

## **Conflict along the Borders: Issues of Governance for Schools with Governing Bodies**

**PAY 01228**

**Lesley Payne**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The alienation or relevance of schools to their communities has become a major theme in current educational reform movements (Chapman et al, 1995; Sarason, 1996; McGraw, 1994; Heller & Edwards, 1992). This has led to waves of restructuring of schools toward community empowerment, site-based decision-making and the devolution of powers from central authorities to the schools themselves. The United Kingdom, New Zealand, many states in the United States of America and the state of Victoria in Australia, have all constituted localised governing bodies for public schools (Gannicott, 1997). With the new Western Australian School Education Act 1999 (Education Dept. of WA, 2000a) government schools in Western Australia will also have decision making groups constituted as School Councils. Although the powers of Western Australian state school councils are limited, council members will be drawn from the parent body, staff, and the community, and will have a voice in reviewing school policy, planning and financial arrangements, as well as evaluating the school's performance (Education Dept. of WA, 2000b).

In all educational sectors since the 1980's there has been a drive for new corporate forms of management, and entrepreneurial patterns are being advocated where organizations can be simultaneously tightly controlled and at the same time free-wheeling with the aim to create locally autonomous yet centrally cohesive institutions (Beare, 1988). Reid and Johnson (1993) see that the social and democratic agenda in Australia is increasingly yielding to an economic one. Schools find themselves immersed in a free market economy and exposed to the perils of competition. They are increasingly experiencing the pressures to become more market-driven than mission-driven. Tensions are heightened for independent schools as they endeavour to adopt more professional and effective governing processes while recognizing the expectations of community empowerment and development, which were often the basis for their foundation. Many schools have self-destructed under such stresses.

In this market driven environment the old feelings of being part of a community or of schools as an extension of the family, are being replaced by the view of parents as clients, customers or consumers and schools as providers of a service (Munn, 1993). Parents are likely to have increased and differing expectations and demand a higher level of satisfaction. On the other hand schools find that parents tend to be less willing and have less time than in the past to be involved on the practical level of the school, to "roll up their shirt sleeves" and give freely of their own energy and services (Sarason, 1996).

Schools must face not only this shift in expectations as a consumerist attitude on the part of parents replaces the more familial relationships of the past but also the challenge of a growing complexity of administration and management. Governance is viewed as pivotal in determining which schools improve and grow, and indeed whether they survive and independent school governance is already battling with these dilemmas. If the trend world wide is for government schools to emulate the governing structures of independent schools

and envy their ideological and organically grounded sense of community then examining multiple views of governance processes within schools already operating with governing bodies can offer valuable insights that are applicable to the public sector as well (Chait, 1997; Aitken, 1992).

In this study, we examine the governance processes within purposefully selected schools that operate with governing bodies. We explore the roles, structures and practices of governance as viewed by constituents and develop an understanding of the issues, processes and dynamics for the people involved. We look specifically at the tensions and conflicts that develop along the borders between differing roles and how boundaries are managed and negotiated

## THE STUDY

Several researchers have spoken of independent school governance as an area worthy of study, however, very little research has been undertaken at the individual school level looking at the dynamics of governance (Hakim, et al; Aitken, 1992; Chubb & Moe, 1990; James & Levin, 1989). The research sites for this study were purposefully chosen as schools that were similarly child-centred and outcome based in their approach to education. Importantly these schools had their origins in the period of the radical school and community empowerment movement which created large numbers of small alternative, schools here in Australia and overseas in the 1970's and 1980's. They are also schools that have been through varying degrees of stability. Their governing structures differ as to the level that stakeholders are involved in governance.

The multiple sites investigated (see Table I) were thirteen independent primary schools in Perth, Western Australia and one primary school within the Western Australian state school system termed an 'alternative' school (GAS). It is known as the alternative school because of the level of parent involvement in governance. Five of the independent schools identified themselves as Montessori schools (MS), one was a Waldorf School (WS) and the remaining seven were other small independent schools (OIS). They exhibited all six of Kane's (1992) characteristics of independent schools. They were self-governing and self-supporting to a large extent. They were also characterised by having self-defined curriculum, self-selected students, self-selected faculty and a small size. In contrast, the government school is characterised as being small and having self-selected students and staff but is not self-supporting. The school could be described as self-governing to a certain extent as most decisions are made locally. The community has some input into curriculum but they must abide by the overall policies and directives from the education department.

