



ARCHDIOCESE OF SEATTLE  
**CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**  
*Reaching Higher*

# Elementary School Commission Guidebook

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## Introduction

If you are reading *Guidebook for Commission Members of a Catholic Elementary School*, you probably have been asked to serve on a commission and want to learn more about the role. You probably said yes to the request because you have seen the school's impact on your own life, your children's lives or the lives of others you love or admire. You may have felt motivated to pay back what you or your loved ones received, or to pay it forward by working to assure the school can flourish into the future. No matter where you are in your personal faith journey, you must also sense how the school's spiritual foundations are what make it unique in the spectrum of educational opportunities for families today. However deeply you already understand what makes this school irreplaceable, you are about to enter even more deeply into its inner life. You will become a central figure in fostering the vibrancy of the school community. And if you open yourself to the graces available, you will enrich your own life and faith as well.

While much of what is laid out in this guidebook is applicable to any Catholic school with a board or school commission, it is intended primarily for what are called "Category I-a elementary schools." These are schools which are not just Catholic, but part of the Corporation of the Catholic Archbishop of Seattle, which includes every parish-sponsored or regional elementary school. These schools have school commissions rather than governing boards. The commissions are not strictly policy-making boards but advisory to the pastors<sup>1</sup> of the parish or parishes that sponsor them, and to the school principal.

Category I-b schools, in contrast, are high schools which were once part of the corporation of the Archdiocese but have now been separately incorporated with the Archbishop serving as their sole corporation "Member." These have boards of directors of limited jurisdiction, and a separate *Guidebook* has been prepared for them. Category II schools are those sponsored by Catholic orders and those which have always been separately incorporated.

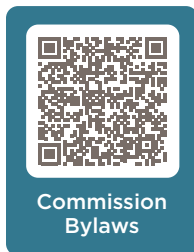
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<sup>1</sup> When the guidebook refers to the role of pastors, we include other types of canonically appointed heads of parishes, such as priest administrators, pastoral coordinators and priest moderators.



This guidebook is designed to answer the key questions you will have about the school commission and your role on it, and can provide a framework to get you started. It is a part of a suite of documents that define the commission’s work and how you go about it. Other components of that suite include: Church and Archdiocesan documents about the role of Catholic education, your school’s Bylaws, the *Office for Catholic Schools Policy Manual* and your own school’s policies, many of which you will be helping to shape. Rather than go into great detail on each topic, this guidebook will give an overview and link to other, more in-depth documents and videos. While most of the resources found at those links refer to boards of directors, you will find, with some adaptation, that most of the governance principles apply to school commissions as well.<sup>2</sup> We encourage you to follow those links as you are able and as you need them. Just as we expect our students to continue to learn and grow, we hope you set the example for lifelong learning in your own work as a school commission member.

Click or scan for more information:



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<sup>2</sup> You will see most of these links at the end of each section, and you can either click on them from your computer or scan the QR codes using the camera on your phone or tablet.

Catholic schools have a unique *charism*, a gift from the Holy Spirit which consists of a special mission and spirituality. Because we want you to access the full depth of your school's *charism*, we will begin by offering you a prayer, one that we hope you will return to during the course of your service.

## A School Commission Member's Prayer

*I have been asked to serve, Lord, and I have agreed.*

*Help me to know my fellow school commission members in their gifts, their concerns, their lives. I am doing your work, Lord, and Your love for me and for them is, above all, personal.*

*Help me to welcome conflict as a sign of the diversity in the commission and as an opportunity to reach for creative solutions. Help me to recognize this diversity as a sign of Your capacity to love us all and help me to cherish it as a great strength.*

*Help me to approach issues with an open, inquiring mind that is free from prejudice, with my spirit depending on Yours for the strength to make hard decisions.*

*Help me to listen and to know when and to whom I should listen.*

*Help me to learn to use my own gifts to promote thorough, thoughtful discussion of important concerns in our Catholic Community.*

*Help me to develop my skills as a peacemaker, to know when and how to mediate, to conciliate and to negotiate.*

*Help me to enjoy doing Your work and to remember Your promise: whenever two of us are gathered in Your name, You are with us.*

*Amen.*

*(Adapted from: The National Catholic Educational Association)*



## What is the mission of Catholic education?

To understand the mission of Catholic schools, including yours, we must understand the mission of the Catholic Church. This is a profound subject, about which much has been written. But in its simplest form, its mission is to share the Gospel. The word “Gospel” means “Good News,” and the Good News it refers to is Jesus’ message that God loves us, not just abstractly, not from a distance, but in the very way that Jesus did, as God among us. Fully receiving this love affects every part of our lives; it changes us, and it lifts us up. Experiencing God’s love helps students learn, grow and seek their place in the human family. The Church’s mission is to spread this Good News and to establish a community of believers seeking to receive and live out this Good News in practical ways by loving and serving the needs of others. People often ask, “What makes Catholic schools so effective?” The simple answer is that this Good News permeates every aspect of the school.

