

# THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF CHARTER SCHOOL BOARDS

by

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## Overview

Bestselling author and executive business consultant Patrick Lencioni is on to something. In his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, he explains why business teams of all kinds fail. More importantly, he explains what they need to do to succeed. Though I haven't yet met Lencioni, I credit him with the idea for the title of this essay.

The idea of writing something about school board dysfunctions has been percolating in my mind for some time. As a superintendent of schools in the private sector for twelve years and as a charter school board member the past several years, I have often had a front row seat to the dysfunctional things school boards do. Not that board dysfunction is limited to schools: I have also witnessed dysfunctional behavior as a member of other governing boards. All told, my hands-on experience—or should I say, my seats-on experience—with boards presently totals something in excess of twenty years.

During these years, I've sat through lengthy board discussions about such important things as the color of trim for new offices, how teachers should approach the controversial issue of Santa Claus, and whether a particular student deserved a detention. I've seen shouting matches and power plays that would make Machiavelli blush (and here I should note that names in this paper have been changed to protect the guilty). One board on which I served as superintendent was so divided that one-half of it threatened to sue the other half. And if such provincial behavior weren't depressing enough, I've also

seen boards that were flat-out incompetent. In another organization, failure by the board to provide proper financial oversight resulted in an embezzlement case involving the executive director and the FBI. Extreme, yes, but it illustrates how serious problems can arise when boards don't function properly.

Years of such observations have led me to conclude that boards have common dysfunctions. The purpose of this paper is to improve the performance of charter schools by helping board members understand what some of those common dysfunctions are and how to avoid or remedy them.

I'd love to claim originality of thought here, but much of what I will say has been written or said by others—often better than I could write or say it. My desire is that this brief piece will ignite passion in charter school board members to commit themselves to making their boards into models worthy of imitation. For further study, I strongly recommend reading the works of Patrick Lencioni and John Carver, both of whom are listed in the references section of this paper.

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this paper to my friend and mentor, Dr. Bruce Lockerbie. Bruce is chairman and founder of Paideia, an agency that works with schools, churches and non-profit organizations that want to improve their leadership. Thank you, Bruce, for your years of wise counsel and for being the first to provoke serious thought in me on the subject of effective school board leadership.

## What Charter School Boards Have In Common

One of my favorite quotes about board dysfunction comes from the late business genius, Peter Drucker. In one of his many outstanding books on leadership, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, he asserted that “there is one thing that all boards have in common ... *They do not function.*” (1974, p. 628) (original emphasis).

As a charter school board member that can be a hard pill to swallow. After all, you have the best of intentions, you volunteer your time and skills, and you are probably successful in your other roles in life. You may even serve on several other boards. But the assertion that all boards do not function, coming as it does from the luminous Drucker, suggests that we ought to ask ourselves what would make him say that.

One need not consult the Oracle of Delphi to understand why—especially anyone who has served on a charter school (or other) board for any length of time. The dysfunction is obvious. Think about it: What does the typical charter school board meeting look like?

First, it generally meets monthly, which is way too often. When enough board members are present for a *quorum*—or as I like to say, a *quarrel*—the meeting is called to order. The chair then asks if everyone had a chance to review the minutes and the financial statements. Most board members will then peruse them for the first time. A resolution to adopt them will be passed—though many board members don’t know how to read and interpret financial statements.

Next, depending on the order of the agenda, the board will discuss old business, new business, and other business (as opposed to just *business*). It will spend several hours rehashing and reviewing decisions that already have been made by the school leader. It may discuss adopting policies about which it generally has insufficient training and knowledge (e.g., does your school have a good AHERA policy?). The board will listen attentively to administrative presentations about field trips, essay winners or other feel-good information. Finally, as the meeting winds toward the end, no issue that any single board member wants to raise is considered inappropriate or out-of-bounds. At some point, usually near exhaustion, the board will adjourn, only to repeat the process next month, and the next month, and so on.

Some boards meet between meetings through committees. Often, these committees do little more than reach a foregone conclusion or serve as a smokescreen or end-run tactic.

What is the result of all this largely pointless activity? Charter schools which fail to perform the very thing for which they were created: *student achievement*. Some charters aren’t even rivaling the achievement of their nearby local districts.

