

Governance Health Index

A Framework for Effective School Stewardship



With governance challenges on the rise across the independent school landscape, SAIS set out during the 2024–2025 school year to address a timely and complex question: **How might we design a governance framework that strengthens organizational health in a changing educational landscape?**

In November 2024, we convened a Governance Summit with 23 heads representing a range of schools in our association—geography, school size, student demographics, mission, and educational philosophy. Through a design thinking challenge, these leaders generated four governance prototypes, each exploring new possibilities for board effectiveness, head-board partnership, and strategic alignment.

As a result of this generative process, four governance prototypes emerged—each offering a different lens on how boards and heads could lead with greater alignment, resilience, and strategic clarity. From these prototypes, the Governance Health Index (GHI) was born. The GHI identifies six core competencies essential for healthy governance:

- Collaborative Leadership
- Community Engagement
- Strategic Direction
- Talent Cultivation
- Shared Accountability
- Adaptive Innovation

To ensure broad applicability and practical value, the GHI was tested with a representative sample of SAIS board chairs and ultimately refined with input from both the SAIS board of trustees and staff. The result is not a static rubric, but a growth model and diagnostic dashboard—a tool that allows governance teams to assess where they are now and chart a path forward. Each competency is accompanied by a developmental continuum, guiding boards and heads from disconnection to optimization in their leadership practice.

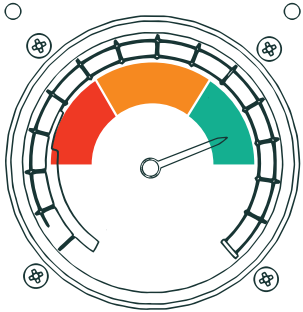
Ultimately, the Governance Health Index provides a shared language and structure for strategic reflection, performance review, and board development. In a time marked by complexity and change, it offers a forward-thinking, mission-aligned framework to help boards and heads lead with clarity, coherence, and purpose.

Dr. Brett Jacobsen
SAIS President



Governance Competencies

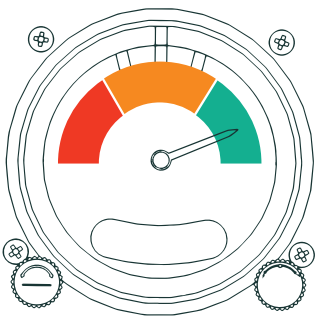
Collaborative Leadership



Community Engagement



Strategic Direction



Talent Cultivation



Shared Accountability



Adaptive Innovation



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Governance Competencies

01 Collaborative Leadership

The leadership partnership that ensures clear governance delineation, aligns resources and policies, and maintains operational coherence to support the school's mission, vision, and long-term sustainability

Head of School

- Oversees the management of staff, programming, facilities, and resource allocation
- Establishes transparent communication channels and decision-making processes with the board
- Leads the community through transitions—whether strategic, leadership, or cultural—by leveraging the expertise of trustees and operational teams

Board of Trustees

- Selects head and defers management of operations
- Sets the conditions for ethical governance, ensuring systems support head and strategic & operational priorities
- Partners with head to oversee strategic targets, financial planning & investments, and major policy decisions

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Collaborative Leadership?



Disconnected

Head and board operate in silos, with weak communication and misalignment of resources



Developing

Basic governance structures exist, but gaps are evident in resource alignment



Coordinated

Governance roles are well-defined, communication is strong, and resource allocation mostly supports strategic priorities



Optimized

Head and board work as a high-trust partnership where resources and operations fully support strategic execution

Key Questions

Which of the following key questions should be prioritized for deeper discussion within our board this year?

