

## Article

## Striving for Greatness in Trusteeship



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*Most non-profit boards are good, but few are great, and independent school boards are no exception. And few trustees, if asked, would characterize their service as among the most rewarding and productive experiences of their lives. Instead, many trustees would express some frustration along the lines of the following:*

- *I don't know why I was asked to serve in the first place.*
- *I don't understand what performance is expected of me as a trustee.*
- *I am not regularly engaged in meaningful work critical to the school.*
- *Board meetings are often boring and unproductive, spent listening to committee and staff reports.*

Most schools commit resources to trustee training, and most trustee training is adequate to the task of dysfunction avoidance. However, training often misses the mark in equipping trustees to achieve greatness in trusteeship necessary to build and sustain truly great schools.

There are a number of publications to help boards reach greatness, and my thoughts are shaped by the profoundly insightful and analytically rigorous work of Jim Collins' [Good to Great](#) and [Good to Great and the Social Sectors](#) (a monograph), and John Carver's [Boards That Make a Difference](#). These works are exceptionally helpful in understanding what great boards do and don't do.

### Getting and Keeping Great Trustees

One barrier to greatness in trusteeship is failure to recruit and retain the right people for the job of school governance. If greatness in governance is the goal, schools must find a few *great* women and men with a deep and demonstrable understanding of and commitment to the school's unique mission and purpose. An impressive background as a business person, lawyer, or community volunteer — without some deep tie to the school and commitment to its mission and purpose — is not a qualification for service as a trustee. An influential community or business leader unwilling or unable to commit herself to the intense work required for great governance will not become a great trustee.

Better to use such a person in another role — such as assisting, on an as-needed basis, with outreach to potential funders or alums. Discipline, competency, and commitment are all essential qualities for a great trustee. In selecting a trustee, the board must determine whether the candidate will regularly and reliably attend board meetings, be prepared for meetings, accomplish tasks delegated to her, contribute personally to the school, maintain confidences and unconditionally support legitimate board decisions — even decisions with which she personally disagrees. In assessing competency, the board must examine a candidate's reputation for skill and performance in the work or field relevant to the needs of the board and school. Commitment to the school's mission is the last but most important quality. A great board demands fidelity of its members to the mission of the school rather than to an individual leader of the board or of the school. Be wary, therefore, of those motivated to serve by allegiance to the current board chair or current head rather than by commitment to the school's unique mission and purpose.

### Engaging Trustees in Meaningful Work

Marginal effectiveness of boards is due principally to a meager diet of meaningful work. Too much of the work of boards is limited to rubber-stamping the work of administrators and listening to reports from board committees and administrators — leaving trustees malnourished and hungry for meaty, meaningful work.

There is no work more meaningful for a board than deciding the mission and purpose for the school. Often, it is assumed this responsibility can be met on an intermittent basis, every five years or so, as part of a long-range or strategic planning exercise. To the contrary, this work must be continuous and unrelenting. And it cannot be responsibly delegated to the school head, whose job is principally about what happens within the grounds of the school. The school head, in most cases, does not know the community and its needs and priorities as well as trustees. Nor is her or his knowledge of the breadth and depth of community resources available to support and enrich the work of the school equal to that of trustees. The board's focus is external, while the school head's focus is internal.

A school's board must continuously evaluate the school's purpose within the larger context of the community and outside world. Carver, in his work on policy governance, challenges organizations and their boards to understand that, while every non-profit organization bestows some benefit to the community, it conversely *extracts* some cost *from* the community because of the "talent, capital, and space" it consumes and diverts from other worthwhile community endeavors. Carver, therefore, admonishes each governing board to focus *obsessively* on this benefit and cost assessment and ask: "What good shall we accomplish, for which people or needs, and at what cost?"

This process of examination by the board will lead to the adoption of what may be described as the *clarifying purpose*. Jim Collins refers to the concept as the [\*Hedgehog Concept\*](#), which can be understood as the intersection of three spheres:

1. organizational passion (what the organization is deeply passionate about);
2. its relative value (what the organization does better than any other organization);
3. and its net benefit to the community (return on community's investment of resources).

Once the board determines the clarifying purpose for its school, its critical role is then to promulgate the clarifying purpose as policy and declare it to all current and prospective stakeholders. As policy, it serves as the guidepost for current and future boards and administrations on what to do and not to do. It also drives long-range planning and day-to-day operations.

This rich diet of meaningful work is transformative. Good trustees become great trustees. The great trustee is strong and vigorous, possessing a deep understanding of and commitment to the school's clarifying purpose. She extols the value of the school to the community, strengthens its reputation, and builds community support for the school.

Unlike the merely good trustee, she is equipped and motivated to make the compelling case to the community for entrusting its valuable and limited resources — students, workers, volunteers, and money — to the school instead of other worthwhile competing community endeavors.

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