With whom does the ultimate responsibility for this failure lie? The legal conclusion is inescapable: Regardless of whether the school is self-managed or the management is contracted through a service provider, the final responsibility rests with the board of directors.

This being the case, it’s time to consider how to avoid the five dysfunctions of charter school boards.

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## Dysfunction #1

### Managing vs. Governing

The difference between managing and governing a school is like the difference between coaching an NFL football team and owning one.

Although it's not a perfect analogy, in football, a coach is hired by the owners to run the team—and he's held accountable on the basis of the team's performance. There is no such thing as a successful coach without a winning team.

With perhaps a notable exception or two, the owners of the team do not tell the coach which plays to call or otherwise how to do his job.

In charter schools, the board governs for an owner. But who is the owner? Obviously, the board doesn't own the school as with a football team owner. And it isn't the management company, even if it owns the building. It is *the public* who ultimately owns charter schools.

Thus, charter school boards govern schools in the sense of a trust. This is why board members are sometimes referred to as trustees—people who control something on behalf of the owner. Charter school trustees have the authority to govern the school on behalf of the public.

The management of a school functions similar to a football coaching team. Management in a school has direct supervision of the teachers, staff and students. Management should possess the expertise necessary to run the school on a day-to-day basis. The head administrator should be evaluated by the board as to how well he or she is achieving the objectives of the board, just as a football coach is evaluated according to the objectives of the owner. In essence, the board says *what* it

wants; the management determines *how* to achieve it (within board-defined limits).

Whenever a board performs the roles, tasks or responsibilities of management, it becomes dysfunctional.

Consider the following example from a conference I attended a few years ago. A board member in the audience boasted to the rest of the group (mostly other board members) that individual board members in his school conducted teacher evaluations. That's as dysfunctional as it is misguided. School board members aren't usually qualified to evaluate teachers anymore than Wendy's board members are qualified to evaluate restaurant employees.

Even if occasional charter school board members are qualified to do so, performing the role of management puts the board at risk of alienating the school faculty and staff, as well as potentially inviting the entrance of a union (see Carpenter, 2006)—an occurrence the board will likely regret.

Instead of evaluating, hiring and firing personnel, choosing curriculum, selecting test instruments and reviewing routine student discipline matters—all of which are management functions—the board should prescribe the outcomes it wishes to achieve, establish (through policies) the boundaries in which the outcomes are to occur and then hold the management accountable by evaluating those outcomes.

For boards that need further help defining governance responsibilities, I recommend the book, *Boards That Make a Difference* (Carver, 1997). It unpacks the mystery of how to cease managing and start governing.

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## Dysfunction #2 Using Individual vs. Group Authority

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Too often, charter school board members mistakenly believe that the authority which the board possesses to govern the school is possessed by each board member individually. It is not. Some board members go so far as to behave as if what they want accomplished individually is the same as what the board wants accomplished. A friend who is an authorizer told me of a comical example of this: A board member ordered the school leader to install a bicycle rack because she wanted her child to ride a bike to school.

In schools in which I’ve served, *individual* board members have:

- Telephoned me at home (sometimes on weekends) to dispute student discipline matters involving children of their friends
- Spent or encumbered school funds on pet projects without board authorization
- Directed traffic and staff at school drop-off/pick-up time without being asked to do so
- Authorized fundraising
- Polled teachers for opinions about the strategic direction of the school

Quite thankfully, renegades such as these are usually just one person on a board. Even so, one board member who thinks he or she possess the authority of the board—especially if he or she happens to be the chair—can interfere with the effective governing of the entire board.

Such individuals often give di-

rectives to school leaders, form cliques, interfere with management, raise issues at the board level that arise from personal agendas, and/or pose as the spokesperson for the staff or parents or some segment thereof.

In reality, the only time a board member possesses authority is when he or she is sitting in a board meeting, as part of the whole board, or when he or she has been duly appointed to act on behalf of the board (such as, being part of a committee—something that should be used sparingly, if at all, since board committees diminish the board’s ability to hold the CEO accountable) (Carver, 1997).

In contrast to individuals running around the school imposing their own agendas, a functional board speaks with one voice. It does this only when it passes a resolution (regardless of the actual vote count).

Individual board member opinions which may be stated in board meetings are not binding on the school’s administration. How could they be? No matter how talented, there is no superintendent that can simultaneously satisfy multiple individuals with conflicting opinions.