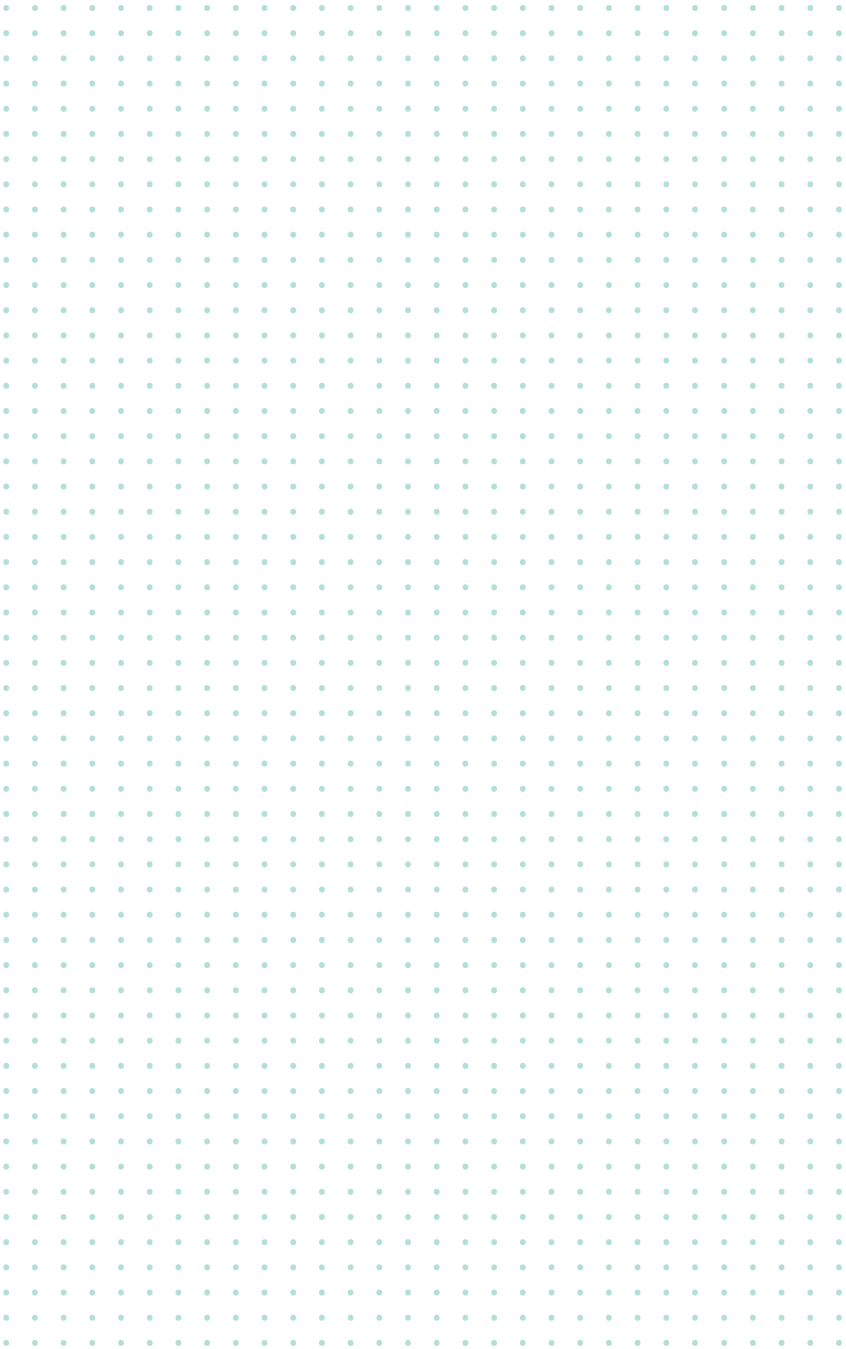
- ☐ Are board and head roles clearly defined and mutually respected?
- ☐ How effective and transparent is communication between the board and head?
- ☐ How do we ensure trust, alignment, and shared leadership?
- ☐ Do our meeting agendas balance oversight and strategic dialogue?
- ☐ How do we prepare and support the board chair and committee leaders?
- ☐ Are we modeling ethical governance practices (conflict of interest, confidentiality, unity of voice)?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Collaborative Leadership?

- ☐ Role and responsibilities of the Executive Committee
- ☐ Use of consent agendas for efficiency
- ☐ Purpose and protocols of executive sessions
- ☐ Board chair/head partnership practices
- ☐ Clear delineation between governance and management
- ☐ Norms for communication between board and head
- ☐ Unified voice and confidentiality expectations
- ☐ Role clarity in policy establishment (board vs. head)
- ☐ Onboarding and mentoring new trustees

A large grid of teal dots, arranged in 20 rows and 40 columns, intended for taking notes or providing feedback.



Scenario

A challenging incident involving a student on campus became public, prompting strong reactions from the community. After sharing incident with the Executive Committee, the head of school quickly communicated with parents and staff, but some trustees felt left out of the response strategy. This lack of coordination led to mixed messaging, further escalating tensions. A few trustees began fielding complaints directly from parents, bypassing the head, which created confusion about roles. Trust between the board and the head has weakened, with both sides feeling

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**What
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02 Community Engagement

The cultivation of meaningful relationships with internal community members and external partners, strengthening the school's mission and advancing strategic priorities

Head of School

- Supports community to foster a positive school culture and a strong sense of belonging & connection
- Articulates the school's mission and vision to community and engages them in fulfillment of strategic priorities
- Represents the school at community events and with external partners

Board of Trustees

- Serves as ambassadors of the school's mission and values in cultivation of community relationships
- Extends the school's network of partnerships to advance strategic priorities
- Participates in and advocates for fundraising and development initiatives

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Community Engagement?