Not perfectly, though. Schools are, after all, human institutions. But this is where your work on the school commission can help. By bringing your gifts and your own searching, loving heart, you help assure that the school is governed in a way that invites the Holy Spirit to be an active part of this educational community. One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, speaking about you and your colleagues a half century ago, put it this way:

*“These faithful are by Baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ, and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.*

*“Thus every layperson, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, or her, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself, according to the measure of Christ’s bestowal.”*



Jesus said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Church has vested in our local Archbishop, the Most Reverend Paul Etienne, the responsibility for shepherding the people of Western Washington and for assuring that the Good News is alive in the Catholic community and the broader community which it serves. Those working in Catholic schools are assisting him in his teaching ministry. The mission of our Catholic schools is expressed as follows:

*The schools of the Archdiocese of Seattle, in communion with the Archbishop, in collaboration with parents, parish leadership, and the community, and in the service of teaching Gospel values and the faith of the Catholic Church, educate students in Preschool through 12th Grade for leadership and service to the church and society through excellent religious, academic, and co-curricular programs that strive to be accessible to all.*

Further elucidation of how Catholic schools are expected to carry out this mission can be found in the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS). These standards are integrated into a school’s accreditation and serve as a guide to achieving Catholic school excellence. The standards are grouped into four domains: Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence and Operational Vitality. A copy of the NSBECS can be found at the link below.

In this guidebook, we hope to clarify the indispensable role school commissions play in helping the local Church accomplish its mission to spread the Good News.



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<sup>3</sup>Matthew 28:18-20, taken from the *Pastoral Plan* of the Archdiocese of Seattle

## Who owns the school?

Category I-a schools are a ministry of the parish, or in the case of regional schools, the parishes, that sponsor them. Like any other ministry they are part of the parish. The parishes are part of the Archdiocese, which in turn is part of the universal Church. From the perspective of civil law, they are part of the corporation of the Archbishop of Seattle, but the Archbishop has delegated to the pastor, or the canonically appointed leader of the parish, the authority, within Archdiocesan policies, to make decisions about and manage parish assets and ministries. While the pastor has been delegated the authority over the school in his parish, the Archbishop is still responsible for the mission of Catholic education and Paragraphs 803 to 806 in Canon Law, give him clear responsibility to “watch over and visit” each of the schools in his territory to assure that schools are faithful to their Catholic educational mission. Part of his responsibility is exercised through the Superintendent for Catholic Schools and the Office for Catholic Schools (OCS). In summary, the principal manages the school, and is supervised by the pastor (or canonically appointed leader of the parish), acting within the policies set by the Archbishop, which are administered on his behalf by the Superintendent and the OCS staff.





## What is a school commission?

A school commission is a type of board, and boards are essentially a means of connecting an organization to the people it serves. In the case of a school, they help it hear the needs of the community and they help the community hear the school's needs for support. Boards take several forms, from those that have the authority to make or approve policies for the school to boards in place to advise those who have the authority to set policy. School commissions fit into the latter category. Since those coming onto school commissions may have experience with other Catholic school boards, let's take a moment to look at the different kinds of boards found in Catholic schools.

### Governing boards

Governing boards are empowered by a school's bylaws to set policies that shape how the school is run. As discussed above, a corporation member, like the Archbishop or a sponsoring religious order, may have reserved powers, in which case the governing board is called a "board of limited jurisdiction." Most high schools in the Seattle Archdiocese are separate corporations which have governing boards of limited jurisdiction. For instance, they have the authority to hire, supervise and remove the chief administrator, although this is generally subject to approval by the corporation member. Even in their authority to supervise the chief administrator, governing boards will generally delegate all operational authority to her or him, and limit themselves to high-level supervision and formulating policies to guide the administration.

### Advisory boards

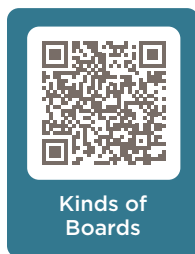
As the name implies, these boards do not have governance authority. They are in place to provide a broader range of perspectives and expertise to those who make policy decisions for an organization. In some cases, this may be another board which itself is a governing board. In other cases, it may be the CEO of the organization. In the case of advisory boards, the duly authorized decision-maker will decide what matters to seek advice on and whether to follow that advice. In parishes, the duly authorized decision-maker is the pastor, and the principal as his delegate. Our school commissions are sometimes referred to as advisory boards, but they are not purely advisory because of the designated role they play in the policy-making process. They should more properly be referred to as consultative boards.



## Consultative boards

These are similar to advisory boards, but organizational bylaws or policy stipulate that they be consulted on specified matters. The organization's decision-makers must listen to and consider their recommendations even though they are not obligated to follow them. This is common in Catholic schools which are wholly owned by their dioceses, such as the parish schools of this Archdiocese. Since they are not separate corporations, they do not have true governing boards. Rather they have school commissions, which advise both the school principals and the pastors of the sponsoring parishes. In this Archdiocese, school commissions have been assigned areas, such as development and strategic planning, where they must be consulted. Even in those areas where commissions' input is only advisory, wise pastors and principals take care to consult them on important school issues.

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It is also important to distinguish how a commission for a Catholic school may be different from boards for other types of organizations. A Catholic school commission operates in many ways and has many responsibilities in common with a for-profit board. Both are groups of people in place to assure the effectiveness and stability of their organizations. But while a for-profit board is elected by and responsible to its shareholders, a Catholic school commission is responsible to the pastor, the principal, the Archdiocese and, through them, ultimately the people it serves. The school doesn't have shareholders, but it does have stakeholders, and the school commission must represent their interests. The mission of the for-profit board is to maximize the market value of the shareholders' stock. The school commission's responsibility, in contrast, is to help the school optimize its accomplishment of its apostolic mission on behalf of the stakeholders of Catholic education. And whereas the corporate board is elected by those who are shareholders of record, the commission members of Category I-a schools are chosen by the pastor, generally based on recommendations from the principal and school commission.



