee, etc.):

1. Which group has primary responsibility to decide the issue or set policy in this area? (This requires that basic areas of responsibility have been clarified. It may be that the issue should be referred to another group to take it up first.)

2. Which groups or individuals should have input in the decision? Who's affected by it or needs to be heard? (All individuals/groups identified should be given an opportunity to speak to the issue before any final decisions are made.)

3. Once a decision has been reached, who needs to be informed of it? How shall it be implemented? (Frequently we drop the ball at this stage, so happy that at last we've come to a decision that we forget it needs to be communicated and carried through.)

Frequently, the chairperson can ask the first two questions before placing an item on the agenda, thus saving the time of the full group in taking up issues that belong elsewhere or that need others present to discuss effectively. The secretary can perhaps be responsible for asking the third question, before the item is closed. But all members should train themselves to ask these questions in relation to every agenda item.

Third, our structures should facilitate communication. In this respect it is essential that there be a reasonable proportion of board members drawn from the college (or faculty core group if there is no college). It is important that these faculty board members see their role in the board as full trustees, not simply as "watchdogs" for the faculty. Moreover, through them the board is represented in the college/core faculty. Their role in fostering communication and an apprecia-tion for the concerns of each group by the other is essential.

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Fourth, we need to make a commitment to fostering a sense of community and common purpose between the board and college/core faculty. People need time to get to know one another, to enjoy one another, to trust one another. The groups need time to explore and build up a common vision of the school's mission and its future. An annual retreat of the college/core faculty and board should not be seen as a luxury, but as essential. Other, informal opportunities for interaction should be built into the schedule: times to have dinner together, or to share in an artistic experience, for instance.

Rather than considering these things to be frills, we should recognize how essential they are. All of us who are involved deeply in the life of a Waldorf school are called upon to make great sacrifices; all are overworked and overextended. If we are to carry on, we need to experience, along with the work, a joy in striving together, a joy in the process. We need to know that we are not alone, to experience the deepening of colleagueship, the possibility of friendship, of human concern for one another. When these qualities are fostered, our meetings become something we can actually look forward to. Creative energies are freed, and there is a quickening of our vision of the possibilities in the work we do together. It is out of this experience, first and foremost, that we will find the spiritual forces to create the future together.