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## Effective Board Governance in Covenantal Christian Schools

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## Effective Board Governance in Covenantal Christian Schools

### Abstract

This action research project examined the various perspectives around effective board governance of current and former board members and administrators working in covenantal Christian schools. The survey, administered to participants working with covenantal schools across Canada, contained fifteen questions related to effective board governance components. Participants were also able to provide anecdotal qualitative feedback if desired. The results of the study revealed that there is notable agreement as to the importance of various components related to effective board governance in covenantal schools; however, there are a few areas where boards in covenantal schools may have opportunity for growth. These include areas such as professional growth and development and drafting and strengthening concise governance policy handbooks. The findings of the study suggest that boards and school leaders in covenantal schools should continue active discussion in their school communities about components necessary to effective board governance while maintaining their strong commitment to covenantal education

### Document Type

Thesis

### Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

### Department

Graduate Education

### First Advisor

Patricia C. Kornelis

### Keywords

organizational effectiveness, school boards, Christian schools, Canada, handbooks, mission statements

### Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education

### Comments

Action Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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Effective Board Governance in Covenantal Christian Schools

by

Justin Raap

B.Sc. University of Winnipeg, 2008;

B.Ed. Lakehead University, 2012

Action Research Project  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt University  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
May 2022

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank a number of people involved in supporting this work over the past two years. First, thank you to those in our local and broader school communities – my colleagues in the school, fellow principals, my local school board and the many board member participants – mostly volunteers – willing to participate in this study and/or support this work in various ways. Thank you to the various Dordt professors and instructors, particularly my faculty advisor Dr. Pat Kornelis, for your insights and wisdom throughout this project and the entire MEd program. Thank you to those of you who have laboured and continue to labour in covenantal schools in various capacities. As a former student in a covenantal school, parent of children in a covenantal school, and teacher and school leader in a covenantal school, I am grateful for many of your tireless efforts. Thank you to my parents for their commitment to covenantal education for their children which has, in turn, led to this desire to think more deeply about the successes and struggles present in these schools. Thank you to my family who has endured two consecutive summers of additional schoolwork and ongoing extra work during the school year. And finally, thank you especially to my beautiful wife who has supported and encouraged this work, at times through difficulties and struggles. Our Heavenly Father is gracious and merciful and worthy of all praise.

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### **Abstract**

This action research project examined the various perspectives around effective board governance of current and former board members and administrators working in covenantal Christian schools. The survey, administered to participants working with covenantal schools across Canada, contained fifteen questions related to effective board governance components. Participants were also able to provide anecdotal qualitative feedback if desired. The results of the study revealed that there is notable agreement as to the importance of various components related to effective board governance in covenantal schools; however, there are a few areas where boards in covenantal schools may have opportunity for growth. These include areas such as professional growth and development and drafting and strengthening concise governance policy handbooks. The findings of the study suggest that boards and school leaders in covenantal schools should continue active discussion in their school communities about components necessary to effective board governance while maintaining their strong commitment to covenantal education.

Globally, the education system is always concerned with improving student learning, growth, and achievement. Historically, administrators and staff have focused on improvement that lead to positive learning outcomes; however, it has also become clear in the public education system that higher-level governance at the school board level has also been associated with improved outcomes (Zonnefeld, 2009).

Though many Christian schools operate with unique faith-based mission and vision statements (perhaps missional, non-denominational, or covenantal), like public schools they are typically governed in some way by a local school board. The context is different in many of these Christian schools, particularly covenantal Christian schools set up by parents, for whom governance often includes parent volunteers elected to serve on a school board. This includes a high level of volunteer parental involvement “out of sheer necessity” (Contant & Noot, 2019, p.7). For many of these covenantal Christian schools, however, the ability to hire competent leaders and staff has changed the focus of the board from immediate day-to-day governance to longer term mission and vision planning. Christian school boards have shifted in such a way that they need to be concerned with longer-term vision and planning. While still maintaining day-to-day operations as per a well-defined mission statement, it is the vision that should take up the majority of a school board’s time and efforts (Contant & Noot, 2019).

Shifting away from day-to-day operations, however, is not without challenges for volunteers who often have little formal training in education and sound pedagogy. In fact, this is a challenge facing many volunteer boards. Volunteer boards have a beautiful opportunity to serve so many people, yet are faced with a serious calling and need to be concerned with addressing the question: what does it mean to be ‘effective’ (De Pree, 2001)? This is not a new question, as even public school boards have been found to either lack effectiveness or simply

equate effectiveness with efficiency, success, or organization goals. This challenge has plagued Christian school boards as well and is becoming a more prominent question for Christian school leaders (De Pree, 2001; Zonnefeld, 2009).

Despite the aforementioned changes to governance in covenantal Christian schools, most still experience a high level of involvement in governance from parents and other stakeholders. Due to the volunteer nature of many of these capacities, there are limitations around time and experience and conversations around effectiveness can be difficult, particularly when combined with the fact that there is little research around effectiveness specific to Christian schools, let alone covenantal Christian schools. In fact, Zonnefeld (2009) noted his disappointment in the lack of research specifically directed to Christian school boards. Others have pointed to the fact that it is worth noting the commitment, dedication level, and desire to serve a school that is demonstrated by many of these volunteer members, yet observe a disparity in the training, experience, and education that those on volunteer Christian school boards possess as opposed to those in the public system or in boards of other contexts (Hekman, 2006; Smoley, 1999). It is clear that despite all of this, for volunteer Christian school boards these conversations around effectiveness are still critical (Contant & Noot, 2019; De Pree, 2001).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explored the following question: what components are necessary to ensure effective board governance in covenantal Christian schools? There is plenty of research around public school board governance, as well some research around Christian school boards or volunteer boards. The purpose of this study was to explore application of some of those more broadly applied components of effective governance to the covenantal Christian school contexts

by way of examining research-based practice in light of the perceptions of current and past covenantal Christian school administrators and board members.

### **Definitions**

Unless otherwise noted, these definitions are those of the researcher of this study:

*Christian School* – Any faith-based school unique from exclusively publicly-funded schools.

*Covenantal Christian School* – A faith-based school set up and governed by parents in volunteer capacity with the objective unity of purpose between home, school, and church.

*Mission* – The objectives for the day-to-day operations of the school, particularly around maintaining the faith-based objectives of the school.

*Vision* – The bigger picture, longer term guide for school planning and philosophy, particularly around the future position of the school.

