Trinity Classical Academy: A teaching case in three parts

Bradley Almond, Texas A&M University – Central Texas

Abstract
This case primarily explores issues related to a multi-party, multi-faceted, escalating conflict that occurred at Trinity Classical Academy (TCA), a private, non-profit primary and secondary school. The case consists of a sequence of three parts, each with its own separate narrative, discussion questions and decision point for the protagonist, the school’s headmaster. The backdrop to the case is the newness of the institution, the complex web of relationships among its founders, faculty, and community, and the unique hybrid structure in which the school operates. The overarching goal of the case is to have students understand the nature of conflict in organizations, the dimensions that can classify it, the circumstances that make it more or less likely to occur, and the characteristics that make it more or less easy to resolve.

Learning Outcomes
After completing this sequence case, students should be able to:

1. Identify and describe the nature of interpersonal and organizational conflict as it occurs within a specific context.
2. Identify and describe the progressive stages of conflict as they occur within a specific context.
3. Analyze the contextual conditions in an organization to determine which features of the organizational context make conflict more or less likely to occur.
4. Identify and describe the characteristics of a specific interpersonal or organizational conflict that make it more or less easy to resolve.
5. Recommend a course of action to address conflict within a specific organizational context.

Application
This case is most appropriate for undergraduate or graduate courses in organizational behavior or organizational development. It could also be suitable for upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses in leadership.

Key Words
Conflict, non-profit, conflict resolution

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Trinity Classical Academy (Part 1)

Introduction

Rob Harris lumbered into his office, doing his best to keep his briefcase on one shoulder while avoiding dropping either the stack of standardized tests in one hand or the cup of coffee in the other. Carefully setting down these items (starting with the coffee), he reclined in his chair to ruminate over the state of his school. Rob was in the start of his second year as headmaster of the newly founded Trinity Classical Academy, and things were definitely looking up. Enrollment was up nearly 20%, and returning families were reporting that things were going much more smoothly this year than they had last year (the school’s inaugural year of operation). All classes were fully staffed (no small feat in this market!), and he had just received a sizable raise from the school board based on his performance during his first year.

The only possible blight on his sunny day was the trickle of minor complaints he had received from parents in the last couple of days concerning Phoebe Shea, the sixth grade teacher. But even these did not concern him much—it seemed to him at first blush that one or two parents were taking things too personally, or were simply struggling to adjust to the unusual structure of things at Trinity—as everyone invariably did at first. Mrs. Shea was a favorite—a darling of the school board and of most parents, and her husband, Daniel (who was a board member), was a friend who had been a source of wise counsel to him on more than one occasion. Coming out of his reverie as a cluster of giggling students bustled past his door, Rob popped open his laptop to check his email.

About Trinity

Trinity Classical Academy (TCA) was founded in 2011 by a group of families from throughout the Clarksville-Hopkinsville area who had been actively working together to design and develop the school since 2009. This area includes Christian County (KY) and Montgomery County (TN), which together comprise the bulk of the Clarksville-Hopkinsville metropolitan statistical area. TCA was a classical, sectarian, hybrid school that met in Hopkinsville, KY and offered instruction for grades pre-K through 10th to about 150 students. The school’s classical curriculum included all subjects but took an especially high view of the humanities and of language mastery, and held the eloquent and wise use of language as its highest ideal. Modeled after university courses, Trinity as a hybrid school held classes 2 or 3 days a week (depending on
grade level), and students completed the balance of their lessons and homework at home with a parent. All classroom teachers at TCA were paid professionals with teaching experience and at least a baccalaureate college degree (several had graduate degrees).

This unique school structure required a high level of active collaboration, communication, scrutiny and accountability between parents and classroom instructors—much more so than in traditional schools. To help with this collaboration, TCA required all classroom instructors to post comprehensive lesson plans online before the start of each week, detailing exactly what would be covered in class and what parents and students would be required to do at home. Mastering this process involved a steep learning curve for both parents and teachers alike, and nearly all families reported struggling with it initially. Trinity met at Highland Baptist Church in Hopkinsville, KY, but because of its central location and part-time schedule the school also drew families from surrounding municipalities, including Fort Campbell (one of the largest Army bases in the U.S.) and Clarksville, TN.

