

**SHIBBOLEY SCHECHTER:  
A GATHERING OF IDEAS  
FOR LAY AND PROFESSIONAL  
DAY SCHOOL LEADERS**

**NO. 29 -- SPRING 2002**

**UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM  
SOLOMON SCHECHTER DAY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION**

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by Dr. Patrick F. Bassett

Many independent school board members consider placement on the Nominating Committee somewhere on the power and prestige chart just below relegation to the clean-up detail for the annual auction. ISACS contends that the Committee on Trustees (a.k.a. Nominating Committee) is the single most important of all board committees, based on the premise that a school's future is only secure to the extent that its board is strong. No job is more important than the recruitment, on-going education, and annual evaluation of the board, all orchestrated by the Committee on Trustees.

Regarding the recruitment process, ISACS would note the following points:

- **Current Parents:** There is sometimes an inverse relationship between the number of current parents on a board and both the stability and fundraising capability of a board: i.e., those schools with a majority of non-current parents on the board often seem to reap a greater harvest, without suffering as much tumult, as those boards with a majority of current parents. (ISACS average board membership = 45% current parents.)
- **Membership on the Committee on Trustees:** board chair, past chair, vice-chair (heir apparent), head of school, plus any other key trustees.
- **Profiling:** The typical screening process involves identifying strategic needs of the board and school, soliciting nominees from the board in general and other constituents, then discussing the natural "matches." For example, a school beginning master planning for campus renovation or expansion might decide an architect, engineer, and/or contractor would be a beneficial ("strategic") addition to the board; likewise, a marketing expert for a school focusing on expanding outreach, etc.
- **Pool:** Since current parents are already heavily invested in the school, they represent a large and obvious pool for board recruitment for a portion of the board. Successful and loyal alumni represent a second obvious pool, often providing much of the commitment and "long view" of the most successful boards. If day schools were to follow the boarding school model of meeting three times per year for two days of meetings (rather than meeting monthly), alumni who are dispersed geographically would become a much more important segment of the pool. The other natural allies include past parents and grandparents (some of whom are retired executives with time, expertise and resources to bring to the table). Finally, "opinion leaders" from outside the school's immediate family are critical strategically for most boards and schools: these are folks who typically are connected to current constituents and are recruited by their contacts informally before being approached by the Committee on Trustees.

- **Committee Appointments:** In the most efficient and effective recruitment models, board committees do much of the significant work of the board and include non-board members with expertise in the area of focus of the committee. ISACS recommends that whenever possible, schools appoint members to board committees first, as a “try-out” system for later appointment to the board. No matter what expertise and resources any individual may have, if that individual is not a “team player,” appointment to the board will be counterproductive: thus, work at the committee level can either inspire a larger level of enthusiasm for the school and willingness to go to the next level (board membership) or can gracefully screen out potential rogue elephants.
- **3 Rs vs. 3 Ws:** The old adage for board recruitment was the 3 Ws: to seek those with two of the 3 Ws of Work, Wisdom and Wealth. The problem with the old adage was that come capital campaign time, too many board members thought to themselves, “Thank God I was recruited for my work and wisdom.” The new adage is that we need the 3 Rs: those who can (beyond their specific expertise) contribute significantly in Raising students, Raising image, and Raising money.
- **Trustee “Contract”:** Increasingly, the Committee on Trustees finds it useful to stipulate in advance of a nomination the expectations of trustees. The trustee contract should specify attendance, participation, confidentiality, and financial support expectations. It is ISACS’ experience that potential trustees appreciate knowing especially the financial expectations in advance (e.g., “Our average trustee annual giving gift is \$2500 per year”) of accepting a position on the board and that boards appreciate those who, once informed in advance, are ready to contribute significantly their time and resources for the good of the order.  
Bringing the right players to the table will guarantee the long-term success of any operation.

## Our Schools Respond:

### From Janet Urman, President, Pressman Academy, Los Angeles, CA

We recently discussed Board Recruitment at a Board meeting as we were working on a profile of our members. Our School Head distributed Pat Bassett’s article as part of our efforts to continue to educate our Board members. We added one additional item:

What is the relationship of the professional staff (e.g., Education Director, Early Childhood Director) to our Board? We decided that “technically” we would not consider them members of our Board, but they are welcome at all meetings and do not vote.