### **Literature Review**

Covenantal Christian schools are faith-based schools that have been set up by parents united by a common religious goal or affiliation. For example, a wave of Dutch immigration to Canada in the mid-1900s resulted in parents desiring and realizing the need for schools united with their own faith-based convictions. For many of these parents, there was a desire to establish schools not under the direct influence or control of the state. It was exceptionally important to them that their faith and the idea of covenant was passed on through the generations. Covenantal Christian schools were a means to accomplish this goal. Unity of church, home, and school is a critical part of the covenantal model. In a covenantal model, parents are primarily responsible for education. A covenantal model for education extends beyond parents to the broader faith

community with the church and school supporting the desire and responsibility of these parents (Beerens, 2014). In North American, this desire led to the establishment of numerous covenantal Christian schools in various Reformed and other church communities. As these schools were established, parents were exceptionally involved from construction to liaising with the government to volunteering in classrooms. Many of these schools have changed in nature, size, and even mission and vision over time. What hasn't changed, however, is the structure of their governance with common practice involving parent and other school community volunteers in governance.

These founding school boards were part of the day-to-day operations “out of sheer necessity” (Contant & Noot, 2019, p. 7); however, Christian school leadership has evolved with competent principals, heads of schools, and staff that allow boards to shift their focus and become more effective (Contant & Noot, 2019). While there are various local contexts or nuances, there are specific governance or leadership principles that universally support effectiveness (Swayner et. al., 2021). Regardless of their capacity or makeup, school boards are ultimately responsible for the operation of the school, be it distantly or more directly involved based on local context, and in this way their governance directly affects student learning outcomes.

There are many shared beliefs, values, commitments, and promises prominent in covenantal relationships that lead to specific implications for governance (De Pree, 2001). In the context of faith-based schools, these shared beliefs revolve around a Biblical foundation and highlight the importance of the mission and vision statement of the school. Not only serving the school community, but also serving to further God's kingdom is a critical aim of covenantal Christian schools. This challenge of remaining truly committed to these shared beliefs is not

unique to schools. Many faith-based organizations have long struggled to remain true to their mission and vision, are especially susceptible to drifting from the mission and vision, and need to pay special attention to remaining ‘mission true’ (Greer & Horst, 2014).

De Pree (2001) commented on the intentional use of the word ‘effective’, noting that this word implies far more than simply being efficient, fiscally prudent, or simply possessing authority. For this reason, there is a “vociferous need to diligently examine internal board activities and their effect on external outcomes” (Zonnefeld, 2009, p. 9).

### **Critical Components of Effective Board Governance**

There are various intersecting components that have been identified as critical to effective board governance both in the broad context of volunteer or non-profit boards, many which have also been observed or can be applied to the specific covenantal Christian school context. The various components have been described by some as indicators, factors, marks, or measuring points of an effective board. De Pree (2001) identified a number of ‘marks’ of an effective volunteer board. Along with others, he has pointed to a clear mission and vision statement as a critical component, reinforcing the ‘crows-nest’ approach suggested by Contant and Noot (2019). Effective boards are concerned with vision and mission, with long-term planning as much or significantly more than day-to-day operations (Contant & Noot, 2019). In fact, one way to measure effectiveness for boards would not simply be the smooth operations of the current school, but in how much a school board is planning for the children of the current students enrolled in the school (Contant & Noot, 2019). Additionally, how well a board maintains commitment to and focus on its current vision and mission statement has been noted as an indicator of effectiveness (Greer & Horst, 2014). Other governance models have incorporated similar practices centered on mission and vision, such as the mission-directed governance model,

which has experienced much success across numerous North American covenantal Christian schools (Stob, 2011).

Mission and vision definition continue to be at the heart of successful faith-based organizations, and remaining true to one's mission amidst various external pressures is another critical component to effective governance (Greer & Horst, 2014). De Pree (2001) also reinforced this as a mark of effective volunteer boards, suggesting that staying in-tune with its environment is an effectiveness indicator for volunteer boards. Edlin (2014) argued that no education is religiously neutral and as such that the choice of schooling is of particular importance for parents, an argument that is especially true for those embracing a covenantal model, underscoring the importance of mission and vision definition and adherence as a component of effective covenantal Christian school governance.

De Pree (2001) also suggested the importance of nurturing strong personal relationships, a practice that is also considered critical to overall organizational health, trust, and relationship building (De Pree, 2001; Lencioni, 2012). The Association of Christian Schools International also identifies relationships as fundamental to Christian schools (Swayner et. al., 2021).

Leadership and relationships with leaders is another component of effective governance, as De Pree (2001) pointed to maintaining and attracting competent, inspirational leaders as an effectiveness indicator, while other researchers have placed strong emphasis on the relationship between the principal and school board or board chairperson (Contant & Noot, 2019). Others have reinforced similar ideas both in and outside of covenantal Christian schools. (De Pree, 2001; Lowrie, 2004)

Professional development and growth practices are also important components to board governance. The practices of orientation, ongoing training, and insufficient self-evaluation have actually been identified as areas of growth for many school boards (Zonnefeld, 2009), while De Pree (2001) includes self-reflection as a mark of an effective school board.

Closely related to the above component is the importance of providing a mechanism for growth, development, and self-reflection (Burns et. al., 2018). Former administrators and board members noted this challenge in covenantal schools, pointing to the importance of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and practices in policy handbooks, particularly as many covenantal schools have outgrown existing board practices (Contant & Noot, 2019).

Researchers have pointed out that a considerable number of these components have been determined to depend on a board's willingness to commit to school improvement (Contant & Noot, 2019). With this commitment in mind and a willingness to take it seriously in the context of continual reflection, it is far easier to successfully grow a school community in unity towards a shared mission and vision (De Pree, 2001).

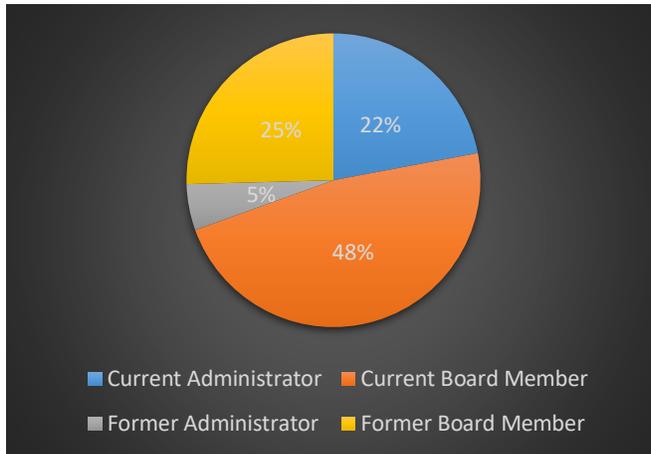
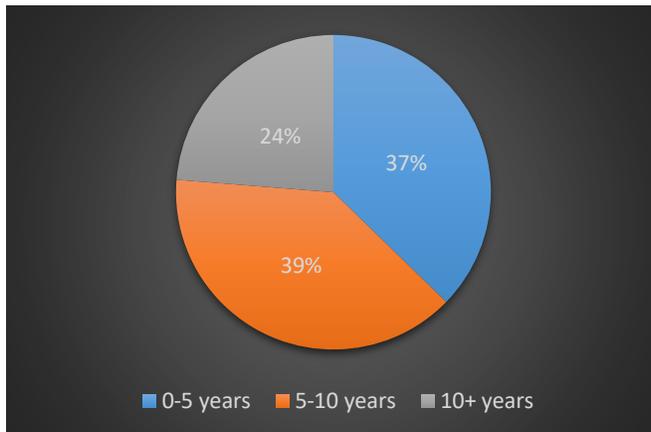
In summary, there is much research suggesting that there are many critical components to consider for effective board governance. Yet covenantal schools have struggled at times with embracing some or all of these components. Many of these schools have grown in number, a blessing which naturally carries with it various governance challenges. Most covenantal schools are founded and governed by wonderful, faithful, God-fearing volunteers serving as board members in various capacities and enabling them to continue to operate. While the function of many school boards has likely changed over time, effective governance remains an imperative discussion and consideration. These board volunteers would be well-served by an exploration of