TCA’s head of school was Rob Harris, 33, formerly an award-winning teacher from Nashville-area public schools. Rob had a master’s degree in literature from Duke University, and had completed one year of doctoral-level study (also in literature) at the University of North Carolina. The Trinity school board reported that Rob was generally mild-mannered, but was a masterful teacher who exuded a quiet sort of competence that instilled confidence in parents and students alike. He also had good rapport with the faculty, who respected his abilities as both an instructor and administrator. He was first recommended to the board as a possible head of school candidate by the board chair, Brandy Meyer, who befriended him when they were undergraduate students at Duke. Rob and Brandy’s husband, Mark, were also friends: they co-founded a Christian fraternity while attending Duke University, and the Harris and Meyer families remained very close. Because Rob’s initial salary was not known at the time he was hired (it was dependent on final enrollment numbers), the board offered to let Rob’s wife, Darla, teach kindergarten to help ensure that the Harris family would have enough money for Rob to be able to accept the job.

Because of the unique nature of the school and its relatively small-market location, TCA’s structure was full of potential conflicts of interest: several board members or their spouses were also teachers, and all board members had children enrolled. However, the founders (most of whom were still board members) did not see any way to avoid all of these conflicts at first, and reasoned that ultimately it was better for the school’s character and culture to permit these conflicts of interest and to resolve any internal issues and conflicts that might arise from them through the use of reasoned one-on-one communication rather than through restrictive formal policies that would require mediation and/or enforcement by a third party. The founders wanted to avoid burdening their young school with excessive policies and regulations, and also to foster among teachers, parents, and board members the mature and eloquent use of language that they expected of their children and that the school’s entire classical curriculum was built upon. Furthermore, the founders reasoned that if they had been adamant about avoiding all conflicts of interest from day one they would never have been able to open the school in their market at all—there simply weren’t enough people with Trinity’s unique qualifications willing to work part-time with no benefits.
TCA’s Niche Mission and Market

TCA maintained a faith-based orientation, followed a classical curriculum, and utilized a hybrid schedule. While several area schools offered one of these three distinctive features, none but TCA offered all three. TCA viewed itself as an institution that existed to strengthen and support the family by enabling parents to become and to remain actively involved in educating their children through high school graduation. Given the fact that Trinity was entirely funded by tuition dollars and therefore had a very small operating budget, teacher salaries were prorated based on the starting salaries of public school teachers in Hopkinsville, which in 2012 was about $30,000 per annum. As a result, 2-day teachers earned $12,480 per year and 3-day teachers earn $18,720 per year, with no benefits. It was admittedly a labor of love for everyone involved. Many of TCA’s teachers were parents who simply wanted to earn just enough income to cover the tuition costs for their own children to attend TCA. Tuition rates were quite modest: $2,900 per child per year for grades pre-K through 4, and $3,750 per child per year for grades 5 and higher.

Developing Parent-Teacher Collaboration

To help parents adjust to their new roles and responsibilities as “co-teachers,” TCA offered periodic parent meetings called CrossCheck sessions, which allowed parents in the same grade to meet, develop friendships, and share best practices for managing their at-home school days. While agreeing that such an arrangement could be helpful given the unique structure at TCA, other sister schools had warned TCA’s founders to be cautious with unsupervised parent meetings since they could quickly degenerate into gripe and gossip sessions. Some teachers were worried about this, too. But Rob reasoned: “if the parents want to gripe and gossip among themselves on their own time, we can’t stop them. It is better to offer a structured communication forum so then at least we can try to foster positive and open conversation.” Furthermore, CrossCheck facilitators were supposed to contact the teachers beforehand (“We are having a CrossCheck soon. Is there anything we need to know, and is there anything we can pray for you about?”), and as a courtesy, to follow-up with a recap afterwards.

