

Implementing the Carver Governance Model In a Christian School Setting *A Van Lunen Fellow Project*

Project Summary

This project was undertaken during the 2008-09 school year in the Calvin Christian School Association (Grandville, MI) in order to enhance the role of the board of trustees, to increase contact between trustees and constituents, and to clarify the roles of board and administration so as to avoid micro-managing by the board.

With help of a consultant with expertise in the Carver Governance Model, the Calvin Christian board took major steps toward implementation of the model, which was a significant shift in the board's operational methodology. Because the most crucial element of the Carver Model is getting the board to focus on Ends Policies [educational outcomes], the board spent considerable time discussing core values and then developed four Ends Policies and corresponding success indicators. At the end the 2008-09 year, the Ends Policies and corresponding measurement tools were firmly in place. The board also began developing Executive Limitations. Governance Process Policies have yet to be developed.

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Introduction

This project was undertaken shortly after I attended the 2008 summer session of the Van Lunen Center: Executive Management in Christian Schools at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Attending the Van Lunen Center and a seminar on the Carver Board Governance Model two weeks prior convinced me of the need to assist the Calvin Christian School Association's (CCSA) Board of Trustees in redefining itself. In the two years prior to 2008 there were several instances of micromanaging by the CCSA Board of Trustees or its officers, thus muddying the delineation of board and administration roles and responsibilities. The CCSA Board of Trustees had been spending most of its board meeting time focusing on matters that had only limited relevance to the outcomes the school system was designed to achieve.

Over a twelve-month period, the CCSA Board of Trustees made significant progress toward implementing the Carver Governance Model.

What is the Carver Policy Governance Model?

Because many people are unfamiliar with the Carver Governance Model, it is important to explain it and discuss its key components, particularly as they apply to a school board and its operational methodology.

The essential feature of the Carver Policy Governance Model is that board takes very seriously its role as **representing the owners** [parents and donors] and focuses on policies that **determine the ends toward which the school is working**. As it develops these Ends Policies the board looks at the big picture of its educational venture, especially the school's mission and values. John Carver says this about Ends Policies: "Written with a long-term perspective, these mission-related policies embody most of the board's part of long-range planning."

In developing its Ends Policies, the board resolves the largest policy issues first and then moves toward smaller issues, thus satisfying its need for accountability. Once the board identifies the ends toward which the school system is working, it then delegates responsibility for achieving those ends to the administration [superintendent]. **Ends policies are essential to an organization because they describe the organization's reason for existence.** Carver says, "It is obvious that the careful, wise selection of ends is the highest calling of trustee leadership. Focusing on ends ensures that the board tackles the difficult questions by mobilizing board time, mechanics, and concern around what good is to be done for whom and at what cost. The board cannot forget these questions, even for one meeting. The vigorous focus of this process opens up new insights into what the proper ends should be. To take a rigorous ends approach is difficult, especially since it is so contrary to our traditional learning about the nature of board deliberation. In order to conceptualize ends as they relate to your organization, you must focus on outcomes."

A well-functioning board under the Carver Policy Governance Model **defines and delegates rather than reacts and ratifies**. Many non-profit boards are used to approving plans brought to them by staff much like CCSA has been used to doing. Most Christian school boards function that way but the natural result is that boards tend to become entangled in trivia—a frustration for many gifted people on a board who are looking for and deserve a more significant role that makes better use of their talents and insights. When the board gets involved in simply approving administration plans or other trivia, it can limit the creativity of staff while forcing the board to be reactive rather than proactive.

As the board focuses on ends, it allows administration to focus on the means of achieving those ends. However, the Policy Governance Model recognizes that the board must concern itself with how the organization conducts itself. That is where **Executive Limitations** come in. The board cannot possibly define all the means of achieving ends that are acceptable. Instead, it states clearly what means are not acceptable. An example might be this: “The superintendent shall not allow employment practices that are unchristian or which show disrespect for employees based on gender, age, or ethnic background.” Similarly, in the area of finances an Executive Limitation might be: “The superintendent shall not allow the Association’s assets to be jeopardized by inadequate insurance coverage.” or “The superintendent shall not permit the Association to operate with a deficit budget.”