the existence or importance of these components within their context to support optimal governance, and ultimately student learning and achievement.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This mixed-method study consulted current and former board members and administrators in covenantal schools to solicit their perceptions of effective board governance practices. While there is plenty of research that suggests components of effective board governance in various settings, the research around covenantal schools is limited and this study intended to examine the effectiveness components identified by the participants in light of more broadly applied research. Board members and administrators were invited to be participants in this study because the literature review suggested that both are critical to effective board governance (Burns et. al, 2018; Contant & Noot, 2019; De Pree, 2001; Lowrie, 2004). The study consisted of 59 participants, with 43 board members and 16 administrators (current and former). Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate how many years of experience they had working on or with a school board in covenantal Christian schools. Though demographic details were not the primary purpose of the study, they were both recorded, broken down by category, and noted in Figures 1 and 2. The location of the respondents was not considered.

**Figure 1***Survey Respondents by Role***Figure 2***Survey Respondents by Experience***Procedures/Study Design**

Participants were invited from various covenantal schools across Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. The online survey was converted to Google Forms and shared via email with various administrators over 20 covenantal schools, with the request that they complete the survey and each also share the survey with current and previous board members in

those respective communities. Additionally, the survey was shared via email with a number of former covenantal Christian school administrators (see Appendix A).

The study was administered by means of a survey consisting of two distinct parts (see Appendix B). Using a Likert scale ranging from 1=not important to 5=very important, the first part of the survey asked participants to rate the level of importance of various effectiveness components for governance identified in the literature review and/or those that are common practice in many schools (see Appendix C). In the second part of the survey, participants were invited to provide any additional feedback on components that might be absent in the survey as well as any other related feedback they desired. Additionally, the second part of the survey involved follow-up correspondence with participants who indicated their willingness to participate in further discussion around their responses. Survey respondents were limited to one response per email address, and the survey remained open for approximately two weeks. Participation was entirely anonymous, except for those who chose to provide their contact information for follow-up discussion.

Once the data was collected, numerical scores were assigned to each component identified in the quantitative survey and analyzed for mean and standard deviation. Responses to the additional questions were compiled and coded using common categories or themes. Any comments directly related to the existing survey questions were not coded and were only used as part of the summary findings or in follow-up interviews. Finally, some board members and administrators who indicated their willingness to participate in further discussion were contacted via email with follow-up questions to simply add additional insights or clarification to their responses for the discuss section.

## Results

Responses to the first section of the survey (questions 1-15) were analyzed for mean and standard deviation (SD). Results were sorted from high to low by mean with comparative SD (see Table 1), and additionally from low to high by SD with accompanying mean (see Table 2), with additional explanation following the tables. For additional reference and discussion purposes, the raw data scores for each individual question were also sorted (see Appendix D).

In considering the mean results, nearly all of the components scored relatively highly, trending towards 'Important' or 'Very Important' on the linear Likert scale in the survey. The lowest score was a 3.49, falling almost perfectly between 'Somewhat Important' and 'Important' on the linear scale, and only five components identified in the survey scored lower than a 4 or 'Important' by mean analysis. The SD was included in Table 1 to note any trends in comparison with the mean.

**Table 1**

*Survey Responses Sorted High to Low by Mean with Comparative Standard Deviation*

Level of Importance Linear Likert Scale from (1=not important) to (5=very important)

Survey Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
School boards should establish a clear trust relationship with administration and staff.	4.85	0.41
School boards should clearly define board and administration roles and responsibilities in policy handbooks.	4.75	0.51
School boards need to have a chairperson and principal that work closely together.	4.73	0.49
School boards should actively monitor adherence to a clearly defined mission and vision statement, making changes as required.	4.58	0.72
School boards should participate in some form of ongoing principal evaluation.	4.54	0.62
School boards should prioritize clear communication between all stakeholders.	4.51	0.50
School boards should intentionally participate in succession planning for various roles (eg. chairperson, treasurer)	4.42	0.79
School boards should nurture strong Christian relationships between its individual members.	4.31	0.84
School boards should seek opportunities for external evaluation, audits, or other accountability mechanisms for reflection and improvement.	4.20	0.71
School boards should visit classrooms and staff in the school on a regular basis to stay in-tune with the atmosphere of the school.	4.14	0.90
School boards should prioritize supporting their staff and maintaining staff morale via regular feedback from and communication with staff.	3.92	0.93
School boards should ensure there is diversity (gender, experience, etc.) represented on the board.	3.75	0.80
School boards should seek out and participate in various training and professional development opportunities.	3.59	0.83
School boards should carefully plan to have members with previous board level experience.	3.59	0.87
School boards should aim to spend up to 80% of their time on mission and vision planning and as little as 20% on the day-to-day operations of the school.	3.49	0.95

The SD varied from 0.41 to 0.95, indicating much more uniformity in some components than others. To better understand the SD, this indicates the proximity of the average response to each question's mean. For example, the question around trust relationships with administration and staff scored the highest mean approaching 'very important', with a response of 4.85. The SD

was 0.41, meaning the average response was less than 0.5 or half of a criteria point away from the mean, indicating strong uniformity. In contrast, the question around classroom visits scored a 4.14 – slightly higher than ‘important’ but had a SD of 0.90, meaning the average response was nearly a full criteria point away from the mean and far less uniform. The mean was also included in Table 2 for comparative purposes.