Catholic school commissions are also different than public school boards. Like Catholic schools, public schools have mission statements, but because the members of these boards are elected by the registered voters within the school district, they must be responsive to the desires of a majority of voters, even if those desires are in conflict with the schools' stated mission. Catholic commissions are accountable to the pastor, whose sole concern is whether the school is accomplishing its Catholic educational mission.

Public School Boards	Catholic School Commissions
Hire administrator.	May be asked to serve on a Search Committee to recommend an administrative candidate to pastor for hiring.
Evaluate the administrator.	Give input regarding the administrator as part of the evaluation.
Enact policy for system.	Recommend policy to the principal. Are responsible for supporting the established policy.
Make regulations regarding the running of the school.	May be asked for opinions and advice; the administrator makes regulations. Are responsible for supporting the principal's rules.
Have the final word with respect to decisions regarding the school.	The pastor, who delegates most decision-making authority to the principal, in consultation with the Supt. of Catholic Schools, has the final word regarding the decisions affecting the school. School commission is responsible for supporting the decisions made by the proper authorities.

The biggest difference between a Catholic school commission and either the for-profit corporation board or the public school board is that the latter two must exclude the spiritual dimension from consideration and deliberations. For Catholic school commissions, the spiritual mission is at the core of every decision they make. Even though it deals with many of the same financial and organizational questions as the other boards, and often applies the same solutions, it must always view them through the lens of how best to spread the Good News of God's abiding love for His children.



## What is the school commission’s role in Category I-a elementary schools?

Over the years, the Church has continued to articulate Catholic Social Teaching as a concrete way to make God’s love more present in the world. Two important principles from that tradition are important for how school commissions work. The first is *solidarity*. Solidarity underscores the communal dimension of human life. To meet the challenges we face as a human family, we must draw together and support each other and, at times, challenge each other to be our best selves. As Catholics, we look to our pastoral leaders and the wisdom passed down through scripture and tradition to draw us together in our common search for the good. This solidarity is sometimes at odds with the high value our culture places on individual sovereignty.

Catholic teaching also places a high value on the dignity of the individual human being. The concept that balances the collective dimension we find in *solidarity* is *subsidiarity*. Subsidiarity posits that there is an appropriate level at which decisions should be made. Although the notion of “hierarchy” may suggest that the Church is most concerned with centralizing authority, in fact it strives wherever appropriate to have authority exercised at the lowest possible level—that is, the level closest to those affected by the decisions made.

The principles of *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* are important for Catholic school commissions because they are part of a larger structure for supporting Catholic education. School commissions contribute to decisions that affect both the work of the Church as a whole and the individuals in the communities they serve. A good way to understand the school commission’s role is as part of a chain of care. Let’s reflect for a moment on how that chain of care works to support students in our Catholic schools.

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## The chain of care

We said earlier that the underlying mission of the Catholic Church is to spread the message of God's immense love for us. In Catholic schools, we want students to experience the loving, creative presence of God in the world and learn how to respond to that love in their own lives. They experience this to some extent through their studies, but the primary place where that happens is in their relationships—relationships with each other, but most powerfully their relationship with their teachers. In the care that Catholic school teachers show them, students experience God's loving, creative presence in their lives.

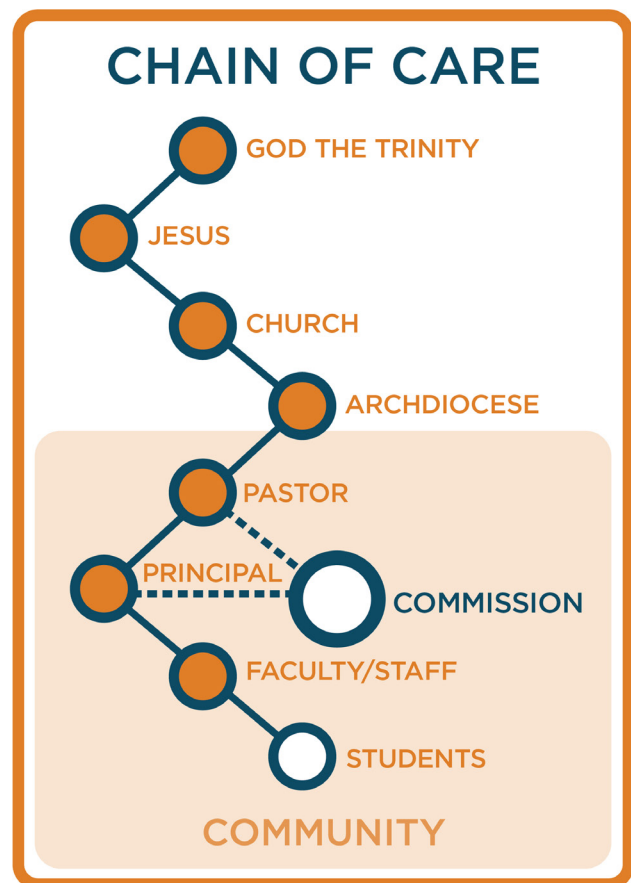
Our teachers are very good at reflecting God's love in the care they show our students. But as good as they are, they do not by themselves generate the grace needed to sustain this. Our teachers also need to experience God's loving, creative presence in their relationships, and for them, a key relationship is with the administrators who support and guide them. If they do not experience God's love through that relationship, it will be difficult to sustain the love and care the students need to experience through them.

