

The Catholic School Board: Sacred Work for an Apostolic Work

by Robert Birdsell and Kent Hickey

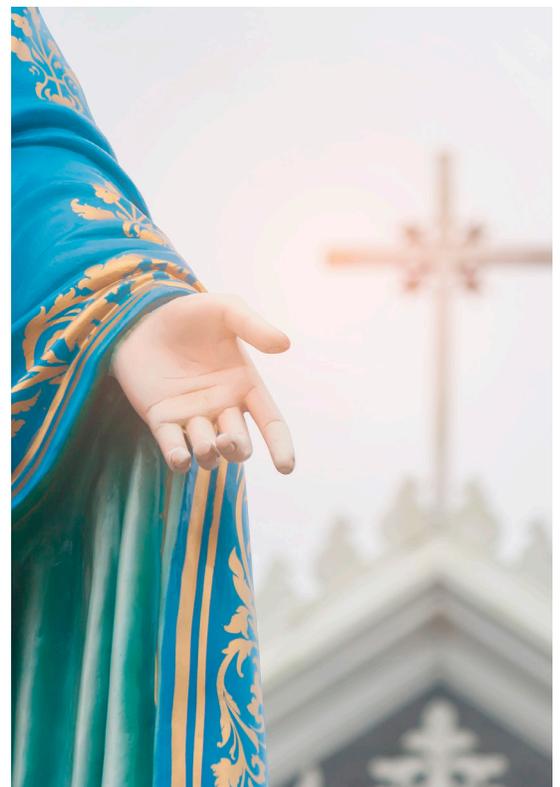
Our work over the years advancing educational opportunity and institutional excellence in the Catholic education ecosystem has allowed us to establish relationships with leaders from across the nation. We learn so much in our conversations with these wise and dedicated educators, including what is working well in Catholic schools, and what is not. In recent years we have been surprised by how often conversations turn to tensions and dysfunctionality within the school board/school leader dynamic. It is a phenomenon that deserves more of our collective attention.

Start with Three Assumptions

First, the transition in recent decades to primarily lay boards has been a positive and necessary development. Catholic schools are complex organizations, and talented, generous volunteers are needed if they are to function well.

Second, the volunteers who serve on these boards are in general selfless, and service oriented. Those who volunteer out of self-interest and ego are few, but their destructive impact can outweigh their small numbers. A mission-centered board culture with clear roles and responsibilities for members helps minimize the potential damage.

Third, let us recognize that the school head job itself has never been more difficult, so much so that it is now hard to find and retain exceptional leaders in this role. The first [ILEE \(Institute for Leadership and Entrepreneurship in Education\)](#) cohort in 2019 is illustrative: Of the seventeen presidents in this cohort, half departed their positions within just four years, with six leaving the field entirely. Expand that sample size to a nationwide trend and it is clear that we have a problem that must be addressed.



Source of Friction

While there is no single reason that explains this disturbing trend, board friction is often cited as a leading cause in our conversations with school heads. Sometimes this is due to personality clashes, but we believe the underlying issue runs deeper. It has more to do with not appreciating or understanding the true nature of the board and its elevated role in the Catholic education ecosystem.

A Catholic school board is, at its core, a spiritual body, one that is entrusted with the sacred duty to care for the school as an apostolic work. Certainly, much can be learned from secular governance models, and Catholic schools should borrow freely from best practices at non-profits and corporations. However, if practices gleaned from secular institutions are not immersed in Catholic identity—if a Catholic school's policies, structures, and relationships simply mimic what works best at the local private school or a Fortune 500 company—mission as spoken will be disconnected from mission as lived.

A Catholic school board that does not embrace its core identity as a spiritual body entrusted with the care of an apostolic work will inevitably drift from mission, and the dysfunction that follows will often be reflected in the board's relationship with its head of school.



