

## **Avoid Walking the Plank, or at Least Reduce the Splash!**

By Ken Coley

The three most critical moments in the life of a school are the dismissal of a student, the termination of a teacher, and the removal of the head of school. As I discuss in chapter 9 of *Navigating the Storms*, these moments may be compared to the legend of pirates forcing a passenger, a crew member, or even the captain to “walk the plank” (2010, 123–145). We certainly try to avoid such moments, but when the separation of individuals from the community has to occur, can we reduce the splash, or impact, of these difficult situations? This article examines only one of these potential splashes—the removal of the head of school.

Most important, as representatives of the Lord, we must concern ourselves with attempting to glorify Him in our employment, as in all things. With this in mind, here are some steps that you can take at the beginning of your employment to prevent a painful separation, or at least to lessen the distraction for all involved.

### **Ask for Four Things from Your Employer**

Let’s face reality—some well-meaning folks are not prepared to craft these documents without your help or professional assistance. For this reason, putting in the time to ask for, obtain, or craft the following documents before storm waves hit the ministry would be investing time well.

**1. Ask for an employment contract** instead of working with an at-will employment agreement. In the absence of a contract document or an implied contract mentioned in other documents like handbooks or policy manuals, the administrator is considered “at will”:

Employment at will is a legal concept referred to as the Doctrine of Employment at Will. It essentially means that, in the absence of employment contracts (such as collective bargaining agreements) that indicate otherwise, employers generally may fire employees for any reasons, no reasons and even unfair reasons, as long as they are not illegal reasons. (EmployeeIssues.com)

An example of an illegal reason might be the violation of “whistle blower” regulations, that is, an employer’s firing a person who has reported wrongdoing in the organization.

**2. Include in the contract an arbitration clause** stating that a prescribed process will be followed by both parties should there come a time when a satisfactory agreement cannot be reached and one or both parties is considering legal action. There are several Christian organizations that provide counsel and arbitration experts.

One such organization is Mediation Law Group, and part of one of this organization’s dispute-resolution documents reads as follows:

Employer and employee recognize that Christians and Christian organizations are called by scripture to a different standard of resolving their differences (Matthew 18; 1 Corinthians 6). Resolving workplace disputes through processes alternate to the secular courts is often faster, more economical and confidential than the traditional court process, and tends to preserve relationships between the disputing parties.

[ACSI recommends that if your school uses an agreement regarding mediation and binding arbitration in its employee contracts, you should use the suggested wording provided by Peacemaker Ministries ([www.peacemaker.net](http://www.peacemaker.net)).

You can find this wording on the new ACSI *Personnel Resources for Christian Schools* CD (Burt Carney, editor; Purposeful Design Publications, 2009—Ed.)

**3. Request a job description** that outlines what is expected of the administrator. The job-performance expectations could potentially include such responsibilities as the oversight of the school's budget and finance procedures, the ongoing development of the professional staff, and the instructional leadership related to the academic success of students. But what about other dimensions of school life, such as relationships with the community, the spiritual development of students, and the care and maintenance of the facilities and the grounds? Without careful planning and consideration, the potential for a colossal shipwreck is on the horizon!

**4. Establish an evaluation process** that ties the job description to what the board expects the school to accomplish under the supervision of the administrator. The evaluation process should include clear metrics and formative steps to achieve the desired ends. John Carver describes the board responsibility here as *monitoring*: "Monitoring, then, is the systematic, data-based determination by the board that organizational performance complies with a reasonable interpretation of prestated board expectations. Those expectations are expressed in the board's Ends and Executive Limitations policies" (2006, 165). He goes on to suggest three methods of monitoring (167–168):

1. *Executive report.* The CEO makes available a report that directly addresses the policy being monitored....
2. *External audit.* The board selects an external resource to measure staff compliance with respect to a specific policy....
3. *Direct inspection.* The board assigns one or more board members to check compliance with a specific policy.

[The *Personnel Resources for Christian Schools* CD mentioned earlier also contains administrator contracts, job descriptions, and sample evaluations that can be used as this article suggests. You can purchase this CD through Purposeful Design Publications at [www.purposefuldesign.com](http://www.purposefuldesign.com). Also, ACSI recommends that every board and every administrator have a copy of *Christian School Board Governance: A Framework for Effectiveness*, second edition (Derek J. Keenan, editor; Purposeful Design Publications, 2007). We believe that the two most important positions in the Christian school are those of the board member and the administrator. Development of a harmonious synergy between these components of leadership is essential to the effectiveness of the school. But if boards are to “govern” and administrators are to “administer,” what does that look like in practical terms? How should these important roles be defined in order to achieve maximum effectiveness? This governance manual is designed to provide both direction and destination—direction as you clarify roles and responsibilities for the board and the administration, and destination as you move your board toward a policy-setting governance model and away from involvement in administrative duties and responsibilities. You can purchase it through Purposeful Design Publications as well. —Ed.]

### **Move Forward After Employment**

Here are some additional recommendations for developing strong ties with the board:

- Pray without ceasing for peace, discernment, transparency, humility.
- Conduct all transactions and decision making with integrity (Paul exhorts leaders to “have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Corinthians 8:21, NASB).
- Spend time with other leaders and decision makers, and listen to and learn from their values.
- Accept delays and lack of support for new directions graciously, not with a spirit of competition or contentiousness.

Make your relationship with your board one of your highest priorities. Consider the wisdom written by one of the giants in the Christian school movement, Roy Lowrie Jr.:

The board-administrator relationship is the key relationship in the school, for its quality controls the quality of the school. Neither the board nor the administrator should allow anything less than an excellent relationship to occur. That relationship is preserved, nurtured, and encouraged to grow. If it cannot become what it should after much prayer and counsel, the administrator should leave the school, or board members who cannot get along with the administrator should resign. No stalemate and no adversarial positions can be tolerated. (2004, 75)

### **Consider Your Attitude and Behavior During a Separation**

If it ever becomes necessary for you, as the administrator, to separate yourself from the school and community that you have grown to love, consider deeply the impact that your attitude and behavior will have on those who are watching, particularly the students. Paul gives a challenge, in Colossians 3:12–15, to make Jesus the ultimate measure for evaluating performance and *His* review is what's most important:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule [literally *act as arbiter*] in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

### **References**

Carver, John. 2006. *Boards that make a difference: A new design for leadership in nonprofit and public organizations*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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EmployeeIssues.com. Employment at will states.

[http://employeeissues.com/at\\_will\\_states.htm](http://employeeissues.com/at_will_states.htm).

Lowrie, Roy W., Jr., and Roy L. Lowrie. 2004. *Serving God on the Christian school board*. 3rd ed. Colorado Springs: Purposeful Design.

Mediation Law Group. Forms and resources.

<http://www.mediationlawgroup.com/pages/FormsResources> (select *Faith-Based Employment Dispute Resolution Program* toward the bottom of the screen).

Editor's note: *The Helmsmen*, also authored by Ken Coley, and *Navigating the Storms* are two excellent books for administrators or for those seeking to be in administration. You can purchase both through Purposeful Design Publications.

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Legal Legislative Update 21.2