

Christian School Management

The Cord Principle

“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”



Christian Governance: The Cord Principle (2024)

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV)

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

The Christian school includes 3 organizational partners who work in service to the school’s children:

1. The Board establishes the mission, hires the Principal/Head of School, holds the Principal accountable for full classrooms, plans exercising foresight through strategic planning and strategic financial management, and provides the resources (people, money and facilities) needed for that plan to succeed.
2. The administration, led by the Principal, enrolls the school responsibly, carries out the Board’s Plan, and supports the teachers to success.
3. The teachers serve the children, deliver the mission, witness to the action of God in the lives of children, and act through their individual Professional Learning Journeys as a Christian Professional Learning Community. The staff support both administration and teachers by engaging with resources and planning for their effective deployment.

In the same way, the Christian school includes 3 human partners who cooperate 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 or 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 Principal, 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.

These 2 sets of 3 strands (organizational and human) form the Cord Principle. Together, they 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 or School 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 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 Principal. This has even led the Board to arbitrarily dismiss the Principal, even in the middle of a contract, and assume the Principal’s responsibilities at the Board level.

The Cord Principle is emphatic that the Board’s sphere is strategic:

1. establishing the school's mission and using it "as the first frame of reference when making decisions" (p. 21)
2. hiring the Principal, who is the Board's ONLY employee, who must then be supported and evaluated (cf. ch. 3)
3. setting the school's "strategic direction" together with the Principal and using that direction "for budgeting and other priorities" (p. 39) i.e. carrying out Strategic Planning and Strategic Financial Management.

There is another major consideration for the Board – in holding the Principal accountable, a key metric is enrollment. This does not imply that there is a good and a bad enrollment in terms of school size. Good schools exist at 100 students and at 1,000. No, the metric is whether the school is full with mission appropriate students i.e. there are no empty seats.

4. hold the Principal accountable for full enrollment.
5. takes a leadership role in philanthropy in that all Board members give, and give first to any philanthropic endeavor of the school.

There may, of course, be other considerations for the Board – but if it can focus and do these 5 things brilliantly, the Board members can sleep easily at night. These tasks constitute the strategic function of the Board and can be contrasted with the operations function, which the Board is incompetent to carry out. 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 are 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 Principal spends it; the Board identifies strategic priorities in the operations arena, but the Principal 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 Principal, an admission / marketing part-time person, and a bookkeeper. In very large schools, the Administration might include the Principal, a Chief Financial Officer, an academic leader of each division, an Admission Director, a Marketing Director, a Director of Philanthropy and Database Manager, an Athletics Director, and a Director of Guidance and College Counseling.

Wherever your school is, the Administration's task is as well defined as the Board's: deliver the mission with excellence, fill the school, carry out the Strategic Plan / Strategic Financial Management, be disciplined around the budget, maintain a safe school. 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

administrative duties along spiritual, financial, organizational, curricular, and human resource lines and seeking to learn every day.

Note that the second task, after delivering the mission with excellence, is filling the school. This is not the same thing as balancing the budget. The latter is, of course, a good thing. But it is not a holy thing. It is merely practical. The holy thing is ensuring that no seat is empty for the Satan to sit on. Once you determine what size of school you are to have under grace, the Administration is bound to expend every effort to achieve enrollment success – a school full of mission appropriate children.

This is an excellent model for the third organizational partner, the teachers and staff. Their primary task is to deliver the mission directly to the students / children of the school. This is not the job of the administrators. Administrator like to think that this is their job! 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 those jobs which are incredibly taxing and not always well compensated. We thus consider this partner the *most* important of the 3. The other 2 partners, the Board and Administration, have as their focus the support of the teachers and staff, and all they do is geared to that end.

The responsibility placed on the teachers and staff is glorious and daunting: “The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher” (Luke 6:40). Their character and expertise must be beyond reproach. The science teacher, for example, must understand and really know science as well as be a Godly person. The 2 aspects of character and expertise must be constantly sought for and, as for all the partners, must be expanded through continuous professional renewal of body, soul, mind, and heart.

At the same time, to ‘do’ is not enough for a teacher. The witness to the mission's action, what we would hopefully describe as the Spirit's action in the life of each child, is a key responsibility. This communication from teacher to student is a reflective communication, enabling the child to understand the working of God's Spirit within them, and the outcome of their cooperation in this faithful living through their effort using God's good gifts. Communication from teacher to parent is an awakening communication, particularly in these days of emotional distance. For the parent to know and understand how their very own flesh and blood is progressing, growing, maturing within and through God's love expressed in the teacher's actions is to appreciate, enjoy, and be with their own child as together they witness in the world as a family. This communication ensures the parent knows and understands the impact of the mission in their child's life leading to re-enrollment.

The 3 human partners form a cord within and around the 3 organizational partners and, of course, there is overlap. We must always remember that the children come to school, but they belong to their families. At the same time, the relationship between the partners is complicated by the action of the government. The government has mandated that the child be educated, although that can happen in a variety of ways – home schooling, public and private schooling. The government mandates, the parent chooses, and the child 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. 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 cf. also Ezekiel). The school is responsible for the children through the contract that is signed and because it takes 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 as well as an independent entity. The Principal relates to the government and takes a leadership role for their teachers and staff who have responsibility for mission delivery.

We would thus say that the parents’ task is to choose a school that is consistent with their ambition for their child(ren). This is usually epitomized by the school’s mission and values. It is felt through the sense of community each school nurtures. Once that choice is made, the parent does not relinquish responsibility to support the school to effectively educate the 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 Principal, who has been appointed by the Board of Trustees and who has the power to both accept and reject a child. 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 3 cords cannot be untangled without causing great harm to the child. The 3 cords must cooperate on the basis of mission and the Child Principle. When such cooperation exists, we typically experience the most powerful outcomes in the child’s life.