To help prevent gripe sessions at CrossChecks, Rob had selected one parent from each grade (based on character and trustworthiness) to facilitate each CrossCheck session. Each facilitator was given written guidelines in advance about the purpose and protocols of these meetings. Facilitators were told that if complaints began to be voiced during the session, they were to table the discussion and instruct the complaining parent or parents to address their concerns directly to the teacher or to Rob at a later time. At the start of the year Rob also called each CrossCheck facilitator to go over the guidelines to make sure they understood clearly what the correct protocols were. As an added precaution, Rob or a board member was generally present at CrossCheck sessions to monitor the sessions and help redirect the conversation if it seemed to be heading in a wrong direction. This protocol worked seamlessly during the school’s first year of operation, so Rob and the board decided to utilize it again in the current year.

The Critical Event
As Rob opened his email, he noticed a note from Kay Martinez in his inbox entitled “recap of sixth grade CrossCheck.” Kay served as the point person for the sixth grade CrossCheck meetings, and her son, Colin, was a student in Mrs. Shea’s class. “That’s funny,” Rob mused to himself. “I didn’t know they’d already had a CrossCheck meeting this year.” As Rob read through the text of the message (see Appendix A) and the attached meeting minutes (see Appendix B), he felt his insides begin to knot. It seemed that the complaints about Mrs. Shea were more widespread and severe than he thought. Rob felt deflated. Kay was known for her respectability and maturity, and had an enthusiasm about Trinity that was contagious to those around her. Furthermore, Rob did not know her to be one to exaggerate matters. It was for these reasons that Rob had chosen her to be the point person for the sixth grade CrossCheck meetings in the first place. He felt he needed to act fast to resolve this conflict before it got any worse.
Appendix A: E-mail from Kay Martinez

Date: 8 October 2012, 12:01 a.m.
To: Rob Harris
Subject: recap of sixth grade CrossCheck

Mr. Harris,
Last Thursday we had our first CrossCheck of the year for 6th grade. We had seven parents in attendance. Three other parents are teachers at Trinity, and so of course could not be in attendance, and another parent couldn’t make it but sent an email to me addressing some concerns. Martha (who is on the school board) texted me just before we started to tell me she couldn’t make it. I debated cancelling the meeting until you or another board member could be there, but since the parents were already there I decided to proceed as a courtesy to them. Overall, we had a very good response on the part of co-teacher involvement.

I wish that my responsibility of providing you with a recap of our meeting could be a more pleasant one, but regretfully, it is not. While there was mention of some positive things noticed from the year thus far, the list of concerns raised by parents far outweighed the positives. Most seemed to be in agreement that Mrs. Shea truly cares about her job as our students’ teacher and has many positive attributes. Those attributes, however, are hard to see right now through all the “sea of red” coming home on students’ papers and the multiple daily emails of additional instruction. One of the things that our parents appreciate about the classical approach to education is that not only does it recognize the importance of growing our children academically, but the importance of growing our children in character, where attention is placed not only on the student’s work but on the student himself; however, this would not seem to be the sort of atmosphere that is being fostered in the sixth grade classroom right now, being instead one in which the student’s work would seem to take precedence over the student himself. Recognizing that we are to expect a curriculum of rigor and high expectations from Trinity, discussion among co-teachers touched on the differences between our children being “challenged” versus “exasperated.”

I am attaching some “minutes” of sorts from our meeting, typed out by my husband, Gabe, who was also present. I hope this will provide you with an idea of the general consensus among our sixth grade co-teachers at this time. All parents attending were in agreement that attention is needed to what we feel are some very legitimate concerns.