**Table 2**

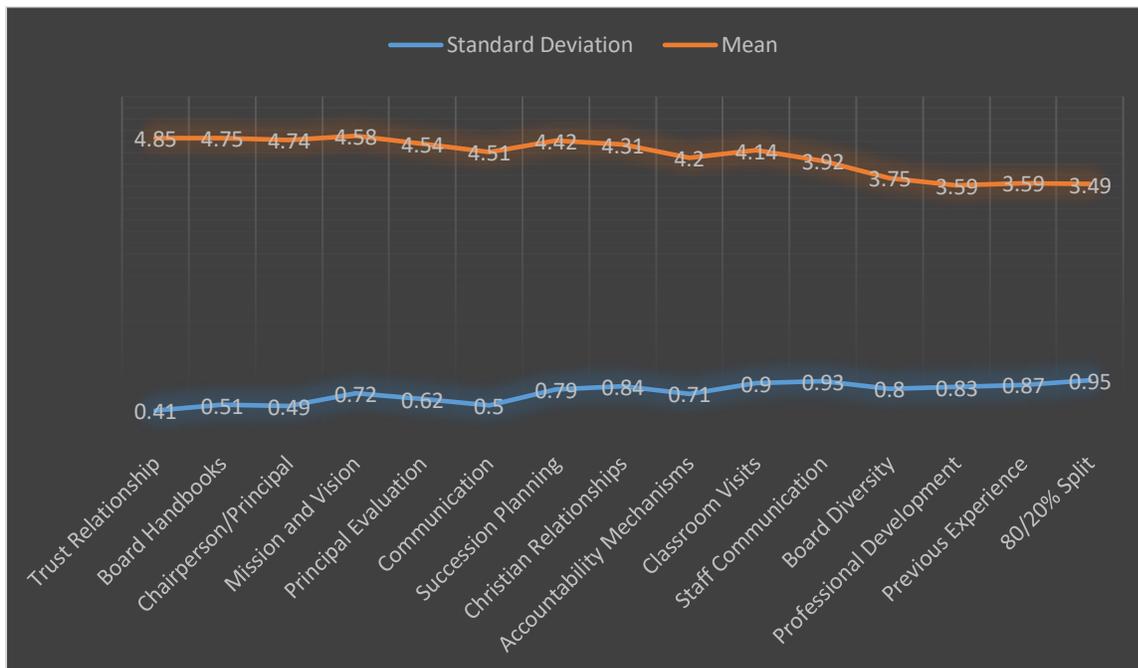
*Survey Responses Sorted Low to High by Standard Deviation with Accompanying Mean*

Survey Responses	SD	M
School boards should establish a clear trust relationship with administration and staff.	0.41	4.85
School boards need to have a chairperson and principal that work closely together.	0.49	4.73
School boards should prioritize clear communication between all stakeholders.	0.50	4.51
School boards should clearly define board and administration roles and responsibilities in policy handbooks.	0.51	4.75
School boards should participate in some form of ongoing principal evaluation.	0.62	4.54
School boards should seek opportunities for external evaluation, audits, or other accountability mechanisms for reflection and improvement.	0.71	4.20
School boards should actively monitor adherence to a clearly defined mission and vision statement, making changes as required.	0.72	4.58
School boards should intentionally participate in succession planning for various roles (eg. chairperson, treasurer)	0.79	4.42
School boards should ensure there is diversity (gender, experience, etc.) represented on the board.	0.80	3.75
School boards should seek out and participate in various training and professional development opportunities.	0.83	3.59
School boards should nurture strong Christian relationships between its individual members.	0.84	4.31
School boards should carefully plan to have members with previous board level experience.	0.87	3.59
School boards should visit classrooms and staff in the school on a regular basis to stay in-tune with the atmosphere of the school.	0.90	4.14
School boards should prioritize supporting their staff and maintaining staff morale via regular feedback from and communication with staff.	0.93	3.92
School boards should aim to spend up to 80% of their time on mission and vision planning and as little as 20% on the day-to-day operations of the school.	0.95	3.49

The mean and SD were also comparatively presented in the graph in Figure 2 below. As illustrated, generally speaking the measures scoring more highly on mean also maintained a lower SD and as the mean decreased the SD converged towards the mean, statistically suggesting a higher level of agreement on the Likert importance scale for the responses that scored more closely to ‘important’ or ‘very important.’

**Figure 3**

*Survey Responses Illustrated High to Low by Mean with Comparative Standard Deviation*



In the optional second section of the survey, all participants were invited provide additional information by way of three additional questions:

1. Are there any additional components you feel are important to effective board governance in covenantal Christian schools that are missing from above?

2. Please add any other comments or insight you might have in supporting effective board governance in schools.
3. Are you willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview to discuss your responses? If so, please provide pertinent contact information below.

Over 40 of the 59 respondents provided additional feedback to at least one of the first two questions with much overlap between the two questions. Some simply clarified their responses, while others suggested additional components they felt necessary to effective board governance, while still others qualified their level of agreement or even disagreement with some of the survey questions. The responses varied from a few short words or sentences to a few paragraphs. For this reason, answers to questions 1 and 2 were coded together. Once all of the anecdotal qualitative data was collected and analyzed, it became evident that there were two particular types of data. Some of the data simply related to the existing questions or built on an existing component to effective board governance. This data was not coded, but rather was collected and used in the discussion section as it related to the various components. The other portion of anecdotal qualitative data suggested additional components that respondents felt necessary to board governance, in response to the survey statement “are there any additional components to you feel are important to effective board governance?” These responses were coded based on a number of prevalent themes: 1) networking and relationships, 2) commitment levels of board members, 3) policy and committee work, 4) legislative requirements, 5) the Christian or Godly character of the school, 6) financial or business aspects, and 7) other (for the few responses that didn’t fit within a common theme). For discussion purposes, these responses were sorted by percentage to demonstrate how prevalent each category was compared to some of the others (see Appendix E).

Finally, of those willing to provide their contact information for follow-up discussion, four were contacted via email correspondence. Despite use of the word ‘interview’ in the question, these were not formal interviews, rather simple email correspondence. For this reason, these responses were not coded but included to clarify specific or unclear thoughts around some of the areas related to the research and study results. For the purpose of anonymity, the board members and administrators contacted in follow-up are given names that begin with A, B, C, and D: Andrew, Brianne, and Chris, and Dave. Andrew and Chris both currently serve as principals, while Brianne and Dave are both currently serving board members.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine components necessary to effective board governance in covenantal Christian schools. Most of these components were drawn from more broadly applied research around governance in other organizations and then framed as questions on a scale of importance for various stakeholders directly involved in board governance. Considering the various responses numerically and anecdotally, it became abundantly clear that despite most components scoring quite highly in terms of importance, there are a number of components that are not necessarily universally supported or practiced in covenantal Christian schools. All of the 15 components used in the survey questions were identified and supported by the literature, even noted by one respondent as “inherently agreeable,” yet some components had a significantly higher standard deviation or lack of uniformity than others. An analysis of the numbers and accompanying commentary in the qualitative results yielded some trends worthy of further discussion and investigation.

