

Mountain Discovery Charter School

Board of Directors

HAND BOOK

July 22, 2010 edition

Introduction

This Hand Book is intended to help explain the role and function of the Board of Directors at Mountain Discovery Charter School. Understanding this is useful to the entire MDCS community – teachers, staff, parents, students and present and potential board members.

The original charter of the school contains official by-laws that set up the structure, function and procedures of the board. This Hand Book does not supersede these by-laws, but functions as an extension of them. The by-laws explain the protocol and legal function of the board, while this Hand Book discusses the sociology of board function and individual behavior of board members. Thus, for a full understanding of board operation, one would need to both study the by-laws, and read this Hand Book.

General Purpose and Make-Up of the Board

The general purpose of the Board is to support MDCS in achieving its mission. As stated in the school's original charter documents, here is the **mission** of the school:

We believe that empowering our students empowers our community. The students at Mountain Discovery Charter School are actively engaged in an experientially rich, hands-on course of study developed to maximize each child's potential to become a responsible and respected citizen of the local and global community. Parents, Students, Teachers and Staff are dedicated to:

- Fostering individual learning styles to reach ambitious academic goals.
 - Nurturing and facilitating our children's natural abilities to think creatively and critically.
 - Promoting self-confidence through respect for self, others and environment.
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Contained in another section of the charter is this wording as well:

Mountain Discovery Charter School will create an educational environment where students are inspired to academic discovery and excellence through an emphasis on experiential learning designed to honor individuality and diversity, nurture respect for self, others and the environment, and to foster a lifelong love of learning.

There are two additional, guiding principles of equality which are also important in the board's purpose: **(1)** the board should never put the individual interest of one entity (student, parent, class, etc.) ahead of the interest of the school as a whole, and **(2)** the board should always ask "What is in the best interest of the school as a whole?"

Functional Model for the School and Board

Included with this Hand Book is a model depicting the functions of the Mountain Discovery Charter School. "Operations" are on the left side of the model, and "Planning" is on the right side. Here is an itemized walk-through of the model:

- The students and teachers are at the top of the model for they are the most important people in terms of the mission of MDCS. The mission and goal statements for MDCS focus exclusively on students and their education, thus, this is the focal point of the model – all other functions are subservient to the educational mission of MDCS.
- Teachers form the all-important second tier in the model – they are the critical personnel most responsible for accomplishing the school's goals and mission.
- An interactive arrow links the "Teachers" with "Parents." Parents and teachers should always communicate directly relative to any student or class concerns.
- The support staff and director form the 3rd tier, which is a support function for the teachers. The support staff and director serve in a supportive capacity to the teachers, while also providing stability through the proper management of the school as a whole.
- There is a secondary linkage from the support staff and director to the parents/teachers communication link. In some instances, after a parent has communicated directly with a teacher, additional input may be needed from the instructional support staff or director.

- Since most of the operational aspects of the school occur with students, and in association with a class, teachers are most responsible for the quality of operation at the school.
- The right side of the model is the “Planning” realm of MDCS, and this is where the board performs. There is a line of demarcation between “Operations” and “Planning” because they are two separate activities. In fact, conflict can emerge should operations begin to lapse over into planning, or planning begin to lapse over into operations. The teachers, support staff and director are totally responsible for the operations of the school. While the board is ultimately responsible for the school as a whole, including operations, under normal circumstances the board’s purvey is most constructively limited to planning and its various elements (detailed later).
- The board’s principle linkage to operations occurs through the director, as indicated by the arrow linking the two. The director may, at their discretion, seek input on operational matters from the board. In some instances, operations could be improved with the creation or refinement of a school policy, which is a part of planning, and a dedicated responsibility of the board.
- At the bottom of the model is an arrow linking the board to the operational side of the school. The board function here is described as “praise, moral support, assurance, understanding and stability.” The board can be quite influential in “setting the tone” at the school, and this linkage depicts the importance of this function of the board.

Make-Up of the Board

The charter allows for no less than 7, but no more than 11, board members. Board members serve two-year terms, which can be renewed for up to six years. The director of the school serves continuously as a ex-officio, non-voting member of the board.

In general, it is good to have a diversity of backgrounds and talent on the board. For example, the board benefits from input on such things as organizational behavior, legal questions, fund raising, public relations, teaching pedagogy, strategic planning, building and grounds maintenance, information technology, and more.

