



Step-by Step Guide to Creating a School Board to Ensure a Catholic School's Viability

Incarnate Word Academy offers a model for a school board and its committees

Martha Ann Snapka, IWBS

Clockwise from top: Brendon Bottom, seventh grader; General Marc Cisneros, chief executive officer/executive vice president of the John G. and Marie Stella Kenedy Memorial Foundation; Brent Bottom, IWA school board chair, Madison Longwell, eighth grader; and Sister Anna Marie Espinosa, IWA president, cut the ribbon at the Dedication Ceremony of the Kenedy Center for Math and Science.

Montessori students prepare for a beginning of the day activity.

Elementary students enjoy a break during recess.

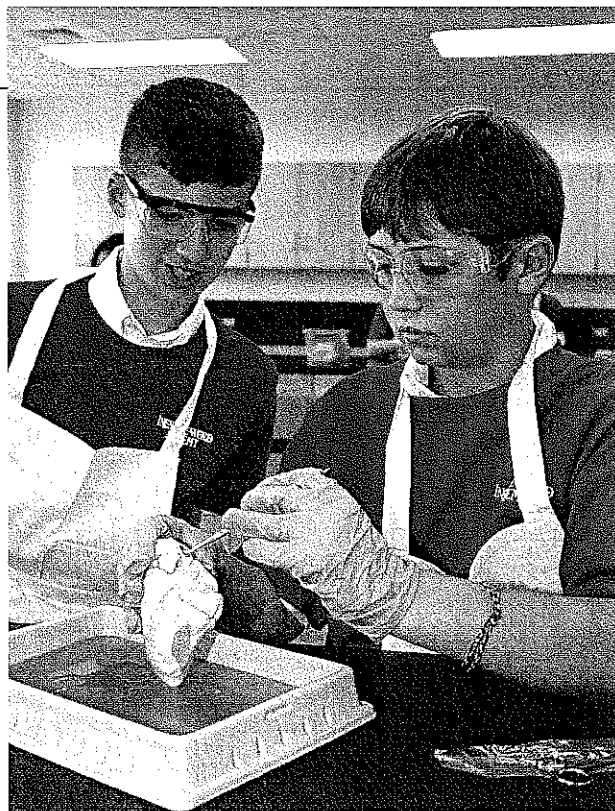
Incarnate Word Academy (IWA) was established in 1871 in Corpus Christi, Texas, by four Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament. It was a small, humble beginning. The facilities awaiting these first Sisters were poor and inadequate, primarily consisting of an abandoned two-story adobe building. Today, Incarnate Word Academy covers an expanse of 14-plus acres and provides education at the pre-school, elementary, middle and high school levels. The enrollment is now more than 900 students and IWA recently constructed a new, entirely donor-funded, middle school math and science center.

Evolvement of Governance

Until 1975, governance on the Incarnate Word Academy campus was primarily the responsibility of the Incarnate Word Sisters. With the call of Vatican II for collaboration and lay participation, IWA engaged in forms of shared power that evolved according to the needs at the time. In 1975, when the high school opened its doors to boys, a Development Board was established to assist in raising funds for the transition to coeducation, namely the boys' shower room and increased operating expenses. Several years later, after the office of IWA president was created, an Advisory Council was launched in 1989 to advise the president in the areas of finance, building and grounds, coordination of fundraising and long-range planning.

Sister Martha Ann Snapka, IWBS, is former president of Incarnate Word Academy, Corpus Christi, Texas, and has served as planned giving director of IWA's planned giving program since that program's inception (*smasnapka@hotmail.com*).

Kyle Guerra and John Mark Morales, Middle Level students, conduct a dissection.



In 1993 the sisters initiated a study of school governance on the campus. The study committee, composed of sisters and lay persons representing the congregation, the school administration, the faculty, alumni and parents, explored forms of governance and recommended a policy making body with powers and duties delegated by the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament Congregation. Thus, the IWA school board, composed of 13 members including sisters and lay persons, was formed in May, 1994.