Isolated

No evidence of engagement



Aware

Basic efforts to engage key community members are underway but lacks meaningful interaction



Involved

Regular engagement with stakeholders is established and input is solicited



Connected

Strong relationships drive trust and mutual support and enhance the school's brand reputation

Key Questions

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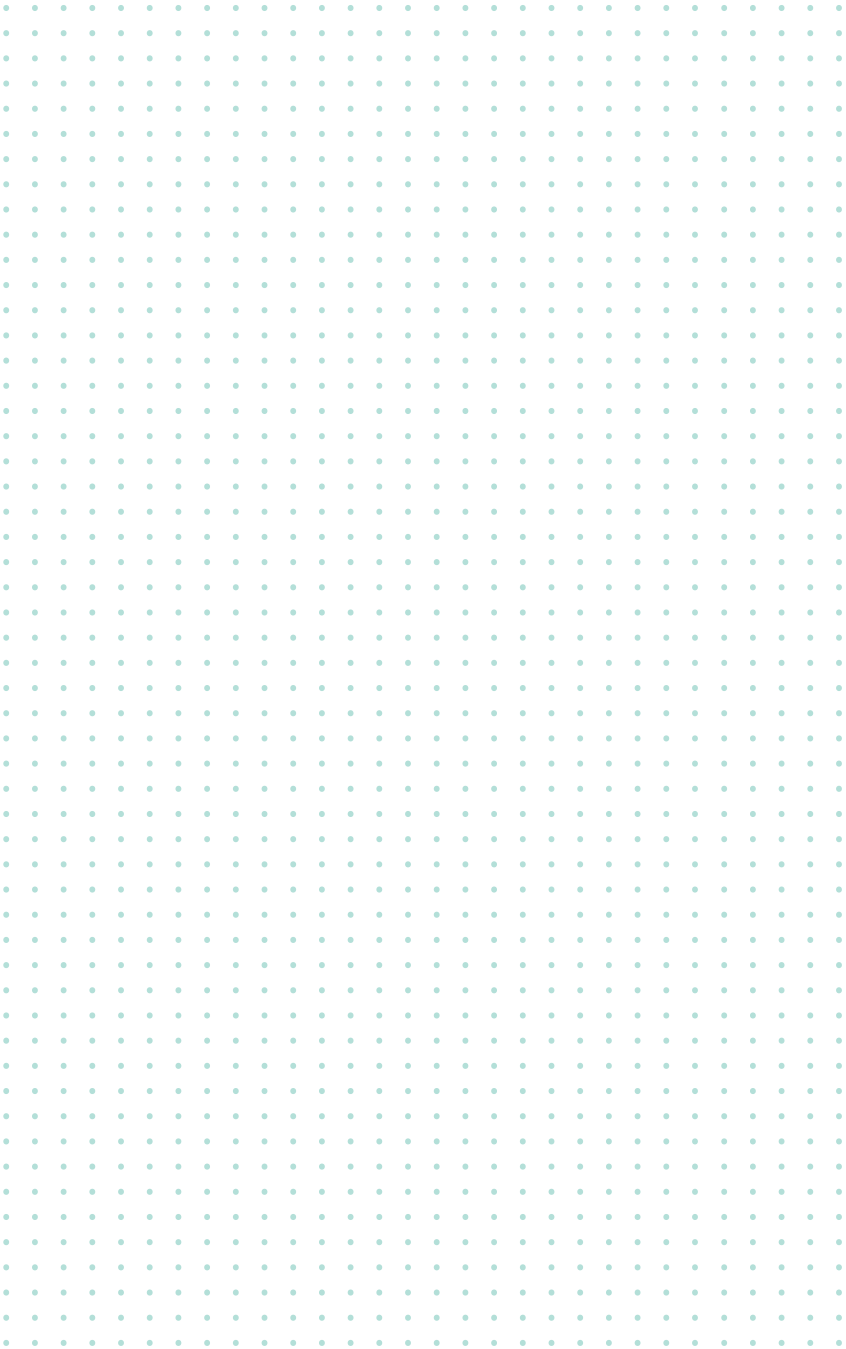
- ☐ How does the board support the head's community-facing work?
- ☐ In what ways are trustees visible and engaged in school life?
- ☐ How do we gather and respond to stakeholder input (parents, alumni, faculty, students)?
- ☐ Are we effectively telling the school's story and amplifying its mission in the broader community?
- ☐ What external partnerships (civic, philanthropic, corporate) should we be cultivating?
- ☐ How do we support advancement, fundraising, and donor relations?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Community Engagement?

- ☐ Board visibility and ambassador role in the school community
- ☐ Engagement with alumni, donors, and civic leaders
- ☐ Role of trustees in advancement and fundraising strategy
- ☐ Trustee participation in school events and traditions
- ☐ Community listening strategies (e.g., town halls, parent coffees)
- ☐ External communications and brand alignment
- ☐ Partnership-building with external organizations or networks
- ☐ Strategies for community input into strategic planning
- ☐ Role of board in shaping narrative during crisis

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Scenario

The board recently approved a tuition increase to address rising costs, but the decision sparked backlash from parents. Many felt the change was abrupt and lacked transparency, leading to a decline in trust. At a community meeting, tensions flared as parents expressed concerns that their voices weren't heard in the process. Some trustees are now reluctant to engage directly with parents, fearing confrontation. Meanwhile, the head is caught between defending the board's decision and repairing relationships with families.

