

Governance support resources

The role of chair

The election of the chair is an annual event on our nation's school boards. What is this notion of chairmanship and what does it really mean for us?

Governance is about strategic leadership and stewardship – acting on behalf of our stakeholders. In order for us as a board to do this we need to have processes and systems in place that we implement in a planned and focused way.

We need a leader who displays the qualities and skills we believe we need to enable us to act effectively and lead our school into the future. Sadly, very little thought often goes into either the expectations of this role, or who could best take on this extra responsibility. By default this often falls to the trustee who has been on the board the longest, or in order not to offend anyone, to the current chairperson.

Before any election takes place it is wise to have the board's expectations of the chair documented and discussed. Is the board expecting a hierarchical leader or do they expect a servant leader approach? Eg:

At School we believe that the role of the chair is pivotal in ensuring the ongoing success of our board and school. The following are the key responsibilities that we have identified:

Key responsibilities of the chair

1. To provide leadership for the board

As a “first among equals” the chair is expected to lead the board whilst being mindful that the chair cannot act independently of the board unless through a delegated authority.

2. To ensure the work of the board is completed

This does not mean they are responsible for doing this work.

3. To effectively organise and chair board meetings

The chair has a key role in ensuring meetings run smoothly, trustees conduct themselves appropriately, and the board acts as a unified body.

4. To ensure the board works as a team

By including all trustees in decision making the chair is creating an environment of unity and common purpose. The chair needs to motivate trustees by ensuring their differing views are heard and individuals feel valued for the contribution they bring to the team. Once the board decides on a matter these disagreements should not be reopened or discussed outside the meeting.

5. To be the spokesperson for the board

The chair is responsible for communicating school policy and appropriate board decisions to the school community.

6. To establish and maintain an ongoing working relationship with the principal

It is important that this relationship has the essential ingredients of honesty, support, and mutual respect. The quality of this relationship is one of the most important factors in determining a successful partnership between the board and the school. Some chairs and principals find it useful to prepare a set of ground rules or guidelines, eg:

- understand each other's strengths and weaknesses
- do not undermine each other's authority
- do not break confidences
- be honest with each other
- respect and trust one another

- agree and accept the need to follow policy and procedures
- agree to no surprises at board meetings
- do not hold back relevant information

7. To ensure the principal's performance agreement and appraisal are completed on an annual basis

Boards have a variety of different ways of meeting this requirement.

8. To promote good communication between the board and the wider community

The chair needs to ensure the board has processes in place and strategies developed to enable it to understand and give effect to the aspirations the community has for its students.

If either the chair or the principal is new to the partnership then at the first one on one meeting you may wish to agenda items similar to the following:

1. get to know each other as people
2. what do you see as your role?
3. what is your understanding of the vision of the school?
4. discuss the expectations of the board and each other
5. are we each other's critical support person?
6. agree on the frequency and length of one on one meetings
7. establish when, how, and the reasons for contact to be made out of these times
8. agree to no surprises at board meetings
9. discuss the process for opening and distributing mail
10. where do you go for advice and support?

An example chair role description policy can be found in the [NZSTA governance framework](#) (policy B5).

Where do I get advice?

The *Governance advisory and support centre* advisers can also assist and are contacted on 0800 782 435, option 1 or govadvice@nzsta.org.nz