

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNLOCKING LEADERSHIP: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVED DAY SCHOOL VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

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FROM PRIZMAH'S CEO

What makes a Jewish day school work? There are so many elements—the physical structure, the educational experience, the passion of teachers, the generosity of donors, the curiosity of children, the vision of founders, the dedication of professionals and volunteer leaders, the community of parents. No one aspect determines success, and all together contribute to a thriving institution. A change in any one of these can dramatically alter the course of a school's trajectory.

The starting point of this study is Prizmah's unwavering belief that it is possible to improve schools by improving the ways their boards function and that the relationship between the head of school and the board chair is critical to school success. Just as we recently studied the landscape, opportunities, and challenges of professional day school leadership, so do we now share the results of an exploration into the realities of day school boards. Thousands of day school believers devote countless hours each year to board meetings and committee work, all of it with a passion for their school, all of it as volunteers. How can we make the most of this precious resource? How can we ensure that being a day school board member is a sought-after role that contributes to stronger and more sustainable schools?

It is in service to these questions that Prizmah, with the generous support of the AVI CHAI Foundation, commissioned Rosov Consulting in a comprehensive study of day school lay leadership. The findings in this report at times validate what many of us think we know about day schools and lay leadership, and also shine a new light on the facets of the board leadership dynamic. This report details the multiple contexts within which day school boards function—most of which are difficult to influence—and the internal factors that affect how boards themselves operate. By understanding the landscape and identifying the levers that can trigger change, we position ourselves to focus on the most promising interventions and approaches.

This study has challenged Prizmah to conceive of new ways to advance our work. Prizmah is committed to strengthening the partnership between board chairs and heads of school and leveraging leading governance practices to improve school outcomes. Our deepen talent team, led by our vice president of leadership development Ilisa Cappell, is excited to work with lay leaders and professionals and invest in strengthening the lay-head partnership.

We invite you to explore the findings, imagine how boards themselves can work differently, and take advantage of Prizmah's expanding resources for boards.

Warmly,



Paul Bernstein, CEO



I. BACKGROUND

A substantial body of literature supports the claim that strong board leadership, and in particular, strong volunteer-professional partnerships, make a difference to the effectiveness of schools. This study seeks to understand how positive and productive volunteer-professional partnerships are cultivated and sustained in the Jewish day school sector, recognizing that the Jewish communal context is one where there are few if any degrees of separation between volunteers and professional leaders and between leaders and the communities they serve. This study has been designed to generate recommendations for how schools and Prizmah can enhance the contribution of volunteer leaders to the governance of schools. It complements Prizmah's 2017 study of day school professional leaders, "[The Learning Leadership Landscape: Experiences and Opportunities for Jewish Day School Personnel.](#)"



II. WHAT THE LITERATURE ESTABLISHES

A first step in this work involved reviewing the extensive literature concerned with the responsibilities of volunteer board leaders and the conditions in which those responsibilities are fulfilled. This review confirmed that there are three primary tasks for which school boards and their chairs are responsible and that are especially important in supporting high-quality institutions:

- A. **Steering.** The board looks beyond the immediate horizon to develop a shared vision, articulates guiding values for organizational action, establishes major goals, and outlines strategies for achieving those goals.
- B. **Supporting.** The board ensures that the organization has the resources needed to achieve its goals: people to do the work, money to pay salaries and expenses, and credibility with the public, on whose support it depends.
- C. **Supervising.** The board provides oversight not only of the finances and programs, but also of the organization's legal and moral conduct. The board delegates authority to the head, who is therefore accountable to the board. The board supervises, provides feedback to, and supports the head.



III. WHAT OUR RESEARCH SHOWS

Through a series of interviews and analysis, we identified that in Jewish day schools the performance of these tasks is both complicated and enriched by four features:



HASHKAFAH (IDEOLOGY)

In the day school context, mission/vision is concerned with Jewish values and commitments, and not only with educational goals. While this lends additional dimensions of meaning to the visioning work, it also brings greater potential for conflict.



MISHPACHAH (FAMILY)

Many, if not most, day school board members are also parents or relatives of students. This can deepen commitment to the work of the board, while also making it harder to separate personal interests from those of the school.