### From Rabbi Mitchel Malkus, Head, Pressman Academy, Los Angeles, CA

Patrick Bassett’s article both articulates a framework for assisting us in developing boards for our schools and reveals some important differences between boards at elite private schools and those at Solomon Schechter schools. A critical review of his major points is useful to help us adapt his ideas to the context of Jewish day schools.

**Current Parents:** While Bassett’s suggestion that there is an inverse relationship between the number of current parents on a board and the stability and fundraising capacity of a board certainly eliminates much of the messiness we confront in working with our boards, I believe this type of thinking reflects an elitist vision that would be harmful to the types of communities we are trying to foster. Elite private schools are infamous for having boards with few parents and little accountability to those parents. In our communities we are trying to develop a spirit of deep commitment and involvement among parents and so I would suggest that the significant majority of a board (roughly 75%) be current parents.

**Profiling:** My school board has been engaged in discussions on this topic in a very positive way. Thinking about boards in terms of the types of individuals who serve and the skills they bring focuses a board on the work to be done and away from much of the personal politics that may get in the way when the nominating committee meets. A profiled board provides support/justification for making difficult decisions about who will and will not serve.

**Committee Appointments:** The board I work with is divided into committees where only the chair is required to be a board member. As Bassett explains, this system broadens the pool of leaders and gives those leaders an opportunity to gain confidence in their ability to serve. Such a system also gives the board a chance to gauge the appropriateness of asking someone to join its ranks.

**Trustee “Contract”:** My board has a document called the “Responsibilities of Board Members.” It is an extremely useful document in orienting new board members to the work and commitments that will be expected of them during their terms. Our contract spells out the role (different than that of a parent) that a board member is expected to play. The contract makes a clear distinction between the role of the professional staff and the policy role of the board. The document also mentions a financial commitment but not specific amount. Level of giving has never been the determining factor in being nominated to my school’s board and yet, when the responsibilities document was drawn up, board members felt that each of them should make a personally significant financial gift reflecting the school’s philanthropic priority to each member.

(cont’d. on page 3)

**From Cheryl Finkel, Head, Epstein School, Atlanta, GA**

I am in total agreement with everything Pat Bassett wrote. Most of us are familiar with the Nominating Committee that holds its first meeting in March and works fast to fill open board positions with people they don't really know well. It can be difficult for a school board to make the switch to the more strategic Committee on Trustees, which leads the board in its education and self-assessment process, keeping an eye on the performance of current and potential trustees, always planning for the succession of key leadership.

The Epstein School Board of Trustees has worked for the past four years under the Committee on Trustees approach and has fulfilled many of the recommendations in the ISACS article. First they created a letter for newly-appointed trustees, outlining the responsibilities of their new role (see below). Then they added an annual orientation workshop for the new trustees in early June and strengthened the program of the annual board retreat each August. They added board training segments to regular board meetings several times a year. These included informative sessions on various areas of school function, such as "Finance in Independent Schools," "Workshop on Admissions," "The Annual Fund: How to Make a Successful Solicitation."

This past year our new board president involved more people in the work of the Committee on Trustees by creating a Subcommittee on Board Education. The chair worked closely with the head of school to draft a curriculum of board sessions for the entire year; she also proposed a new format for board meetings that emphasized the acquisition of new leadership and governance skills along with more extended time for Jewish learning. (Traditionally, our board meetings have opened with a brief *D'var Torah*.) The Executive Committee reviewed the proposed model, recommended some revisions, and the program was implemented successfully. Here is the new structure: The meeting opens with a half-hour of Torah study and a light dinner at 7:00 p.m. At 7:30 there is a half-hour module of board education. Board business begins at 8:00 and usually ends by 9:00 p.m. This works because so much of the board's work is accomplished in the committees, reported in writing, and e-mailed to board members in advance of the meeting.

One of the most elegant parts of these Torah study sessions is that we have asked our Judaic scholars to tie their teaching to the topic of that night's board education segment and they have been delighted to do so. For example, when we studied the fundraising responsibilities of board members, the Judaics teacher brought biblical and talmudic texts on the subject of community welfare and the requirements of a Jewish community to provide financially for schools. At the meeting when the Personnel Policies Committee presented a study on compensation and benefits, the Torah study explored fascinating Judaic texts about teaching and teachers. Wouldn't it be wonderful to compile a Schechter board education manual filled with leadership topics for trustees, each illuminated by the wisdom of pertinent Jewish texts?

