

Governance Benchmarks for South Australian Independent School Boards



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In 2006 the AISSA Board initiated a project to identify benchmarks across a range of areas with the aim of assisting member schools to maintain and enhance the unique strengths of Independent schools. The enhanced regulatory and compliance environment within which schools now operate also provides further justification for the project.

The first set of benchmarks has been developed in the area of board governance.

The AISSA *Governance Benchmarks for South Australian Independent School Boards* are intended to be a means of assisting Independent school boards in establishing and maintaining high standards in the area of school governance. The benchmarks include also a series of indicators of good governance practices to further assist school boards in this area.

In forming these benchmarks and indicators of good governance practices the AISSA has drawn on a range of standards and benchmarks developed by other organisations. The benchmarks have also been developed in consultation with the AISSA School Governance Committee. I thank members of the Committee for their contribution to this important project.

I would welcome any comment or questions regarding the Governance Benchmarks from member schools.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Garry Le Duff". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Garry Le Duff
Executive Director
Association of Independent Schools of South Australia

PREAMBLE

Increasingly schools are operating in a climate of greater legislative and public accountability. The AISSA Board has developed the following set of governance benchmarks and indicators of good governance practices to assist Independent school boards to maintain high standards in governance.

The benchmarks are designed to be used as a guide for school boards to assess and improve performance.

Where schools are part of a system it should be noted that the school and the board will have other lines of accountability and compliance which may modify the indicators outlined below. Schools which are owned by other authorities, such as church authorities, may also have other lines of accountability and compliance.

In developing the benchmarks, and indicators of good governance practices, the AISSA has drawn on a wide range of standards and benchmarks developed by other organisations. This list of benchmarks and indicators is not exhaustive and schools may wish to define their performance by additional standards. Further details regarding standards and benchmarks for other organisations are available in the references provided at the end of this publication.

GENERIC FUNCTIONS OF THE BOARD

The following is a set of generic board functions.

- Determine the organisation's mission and purpose.
- Set clear limits of authority for the chief executive officer and individual board members.
- Select the chief executive and external auditor.
- Support the chief executive and assess his or her performance, including in regard to the implementation of board policy.
- Ensure effective planning.
- Ensure adequate resources are available to guarantee the financial stability and the financial sustainability of the institution.
- Manage resources effectively.
- Determine, monitor and strengthen the organisation's programs and services against strategic objectives.
- Enhance the organisation's public standing.
- Ensure legal and ethical integrity and maintain accountability.
- Recruit and orient new board members and assess board performance.

BENCHMARKS

Mission/Vision: Strategic Directions

The board is the responsible steward of the school and is accountable for the good governance of the organisation.

- Board policies are consistent with the philosophy, mission and vision of the school.
- The board has a 'Code of Conduct' by which it and the school community abide.
- The board has a consolidated set of policies which guide its operation. The policies are collated in a policy manual and known to the school community.
- The board ensures that policies and processes are in place which promote the effective running of the school.
- The board has established policies and processes in place to manage and minimize risk including the keeping of appropriate and accurate documentation.
- The constitution of the school is reviewed via an approved schedule.
- The board has the required skills and knowledge, including access to external advice, to discharge its responsibilities and achieve the mission of the school.
- The board ensures that the school operates within the legislative environment, including registration obligations, laws and regulations, and meets its legislative accountability (e.g. accounting and audit standards) and compliance requirements (e.g. funding agreements with governments and other agencies).
- A succession planning policy is in place for the principal and other key staff.
- The board has an approved risk management plan which is reviewed according to an agreed schedule.

The board provides leadership and sets the strategic directions of the school.

- There is a clear statement outlining the school's philosophy, mission and vision.
- The board promotes and articulates to the school and wider community the school's philosophy, mission and vision.
- The board has a developed strategic plan which is reviewed on a regular schedule.
- The board ensures that the strategic plan and associated work plans are implemented and monitored by the principal.
- The board regularly evaluates the policy and political context within which the school operates.
- The board is accountable.

Board Roles and Responsibilities

Board members are aware of their roles and responsibilities and the respective roles and responsibilities of management.

- The roles of the board/principal/chair are clear.
- Board governance is clearly differentiated from school management.
- The principal of the school is responsible for the day to day management of the school and is the responsible leader of the school. The principal is accountable to the board.
- The working relationship between the board and the head of the school is underpinned by the principles of cooperation and effectiveness.
- A governance manual outlines the governance policies and procedures of the board.
- A board induction process is in place and ongoing professional development is implemented.
- Board members undertake sufficient preparation which enables them to perform their duties.
- Terms of reference for each board committee are established and linked to the functions of the board. The roles and performance of each committee is reviewed according to an agreed schedule.

Financial Accountability

The board is accountable for the financial sustainability of the school including ensuring that the school can fulfil the education program offered and the school's mission.

- The board has an understanding of the financial situation of the school.
- The board engages in financial planning which promotes the long-term financial health of the school, including the identification of key performance indicators.
- The board receives timely and accurate financial information.
- The board takes appropriate care of the resources for which it is responsible.
- The board is accountable for the effective use of government funds.
- The board sets the remuneration level for the head of the school. In setting the remuneration the board's decision is underpinned by the principles of fairness, responsibility and sufficiency and defines any performance measures upon which this is dependent.
- The board appoints the auditor and meets with the auditor on an agreed schedule.

Decision Making

The board promotes and practices ethical decision making.

- Board decisions are underpinned by the principles of integrity, honesty and objectivity.
- A conflict of interest policy is approved by the board and reviewed on an agreed schedule.

The board makes informed and transparent decisions.

- The agenda for board meetings predominantly reflect the key strategic business of the board.
- The board receives clear briefings from staff as determined by the board.
- The board is aware of the views of the school community.
- Board members are active participants in board meetings.
- The views of all board members are recognised.
- The boardroom culture is accepting of disagreement and reasonable dissent.
- The board communicates its decisions to the wider school community, except in cases where such communication would breach privacy or confidentiality.
- The board audits new and reviewed policies against its strategic plan.
- The board exercises independence of judgement in its decision making.
- Accurate records are kept of all board and board committee meetings.
- The board undertakes an evaluation of its performance, according to an agreed schedule and methodology.

REFERENCES

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- Board Works International (2007) *Good Governance* Number 55 January-February.
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- Office of Strategy and Review (2006) *Excerpts from the Report on the Review of School Governance in Victorian Government Schools July 2005*.
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VALUES

We believe passionately in Independent schooling and the right of parents to exercise choice.

We accept only the highest ethical and professional standards.

We respect and are strengthened by diversity.

We promote a spirit of openness and mutual trust.

We embrace a culture of support, encouragement and networking.

VISION

We will be a forceful and inspirational voice of education in South Australia.

We will be the most powerful advocate for Independent schooling in the community.

We will provide dynamic and innovative services.

We will be vigorous, optimistic and unified.

We will work together to achieve great things for students in schools.

We will use our differences to gain strength and understanding.

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