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Governance Competencies

03 Strategic Direction

The ability to design, communicate, and coalesce community around the school's mission, vision, and strategic priorities to ensure cohesive goal-setting, planning, execution, and oversight

Head of School

- Partners with board in designing school's strategic targets
- Translates targets into actionable objectives for internal teams
- Leads operational alignment of community around strategic priorities

Board of Trustees

- Establishes the school's mission and adopts the long-range vision
- Approves and monitors the fulfillment of strategic targets
- Ensures strategic alignment across all governance decisions

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Strategic Direction?



Undefined

Board and head struggle to articulate how current initiatives align with the school's mission



Emerging

Basic understanding of strategic priorities; alignment is inconsistent



Aligned

Vision and priorities are clearly articulated and mostly aligned



Connected

Strategic priorities are fully embedded in decision-making processes

Key Questions

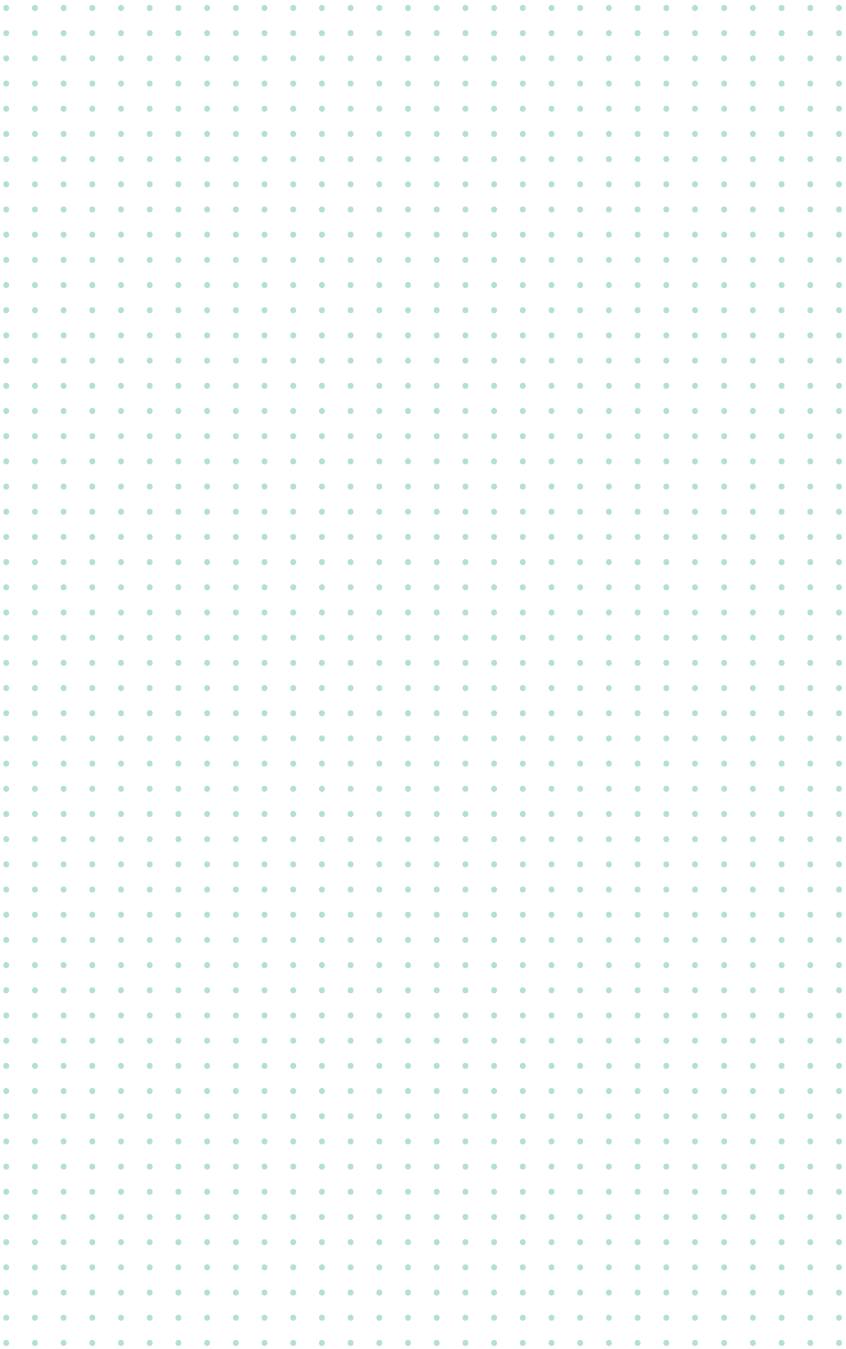
Which of the following key questions should be prioritized for deeper discussion within our board this year?

- ☐ Do we have a clear and compelling long-term vision for the school?
- ☐ Are strategic priorities current, mission-aligned, and widely understood?
- ☐ How are we monitoring progress toward strategic goals?
- ☐ Are we asking the right questions about market trends, enrollment, and program relevance?
- ☐ How often do we revisit our mission and strategic plan?
- ☐ How do we engage in meaningful generative thinking at the board level?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Strategic Direction?