Thank you,
Kay Martinez
Appendix B: Minutes from Sixth Grade CrossCheck Meeting

Rob,
This is Gabe Martinez. I attended the Sixth Grade CrossCheck last Thursday along with my wife, Kay, who acted as facilitator. Because much of what I do is attend numerous weekly meetings on various construction projects around Ft. Campbell and meeting minutes are a fact of life for me, I volunteered to type things up (if I can do it at work a couple of times a week, I guess I can do it here!). I will keep names and emotions as anonymous as possible, and keep things to the point from this meeting and other emails received from parents who could not attend. Our desire is to work as a team of parents/teachers/school to see the best for our children, and we know that Trinity intends to foster an environment that provides a quality education where children enjoy learning.

All that said, here are the meeting minutes for the Sixth Grade CrossCheck, 4 October 2012, Highland Baptist Library, 2:30-3:30 p.m.:

Many Positives:
- The consensus among parents was that Mrs. Shea truly cares about her job as our students’ teacher, and brings a great deal of energy and enthusiasm into the classroom.
- She wishes to see the students prepared for the next step.
- One parent said, “my child will one day say ‘Mrs. Shea was one of the best teachers I ever had.’”
- She raises the bar for the children, and they are rising to meet those expectations to the best of their ability.
- Another parent: “I have seen my child grow tremendously in the area of responsibility”
- The children are enjoying the material and are excited about what is being studied

Parental/Co-teacher concerns:
- The lesson plans keep changing. Mrs. Shea often gives students instructions that do NOT appear on the plans, and she often emails parents after the plans are posted to make changes or additions of things she forgot to include in the original plans.
- Parental quote: “There is no flexibility, no grace. It can be exasperating.”
- Parents are aware that the 6th grade class had only 3 students last year, and that they were all exceptionally bright. Is that the frame of reference Mrs. Shea is operating from? A class of 12 can’t necessarily do what that class of 3 could.
- Too much homework: many home days for some students are taking 8 to 10 hours or longer. The work is not difficult, but there is too much, and it all must be done in a very exacting manner. This perfectionism and nit-picking makes students dread their work, and parents dread grading it. Everyone feels like they can never measure up.
- Students should not be reprimanded by Mrs. Shea for something their parents did (e.g., how a parent graded a math assignment). If Mrs. Shea needs to communicate about how parents are marking homework, it should be with the parents directly and not indirectly through the students.
• Why are kids being chastised for reading ahead? What about initiative and curiosity? We thought these were good things that the school encouraged.
• Parents in unanimous agreement that immediate action is needed.
Trinity Classical Academy (Part 2)

A couple of days after emailing Rob her recap of the sixth grade CrossCheck meeting, Kay, acting on her own volition and without Rob’s knowledge, emailed Phoebe to request a one-on-one meeting, which was then scheduled by the two women for the following day. Later that same evening, Kay told Martha Wyatt, a board member and personal friend, that she felt guilty (and somewhat sick to her stomach) about the CrossCheck meeting she had presided over at which so many concerns about Mrs. Shea had been aired. To her it felt as though the meeting had morphed into a bit of a gripe session, and she knew she was supposed to have prevented this from happening.

Because of the way this meeting had turned out, Kay told Martha that she now felt it was her responsibility to ask for a meeting with Phoebe, and that it was important to apologize to her and to discuss her concerns with Phoebe’s class in person. Based on her reading of the Trinity Conflict Resolution Policy (see Appendix), this is what she felt should have been done to address the parental concerns in the first place. And as a de facto leader of the sixth grade parents, she felt she needed to set a good example for the other parents to follow.

The following day Phoebe and Kay met privately on school grounds during Phoebe’s conference period to go over the issues raised at the CrossCheck meeting. Kay later reported starting their meeting by saying something to the effect of the following to Phoebe: “I have had some concerns about your class, but I should have contacted you first to discuss them privately. I’m sorry I didn’t. Honestly, I was a little intimidated by you—you are so admired and confident as a teacher that you didn’t seem that approachable to me concerning your teaching methods, but that is no excuse: I still should have contacted you, and I’m sorry I didn’t. But having said this, I do think some of the concerns that were raised at the CrossCheck meeting are legitimate, and I wonder if we could perhaps talk about them?”