Best Practices for Catholic School Boards

1. Start meetings in the chapel with Mass or contemplative prayer.
2. End meetings with reflection: Where did we see God's presence (or not) in our meeting?
3. Hold a Board overnight retreat every year. No business. Bring wine.
4. Current parents may serve on Board committees but cannot serve on the Board itself. ("A person should go where he won't be tempted." St. Thomas More)
5. Provide a stipend for the Director of the Work to receive ongoing spiritual direction.
6. Fund opportunities for emerging leaders to receive spiritual formation ([such as ILEE seminars!](#)).
7. Keep Boards mid-size (10–15); big enough to staff committees but not so big that hands are idled. (Beware the Devil's workshop.)
8. View policy as guardrails for saints not handbooks for lawyers. (Wisdom from Fr. Mike Garanzini, SJ.)
9. Give your newly hired Director of the Work a three-year contract; never offer just a one-year contract renewal. (Commitment cuts both ways.)
10. While the Chair often represents the Board, the Chair is not the Board. The Board acts as a discerning body, not a single person.
11. Invite the opinions of lawyers and HR professionals into discernment but never surrender decisions to them.
12. Establish an Executive Committee of 3–4 Board members; incorporate Board leadership transitions into its membership.

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Apostolic Work

One way to reduce dysfunction and unlock potential is to be clear about who we are and what we do. Let us start with the school itself: A Catholic school is first and foremost an apostolic work, especially when viewed from its Greek root, *apostolos*, “messenger” or “envoy.” The messenger role is vital because, in the words attributed to St. Theresa of Avila, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.” Catholic schools step into that body and animate the gospel, drawing from a much deeper well than any secular source. Our schools are charged with nothing less than sending forth disciples of Christ.



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If a Catholic school is indeed an apostolic work, then it follows that the head of school is the “Director of the Work”—a title used in the past for members of religious orders who led schools. “Director of the Work” still holds true for lay leaders today because advancing the work’s mission remains the primary focus of the job. Admittedly, it’s a title that would likely not replace those of president, head, or principal in our schools...but perhaps it should.

“Director of the Work” reinforces what we have written about extensively and serves as the foundation of our ILEE retreats and seminars: the Catholic school leader is the “[Spiritual CEO](#).” A Catholic school and its board should understand that the most important expectations of the head is to be a contemplative, discerning, morally courageous, faith-centered director of the apostolic work. A board that does not understand this will

Best Practices for Catholic School Boards

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13. Never let words spoken in anger at a Board meeting pass through the night without a follow-up conversation.
14. Establish a clear timeframe and process to conduct annual Director of the Work reviews, including in-writing and in-person components.
15. The primary role of the Board is to practice *cura apostolica* (care for the apostolic work); however, always do so in the spirit of *cura personalis* (care for the person).
16. Include in the bylaws an opportunity for either the Executive Committee or Director of the Work to call for a meeting with a Consultor to serve as a discussion facilitator and sounding board at times of significant tension and/or fractured relationships. (Better to engage a consultor before engaging attorneys.)
17. Practice the Principle of Subsidiarity: respect boundaries and let the managers manage.
18. Board conversations and documents are fully and completely confidential; failure to follow this rule is grounds for dismissal from the Board or employment from the school.
19. The Director of the Work should be an *ex officio* board member with full voting rights.
20. The Board Chair and Director of the Work should go out for a beverage once a month.

inevitably find itself in conflict with the school head who does. (And, of course, the reverse is also true.)

Finally, recognizing the school as an apostolic work and its leader as Director of the Work shapes the identity and purpose of the school board itself: Boards are stewards of the Catholic mission and identity of the school, more like the Twelve who together led the early Church than the titans of industry who sit on Boeing's board.

The words Pope Francis used to describe what it means to be an apostolic Church apply well to the role of the board at a Catholic school: "... it means taking the salvation of all mankind

to heart, not feeling indifferent or alien in facing the fate of so many of our brothers and sisters, but open and sympathetic toward them. It means, moreover, having a sense of the fullness, the completeness, the harmony of the Christian life, always rejecting partisan, unilateral positions, which close us within ourselves." (From *L'Osservatore Romano*, Sept. 19, 2014) Those challenging words reflect the kind of culture we need in our school boards, and the kind of people we need to serve on them.