We chose to focus on primary schools as the level of parent involvement and the probability of a sense of community were thought to be greater than in large secondary schools. Although there are large government and independent primary schools in Western Australia, many of the primary schools are comparable in size to the independent schools. Schools of 300 students or less comprise 63% of all government primary schools and 80% of all independent primary schools (Education Dept. of WA, 2001).

This is a multi-stage study and in Stage One the interviews were with the schools' principals (some have since resigned or been replaced) or with the very recent principals of the schools. In the case of the government school as well as the present principal, a recent past principal was interviewed as he was considered a key informant. He had been at the school in question for a considerable amount of time and had also had experience with the governance of other small independent and state schools in Western Australia and New

Zealand. He is presently a principal in a more traditionally governed state school. The interviews with principals aimed to seek clarification about structures, processes and relationships related to school governance from the principals' perspective.

In Stage Two five schools, including the government alternative school, were selected for more in depth investigation of the themes and patterns that had emerged in the first stage. The school's inaugural principals and at least two early board members of these case study schools were then interviewed.

Table I. Research Sites Stage One

SCHOOL	TYPE	DATE FOUNDED	Stage One: Principals
GAS 1	State Alternative School	1983	Current Principal Former Principal
MS 1	Montessori	1977	Recent Principal
MS 2*	Montessori	1989	Recent Principal #
MS 3*	Montessori	1990	Current Principal#
MS 4	Montessori	1981	Current Principal
MS 5*	Montessori	1991	Current Principal#
OIS 1	Other Independent	1981	Current Principal
OIS 2	Other Independent	1975	Current Principal#
OIS 3	Other Independent	1975	Recent Principal

OIS 4''	Other Independent	1976	Current Principal
OIS 5	Other Independent	1969	Recent Principal
OIS 6*	Other Independent	2000	Current Principal#
OIS 7	Other Independent	1974	Current Principal
WS 1	Waldorf Steiner	1983	Current Principal#

This qualitative study uses a focused semi-structured interview format. Establishing any perspective of governance issues requires access to views from different sources, as the experience of these issues will vary for different people (Patton, 1990). Therefore, we interviewed principals, early board members and present board members. This allows a glimpse of the processes at work and contributes to an emerging theory of why some issues are significant and relevant and how they change for different perspectives, voices, time periods and contexts.

The discussion points were sent to the participants prior to the interviews. They were modified slightly for the Stage Two interviews after analysing the data from the interviews of principals in Stage One and finding emerging from the data, themes related to boundaries, identity and expectations. The discussion points around which the interviews were structured related to the roles and the structures, the difficulties and successes, and the values and vision of the school. In the second stage participants were also asked how they saw the identity of the school and whether it had changed at all. In order not to force the data specific questions about boundaries were not asked. These issues were allowed to emerge from the conversations and in the participants' own words.

## RESULTS

Data analysis began alongside the data generation process primarily facilitated by the employment of QSR NUD\*IST qualitative analysis software (Qualitative Solutions Research, 1997). The raw data from the transcribed interviews were categorised and coded and the related experiences investigated for structures, patterns and themes and what they revealed about boundaries, tensions and conflict.

## Governing Structures

The composition of school councils in the subject schools covered a spectrum from a direct democracy approach, through to representative government and appointed formats (see Diagram 1). At one end of the spectrum is one of the independent schools, OIS 2, which endeavours to run in the format of a direct democracy with all decisions, except financial ones, being made by consensus.

Our governing body in our constitution consists of any group of teachers, parents and students who meet together for the purpose of governance. So whatever comes up – it could be an ad hoc group; it doesn't have to be a continuing group according to our constitution.....It could be everyone in the school. They have to be parents of children in the school, children in the school and staff. There has to be some representation from all of those. We operate by consensus. Olivia (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

### Diagram 1. Spectrum of Structures

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The government school, GAS 1, is placed on a spectrum towards the greater parent participation end.

The school council was to basically ratify or endorse the decisions that were made by the school community. I can't remember the school council vetoing a decision made by the school community. Jeff (Principal/Former)

However, although it has a representative council made up of elected community members and staff, and this council is allowed to have a say on issues of school development and be informally directed by a direct democracy group from the community, the school is controlled overall by a centralised and bureaucratic department. The council does not own the school and has no say on overall policies. Representatives of the school council do interview and select staff, including the principal and this is more involvement than other government school councils have at this time.