Once the board establishes the Ends Policies and the Executive Limitations, it monitors progress toward those ends and holds the superintendent accountable. Carver notes that “good monitoring is necessary if a board is to relax about the present and get on with the future.” It is important, however, that the board only receive relevant information and not be overwhelmed with reporting data that does not relate to the specific ends the board has defined. The reports about ends are the board’s means of holding the superintendent accountable for working toward the ends.

Finally, **the board has to define what it expects of itself**. These expectations may relate to such things as how the board will maintain contact with the constituency, the role of the chair, the function of committees, selection of future board members, procedures for conducting meetings, and planning and controlling the agenda.

Implementing the Carver Policy Governance Model

The first step in the implementation process involved securing the services of a consultant who had expertise with school boards and with the Carver Policy Governance Model. Fortunately, David Medema from Pondera Advisors, who was assigned to me by the Van Lunen Center had such expertise and was a natural fit for the work with the CCSA Board of Trustees.

In July 2008, I set up a meeting that included the president and vice president of the board, David Medema, and me. Mr. Medema explained the distinguishing features of the

Carver Policy Governance Model. With some prompting from me, the board officers agreed to present to the CCSA Executive Committee the following month the possibility of working toward implementation of the Carver Policy Governance Model.

At the August 2008 Executive Committee meeting, I presented a formal proposal regarding implementation of the Carver Policy Governance Model for the CCSA Board of Trustees. I gave a brief overview of the model and shared its essential features and noted that adopting it would be a major shift for the CCSA Board of Trustees. The board president and vice-president strongly endorsed the proposal resulting in its being unanimously adopted with minimal discussion.

The Executive Committee then presented the proposal [which now became its proposal] to the full board at its August 2008 meeting. Once again, I explained the features and components of the Carver Policy Governance Model and explained how I believed it would enhance the role of the board and make better use of the trustees' gifts and insights. The board quickly grasped the importance of mission-related Ends Policies and unanimously adopted the proposal to implement the model.

At my urging, the Executive Committee believed it would be important to get the board thinking about "big picture" issues as it began implementing the model. Accordingly, the Executive Committee designed a process for looking at such "big picture" issues over an eight-month period. Essentially, that involved devoting every other board meeting to a "big picture" issue discussion.

The first half of the September 2008 board meeting was devoted to a presentation by our consultant, David Medema, about the Carver Governance Model—another step in the board's education about it. After Mr. Medema's presentation, the board spent one and one-half hours discussing core values, which the Executive Committee and I felt would be an important prerequisite to developing Ends Policies. The board reexamined the CCSA mission and reflected on the core values associated with it. Prior to the meeting the trustees had been asked to talk with constituents to seek their input about core values. Encouraging the trustees to make those contacts was designed to reinforce another key component of the Carver Policy Governance Model—i.e. the importance of the trustees staying in contact with constituents.

The October board meeting agenda revisited the core values discussion and the board president asked the superintendent to prepare a diagram regarding core values that could be used by the board for quick reference, especially as Ends Policies were developed. More time was also spent answering questions about the Carver model.

Because of the busy holiday season and other pressing issues, the board made little progress implementing the model in November and December. In January 2009 the Executive Committee agreed to invite David Medema back to help it focus on possible Ends Policies. That meeting took place in February. In the meantime the Executive Committee members looked at sample Ends Policies from other schools, both public and Christian.

In March 2009, the CCSA administrators discussed possible measurement tools [indicators of success] that might work with the Ends Policies being considered. The Executive Committee reviewed the possible success indicators and refined the proposed Ends Policies over the next two months. The board approved “in concept” the proposed “Ends Policies” in April but asked the Executive Committee to rework the wording on a couple of them and to change some of the indicators of success.

The Executive Committee devoted time in May to reworking the Ends Policies and associated success indicators for final presentation to the June board meeting. At the June meeting the board gave final approval to the Ends Policies, the success indicators, and some initial Executive Limitations.