Perhaps the most statistically noteworthy quantitative component, with the lowest mean score of 3.49 and highest SD of 0.95, was the idea of boards aiming to spend 80% of their time

on mission-vision and 20% on day-to-day operations (see Tables 1 and 2). This is somewhat surprising on the surface, though less alarming with a bit more context. There was a high level of agreement with having a board defining and actively ensuring adherence to a mission and a vision statement, but exactly what that looked like was a bit less clear. Over the past number of years, there has been a movement for boards of covenantal schools to become less operational and more visional (Stob, 2011). In fact, entire books have been written on this very topic and are being used by some boards in their desire to improve governance practices. For example, Stob (2011) argued for the importance of governance with a mission-vision focus in a book that some schools have started using as a framework to articulate their own governance models. Contant and Noot (2019) commented,

How different would our board meetings be if 80% of a board's time was focused on the future and managing the tension between continuity and change.....In contrast, the remaining twenty percent of the board's time ought to be focused on monitoring current operations. Boards should develop some key performance indicators to assist them in this monitoring role. (p. 8)

The results in this survey perhaps speak the uniqueness of Christian schools, a contextual consideration addressed further by Contant and Noot (2019) in the 'crows-nest' analogy, explaining the evolution of governance in Christian schools as follows:

Out of sheer necessity, the founding boards of many of our Christian schools spent most of their time on deck..... (they) literally laid the foundations of our Christian schools.....the evolvement of Christian school leadership has freed up our school boards to focus on their most important task....spending most of their time and energy

leading the school community in developing a strategic vision for the school that doesn't yet exist. (p. 7)

There were quite a number of contextual considerations in the optional feedback from respondents given to clarify their responses that are valuable in understanding these specific statistical results surrounding mission and vision. Some commented that they felt in their circumstance that a less operational 'hands-on' board would be desired but simply wasn't possible given limitations on resources. Some feared that not having a hands-on board or committees with parent volunteers highly involved in the school might lead to parents not being as involved in the education of their children, the very component that is arguably most important in a covenantal school. In a follow-up email discussing his preference for a more 'hands-on' board, Andrew commented,

If our schools are parental schools, then anything we can do to increase parental involvement/ownership/ investment is good. Boards that are "hands on" will organize a grounds clean-up instead of hiring a facilities manager. They will have a parental IT committee instead of contracting out the IT support. They will regularly visit classrooms instead of delegating this solely to an educational leader. All of these things could be better done by a paid employee. But I think that there's a tradeoff there in terms of parental investment and ownership. (Andrew, personal communication, February 28, 2022)

Others appeared to have a perception about boards in covenantal schools and how involved they should be in day-to-day operations, but not necessarily a good understanding of why. Yet many board members and administrators commented on the importance of boards not "wading into the weeds" and were very wary of boards becoming too involved in day-to-day operations. In many

ways, this isn't necessarily a surprising result in that some covenantal schools are still in early days of establishment or still rely on countless volunteer hours to maintain a budget, but it's a result that might speak to the need for further discussion around the purpose of the board in covenantal schools. This relates so closely with governance components such as professional development, board handbooks, and accountability measures. Similarly, a number of respondents commented on the purpose and function of board visits to the school, a component that many respondents scored as 'very important' while others responded anecdotally "I don't really understand the point of these visits." Some of these sentiments were even shared by very experienced board members and administrators, but not universally given the relatively high SD of 0.90 (see Table 2). Despite advocating for a board that is minimally involved in day-to-day operations, Contant and Noot (2019) still see value in board visits, suggesting that

Occasionally boards need to come down from the crow's nest to walk the deck (the hallways) of the ship (school) to experience the living and learning conditions of the school. If the only time board members visit the school is to attend evening board meetings, they are missing a firsthand opportunity to understand the current situation in their school. (p. 8)

A similar component statement regarding the board 'supporting staff morale' also scored lower than many other components with a mean of 3.92 (see Table 1) for similar reasons, despite appearing to be a question that one might assume to be of obvious importance. Some contextual comments here were helpful, with numerous responses pointing to the fact that they felt a board directly supporting staff could be helpful but wasn't an important function of the board but rather fell under the purview of the administration or principal. One respondent went as far as to say

“I’m uncomfortable with that statement” suggesting the board be “supportive in a general way” so as to be careful to overstep the role of the administration.

While it is certainly encouraging to observe a number of comments and consideration around the importance of these components related to mission and vision, there is less consensus on these measures than most others or than might be expected, and a bit of a gap that has potential to be filled by further discussion and articulation of board governance functions. Despite these concerns around how much time to allocate to mission and vision in contrast to day-to-day operations, active adherence to a mission and vision statement scored among the highest mean scores, closely approaching the ‘very important’ criteria with a mean score of 4.58.

Another interesting result was related to whether or not boards should pursue ongoing professional development or training, not due to only to the mean and SD scores of 3.59 and 0.83 respectively (see Table 1), but also in consideration of the coded data themes and accompanying optional anecdotal and follow-up feedback from numerous participants. As noted in the literature review, many volunteer boards are composed of individuals lacking significant educational experience (Contant & Noot, 2019; De Pree, 2001). In some schools, boards have pursued professional development by way of book studies, guest speakers, or networking with other boards. And despite scoring among the lowest of the components in this study, there is still some importance in this component according to boards and administrators, given a Likert scale mean result of 3.59, falling between the descriptors of ‘important’ and ‘somewhat important.’ More statistically notable, however, is the fact that this component was among the highest SD from the mean at 0.83 (see Table 2), nearly the equivalent of a full Likert scale point indicator in this survey, indicating that this isn’t necessarily a consensus sentiment. A further look at the anecdotal feedback from the optional questions that asked participants ‘are there any additional

components you feel are important to effective board governance?’ and ‘any other comments or insights you might have?’ indicates that many board members are craving some form of professional development or opportunity to grow, particularly through networking or connecting with other boards of similar structure. A coded theme in the anecdotal responses pointed to networking as an additional measure supporting effective board governance. Part of the deviation is linked to many respondents not seeing this as a critical or particularly important measure, as nearly half of the respondents to this question viewed this component as only ‘somewhat important’ or ‘not critical’ (see Appendix D). On the other hand, there also seems to be a bit of a sense of ‘where does one start?’ in the anecdotal data. One respondent, Dave, who scored professional development as ‘not critical’ admitted that he liked the idea, but his hesitation was more related to not really knowing how a board would go about this, what opportunities might be available, or what this might look like in practical terms stating “Professional development for board members is an interesting idea but I don't know where you'd start with that.” In a follow-up conversation with Dave, he noted that

We do onboard new members with regard to our policies but we do not have requirements for reading material (other than policies) or training. I'm not sure if it has ever been considered. It is a good idea. Aligning with other covenantal school boards would likely provide a better learning experience.....since so many of our policies and decisions have covenantal Christian foundations. (Dave, personal communication, February 25, 2022)

The idea that board members aren't sure how to pursue professional development reinforces Zonnefeld's (2009) notion that many school boards simply lack the training needed or mechanisms for professional growth as a board member and that it is imperative that board

members understand their roles and responsibilities. A similar component for consideration that was not included in the quantitative survey yet was suggested by multiple administrators and board members was the idea of pointing to the commitment level required of board members, which could perhaps be addressed by professional development and a better understanding of the work required to serve on a board. It is evident that some board members, despite working with other volunteers who also possess the best of intentions, feel at times insufficiently qualified to serve on a school board and could even benefit from simply collaborating with other boards of similar structure. This is certainly an area where there may be opportunity for growth in covenantal school boards.

