



In the Eye of the Storm: Board Chairs and Heads During a Crisis

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As COVID-19 continues to spread, impacting every aspect of our lives, independent schools, board chairs, and heads of school across the country are wrestling with complex decisions that have serious and far reaching implications. An effective board chair/head partnership is the cornerstone of a successful school, but nothing undermines that success faster than when the chair and the head are moving in different directions, especially when the school and community are under stress due to some type of crisis. Given the massive and frightening implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following suggestions are offered in an effort to bolster the good work that boards and heads can do together, even in the face of the (previously) unthinkable. As the pandemic unfolds, board chairs might consider doing some or all of the following:

1. **Establish a regular check in call for the duration of the crisis:** Given how quickly events are moving with the coronavirus, and depending on a particular school's circumstances, this call could be arranged every other day, or on a daily basis. It should be a standing arrangement, and while the call needn't be long, it should not be skipped. The call should focus on the most important issues/actions facing the head and the school, and time should not be spent on the update call on longer term questions.
2. **Focus on a few key elements in supporting the head during the crisis:**
 - a. *Stay in the appropriate lane:* During a crisis, board chairs can naturally be drawn towards involvement in operational decision making. While this is understandable at some level, it's also a trap. If the board becomes entangled in daily operations, it creates exponentially more complexity just when clarity and a streamlined response is needed most.
 - b. *Ensure the head has appropriate resources to manage the crisis:* Resources in this case include but are not limited to the financial resources to implement solutions, either interim or longer term. Resources also include human resources, and support resources like outside advisors. The better the tools the head has to deploy, the more successful the resolution will be.
 - c. *Ask (and seek to verify) how the head is managing the stress of the crisis:* During a crisis, all eyes in the school community turn to the head. It's a difficult and sometimes lonely job on a good day, and when the landscape is in flames it can

quickly becoming an overwhelming job. Help make sure the head is getting enough sleep, eating and exercising, and that he or she is able to attend to their own family. It is crucial that the chair demonstrate a genuine care and concern for the human well-being of the head.

3. **Run interference for the head:** This may require the chair to manage certain situations or personalities involving the board, but running interference also includes opening doors to outside resources that the head might not be able to access on his or her own. In addition, sometimes a board chair, especially one who is themselves a current parent, can be an enormously useful player in managing other parents. In any case, the management of any and all of these situations should be coordinated with the head in order to ensure consistency in the board/head collaboration.
4. **Follow the head's lead:** It is crucial for the school and the community to see the head leading the crisis response. This is true for the duration of the crisis, but also important in the time immediately following the crisis. If the board is perceived to have taken over during the crisis, the head's authority and leadership is significantly weakened, and the school is generally worse for it. At the same time it's vital for the board to be seen as engaged and informed. One way to manage this tricky balance is through communications. In general, the chair should take the lead on communicating decisions and actions of the head and leadership team to the rest of the board, while the head manages public communications on behalf of the school. For major announcements, it's advisable to have both the head and the chair sign any publicly issued letters or statements. In the event a statement needs to be made to the media, only the head should speak for the school.
5. **Develop agile, short term plans:** During a crisis, especially one like the coronavirus, events move quickly. With this rapidly shifting landscape in mind, it may be useful to organize some of the response planning in shorter, repeating increments. Having 3 day, 7 day, and 30 day plans is reasonable, though there will most likely be nearly constant changes to each, as circumstances unfold. These plans need to have enough focus and detail to be actionable, but not so much as to create excess weight and complexity that prevent nimble actions. These plans should be created by the head and leadership team, and communicated to the board chair and board leadership for review and suggestions. Board members should not be tasked by the chair with creating the response plans.

There are dozens of other ways for board chairs to support and facilitate the work of heads of schools, but the list above touches on some of the most immediate and impactful steps a chair might take. No crisis is easy, and the COVID-19 pandemic is the most complex and wide-ranging challenge schools have faced in living memory. With that in mind, the partnership between the board chair and head has never been more important to the schools, the students, and the families that they serve. We wish you all the best of luck in managing these unprecedented circumstances.

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