



Entering into Justice for All Peoples and the Environment

Governance through a lens of presence and absence

A Metaphor to hold in mind

Every important decision is made in the “presence” of people who are not in the room.

Board members spend much of their time trying to understand the needs of the school and make wise decisions on its behalf. They read reports, hear recommendations, test assumptions, and weigh competing priorities. Even in the best governed institutions, however, there is an unavoidable limitation. Because many of those who will be most affected by a significant decision are absent when it is being discussed.



Sometimes those absent voices belong to people who are easy to identify. We can think of a future student who has not yet enrolled; a family whose circumstances mean they rarely engage with school processes, staff members whose experience of a decision differs significantly from those making it. At other times the absence is less obvious. The local community beyond the school gates may carry consequences that were not anticipated. The natural environment may bear costs that appear nowhere in the budget papers. Future generations inherit decisions long after the board that made them has completed its term.

The invitation for this resource is not to feel guilty about those absences, nor to imagine that every competing interest can be represented perfectly. Rather, it is to recognise that justice often begins when we ask who is missing from the conversation and whether there are assumptions, systems, or habits that make some interests easier to hear than others.

Governance through a lens of presence and absence

Most boards would describe themselves as fair-minded. Presumably that is the case in many circumstances. Yet governance inevitably operates through structures that privilege certain forms of participation. People with confidence, access, education, resources, authority, or long familiarity with institutions often find it easier to have their concerns recognised and acted upon. Others may be affected just as deeply by a decision while remaining largely invisible to those making it.

Justice invites boards to widen their field of attention. It asks not only whether a decision is lawful, affordable, or strategically sound, but also whether its consequences are being carried equitably. It encourages reflection on who benefits from existing arrangements, who may be disadvantaged by them, and whether the board has become accustomed to patterns that deserve closer examination.

This does not require a board to become an overtly activist body or to solve every social problem that comes within view. It does require a willingness to notice that institutions, including schools, can unintentionally reproduce inequalities that already exist within the wider community. Governance shaped by justice remains attentive to those realities and is prepared to ask whether a different course might be possible.

The 10 facets reframed through a lens of presence and absence

Facet	Who might be represented by the empty chair?
Role clarity	Are there people affected by our decisions whose experience rarely enters governance discussions because we assume their concerns belong elsewhere?
Strategic vision	Who is included in the future we are imagining for this school, and who may be unintentionally absent from that picture?
Board composition	Which experiences, communities, or perspectives are not represented around the table, and what might we be missing as a result?
Financial stewardship	Who benefits most from the way resources are currently distributed, and who may be carrying costs that remain largely unseen?
Risk management	Are we paying sufficient attention to risks borne by future generations, vulnerable communities, or the natural environment, as well as those faced by the institution itself?
Succession	What kinds of leadership are we encouraging, and whose interests are likely to shape governance in the future?
Transparency	Who finds it easiest to understand, access, and engage with the board's decisions, and who may be left at a distance from them?
Stakeholder engagement	Which groups participate readily in consultation processes, and which are affected by decisions despite rarely having a voice in them?
Community partnership	Are our partnerships helping us hear from people beyond our usual networks, or are they largely reinforcing perspectives we already know well?
Board effectiveness	How regularly does the board consider people, communities, future generations, and environmental impacts that are not directly represented in the room?



Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Who occupies the empty chair in our current governance conversations?
2. When significant decisions are being made, whose interests are easiest to identify and account for, and whose require more deliberate effort to notice?
3. Are there groups within the school community, or beyond it, who are affected by our decisions but have little opportunity to shape them?
4. What assumptions about fairness, participation, access, or responsibility might the board benefit from examining more closely?

Practice: noticing the empty chair

A reflection before a significant decision

Choose a current issue before the board.

Before discussion begins, invite members to spend several minutes reflecting silently on the following questions:

- Who is most affected by this decision who is not represented in this discussion?
- What might they hope we would notice about the situation before us?
- Which consequences of this decision are likely to emerge after current board members have completed their service?
- Is there an environmental impact, whether immediate or long-term, that deserves greater attention than it is currently receiving?

After the period of reflection, invite conversation to begin.

Rather than trying to advocate for every absent interest, focus on what becomes visible when the issue is viewed from beyond the board table itself. The purpose of the exercise is to expand the board's awareness before decisions are made.

A final question to take into your next meeting

If at least some of the communities, future generations, and parts of the natural world affected by this decision had a seat at the table, what might we hear that we are not hearing now?