Governance in Fact and Fiction

Review of *No Ivory Tower* by Stephen Davenport and *Beyond Hand to Mouth* by Nicholas Prassas

Review by Daniel E. White



ISTOCK

Independent schools pine for "Goldilocks" governance, in which people with just the right skill sets exercise just the right balance between intrusion and inattention to ask just the right questions producing just the right policy, giving just the right amounts of money themselves to stimulate more generous donors than imaginable. Schools that do not meet governance and/or finance standards in accreditation are the most likely to flounder and then close.

Two recent books — one fiction, the other nonfiction — provide thoughtful, provocative storylines that could be the foundation for effective training of those who would lead our schools through governance. They share an understanding that schools comprise people, nearly all well-intentioned and motivated by a worthwhile mission yet variously trained and prepared for their roles — and all subject to the vicissitudes of their own lives, independent of the school.

The authors share empathy for the subjects in their stories. Yet they do not let empathy cloud their judgment about effective practice. Their stories are engaging, but their messages stark: Governance matters.

No Ivory Tower

Stephen Davenport's *No Ivory Tower* is a follow-up to his first novel, *Saving Miss Oliver's*. In the earlier book, Davenport created Miss Oliver's, a venerated Eastern all-girls boarding school teetering on the brink of financial disaster. In retrospect, a more accurate title might have been *Setting Up Miss Oliver's to Be Saved* — because the school's major steps toward salvation become manifest in *No Ivory Tower*.

As the second book opens, a new head of school, Rachel Bickham, is in place. She was a popular teacher promoted when the previous first-year head, Fred Kindler, resigned. There is also a new chair of the board of trustees, Milton Perkins. Under his guidance, the board has recognized the school's perilous financial condition and is leading efforts to put the institution back on firm financial ground, aided by generous alumnae. Meanwhile, master teacher Francis Plummer, an antagonist to leadership change in *Saving Miss Oliver's*, is back in front of his classes and performing at a less-than-master-teacher level.

What could possibly go wrong?

Veteran independent school educator that he is, Davenport knows that the story of a school is actually a collection of interwoven stories revealed in the lives of its people. New heads, especially those promoted from within, face the inevitable challenge of being new. Trustees have lives outside the

schools they serve and are not always tuned in as well as they should be. Alumni donors often want to give to the school in their memories rather than the school as it exists today. Master teachers run the risk of going stale, teaching a well-grooved Shakespeare lesson once too often, to cohorts of students whose generational attributes can change as rapidly as the technologies. Mix in the steady anxiety and wishes of parents, and the arc of any school year will defy the sense of order and predictably for which the school aims.

No Ivory Tower, then, skillfully threads these human subplots into a rich main plot. Davenport clearly enjoys a surfeit of subjects through which the complexity of Miss Oliver's is revealed.

The characters are archetypes but not cardboard ones. One feels empathy for Rachel, Francis, Milton, even parent Mitch Michaels, who seems to work hard at not drawing empathy from anyone. And archetypes are a legitimate way to focus attention on those attributes that make them archetypes; first-year heads really do face unique problems; aging teachers are a challenge to their schools and themselves; governance is never a slam dunk for a school.

Ultimately, *No Ivory Tower* is about effective governance in the face of change. We know, for instance, that Miss Oliver's would not have needed saving if the board had been paying close attention to its fiduciary responsibility. And an attentive board might have known the pitfalls of appointing a young man to head a girls school following a long-term iconic woman in leadership. But as *No Ivory Tower* opens, the board, brought to its senses, reclaims its governance responsibility. It also figures out how to work with the head of school to blunt external threats, and its members learn to resist the temptation to be individual problem solvers. Above all, it stands behind the newly appointed head as she learns what it is like, as the saying goes, to herd cats.

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No Ivory Tower is also about leadership, the challenges of understanding the motivations, potentialities, and limitations of the people one leads, and the courage effective leaders display daily to pursue worthy visions with humble pride. How does one handle the faded star? Who should be brought into administration, and is that the only possibility for career advancement for a teacher? How do you handle boundary-pushing young people within the context of a rule-governed school?

There are tales of good teaching, effective and not-so-praiseworthy parenting, and the marital challenges that arise between two talented, responsible leaders in their respective fields. All along, Davenport is skilled at prompting the reader to turn to the next chapter and then the next to learn how the characters balance and solve the personal and professional challenges in their lives.