The new step in governance of the school, while challenging, was welcomed by the sisters as a logical step to continue the tradition of collaboration and shared responsibility and to further the charism of the sisters. To ensure the effective and efficient campus-wide management of the school, committees were formed to focus on the areas of mission effectiveness, finance, facilities, development and long-range planning. Today, the board consists of 15 members and has been recognized twice in the past 15 years by the NCEA Department of Boards and Councils.

Tradition and Vision

The sisters have not been alone in the quest to provide an excellent Catholic education to the students they serve; alongside have been dedicated faculty, staff, parents, alumni, volunteers and supporters. This quest has required all to work cooperatively, adapt to change and face challenges. Over the years, IWA has been blessed with a devoted, competent board, whose members have taken seriously their roles in advancing the mission of Catholic education, securing viability and offering leadership.

Kathryn Green, chair emeritus of the board, pointed out in her remarks presented during the outstanding board recognition luncheon during the NCEA Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, in March, 2008:

Because Catholic schools must ensure that education is excellent, that the institutions are financially secure and, most importantly, that they are beacons of our Catholic faith, Catholic school board members must understand the unique role of our schools. Members of a Catholic school board must have a willingness and excitement to accomplish what Catholic schools seek to accomplish and each member must be accepting of change and challenge.

The establishment of the school board in 1994 enhanced collaboration in the area of governance, a move that has benefited IWA significantly through the talents, leadership, witness and vision of board members. Motivated by the dynamic leadership and creative vision of IWA President Sister Anna Marie Espinosa, the board has formulated policies, made decisions and taken actions pivotal to establishing a firm foundation for quality Catholic education to flourish. They have worked to ensure excellence in education and financial

security, to give strong witness of Catholic faith and to understand the unique role of Catholic schools.

Board members, aided by ongoing formation and orientation on aspects of the school's mission, have demonstrated clarity in understanding the board's role in relation to the Congregation of Incarnate Word Sisters, the IWA president, the principals, the faculty and staff. They have grown both in terms of the strengths each member has and in the ability to work together for the benefit of the

viability of the school's mission is sustained and advanced"

Articulating the Vision

To insure that Incarnate Word Academy continues to promote Catholic identity, visibility and solvency, the school board articulated the following vision statement:

Incarnate Word Academy will continue to build on the strong foundation of the educational charism of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament by:

abilities to succeed and be motivated to continue on to college or other higher education experiences, and

- Providing appropriate and just compensation and benefits to attract and retain quality faculty and staff in a highly competitive market.

Committee Structure

To help it fulfill the vision, the board created a committee structure. With the assistance of its nine fully functioning committees, the board has made outstanding contributions in the areas of mission effectiveness, strategic and long range planning, budgeting, development, marketing and plant and facilities development. The committee structure provides an intentional testing ground for new board directors in addition to the promotion of the faith community, the enhancement of the educational program and the advancement of the mission and vision of the school.

To provide for a diversified, competent and skilled board, the nominations committee maintains a pool of capable individuals for nomination as directors and develops a process to identify individuals qualified to serve on the board. Ralph Meyer, current chair of the advancement committee, observed,

The strength of our board, I believe, lies in the mixture of qualified persons, with diverse interests and backgrounds. I have been most impressed with three aspects: the commitment of Board members to quality Catholic education, the operation of the Board with the highest standards of professionalism and ethical behavior, and the dedication of members from diverse backgrounds, training, professions, and vocations.



Mary Allman, IWA high school student, visits with Mary Castro, a victim of Hurricane Ike.

school. Brent Bottom, current IWA school board chair, said,

The school board has a wonderful working rapport with the Sisters of the Incarnate Word. In decision making the relationship is reciprocal. The sisters provide a genuine knowledge of education and deep theological understanding while the school board imparts practical expertise from a variety of societal situations.