- ☐ Role of the board in setting, adopting, and monitoring strategic plans
- ☐ Use of dashboards or KPIs to track strategic priorities
- ☐ Agenda design for generative vs. fiduciary vs. strategic discussions
- ☐ Strategic enrollment management and value proposition
- ☐ Board retreat planning for long-range thinking
- ☐ Periodic mission review and alignment
- ☐ Scenario planning and futures thinking
- ☐ Balancing short-term initiatives with long-term vision
- ☐ Evaluating strategy execution at the committee level



Scenario

The board's strategic plan is three years old and increasingly disconnected from the school's current realities—including changing enrollment patterns and evolving academic expectations. The head is trying to pivot programming, but without updated board guidance, strategic misalignment is emerging. Faculty and staff express confusion over shifting priorities, and parents are beginning to ask questions about the school's long-term direction. The lack of a clear, updated strategy is causing friction between governance and operations, undermining momentum at a critical time.

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Governance Competencies

04 Talent Cultivation

The process of recruiting and developing high-performing professionals that align with the school's mission, vision, and values

Head of School

- Recruits and retains a high performing and mission-driven faculty and staff with the expertise and diversity of skillsets & backgrounds
- Cultivates a culture of continuous learning, where knowledge and skills are developed across all levels of the school community
- Orients team to improve programs, adapt to changes, and advance strategic priorities

Board of Trustees

- Recruits and retains high performing and mission-driven trustees with the expertise and diversity of skillsets & backgrounds necessary
- Provides on-going leadership development of trustees that align with mission, strategic priorities, and ethical governance practices
- Prioritizes the development of head through coaching and mentorship

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Talent Cultivation?



Underdeveloped

Lack of focus on growth or recruitment



Limited

Minimal investment in talent development



Emerging

Initial steps to recruit and develop talent are in place



Empowering

Exceptional talent pipelines drive organizational excellence

Key Questions

Which of the following key questions should be prioritized for deeper discussion within our board this year?

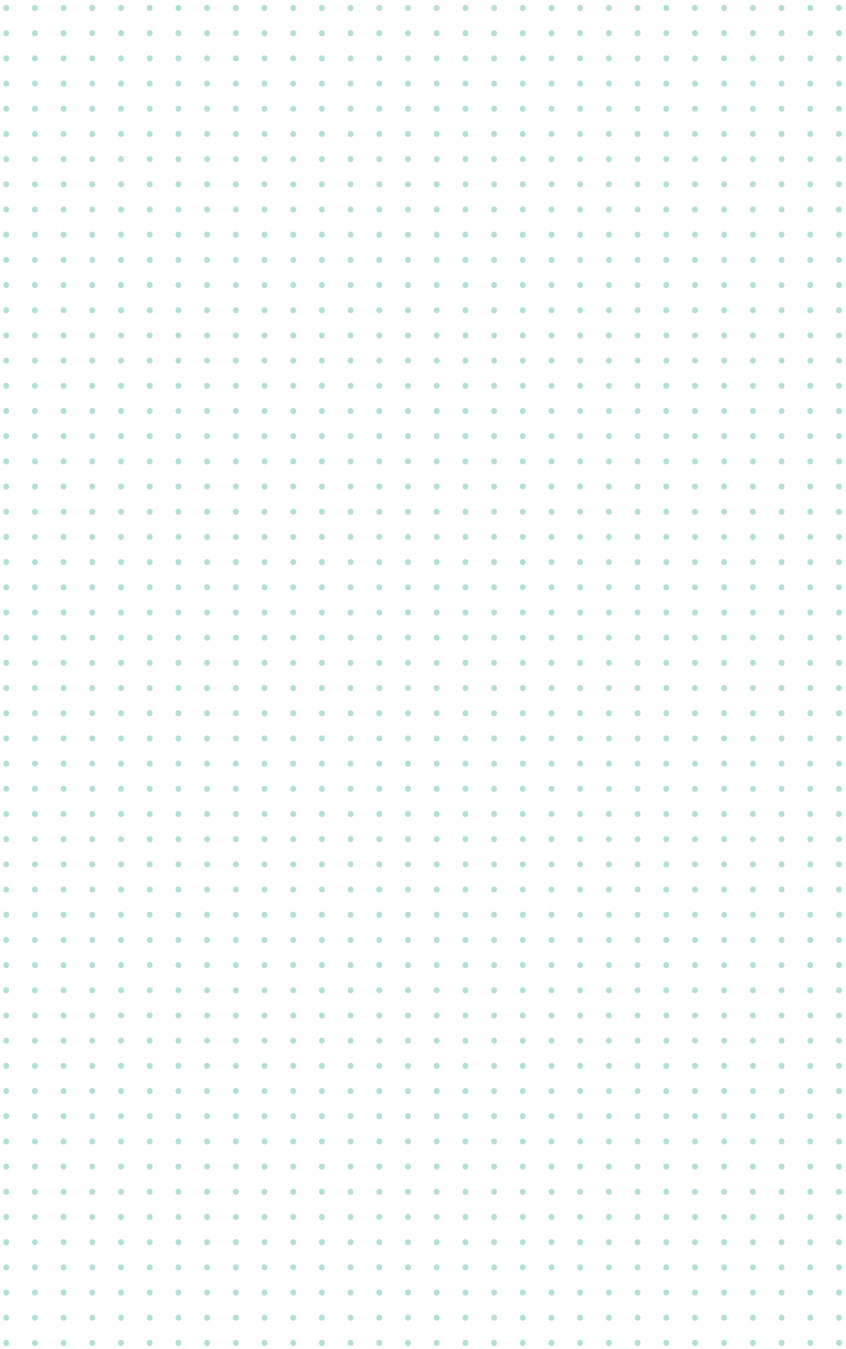
- ☐ Are we recruiting trustees with the right mix of skills, backgrounds, and perspectives?
- ☐ How do we onboard, mentor, and develop new trustees?
- ☐ Do trustees have opportunities for governance training and leadership development?
- ☐ How are we supporting the head's professional growth and performance?
- ☐ Are we investing in leadership development at all levels of the school?
- ☐ How does our board culture reflect continuous learning?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Talent Cultivation?