How do things turn out? A fellow school head once noted that we all work for the same school. Only the names change. She might have added: none are ivory towers.

Beyond Hand to Mouth

"Ninety-five percent of all small businesses fail in the first five years. Statistics for not-for-profit organizations are less precise, but I have no doubt the failure rate is comparable," writes Nicholas Prassas, a consultant to schools and nonprofits, in his introduction to *Beyond Hand to Mouth*.

"Why do these organizations fail?" Prassas continues in bold letters. "Because they deserve to."

Prassas's question and answer set the tone for *Beyond Hand to Mouth*. The book subtitle is *Tactical Finance for Not-for-Profit Organizations*, but it's really a book about governance. After all, while establishing and serving the mission and hiring effective leadership are critical board functions, ensuring that the organization has the money needed to enable leadership to serve the mission ranks as the key responsibility.

To hear someone assert that independent schools — with noble and worthy missions, staffed by selfless people focused on the well-being and development of children — might deserve to fail can seem blasphemous. By virtue of their virtue, don't schools deserve not to fail? Prassas is a fan of independent education but notes how often schools, like other not-for-profits, can often be their own worst enemies when they need not be.

Most schools don't fail. But far too many are financially fragile, led by educators who often learn what they know about finance on the job, serving schools governed by boards on which the work of the finance committee is considered arcane.

Chapter One of *Beyond Hand to Mouth* is titled "On Governance." Prassas writes, "We begin with governance because, at its core, finance is not about money. It is first and foremost about people." Boards are collections of "impassioned individuals, working selflessly toward a common goal," an aggregation of men and women with diverse skills connected to the school or the head or the board chair — or not at all. Their motives for serving are myriad. Their degrees of engagement in board work vary widely. Their education about their fiduciary responsibilities ranges from knowledgeable to uninformed.



Yet to trustees is given authority, almost from the time of election, without a concomitant level of responsibility. Prassas notes that for trustees in nonprofits, schools and otherwise, "the absence of personal consequences is less well-understood, but unfortunately evident...." He identifies the issues that surface when a board intrudes on operations, and he is equally dismissive of "prima donna" boards that "contribute their 'wisdom' and 'experience' but ... in actuality just sit back ... and bark orders at management." At the close of the chapter, Prassas offers several suggestions about the size, structure, and preparation of boards that will be, consequently, primed for better performance of their governance functions.

Prassas's way of teaching is to tell stories. He has nearly 20 years of experience working with nonprofits that seek help in establishing financial sustainability, and many of his clients have been independent schools. He has collected a useful array of stories, some about success, others about failure. All are presented in an entertaining and instructive fashion.

Each chapter concludes with suggestions gleaned from his experience and his thoughtful consideration of how independent schools and other nonprofits can ensure their success in the future based on financial stability. Some stories are more personal, like the opening one in which he is working with an executive director of an organization (for which he had been a major donor) on plans to raise funds. The executive director finally, in "feigned jest," asks Prassas if he wouldn't "just write another check." He didn't, ever again. *Beyond Hand to Mouth* is all the more useful because its author hasn't just been paid to help schools and their boards; he has been a donor himself.

A list of the chapter titles in *Beyond Hand to Mouth* reads like the job description for any independent school trustee: determining price; fundraising; fiduciary behavior, establishing and managing endowments, including board-designated endowments; financial planning; planned giving; managing money; borrowing money; working with rich people. In the chapter on governance, Prassas discusses leadership, the hiring of which is a critical board function.

Heads of schools would benefit from reading *Beyond Hand to Mouth* and marking those stories that describe what the head hopes would be the case for his or her board and school. Then that head would do well to give a copy to the CFO. Once these school leaders understand the messages of the book, they can do their trustees a great service by buying each a copy and setting aside time for the board to talk about what they have read.

If the reader wants a primer on "School Governance and Finance for Dummies," look elsewhere. Prassas says of his purpose for the book, "It will dance among topics I feel are neglected, misrepresented, or romanticized by those who manage or consult with not-for-profit organizations." Readers are encouraged to engage with the stories, reflecting on their own motivations, expectations, and expertise as a result. In doing so, and acting on what they learn, school trustees and top administrators may move their schools beyond survivability to sustained viability.

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