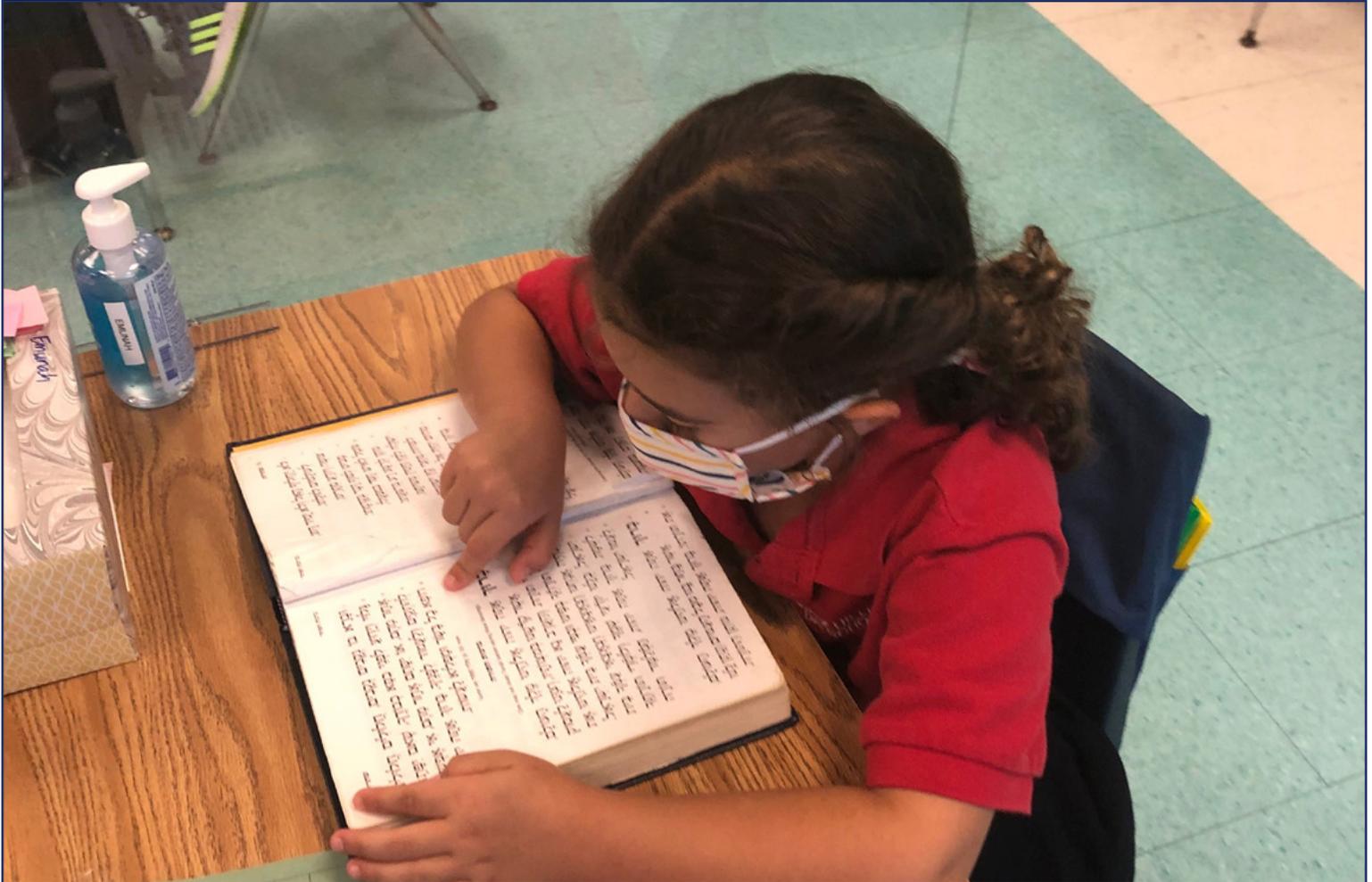
CHEVRAH (SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS)

Mixing in the same social circles and attending the same places of worship can help create productive bonds between volunteer and professional leaders. However, these individuals can also become too close to one another to be sufficiently dispassionate when making decisions, especially when it comes to assessing performance or discussing emotionally charged issues related to the school's core ideology or identity. These issues often touch at the core of why leaders take on their volunteer role in the school from the start. The close relationships among professional and volunteer leaders and interactions in settings outside the board room can create a sense that "the real work" is being done elsewhere, such as at the shul kiddush club.



HEMISHNESS (HOMEYNESS)

The intimacy and sense of family nurtured by many day schools means that schools can resemble families more than businesses. This family feeling can strengthen the bonds and commitment of board members, but it also risks undermining the efficient and responsible functioning of the board. Preserving confidentiality is especially challenging in this context. In tight circles, issues of burnout and preservation of boundaries are common challenges.



IV. APPROACH AND FINDINGS

We employed a qualitative data-gathering approach. We interviewed heads of school, their current board chairs, and one other volunteer leader in a set of 20 schools, sampled to take into account gender, school size, community/day school market, grades served, and denomination. In total, we conducted interviews with 60 individuals.

A. Nested Contexts: The Circumstances Within Which Boards Function

Day schools exist within a set of nested contexts over which school leaders typically have limited influence. We identified three broad contexts that influence the extent to which board leaders can fulfill their responsibilities and that can introduce stresses or supports into the relationships between board chairs and heads of school.



