

## **Characteristics of High-Performing Trustees & Boards of Independent Schools**

By Patrick F. Bassett

Many of us have seen or heard or been fortunate enough to have served with high performing trustees and high-performing independent school boards: I've been on and remain on several of such boards. What distinguishes the boards and their individual trustees from the pack? In the case of independent schools...

1. They understand and appreciate the culture and effectiveness of the schools they serve, and promote their school publicly, privately, and unabashedly at any opportunity to do so.
2. They know their first job to support their school's leader, and do so in myriad ways, including...
  - Appreciating the difficulty of the job
  - Recognizing the competing interests of the various constituencies vociferously expressed
  - Circling the wagons when necessary to do so
  - Understanding, in the words of one wise head, "The role of leadership in schools is more about climate control than command and control"
  - Knowing "[Why a School Doesn't Run – or Change - Like a Business](#)"
  - Leaving board meetings impressed by the competency of the school and board leadership to make headway even in headwinds and grateful that they are not the leader of the school having to navigate every day so many cross currents.
3. They know, apply, and adhere to best practices for boards and for individual trustees, gleaned from reliable resources such as *BoardSource*, *CASE*, and *NAIS*. (The latter's [PGPs -Principles of Good Practice](#) are available on the [NAIS website](#). First-time trustee visitors from NAIS schools can identify themselves as trustees of their school in the log-in process to access documents and data not available to the general public.)

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4. They accept and execute on their obligation to lead in fund-raising and advancement, to give at the sacrificial level for annual and capital giving, and to accompany the head of school when requested on the "big asks" to the top donors to the school.

5. They carefully engage and vet potential future trustees by assigning them as non-trustee members of board committees or school/board task forces on an ad hoc basis to ascertain if their performance matches their appeal based on other criteria.

6. They subscribe to Harvard governance guru Dick Chait's three levels of governance, the fiduciary, strategic, and generative (cf. his article [Governance as Leadership](#)); they incorporate the three levels by framing issues on the table through the corresponding lenses of oversight, foresight, and insight; and, they make room at each board meeting for agenda items from each of these categories.

When all of these stars align, we see boards that deliver value and schools that prosper, accordingly.

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