We are also blessed to have dedicated, faith-filled administrators in our schools. But they also need to experience God's loving, creative presence in their relationship with the pastor. If pastors fail to support their principals, appreciate their accomplishments, understand their challenges or provide constructive direction, then it will be difficult for principals to reflect God's loving, creative presence in the leadership they provide to school staff. A key relationship for both the pastor and the principal is with the school commission. The school commission represents the people of God whom the school is serving. If the school commission supports, encourages and honestly and lovingly advises the pastor and principal, they will be strengthened for the leadership challenges they face. If principals dread school commission meetings or phone calls from members because they don't feel trusted and supported by them, they simply cannot sustain the grace-filled leadership that sets the tone for the school.



School commissions can find their role challenging. Because they are advisory and they meet only once a month, it can be easy for them to be disengaged and let the pastor and principal “do what they want.” This is not healthy because the perspective and skills they bring as members of the school community are lost. Because school commissions have important responsibilities on behalf of the Church and the school community, it can also be easy for them to feel too much responsibility. They can devolve into an interest group trying to pressure the principal to make certain decisions. The sweet spot for school commissions is to remain engaged, but recognize that they are part of a leadership team in which the principal is the educational leader and the pastor is the ultimate decision-maker.

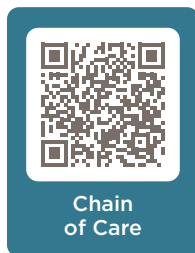
School commissions should be meeting monthly, a minimum of 10 times per year, with meetings lasting 1.5 to 2 hours, which often means packed agendas. Even if the commission is meeting regularly, it can be difficult to remember that the most important thing they can give their schools is love and support for their administrative leaders, who often feel they are facing daunting challenges alone. For them to provide the level of care needed, school commissions also need to experience God’s loving, creative presence in their work, and a critical relationship for them is with the Archdiocese. The Archbishop provides support for school commissions, as well as the pastor and principal. He does this primarily through the Office for Catholic Schools, whose staff is there to provide knowledge, guidance and encouragement. The OCS staff in turn needs to experience God’s loving, creative presence from the Archbishop and their colleagues at the chancery, who must experience it in their relationship with the universal Church, which ultimately must experience it from Jesus himself, who promised to be with the Church always. Even Jesus is part of a community of divine love which we call the Trinity.



While they may not realize it, what students experience in a Catholic school is brought to them by a whole series of people, many of whom they never see. The people on this chain are supporting each other to support the students' education and help them experience the loving, creative presence of God in their lives. This is the *chain of care*, and the school commission is a critical link in the middle of the chain.

The chain of care is how Catholic schools live out the Catholic Social Teaching principles of both *solidarity* and *subsidiarity*. The chain as a whole must be alive and strong (solidarity), but the role of each individual link must also be clear and respected (subsidiarity). Decision-makers at each level must not take away decisions proper to the levels below or above them. School commissions strengthen this chain by providing thoughtful and honest input to help the principal and pastor provide life-giving leadership to the school community.

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## How does the school commission collaborate with others?

Successful collaboration across the chain of care requires that participants pay special attention to the relationships adjacent to them. This means, for instance, that the school commission will cultivate a strong relationship with pastor and the principal. If, on the other hand, the school commission cultivates a strong relationship with the faculty, but fails to connect foremost with their principal, it actually weakens the chain of care. Let's consider the four most important collaborative relationships for a school commission.

### Relationship with the Principal

This is the most important relationship for the school commission. While it interacts in important ways with the pastor and other councils in the parish, because its focus is the school, its most active working relationship is with the principal. It can be said that its main task is to help the principal be successful in the fullest sense possible. This person was chosen because she or he has the education, experience and skill to lead and manage school operations. The school commission supports her or him in their responsibility for managing the school according to general parameters defined by the Mission Statement, Bylaws, Church teaching and Archdiocesan policy. The chief administrator in turn delegates to the other administrators and staff management of specific areas where their competence is appropriate. The school commission's work on behalf of the school falls into three distinct roles, and it is important to understand which role of the commission or a commission member is appropriate for each situation.





## Helping formulate policy

The most important role the school commission plays is helping to formulate governance-level policies. Because the pastor is the chief administrator, the commission is in a sense assisting the pastor in this role. But generally, the commission will be working with the principal to deliberate and draft these policies. Generally, it is best that the commission work at the level of governance policies, general guardrails that assure the effectiveness and sustainability of the school's ability to accomplish its mission. Actual operations of the school, should be left to the principal. What constitutes "governance-level" versus "operational" policy can be hard to define. While there is no clear line, some words can help guide:

Governance	Administration
Strategic	Tactical
Vision	Implementation
Policy	Operations

Examples of governance-level issues would be the school's mission statement, strategic plan, campus master plan, launching a capital campaign and tuition levels. Examples of operational issues would include hiring decisions, discipline and budget expenditures. Defining how these terms play out is done over time by robust communication between the commission and the principal. They are not meant to imply that the principal is not expected to think strategically or have a vision or formulate school policies. But ultimately these are leadership levels where the school commission can be most useful. If the school commission finds itself drifting into tactics, implementation and operations, it compromises its own value. Even if it has skills and knowledge in these areas, the collective nature, meeting frequency and bandwidth of a school commission will cause it to be inconsistent and disruptive if it drifts into operational issues. Rather, the school commission's role in policy-making should center on the what—not the how—to help set general parameters for what the mission requires and give the principal all the support and encouragement she or he needs.