Phoebe’s first question in response to this was, “how could you possibly conclude that I am unapproachable if you never tried to approach me?” Phoebe perceived Kay’s opening gambit differently, later reporting that Kay only essentially said, “I’m sorry you were hurt by what happened, but I’m not sorry for having held the CrossCheck meeting since we parents are supposed to have them.” Phoebe insisted that this was, in her words, a “non-apology apology” akin to saying, “I regret that you were hurt, but I’ve done nothing wrong.” Phoebe consequently told Kay in reply, “That’s no apology. You’re not sorry for anything.” But Kay insisted, “Yes I am. How can you say I am not sorry? How can you possibly know what is in my heart? I am sorry!” And back and forth they went: Kay kept insisting she was sorry, but Phoebe kept insisting she wasn’t. Finally acknowledging the impasse, Kay conceded, “If you won’t accept my apology then I guess there’s nothing else to talk about.”

At this, Phoebe said, “Kay, I can’t accept what you haven’t offered,” then stood up and turned to leave the room. Just before Phoebe left the room, Kay pleaded, “I need you to please keep this issue between you and me, and not take it out on Colin.” Phoebe was deeply offended by this and said with a raised voice: “how dare you accuse me of this? What kind of a person do you think I am?” Kay later claimed that Phoebe then snidely said, “If that’s what you think of me,
why don’t you go tell your little headmaster?” But Phoebe denied this, claiming she only said, “Now I’m going to go tell the headmaster.”

Regardless, both then hurried to Rob’s office, but found that he was not there. So they went next door to the office of Emmeline, the campus coordinator, to ask for Rob, but Emmeline said that Rob was in class. At this, Phoebe said, “Ha! That’s unfortunate,” and turned, pushed past Kay, and went back to her class. Kay, having reached her limit, burst into tears and sobbed. Emmeline said she and Kay didn’t talk much at all, but she did sit with and try to comfort Kay. Emmeline offered to get Rob, but Kay said, “No, no, I’m not in a position to talk to him. I’ll go calm down and call him later.”

While she did not witness the actual meeting between Phoebe and Kay, Emmeline, a long-time friend of Phoebe and of the entire Shea family, later said that although she knew Phoebe’s artistic temperament well enough to know she was capable of such outbursts, she “couldn’t imagine any scenario in which it would have been OK for Phoebe to lose her temper and push past Kay like that.” Distressed by what she had just witnessed, Emmeline sent Rob an emergency text after Kay left, and he quickly went to Phoebe’s classroom, where he found her alone, crying hysterically. He later reported that he was unnerved by how discomposed she was.

Rob, thinking he was being kind and sticking up for her, offered to take over her class for her until she regained her composure, but she reacted strongly negatively to this, saying, “Oh, so you don’t think I’m competent, either!? You think I’m going to take it out on the kids, too?!” Rob was baffled by this reply: he knew from Emmeline’s text that something had happened, but at this point did not yet know what it was. Trying to de-escalate what was clearly a volatile situation, Rob said, “no, I just wanted to give you a chance to calm down and collect yourself if you needed it, but if you’re sure you are going to be OK, I’ll leave.”

Rob, a little shell-shocked, returned to his office to try to piece together what had just happened, and to try to understand why it had happened. Over the course of the afternoon he spoke with Emmeline, Kay, Phoebe, and Martha (who, incidentally, had rushed to campus to talk to Rob after having received an urgent call from a sobbing Kay describing what had just taken place between her and Phoebe). He now felt he had a pretty good sense of what had happened, but he remained unsure how to proceed. These were uncharted waters at Trinity.
Appendix: Trinity Classical Academy Conflict Resolution Policy

As Christians, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

**Take Responsibility** — Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts—confessing our faults and offenses to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any of our own attitudes and habits that may have lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we may have caused.

**Gently Restore** — We will not pretend that conflict doesn't exist, nor will we talk about others behind their backs. We will overlook trivial or minor offenses. We will talk personally and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook, seeking to restore them, not condemn them. When a conflict cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others we trust to help us settle the matter.