Functions of the Board

Ultimately, the board is responsible for the school as a whole. And specifically is responsible for choosing, overseeing and evaluating the director of the school. Given that all employees are dedicated to operating the school, the board’s functions have, under normal circumstances, a non-operational focus. Referring

to the model, on the left side depicts the “Operational” realm of school function, and the right side depicts the “Planning” realm. As can be seen, the Board’s principle responsibilities reside in the planning realm. The Board’s principle responsibilities include:

- Choosing, overseeing and evaluating the school’s director.
- Assuring the success of the school’s director through support and constructive evaluation.
- Creating policies that help in the proper and successful management and function of the school.
- Assisting in spending decisions and budgetary management of the school.
- Maintaining an up-to-date and effective strategic plan for the school.
- Playing a central role in fund raising, both in planning and participation.
- Building external relationships that can be of political and financial benefit to the school, and which produce positive public relations and good will for MDCS.

Most malfunctions of school boards involve the board venturing unnecessarily into the operational realm of the school. For various reasons, this can lead to confusion and conflict. Thus, there is a line of demarcation on the model that separates operations from planning. A common challenge for board members is to resist the temptation of getting involved with operational matters of the school. However, there are instances where board intervention in operations of the school is appropriate. For example, if the director of the school is no longer capable of functioning in the role of director, the board can intercede on the school’s behalf through an appointed individual (s) or a sub-committee of the board. Other examples include natural disasters, the hiring and firing of school personnel as directed by the North Carolina Charter School Law, and the hiring or dismissal of the school director.

Special Privileges and Benefits of Board Membership

There are no special privileges or benefits that come with board membership. Conflict can be created should board members think they are due, or attempt to seek, special privileges or benefits. There is only the privilege of serving, and the benefit of satisfaction in seeing the school prosper, in part, because of the board’s good work.

General Standard of Conduct and Decorum

The board should expect no higher standard of conduct and decorum from MDCS employees than they are willing to practice themselves. Thus, board members should set an example of professional conduct for the school to follow.

The board contributes to the social and working atmosphere of the school more than they might suspect, thus, board members should strive to make positive contributions through their conduct, and think carefully about the impressions they are conveying.

Representing the Board as a Whole

Folks in the MDCS community may generalize the words and actions of a single board member to the board as a whole. And even if they do not, the individual actions of board members are at least a *reflection* on the board in terms of standards of behavior and conduct. Thus, when a board member conveys praise, gratitude and support, the teacher, class or staff member who receives it feels great about the board member, and good about the board. Of course, when a board member criticizes folks, just the opposite reaction occurs, and the board as a whole is damaged. Thus, board members should always remember that they are viewed, to some extent, as representing the board as a whole, and when in the community, as representing the school as a whole.

Presenting a Unified Front

Stability is a necessary ingredient for a flourishing educational environment, and the board plays a significant role in the stability of the school. The policy structures which the board oversees play a role here, as well as providing steady and reliable support for the director and support staff of the school. A further contribution to stability, and the reassurance it provides, is for everyone at the school to feel as if they are being served by a harmonious, mutually-supportive board who are working together to serve the best interest of the school. Or in other words, the board is unified. A fractured or divided board can undermine employee morale, frustrate the director, and thus destabilize the school.

There always will be differences of opinions among board members, and between the director and the board. However, in a properly functioning board, these differences will be heard, processed, and resolved in a professional manner, within the confines of the board. Thereafter, the board will convey unified support of the resolution, which of course, includes support by individual board members who may have been opposed to a given outcome in the process. To the highest reasonable extent, this resolution process occurs within the board, and no vestiges of board conflict are conveyed to other parties in the school.

Board Deliberations and Voting

Most issues that come before the board are important and deserving of close examination. Board members should be open-minded in considering all relevant information and points of view on issues being considered. A detailed explanation of the voting process can be found in the bylaws.

Misperceptions of Board Power

In reality, the board's authority and power is quite limited - it is restricted to the "planning" function of the school, and to the support and constructive oversight of the school's director. There can exist, however, the misperception on the part of teachers, staff or parents, that the board is all powerful. This misperception is not constructive and board members should act to dispel this notion. Otherwise, teachers and staff may be unnecessarily intimidated by board members, and possibly fearful of board member recourse against them. A fundamental failure of board function exists should the teachers or staff of the school feel fear or paranoia toward the board.

Board members have no more power in addressing a personal, operational problem than any other adult associated with the school. Often, board members are also parent of a student. When addressing a student issue with a teacher, a board member should convey to the teacher that they are acting only as a parent, and that no parent/teacher issues will be discussed with any other board member, nor brought up at any board meeting. For the benefit of the teacher, and student, it is important that the teacher can relate to a parent, as a parent, and not as a board member. Board members should be careful that their membership on the board does not create a perception of power and influence, even if unintended.