Thick or Thin Culture

That cultural identity is a lofty reality for a board to live in, but that is the space every board member enters when she or he accepts the invitation to serve. It's a board with a nature that is fundamentally different from secular boards.

The most successful Catholic school boards we've worked with foster what David Brooks has called "thick institutions"—those with rich, meaningful internal cultures steeped in faith rather than thin, procedural ones. How do you tell the difference between thick and thin culture on Catholic school boards?

For starters, look at how they start their meetings: One begins with a half hour in the chapel in prayerful reflection; the other takes two minutes for a perfunctory prayer before getting on to the "real business." That latter board ends up "being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart." (Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*) It lacks a thick, contemplative culture, a **sine qua non** for Board leadership.

Boards that lack a contemplative culture then suffer from another deficiency: inability to practice



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discernment, the gold standard for decision-making in our Catholic tradition. A discerning board is one that is so steeped in its role as caretaker of the apostolic work that all its decisions are grounded in deep, communal, graced movement within. All board actions—regardless of how secular they may appear to be on the surface (personnel, policy, financial, facilities...)—then reflect a [disposition of discernment](#).

And there is only one way for a board to become that kind of discerning body: “Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn again and again to listen to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them.” (*In the Name of Jesus*)

The Counter-Cultural Catholic School Board

Viewing a Catholic school board through the apostolic work lens changes everything for the better and creates an environment that allows boards and heads to labor together in common mission and shared understanding. It’s these boards—and they do exist in our best Catholic schools—that most inspire us because they are so counter-cultural in nature.

In an era fixated on metrics and immediate results, these “thick” boards cultivate patience and contemplation; they take the long view when discerning direction. In a society that often divorces spirituality from professional

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competence, they insist on moral formation. They seamlessly integrate spiritual wisdom with practical demands. Through ongoing contemplation, discernment, balanced decision-making, authentic community, clear roles, and love for the school and for each other these Catholic school boards fulfill their vital purpose.

That vital purpose includes elevating the goals of the Catholic school to those of the wider Church in service and love of one another. That purpose cannot be fulfilled by governance techniques alone, but from moral imagination—the capacity to view leadership as both practical craft and spiritual calling. It is a purpose emanating from a place of gratitude that has no room for power plays and selfish interests. As Thomas Merton wisely observed, “We do not exist for ourselves alone, and it is only when we are fully convinced of this fact that we begin to love ourselves properly and thus also love others.” (*No Man is an Island*)

This insight perfectly captures the essence of Catholic school governance—resisting the

temptation of ego and creating communities where leaders and board members serve a purpose beyond themselves. In this rarified air, the Catholic school board becomes a body—a corpus—that animates God’s will on the ground and, in collaboration with the Director

of the Work, labors to build our schools into manifestations of the Kingdom.

For Catholic school boards, that is the most countercultural—and necessary—governance imperative of them all.

For more information on professional development opportunities for Catholic School leaders, visit: <https://www.catholicvirtual.com/resources/resources-for-schools/>



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Rob and Kent began their careers together at Marquette University High School.

Access the resources mentioned and learn more about spiritual leadership at these links.

1. (n.d.). *ILEE A one-of-a-kind professional community for Catholic school leaders*. Amerigo. <https://www.amerigoeducation.com/about-amerigo/ilee>
2. Birdsell, R., & Hickey, K. (2023, December 1). *Become the Spiritual CEO Your Catholic School Needs: Navigating Challenges and Embracing Formation for Effective Spiritual Leadership*. <https://www.catholicvirtual.com/resources/become-the-spiritual-ceo-your-catholic-school-needs/> December 2023
3. Birdsell, R., & Hickey, K. (n.d.). *Discernment is Disposition White Paper*. <https://www.catholicvirtual.com/discernment-is-disposition-white-paper-thank-you/>

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