Devising proper lines of authority and requiring that individual board members adhere to them by casting them as board policy can go a long way toward eliminating “loose cannon” problems. Also, new board members should receive an orientation which explains the governing philosophy of the board.

Lastly, waste no time as a board in removing an individual board member who consistently refuses to abide by the policies of the board to act and speak as one. Schools run better without such members.

### Dysfunction #3 Creating “Revolving Door Accountability”

*Prior to* selecting a CEO, the board should decide what is to be accomplished by the school. Board expert John Carver refers to these accomplishments as “Ends,” defined as those things that are to be accomplished, for whom and at what cost. (Carver, 1997).

Only once the board knows what it wants, is it in a position to search for someone whom it may hold accountable to achieve it.

A good starting point for determining ends is for every board member to read the contract that exists between the board and the organization that approves it to operate and receive state funds (i.e., its authorizer or sponsor). These contractually agreed-upon outcomes should be the minimal basis of CEO accountability.

What is more often the practice, however, is that a board hires a CEO without any forethought as to how he or she is to be held accountable. As my friend Bruce Lockerbie says, oftentimes the first job evaluation the CEO gets in such cases is written on a pink-slip. The board then repeats the process with its next CEO, thereby creating a “revolving door” to the school leader’s office. This is board caprice, not accountability, and it is highly detrimental to building a good school.

Beyond those outcomes which the board is contractually obligated for the school to achieve (the very essence of the charter school idea), the board should develop additional policy objectives that are consistent with the mission and vision of the

school. The CEO should then be delegated with the necessary authority to achieve them. True accountability comes from assessing the school’s performance against the pre-defined outcomes.

Besides student achievement, which is clearly the primary deliverable for any charter school leader, the board should also ensure that school finances are being appropriately handled. Every board should receive regular financial statements including balance sheet, statements of cash flow, and income and expense.

It is also advisable for the board to hire *its own* auditor to periodically review these statements and to conduct an annual audit.

If you think this is too expensive, I can assure you it is a bargain compared to dealing with the occasional crooked CEO who steals money, as happened in an organization on whose board I once served. Few of us on the board expressed concern about not receiving good financial reporting until it was too late.

And it’s not just embezzlement against which the board should guard. The board also needs to protect the school from incompetent management which can cause a school to close due to insolvency. For a sobering example of this, read the California Charter Academy story in chapter four of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* (Lake, Hill, 2005).

Finally, if you have a talented CEO who is accomplishing what the board has defined, show your appreciation to him or her. You’ll be doing your school a favor since it is well known that talented school leaders are in short supply. Keep the door to the CEO’s office voluntarily locked—from the inside.

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## Dysfunction #4 Spending Time on Administrivia

I don't recall where I first heard the word "administrivia." Someone coined it to refer to the thousand-and-one details involved in running a school. I like the word because it captures so well, the tendency of school boards to spend unbelievable amounts of time on insignificant things, or at least things that are far less significant than student achievement.

A former superintendent friend once told me that in his observation, school boards spend 75 percent of their time talking about things that really don't matter. By the time they're two hours into this bog, board members are too tired to devote even 15 minutes to talk about improving student performance. This same friend says that if charter schools invert this model and spend 75 percent of every meeting wrestling with the difficult issues of student performance, charter schools would become the most successful schools in the country.

What issues do boards waste their time on, if not discussing student performance? Well, the sky really is the limit. Here's a sample of discussions I've endured:

- Paint colors on exterior classroom doors
- Filling secretarial positions
- Content on classroom bulletin boards
- Cheerleader skirt length
- Selecting a contractor to repaint an exterior sign
- Extra-curricular activities
- Recess protocol
- Tennis court resurfacing

- Restroom usage schedules
- Field trip details

For boards seeking not to waste time on administrivia, I recommend three things.

First, establish a baseline for your board by having someone keep a minute-by-minute running summary of how the board spends its time during two or three regular meetings. Put the findings into one of two columns. One column is for minutes spent on student achievement. The other column is for everything else. Compare the two columns. If your board is spending less than half its time on student achievement, the board is wasting time on administrivia. (Obviously, there are other important topics that boards need to discuss, but they shouldn't consume half of a typical meeting.)

