

A Practical Exercise: Governance vs. Operations Role-Play

One of the most effective tools we've used with Catholic school boards is a structured role-play that helps members identify which issues fall under governance and which fall under operations.

You can run this activity in 20–30 minutes at any board meeting.

Step 1: Prepare Scenario Cards

Create 10–15 short examples that reflect real-life school situations.

For example:

- A parent complains about a teacher's grading practices.
- The school is considering a new math curriculum.
- Enrollment is down 8% from projections.
- A staff member requests an adjustment to the daily schedule.
- The board wants to consider a building expansion.
- A donor offers a restricted gift tied to a specific program.
- The principal disciplines a student whose parent knows a board member.
- The school is revising its mission statement.
- A teacher asks a board member about salary concerns.
- The school wants to expand to a second campus.



Step 2: Ask Board Members to Sort the Scenarios

In small groups or as a whole board, ask:

Is this primarily a Governance Issue or an Operations Issue? Why?

If the board has a role, what is it?

If the board does *not* have a role, how should a board member respond?

Encourage discussion—not immediate answers.

The learning is in the conversation.

Step 3: Debrief With a Governance Framework

After discussion, walk through each scenario and connect the classifications to your board's:

- Bylaws
- Jurisdiction (advisory, limited, or specified)
- Principal/president job description
- Committee charters
- Diocesan governance guidance

Boards often discover that they *intuitively* understand the boundary—what they lack is shared language. This exercise builds that language.

Step 4: Establish a “Boundary Protocol”

After the role-play, invite the board to adopt a short set of guidelines such as:

- If it’s about personnel → operations.
- If it’s about strategy, policy, or major resource allocation → governance.
- If it involves a parent complaint → direct to school leadership.
- If it involves school culture or Catholic identity → shared responsibility, led by the principal.
- If you’re not sure → ask the principal/president/board chair privately, not in front of the community.

Boards tend to feel great relief when such guardrails are articulated.

You’re Not Alone — and You Can Get This Right

The governance–operations distinction isn’t a flaw in Catholic schools. It’s a natural growing pain of passionate, committed communities. When boards and school leaders work together with clarity, respect, and shared mission, schools become stronger, leaders feel supported, and students benefit most of all.

With deliberate practice—and the right tools—boards can confidently discern when they should lead, when they should support, and when they should step back.



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