We have been lucky that talented people have been willing to serve as trustees. Although all the independent school wisdom warns that boards should not be dominated by current parents, ours have always been about 80% parents and we have done all right with that. Somehow the board's culture has always helped these parent/board members be aware of the potential for role conflict and find ways to manage it appropriately. In my 19 years at Epstein I have found our board wise and responsible in its governance, rational and supportive in its tone of discourse. And, most important, our trustees have been passionately devoted to our Solomon Schechter Day School, giving tirelessly of their time, energy, and resources to make Conservative Jewish education a beautiful reality for the youth of Atlanta.

**Sample Letter to New Board Member**

Dear :

We are very pleased you have accepted our invitation to serve on The Epstein School's Board of Trustees. This is a very exciting and dynamic time for our school — filled with the challenges of our mission and the complexities of educating children in our modern world.

While it is an honor to serve as a member of this working Board, it is also a significant responsibility. Your overall goal as a member of the Board is to ensure the school's continued success, both academically and fiscally. Below are the highlights of your role and responsibilities.

- \* Your very first responsibility is to attend the Annual Meeting on Tuesday, \_\_\_\_\_ at 7:30pm. You will be elected and installed at this time. Please RSVP to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - \* Attend Board meetings regularly on the first Tuesday of each month. The Board's by-laws permit no more than two absences a school year.
  - \* Actively participate on at least one Board committee.
  - \* Participate in the strategic planning process that sets the direction of the school for future years. Help set annual goals that move the school toward its chosen direction.
  - \* Help ensure the school's financial health by reviewing periodic financial statements, assisting in the school's fundraising effort and making a personal gift to the school's Annual Giving or Parent Annual Giving program.
- In addition, each Board member is expected to make a personal gift to the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta's annual campaign as well as assist with solicitation efforts.
- \* Serve as a key ambassador for the school and its mission to all stakeholders in the school and to the greater Atlanta community.

If you have a concern about any of these items, please call me at \_\_\_\_\_. We are very excited you have agreed to serve the school in this capacity and look forward to our close working relationship in the future.

Most sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
President, Board of Trustees

\_\_\_\_\_  
Head of School

## Want a Great Board? Start with Strong Committee Chairs

Committees are the linchpin. When a Board of Trustees operates effectively, that success is built on a foundation of strong, well-led committees. When Board meetings are well-attended, purposeful and gratifying, that, too, usually grows out of understanding and applying the principles of putting committees together the right way.

Great Board committees generate the following benefits:

- fewer — and shorter — Board meetings;
- Board decisions built on research and analysis (by committees) rather than on opinion and hearsay;
- minor issues handled by the few rather than the many;
- the opportunity for outstanding people to work on projects and issues that matter to the school's future, rather than enduring the boredom of large-group deliberation of trivia;
- the foundation for moving a strategic or long range plan toward its goals in the most expeditious manner possible, and
- a school that gets better than it has ever been — and fast.

As Board President, did you note the Achilles heel exposed here? The fact is that committees tend to be only as strong as the people who lead them. The key to success is identifying, recruiting, and managing good leaders for your Board committees — a critical role shared by you, the Committee on Trustees, and the School Head.

### Identifying Effective Chairs

When considering individuals for committee chair positions, concentrate more on their leadership characteristics than on the technical professional aspects of their backgrounds.

Fine chairs are almost always doers. They may or may not have much technical knowledge in the area(s) to be tackled by a given committee in a given year, but they can clearly energize and direct those who do have such skills.

For example, say that the Finance Committee's primary charge for the coming year is to create or interpret a new strategic financial plan.<sup>1</sup> The ideal chair may not be a "financial person" at all. Instead, what you truly need may be a fine strategic thinker and leader — one who grasps the big picture of the school's future, and who can organize several "financial people" to carry out this task.

### Identifying Committee Leaders

The annual Board agenda, developed by you and the Executive Committee, dictates the basic committee organization for the year. Once those two elements are in place, the leadership group comprised of you, the head, and the chair of the Committee on Trustees should assess both your current and anticipated Board membership for potential chairs.

