In Search of Best Practices in Christian School Governance

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine to what extent certain governance practices exist in Christian schools in the United States. Practices that impact the relationship between a Christian school's Board and the school administrator are the main focus. The mixed-method data collection included a nationwide survey (n=645) of school administrators. Statistically significant differences were found between schools that are accredited and those that are non-accredited.

Descriptors:

School governance, *Christian school administration*, *non-profit boards*, *school accreditation*

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Like the denominations and congregations that make up the body of Christ, *individuality* is the best descriptor of the thousands of Christian schools around the U.S. A visit to several Christian school campuses or perusal of their websites might lead a researcher to wonder if any two are the same, even when comparing schools in the same community. From the big picture of their stated purposes to the nitty-gritty of policies like student dress codes, nonconformity rules. However, in addition to desiring to be known as an institution that follows Christ, these schools have at least one other thing in common: each has some form of governance that provides oversight of the school. Though the team of overseers may go by different names--school board, school committee, board of trustees, board of directors, or board of governors, to name a few— each school has a designated group vested with authority to make significant decisions that influence the effectiveness of their school.

This researcher has been involved with the Christian school movement since 1981 as a teacher and principal, a graduate school professor, a participant on several boards, and an author of numerous publications on the topic of Christian school administration. It has been his observation over the years as he has interacted with thousands of leaders and educators that the synchronization that exists between the school's governing board and the head of school is a major factor in the school's success. Put another way, the failure of many schools to develop a harmonious, productive working relationship between the governing board and the administrator is the most significant concern in the Christian school movement in this decade. This concern led to the construction of this research project.

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The purpose of this research is to examine to what extent certain governance practices exist in Christian schools in the U.S. Specifically, the researcher primarily focuses on practices and procedures that impact the relationship between the Board and the school administrator. No other relationship in a school community is as important as the one that exists between the Board and the administrator. (Lowrie, 1976.) A secondary focus in this article is the practices that strengthen the teamwork of the Board itself.

Background and Review of the Literature

Professional publications about board governance abound. Most articles are *prescriptive*— explaining how boards *ought* to function. Much of the discussion in these sources is based on anecdotal evidence from the author's experiences. Far fewer articles or texts are primarily about Christian schools and once again, these are mostly prescriptive. Research based literature that is *descriptive* is in scarce supply. Nevertheless, the following is a review of the major concepts put forth by authors in the field. Because of the paucity of articles focused on Christian school governance, this author has chosen to broaden the sources that are included by drawing from scholarly writing on non-profit boards and the governance of charter schools.

Nearly every discussion on board leadership begins with the significance of a shared mission and vision. Brian Carpenter (2008), writing about board governance of charter schools states,

> The first fundamental*, non-delegable* obligation of the board is to define why the school exists. Once a board has done that, it is capable of moving to the next two steps: prescribing the outcomes the school will accomplish and establishing what level of achievement will demonstrate satisfactory performance of those outcomes. *When a charter school board fails to figure out why the school exists, it creates by default, the problem of having no meaningful benchmarks against which to assess the organization's*

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progress toward its purpose. **There are few abdications of charter school governance responsibilities that are as grave.** (Emphasis added.)

Keenan (2007) describes the mission statement as the "task statement" of what the organization will do to ensure a realized vision. The mission statement of a school answers the question, *who are we?* It is answered with, *we are a school that*… Many organizations and schools have statements that are lengthy and convoluted. Barna (1992) explains that the *mission statement*, when completed, should be a simple, yet powerful and inspiring statement that communicates to both internal and external stakeholders what the organization is all about. He urges that the briefer the statement, the easier it is for a board and staff members to remember it. However it is worded, understanding is the key. Janet Lowrie Nason (2002) writes,

> Discerning and articulating the uniqueness of a Christian school is important for everyone connected to the institution. It defines the mission and brings cohesion to parents, teachers, and students. Integrity or purpose stands at the heart of institutional identity and permeates every facet of the school's life.

