

Governance During COVID-19: Five Things Boards Can Focus On Right Now

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By Monique Davis

In these disruptive times, independent school boards are being asked to consider an unprecedented volume of critical and time-sensitive issues. Individual trustees also are affected by changes in work situations, concerns for their families, and the challenges facing the schools they serve. In this environment, future-forward thinking is often relegated to a time when the crisis is over. But there's an important throughline from today to tomorrow: Today's decisions affect a school's future sustainability, and a clear vision of the future contextualizes today's choices. Good board stewardship includes crafting a road map into a post-COVID-19 future.

This dual effort of managing the moment and planning for tomorrow can be overwhelming. To simplify the work, NAIS poses two questions for boards and trustees to consider: What should boards be doing right now? And, what, no matter the circumstances, should school leaders keep in clear focus?

Here are five ideas NAIS suggests implementing now—amid crisis—and to nurture over time so that we not only survive, but thrive.

1. Take care of the head of school. Their job just got much harder as they're balancing more needs and issues than ever before. First, figure out what your head of school needs. One way to do this is to [simply ask](#). Invite them to define what “caring” means to them. Then listen and help them get what they need. It's also important to let them know you have their back; the board and head must be a united team. The school community looks to the board for leadership, including attitudes toward the head of school. Trustees need to pay attention to both their verbal and nonverbal messages to all school stakeholders. When the car with the vocal and loud minority drives up, boards shouldn't get in. Often, these voices do not represent the majority. Instead, boards should stay calm and let the head lead and be ready to help if asked.

Trustees should remember to say “thank you,” acknowledging the head's dedication and efforts. It is a tough job, even under normal circumstances. If possible, a little lightheartedness and humor can go a long way at the right time.

2. Continue strategic and generative thinking. Working within the guidelines of [governance best practices](#), boards can stay focused on their work and let the head lead the school.

Understanding the “why”—the purpose, approach, process, and desired outcomes—will position boards for success. Trustees who understand their roles and launch collaborative efforts with clear expectations are better prepared.

Board work will be shaped by this global event, and boards’ strategic work should continue so that a school is ready to thrive in the post-COVID-19 environment. Identify and organize a strategic task force that will organize the work, manage the different phases, and design an implementation plan. Members of this group include the chair, head of school, and other leaders whose expertise or knowledge can guide the work. This may consist of trustees, specific committee chairs, faculty or staff, community members, and consultants. Keep the task force as large as is purposeful and as small as possible.

Now’s the time to organize board committees and adapt work to an online environment. Identify essential work that must be done, nonessential work that a committee may still be able to complete, work that can be deferred, and new work that might serve the community well at this time. Structure this work by setting key goals, identifying challenges, and agreeing on timeframes for this work. Assign roles and responsibilities, and determine metrics for success and build in opportunities for a celebration of the small wins along the way.

It’s a changing landscape, and important to observe the needs of your community. Do your research—assess demographic data, community trends, reports from futurists—and identify new opportunities. And throughout the process, communicate with your school community. Through the school website, social media, video, and email outreach to individuals, foundations, donors, and alumni, let them know what you are planning to do, what you are doing, and how it will impact them.

3. Solve the right problem. It’s easier to take action than it is to solve a problem. First, be sure you understand the problem. Write the problem out—on a whiteboard or a screen share, and include as many specifics as possible. This exercise helps define the issue, helps to keep the conversation from getting circular, and allows everyone to agree. Then step back and ask Is this even a problem at all? And whose problem is it? Pay attention to the words used, which can reveal attitudes that surround an issue. It is essential to consider different perspectives.

Next, get the right people involved—individuals who have direct knowledge of the problem. This can include the head, trustees, administration leaders, and specific community members. Ask, who can provide useful information? Who can help us solve the problem? Who can manage the next steps? Slow down to take time to ask exploratory and generative questions. The right questions allow us to find multiple ways into solutions. Often in our desire to take immediate action, we forget to consider all of our options. So, ask what if? If an unwanted outcome is revealed, circle back, and refine the solution to the problem.

4. Rethink fundraising. Stewarding resources is a trustee’s critical responsibility. And, financial forecasting and planning are essential now.

Schedule meetings with major donors. Be up front and explain your current need (parent relief program, faculty support, community food bank, online auction, etc.) while consistently aligning

the message to school mission, vision, and purpose. Communicate your plans to guide the school through the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future. Explore ideas with donors and ways they might help. Show your appreciation for their time and thinking and stay in close contact.

Galas are significant fundraising moments for most schools. Consider postponing instead of canceling a 2020 fundraiser—and have a contingency plan for that. Plan to keep 2021 galas scheduled for the spring. Take time to discuss and consider strategies to decrease dependence on this event. Ideally, gala-generated revenue should not be more than one-third of fundraising goals.

Create multiple online events to engage the philanthropic community. Fundraisers may include online dinner parties, auctions, paddle raises, opportunities to listen to an author, comedian, speaker, or educator. Ask for support for financial aid, for helping families affected the most, and for student experiences. Be specific in requests, and design engaging online experiences, making sure to leverage video and social media.

And now is an excellent time to begin building relationships with foundations that might support your school, its programs, and projects in the future and tracking those that are a good match. Understand how they award grants, and develop your case for support to connect with a foundation's focus—building these relationships takes time, and it's worth the effort.

5. Take care of yourself. This is a ubiquitous phrase, but it keeps coming up because it's true. Get more sleep, breathe, walk, meditate, practice yoga—whatever it takes to help you be at your best. Take a timeout and forget about COVID-19, just for a moment. You are a dedicated leader, but you do not need to focus on the crisis all the time or continuously check emails.

The work of the school is not more important than the well-being of your family, time for yourself, and the opportunity to explore other interests. Trying for balance is always a good idea. And make sure to ask for help, use all the resources available to you, and don't expect to have all of the answers. Now is not the time to go it alone.

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Monique Davis works with independent schools and nonprofits to embrace the power of strategic collaboration as a foundation for sustainability. With more than 25 years of experience on nonprofit boards, serving as both a trustee and chair, she designs strategies to lead schools through board development, governance best practices, strategic thinking, generative conversations, and community engagement.