1. THE MISSION-DRIVEN NONPROFIT CONTEXT

Day schools are part of a nonprofit sector in which there are 1.5 million institutions. The experiences our interviewees highlighted that are consistent with the nonprofit sector as a whole include challenges associated with:

- i. recruiting sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified and motivated volunteers to sit on boards and then to play a leadership role, compounded by the need to continually search for new leadership (both volunteer and professional).
- ii. maintaining the attention and engagement of board members, either because their time and attention as volunteers are genuinely limited, or because the work of boards can sometimes be tiresome.

2. THE JEWISH DAY SCHOOL CONTEXT

A second context in which day schools are situated extends to the day school sector as a whole, as opposed to nonprofits more generally. The features of this context invariably pose challenges to a board's healthy operation, but they can also enhance the board's capacity to make a positive difference to a school's overall functioning. As noted above, these issues are prominent in day school research literature.

- i. Day schools are, by definition, mission-driven institutions. Their Jewish mission has potential to inspire boards to do hard work and overcome difficult challenges. At other times, it can translate into unrealistic expectations of the school's professionals.
- ii. The often intimate, family-like quality of day schools makes it difficult to maintain boundaries between professionals and volunteers. It can be especially hard for chairs to fulfill one of their primary functions, as supervisor of the head of school. Schools can be hobbled by their heimishness.
- iii. The high percentage of board members who are also parents in the school—which makes them extraordinarily passionate supporters—can also result in parent board members seeing some issues narrowly, in terms of what's best for their own child.

3. THE LOCAL COMMUNITY CONTEXT: "IT'S PART OF THE NATURE OF OUR COMMUNITY"

Day schools are most immediately nested within their local Jewish community. Day schools must function within socio-cultural, demographic, and economic circumstances that are largely beyond their control, and yet heads of school often find themselves taking the heat from boards for problems that might also be challenging their competitors or other local Jewish institutions. By the same token, the extent to which a day school board can perform the key function of providing resources for a school is highly influenced by elements in their local context.



B. Inside Schools: Three Ingredients That Make a Difference

While the nested contexts in which day schools sit can be challenging, the effectiveness with which board members perform their primary functions is to a much greater extent a consequence of what happens inside the school, at the board itself, and in the relationship between chair and head of school. When volunteer and professional leaders reflect on where they struggle and where they see their strengths with respect to the contribution of volunteer leadership to governance of the school, they point most often to three factors located within their institutions over which they have some, even much, influence.

There are tremendous pressures in terms of enrollment. The president and board members could mistake that and put too much blame on the head, instead of diagnosing the problem appropriately. It's the same issue for affordability."

I. STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

The literature on volunteer leadership from the nonprofit context is replete with recommendations for structures and systems that can enable boards and board chairs to function with maximum effectiveness. At the schools we studied, when such structures and systems were in place, professionals and volunteers often found it easier to fulfill their responsibilities. When these structures and systems didn't work as well as they were supposed to, at least as promised by the many board how-to books, the various players were invested in making them work more effectively. They understood that practices of this kind do make a difference to the functioning of their schools.

II. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND NORMS

Structures and systems help many boards fulfill their key roles, and yet in some schools even when such practices are in place, interviewees reported that their boards struggled to be effective or they complained that volunteer-professional relationships were frayed or unproductive. These reflections indicate that high-functioning boards and effective head-chair relationships don't only hinge on the implementation of the right structures and systems, they also depend on the culture of work, on the organizational and interpersonal norms, with which structures and systems are operationalized. Our interviewees shared some powerful examples of the kinds of cultures that support the effective collaboration of school heads and chairs and the capacity of boards to engage over time in challenging work. At the heart of these examples are three norms: trust, respect, and collaboration, as elaborated in the report.



III. DISPOSITIONS AND CAPACITIES

The dispositions and capacities of the head of school and the board chair make a difference not only to how they perform their roles but also to how their institutions function.¹ **With respect to the head, when it comes to facilitating the board's contribution to the well-being of the school the dispositions that loom largest are concerned with: the head's ability to work collaboratively and empathetically with board members as a whole and with the board chair in particular. Some interviewees singled out specific dispositions: openness to negative feedback; mindfulness of the volunteer nature of board work; the ability to maintain open and positive communication with volunteers; empathetically adjusting one's work ethic to align with the chair's way of working.**

- The only skill or capacity that interviewees called out that couldn't be characterized as a personal disposition was that heads be able to understand the financial dimensions of their work. Volunteer leaders wished that the heads with whom they work could engage with them as equals in relation to the business aspects of the school.
- With respect to the board chair, there were a small number of **dispositions that interviewees called out as making a decisive difference to the quality of their contribution to a school's functioning. These can be characterized as people-management capabilities, knowing how to get along with or manage diverse and difficult personalities. One particular disposition that a few interviewees highlighted was akin to steadfastness, being able to take and uphold difficult or unpopular decisions. This quality enabled volunteer leaders to withstand naysayers or critics and convey a positive message to the school community.**

C. It Takes Three to Tango: Head, Chair, and Board

As stated above, the relationship between the head and the board chair is the critical one for school leadership. Nonetheless, the presence of the board as a whole creates an additional dynamic that is critical for effective school management. The triangular relationship between the head, chair, and board, which in turn is nested within relationships involving parents, the executive, and a leadership team, collectively are part of a dance that can be hard to execute. Adding a layer of complexity, this is a tango for three; too much intimacy with one partner risks creating too much distance from another. Building these relationships means being ready to be pulled in more than one direction at the same time.