Two other independent schools, OIS 4 and OIS 6, are representative democracies but incorporate a direct voice from the school populace by including students on the boards and by not delegating to committees.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Montessori school, MS 5, which has a self-appointing board of community leaders, friends and ex-parents but does not include any representatives from the current parent body or staff. The principal and bursar sit on the board, but without voting rights. The Waldorf school, WS 1, is partly representative and partly appointed as it has a board with the majority of members being nominated by other governing structures within the school. Two members represent the Foundation Council (who may or may not be parents), three are faculty nominated by the College of Teachers, and the Educational Administrator (Principal) is also a member. Three members are elected from the parent body. The office holders, however must be from the Foundation Council. This would be very similar to boards of the larger independent schools that have nominated members from various stakeholder groups, such as religious and alumni associations, and operate somewhat removed from the school community.

The remaining eight independent schools are in the centre of the spectrum in terms of the level of democratic representation for the parent body. They are characterised by being made up of representatives primarily elected from the current parent body, but also including the principal. In all cases but one out of these eight schools, principals had voting rights and in five cases an additional faculty member with voting rights was also on the council.

## **Emerging Themes**

### **Boundaries, Roles and Decision-making.**

There had been no use of the word "boundaries" in the guided interview questions. However this theme emerged from the First Stage of interviews. Participants identified the difficulties around boundaries and roles as the most destabilising factors they had to deal with. It seems blurred boundaries or misunderstandings occurring around role division are issues, despite the availability of literature on the topic, and continue to cause confusion, conflict, disappointment and frustration (Block, 1998; Carver, 1997; Chait, 1997)

But certainly all the time I was involved up until the time I left the council had been very clear about the fact that their role was to manage the schools' finances and the principal's role was to manage the educational program. That was a fairly clear dividing role. Some people at various times tried to blur those boundaries but up until I resigned it had been clear but it had altered at the end. It became a problem. Rachel (Principal/Recent)

In theory, for most schools in the study, the responsibilities for decision-making were divided between the board and the principal, with the principal being responsible for educational and day-to-day decisions and the board for the financial and policy decision-making. Interestingly, only the principals from the government alternative school saw that the council or parents had the right to impact on decisions related to educational matters.

The power the parents have to influence everything. The learning program, all the procedural matters in the school, the appointment of staff, just right down to saying we want that building painted that colour. Jeff (Principal/Former)

The other fifteen principals were clear that the dividing line should be along the educational boundary.

It seems clear at the moment because the council has a trust in what I do. It hasn't always been clear before with council trying to oversee the educational program as well. This could happen again but at the moment we have it more or less working well. Ben (Principal/Current)

Keeping the educational boundary defended, and the borders clearly marked, was mentioned as a past, present or possible problem by all the current independent principal participants, except for the principal of the direct democracy school, OIS 2. In this school, although in theory parents could have an influence, in practice it was left to the students and staff.

So we might send home for ideas to support those (*independent study contracts*).....It doesn't happen very often (*where a parent might try and change what a student has organised*) and then when it does we try and sidetrack the parent because we explain to them that we are here for the benefit of the kids and we don't think what you are doing is for their benefit. However, if you are really, really keen on something, we'd like to make arrangements for you to come in and do it and your enthusiasm might rub off on other kids. Olivia (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

The direct democracy school had been established for some time under just the one principal and as she pointed out nothing changes if she doesn't want it to because of the need for consensus.

Not really (*could any of this way of operating change?*) because the staff is on the governing body and the governance has to be by consensus so to change anything everyone has to agree. Olivia (Principal/Current)

In the initial foundation period of the schools, when trust in the principal was almost unquestioned, it was less likely to be an issue.

In my day it was a case of the only one who knew all about it was me. I mean the school council didn't interfere with anything really. The only thing they were there for was administration. Donald (Principal/Inaugural)

The early board members also saw the boundaries as generally clearly drawn.

