

# Christian School Management The Cord Principle

*“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”*



## Christian Governance: The Cord Principle

Ecclesiastes 4: 12 (NIV)

“A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

The Christian School includes three organizational partners who work in service to the school’s students:

1. The Board establishes the mission, hires the Head of School, plans for the future and provides the resources (money and facilities) needed for that plan to succeed.
2. The Administration, led by the Head, determines the vision, carries out the Board’s plan, and supports the faculty to success.
3. The faculty serve the children, deliver the mission, and act collaboratively as a professional learning community. The staff support both administration and faculty by engaging with resources and planning for their effective deployment.

In the same way, the Christian School includes three human partners who cooperate together in service to the child:

1. The parent/s to whom God gives the responsibility of unity (the “two shall be one” reflecting the unity of God) within which the child grows safely, and through which the child, known by God from before the womb, can fully develop God’s intent for her / his life
2. The teacher, who is the intersect (the relationship-in-action) of the school’s mission with the child and who is fundamentally concerned with empowering the child’s agency in interaction with the school’s mission
3. The Head, who stands as the guardian of the child’s healthy development, the proactive partner with the parent, and the sustainer of the teacher’s Godly genius

Together, these three strands (organizational and human) are effective and the school operates harmoniously. In conflict, or where the parts do not lift up each other’s sphere, the school is in disarray and mission delivery is endangered. Let us discuss each of these in turn.

The Board of Trustees: this entity (sometimes also called the Board of Directors, or Governing Board) has clear responsibilities and clear boundaries. BoardSource (Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards 2015) writes that “strong Board leadership is fundamental to a strong and effective organization” (p.11). This strong leadership is often construed as running the school. Nothing could be further from the truth or more destructive. We encounter far too many Christian schools where the Board continuously interferes with the operations side of the fence, directing school employees and negating the authority of the Head. This has also led to the arbitrary dismissal of the Head, even in the middle of a contract, and assuming the Head’s responsibilities at the Board level. The Cord Principle is emphatic that the Board’s sphere is strategic: establish the school’s mission and use it “as the first frame of reference when making decisions” (p. 21); hiring the Head, who is the Board’s ONLY employee, who must then be supported and evaluated (ch. 3); setting the school’s “strategic direction” together with the Head and using that direction “for budgeting and other priorities” (p.39). There are of course other considerations for the Board – if it can focus and do these three things brilliantly, the Board can sleep easy at night. These tasks constitute the strategic function of the Board and can be contrasted with the operations

function that the Board is incompetent to do. This is an important understanding for individual Board members and the Board as a whole – as volunteers from many walks of life, the perspectives each brings to the collective table is invaluable. However, none is actually skilled in running a school and in running THIS school. To avoid the “blind leading the blind” (Luke 6:39), the Board, for example, approves the budget but the Head spends it; the Board identifies strategic priorities but the Head executes them; the Board approves construction but the construction company builds the building. The Board cord is both a strength and a potential noose – wise Board leadership understands the strategic / operations difference and leads strategically. This makes it a healthy organizational partner and allows it to contribute meaningfully to a strong and healthy school.

The second organizational partner is the Administration. It doesn't matter how small or large your school is and thus how many people are in the Administration. In some very small schools, it might be the Head, the Head's Assistant (shared with several other people), an admission / marketing part-time person and a book-keeper. In very large schools, the administration might include a Chief Financial Officer, a division head or principal of each division, an Admission Director, a Marketing Director and a Director of Development, the Athletics Director and the Director of Guidance and College Counseling. Wherever your school is, your task is as well defined as the Board's: deliver the mission with excellence, carry out the strategic plan together with its financial framework; be disciplined around the budget; maintain a safe school. Of course, you can think of a myriad other matters. In its essence though, if you had to prioritize your time, that would be it. And it is clear how this works – the Board determines the budget (and thus sets tuition) while the Administration spends the budget; the Board creates the strategic plan and the budget to support it while the Administration implements; the Board creates and/or affirms the mission while the Administration interprets the mission in the light of everyday realities and uses it to guide and direct conversation and decision making. The Administration must be competent to run the school and, because no-one was born with the skills to do such a complex thing, the administration must also be committed to continuous improvement thinking about administration along spiritual, financial, organizational, curricular, and human resource lines and seeking to learn every day.

This is excellent modeling for the third organizational partner, the faculty and staff. Their primary task is to deliver the mission directly to the students / children of the school. This is sometimes lost on administrators who, being student-centered (cf. The Child Principle), think that they are also carrying out that task. Well, to some extent they are right. But they are not the Kindergarten teacher rolling on the floor all day with 5-year-olds or the Music teacher working with choirs of 60 or 160 children in preparation for a worship service or a Christmas celebration. No, it is the teachers and the front-line staff (the assistants and the janitors and the lunch folks) who interact on a daily and minute-to-minute basis with the school's-reason-for-existence, the children. Neither the Board nor the Administration can do their job. We thus consider this partner the most important of the three. At the same time, their job is incredibly taxing and not always well compensated. The other two partners therefore, Board and Administration, have as their focus the support of the faculty and staff and all they do is geared to that end. The responsibility placed on the faculty and staff is glorious and also daunting: “The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.” (Luke 6:40). The character and expertise of the teachers and staff must be beyond reproach. The science teacher must understand and really know science as well as be a Godly person. The two aspects of character and

expertise must be constantly sought for and, as for all the partners, must be sought out through continuous professional renewal of body, soul, mind, and heart.

The three human partners form a cord within and around the three organizational partners and, of course, there is overlap. While these principles are primarily focused on the excellent operations of Christian schools, we must always remember that the students come to school, but they belong to their families. At the same time, this is a complicated relationship because the government has mandated that the child be educated, although that can happen in a variety of ways – home schooling, public and private schooling, to identify the basic methods. So the government mandates, the parent chooses, and the student goes to school. What is the importance then of the parent and how does the parent fit into the cord?

There have been many learned books and articles written about this and we make no effort to replicate or compete with them. We take a very practical stance about this. Parents are responsible for their children: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). And they are distinct from them: “Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16). The school is responsible for the children through the contract that is signed and because they take on legal responsibilities. For example, *Garcia v. City of New York* (1996), held that schools, once they take over physical custody and control of children, effectively take the place of their parents and guardians to both control and protect them. But schools have responsibilities beyond the parent because they act as representatives of the state. In this relationship, the Head takes a leadership role for her/his faculty and staff and responsibility for mission delivery.

We would thus say that the parents’ task is to choose a school that is consistent with the parents’ ambition for their child/ren. This is usually epitomized by the school’s mission and values and felt through the sense of community the Christian school has. Once that choice is made, the parent does not relinquish responsibility to support the school to effectively educate their child. At the same time, the parent must now submit to the school’s authority given to it both by the parent and the state: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you” (Hebrews 13:17). That authority is localized in the Head who has been appointed by the Board of Trustees and who has the power to both accept and reject a student. This authority is not unlimited however, because at the end of each day the school gives the child back to the parent. This is why it is the Cord Principle – the three cords cannot be untangled without causing great harm to the child. The three cords must cooperate on the basis of mission and the Child Principle and when such cooperation exists, we typically experience the most powerful outcomes in the child’s life.