



Embracing Diversity of Faiths, Cultures, and Languages

Governance through a lens of translation and understanding

Metaphor to hold in mind

Some things are not lost in translation because language failed, but because we assumed words meant the same thing to everyone listening.

Schools often rely on shared language. Terms such as belonging, respect, faith, inclusion, wellbeing, or community appear regularly in strategic plans, policies, and conversations around the board table. Yet within culturally and religiously diverse communities, those words may carry quite different histories, expectations, and emotional weight.

Most boards become aware of this gradually. A policy that seemed straightforward produces unexpectedly different responses. A celebration welcomed warmly by one group creates uncertainty in another. A phrase intended to signal openness is experienced elsewhere as unfamiliar or excluding.

The issue is rarely communication alone. More often, it is the assumption that understanding is already shared.

This characteristic invites boards to consider what governance requires when a school community includes multiple faith traditions, cultural experiences, languages, and ways of interpreting the world.

Governance through a lens of translation

Schools do not become diverse simply because different groups are present within them. Diversity begins to shape governance when boards recognise that people may not automatically experience the institution in the same way, even when they appear to share common goals.

That can be difficult to notice from within established governance cultures. Board processes, meeting styles, communication patterns, and assumptions about participation often feel neutral to those already familiar with them. For others, they may feel unfamiliar, overly coded, or shaped by expectations that have never been made explicit.

Faith adds another layer again. In many school communities, religious language carries very different meanings depending on people's histories and experiences. Some families hear openness and invitation. Others hear uncertainty about whether they truly belong. Occasionally, people remain silent not because they disagree, but because they are still trying to interpret the terms of the conversation itself.

Engaging this characteristic does not require boards to remove difference or avoid conviction. It asks something more demanding than that. It invites curiosity about how meaning is formed, how institutional language is heard, and whether governance practices allow genuine encounter across cultural and spiritual difference.



The 10 facets reframed through a lens of translation

Facet	What assumptions might we be making about shared meaning?
Role clarity	Are governance expectations and responsibilities equally understandable across different cultural and professional backgrounds?
Strategic vision	Does the language of the school's vision carry the same meaning across the diversity of the community?
Board composition	Are there perspectives missing from the board because pathways into governance feel unfamiliar or inaccessible?
Financial stewardship	Do resource decisions reflect awareness of the differing needs and experiences within the community?
Risk management	Are there cultural or faith related risks that may not be recognised within the board's usual frame of reference?
Succession	How might future leadership pathways become more accessible across cultures, languages, and faith traditions?
Transparency	Is information communicated in ways that are genuinely understandable across the diversity of the school community?
Stakeholder engagement	Which groups are most comfortable participating in consultation processes, and which may remain less visible?
Community partnership	Are partnerships shaped around genuine exchange, or primarily around institutional expectations?
Board effectiveness	How confident is the board in recognising when misunderstanding may be cultural, linguistic, or faith related rather than simply disagreement?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Which words or phrases does this school use regularly that may not mean the same thing to everyone listening?
2. Are there groups within the community who understand the culture and expectations of governance more easily than others?
3. When misunderstanding occurs, do we tend to interpret it as disagreement, disengagement, or something else?
4. What would it mean for this board to become more skilled at translation, not just communication?



Practice: listening beneath familiar words

A brief reflection on institutional language

Choose a word commonly used within the school. For example:

- belonging
- excellence
- wellbeing
- faith
- community
- inclusion

Invite board members to reflect silently for a moment:

- Would this word carry the same meaning in every family represented in this school?
- What histories, assumptions, or experiences might different people hear within it?
- Are there ways the school uses this language that may unintentionally narrow who feels addressed by it?

After a short pause, open discussion.

The aim is not to arrive at a single agreed definition, but to notice how governance changes when difference in interpretation is taken seriously.

A final question to take into your next meeting

What assumptions about shared understanding sit beneath the way this board governs?