To manage the school and its finances (*the role of council*). The educational leadership you really need to leave to the principal. Mike (Early board member)

The board would administer. Come up with policy and procedure. In conjunction with the principal but they would actually enforce them. They were like the principal's backstop. The principal was strictly there for educational matters. It was quite clearly defined. Lynne (Early board member)

The other difference is that one of the principles is that the responsibility for education is in the hands of professional educators. That is the teachers. That all pedagogical matters are the teachers province and that the parents that are on council can not interfere with what happens in the classrooms or say we are going to sack a teacher we don't like. Eve (Early board member)

Although they acknowledged it wasn't always so clear for others.

Too many parents confuse the issue of being a parent to being a teacher. Lynne (Early board member)

It was those who had been there for longer and there seemed to be a lack of clarity in some parts as to what was council and what was the college and within a school structure educational issues really touch on everything. Eve (Early board member)

This difficulty with boundaries, although particularly related to division between the roles of the board and the principal, was also with staff, particularly around which areas are educational and thus, the province of the faculty.

They (*staff*) felt that the way the budget was allocated was an educational issue rather than an administrative issue. ....It was when the staff got to the point where we had a lot of very experienced staff, who I guess, wanted more out of their work. Then they started pushing the boundaries of what they were responsible for in the school. Where they had before been happy with what they were doing, they then wanted input into just about everything. Kate (Principal/Inaugural)

Most principals recognised that ensuring clarity of role definition and defining the boundaries between responsibilities was difficult to accomplish.

That's one of the things I asked for- a clear duty statement, but still the lines between what is educational and what is overall policy is really the result of trust. Nina (Principal/Current)

Although your question has made me think how have we documented it (*the division between educational and management roles*) or have we? In another situation maybe we haven't. Dan (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

Several early board members saw that it depended on strong leaders to protect themselves.

I still feel strongly that somewhere there in that leadership you've got to have an educationalist with a good grip of the philosophy because they have got to be able to fend off the people who come in with these great ideas. Mike (Early board member)

The early board members from the school with the appointed non-stakeholder board saw the board as the necessary protection.

Like if there was any conflict in the school they could come in as the calming body.....They were able to, if people were disruptive which often happens in those types of schools, they could then ask them to go without the teachers being annihilated in the process. Rita (Early board member)

The thing is it's a cushion. Sam (Early board member)

Changing boundaries and maintenance of boundaries was specifically mentioned as problematic.

But it can also be destructive when people go beyond what their responsibilities are. And because of the structure of the school, there was really no one clearly responsible for maintaining these boundaries.

.....I don't think it matters how formal you make the structures, unless it is very clear who is maintaining the boundaries, and they are being pushed very hard by people who are dissatisfied with what's happening. Kate (Principal/Inaugural)

One participant felt the problem was organic to 'parent-run' schools where councils often can't see the boundaries to their powers and don't know how to cope with this level of responsibility.

Whereas here that craziness that happens, that snowballing negatively, it's almost like children without any boundaries. They just keep going and they get more panicked and more desperate because there is nobody to stop them. Try as you like you can only do so much and then they start questioning. Who are you to say, this is a parent-run school. They have different ideas of what parent-run school means too. Nina (Principal/Current)

Perhaps after all it is an art form and principals need to add this skill to their repertoire.

Then these lines, that are probably not lines in the sand. Like when you've got parent input or problems or suggestions, where to draw them. The art of knowing that 'wiggly' line because don't think in our schools you can draw the line in the sand and never move it. You'd be courting disaster but not to have a line or not attempting the line here or there, and they are the hardest things

in the job. Getting more sure at that. Drawing it deeper, kicking it over and rubbing it out but not being totally driven. Dan (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

### **Conflict and Trust**

Conflict, identified in the research literature as creating schisms and causing some schools to self-destruct or be taken over by others, was also a factor that emerged from the interviews (Firestone, 1975).

It went into two camps. It started from one of the parents who was definitely not thinking objectively and certainly wasn't looking at how to help the school. It almost became a vendetta. The person wasn't on council but got to a couple of council members. It just became a muscle man thing. Vic (Early board member)

And what they were doing, I thought, was actually ruining a really good thing. It was a power play. One camp off against another. ....So I guess at the end of the day they won the battle and it was really, really sad because the pawns were the kids. Lynne (Early board member)

Some of the tensions are between the principal and the governing body,

If that trust between the council and the principal breaks down, that's another area of conflict. Rachel (Principal/Recent)

Or staff,

I think that when you have professional educators it leaves them in an invidious situation when you can have parents white-anting them. When you see that and you see people with that sort of expertise really lost to us because of factional infighting, I go to schools and I weep. Sam (Early board member)

And some is between the parents themselves

You get conflict between the architect types and the builder types. The ones who just want to do it and the ones who have to see the overall picture. Dan (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

When differences can't be resolved then groups leave and the school must regroup.