## Sounding board

School commissions generally comprise a wide diversity of talents, knowledge and skills. So it makes sense that a principal may want to tap into that reservoir by asking the commission or individual members for advice when dealing with a thorny operational issue. The problem is that if the administrator asks for advice, the response may come back sounding more like policy. Three rules will help prevent this. First, the commission should refrain from giving operational advice unless it is requested. Second, the commission or commission member should make it clear that they are only giving advice and that they expect and trust the administrator to make operational decisions. And third, the commission should continue to support the principal who makes a decision within her or his authority, even if it diverges from the advice given. Many will recognize this as sound practice at all levels of management, but they will also recognize how hard it is to follow. This discipline will, over time, strengthen the relationship between the commission and the principal and thereby strengthen the school.

## Volunteering

Not only does the commission comprise a wealth of skills, but its members are among the most knowledgeable about the school and most committed to its mission. They are, thus, an obvious source for recruiting volunteers for fundraising campaigns, marketing efforts, class presentations and projects like facility planning. Again, the danger is that they may think their role is to direct school personnel, wearing their commission policy input hat while they volunteer. They may forget that in this context they are just a volunteer, participating at the behest of the school employee in charge of the project. Even if they realize that they carry no authority as a commission member in a volunteer role, others may assume they do. So care must be taken to clarify that the commission member is wearing a *volunteer* hat rather than a *policy* hat.



## Relationship with the pastor

The school commission has been asked to help guide the school on behalf of the Church and the community the school serves. Similarly, the Archbishop has entrusted to the local pastor the responsibility to maintain the integrity of the Church's teaching and the vibrancy of the parish community. By extension, this includes the well-being of all God's people served by parish ministries. It is critical that the school, and particularly the school commission, be in "communion" and in communication with the pastor. The school needs to draw from the pastor's teaching about what being Catholic means and how the Church lives out its call in this particular locale. Conversely, the pastor needs to learn from the school about the experience and needs of the people served by the parish, especially its youth. Because the span of his responsibilities is so broad, the pastor relies on the principal to lead the educational ministry, but he still has ultimate responsibility.

It is also important that the commission has an active, healthy relationship with the pastoral council and the finance council of the parish. The best way to do this is to have clarity about which body is responsible for which decisions, how those decisions are made, and how the respective bodies are expected to share information with each other. Collaboration can be further strengthened by having cross-membership or holding occasional joint meetings. If you would like to learn more about the relationship between different levels of governance in the Seattle Archdiocese, please reference the 2007 document, *Many Gifts, One Spirit: Consultative Leadership*, which is available via the link and QR code below.

The expectation is that the pastor will attend school commission meetings, but this is not always possible. With so few priests and so much of the sacramental ministry of the Church dependent on them, they are often stretched thin by regular liturgies, funerals, pastoral counseling and anointings, not to mention significant administrative responsibilities. Commission members are also busy people, often in demanding professions, raising families and volunteering at the school. Both the pastor and the commission must be patient with each other and find times and means to sustain fulsome communication and a grace-filled relationship.



## Relationships within the school commission

The third critical relationship is among school commission members themselves. One of the primary principles of governance is that a board's authority rests in the board as a whole only. No individual board member has authority to act on behalf of the board or the school. While school commissions do not have the same authority as boards, this principle still applies. Because of this, if school commissions are to be effective, they must give due attention to how they work together, what processes they need, and how relationships of trust can be strengthened. More information is given below about how boards and commissions increase their mutual trust and collaboration, but commission training, commission spiritual retreats, time for planning, along with sharing meals and activities to get to know each other, significantly increase a commission's effectiveness. In addition, Catholic spirituality has rich resources for engaging in graced discernment both as individuals and as groups. More information can be found under "Discernment" on page 28.

## Other relationships

The chain of care described above can seem overly hierarchical. We said that the most important relationships for each level are those adjacent to them on the chain of care. But that doesn't mean that all these different levels have no relationships with each other. It is good for commission members to meet faculty and listen to students and parents to learn about their experiences so that their work is not solely in the abstract. But great care must be taken not to disrupt the authority and responsibility that others in the chain have. For instance, it is good to listen to a parent focus group set up to discuss the challenges faced by students with special needs. But it is harmful for commission members to allow individual parents, or even a group of parents, to complain to them about a discipline decision they felt was unjust. In such cases, the commission member should direct complaints to the school's published grievance or appeal process, rather than encouraging them to appeal directly to the commission.

The commission should also keep in mind the role played by the Office for Catholic Schools in supporting their work. While OCS staff is more often working with principals and pastors, they also want to provide resources, training, and support to school commissions. The school principal should keep the commission and especially its chair apprised of these resources and opportunities.



## The duties of a school commission

School commissions, unlike boards of directors, do not have fiduciary responsibility, so many of the requirements that apply to governing boards do not apply to them. “Fiduciary” comes from a word meaning “trust.” Fiduciaries are “trustees” who are acting on behalf of and furthering the interests of others. Sometimes those joining a board with fiduciary responsibility worry that they may be exposing themselves to personal liability if the school does something that leads to someone having a claim against it. Although the actual exposure is quite limited for non-profit boards because of protection provided by the law and indemnification by the organization, school commissions have no exposure. Because of the need for a “safe harbor,” our common law tradition has identified three duties to guide those who do have such fiduciary responsibilities. Although they are not legally required of those on consultative boards like school commissions, they are still a good general guide for how to best fulfill their role. These are the duties of Care, Obedience and Loyalty.

### The duty of Care

To exercise the duty of care requires one to remain informed about the business of the school, attend meetings, and serve the interests of the school. School commission members are expected to give the school the benefit of their judgment uncorrupted by the taint of self-interest.