Project Results

At the end of one year the CCSA Board of Trustees has partially implemented the Carver Policy Governance Model. Trustees have begun to grasp the changing nature of their role. The most critical component—Ends Policies—is firmly in place and the board has begun work on Executive Limitations. The next school year will be needed to reach full implementation which will mean putting Executive Limitations in place and defining policies for how the board itself will operate. The primary reason for the board’s delay in full implementation of the Carver model lies with the amount of time devoted to other key issues—declining enrollment, merger talks, and a unique personnel issue related to declining enrollment and associated budget cuts.

Analysis and Commentary about the Project

The past year’s work with the CCSA Board of Trustees on the Carver model has been incredibly rewarding for me and instructive for the trustees. The trustees and I have learned the ins and outs of the Carver model and have realistically evaluated our current mode of operation. Though the trustees have some reluctance about giving up power, most would agree that they have learned more about our system’s operation and outcomes in the past year than in any similar period during their term of service.

Looking back, it seems obvious to me that believing our board could fully implement the Carver model in one year was unrealistic. It might have happened if the board’s attention was not diverted to other important matters, but the shift in operational methodology was perhaps too great for that to have happened. It took a significant amount of time for the development of Ends Policies and for the board to fully embrace them.

As I researched for our board’s benefit other school systems that have adopted the Carver model, I quickly learned that there are very few schools who have fully implemented the model. Some have developed very broad ends or a single end based on the school’s mission. However, many have either not developed success indicators related to the ends or have success indicators that are not easily measured. Grand Rapids Community College is one such system. Its ends are admirable, but its success indicators are too broad to be meaningful and are not very measurable. Thankfully, the Ends Policies that CCSA developed relate closely to the mission and core values of our system, and the

corresponding success indicators are clearly measurable. It will require more administrative and teacher time to measure our achievement, but the time will be well worth it.

At the same time the board was working on the Carver model, the administration and staff began working with Christian Schools International as a pilot school for a new accreditation system called “Measuring the Mission.” Interestingly, initial feedback from a staff survey indicated that most of the areas of the system’s operation that needed more attention related closely to the ends the board developed. The staff wanted more measurement and the measurement they desired will dovetail nicely with the success indicator measurement of the Ends Policies.

It has become apparent as the CCSA Board of Trustees moves more closely toward full implementation of the Carver model that there is reluctance on the trustees’ part to relinquish some of its power. This is particularly noticeable in the board’s current Education Committee. That committee’s dealing with a difficult personnel issue caused it to regress into micromanaging—the very thing that the Carver model is designed to avoid.

The availability of an expert consultant who had familiarity with the Carver model and had worked with other school systems to implement that model proved to be an invaluable resource. The consultant could say things to the board that might be viewed as self-interest if I were to say them. He could say to the board without hesitation that certain things they were currently doing violated the Carver model’s clear distinction between board and administrative responsibility. I would recommend to any school system attempting implementing the Carver model that they make use of a consultant. This avoids the impression that the superintendent is just trying to get his/her way.

As the CCSA Board of Trustees came to grips with the Carver model and what it meant for the way the board operates, I had to sit back and let things sink in. The board had been used to simply ratifying things the administration proposed. The board’s ownership of the Carver model is key to its future benefit for the system.

Knowing what I do now, if I were to design this project again I would do two things differently. First, I would allow more time for full implementation—i.e. two years rather than one. Second, I would use the consultant more frequently. I bowed to the board’s reluctance to hire the consultant for more time. Looking back, I realize the consultant could more easily and effectively have pushed, encouraged, and cajoled the board than I could do as the board’s primary employee.

Do I believe that encouraging the board in the direction of the Carver model was the right thing to do? Absolutely. Would I proceed differently with implementation? Yes, to some degree. Nevertheless, I am thoroughly delighted with the progress the CCSA Board of Trustees has made in the past year and look forward to how clear measurement of the board’s ends will shape the future of the system. I thank the Van Lunen Center for allowing me to do this project. It has been good for me and our school system.