A second aspect of governance emphasized in the literature is creation of policies and procedures that strengthen the relationship between the board and the administrator. Lowrie's text (1976), *Serving God on the Christian School Board*, is a classic in this field and provides sage instruction on this point:

> A prime function of the board is to establish the basic policies within which the Christian school administrator is to manage the school. Establishing policies is an ongoing task of the board, for not all policies are set during the school's founding year…The administration of the school is the responsibility of the administrator, not the board, the

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board chair, or the board officers. Competent administrators will not work long under a board that meddles in the daily administration of the school. This approach causes divisions of authority and of responsibilities that create confusion among students, parents, and teachers.

Perspectives such as Lowrie's has led to the well accepted concept of the board hiring and overseeing one employee—the head of school. Such an approach necessitates clarity in communicating expectations of his/her job description and performance. Another expert in the field, Graybeal (2007) emphasizes that this process of oversight is hard work and must be carried out with precision and transparency. To fail to do so leaves the administrator vulnerable to attacks from individuals with hidden agendas. He urges, "It is time to do away with cookie-cutter assessment tools and call on board members to meet the challenge of being trustworthy trustees through effective evaluation of the school head." Andringa and Engstrom (1997) give the following advice on how to approach the evaluation of an organization's chief executive:

- The board and the chief executive should develop the process and timing together.
- The board should not evaluate any staff other than the chief executive.
- Use a two- to three-member ad hoc committee of skilled board members to conduct the evaluation.
- As the situation requires it, decide whether to interview staff. This should rarely be necessary and happen only with the chief executive's knowledge.
- Write an "evaluation of the evaluation" for the files so the process can be even more effective the next time.

A third facet of effective governance involves the relationship between the chairperson that leads the board and the head of school. This bears repeating: this relationship is the most

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important one in the life of the school community. "The relationship between the administrator and the board bears the heaviest brunt of satanic opposition against the school. It must be carefully nurtured, and it requires a continuous and spiritually mature application of biblical principles by each party. Strong schools are established only when the administrator and board work effectively together over a number of years." (Lowrie, 37)

A fourth point of emphasis in the literature on board governance is the concept of the board communicating with "one voice." Coley (2006) expresses the concept this way in his book, *The Helmsman: Leading with Courage and Wisdom*:

> "This requires that the board meet together regularly and pray earnestly for the power of the Holy Spirit to bring a spirit of oneness among the directors as they set policy and assess the progress of the school. Having served for a number of years on the board of governors of a local school, I have found that I do not consider myself "on the board" unless I am actually at a meeting or fulfilling some duty that the board requested of me."

Schimmer (2014) expresses this distinction of roles by using an illustration that he calls ***The Four Hat Principle***. He challenges board members to view their various activities as follows:

- o **The Parent Hat**—attending school functions with your child.

- o **The Governance Hat**—attending a duly called meeting, serving on a board committee or doing board level work.

- o **Implementer Hat**—carrying out an assignment given to a person by the board.

- o **Volunteer Hat**—serving students or faculty alongside other parents.

A fifth point is the significance of the selection of qualified individuals to serve on the board.

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Ryrie (1999) emphasized the following guidelines for Christian organizations to keep in mind when identifying, recruiting, and vetting new members:

> 1) The selection process should include the entire board, not controlled by one or two forceful members who wish to control the process.

> 2) Board member should always be on the lookout for possible new members, even when there is no immediate need.

> 3) Pray individually and as a group for the Lord's leading in the choices.

> 4) A subcommittee of 2-3 members should conduct an interview in an informal setting to discuss the prospective candidate's interest in serving. "The necessity for compatibility of lifestyle on the part of the board and workers in an organization needs to be given high priority when choosing board members."

Consistent with an emphasis on the selection of new board members is the necessity of continuously assessing the performance of the board. Most boards that do this make use of some type of self-evaluation. Keenan (2007) contends, "In order to merit the confidence of the CEO, particularly in the evaluation process, the board must indicate its willing ness to evaluate its own effectiveness. This evaluation prepares the board for its own growth and development. A strong self-assessment helps the board note its strengths and identify its challenges, possibly providing indications about the type of board members that it should add in the future."

While the preceding discussion is replete with wisdom from experienced leaders involved in the field of board governance, it is the conviction of this researcher and educator that data obtained from those currently serving as administrators is necessary to start building a scholarly case for best practices in Christian school governance.