### The duty of Loyalty

When acting in their role on the commission, members are expected to give primacy to the interests of the school rather than personal concerns. Commission members should disclose to the commission chair any actual or potential conflicts of interest. If a conflict or the appearance of a conflict of interest arises, the members involved must follow the school’s policy or direction of the pastor for resolving it. The duty of loyalty also requires commission members to protect the school’s confidential information in their possession, including the confidentiality of deliberations with leadership other than those made publicly available.

### The duty of Obedience

Commission members owe a duty of obedience to have their work support the school’s mission and vision. This duty also includes an expectation for commission members to support compliance with the requirements mandated by state and federal laws (including the IRS); to read, understand and comply with the school’s key mission and governance documents (mission statement, by-laws, the *Office for Catholic Schools Policy Manual*, etc.), and to follow the direction of the pastor consistent with its status as a Catholic school.



## What is the span of the commission’s consultative responsibility?

The *Sample Bylaws for School Commissions* specify five particular areas where the commission’s input is to be sought: planning, policy development, finance, public relations, and evaluation of the commission’s effectiveness. These are based on the assumption that while the school team has expertise in the educational aspects of running a school, they can most benefit from commission members’ expertise in the business aspects and their ability to encourage the support of the community. The school is a business and, like other businesses, must have a sustainable business model. But the business model does not operate in isolation. A Catholic school is a complex entity and must have three other models that must also remain viable and effective—Apostolic, Pedagogical, and Community models. Here is a summary of all four models that operate within a Catholic school:

### Apostolic

A Catholic school’s mission carries on Jesus’ mission of sharing the Good News of God’s love and desire to be in right relationship with us. He entrusted this mission to the Apostles, who in turn entrusted it to the people who followed them, all the way down to us today. Nurturing this faith requires a religion curriculum, campus ministry, formed teachers, opportunities for service, and more, all organized in an intentional way to form an effective Apostolic model.

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## Pedagogical

A Catholic school’s mission includes preparing the next generation of leaders. Empowering young people to transform the world means preparing them for academic success at ensuing levels and leadership in their future vocational settings. This requires a rigorous curriculum, excellent teaching, extra-curriculars, technology and more, all organized into an intentional and effective Pedagogical model.

## Community

Catholic schools help students experience God’s love shared in a caring and nurturing community. For young people to realize the full potential God has given them, they need a fabric of nurturing relationships—a student body where all are made welcome regardless of ethnicity, financial means, beliefs, and physical characteristics—surrounded by the love and support of faculty, parents, alumni, and benefactors. These relationships must be fostered in an intentional and vibrant Community model.

## Business

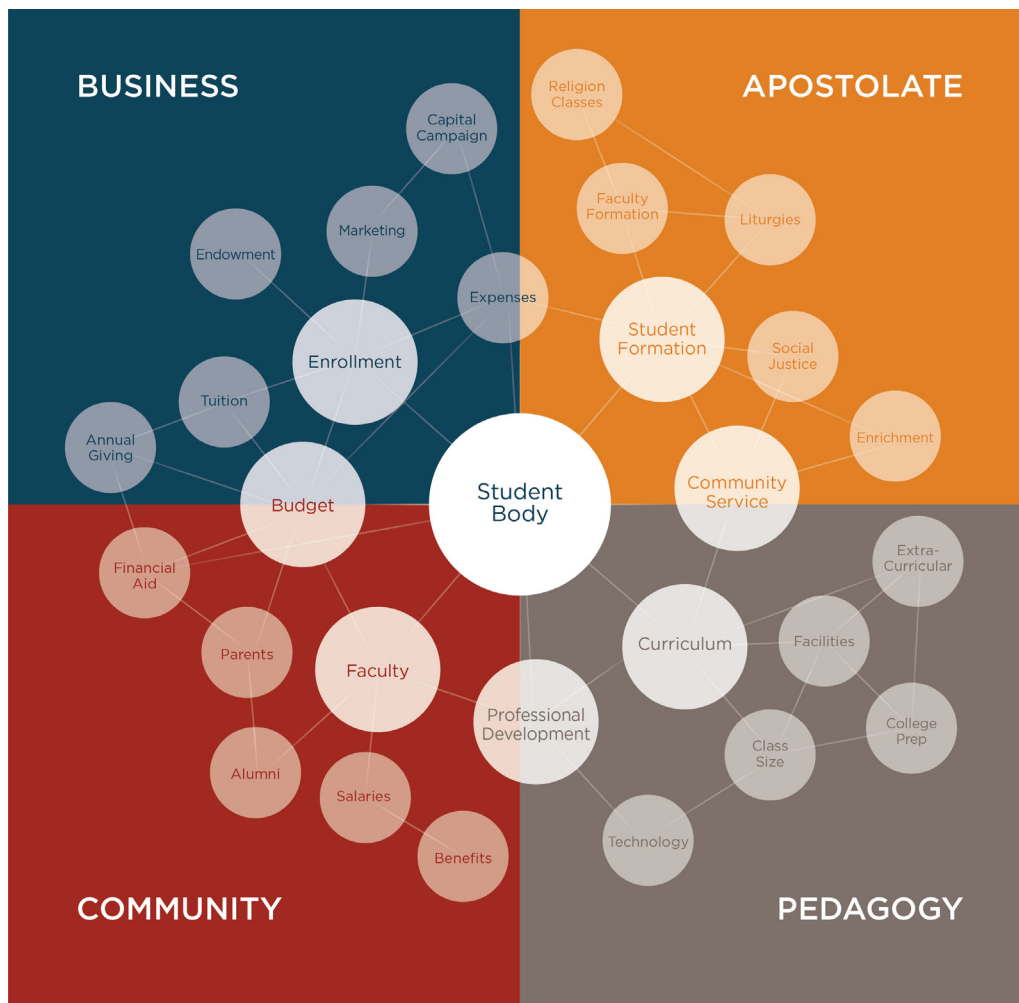
Catholic schools are schools of excellence in every facet of their operation. To assure that the school’s values are translated into a sustainable program of action, the school must create a budget that supports those values, which provides for financial aid, quality instruction, and appropriate compensation for employees. This in turn requires thoughtful tuition policies, management of endowments and other assets, along with robust efforts to attract philanthropy. All these must be organized in an intentional and sustainable Business model.

