



Frequently Asked Questions about the Governance of Telluride Mountain School

TMS is an “independent” school, and a member of the Association of Colorado Independent Schools and the National Association of Independent Schools. What does “independent” mean in this context?

An independent school is a school that governs itself. There is no authority outside the school that dictates how the school is governed: there is no publicly elected school board, no church, no corporate parent. This defining characteristic of self-governance is highly prized by the 1800 independent schools that are accredited by NAIS. It is the cornerstone of the character and quality of the educational programs these schools deliver.

Why is TMS governed by a “self-perpetuating board”?

There are three models for governance of an independent school in use, but of them, the self-perpetuating board is the only one that NAIS fully endorses. The alternatives are a parent-run or cooperative school, whereby parents are members of the corporation and elect the board and the “Carver Model,” which includes detailed prescriptions for governance in a school’s bylaws. More than 90 percent of NAIS schools choose the self-perpetuating model because of its proven success; according to NAIS, departures from the self-perpetuating model often lead to a meltdown. A self-perpetuating board is one that recruits and appoints new board members and helps those new members become oriented to NAIS “best practices” of independent school governance.

How does the board evaluate its performance?

Among the best practices for good governance is one that urges boards to undergo frequent self-assessments and review of all of the other best practices of good governance. There is a wealth of material provided by NAIS detailing best practices for governance by a self-perpetuating board.

How can we know that self-governance is working for TMS?

Accreditation by ACIS (which is an affiliate of NAIS, and conveys NAIS accreditation) is a way for an independent school to hold itself accountable to its own mission and values. Periodic reviews by an accreditation committee consisting of representatives from other Colorado independent schools help TMS ensure that it is meeting or exceeding proven standards for independent school practices. Among the most

important of these standards are that the school is, in fact, independently governed, and that its governance supports the school's mission. Accreditation also validates that there is congruence between what the school says it does (its mission) and what it actually does (its program), and that it is financially viable.

How does the TMS board recruit new members?

In accordance with NAIS recommendations, the board appoints a Committee on Trustees, comprised of board members. This committee maintains a list of potential future trustees, which consists of individuals who may be interested in supporting the school as a trustee; may have skills such as a legal, financial or educational background that would help the board carry out its responsibilities; and, most importantly, who support the school's mission and values. Working with potential trustees when they volunteer their time to the school is one way current trustees get to know the potential trustees. Typically, there is a period of time during which there are informal and formal conversations between a potential trustee and members of the Committee on Trustees to assess the fit. This may be followed by a recommendation from the Committee on Trustees to the full board to invite a prospective trustee to join the board.

How does the TMS board work with the Head of School?

The relationship between an independent school board of trustees and their head of school is a major subject of NAIS best practices recommendations. The board has only one employee, one person who reports to them: the Head of School. All of the other school employees report directly or indirectly to the Head. Similarly, the board of trustees is not directly responsible for parental concerns about school programs or practices. Those issues are the Head's responsibility. The board's responsibilities include hiring and supporting the Head of School, approving the school budget, raising money for the school, ensuring that the school's mission is carried out by school programs, and helping to craft and maintain the school's strategic plan for future growth. One of the best references describing a trustee's responsibilities was prepared by ACIS Executive Director Lee Quinby and can be viewed [here](#).

How can parents influence the school's governance or programs?

Optimally, this question should very rarely come up. The reason is that TMS is a mission-driven school that strives to adhere to best practices for independent schools. This means, first, that parents apply for admission to the school and are admitted because they affirmatively choose to enroll their child(ren) in a school whose mission is one they embrace. Second, in adhering to best practices and achieving accreditation, the school should be offering a program that fulfills the promise of its mission statement. Ideally, most members of the school community should be happy with the school most of the time. Of course, in reality, there are times when our aspirations as a school will fall short of our actual achievements and times when a school constituent may feel the school is falling short of expectations. If a parent feels that this is happening, the best practice is for that parent to bring their concerns to school staff, starting with a classroom teacher, division head or assistant head, and ultimately to the Head of School if necessary. The TMS faculty and administrative staff are as fully steeped in the school mission, culture and values as the parents and students are, and, therefore, parental concerns will be heard and addressed.

How well is self-governance and a self-perpetuating board serving TMS?

TMS is still a very young school, just approaching its twentieth anniversary. But it has already educated hundreds of students and graduated impressive alumni. Despite being located in a very small, very remote community, it has achieved near-full enrollment and has a waiting list for many classes. Yet the school aspires to even more, having recently, for example, become an International Baccalaureate accredited school and the only independent school in Colorado offering the IB diploma to students. We are proud of all we have accomplished but are not resting on any laurels. The current state of the school testifies to the value of independent schools governed by a self-perpetuating board. NAIS experience over the last fifty years since its founding strongly suggests that this model works in delivering educational programs that meet the expectations of students, parents and educators. If you love TMS, you may not always be mindful of this fact: but the school's success is curated by its system of governance. The school has reached the stage in its development where the challenges for the Board of Trustees are no longer the challenges of launching a great school. The challenge now is to ensure future sustainability by solidifying the school's financial foundation, improving its facilities, and broadening and deepening its programs. That is the precisely the generative work the board is deeply engaged in doing.