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Methodology

The first phase of this investigation began with the researcher conducting interviews about school governance practices with numerous experienced school leaders and authorities. The request of this panel of experts was simply, "Give me your top ten most important practices a school board needs to know." The researcher filtered through a large number of potential practices popular in schools today through the sieve of concepts in the literature and the advice of the experts whom he consulted. From these filters a concise list of the most effective practices began to take shape. Several experts from around the country assisted the researcher in narrowing this list to ten practices. Three of the participants are well known leaders in the Christian school movement: Dr. Derek Keenan, Dr. Alan Pue, and Dr. John Schimmer. All three have published articles or books on the topic of school governance and are seasoned seminar presenters on the topic. This use of an expert panel was an approach that was employed in an effort to strengthen the validity of the instrument that was used in the second phase of research. (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001) There is a strong congruence between prescriptive statements in the literature about effective practices and the practices that were recommended by the experts who were contacted.

Through the review of the literature, the waves of interviews, the contributions of the expert panel, and the pilot study (described below), the researcher determined the governance practices listed in Table 1 to be the top ten effective practices to be included in the survey of current school administrators.

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Table 1.
Summary Chart of Current Practices.

1. The mission/vision of the school should be clearly understood by all the leaders.

2. Board members should evaluate one employee: the Administrator. The boundaries of his authority and the Board's expectations should be clearly articulated.

3. Board members have authority only when they are involved in an officially called meeting and should not interject themselves into the daily affairs of the school.

4. The Board should develop a close working relationship with the Administrator

5. Founding members should be willing to rotate off the Board and encourage the selection of new members.

6. Each Board member should contribute by giving financially and through his/her personal interests and abilities.

7. The Board should insure the protection of the ethical, financial, legal, and physical security of the school, including the safety of the students.

8. Board members should direct community members who have criticism to the appropriate administrator or staff member.

9. The Board should include the Administrator in all meetings except for the time of his/her evaluation.

10. The Board will conduct an official job performance review annually, and the evaluation will be based on the Administrator's job description.

Instrumentation and Pilot Study

From this list of ten practices a Likert style questionnaire was developed to collect data that might reveal to what extent these practices are actually employed by school boards. Based on the list in Table 1, a seventeen item survey was drafted in an effort to measure current practice. Also included in the survey were seven demographic categories: size of school, age of school, administrator's length of tenure, membership status in ACSI, accreditation status with ACSI, membership status in other school organizations, and number of members on the school board.

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In February 2014, twenty current heads of schools in the Southeast participated in a pilot survey for the purpose of evaluating the wording of the survey instructions and items. The usefulness of conducting such an exploratory investigation is supported in the literature (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, 116). Several modifications were made as a result of the pilot study. The researcher also gained insight into the length of time that would be needed to complete the questionnaire. The final list of statements that the participants were asked to respond to appears in table 2 below. Table 3 contains the final statement of the survey—one that made use of a *frequency* response.

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Table 2.
Likert scale questionnaire used in nationwide survey.

Respondents were asked to select the answer that most closely reflects the current practice in the school that he/she leads. The following responses accompanied each statement:

strongly agree   agree   unsure   disagree   strongly disagree

1. Our full board annually participates in board training.
2. The majority of the board have a strong grasp of the purpose and value of Christian education.
3. The board is an effective caretaker and communicator of the mission of our school.
4. The majority of the board have a strong understanding of the duties of a school board member.
5. There is a process in place for recruiting and vetting new board members.
6. Our board annually conducts a formal evaluation of the head of school.
7. A CPA annually conducts a financial audit of the school.
8. Our board annually conducts a *self-evaluation* of its own performance.
9. Our board is aware of the school's emergency crisis management procedures to be executed in the case of an intruder.
10. The board has a practice of meeting without the head of school. (Other than for his/her evaluation.)
11. The board and the head of school have worked together to develop a formal process for the evaluation of his/her job performance.
12. The chairperson of the board personally communicates with the head of school and is interested in the head and about his/her well-being.
13. Our board participates in the hiring of all teachers.
14. Our board participates in the evaluation of all teachers.
15. One or more board members attempt to interject themselves into the activities of the school outside of board meetings in ways that are inappropriate.
16. Overall, I have a positive working relationship with my board.

Table 3.
Questionnaire statement that requested a frequency response.