What you ended up with were different groups of people just having different ideas about what the school should be doing. There was no way we were going to be able to satisfy them all and, of course by trying to, you actually end up making it worse and people start to leave. Vic (Early board member)

Yes. We had a huge split on the council last year. Factionalisation and huge repercussions all through the school with people taking sides and all of that. In the end we virtually had to start again. We had to scrap most of the council and that took a lot to do. Nina (Principal/Current)

If the school survives, then for a time at least it will be stronger and more cohesive.

Now it's the people who didn't leave as a result of that, that were already more committed. Then they felt the need to rally. It's almost like having a war to rally the people. It brings people together in support of each another. Nina (Principal/Current)

There has been little study of the dynamics of trust in schools but it emerged here as an important theme as fourteen out of the eighteen principals identified trust as an essential element in their being able to do their job and the continued stability of the school (Tschannen-Moran, 1997).

No I think that there's an acceptance that I will stuff up, that I won't always have to get it right. I don't have to be perfect. It's part of the method really. Dan (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

When there is trust and tolerance on the part of the council members, especially towards the coordinator (Principal), then things can go smoothly. This hasn't always been so. Tim (Principal/Current)

However, they also understood the precariousness of their situation.

I think me looking at other schools' models, without knowing all the ins and outs. I love keeping track of the stories of small independent schools because there but for the grace of God go I. So I don't feel any superiority to any of these stories. Dan (Principal/Current & Inaugural)

...it's very difficult to then contain the results of that pressure. To contain it in a way that is constructive; it will then become destructive. Out of control. Kate (Principal/Inaugural)

Some saw the conflict as inevitable and coming with the territory.

Sure you get the solid, really supportive, I love the school and I'm going to support it types, but you get the people who within themselves are in the business of not being satisfied with what is provided. So that maybe a part of

why you get so much conflict and also because parents are empowered in this situation. Nina (Principal/Current)

## DISCUSSION

### Borders, Tensions and Conflicts

Boundaries are essential in all systems, they define the uniqueness of an organization and provide the territory within which groups or individuals operate. These borders can be defined by physically segregated environments, the internal rituals and expectations established over time, the roles people take, and formal documents and policies. (Mitchell, 1997). In that they have survived so far, all the schools in the study have been able to contain border disputes to continue with their objectives. However, the data from this study uncovered a widespread concern with division of roles, blurring of boundaries, and changing boundaries. What were not identified were any specific strategies that defended or reassessed them periodically. Individuals were left to operate within their marked territory while often the very people they thought would help them prevent incursions would be the ones moving the lines.

The people who wrote the guidelines and had looked at the constitution in the past had always thought it was very clear but like any document people can interpret it to suit themselves and that's what happened with the last council. In the past we had thought it was very clear what the boundaries were.  
Rachel (Principal/Recent)

But if you have people playing over the boundary, it doesn't stay a game anymore. And you need an umpire. Where a team is playing a game, when they are playing they are so intent on playing that the ball can go out. Not intentionally. People say, hey the balls gone out without saying hey the ball's gone out of the court we're going to play over there. It happens unless someone calls them back to order and sets them to play again.....If you need to change the boundaries then it needs to be a fair decision by the people who made the boundaries. Kate ... (Principal/Inaugural)

In Firestones studies, (1976, 1975) the generally accepted estimate for the average life-span of 'parent-run' schools was 18months. To outsiders the differences causing conflict may seem small but early discussion often only weeds out the gross differences. It then leaves gaps in interpretation around deeply held values and disputes will move into the political realm or even into wars.

The biggest difficulty was that people can all have a dream. They are all using the same words but they have different pictures in their heads for certain words. This led to terrible anguish for some. Claire (Principal/Inaugural)

Instead of solving these differences periods of crisis often led to groups leaving rather than surrendering and, in fact, four of the schools in the study grew out of the ashes of other schools. While purging the dissenters can help by leaving more unified survivors, exhaustion and loss of manpower often outweighs the benefits of unanimity.