Another noteworthy finding in the survey was around the idea of succession planning. A closer look at the survey data shows us that there was clearly a recognition of the importance of succession planning with a mean score of 4.42, yet the component also scored a SD of 0.79, approaching a full scale point in the survey (see Tables 1 and 2). Additionally, similar component statements around planning for board members with previous experience or ensuring diversity were not scored as necessarily important as succession planning and both had also had comparably high SDs of 0.80 and 0.87 respectively. Given the mean scores of 3.75 and 3.59 approaching 'important' by description (see Table 1), there are many that feel quite strongly about the importance of this component statement and some of the related statements, yet a substantial amount of respondents are less convinced of the importance with over one-third of respondents scoring a 3 or less (see Appendix D). A number of the anecdotal comments supported both of these conclusions, with one respondent believing that "intentional board member selection and recruitment is the most effective way to ensure a high functioning board" despite another suggesting that "diversity in the board is important, but since this is an elected

position, it isn't always possible" and yet another expressing concern that "there may be times when a school society simply lacks enough experienced members willing to let their names stand." Similarly to the previous measure, it appears this governance component is on the minds of some respondents, but there are evidently some challenges present as to how school boards can improve in this regard.

It's not all negative, of course. In fact, it is having these conversations that are important, as there is no perfect governance model or one size fits all approach (Swayner et. al, 2011). This underscores the importance of clearly defining roles and responsibilities in handbooks, a component also scoring a very high mean at 4.75, with a high level of agreement and low standard deviation of 0.51 (see Tables 1 and 2). One respondent took the opportunity to provide even stronger language, suggesting that "it is incredibly important that school boards have board handbooks and that they regularly review them." Despite his advocacy for a mission-governance model, even Stob (2011) noted local contexts and the need for any governance model to be fluid and subject to change or adjustment as needed, with his model described as one researcher as a 'hybrid' model that integrates mission and vision discussions into existing infrastructure and policy (Zonnefeld, 2012).

The highest scoring mean at 4.85 with the lowest scoring SD of 0.41 was around trust relationships between the board and staff and administration (see Tables 1 and 2). In the presence of these trust relationships, there are often issues that can easily be worked through when remembering that in covenantal schools there is typically a shared commitment to the mission and vision of the school. An experienced board member, Brianne, emphasized the importance of considering all stakeholder relationships in promoting any change or improvement within the school, suggesting that in her experience,

we have at times put planned changes on hold for a year to get staff, parents and whoever else might be involved on side....there was some criticism that there was too much change. If you don't take the needed extra time, stakeholders will feel that they are getting changes forced on them and will either resist or not implement them willingly or enthusiastically. We have been pleasantly surprised to find that, given time, people who are initially opposed to a proposal can become its most enthusiastic supporters and promoters. Having everyone on side makes implementation much more effective.

(Brienne, personal communication, March 3, 2022)

Similarly, as suggested in the survey responses with very importance scores and strong agreement scores of 4.73 and 0.49 (see Tables 1 and 2), the relationship between a school principal and board chairperson is critical. This relationship will serve to diffuse some of the challenges that can occur with board governance. In a follow-up interview with Chris, a principal, he commented,

The leadership of the board chairman and his collaborative relationship with the principal and all the various sub-committees will "steer the ship" in the proper course. This also provides the necessary accountability to ensure board members are "pulling their weight" and placed in a role which matches their strengths and skill sets. (Chris, personal communication, March 02, 2022)

One respondent, speaking directly to the importance of maintaining this relationship, even indicated that in their situation, it was the role of the principal that was the constant in the boardroom and could support the often yearly transition between board members. The principal has a unique job in that he is accountable to the board and subject to evaluation (a component that also scored highly in the survey responses) – but should also be strongly supported or even

empowered by the board. (Burns et. al., 2018) In fact, in their recent publication around leadership practices for flourishing schools, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) noted clearly that “education is fundamentally a relational enterprise” (Swayner et. al., 2021, p. 15). This is a sentiment that can easily be forgotten in discussions around governance but one that resonated strongly in this study.

One topic related to governance component meriting brief discussion with mean scores above ‘important’ and SD lower than some of the more statistically apparent components discussed earlier in this section was that of accountability or evaluative mechanisms, both for the principal (4.54 and 0.62) and the board (4.20 and 0.71) (see Tables 1 and 2). In some provinces in Canada such as Alberta or British Columbia, all schools, including covenantal schools, are subject to regular provincial ministry or department evaluations. In other provinces such as Ontario, schools actively and regularly participate in external evaluations from other organizations or groups of experienced individuals, sometimes above and beyond government requirements. Some schools have been active in pursuing regular opportunities for external accountability above and beyond their government requirements, a component suggested by various respondents in the optional feedback, with one respondent pointing to the necessity for boards to “build accountability mechanisms into governance.” These are encouraging trends and the high level of agreement with the importance of these components is indicative of school boards that are, in some ways, committed to improving and reflecting on their own governance effectiveness.

Also on a positive note, there were a number of other questions with exceptionally high levels of importance mean scores, as well as significant unanimity. It is noteworthy that some of the highest scoring governance components on the mean importance scale were those that clearly

align with the premise of covenantal schools and the overlapping sentiments in the mission and vision of many of these schools. These include components related to core Christian values such as trust (4.85) and strong Christian relationships (4.31) (see Table 1). One respondent's comment both summarized the sentiments of numerous participants and strengthened these findings, pointing out that it is "imperative that the board fosters and promotes a trusting and respectful environment/relationship between all parties....one that reflects what we have in common, namely the love God has shown to us in his Son." Further in the coded qualitative data, a largely recurring theme in the additional responses directly related to the Christian or Godly character of the school (see Appendix E). Perhaps this was summarized well by one board member in responding that, "board, staff, students, and parents, are all brothers and sisters in Christ and may all work together in Him alone. That perspective gives humility and grace in working together to make the school function well for the up building of the Lord's kingdom." While this might appear to be an oversimplification, it speaks to the common desire to serve God and one another as we work together in covenantal schools, a unity of home, church, and school.

In the end, there are a few key takeaways for covenantal schools.

Evidently, covenantal schools – like any other school - are not perfect and face some challenges related to operations under a relatively unique governance structure. However, given the perspectives and experiences of many current and former board and administrators working in covenantal schools across Canada, there is much alignment between numerous research-based best practice governance components and actual governance practices in covenantal schools. Further, as a rule, it seems school boards are aware of the importance of building relationships in schools, working closely with an administrative team, mission and vision definition and adherence, and the commitment and time required to be an active board member. There was

strong value placed on a number of the measures that are inherently related to the Christian, covenantal character of the school including strong Christian relationships among board members and trust building – all governance principles that are clearly in line with Scriptural, covenantal obligations.