17. As head of school I spend time with the chair of the board… (Select the best answer)

         weekly   monthly   as needed   seldom

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Population and Sample

Following the pilot survey the researcher launched an effort to recruit nationwide participation by contacting the leadership of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), the nation's largest Christian school organization. Permission was granted by the organization's leadership and a statement of endorsement was included in the cover letter that accompanied the request for participation. The survey was uploaded to Survey Monkey and a link was distributed to school administrators through ACSI regional offices. There were approximately 2,900 schools in the organization at the time of the survey in the spring of 2014 (N=2,900). It is important to note that the responses on the survey reflect the *perception* of the school administrator about his/her board. In some cases the administrator chose the response, *unsure*. Had one or more members of the school board been given the opportunity to participate, then some of the responses most certainly would be different. The final number of respondents was *n*=646, including participation from every region in the US. The demographic information did not request the state in which the school is found in an effort to reinforce the notion that the survey was totally anonymous. Consequently, the researcher has no way of knowing if every state is represented in the sample. The survey instructions informed the respondents about the purpose of the research, guaranteed anonymity, and made them aware that they could skip responding to any statement in the questionnaire or could exit the survey at any time. The reader will note that there is a fluctuation in the number of responses in Table 4. Also, the researcher did not offer any incentives for participation to the individual administrators.

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Findings and Discussion

Table 4 contains the Likert scale responses of the first sixteen statements and the frequency response to question seventeen. The data was analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics. This researcher identified three broad categories and frames the discussion below accordingly. The first category contains five statements about which there appears to be widespread acceptance and cause for celebration. The second category consists of three statements that this researcher believes reflect areas of weakness or room for strengthening. The third category contains three statements about which the respondents' perceptions is cause for major concern.

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Table 4.
Board Governance Questionnaire: administered spring 2014.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Weighted Average
Question 1	8.06% 52	28.22% 182	8.06% 52	39.84% 257	15.81 102	645	3.27
Question 2	37.77% 244	49.38% 319	6.35% 41	5.26% 34	1.24% 8	646	1.83
Question 3	22.45% 145	54.33% 351	10.99% 71	11.15% 72	1.08% 7	646	2.14
Question 4	16.56% 107	48.92% 316	15.63% 101	15.79% 102	3.10% 20	646	2.40
Question 5	20.00% 128	49.53% 317	12.03% 77	15.63% 100	2.81% 18	640	2.32
Question 6	23.09% 148	36.04% 231	7.96% 51	27.77% 178	5.15% 33	641	2.56
Question 7	47.82% 307	25.55% 164	7.01% 45	16.04 103	3.58% 23	642	2.02
Question 8	6.52% 42	17.08% 110	19.25% 124	42.08% 271	15.06% 97	644	3.42
Question 9	11.78% 76	35.35% 228	24.34% 157	23.88% 154	4.65% 30	645	2.74
Question 10	6.08% 38	13.28% 83	3.68% 23	39.04% 244	37.92% 237	625	3.89
Question 11	12.02% 75	37.18% 232	11.38% 71	32.05% 200	7.37% 46	624	2.86
Question 12	46.41% 291	41.79% 262	4.78% 30	5.10% 32	1.91% 12	627	1.74
Question 13	13.44% 84	22.56% 141	2.08% 13	27.68% 173	34.24% 214	625	3.47
Question 14	1.13% 7	6.27% 39	2.41% 15	44.69% 278	45.50% 283	622	4.27
Question 15	6.05% 38	15.31% 95	5.41% 34	31.37% 197	42.04% 264	628	3.88
Question 16	50.72% 317	41.28% 258	2.88% 18	3.68% 23	1.44% 9	625	1.64
Question 17	26.79% 165	26.62% 164	38.47% 237	8.12% 50		616	2.28
	Weekly	Monthly	As need	Seldom			

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Current Governance Practices to Celebrate…

The data in Figure 1 reveals much to celebrate. Respondents for the most part believe that board members support Christian education in general and the school's mission in specific. Administrators indicate that there is a process for selecting board members (70%) and that there is an annual review of the school's finances (76%). <u>Overall >90% of the administrators surveyed report a positive working relationship with their boards.</u>

Figure One. Areas of strength revealed in nationwide survey as reported by school administrators.