Sister Anna Marie Espinosa emphasizes what is at the core of a viable and vibrant partnership: "The relationship of the president to the school board is pivotal to the well being and growth of the school. It is within this very relationship that the

- Focusing and enhancing its distinctly Catholic character;
- Seeking to evangelize by proclaiming the Good News revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation;
- Providing each student with opportunity to know and experience Jesus Christ in everyday life;
- Serving as a living witness of Gospel values in the Corpus Christi area;
- Maintaining an optimal enrollment at each academic level;
- Offering programs of academic excellence that educate the whole child and providing opportunities to students of diverse academic

Catholic Identity and Commitment

The mission effectiveness committee is instrumental in promoting Catholic identity and mission effectiveness in all aspects of the educational program. The committee has provided significant leadership in initiating a new campus ministry program, which offers students and all members of the IWA community the opportunities of deepening their relationship with God and experiencing lived Christian community and Catholic identity.

This committee has encouraged the High School Mission program, giving students the opportunity during Holy Week to travel to villages and towns in Mexico and, during the past year, to Hurricane Ike-devastated Galveston, Texas, to spread the Gospel message and to strengthen their faith. The members also have supported the "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd," a Montessori-inspired approach to religious education that serves as a supplement to the elementary religion curriculum.

Tim Ehrman, who served as chair of the IWA school board from 2004-2006, stressed the importance of a board having a clear vision and a strong commitment to the school's mission:

Our school board members strongly believed in the mission of Incarnate Word Academy and therefore were not afraid to address the tough issues that faced the school—tuition rates, capital projects, and what it means to be a Catholic school. In addition, we had a great working relationship among the school administrators, the sisters, the school board, and the parents that allowed a free flow of ideas and an ability to accomplish many tasks.

Jim Devlin, former chair of the Finance Committee, added, "At Incarnate Word Academy, the board is

encouraged to express opinions that both endorse and sometimes conflict with existing policy. These discussions often make for very spirited debate, but always end in a net benefit to the school, which is really all that matters".

"I have been blessed," said Sister Anna Marie, "to work with school board members and directors who have been supportive, challenging, candid, engaging, professional, thoughtful and fiercely committed. Our board meetings have been invigorating and fruitful. I love our conversations, which are actually an engagement in the spirituality of conversation. While they are sometimes "messy," they surface and generate collective wisdom and lead us to a shared vision.

Responsible Stewardship and Solvency

Committed to ensuring solvency of

Incarnate Word Academy, the finance committee works consistently with the IWA president to maintain a balanced budget and a stable contingency fund balance at approximately 15 percent of the operating budget. Its strength is evident in its understanding of the relationship and balance of enrollment, tuition and salary and its commitment to a consistent effort for promoting cost based / needs based tuition levels.

Accomplishments of the finance committee include an annual salary increase for staff, sufficient funds needed for physical plant improvements, financial projections consistently used as an effective planning tool and an annual increase in financial aid for tuition assistance to meet growing demand. IWA Business Manager Malcolm Smith, who has worked with the finance committee since 1994, expressed his appreciation for the advice, input and expertise shared by the members:

They have dedicated time and attention to study, evaluation and analy-

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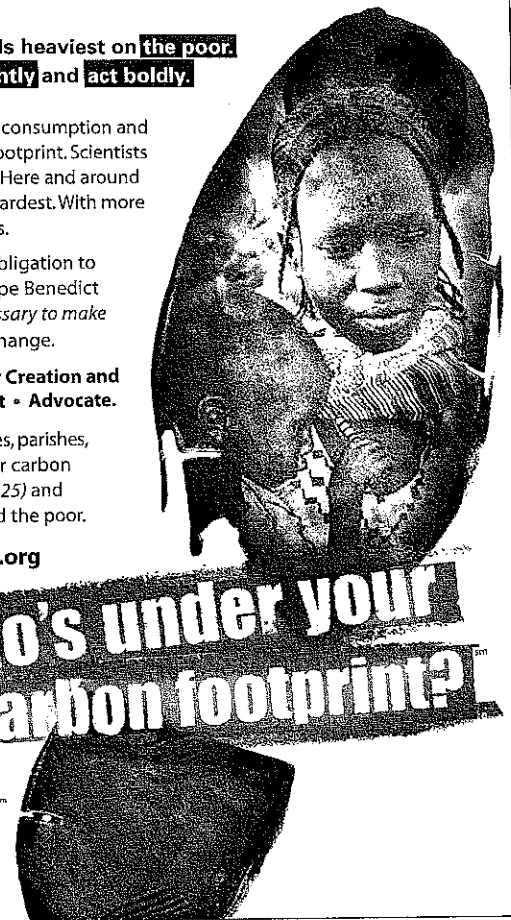
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Kathryn Green, IWA school board chair emeritus, signs the beam at the topping out ceremony of the Kenedy Center for Math and Science.