On the other hand, the unique governance structure of covenantal schools is subject to a few apparent areas for growth. The idea of professional development or training for board members is a crucial conversation that board members should be having in covenantal schools. It is the very unique governance structure in covenantal schools that establishes the need for professional development. Teachers, educational assistants, administrators, and other school staff are working professionals who are typically expected to be lifelong learners and active in their own professional development. It is incumbent upon board members to consider seriously how they can model this commitment to lifelong learning. This was echoed by various respondents, with one suggesting, “it is important to provide orientation and training to Board members on good governance.....if we intend to create educational institutions that model a thirst for knowledge and spiritual growth we must require this...excellence in any schools starts at the top with the board.” Similarly, one respondent, a former board chair, commented that “As chairman, I find it of great importance to seek input from all board members, to challenge them to apply themselves...” The role is serious and this is one area of commitment that is critical (De Pree, 2001). There is certainly research that suggests that training and intervention can improve a board’s effectiveness (Zonnefeld, 2009). At the very least, it seems boards should have a policy for professional development or some formalized structure that serves to improve networking, onboarding of new members, or other measures for improving board growth (Burns et. al., 2018; Contant & Noot, 2019). The work done by school boards is not easy work, and as suggested in

much of the feedback, many board members feel this burden and would welcome additional opportunities for growth. If nothing else, given the desire for more professional development coupled with the uncertainty of what this might look like and whether or not this is important, boards should at least be engaging in this conversation. Closely related to this was one of the coded themes that arose from the qualitative data around how much of a commitment it is to serve on a board and the importance of this awareness, a perfect segue into the next opportunity for growth.

Clearly defining roles and responsibilities is another overarching component that will support effective governance. Again, the work on a board is not easy work but it is serious and often rewarding work with sufficient commitment and clarity. In their standards manual for school accreditation, ACSI specifically noted that it is “critically important that roles and reporting relationships are clearly established and communicated” (Burns et. al., 2018, p. 13). In this study, policy and committee work was the most prevalent additional measure suggested in the coded qualitative results (see Appendix E), and this single component was supported almost uniformly with all but four respondents scoring it as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ (see Appendix D), yet the anecdotal qualitative feedback suggests there are still some schools lacking these well-defined handbooks or schools that simply don’t have handbooks that align policy with practice. This has the potential to leave board members, typically volunteers, often unsure of their roles or realm of authority and administration teams that are sometimes unsure of what clearly falls under their purview. A number of respondents indicated the importance of these boundaries, yet a number also indicated that they aren’t always sure this is clear to all board members or have observed various struggles for this very reason.

### **Limitations and Consideration for Future Study**

While this survey reached a large proportion of covenantal schools across Canada, there were a few limitations that might be considered for future study. First, most respondents in this survey were current or former administrators and board members at covenantal schools operated by societies primarily composed of Canadian Reformed Church members, a relatively homogenous group. There are similar schools operated by other denominations where one might expect similar results; however, it is possible that there are specific nuances closely associated with specific religious affiliations or even ethnicities. Another limitation to this study is that those contacted in this survey (employed by covenantal schools or working as school board members) would evidently be committed to covenantal education and would carry a different perspective than someone who might embrace a more missional approach or an approach that doesn't carry similar limitations.

A consideration for future study could involve the depth of questions. This survey involved 15 questions that could be described as rather broad or general, which may have limited the detail gleaned in the study. While many of these questions are so closely related, it's possible that some of the questions in this survey could likely be narrowed down into multiple individual questions around specific governance components. For example, the entire idea of policy development, strategic planning, and committee work could delve more specifically into the makeup of committees, the specific task committees need to be busy with in covenantal schools, the time frames for strategic planning cycles, or how committees are appointed, among other possible explorations. Another example could include the discussion of professional development for boards and the specifics around this, as it is a rather broad term. Does this include a book study, an onboarding or orientation process, networking with other schools,

attending seminars or workshops, or bringing in guest speakers? Many of these details are related local nuances with unique contexts and were not within the scope of this project, but might describe a more extensive picture, such as demonstrated in Zonnefeld's (2009) exploration with over 70 questions. Finally, the very premise of covenantal schools includes involvement from the church, home, and school. A more extensive study might include the perspectives of additional stakeholders such as staff, students, and parents along with board members and administration.

## **Conclusion**

With all of these considerations in mind, it is worth clearly articulating a few summary conclusions for school boards to pursue in effective board governance in covenantal Christian schools.

First, many boards of covenantal schools clearly recognize the importance of strong governance principles and in doing so are committed to actively building and furthering God's kingdom through education. Boards need to continue doing the Christian work they've been called to do. They need to continue building trusting, nurturing relationships with one another, administration, and staff teams. The work is often done by volunteers out of a desire to serve one another and serve God. This desire for Christian service is one of the strengths of boards in covenantal schools and preserving these core values needs to continue to be a strength of a Christian organization in remaining both effective and mission true.

Secondly, there is strong evidence that boards in covenantal schools should commit to professional and spiritual growth together. Professional development is a broad term and can take on different structures or forms in different contexts; however, boards should decide what this looks like for their context. Most respondents noted the importance of accountability

measures for boards as well as ongoing principal evaluation, yet there was some uncertainty around professional development for board members. Iron sharpens iron is a biblical concept from Proverbs that encourages us to correct one another and be able to grow together. (Proverbs 27:17) This growth mindset has extended to the boardrooms of businesses, corporations, and other settings, not to mention to the various staff serving in covenantal schools, and there is no apparent reason why it shouldn't extend to boardrooms of schools. There are plenty of opportunities and apparently a strong desire from their members for school boards to connect with one another. There are various invaluable resources and organizations available to boards. At the very least, a conversation about professional development is a starting point for school boards.

Finally, boards should be active in developing or strengthening board governance policy handbooks for the work of the board and school staff. This single component will impact a number of other components identified as areas of need in this research. A board with a well-developed handbook will have members who are acutely aware of their roles, responsibilities and time commitments. A board with a well-developed handbook should experience more clarity around the roles of administration and the roles of the board. A handbook will support development and maintenance of committees that operate as needed and directed by the board. A well-developed handbook will explain whether classroom visits are necessary, and why or why not as part of all of its ongoing policy review and development. A board with a well-developed handbook will have direction for how much professional development to pursue. A board with a well-developed handbook will have articulated how much time to allot to mission and vision as opposed to day-to-day operations and make adjustments as necessary. Developing these handbooks will help boards understand how their work and function relates to the mission and

vision of the school. And perhaps most importantly, a board with a well-developed handbook that undergoes regular review will be engaged in ongoing conversation about how best to guide their school communities. This might involve revision, change and improvement, or simply be a mechanism for a renewed focus on and commitment to this critical work.