- ☐ Board composition: skillsets, diversity, and strategic needs
- ☐ Recruitment, onboarding, and offboarding practices for trustees
- ☐ Ongoing trustee education and governance training
- ☐ Head of school evaluation and professional development
- ☐ Succession planning (board chair, committee chairs, head)
- ☐ Cultivating leadership within the board (e.g., pipeline for chair)
- ☐ Role of board in senior leadership team support and retention
- ☐ Assessment of board culture and trustee engagement
- ☐ Use of self-assessments or 360 feedback

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Scenario

The faculty is raising concerns about the school's ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers, noting that increased workloads, limited professional growth opportunities, and compensation concerns are impacting morale. Meanwhile, prospective families are asking more pointed questions about faculty credentials and stability as part of their enrollment decisions. Despite the head's efforts to advocate for strategic investment in talent development, the board has not prioritized it in recent planning cycles. Trustees acknowledge the issue but lack a coordinated approach to trustee recruitment, onboarding, or leadership development on their own board. This disconnect creates tension: while the school seeks to be known for excellence in teaching and learning, neither board nor staff development is currently aligned to support that goal.

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05 Shared Accountability

An interdependent relationship where the head and board collectively uphold responsibilities, monitor performance, and ensure progress toward strategic targets

Head of School

- Reports school progress and pain points to the board
- Demonstrates measurable progress toward strategic priorities and organizational objectives
- Ensures compliance with accreditation standards and legal requirements

Board of Trustees

- Partners with the head to develop shared goals
- Monitors organizational health, progress towards strategic targets, and compliance with accreditation standards and legal requirements
- Evaluates head and itself on a consistent basis through the lens of governance competencies and shared goals

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Shared Accountability?



