

Building the board your school deserves: Harvard Professor and Catholic school leaders offer advice

Do you want your Catholic school to be as effective as possible? If so, then your school needs an effective board of directors, according to a Harvard professor who spoke on the role of boards in school governance at a recent workshop sponsored by the Catholic Schools Foundation.

“You couldn’t have picked a more important topic!” said Dr. James P. Honan, a Senior Lecturer on Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “The role of governance for nonprofits is more important than ever before.” Due to a poor economy and increased competition for scarce dollars, Catholic schools – like other nonprofits – need to have savvy boards in order to continue to thrive, Honan said.

When Honan asked his audience of Catholic high school principals and presidents what they most wanted to learn from his workshop, the answers were to the point – and even humorous. “‘How to be a Board Member 101’ or ‘Being a Board Member for Dummies’!” exclaimed one person, as several others nodded in agreement. “The advancement/fundraising aspects of being a board member,” said another person. “How to recruit the best board members possible,” said a third person.

Honan, an expert on nonprofit governance who currently serves on the boards of Marist College (where he is an alumnus) and Dana Hall, a girls’ school in Wellesley, and is a former board member of Fitchburg State College, assured his listeners that there are numerous frameworks and tools available to them. He singled out a book called *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara E. Taylor. And Honan noted that the book’s authors saw effective boards as operating at three levels: Fiduciary, strategic, and generative.

“The board’s fiduciary responsibility is its first and most important responsibility,” said Honan. “Board members need to provide fiscal oversight, to be problem-spotting and serving as sentinels of the school through the use of facts, figures and financial reports. This work requires good financial skills.”

Strategy is all about the future, Honan continued. “What kind of school will we be? In its strategic role, the school board should be developing and envisioning goals for the school.”

Very high performing boards “are generative,” said Honan. “The generative function of the board is all about reflective learning, discerning, sense-making and creative work.” Generative boards have a “very high level of trust” and a “very high learning capacity in individual board members,” Honan added. “As



Harvard Professor Jim Honan

you develop your board, you want generative discussions that are all about good sense-making and good collective thinking. And you have to practice a lot to get to this place!”

Being proactive about recruiting board members is key, according to Honan. “Build a pipeline, perhaps through advisory groups to the school, where you can test people out.” Keeping some board members who are stepping down around in an advisory role can also make a difference, said Honan, who also pointed out that senior board members can serve as effective mentors to new members.

Taking a hard look at your school’s current board composition can be helpful for discerning future board needs, Honan believes. “Look at the skill sets you need, such as for a sophisticated knowledge of technology and social networking,” he said. “If you’re a private school with a lot of alums and parents on the board, you may need to ask whether members possess the high-end skill set needed for an effective board – or if you need to bring on some independent members who can make tough ‘arm’s length’ decisions.”

Choosing board members who are good fundraisers and/or who have money to give to your school is always important, emphasized Honan. “Many boards have a 100 percent participation requirement of giving among board members,” he said.



Principals Kristyna Dumais and Sr. Joanne Sullivan, from St. Louis Elementary and St. Patrick Elementary in Lowell.

Above all, “have a mental model for your board – ideally have a picture of what you want your board to be and do,” said Honan. The best boards, he concluded, “are willing to hear problems and have a relentless culture of performance. They have an energy and passion for their organization that is completely generative.”

An effective board can transform your school, according to two Catholic school

leaders who spoke on the subject at a recent workshop for elementary school principals sponsored by the Catholic Schools Foundation. Brother Thomas P. Long, FMS, '73, president of Central Catholic High School (CCHS) in Lawrence, and Dr. Karen Juliano, president of the Academy of Notre Dame High School in Tyngsboro, said that their schools are thriving due to wise decisions made in recent years by their school boards.

The ideal board member (courtesy of Brother Long)

- Understands, embraces, and advances the mission of the school
- Provides expertise
- Makes the school a philanthropic priority

- Introduces the president to those who can help the school
- Participates in marketing and recruiting
- Actively serves on one or more board committee
- Attends and contributes to board meetings
- Focuses the school strategically
- Attends some school functions

Tips that will help your board (courtesy of Dr. Juliano)

- Remember that a board has an important role in the life of a school as a *body*, not as individuals.
- Discern what kinds of new members your board needs. If better “town/gown” relations are a goal, for instance, consider inviting a town official to serve on the board.
- Emphasize that board committees are the board’s “worker bees.” A “mission effectiveness” board committee can be a great asset; a finance committee that meets regularly is a must.
- Make good use of an electronic “e-room” for posting all board and committee documents.
- Do everything you can to make the board meetings valuable to the people in attendance.

By Catherine Walsh