

How Ashwood Waldorf School Is Governed, Part 2

In a recent *Leaflet* I shared the role that the faculty plays in the governance of Ashwood Waldorf School. This week I would like to share the role and responsibilities of the board of trustees. What follows is mostly taken from the packet of materials given to prospective board members, and from AWSNA's *Guide to Effective Practices*.

At Ashwood, as in all Waldorf schools teachers, administrators, and trustees share responsibility for governance of the school and the Parent Community Council shares responsibility for the community life within the school. The faculty has primary responsibility for the pedagogy—those things that happen in and around the curriculum and classroom experience. Administrators manage the daily operations of the school beyond the classroom as well as uphold the corporate duties of this non-profit institution. The trustees have primary responsibility for the financial and legal integrity of the school and play a major role in long-range planning. In practice, the trustees work to support the efforts of the teachers and administrators while balancing the need for financial responsibility of the organization. While the trustees directly supervise the school director, the governance system of any Waldorf school aims to be collaborative rather than hierarchical. The trustees rely on board-led committees to research issues and make recommendations to the board for action.

Expectations of a Trustee: Trustees are asked to attend the regular (monthly) board meetings and to serve on at least one board-led working group or committee in order to share the board's workload. Trustees are expected to provide leadership for these working groups or committees. The following are the current focus areas for board-led committees:

- Finance
- Development
- Buildings and Grounds
- Strategic Planning
- Master Planning

The school conducts several fundraising campaigns, including annual appeals and capital campaigns, and each trustee is expected to support the school financially at a level that feels comfortable to them.

School Organization: Ashwood, like all Waldorf schools, uses the basic pedagogy and curriculum developed by Rudolf Steiner, an early-20th-century philosopher. The school's organizational form is based on Steiner's idea that Waldorf schools should be self-governed. Self-governed schools, while free of government mandate, require much effort to form a positive and worthwhile educational experience for children and their families. Waldorf teachers study Rudolf Steiner's philosophy, known as anthroposophy, or "the wisdom of the human being," and apply its insights in their approach to teaching and their collegial work. While Ashwood's board is open to and respectful of the philosophical roots of the school and faculty, board work is essentially organized around standard principles of non-profit organizations and independent school practices.

Decision-making at the board level is based on a majority vote. That being said, the board strives to and almost always succeeds in achieving consensus on all decisions. When issues are complex, the board takes time to conduct research to obtain relevant information, consider multiple perspectives, and to listen carefully to the insights of each member. The board requires that each trustee attend a regular monthly meeting and work on at least one committee. This ensures the requisite continuity and cohesive understanding necessary among school leaders for effective, informed, and compassionate decision-making.

The board also asks that each trustee remain objective and keep the overall purpose of the school in mind when making decisions. When serving as a trustee, one must be able to step outside of the role of an individual and put the welfare of the school first—whether one is a parent, faculty member, or a community member.

The following excerpt from *AWSNA's Guide for Effective School Practices* addresses this issue:

Members of the Board of Trustees are expected to serve the whole school. They may not join with the expectation of advancing a particular agenda item, nor may they act as the representative of the part of the school from which they come (parent, faculty, etc.) They must have a genuine wish to serve the whole school and are expected to place their particular area of knowledge or expertise to work in service to the whole school. The Board works to support a very well defined and socially important type of education. The world would be a poorer place if it were not available. The Board must continually represent those ideals and manifest them in the school community and beyond. It is not enough to meet the standards for a non-profit Board in general; the Board's work must represent Waldorf education. The Board's work and the way in which it is achieved must reflect the ideals of Waldorf education.

The *Guide* also provides insightful questions for each board member to reflect upon:

1. *Will you be able to work in a collaborative organization in which authority is shared between the faculty and board?*

At all levels of school governance on many issues, groups find themselves asking, "What is our role in making this decision?" The Board is no exception, and Board work often requires patience to stop and determine the process for making a particular decision.

2. *Are you interested in serving on a Board which often plays more of a supportive and servant role in implementing the faculty's agenda, rather than in being the primary actor in setting and implementing policy?*

In a Waldorf school, the faculty is responsible for curriculum and pedagogy. This includes program design, scheduling, prioritizing new facility needs, identifying new staff positions, etc. The Board's responsibility is to ensure that the school works on a stable and sustainable financial basis and that the school practices promote safety and respect for individual rights. The Board works closely with the Faculty to identify Faculty priorities for the short and long term, and to either create momentum for implementing these priorities or determine the appropriate timing financially for expanding the school's program.

3. *Anthroposophy is a guiding philosophy for faculty work and decision making. Are you comfortable working in this environment?*

Trustees are not required to be anthroposophists and most are not. However, participating in a Waldorf school organization requires at least an openness and tolerance of this approach to teaching and working.

If you are interested in learning more about the role of the board or serving on a board-led committee, please call or e-mail Betsy Morrell, Board President.

-Jody Spanglet