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THE VALUE OF AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE ON THE BOARD

The Value of an Outside Perspective on the Board

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By Marc T. Frankel



When my son, Alex, was an elementary school student at The Wilson School (MO), I served six years on the board and found the role of parent-trustee to be challenging and worthwhile. Not a single person ever asked me why I was a board member; rather, it was taken for granted that having “skin in the game” was motive enough.

But now into my 11th year as a trustee at Wildwood School (CA), I am consistently asked —by strangers on a plane, by school community members, by my wife—why. Why do I fly a few thousand extra miles every year (on top of the 350,000 I log for business) to serve on a board in a city where I do not live for a school that my child has never attended, nor ever will?

The implicit assumption behind the question is that there are no good reasons to be so involved, absent a more visceral connection to the school (i.e., alumni or parent of a student). This kind of thinking abounds even on independent school boards, and it does the school community a great disservice.

Our cousins in the higher education, symphonic music, and art institute worlds do much better than we do at positioning their institutions as community assets, such that service on their boards is viewed as a civic duty and an honor. Service on an independent school board, by comparison, conveys little cache and, to many people, even less value to the surrounding community. Few would question why someone would serve, say, on the Art Institute of Chicago or Emory University boards. The answer would seem self-evident in the value of these institutions to their regions and the honor of board membership.

As a consultant, I think it's good to give back to the sector that sustains me, but there are far more important reasons why I choose to serve on an independent school board.

1. It's intellectually stimulating. My fellow board members are among the smartest people I know. Their perspectives on issues, often different from my own, force me to realize that I do not have a lock on the truth about independent schools (or much of anything else). I learn something new every time I engage with my colleagues at a committee or board meeting.

The challenges we face, similar to all independent schools, are daunting. But, time after time I see how the interplay between diverse perspectives yields interesting and effective solutions, even if they may not generalize to the next school down the road. One board colleague in particular challenges me to think in financial terms that are alien to my usual frame of reference.

Wildwood educators would say board membership “stretches” me; that is, it is something that requires me to reach further than I might otherwise to master new material. Not surprisingly, I am the better for it.

2. It's fun. I genuinely like my fellow board members and enjoy our time together. Sure, we grapple with serious and sometimes legally and emotionally fraught topics, but the fun-to-grim ratio is wildly favorable. There is something gratifying about the process of understanding issues, blending viewpoints, and reaching a consensus.

My board work at Wildwood is the most fun I have in the independent school business. In truth, it is more fun than being on the board at Wilson where I had a child in school. Not being immersed in the daily drama frees me to focus almost exclusively on the big picture.

3. Boards are pluralism in action. Harvard University's Pluralism Project defines pluralism not as diversity per se, but *energetic engagement with diversity*. Board work is a sort of pluralism, where diverse views, energetically engaged with, come together to guide the work of a school. In my experience, what happens in the boardroom is quite the opposite of groupthink. Some perspectives blend less well with others, and the “heavy lifting” comes in finding enough common ground to move forward.

In this way, our board is a living counterpoint to an increasingly anti-pluralistic society. By constantly aiming for consensus, we force ourselves, perhaps without thinking much about it, to seek understanding and compromise. Being an effective board member requires openness to having your views shifted by the arguments of others and the capacity to approach topics with an inquiring—rather than closed—mind.

4. Board membership helps create a better world. Wildwood is a private school with a public purpose, something that may not be true for all independent schools. Its outreach to the greater community through teacher education and as a model school, and its progressive ethos, speaks to me.

I may not change the world much as an individual, but I am part of an enterprise that does effect change in ways large and small. Watch our students in action, listen to their stories at graduation, and see what we do through seminars for public school districts, and the impact we have becomes clear. I could never do that alone. It becomes an opportunity for our school to recruit, engage, and retain more non-parent trustees if we have a clear and compelling public purpose.

5. I believe in the educational model. Wildwood is a progressive school. I am drawn to the way it educates and the type of graduate it produces. I think its model of teaching serves students well. No school is best for every student, but progressive pedagogies create an environment where students can find their passions better than most. As someone who chafed against a traditional pedagogical model throughout my years of school, the prospect of a truly student-centered approach strikes home in a big way.

At the same time, progressive schools are fragile entities. There is always a pressure from parents, and sometimes even teachers, to shift toward center; to start doing things that traditional schools do, such as giving grades and more testing. Preserving the pedagogical mission is not just the head's job, it is the core of what we must do as trustees.

6. Board membership matters because the world is small. My son now lives and works in Los Angeles, where he moved after college and long after I joined the Wildwood board. So it is entirely within the scope of possibility that I may one day have grandchildren in Los Angeles, and, if so, I want Alex and his family to have Wildwood School as an option. It doesn't get any more important than this. The independent schools in your community exist because someone, years ago, thought it important to sustain them for future generations as well. We never can know in advance who those future students might be.

Of course, Alex may not stay in Los Angeles, and I must trust that wherever he goes, someone now is working to preserve a strong, progressive independent school for students she may never meet. That's how board service works: We give something knowing that somewhere others are giving something that will benefit us in return.

7. Having outside perspective is vital. Parents of current students care passionately about the school, and as valuable as it is, the parental perspective can, at times, be shortsighted, given that they live immersed in the daily drama of school as seen through their children’s eyes. I hope that my presence, along with that of my fellow trustees who are not parents of current students, balances the conversation around the board table. Because I am independent, it is easier for me to “govern above the fray.” Every independent school board needs at least one or two such members.

8. Independent education matters. As a noneducation professional, I think it’s vital that we have a diversity of options for educating children in this country. This choice, imperfectly accessible as it is, matters because it creates a fertile ground for innovation in education and has the potential to have a disproportionate impact on future generations of students. Sustaining and perpetuating this sector matters to our future well-being as a society.

Nights away from home are artifacts of the life I lead. My clients are everywhere, and an airplane often doubles as my office and bedroom. Board membership for me at a school 1,500 miles away is just as reasonable as at one around the corner.

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