Fragmented

Expectations for shared accountability are unclear or ignored



Developing

Basic accountability structures are in place but lacks consistency



Consistent

Board regularly monitors organizational health



Dynamic

Accountability is shared and drives measurable progress

Key Questions

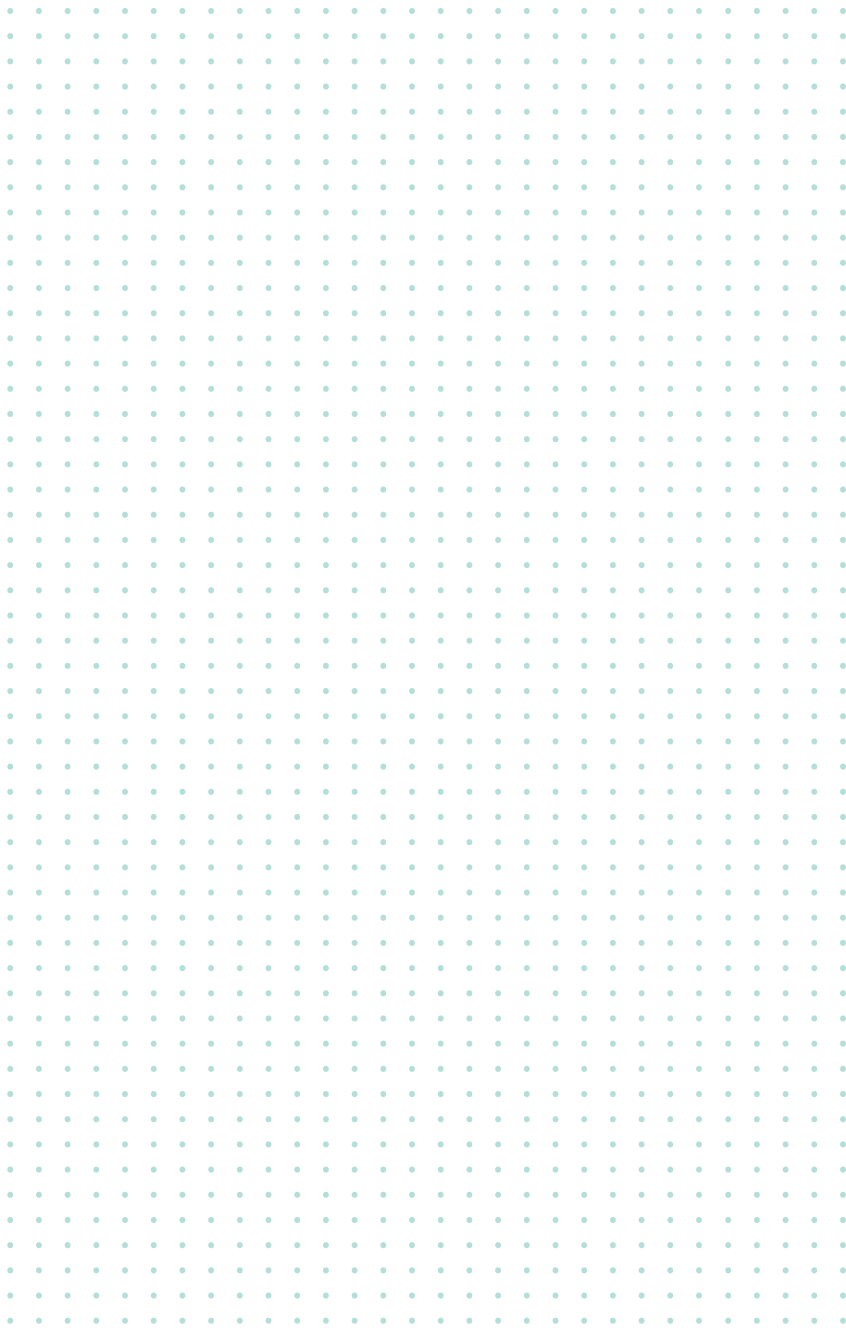
Which of the following key questions should be prioritized for deeper discussion within our board this year?

- ☐ How do we set and monitor annual goals for the board and head?
- ☐ What metrics do we use to assess organizational health?
- ☐ Are we conducting regular board and head evaluations?
- ☐ How do we ensure compliance with legal, fiduciary, and accreditation standards?
- ☐ How well do we own our collective responsibilities versus deferring to the head or committees?
- ☐ Do we have mechanisms for honest feedback and reflection?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Shared Accountability?

- ☐ Board self-evaluation and continuous improvement
- ☐ Executive committee evaluation practices
- ☐ Head of school performance evaluation model
- ☐ Accreditation responsibilities and compliance oversight
- ☐ Legal and fiduciary duties (care, loyalty, obedience)
- ☐ Understanding and modeling fiduciary responsibilities
- ☐ Conflict of interest disclosures and policy enforcement
- ☐ Annual goal-setting process for board and head
- ☐ Role clarity in policy oversight vs. operational execution



Scenario

The head has been regularly reporting on key school challenges and progress, but without clearly defined shared goals or a system to track strategic initiatives, both the board and head are operating with misaligned expectations. A mid-year review reveals that several priorities are falling behind, prompting concern. The board has not conducted a self-evaluation in years, and the head's evaluation no longer reflects current goals. This scenario highlights the absence of a shared accountability framework, leading to confusion, delayed action, and a lack of measurable progress toward strategic targets.

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06 Adaptive Innovation

A commitment to ongoing learning, goal-setting, and planning to innovate and adapt to an evolving educational landscape

Head of School

- Collaborates with board to monitor the macro and micro trends impacting education
- Leads staff in study of the latest research and evidence-based programs and practices
- Provides professional development opportunities to implement mission-driven strategic priorities

Board of Trustees

- Partners with head to develop a vision for long-term innovation and ensures the school remains responsive to emerging trends and challenges
- Evaluates the school's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks to inform strategic decision-making
- Approves investments in innovation for long-term sustainability

Reflection Tool

As a board, where do we feel like we currently stand in this area of Adaptive Innovation?