Key Objectives

Here are a few vital and key objectives that your school board might consider in its efforts to fashion a vibrant Catholic school:

- Promote Catholic identity and ensuring excellence in academics;
- Demonstrate effective strategic planning;
- Utilize a comprehensive marketing plan;
- Articulate a common vision for the future;
- Give witness of Christian leadership and service and encourage students and parents to make a difference in their homes and communities, and
- Practice wise stewardship of resources.

"Members of a Catholic school board must have a willingness and excitement to accomplish what Catholic schools seek to accomplish and each member must be accepting of change and challenge."

sis in areas such as tuition rates and salary increases and the effect these increases will have on the budget. They have provided input concerning the status of the local economy and have addressed the feasibility and logic behind any major improvements and capital expansion. I believe the strength of the finance committee and of the board lies in the ability of the members to discuss or debate a particular agenda item in an objective manner and, after the decision is made, to buy into and support it.

"Several members of the Finance Committee," said Devlin,

more than have served together for over eight years, which allows for consistency and a steady perspective on the difficult issues facing all Catholic schools. The committee makes recommendations to the board regarding budgeting, compensation, asset allocation, contracts for utilities, insurance and development. The long-range financial planning has proved to be one of the most critical

assets to the school as we pursue our mission and continue our growth.

To provide a safe and attractive campus with equipment and facilities that promote an effective learning environment, the facilities committee maintains a depreciation and life expectancy schedule for all equipment and facilities, and proposes to the Finance Committee the annual maintenance budget for the campus. Recent accomplishments include maintenance, security and safety improvements, update of educational equipment, installation of a Web-based Student Information System (Ren-Web) for the entire campus, implementation of a new tuition collection program (FACTS) at the campus business office, and renovated and relocated classrooms to meet the needs of increased enrollment.

A major addition to the IWA campus was the construction of the Kenedy Center for Math and Science during the 2008-2009 school. The center is a striking two-story facility for middle level students with spacious wireless-environment classrooms, equipped with SMARTboard technology and a mobile laptop computer lab. An open courtyard provides a gathering place for students, and a mural of angels is displayed in tile on the Angelus Clock Tower with chimes that ring out the Angelus daily. Brent Bottom recounts his joy and pride in witnessing the construction and completion of this attractive

and much needed facility:

I have found great satisfaction in accomplishing goals both as committee chair and as chair of the board. It brings a great feeling of accomplishment when the ultimate outcome—quality Catholic education for the students—is achieved. I have experienced a feeling of success and pride in seeing the Kenedy Center for Math and Science, our new middle school building, completed. How fortunate for the students and what a benefit for the whole community.

Visibility and Advancement

Making the school visible by insuring that advertising, marketing and recruiting programs are maximized is the focus of the Marketing Committee. The committee has implemented a comprehensive recruitment plan that includes an objective, a strategy and procedures aimed at increasing enrollment as efficiently as possible by communicating IWA's unique characteristics in a compelling manner. IWA's uniqueness includes: integration of faith development with high academic standards, exceptional curriculum and college entrance preparation with 100 percent of graduates accepted by colleges and universities, SAT/ACT scores consistently higher than local and state averages, great opportunities to receive college scholarships, a diverse student body with students of all faiths adapting well in the school's environment, an effective teacher-to-student ratio and encouragement of leadership, service and participation in extracurricular programs for all students.