2. The majority of the board have a strong grasp of the purpose and value of Christian education.	87% A or SA
3. The board is an effective caretaker and communicator of the mission of our school.	77% A or SA
5. There is a process in place for recruiting and vetting new board members.	70% A or SA
7. A CPA annually conducts a financial audit of the school.	76% A or SA
16. Overall I have a positive working relationship with my board.	93% A or SA

SA – Strongly Agree A – Agree U – Unsure D – Disagree SD – Strongly Disagree

Having strong agreement and focus about the school's mission is a crucial first step in developing teamwork among the board members. Practicing careful recruitment and vetting procedures are two practices that will extend and strengthen harmonious teamwork.

Current Governance Practices That Need Attention…

Over half of those surveyed report that their boards do not conduct annual training. (Figure 2) It then follows that one third of the administrators believe their boards do not have a strong understanding of their duties. And 20% sadly report that one or more board members interject themselves into the life of the school in inappropriate ways.

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Figure Two. Areas of concern as reported by school administrators in nationwide survey.

1. Our full board annually participates in board training.	56% D or SD
4. The majority of the board have a strong understanding of the duties of a school board member.	66% A or SA
15. One or more board members attempt to interject themselves into the activities of the school outside of board meetings in ways that are inappropriate.	20% A or SA

SA – Strongly Agree   A – Agree   U – Unsure   D – Disagree   SD – Strongly Disagree

The reader is invited to imagine taking a young team of athletes to their first game with little or no practice. Some will not even know where to stand or how to line up. Others will be uncertain of how their movements fit with their teammates. And then there are all the rules. What rules? It is not logical to think boards can function properly without ongoing training.

Current Governance Practices That Are Cause for Concern…

The lack of a formal, consistent, and professional evaluation reported by half of the respondents is both not surprising and very troubling. Also, a process for the board conducting an evaluation of its own performance appears to be missing in >75% of the schools.

Figure Three: Areas needing immediate attention as reported by school administrators in nationwide survey.

6. Our board annually conducts a formal evaluation of the head of school.	33% D or SD
11. The board and the head of school have worked together to develop a formal process for the evaluation of his/her job performance.	50% U, D, or SD
7. Our board annually conducts a self-evaluation of its own performance.	76% U, D, or SD

SA – Strongly Agree   A – Agree   U – Unsure   D – Disagree   SD – Strongly Disagree

The absence of a process for the evaluation of the head of school harkens back to the theme introduced at the beginning of this article: The administrator and the board must be diligent in caring for the all-important relationship that exists between them. Without harmony in the

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organization's core, there will be a weakening of the entire body. Likewise, this third category reveals an absence of discipline in the area of self-evaluation by the board that will erode the teamwork of the members over time.

Consideration of Demographic Factors

The researcher used factor analysis to disaggregate the data by each of the demographic factors provided by the participants. Only minor differences occurred when the factors of age of school, size of school, and length of CEO tenure were considered. This lack of difference was surprising.

What proved to be an even bigger surprise was the impact of the *accreditation/non-accreditation factor.* A *t*-test was run on the responses to all seventeen items and the means and *p* values appear in Table 5. Five items have *p* values that have a statistically significant difference. The comparison in Item 1 (Our full board annually participates in board training.) yielded a score with a confidence level of p<.05. The comparisons in Item 5 (There is a process in place for recruiting and vetting new board members.), Item 6 (Our board annually conducts a formal evaluation of the head of school.) and Item 7 (A CPA annually conducts an audit of the finances of the school.) all yielded scores at the level of confidence p<.001. Item 13 (Our board participates in the hiring of teachers.) produced a score p<.01. Though not statistically significant in every case, it is interesting to note that for all seventeen items, the average mean score for schools that are not accredited tended to go in the direction (higher or lower) that is less desirable when compared to the average mean score of the accredited schools. Restated, if one accepts the 17 statements as representing desirable practices, administrators in schools that are not accredited *tend* to believe these practices occur less often than their counter parts in schools that hold ACSI accreditation. This is a significant finding.