Second, read Patrick Lencioni's book, *Death by Meeting*. It contains some excellent lessons about the structure of meetings. Although the book is geared toward management meetings (not to be confused with board governance meetings), some of Lencioni's ideas and insights are applicable to charter school boards.

Finally, exercise the discipline of taking the long view of things. Ask yourselves as a board if "xyz" issue is going to be of any importance in five years. If it isn't, delegate it to the CEO and move on.

Student achievement will always pass this litmus test because kids in your school will live with the education they're getting from you for the rest of their lives. Isn't it worth at least half of the board's regular meeting time to discuss how well the school is providing that education?

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## Dysfunction #5 Not Developing Itself

There was a time when a school board could do its job with little or no expertise required. A hundred years ago, if you could read and cipher, you probably would have been considered well-qualified to help govern a school.

Not anymore.

These days, schools are complex organizations. The list of things about which charter school board members should have a working knowledge include, but are not limited to, the following:

- No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)
- Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Sizeable amounts of state-level public school code including your state's charter school requirements
- Financial reporting
- Contractual agreements
- Funding, building, and maintenance of school buildings
- Employment law
- Management companies
- Student achievement and performance measures
- The governance process
- Policy development
- Fund development
- Negotiating skills
- Union tactics
- The politics of school choice
- Marketing
- Media relations

The above sample of items illustrates just how complex the charter school sector is. Regardless, board members have the responsibility to know this stuff. What to do?

The functional board recognizes that it needs to develop itself. To do so, it devotes time in its board meetings and resources for that purpose. It may watch an informative program, discuss a book or invite an outside expert to present information. Board members should also seek to educate themselves outside board meetings by attending an occasional seminar and by staying informed of broader charter school trends.

This doesn't mean that every charter school board member should possess the same depth of knowledge as the school leader. That would be absurd.

It does mean, however, that board members should recognize that they cannot govern properly without a certain level of understanding. It is completely legitimate for boards to invest time and reasonable amounts of school funds necessary to acquire it.

On the charter school board on which I currently serve, the board devoted time for several months to discuss a book on governance which everyone agreed to read. We also regularly invite our school leader to educate us on various issues involving student achievement.

If you're reading this as a charter school board member, that's a good indicator you take your role seriously. But if others on your board aren't developing their knowledge through further training, discussions and reading, their negligence will impede effective governance.

The references at the end of this paper are a good place to start. Pick a resource and resolve as a board to begin spending a few minutes each meeting discussing it. This action alone would improve most boards.

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## In Conclusion

The charter school movement is one of the most significant reforms in public education since the origin of American public schools in the 1830s. This reform mechanism was launched when the first charter school opened its doors in 1992. At present, charter school laws have been passed in 40 states plus the District of Columbia. It is estimated that there are close to one million students being served in charters across the country (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005). Many of those students are low-income minority students for whom the charter school is their best hope for a bright future.

The charter idea is built on the premise that market-like competition for students will improve public education, bring costs down and close the student achievement gap. Many schools are succeeding at all three. More schools need to follow.

The movement is now mature enough that we know what it takes

to create a successful charter school. There are many examples across the country including High Tech High, KIPP Academies, North Star Academy, Plymouth Academy, Amistad Academy, and others that have developed the right combination of talented teachers, scientifically validated curricula and teaching methods, data-driven decision-making, visionary school leaders and highly functional boards. Of those aspects that successful schools share, the board is a critical component because the other things are difficult to maintain in the absence of good governance.

Learning to govern well requires effort and dedication on the part of board members. Like anything else, it is a matter of discipline and consistency. By regularly devoting time in the agenda to discuss books, articles or other presentations, board members can deepen their knowledge and thereby increase the board's overall effective-

ness. They can avoid the five dysfunctions described in this paper by defining and upholding sound policies.

The resources listed in the section below provide an excellent starting point for any board wishing to improve its effectiveness. In the case of articles cited from *School Reform News* and *Education Next*, the journals themselves are worth subscribing to.

Additionally, many states have fine charter school associations. The cost of membership is a small price to pay for the benefits such organizations provide. Besides serving as clearinghouses for important charter school information, state associations create an invaluable opportunity for schools to link together to have their voices heard. I urge every charter school board to join its state association.

Now that you've read this paper, you can begin leading the improvement of your board. What will your next step be?

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