The Advancement Council has developed and implemented a comprehensive development program including the annual giving campaign, the scholarship program, alumni relations, academic chair op-

opportunities, special events, the major gifts program, and a planned giving program. Accomplishments include the following:

- Creation of a major donor recognition society, Living Stones Building the Mission, which has inducted 55 partners in mission.
- Establishment of the annual Scholarship Donor Appreciation Luncheon, which has resulted in 78 named scholarships.
- Initiation of a scholarship recognition society, Precious Stones Supporting the Mission, which has welcomed 32 partners in mission.
- Establishment of the corporate giving scholarship program, Investing in Excellence.
- Additionally, the planned giving office was established and program expanded, the major gifts office and major gifts program expanded and a semi-annual planned giving newsletter initiated. The Giving Campaign goal, which is increased annually, meets or exceeds its goal regularly.

Evaluation

To track the effectiveness of the board, the Evaluation Committee ensures that proper evaluation of personnel and programs is conducted annually or periodically as needed. The committee develops guidelines for the evaluation process, manages the annual evaluation of the president and evaluation of any adopted / approved policy, program or activity assigned by the board. The medium used for evaluation is a dialogue setting, an ongoing mutual conversation with the president, the board and respective parties.

Long Range and Strategic Planning

The task of the long-range-planning-committee is to ensure that the school has a long-term vision of

where it needs to go and a strategic plan of how it will get there. The committee develops a process aimed at identifying a long range vision for the school, serves on ad hoc committees (or Strategic Planning Task Force) in conducting the strategic planning process and monitors the implementation of the strategic plan.

The administration and board have adopted four strategic plans since 1994. Each process has included consultation services and the participation of the school's stake-holders: the board, faculty, parents, alumni, friends and benefactors. The plans have provided specific goals and directions for a three-to-five-year period.

Recent strategic plans, initiated by the administration and board, in collaboration with Meitler Consultants, Inc., have addressed enrollment, educational programs, staffing, governance / ownership, advancement, marketing, finances and facilities.

A vital and significant part of strategic planning was the enrollment plan, which served as the basis for developing enrollment projections. The enrollment plan included community demographic data, public school enrollment trends and projections, parish religious education program enrollments, Catholic elementary school and Incarnate Word Academy enrollment trend data. The analysis of all this data provided insight and direction for the marketing and recruitment efforts of the academy. As a result of the recruitment plan, the school has seen significant increases in enrollment in the past four years.

The Executive Committee, composed of school board officers, the IWA president and the superior general of the Incarnate Word Sisters, is vital in its role of setting the focus, direction and agenda of the board, implementing decisions for the enhancement of the educational program and addressing the recommendations of board committees and directors. Sister

Anna Marie said,

I think of the Peter, James and John relationship with Jesus in the Gospel. It is a group invited to go deeper. I have found that a depth of conversation, ongoing assessment, refinement of vision, collective wisdom and transformation of hearts for mission are the benefits that bona fide leadership brings to bless a school's environment in an ongoing way.

As a result of Strategic Plan 2004 and Strategic Plan 2007, the executive committee implemented the following strategic decisions:

- Added a full-time director of campus ministry and an executive director of advancement, a part-time computer teacher at the elementary level; a teacher for a newly-initiated writing program and a cardio-vascular physical education teacher at the middle level;
- Enhanced the curriculum by adding high school courses in AP World History, AP Studio Art, AP calculus BC, Dual Credit Economics, Kinesiology and Dual Credit Music
- Constructed the Kenedy Center for Math and Science

Conclusion

While viability, visibility and solvency will always be challenging for a Catholic School, a board that is dedicated to the mission, devoted to excellence in education and competent in the areas needed can make a distinct difference. Sister Anna Marie also emphasized the transforming effect a committed board can have in their own lives and the lives of the entire community:

The organism created for systemic change rooted in the school's mission is now rhythmic; as a result, individuals surface from the community willingly and readily to take leadership and to be open to God's work in them for their own holiness and for leading our children to Christ. ■