At the time it was actually quite thriving. ....It went downhill from there really. (*the school being discussed actually closed because of parent exodus*). So I learnt all the things not to do. Vic (Early board member)

My son was attending the school and enjoying it a great deal and then through some parent political conflict the school started to disintegrate basically. Then it finally did disintegrate and we were left without a school. Rita (Early board member)

Two critical elements identified from this study were board/principal relationships and maintaining a link and consensus of expectations with the stakeholders, particularly parents. A loss of trust and the pushing or incursion of boundaries often leads to conflict and shifting expectations. Expectations in this sense being what people have come to assume about the way the school operates or provides. These core expectations may change gradually over time without this change being recognised or acknowledged, or they may change suddenly as they are articulated for the first time and it becomes apparent that not everyone has the same viewpoint. Before such questioning it will be presumed that there is consensus from the undefinable everyone as to what it is the school values, the way things will be done and what will be able to be achieved.

So some people want their kids to be happy and safe and cared for and others have a very pushy agenda about their children being gifted which often comes from their own parenting styles and expectations for their own children. As well as having everything in between. So we could have a meeting and one group would be lobbying for more homework on a regular basis and another group will be saying I brought my kids here so they wouldn't have to do homework. So they are right at the extremes. So it kind of attracts people at the extremes because if they're happy with the average, then they'll often stay at a state school or a more conservative independent school. Nina (Principal/Current)

It attracts people who have broad ideas about education, the extremists at either end. Lynne (Early board member)

An unanticipated or uncontained crisis will challenge the core expectations held by individuals or groups. A conflict may emerge around different interpretation of roles, the drawing of boundaries or what values mean in practice. Any of these disputes can threaten the continuance of the presumed consensus resulting in reassessment, disappointment and loss of trust. Whether they occur at board level or more generally throughout the school population, they must be dealt with effectively. Failure to do seriously threatens the stability of the school. Most boards or principals will deal with these crisis or conflicts by either adapting procedures and changing aspects of the school, or by dismissing the differences as not important or relevant (Beavis, 1992). There is danger in both of these tactics. Adapting them may irrevocably change the school's identity causing further conflict. Dismissing them,

unless satisfactory explanations are given and accepted, can fail to satisfy those who feel their expectations have not been met, resulting in further unrest or groups leaving.

In a healthy organization this tension is dynamic and promotes continual dialogue (Duca, 1996). Boards and principals need to develop such dialogue, determining the best means of defining and holding the core expectations and of maintaining them. If adaptation becomes necessary, changing ways of doing things, or moving any boundaries, must be negotiated with great care and consultation because of the potential for loss of trust and consensus. Even though it was recognised by many that clarifying boundaries and roles cannot be neatly reduced to generating definitive maps by drawing permanent 'lines in the sand', the importance of making some attempt to do so was nevertheless stressed by all.

If they are defined so they become law and you can't change them no matter what then that's gone too far but I think you need to have something pretty solid. If they're not, then they won't stand up. They will become fluid and bend in the wind to suit an individual. You can get one person who can shift them without anyone noticing. I don't think you can define them too much as long as there is a process for changing them as well. They do need to be kept up to date and they do need to be tested from time to time. The people change, the desires change. As long as it's not bowing to vested interest, which is likely to splinter them, then it's healthy. Vic (Early board member)

The dilemma is that this very formalisation of roles and relationships can be detrimental, especially when trust problems are grounded in perceived value differences. The fact that values are hard to define and open to interpretation, means trying to pin them down and mandating procedures for action, can result in a greater sense of distance and differentiation promoting a generalised sense of distrust (Sitkin & Stickel, 1996). This then fosters the interpretation of even superficial differences as indicative of deeper value divergence and further loss of trust. Once distrust has set in it becomes impossible to know if it was ever in fact justified as it becomes widespread and self-fulfilling (Putnam, 1993).

Identity and expectations can be greatly challenged by any of the pressures discussed above but surviving has been most schools' first priority and only now are some of them assessing changes made over time and focusing on how to prevent the undermining of their identities. Until now, none of the schools have spent time considering if congruence with their original founding aims has been maintained, although those with a specific philosophy such as Steiner or Montessori have this as a reference point.

