

## Being a Parent and a Trustee

You're on the playground and a parent comes up to you and says, "What do you think of the way the Board has dealt with the dress code?" What do you say? As a parent you may want to say, "Oh, that's terrible. I can't imagine what's got into them!" But you've just been elected to the Board of Trustees. What response should you make?

As part of your orientation, you've almost certainly been given some documents, introduced to the Board President, and thanked by the Head. You may even have attended a retreat where you all talked about the strategic plan and the strategic financial management plan. Hopefully, you've also been given some advice on how to handle your parent role. The main points might have looked something like this:

Although you still think of yourself as a parent, once everyone else knows that you are a member of the Board of Trustees, no one will think of you as a parent! Every statement you make will be treated as if it is an opinion of the Board. The gossip that "he (or she) said" will now have additional weight given to it. Those who are dissatisfied with the direction the Board is taking will use your opinion to back them up, as will those who are supportive.

As a member of a Christian community, it is tempting to think that the Christian school operates differently than a secular school. After all, parents should act in charity, appreciate the roles you play, and clearly differentiate those roles. If only that were true. It might be for some parents; you should, however, operate far more skeptically – as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). This does not at all mean becoming cynical. It does mean approaching situations with wisdom that enhances the mission of the school and the ability of the Head and the Board to do their tasks.

Solutions that you should consider include:

1. Attending only functions where there are groups of people, i.e., not getting into one-on-one conversations.
2. Keeping to topics that do not involve Board policy or personality.
3. Politely deferring school-related topics to the Head or other appropriate school official – this is especially true of human resource issues, which should never be talked about in any way whatsoever.
4. Providing a concise summary of the Board's decision and reasons for acting.

A key understanding for Trustees is that *each individual Trustee has no opinion*. The Board's opinion is the official opinion of every Trustee. Within the Board meeting, Trustees can have vigorous discussion of any topic – the same is true in the Head's office. Once a decision has been made by the Board or the Head, the individual Trustee is bound to support it. A small number of Trustees resist this teaching – they must be counseled off the Board. The public face of you as Trustee must look exactly the same from Trustee to Trustee.

In the same way, as a Trustee you will be scrutinized carefully with regard to your opinion of the Head. It will certainly be difficult at times, but it is critical that your public assessment of the Head's performance be relentlessly upbeat. Your support of the school and its personnel is a litmus test for other parents of the confidence they have in the future of the school. Whatever your private feelings, and however you express your thoughts within the Board meetings, your support of the Head in public is unwavering. Only the Board as a whole can change its opinion. Think of a phrase that will help you get away from such discussions. Depending on the situation, the following might be helpful:

- The Board fully supports the Head.
- I do not comment on the Head's performance.
- I really appreciate the Head's leadership.
- That's a question our Head would be able to answer much better than I could.
- I'm a Board member – we deal with the strategic role; this is an operations question and you would have to ask the Head about that.

You must recognize that you now have power in a way that, as a parent, you didn't. You are part of a group that has the ability to close the school, fire and hire the Head, make financial decisions that can affect the careers of individuals, revise and change the mission statement. Whether you "feel" it or not, your power makes you much more difficult to deal with.

As a Trustee parent, you will also deal with teachers as they work with your children. Have some sympathy for teachers who appear a little less certain in their dealings with you. They are very aware of the hierarchy in the school, and newer teachers or teachers who are less well-grounded may find partnering with a Trustee parent intimidating. From your perspective, that may be absurd. That's not at all how you see yourself. From the teachers' perspective, they see the role before they see the person. Of course, mature and experienced teachers won't have that issue and your relationship with them will be quite straightforward. Just know the difference!

Recognize (and appreciate) the care with which administrators may couch their conversations with you. For them, you are their boss's boss. Never use your position to exert influence in operational school affairs. You have no jurisdiction over administrators

and cannot require them to do anything. If you stay as the parent during interactions in the school, putting the Trustee on hold, they will be more comfortable with you.

However, you also need to be able to advocate effectively for your child. When you approach an administrator or teacher, make that person as comfortable as possible by saying something like: "I want to talk with you about Isaac's progress in mathematics. I'm here as Isaac's parent, not in my role as Board member. I want you to know that our conversation will stay between you and our family." From a teacher's or administrator's point of view, they want to know what role you are playing. Some Trustees find it helpful to have their spouse / partner make advocacy approaches.

Your role as a Trustee is an important one to the future of the school. Keep a sense of proportion – you as an individual still don't have any real power. The Board operates as an entity and each individual exerts power only as a part of the whole. Stay humble. Keep a sense of humor. Whether you are on the Board for a couple of years or a decade, it won't be forever. And your family is still your more important role. Laugh at yourself a little. Keep a sense of service. It's not about power anyway. You know that. You joined the Board to be able to serve the school with your wealth, your wisdom, your energy. You (should) have no interest in and no part of power politics. Enjoy the opportunity to exercise servant leadership and ensure that, at the end, there's nothing that you regret, and that the school is stronger because of the service you were able to give.

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