

ISCA Case Study 6.4.25

Lines of Authority at Meadowridge School

Background

Meadowridge School is a well-established independent school serving grades Pre-K through 12. The school has a strong enrollment of 600 students and is midway through implementing a five-year strategic plan focused on innovation, inclusion, and financial sustainability.

The Head of School, Dr. Carla Benson, is now in her third year and has been widely credited with increasing faculty morale, introducing academic innovation, and building strong community relationships. However, the school is also facing increased financial pressure due to inflation, rising salary expectations, and deferred maintenance on campus facilities.

The Dilemma

In late spring, Dr. Benson informed the board that she intended to restructure the administrative team to improve efficiency and reduce costs. Her plan included eliminating the position of Assistant Head for External Affairs and consolidating advancement, communications, and admissions under a new Chief External Officer.

The outgoing Assistant Head, who is a beloved figure in the school community and a close friend of several trustees, would not be offered a new role. Word of the restructuring leaked to some parents and faculty, sparking concern and confusion.

Several trustees, including one with a background in advancement, pushed back—questioning the decision's timing, transparency, and potential impact on donor relationships. Some felt the board should have been consulted in advance. One even suggested the board should have final approval over major staffing decisions involving leadership roles.

Dr. Benson, while open to feedback, firmly asserted that staffing decisions fell within her operational authority. She expressed concern that board overreach could undermine her ability to lead effectively.

The Board Chair's Dilemma

Board Chair Thomas Liang is now in a difficult spot. He respects Dr. Benson's leadership and believes in her strategic vision, but he's also hearing serious concerns from long-serving trustees and donors. Some trustees are even questioning whether Dr. Benson's leadership style is "too corporate" for Meadowridge's culture.

Thomas must mediate the tension without blurring the lines between governance and management—or damaging the trust between the board and the Head.

Key Questions for Discussion

1. What are the appropriate boundaries between board governance and head of school management in this situation?

2. How should the Board Chair handle disagreements between the board and the Head of School without undermining either?
3. Should the board have a role in approving major administrative restructuring? Why or why not?
4. How can the board support the Head while ensuring transparency and accountability to the school community?
5. What strategies can the Board Chair use to rebuild trust and cohesion among trustees and with the Head?

Reflection Point

This case invites boards to reflect on the essential balance of trust, oversight, and respect for professional expertise. Effective governance depends not on who wins disagreements—but on how they are navigated with clarity, communication, and shared purpose.