You have to be a Foundation Councilor to be on the executive of the Council. And they are not necessarily parents as such. The reason we have that is to protect the type of school we are. So they have to be people who work very strongly out of the philosophy. This is to protect that we don't get at any stage a group of people who just get elected on and might take it off on another direction. Fran (Principal/Current)

This may be an essential consideration for all schools as it has been postulated that misaligned or diverging expectations between board members and school principals are frequently crucial factors in the deterioration of relationships often leading to otherwise avoidable leadership changes (Page & Levine, 1996). Of the fourteen schools in the study, ten had changed their principal within the last three years. Chait (1997) has an interesting metaphor for this dilemma.

Like a tennis match, an effective board/head relationship sees yes there are lines on the court that provide useful markers about territory and position, yes there are preferred patterns of movement and interaction. Yet with practice and skill and as circumstances dictate adept doubles partners move across the lines and react instinctively to the other's moves. Woe unto the school that lives today by sharp, immutable boundaries between policy and administration, lines between governance and management must be blurred.  
(p 9)

As experienced doubles partners will tell you, it takes many years of practice to develop this level of skill in playing together. Some will never achieve any real partnership. In one of the schools studied, present parents are not involved in management at all. This reflects a concern about objectivity, confidentiality, and professionalism, as well as a desire to protect the schools from groups that may wish to radically change the vision or identity.

Moreover, in an arrangement where a body of part-time amateurs oversee the work of full-time professionals, further difficulties arise in terms of how this can be managed in practice.

It's very hard to get people who are objective. It is very hard to get a nice cross-section, balanced council and because people are making decisions in areas that they are not very expert in, some of them will react by not wanting to make any decisions and leaving it all to the principal. Others will react by being extra pedantic about everything and wanting to take over. Rachel  
(Principal/Recent)

For boards and others in the school-community, the very professionalism of the faculty can be an obstacle to equality of dialogue and good communication. As a concept, this professionalism, isolates individuals physically, attitudinally and linguistically from others. Teachers often reinforce this separation through the use of terminology, by hiding behind their authority or by erecting barricades of formality. In the schools in this study, however, teachers were seen to be continually vulnerable and often challenged.

Though we get a lot of criticism of teachers. The teacher-bashing thing, you know like I don't want my child in that teachers class, that sort of thing and yet we have the greatest teachers we could possibly have. Nina  
(Principal/Current)

Block (1998) claims the principal should be at the core of leadership and decision-making activities because he/she is well informed and can focus daily on the school's mission and operations. For several principals although in theory this was so, in practice it was a difficult role.

That's why I'm going back to EDWA. I'll probably hate being back in EDWA and the bureaucracy and everything but after six years of the opposite where I have to look over my shoulder twenty-five times before I make a decision. Just being able to make a decision and not deal with that kind of intervention all the time or the fear of it. Nina (Principal/Current)

Many of the studies and papers reviewed refer to the difficulties that result from parents with children enrolled in the school being board members (Firestone, 1975; Page & Levine,

1996; Seldin, 1998). Our study indicates that even dedicated board members can find it difficult to separate their parental and council roles. This often leads to conflict, factions and pressures detrimental to the school's stability. There is also the question of expertise and effective management.

And sometimes they just know too much. They've heard something at the board meeting and they just can't keep their mouth shut. ....The cons are that very often decisions are made on emotions and if the parent has a child in that classroom! Mary (Principal/Recent)

Anyone can stand but people with particular skills or expertise are encouraged to stand. This has been criticized but it is felt that the board must become more professional. George (Principal/Current)

Only one of the schools recognized these difficulties by formally implementing training, orientation and evaluation of the board. Some of the others did have "starter" packs or simply gave new board members handbooks or the school prospectus.

Not as such. The outgoing councilors would go through the portfolio and the principal would also meet with them and give them background on areas they need to know about. George (Principal/Current)

The task, as described by the principals in this study, seems almost impossible. Principals, must not only be skilled in a multitude of areas such as education, finances, collaboration, management, administration, industrial relations, business, public relations and so on, but, deal with many varying and changing expectations and demands. Competing desires must be balanced and principals may need to add juggling to their list of necessary skills. The empowerment of parents, with their different and changing expectations, must be managed along with their own need to know their boundaries and to act within them. All of this while being flexible, not drawing those lines too definitely and coping with long, demanding hours.