If your leadership group is struck by the paucity of its choices for the leadership roles, take action. For the future, note that your Board profile<sup>2</sup> apparently needs more vigorous attention to leadership characteristics in potential new Trustees.

To get you through the current year, consider temporarily combining one or more of your proposed committees into a single unit with a strong chair. You'll be better off with one larger committee, well organized and well led, than with two or three smaller units, only one of which is likely to make progress.

After each chair is selected, sessions should be held in which the implications of the annual charge to each committee are considered. In those action-focused contexts, the composition of each committee is also debated and decided, committee by committee. Remember that strong leaders will be highly motivated to get individuals on their committees who will help them attain their goals. Therefore, they should be listened to and often deferred to in this process.

### Next Steps

#### *Plan for the coming year.*

Having set your committee chair and membership line-up, ask each chair to develop (from the committee charge) a more explicit outline for the year. This should include a committee time table corresponding to the point in the year at which you will need your various proposals for action to pass before the whole Board for deliberation and action.

#### *Training and orientation.*

Your Committee on Trustees traditionally provides orientation to new trustees, training them in general Board structure and function, including discussion and analysis of the Board's and the school's foundation documents (strategic or long range plan, bylaws, accreditation documents).

The Committee on Trustees should also give considerable thought to the orientation and training of new committee chairs, focusing on small-group leadership principles and techniques.

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**PUBLISHED BY  
UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM  
COMMISSION ON JEWISH EDUCATION**

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### **When Committees Fail**

If a committee's original charge for the year comprised a feasible set of goals, why would it fail? The fault is probably the committee chair's — and, in these cases, "fault" usually means less an outright dereliction than simply an instance of mediocre leadership.

Successful mid-year intervention — whether by the Committee on Trustees, the Executive Committee, or you — may take the form of renewed training for the chair, renewed orientation for the whole committee, or a complete redirection and restaffing of the committee. The latter may include appointing a co-chair. However, to be successful, this appointment usually requires at least a moderately enthusiastic endorsement from the original chair.

The last resort is you. There are instances in which either the President takes over the problem committee and leads it to a successful and timely completion of its goals, or the overall Board agenda is simply not met that year. For most Presidents in most years, the "worst solution" approach is preferable to the "no solution" approach.

The selection of committee chairs is worth the time and effort you bring to the process. Done well, this task forms the foundation for the Board's success and progress.

<sup>1</sup>See "Your Strategic Financial Play," *Ideas & Perspectives*, Vol. 22, No. 5, p. 17, and "The Strategic Financial Plan: A Checklist for Trustees," *I&P*, Vol. 22, No. 15, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>See "The Board Profile's Cornerstone: Your Strategic Plan," *I&P*, Vol. 20, No. 15, p. 57.

### **Memo to the Board's Committee Chairs: Avoid Having your Work Second-Guessed**

Effective Board committee work can be torpedoed by a Board that listens to a committee's proposal — and then proceeds to redo the work. As the chair of a committee, you can envision the damage that results. Your committee members are frustrated — as are the other trustees, who feel that your group did not do its work well enough.

You can reduce the likelihood of such unhappy outcomes by following these guidelines in creating your written and oral committee proposals.

- Explain how your committee interpreted the original charge from the Executive Committee.
- Note the plan used to attach the various components of the charge.
- Mention the roles played by individual committee members and/or subcommittees.
- Show the sequence of steps that led to a narrowing of the focus and the emergence of conclusions. Convey the degree of challenge involved by quoting the number of person-hours, telephone calls, and meetings.
- Mention the significant contacts made and the resources studied.
- Show the major conclusions, listed in descending order of importance.

- Conclude with a draft resolution designed to focus the ensuing Board discussion and vote.

When Board members receive little more than a one-page list of conclusions and a resolution, a sense of superficiality can result. The approach suggested here emphasizes the process that was followed, building a foundation for the findings that resulted.

### **The Role of the School Head and the Board President in Committee Work**

Both these positions should be *ex officio* to each committee. But this does not mean that either or both should automatically attend every meeting of every committee.

While you have the right to do so, the best organizational practice calls for the president or head to attend a particular committee meeting only when your presence is expected to be of special importance. Attendance is usually, but not always, at the invitation of the committee chair.