Information Sharing and Confidentiality

Board members should be thoughtful about what information they promulgate, and who it could be shared with. With electronic communications, statements can be forwarded out of context and shared with unintended recipients. Thus, additional care should be given to what is written. Also, within reasonable limits, board members should be able to communicate among themselves with some assurance that the communication will be shared only with other board members unless there is specific consent to do otherwise. There should be trust among board members, and a mutual respect that fosters professional courtesy and consideration in the function of the board.

The Board's Relationship with the Director

Given how a charter school differs from a conventional public school, being the director of one is additionally challenging. To succeed and prosper, the director of the school needs all the help and support they can get. The director, in similar fashion to teachers, is required to deal with parents and students who are free to compliment, or complain, as they see fit. Striving to keep everyone happy in an organization with such diverse interests is very challenging, and frankly, impossible. That said, the director has to deal with a lot of unavoidable relational issues, and does not need more any more to deal with from the board. Striving to serve a community of diverse parents, students and teachers, while dealing with a contentious board can place the director in a "caught in the middle" position, which yields a formula for job dissatisfaction and burn-out.

The board's job is to help the director be successful in pursuing the MDCS educational mission, and to make the director's job easier, not harder, and how a board does this includes such things as:

- Supporting the director and asking "How can we help?"
- Originating and refining policies that prove useful in the effective management of the school, and that contribute to accomplishing the mission.
- Offering non-judgmental counsel and feedback should the director ask for input.
- Being parsimonious in assigning tasks that take up the director's time, and that may then take time away from educational support and pursuing the mission.
- Understanding that the director needs the help and support of the board in order to excel.
- Providing unified public support for the director, and confining any constructive criticism internally to the director/board partnership.
- Contributing to a stable, nurturing environment at the school which helps achieve the mission, and aids the director in working constructively with school employees.
- Resisting the temptation to get involved with operational aspects of the school, and honoring the director's authority to independently run the school without interference from the board.

The Board's Relationship with the Teachers

Teachers work very hard relative to the pay they receive. Many could make more doing other lines of work. Thus, the intrinsic, emotional value that teachers receive from teaching at MDCS should not be underestimated. Given that, the emotional and moral support of the teachers at MDCS is important. Or in other words, keeping teachers happy with their work is important because their job satisfaction is linked directly to the quality of teaching they convey to their students.

Occasionally, teachers can receive a hard time from parents, and this can be difficult to avoid. What can be avoided is negativity from the board. Ideally, teachers should receive only praise, appreciation and support from the board. They should believe that the board is on their side, and that the board is working hard to nurture a teacher-supportive work place where they can relax, feel safe, and be free to excel.

Should a board member be the parent of a student, and need to address an issue with a teacher, they should do so with sensitivity. School employees may be prone to magnify comments made by a board member, and be overly-sensitive to what is said by a board member.

In all matters, board members should set the standard of decorum in treating teachers with respect, appreciation and admiration. The board can make a substantial contribution to the stability of the school, and to the job satisfaction of the teachers, by giving the teachers praise, appreciation, gratitude and support.

The Board's Relationship with the Parents

There can be a "secretive" perception about school boards, and that begins with folks not knowing who is on the board. Thus, it helps if board members will introduce themselves as board members to as many parents as possible. Most parents would like to know board members who are approachable, and with whom they feel a comfortable rapport. That being said, board members are likely to hear some ideas, comments or complaints from parents, which is good. Parents want to be heard, and many would like being able to comfortably voice their opinions to a member of the board. However, here a delicate balance is required, as most parental comments will regard operational aspects of the school, which is not the purvey of the board, and problems can result should a board member engage in operational problem solving.

Thus, the board member can serve the school's best interest here by (1) being a good, understanding and sympathetic listener, and (2) diplomatically guiding the parent to the appropriate parties(s) at the school who can help resolve their concerns, or act on their ideas (usually a teacher, or sometimes the director). Finally, parents always feel good when some one thanks them for their input, and expresses appreciation for their ideas and concerns.

In short, board members should be ambassadors of good will for the school, with parents, and with the community at large.

Self-Governance of the Board

Service as a board member places certain constraints on one's behavior. Should a board member feel uncomfortable with these constraints, they should choose not to serve on the board. Should a board member choose to operate outside these constraints, these infractions should be discussed and resolved in closed session of the board. The final page of this hand book discusses infractions in more detail. It is important for all board members to function under the same set of behavioral guidelines, some of which are described in this Hand Book. It can be destabilizing, and cause problems, should board members choose to operate outside the boundaries of proper and constructive conduct. In that the board is self-governing, it is the responsibility of the board to monitor the board's performance, and correct behavior that is not serving the best interest of the school.