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Table 5.
T-Test for independent mean: comparison of accredited and non-accredited schools

Survey Statements	Is your school accredited by ACSI?	N	Mean	P-Value
Q1 Board participates in annual training	Yes	336	3.0446	0.05*
	No	295	3.5186	
Q2 Board has grasp of purpose of Christian ed.	Yes	336	1.7887	0.497
	No	296	1.8649	
Q3 Board communicates the mission	Yes	336	2.0774	0.06
	No	296	2.1993	
Q4 Board understands duties	Yes	337	2.3116	0.384
	No	296	2.4797	
Q5 Process for recruiting and vetting new members	Yes	336	2.1726	0***
	No	290	2.4724	
Q6 Board conducts evaluation of CEO	Yes	335	2.2955	0***
	No	292	2.8493	
Q7 Annual audit by CPA	Yes	335	1.7194	0***
	No	293	2.3379	
Q8 Board conducts self-evaluation	Yes	336	3.375	0.134
	No	294	3.4354	
Q9 Board is aware of emergency procedures	Yes	337	2.6469	0.201
	No	294	2.8401	
Q10 Board meets without head of school	Yes	326	3.9479	0.192
	No	286	3.8287	
Q11 Board and CEO develop eval. process	Yes	326	2.6135	0.622
	No	285	3.1123	
Q12 Chairman takes personal interest in CEO	Yes	326	1.681	0.381
	No	288	1.8056	
Q13 Board participates in hiring of teachers	Yes	326	3.7025	0.002**
	No	286	3.1888	
Q14 Board participates in the evaluation of teachers	Yes	323	4.3932	0.443
	No	286	4.1329	
Q15 Board members interject inappropriately	Yes	327	3.8777	0.502
	No	288	3.9028	
Q16 Overall positive working relationship	Yes	325	1.6646	0.554
	No	287	1.6063	
Q17 CEO and chair spend time together	Yes	320	2.2813	0.82
	No	284	2.2958	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research article is to examine current practices in Christian schools in the United States. The researcher's primary concerns were the practices and procedures that impact the relationship between the Board and the school administrator. Other practices were included in the data collection that directly influence the development of teamwork within the Board itself.

It is the perception of most of the respondents that their Boards understand the mission of the school that they serve and can effectively communicate this mission. Related to this practice, Boards are viewed as intentional about the recruitment and screening of new members. And the vast majority are reported to have a positive working relationship with their administrator.

However, like buildings that lack frequent inspection and timely maintenance, many boards are failing to conduct routine practices that over time may lead to the collapse of their school. Administrators report that the majority of boards are not participating in annual training, nor are they involved in an annual self-evaluation. How do they hope to improve their performance and give training to their new members? When matters arise that call for teamwork, will they possess the collaboration skills that come from training together?

The most significant finding reveals that a third of the schools included in the survey do not conduct an annual evaluation of the head of school. Even more frightening, half of the respondents are either unsure or unaware of the development of a formal process for the evaluation of his/her job performance. Here in lies the fissures that will likely cause a major chasm between the head of school and the board sometime during his/her tenure.

The discipline and refinement that come with achieving ACSI accreditation appears to impact positively the practices of a Christian school's board of directors. Of the demographic factors

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that were considered in this survey, 'accreditation' versus 'non-accreditation', was the only variable that yielded significant differences in the means. This finding should encourage a renewed emphasis on school accreditation, including standards dedicated to governance.

Much scholarly work remains to be done in this area. To what extent do the ten practices discussed in this article influence a school's achievement of its mission and goals? One research design could be to examine the board practices of *outlier*s, that is, schools of varying sizes that perform at extraordinary levels of achievement. Data collection and observation of these schools could potentially lead to the creation of best practices for governance in Christian schools. It is further recommended that school leaders conduct a series of pre-test/post-test experiments in which questionnaires similar to the one used in this project be administered prior to and following board training. This could lead to the identification of training methods that lead to a standardization of effective practices. A third area of investigation could be the interviewing of heads of schools that have been dismissed from their positions. Such interviews could reveal vital connections between board practices, administrator/board relationships, and the performance expectations of the heads of schools.

Finally, this Christian school educator urges all leaders involved in Kingdom work to continue to search Scripture for exhortations and guidance for the effective execution of one's duties. Romans 12, I Thessalonians 5, and 1 Peter 5 have been significant sources of wisdom for this servant and the boards on which he serves. These passages challenge all those in ministry to pursue humility and peace as each one participates in his/her role that the Lord has assigned to His staff of administrators and directors.

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