It is hard work and I can't see any solution. I think that if you are going to have a parent friendly school you are going to have to grapple with this. ....I think anybody in the job is definitely going to burn out. It's a real life style and a huge commitment. I've seen so many bad appointments and so much damage. Also having got this new job where my pay rate is going to be 20% higher than here plus car plus a house and half the work, I thought why would anybody want to go for the job. You would only do it for the love of it. It is just too much work. I was working on Saturday and Sunday for the school and that is not uncommon, and last night till midnight. I have my job and then I have recovery in short periods of time in between..... The skills and the experience that you need to do a job like this are actually at a high level. So the remuneration is not equal to the task at all and I don't think you can solve it by increasing it. I think you still need people who are very, very committed. No I didn't do it for the money. Nina (Principal/Current)

As Chait (1997) puts it, an analogy of the difficulties of such relationships is that of a marriage with the added hazard of the principal having more than one spouse at a time and over time. Boards often choose to act individually rather than collectively, resulting in a principal having to adjust to many different partners with different "rhythms, tunes, and

styles" Not only that but they have to look both ways; it is no wonder they sometimes "tread on toes". Boards may then choose to seek a new partner (p 3). It is not surprising then that principals are often left feeling overwhelmed, undervalued and burnt-out. As one board member saw it,

I think you just need to expect to lose them, to turn over a principal every five years and plan for it. Either that or have some way of letting them recharge their batteries every five years. Vic (Early board member)

Then there is the problem of confusing decision-making environments, which are perpetuated by having rotating participants and little growth toward fully matured and functioning groups.

I guess every year, the changeover, you lost momentum. That can be frustrating. Kate (Principal/Inaugural)

As one principal participant put it, it becomes your whole life and is not for everyone

But you need people who have got a special extra kind of commitment. What I've seen is that where they've made an appointment from EDWA, they've lasted about six weeks. They sort of come in, sit in the office, go home at three o'clock and go oh well what is all the fuss about it's home time. They just can't do the job with that public service attitude because it's a life style not just a job. So those appointments often don't work out. I've seen quite a few of those. They've already done the job in a much easier way so they're not going to come in and burn themselves out. Nina (Principal/Current)

The study so far has explored the difficulties and issues of school governance for the various participants but this needs to be extended to explore possible means of coping with these dilemmas and tensions. There may never be any clear cut strategies or structures to offer a "fits all" set of solutions but by exposing and considering the conflict and problems that arise, we may at least allow them to be pursued and investigated.

## **CONCLUSION**

The merits of community empowerment were acknowledged by most of the interviewees, however, the data revealed that the independent schools have been moving further from this base at the same time as the public sector is moving toward it. Although conflict most often occurred around the educational boundary and about where the lines should be drawn, only the principals from the state alternative school accepted that parents had the right to cross into educational decision-making. The other principals and the board members saw themselves, and their staff, clearly on one side and the council and parents belonging on the other. As well, the pressures to be professional and competitive were in effect moving management to the realm of the principal as well.

The difficulties that arose in determining the division of roles and the maintenance of boundaries have implications for those evaluating or establishing governing structures in any sector. The results from this study indicate the need for schools to have clear and visible goals and to create ways to maintain identity and expectations in the face of constantly changing personnel and constituents. Consensus cannot be assumed but must be regularly re-established. The setting of clear and definable outcomes that are strategic and selective but also easily discernible should help board members and principals to see over boundaries without having to cross them or feel the need to fortify them.

Most importantly schools need to be aware of the tension between the desire to be mission driven and the pressures to be market driven and consider what governance structures might best contend with these conflicting demands. It seems, from this study, that the mechanisms in place for the governance of these schools had not been considered as part of their overall identity and values. Given the interplay between organisational design and values, future work should begin to study more explicitly the relationship between values and design (Starke & Dyck, 1996). More importantly is it possible to make a change in one area without affecting the other.

The schools in this study have survived over many years despite many crisis, breakdown of trust and boundary problems. Those involved in governance need to acknowledge that conflict is continuing and will always be an issue to contend with. What is important is acknowledging the issues and designing ways to keep the dialogue open and ongoing.

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