Self-Evaluation of Board Performance

The board should monitor its performance regularly and correct any shortcomings before they worsen. The board should offer thankful apologies quickly, and generously, for any indiscretions that may be attributed to board function. The board can link its performance back to the MDCS mission by asking such questions as:

- How often, and in what manner, did the board offer praise to the teachers at MDCS?
- How often, and in what manner, did the board tell the director and central support staff that they were doing a great job?
- In what ways has the board made the director's job easier, and not harder?
- To what extent did the board refine school policies in order to link them as directly as possible with the mission of the school?
- To what extent did board members practice sensitivity in handling delicate issues as parents, with teachers?
- To what extent did the board contribute to creating and maintaining a stable, safe, and nurturing social and work environment at the school?

- To what extent did the board watch for repetitious problems at the school that could be lessened by developing a policy to address and manage the issues?
- To what extent did the board respond to opportunities to meet new people that could be of help to the school?
- How familiar was the board with the school's budget, and any associated issues?
- How available were board members to the director in terms of seeking advice or opinions?
- How many new parents did each board member introduce themselves to this month? This year?
- How successful was the board in resisting the temptation to get involved with operational aspects of the school?
- How current, and effective, is the school's strategic plan?
- How effective is the board's fund raising plan for the school?
- To what extent did the board focus board meeting time on important planning issues for the school? And not on operational concerns that are the responsibility of the director, staff, and teachers?
- To what extent do the teachers believe the board is on their side, and are devoted to helping them excel at what they love – teaching?

Board Code of Conduct, Infractions & Consequences

INTRODUCTION: School boards, for the most part, are comprised of well-meaning people who work harmoniously together for the good of the school. Seldom do board members engage in any behavior that is counterproductive for the school. However, when infractions occur, the repercussions on the school can be profound. A code of conduct is set forth here, complete with itemized examples of possible infractions of the code.

GLOBAL STANDARD of BOARD MEMBER CONDUCT

The mission of Mountain Discovery Charter School is expressed on the first page of this hand book. In brief, the mission is to pursue educational excellence, throughout its many dimensions. A board member's job is to **further the mission**, and thereby **improve the school's ability** to deliver educational excellence. Any behavior on the part of a board member that **impedes the mission** and **detracts from the school's ability** to deliver educational excellence is an infraction of proper board member conduct. Major infractions will cause substantial damage to the school and will require remedial action.

Infractions

Below are categorized itemizations of example infractions that could be potentially committed by a board member. This listing is not meant to be exhaustive, but will hopefully serve to illustrate behavior that would violate the global standard for board member conduct.

Emotionally traumatizing a MDCS teacher or staff member

- Public criticism of a teacher or staff member. This could be conveyed in person, by correspondence, or by email.
- Insulting or humiliating a teacher or staff member, publicly or privately.
- Threatening a teacher or staff member, publicly or privately.
- Undermining a teacher or staff member's efforts to do their job.
- Promulgating damaging gossip about a teacher or staff member.

Emotionally traumatizing a MDCS student

- Handling or mistreatment of a student in any way that traumatizes the student or interferes with their schooling.

Abuse of board power

- Using ones position on the board to intimidate or coerce a MDCS employee.
- Bringing personal issues directly to the board rather than following the approved and conventional paths of resolution (e.g. resolving student or class issues begins with the teacher).
- Applying pressure in seeking special treatment or privileges by virtue of board membership.

Breach of board confidentiality & trust

- Making public, information discussed in closed session of the board, for example, personnel or legal issues.
- Disseminating general information from board meetings which contains misrepresentation, bias, or has malicious intent.

Creating factions, taking sides & nurturing conflict

- A principle function of the board is to help maintain harmony and stability in the school. Board members should neither contribute to external factions nor publicly take sides on volatile or sensitive school issues.
- Differences of opinion among board members are to be resolved within the board's normal functions. Board members should express support for majority decisions of the board and not create organizational conflict by airing board disagreements to the school at large.

Public conduct unbecoming of a board member

- Offensive profanity, rowdy drunkenness, or other offensive or illegal behavior that could harm the reputation and good will of MDCS.

Consequences

By committing any of the above infractions, or others with similar negative impact, a board member would be demonstrating that they are not acting in the best interest of the school. Further, actions like those above would do damage to the school's mission of pursuing educational excellence. As a consequence, the offender should be removed from the board. Other actions or compensations could be called for depending upon the nature of the offense and extent of damage.