Static

School avoids implementing new programs or revisiting outdated practices



Reactive

Adapts to changes when necessary but lacks forward planning



Proactive

Initiates learning and adapts to trends with some consistency



Innovative

Embraces continuous improvement and leads in adaptation

Key Questions

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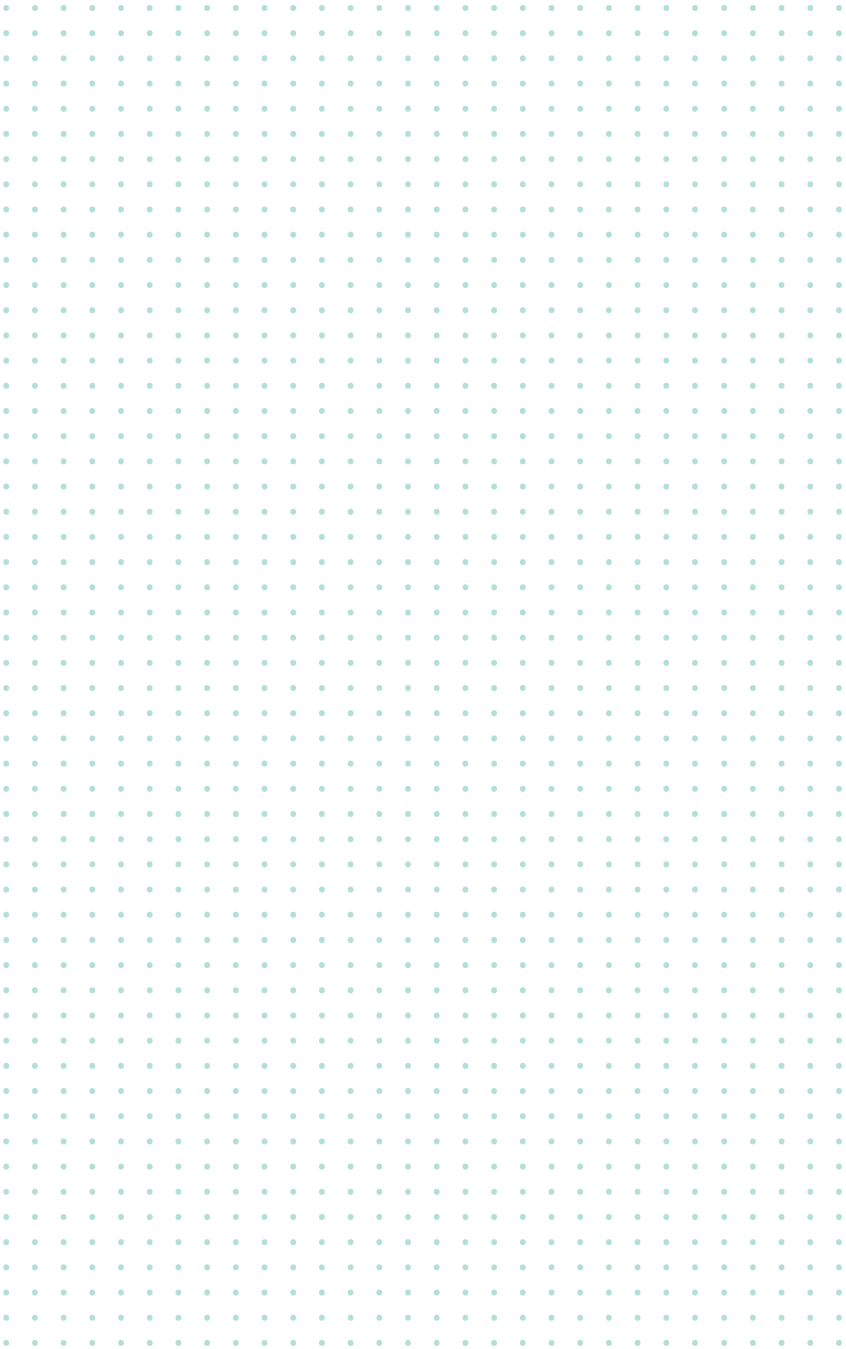
- ☐ Are we tracking emerging trends that could impact our school's future?
- ☐ How do we foster a culture of experimentation and learning?
- ☐ Are we investing in innovation aligned with mission and strategy?
- ☐ How do we assess risk and opportunity when considering new initiatives?
- ☐ What role does the board play in scenario planning or strategic foresight?
- ☐ Are we open to rethinking legacy practices and embracing change?

Key Topics

Which of the following areas would benefit from further discussion to strengthen the governance competency of Adaptive Innovation?

- ☐ Innovation investment strategy (funding, ROI, risk)
- ☐ Use of pilot programs and learning launches
- ☐ Keeping the board informed about educational trends (AI, XR, etc.)
- ☐ Role of board in supporting a culture of change-readiness
- ☐ Evaluating legacy practices for relevance
- ☐ Approaches to strategic risk management and stress testing
- ☐ Establishing innovation subcommittees or advisory groups
- ☐ Leveraging school networks for thought leadership and benchmarking
- ☐ Futures-oriented agenda items (e.g., horizon scanning, market shifts)

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Scenario

The school is exploring the creation of a housing subsidy program to address the growing challenge of retaining and recruiting talented faculty in an increasingly expensive local housing market. The head views this initiative as a strategic investment in long-term organizational health and a necessary step to remain competitive with peer institutions. However, several trustees express hesitation, citing uncertainty about the financial implications, long-term sustainability, and precedent-setting. There is no established process for assessing innovative solutions that lie at the intersection of mission, talent, and financial strategy. Without a shared framework for evaluating risk, return, and alignment with strategic priorities, the initiative stalls—highlighting a governance gap in the school’s ability to respond proactively to emerging workforce and operational challenges.

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