**Seek Reconciliation** — Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation—forgiving others as God has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.
Later that same evening Rob met with Kay and Gabe Martinez in their home to apologize on behalf of the school and to voice his commitment to them to reach a quick and satisfactory resolution. Kay and Gabe appreciated the gesture, and confided some of their frustration and sense of helplessness to Rob, but also acknowledged the obvious delicacy and complexity of the situation. They knew that the Shea’s were lifelong residents of the area who were well-known, highly respected and influential members of the community. Furthermore, they knew that the Shea’s had been involved from the beginning with the founding of Trinity, and that Daniel, a local pastor and seminary-trained theologian, continued to serve as vice-president of the school board. They were quick to express their high hopes in a reconciliation, but also said they were committed to doing whatever was best for the school, even if it meant leaving the school in order to restore the peace.

In their minds it would be more damaging for the school to lose the Shea’s association and good opinion than it would be to lose the Martinez family, who were expecting to move away from the area in a year or two as it was. Kay expressed a desire to reconcile with Phoebe (if nothing else, so that her son Colin could return to class without awkwardness), and asked Rob if it would be advisable for her to ask Phoebe for such a meeting. In light of the “seek reconciliation” component of the school’s conflict resolution policy, Rob encouraged her to do so, and said he would also appeal to Phoebe to agree to meet with her. Later that night Kay and Rob both sent emails to Phoebe: Kay requesting a reconciliation meeting, and Rob encouraging Phoebe to agree to meet with her.

Neither heard back from Phoebe during the next 24 hours. However, late in the evening the following day, Rob received a lengthy email from Phoebe’s husband, Daniel, detailing the many issues and concerns he had with Rob’s handling of the situation between Phoebe and the parents of her students (see Appendix A). This email unnerved Rob for two reasons. First, it was through this email that Rob later reported that he began to realize how different his perspective on the facts and principles of the situation was in comparison to Phoebe’s and Daniel’s. And second, it seemed clear to Rob that the letter from Daniel constituted a written reprimand of the head of school by a single board member without the knowledge, input, or consent of the other board members. Aside from the obvious procedural concerns and conflict of interest, Rob was now becoming a little fearful for his job.

There were several points of concern raised by Daniel that touched on facets of Rob’s formal job responsibilities (see Appendix B). Per the school’s charter and bylaws, board members were not supposed to act unilaterally, and were not supposed to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the school, including anything related to personnel. Per his job description, Rob alone was responsible for the hiring & firing, training & development, and performance evaluation for all faculty and staff. He felt Daniel’s interference was now impeding his ability to do this. He felt like the issues were shifting all over the place and it was hard to get his bearings. Just what were the real issues here? And what should he do?
Appendix A: Letter from Daniel Shea to Rob Harris

From: Daniel Shea  
Date: Fri, Oct 12, 2012 at 12:11 PM  
Subject: 6th Grade Concerns  
To: Rob Harris, Phoebe Shea

Hey Rob,

I need to advocate for my wife, because I believe in her, and because I’m not sure if anyone else does at this point. I have held my peace so far, assuming that this stuff would all blow over easily, and also because of conflict of interest. However, at this point I feel it would be wrong for me to not comment.

Let me start up front by saying that Phoebe and I are not interested in her having another meeting with Kay. Phoebe insists that she has already fulfilled her professional and Christian obligation by meeting with her the first time, and the result was only slander and accusation. It is wrong of you to ask her to meet with her again when Phoebe is sure that it will only result in her having to sit through another enumeration of all of her weaknesses and faults as a teacher and person.

I’ve attempted to order my several additional concerns with this situation in a numbered, logical and historical flow. I apologize for the length.

1) VISION: Trinity is trying to maintain our strong and unique vision, while simultaneously pleasing as many families as possible. This is inevitably going to cause conflict. We have discussed as a board that there will always be families that don’t like how we do things, and that is okay. We should not feel compelled to please or keep all. Phoebe and I both think you are a good man and we don’t think you should always feel compelled to please everyone. In short, since Phoebe’s teaching style is formed and motivated by the vision of the school, if Kay and her family don’t like how Phoebe teaches, they should leave (and we should let them).

