

## **St. Francis Xavier School Board Appointment Process Dated September 10, 2013**

### **Introduction**

The School Board (Board) further discussed the change from elections to appointments on June 19, August 13, and September 10, 2013. (See Board Meeting Agendas and Minutes on site) The Board has renewed its commitment to the appointment process. This document explains why.

This matter has received significant attention from our Pastor, Principal, the Board, school parents, and parishioners. Below we review some of that background, discuss the lessons we learned, and seek closure on this important issue. We look forward to focusing our energy on fulfilling the school's core mission, which is to "provide students with academic excellence centered in the Catholic values of prayer, learning and service." See St. Francis Xavier Parish School Mission Statement.

### **The Board Has an Advisory Role.**

The Board consists of 11 members who serve staggered three-year terms plus the Pastor, who sits ex officio, and the Principal, who is the Board's executive officer. (Constitution,[1] Article IV (Membership).) We are an advisory body. All Board recommendations are subject to the Pastor's approval. (Constitution, Article III (Authority).) Contrast our role with the Lyons Township High School Board, for example, that holds ultimate decision-making authority on hiring, firing, student expulsion, and other matters pursuant to recommendations from school administrators. St. Francis Xavier is blessed with a Pastor and Principal who collaborate with the Board. But we suggest; they decide.

### **The Election System Was Flawed.**

Prior to 2013, parishioners and school parents elected three or four Board members from a slate of about six candidates. In theory, this system was sound. In practice, it developed serious flaws. Over the years, the Board became - through no fault of its own - a largely self-perpetuating body that chose many of its own successors who were then ratified by a small percentage of eligible voters.

Not enough candidates were coming forward to fill open Board positions. As a result, the Board had to solicit additional volunteers to compile a full election slate. The 2012 experience was typical of recent years: only one person self-nominated to run for four open slots. The Board then contacted more than 15 people to find five additional candidates who were willing to run. For obvious reasons, Board members solicited people they already knew. At least one of the five solicited candidates lost that election. Historically, such candidates have been reluctant to run again.

Voter participation was minimal. Again, 2012 was typical: about four percent of eligible parishioners and school parents cast ballots in that election.

Other perceived inequities arose. In recent years, all but one of the Board members had three or more children enrolled in the school. Further, those children tended to cluster in the older grades. Some Board members concluded that the election system was unfairly impeding parents with students concentrated at the East Campus or with "only" one or two students.

Elections also were a poor instrument for balancing skill sets on the Board. We believe that the Board functions best when comprised of individuals from diverse fields, including: ministry, education, fund-raising, technology, project management, marketing, finance, accounting, and law, among others. The failure to provide a Board with diverse experiences was another risk inherent in elections.

Over time, the Board became increasingly concerned that the election system's infirmities were putting the Board's ongoing vitality at risk. To their enduring credit, previous Board members decided to confront these issues.

### **The Board Adopted an Appointment Process.**

The Board learned that these problems were not unique to St. Francis Xavier. Thanks to a grant from the Archdiocese, the Board retained the services of BoardSource, an organization dedicated to building exceptional nonprofit boards and inspiring board service. BoardSource recommended an appointment process instead of

elections. In addition, the Board's informal survey showed that six of the seven other area Catholic schools used appointments.

The Board amended its Bylaws in 2012 to adopt an appointment process.[2] In broad strokes, the Board will identify helpful skill sets in light of school needs and the departing Board members, ask for volunteers to self-nominate, and then interview and appoint candidates who can best fill open positions. The Bylaws permit the Board to create a nominating committee to solicit candidates, but the Board hopes that individuals will continue to self-nominate.

### **We Decided Correctly; We Communicated Poorly.**

The Board's decision to adopt an appointment process was correct. We are sticking with it. We recognize that an appointment process is not the only alternative and that, like every other approach, it is imperfect. But it has been successful to date; its strengths currently outweigh the weaknesses; and it is a marked improvement over the election system.

The Board erred in one important respect, however. We did not promptly publicize our adoption of the appointment process or explain the rationales that drove our decision, including the BoardSource recommendation. For that, we again apologize.

Participants at the March 19, 2013, Town Hall expressed great interest in this subject. In response, the Board held a roundtable devoted to this topic on May 29, 2013. We received a wide range of ideas from the four families who participated. We also listened to others who offered their thoughts. Two strong messages emerged: (i) parishioners and parents want the Board to be transparent, and (ii) they want a participatory voice. We have responded.

### **The Appointment Process Worked.**

Recall that the 2012 election drew one candidate for four open Board positions. The appointment process in 2013 drew three volunteers for the three available slots. Each candidate indicated that he or she would not have self-nominated in the old election system. The Board did not solicit any of these candidates; only one was even acquainted with an existing Board member. The three had diverse professional backgrounds: they were an experienced dean at an area university, an operations director at a technology company, and a lawyer. In addition, two had less than three students at school, and two have children at both campuses for the 2013-14 school year.

### **We Heard You.**

*Transparency:* The Board meets on the second Tuesday of each month except July. As always, Board meetings remain open to interested parishioners and parents, though we must conduct portions of some meetings in executive session. (Constitution, Article V (Meetings).) In addition, the Board now posts its Agendas to the Web site in advance of Board meetings. We also now maintain Minutes and publish those to the Web site.

*Participatory voice:* There are ample opportunities to be heard. First and foremost, volunteer to serve on the Board! If you lack the time or inclination to serve, encourage qualified others to apply. In early 2014, we will publicize skill sets that may be desirable for new Board members. We encourage interested candidates to apply from February 28 to March 31, 2014.

We will continue to host Town Halls and participate at other school-sponsored events. In addition, you may send an e-mail to [SchoolBoard@sfxlg.org](mailto:SchoolBoard@sfxlg.org) or contact any of us directly.

The Board is only one of many avenues to engage the Pastor and Principal. These decision-makers maintain open lines of communication.

### **Conclusion**

We were pleased with the success of the appointment process. With your help, that success will continue. The selection of new Board members is important, but pales in comparison to the overriding duty that we all share: providing our children with an academically excellent Catholic education.