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While the school commission focuses on the business-oriented aspects listed on the previous page, it must rely on the expertise of the school team to design and implement the other three models. The policies which the commission advises the principal and pastor on, and the strategic planning, resource-generating and marketing activities it undertakes, must not only strengthen each of these models individually, but assure that they support each other as one integrated model.

*This chart illustrates how the models must work together. The lines suggest how some of the many elements of each model may relate to elements within the other models.*





## What criteria are used to select school commission members?

You were asked to serve on the school commission for your school because of qualities the pastor, principal, and your colleagues already on the commission, saw in you. The commission will often identify and recommend candidates for appointment to the commission, who are then approved by the pastor. Each school has its own criteria related to the needs of its community and current strategic challenges, but they probably include the following:

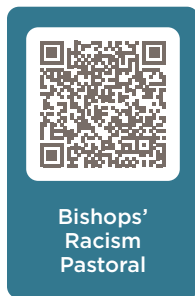
- Interest in and commitment to Catholic education and to this school's philosophy and mission
- Availability to attend meetings and periodic in-service programs and to participate in committee work
- Ability to maintain a high level of integrity and confidentiality
- Ability to deal with situations as they relate to the good of the entire school community
- Recognition as a credible witness of the Catholic faith to the school community and the external community the school serves.



Non-Catholic parents of children enrolled in the school may also be members of the commission. Those in the school community of other faiths who appreciate and respect the mission of Catholic education can provide further depth and strength to the commission.

Our Christian faith calls us in a special way to make sure the opportunities of a Catholic education are available to all regardless of race, ethnicity or socio-economic status.<sup>4</sup> The school not only works to remove both apparent and hidden barriers, but commits its community to working to undo the racism within itself and the broader community. While this is a responsibility of all members of the commission, having diversity of membership is key to assuring that historically underserved families in our community are not only welcomed into the community, but fully included in the life of the school.

[Click or scan for more information:](#)



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<sup>4</sup> Notice of Nondiscriminatory Policy Regarding Students: School admits students of any race, sex, sexual orientation, faith traditions, color, or national and ethnic origin to all the rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to all students at the school. The school does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, color, or national and ethnic origin in administration of its educational policies, admission policies, scholarship and loan programs and athletic or other administered programs.

## What specifically will be expected of you?

As stipulated in the Sample School Commission Bylaws (Article III), members ordinarily serve for three years, renewable once and staggered so that council membership can rotate. Each school will also have a set of expectations of school commission members to insure the commission's effectiveness. The key ones include the following:

- Support the school's mission, including its religious, educational, communal and financial vitality.
- Attend commission meetings and prepare by reading materials sent prior.
- Serve on commission committees as appropriate and regularly attend committee meetings.
- Participate in training, including faith formation activities, available to the commission.
- Be willing to contribute time, talent and philanthropic support as appropriate to one's circumstances.
- Participate in the annual evaluation of the principal at the direction of the pastor and the commission's self-evaluation.
- Be willing to represent the school and its interests in the community and be a channel of communication from the community back to the school.
- Recognize that the commission's role exists only as a body, and that individual commission members do not have authority to speak or act on behalf of the commission unless it specifically delegates that authority.
- Understand that the commission's role is to advise and support the principal and pastor, and that management of the school is delegated to the principal.
- Support the decisions of the pastor and principal made in accordance with school policies and the authority delegated to them.
- Help identify other suitable candidates for possible appointment to the commission.



## What are best practices for doing the board's work?

We have discussed above the role of a commission in a Catholic school, and the general way that commissions need to approach their work. We want to finish this guidebook by taking a brief look at more specific ways commissions accomplish together the important work they do for the school. The following treatment will touch lightly on each area, but also link to additional resources that provide a deeper dive into each of these areas of best practice. These resources discuss topics that apply generally to boards, but can be adapted to the role of school commissions.

### Discernment

The commission's most important job is to help the principal and pastor make decisions about policies that guide the school. They often must offer advice around difficult issues like tuition; the commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion; physical plant; and others. While we hope everyone is careful in the decisions they make, in the Catholic tradition we are invited to go even further, to incorporate Gospel-centered spiritual values into every aspect of the school. This discernment employs both management best practices and the belief that the Holy Spirit wants to guide your decisions and speak through your own heart and those of the people you work with.

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## Commission meetings

Commission meetings function best when they blend formal structure with the informality of people who like working with each other. The formal structure includes an agenda and protocols which assure that everyone gets a chance to speak to important issues. Each member should be committed to listening appreciatively, even when they disagree with what is being said. They should also be willing to express their own views with respect and trust that they are being listened to as well. People always appreciate when meetings start and end on time, but sometimes issues require discussion beyond what was planned. Support efforts to keep the agenda on track, but also be flexible when more time is needed to do proper discernment.