At this point, Phoebe simply feels that you no longer support her. I am confident that what she has been doing in her classroom has been motivated by the school vision—I cannot say the same for how you have handled this situation so far. What part of our vision are you upholding by trying to make all of the sixth grade families happy? Are parents never allowed to be upset? You seem to be sacrificing your teacher’s well-being and good name to pacify some unhappy families, and that is a very troubling matter. She feels that she is guilty until proven innocent. It seems that her great offense was saying no to a couple of people based on vision.

2) CONSISTENCY: Phoebe is teaching the same way this year as she did last year, which you reviewed last year and encouraged her to continue with. Phoebe is a detailed grader and you have encouraged this to prepare students for the logic & rhetoric school. You’ve repeatedly used phrases with her like, “I trust you.” The only change this year is that parents are now required to grade the students’ math homework. She discussed this change with you.
3) TRANSPARENCY: Phoebe has invited the parents to sit in class (I believe only one or two have). She has given parents her cell phone number. She emails them regularly. She gets positive feedback from most.

4) RESPONSIBILITY: Phoebe gives about 90% of the assignments to the parents in the lesson plans, but some things (like spelling words) she only gives to the kids in class for the very purpose of training them to be ready for older grades when much more responsibility will be on their shoulders. She does many other things like this to train them for upper grades and for more responsibility.

5) DISCOURAGEMENT: All of that context led Phoebe to begin feeling discouraged by the lack of support of 2-3 co-teachers. In the last few weeks she has come to dread her home day emails from these 2-3 co-teachers, although she always answers them professionally and graciously. You have seen copies of many of these email exchanges. She contemplated resigning, but hoped that the culture of the school would prevail over the complaints of a few. But it is clear that you have allowed the culture of the school to go in such a direction that hers now seems to be a fool’s hope. This “hanging onto hope” is the position she was in before the amplified complaints of last week. As it says in Proverbs 18:14, “A man’s spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?”

6) CROSSCHECK: She felt humiliated and confused by a meeting being called to discuss grievances among parents, so that it could be reported to the headmaster. This seems more like gossip than a system of feedback. Apparently no board member was present. I remember it being of great concern to the board that these CrossCheck meetings not devolve into negativity. Are these meetings now not regularly attended by board members? In addition to this, the 6th grade CrossCheck meeting was led by Kay, a parent who is not an advocate for Phoebe or her teaching style. We assume that the two parents who are most frustrated with Phoebe’s teaching style were also there to voice their frustration. We have never heard how many were there, but we know that not every parent was there.

7) INCONSISTENT FEEDBACK: Last year you had endorsed and encouraged Phoebe’s teaching practices, yet this year your opinion was varying widely over several days based on your impression of a few parents’ opinions. This is frustrating because even if the parents unanimously thought “it is too hard,” we as a school could still insist on keeping things as they are based on our vision. Again, I don’t know how our vision is guiding your actions. And we still don’t know all the facts. We have been on an up and down roller coaster of changing opinions and this has made the evaluation process feel very arbitrary and unsafe for Phoebe.

8) PROTOCOL: We believe that complaints should always be taken to the teacher first. If a parent has a grievance they have already discussed with Phoebe, then they should discuss it with only the Headmaster, not with other parents. The CrossCheck should be an opportunity for questions and positive feedback, not an opportunity for parents to vote on what they think the teacher should change. Especially not if it’s led by a parent who comes in disagreeing with the teacher, but hasn’t shared her issues with the teacher.
Weeks ago, a different parent complained to other parents before addressing the complaint with Phoebe. This was very hurtful, and I believe helped shape the tone at the most recent CrossCheck meeting.