¹ For more on leadership dispositions, please read "[The Learning Leadership Landscape: Experiences and Opportunities for Jewish Day School Personnel](#)," pp. 10-11.



IV. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings map the landscape within which schools can build the capacity of their boards. Investigating these areas can serve as a prompt or diagnostic to help schools consider where their own difficulties originate. Tackling all these issues at once is too much. When schools use this framework to identify the pressure points where their school is struggling and work on one area at a time, they are more apt to make an impact.

A. Understanding the Landscape

It is undoubtedly possible to improve schools by improving the functioning of their boards. Volunteer and professional school leaders can make a positive change to governance in their own schools by:

- i. Identifying those challenges that are part of larger contexts and where strong, national allies exist to help with the work.
- ii. Focusing internally on addressing weaknesses over which leaders themselves do indeed have significant influence and for which well-established technical solutions already exist.
- iii. Applying a degree of introspection and honesty to their own dispositions and the dispositions of others.



Leaders can similarly bring wisdom, relationships, and expertise from their experiences in the local community and the broader nonprofit context. Board members active throughout the community, for example, can advocate for the school and foster connections to local allies. Heads can connect to colleagues at schools throughout North America, enlisting the experiences of others to improve their own school and board.

B. Structures and Systems

To help make a difference to the structures and systems that support school governance, volunteer and professional leaders can access resources that exist from well-regarded experts in nonprofit leadership such as [BoardSource](#). Resources can help school leaders understand how the multiple contexts in which day schools are situated map on to their specific environment. There is also a rich history of resources (including self-study guides and handbooks) and best practices in the Jewish day school field that can serve to contextualize and inspire better practice. Accessing these tools can enable schools to apply the recommendations in these publications to the particular circumstances of their day school setting.

C. Culture and Norms

Schools have great capacity to engage in efforts to influence their culture. Leaders can consider implementing intentional processes for onboarding new board chairs or new heads of school, for example. Through Prizmah resources like the Reshet network groups, the online Knowledge Center, or coaching, school leaders can learn about governance cultures across the diverse day school field and experiment with new approaches. Another valued resource is to enlist the experience and expertise of past board chairs as mentors. Creating a learning culture means seeking out and drawing on all available resources. [See Appendix A.](#)

D. Dispositions and Capacities

Focusing on dispositional change, especially with board chairs, means trying to change the performance of individuals who occupy their positions for limited terms before others take their place. This kind of turnover is certainly a challenge, and yet it also creates an opportunity. Day school volunteer leaders rarely end their “careers” as volunteers once they complete their terms. They usually move on, as they and their children age out of day school, to play other volunteer roles in the community. Creating strong networks and opportunities for mentorship for board members within a local Jewish community, across institutions, can help people identify and cultivate productive leadership dispositions. If school leaders can find community allies with whom to partner in this work, it would knit day schools into the fabric of Jewish communal life, to the benefit of all.

Understanding the dispositions that are best suited for leadership can help boards select new board members thoughtfully and identify future board chairs with much greater wisdom and intentionality. [Appendix A](#) can be a helpful tool in this regard.



V. PRIZMAH'S ROLE

Prizmah is proud to partner with school lay and professional leaders, to co-create opportunities that contribute in significant ways to the effectiveness with which volunteer leaders steer, support, and supervise Jewish day schools. With sensitivity to the nested contexts in which schools are situated, Prizmah is committed to mobilizing already-existing resources designed to help address the governance challenges that all schools face as well as developing customized resources unique to the day school environment.

By both drawing on the wisdom of the field and applying strategic interventions to the leadership practices employed by individual schools, Prizmah can help advance a broad change in the culture of volunteer leadership in day schools. We are committed to establishing norms that will benefit not only the Jewish day school sector, but also the broader universe of Jewish nonprofit organizations.

Prizmah celebrates the vision, dedication, passion, and perseverance of our Jewish day school lay and professional leaders and is committed to working in partnership toward these goals.

To see the full report, *Unlocking Leadership: Obstacles and Opportunities for Improved Day School Volunteer Leadership*, go to: <https://prizmah.org/knowledge/resource/lay-leadership-full-study>.

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