## Recruitment and on-boarding

Who comes onto the commission and how quickly and thoroughly they understand what is expected of them is of critical importance to the school's mission. This guidebook is intended to assist with that process. Additional tools should also include: a spreadsheet showing characteristics of current commission members and those needed in the future as members are replaced; a recruitment booklet with information like meeting dates, current membership and expectations; an orientation session for new commission members; and mentoring from experienced members.

## Spiritual formation

Serving on a school commission is a volunteer ministry. Though much of your work will seem like what you'd be doing on any board, there is always a spiritual dimension to the work: determining how much to budget for financial aid, honoring the dignity of the students and employees, helping to create an environment of trust, relating to your colleagues, etc. Participating actively in whatever formation opportunities your school offers will not only connect what you are doing to the school's values, but you will find it enriching for your personal faith life.



## Commission evaluation

In our schools, students are regularly assessed to see how well they are mastering the skills and knowledge they need to have. These assessments allow teachers to make adjustments when necessary. As such, the school commission should set an example of evaluating its own work using an annual survey. It is important that all members participate in this evaluation and that commission leadership—working with the commission as a whole—use the results to optimize commission processes and the engagement of its members.

## Commission policy manual

Over time, the commission will make policies about how it does its own work. For consistency, these policies will need to be curated and accessible for future commission members and administrators. Category I-a schools also follow the policies found in the [Office for Catholic Schools Policy Manual](#). The commission's own policies will be consistent with Archdiocesan policies and augment them with additional provisions as appropriate. It will contain policies on matters like commission composition, responsibilities, membership, meeting process, committees, officers, conflicts of interest, and confidentiality. The commission's policy manual should be in a format that is easily accessible and updatable. Schools are shifting away from hard-copy manuals to online versions, using cloud tools like Google Docs or the school's own website.

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## Marketing

Gone are the days when large Catholic families just assumed they would be sending their children to Catholic schools. Schools need to become more sophisticated each year in promoting themselves to Catholic families and others whose children would benefit from a Catholic education. Commission members can help by making sure the school has an effective plan in place, making sure there is adequate budget available for marketing, serving as enthusiastic ambassadors to the community, and in some cases, getting personally involved in promoting the school.

## Philanthropy

The old saying is that boards should provide wisdom, work and wealth. It is powerful when commission members can make significant gifts to the school, but Catholic school commissions aren't selected on the basis of wealth. They are selected to provide counsel and leadership to the school. This includes both helping the school to generate philanthropic support from the community as well as making donations themselves. Powerful leadership is shown when all commission members give every year at a level commensurate with their means.

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## Support and feedback for the principal

The primary person the commission supports is the principal. As such, providing feedback and guidance to her or him is an important job for the commission. While it is good for the commission to give encouragement and feedback throughout the year, it must also contribute, when asked, to the formal evaluation the pastor does annually. Ideally, the evaluation is based on performance against agreed-upon goals, and these goals in turn should be based on the school's strategic goals. It is helpful for the pastor to get feedback from direct reports, faculty, parents, and others, but such feedback does not itself constitute the principal's evaluation. Only the pastor has the role of establishing expectations of the principal (or whoever serves in the role of chief administrator), with input from the commission, and he must evaluate her or him against those expectations. The Office for Catholic Schools provides support to the pastor for this process through the use of a common tool based on the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*, which can be found at this link: [Catholic School Standards](#).

## Committees

Committees are crucial to commission work because they divide up the span of the commission's oversight. They can dive deeper into issues, making sure all key points are considered and saving the commission as a whole from bogging down in details. If your school allows it, commission committees can also include non-commission members, which adds breadth and helps identify and prepare prospective commission members. There will be standing committees for areas that require perennial attention, like finance and development, and ad hoc committees for important issues that are temporary in nature.

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## Planning

Having a clear mission statement is important, but schools also need a clear plan for how it will be accomplished in the next 5-10 years. Strategic planning is the process of aligning all the factors within a school's control to accomplish the mission in the face of factors that are not within the school's control. It is a prime responsibility of the school commission to make sure that there is a strategic plan in place and that it is guiding the school's decision-making. The principal is responsible for facilitating the strategic planning process and operationalizing the resultant plan, but it is the school commission which oversees the process and recommends the plan to the pastor.

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## Conclusion

We hope that this guidebook has been helpful in providing new information on serving on a Catholic school commission. It is intended only as an introduction. As you continue to learn and augment your skills you will continue to become a more effective commission member. We encourage you to access the additional materials linked to in this guidebook and ask questions of your colleagues and your principal. We also invite you to contact the Office for Catholic Schools at [superintendent@seattlearch.org](mailto:superintendent@seattlearch.org) if there is any additional support or information we can provide you.

Again, thank you for saying yes to serving on your school's commission. It is our belief that God has had this in mind for you and is smiling at your willingness to support the development of His children toward the dreams He has for them. May you be blessed by your work as much as it will surely bless others.

*Our life spreads light when it is given in service.*

*The secret of joy is living to serve.*

*-Pope Francis*

*The Archdiocese of Seattle Office for Catholic Schools would like to thank Jack Peterson for his counsel and guidance, as well as, authorship of the Elementary School Commission Guidebook.*

*Jack served students, staff and the community as a leader in Catholic education for many years. He brings not only his strong devotion to his Catholic faith, but also to Catholic education and schools. Hence, his desire to provide guidance to School Commissions and Boards to ensure the sustainability of Catholic schools through purposeful work in creating policy, maintaining budgets, and planning for the future.*

*Jack lives in Des Moines, WA and is CEO of Managing for Mission.*