9) PARENT’S JUSTIFICATION: Kay emailed Phoebe on Wednesday afternoon to ask if she could meet Thursday. Kay said in the email that she had a “heavy heart.” Phoebe assumed that she had this heavy heart because she did not like Phoebe’s teaching style. However, Phoebe also thought the parent might intend to apologize for entertaining complaints without directing parents to take them straight to Phoebe first.

In the meeting, this parent expressed that she was sorry that Phoebe was hurt, could sympathize that it must have felt bad, but also that she was justified in hosting the CrossCheck session. Phoebe told the parent that it was hurtful to be told on the one hand that the parent felt bad, but on the other hand that the parent was justified in leading the meeting as she had. Phoebe communicated both anger and hurt to the parent. She did not scream or yell. She did tear up and raise her voice a little. She's not British. Phoebe communicated that she does not think it is an apology to say, “I’m sorry, but I had to do it.” We tend to think of an apology as, “I’m sorry, I was wrong.”

This apparently was very upsetting to the parent. Phoebe now feels like she is in trouble with you for not making the parent happy. We feel that your actions are arbitrary and are guided by a personal preference for having no unhappy parents, rather than by a vision-driven leadership that is willing to tolerate some parental unhappiness in the name of upholding our standards. I would ask you to take some time to think about this.

I hope you understand that this seems to us as if a complaining faction has now moved into slander mode. It is very unsettling that you would receive this as a valid concern, and not just a miscommunication. Of course you need to ask questions. However, can you understand how devastating this is in the context of never knowing day-to-day if she will be affirmed for her consistent teaching style, or told to change it for some uncooperative parents?

Thanks for taking the time to consider my concerns. My wife’s reputation is valuable, and should not be ruined so that a child of an angry parent can have an “A” instead of a “B.”

If I have any of the facts incorrect, could you let me know?

I would also once again ask that you consider if there is anything more you could do to equip and advocate for your 6th grade teacher.

My prayers are for truth & grace,
Daniel

“The one who states his case first seems right, until another comes and examines him.” – Proverbs 18:17
Appendix B: Trinity Classical Academy: Head of School Job Description

Required Qualifications
- Bachelor’s degree, Master’s or equivalent work experience preferred
- Agreement with and support of the school’s Statement of Faith
- Experience as an educator and school administrator
- Thorough understanding of curriculum design and the Classical model
- Experience with managing a budget and staff within an educational organization
- Strong commitment to Christian education
- Exceptional communication skills: written, verbal, and presentation skills
- Ability to fill multiple roles in a fluid, entrepreneurial environment

Responsibilities
The Head of School is responsible for all day-to-day activities of the school. As a young school, Trinity Classical Academy will rely on the Head of School to assume a variety of roles. The Head of School’s responsibilities span seven functional areas. These seven areas are listed below along with some of the primary responsibilities for each area. Based on the specific responsibility, the Head of School may be assisted in these areas by Board committees, staff, and volunteers. Other responsibilities may be assigned by the Board of Directors as needed.

1. Marketing and Admissions. The Head of School will make admissions decisions, create and execute a marketing plan, revise admissions materials as needed, track applications, and conduct information meetings for prospective families.

2. Academics: The Head of School will adjust and enforce curriculum and policies as needed, coordinate and conduct teacher training, communicate with parents, facilitate communication between parents and teachers, maintain the booklist, and answer staff questions.

3. Staffing: The Head of School will recruit, interview, and hire faculty and staff, create and/or refine policies, lead faculty/staff meetings, conduct faculty/staff performance evaluations, coordinate training and development opportunities for faculty/staff, and resolve faculty/staff questions and conflicts.

4. Facilities: The Head of School will work with leadership at the host church to manage current facilities needs, forecast future space needs, and prepare and develop expansion options.

5. Identity and Culture: The Head of School will create and foster an identity and culture within the school that will reinforce the founding vision of the school through the creation of traditions, practices, and norms of respect, excellence, rigor, faith, wisdom and community.

6. Finances: The Head of School will create annual budgets, review financial results, and create a development plan.

7. Governance: The Head of School will create certification and accreditation plans and participate in monthly Board meetings.