A few respondents commented that many of these governance practices are so closely interrelated. This is true, and in conclusion, we can be thankful for many thriving covenantal schools that appear committed to improving governance structure in various ways. The desire of these board members (often parents) in schools that are structured to reflect parental desires and the work of parents in the home gives evidence that there is clearly a commitment to continued growth and change. This supports the very idea of covenant. Change simply for the sake of change isn't necessarily helpful yet change to align to best practice for governance is encouraging for schools operating with such a unique governance structure and will ultimately have a trickle-down effect on student outcomes. Schools are concerned with learning outcomes. Covenantal schools are concerned with learning outcomes while supporting the work of the home and church and furthering God's kingdom. As has been demonstrated, board governance in covenantal schools is therefore a critical part of those learning outcomes. While some current practices are effective, a renewed commitment to ensuring our governance practices are in line with those covenantal desires and best practice will only serve to improve our schools and allow our students to indeed flourish.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Introductory Letter to the Study

Dear current and former board members and administrators,

Thank-you for your willingness to take part in this study.

My name is Justin Raap, the principal of Tyndale Christian School in Calgary, AB. I am currently completing the final thesis portion of my Masters of Education through Dordt University in Iowa, which includes an action research component. The topic for this action research is *Effective Governance in Covenantal Christian Schools*.

The link below will take you to a short survey with questions about the importance of various components related to effective board governance in covenantal Christian schools. These components have been identified through various literature reviews, schools handbooks and practices, among other sources. Part of the intent of this study is to work with more broadly identified effective governance components and in light of the data collected examine how those apply to covenantal Christian schools. Many of these schools have their own unique nuances and as such there isn't an abundance of research given the more specific context. A table of corresponding sources to individual questions is available if you are interested. The survey should take between 5-10 minutes to complete, including a few open-ended questions that are optional should you desire to add any further context, ideas, or thoughts around governance. These are not being used in any sort of statistical analysis and are *not* required, rather are intended to potentially add context to the introduction and analysis for this thesis. Follow-up interviews may be scheduled with select respondents.

Survey Link: [Effective Governance in Covenantal Christian Schools](#)

Please be assured that survey responses and any other information provided will be entirely anonymous. I am happy to share any results or findings with you upon completion of the study if desired. Additionally, when completed the thesis should also be publicly available here: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/med\\_theses/](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/med_theses/)

The survey will remain open for approximately two weeks (February 16). Thank-you again for taking the time to complete this.

Blessings,  
Justin Raap

## Appendix B: Survey Questions

### EFFECTIVE BOARD GOVERNANCE IN COVENANTAL SCHOOLS - SURVEY

#### Demographic Questions

1. Select the description that best suits you:

- Current Board member
- Former Board Members
- Current Administrator
- Former Administrator
- Other

2. How many years of experience do you have working on or with a school board?

- 1-5
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

#### Survey Questions

SECTION 1: Based on your experience, please rate the importance of the following component statements for effective board governance in covenantal schools.

Note: The linear criteria range from 1 to 5 and will be scored with the following descriptors:

- 1 - Not Important
- 2 - Not critical
- 3 - Somewhat Important
- 4 - Important
- 5 - Very Important

1. School boards should actively monitor adherence to a clearly defined mission and vision statement, making changes as required.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

2. School boards should aim to spend up to 80% of their time on mission and vision planning and as little as 20% on the day-to-day operations of the school.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

3. School boards should seek out and participate in various training and professional development opportunities.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

4. School boards should clearly define board and administration roles and responsibilities in policy handbooks.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

5. School boards should intentionally participate in succession planning for various roles (eg. chairperson, treasurer, etc.).

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

6. School boards should carefully plan to have members with previous board level experience.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

7. School boards should establish a clear trust relationship with administration and staff.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

8. School boards need to have a chairperson and principal that work closely together.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

9. School boards should visit classrooms and staff in the school on a regular basis to stay in-tune with the atmosphere of the school.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important

10. School boards should prioritize supporting their staff and maintaining staff morale via regular feedback from and communication with staff.

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very Important



**Appendix C: Research Links to Study Questions**

Question	Topic	Research Links
1	Mission and Vision Statement Adherence	Contant & Noot, 2019 De Pree, 2001 Stob, 2011
2	Mission and Vision Time Allocations	Contant & Noot, 2019 Stob, 2011
3	Training and Professional Development	De Pree, 2001 Zonnefeld, 2009
4	Clear Role Definition	Burns et.al., 2018 De Pree, 2001
5	Succession Planning	De Pree, 2001
6	Member Experience	De Pree, 2001
7	Trust	Burns et. al., 2018 De Pree, 2001 Lowrie, 2004
8	Relationship Between Board Chairperson and Principal	Contant & Noot, 2019 De Pree, 2001 Lowrie, 2004
9	Board School Visits	Contant & Noot, 2019 Various School Handbooks
10	Relationship Building - Staff	Contant & Noot, 2019 De Pree, 2009 Lencioni, 2012 Swayner et. al., 2021
11	Member Diversity	De Pree, 2001 Lowrie, 2004
12	Principal Evaluation	Contant & Noot, 2019 Lowrie, 2004
13	Accountability Measures	Burns et. al., 2018 Contant & Noot, 2019 De Pree, 2001 Stob, 2011 Zonnefeld, 2009
14	Communication	De Pree, 2001 Lencioni, 2012
15	Relationship Building - Members	De Pree, 2001 Lowrie, 2004 Swayner et. al., 2021

**Appendix D: Level of Importance Likert Survey Individual Response Breakdown**

Question	Topic	1 = Not Important	2 = Not Critical	3 = Somewhat Important	4 = Important	5 = Very Important
1	Mission and Vision Statement Adherence	1	0	2	17	39
2	Mission and Vision Time Allocations	2	6	19	25	7
3	Training and Professional Development	0	6	19	27	7
4	Clear Role Definition	0	0	2	11	46
5	Succession Planning	1		5	20	33
6	Member Experience	0	8	15	29	7
7	Trust	0	0	1	7	50
8	Relationship Between Board Chair/Principal	0	0	1	14	44
9	Board School Visits	1	2	8	25	23
10	Relationship Building - Staff	0	4	16	20	19
11	Member Diversity	0	3	19	27	10
12	Principal Evaluation	0	1	1	22	35
13	Accountability Measures	0	0	10	27	22
14	Communication	0	0	0	29	30
15	Relationship Building - Members	0	2	8	19	30

**Appendix E: Coded Qualitative Data Themes by Percentage**

Number	Theme Description	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Networking and Relationships	7	13%
2	Commitment Levels of Board Members	4	8%
3	Policy and Committee Work	15	28%
4	Legislative Requirements	3	6%
5	Christian/Godly Character of the School	14	26%
6	Financial or Business Aspects	7	13%
7	Other	3	6%