If the head's second-level administration is fully staffed (i.e., Business Manager, Development Director, Admission Director), one member of that group is normally assigned to each board committee as liaison. This makes the head's or president's attendance at routine committee meetings even less necessary.

Reprinted with permission from Independent School Management. *To the Point*. Winter, 2002. ISM, 302/656-4944, e-mail: [ism@isminc.com](mailto:ism@isminc.com).

## Board Tune-ups

Like other finely crafted engines, boards of independent schools need a periodic tune-up to check for leaks, renew fluids, balance timing, determine if all pistons are firing, evaluate overall performance, and apply a trained eye to detect any warning signs of wear. The Independent Schools Association of the Central States suggests that schools that are vigilant about scheduling their vans for tune-ups every 7,500 miles might also consider doing the same for their boards every year or two.

As a resource for board chairs (or other board maintenance engineers), they have prepared a checklist for the periodic tune-up: The task is to compare the “best practices” ISACS version to one’s own version of policies and practices. All of the documents cited are available at no charge by downloading from the ISACS website: Go to [www.isacs.org](http://www.isacs.org) then click on *Monographs*, scroll down to *Board of Trustees*, and choose the appropriate monograph title. (Most of the titles are listed alphabetically under the *Board of Trustees* section, but some are found elsewhere on the same webpage under the category headings of *Admissions*, *Business Operations*, *Head of School*, *Evaluation*, etc.)

### Tune-up Checklist

- Board Bylaws (Bylaws for Independent Schools)
- Board Committees (Board Committee Charges)
- Board Evaluation (Evaluation Instrument for Boards)
- Board Policies (Board Policies Book; Trustee Handbook)
- Board Recruitment (Board Recruitment)
- Board Structure/Meeting Pattern (Benchmarks: Board)
- Contract for Head of School (Head Contract Sample)
- Endowment Policies (Benchmarks: Endowment)
- Enrollment Contract (Enrollment Contracts)
- Enrollment Policies (Enrollment & Re-enrollment Decisions & Records)
- Faculty Contract (Faculty Contracts)
- Head Evaluation (Evaluation Instrument for Heads)
- Long-range Planning (Strategic Planning Outline)

Schools can eliminate a good amount of backfires, mishaps and accidents on the road to good governance with a little bit of preventative maintenance.

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## Open A Schechter Website!

United Synagogue invites all Schechter schools to open WEBSITES. Contact Martin Kunoff, [kunoff@uscj.org](mailto:kunoff@uscj.org), for immediate attention. Many Schechter schools have already taken advantage of this opportunity. There is no fee.

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## SAVE THE DATES

**The next Solomon Schechter Day School  
Association Biennial Conference for Lay and  
Professional Leadership**

**December 15-17, 2002**

**to be held at  
the Jewish Theological Seminary of America  
3080 Broadway  
New York, NY 10010**

**SAVE THE DATES**

## Join Schechter in Cyberspace

There are now 5 Solomon Schechter listservs:

[Roshnet@uscj.org](mailto:Roshnet@uscj.org) — for Principals

[SSDS-Prez@uscj.org](mailto:SSDS-Prez@uscj.org) — for Presidents

[SSDS-Business@uscj.org](mailto:SSDS-Business@uscj.org) — for Business Managers

[SSDS-Development@uscj.org](mailto:SSDS-Development@uscj.org) — for Development  
Directors

and the newest:

[SSDS-Counselor@uscj.org](mailto:SSDS-Counselor@uscj.org) — for School Counselors

A listserv allows people with a particular interest — in our case, Schechter — to share information regarding that interest. Once you sign on, all participants in the listserv receive all postings via e-mail. Registrants are encouraged to be active participants by posting questions, concerns, and ideas to the group regarding issues of interest to the Schechter organization.

To sign up for the appropriate listserv send an e-mail to [education@uscj.org](mailto:education@uscj.org). On the subject line type in "new sign up for" (choose appropriate listserv: Roshnet, SSDS-Prez, SSDS-Business, SSDS-Development, and SSDS-Counselor). You will receive a message welcoming you to that listserv. You may then send a message, question or comment and it will be distributed to everyone on that list. Enjoy!