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Governance in Founder-Led K–12 School Networks: Board Design, Accountability, and the Transition to Institutional Scale

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Abstract: Founder-led K–12 school networks occupy a distinctive governance space characterised by concentrated authority, mission-driven momentum, and structurally fragile accountability architecture. This study examines how board design, succession planning, and accountability mechanisms evolve as founder-led networks grow toward institutional scale. Drawing on cross-sectional data from 120 multi-campus school networks collected through structured surveys, governance document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, all gathered up to December 2020, the study applies an explanatory sequential mixed-methods framework integrating descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, hierarchical multiple regression modelling, and thematic analysis. Three governance stages; founder-led (Stage 1), transitioning (Stage 2), and institutionally scaled (Stage 3) are identified and compared across six dimensions of board capacity. Results reveal that board independence and succession planning are the weakest and most consequential governance dimensions in early-stage networks. The accountability composite score improves nonlinearly and synergistically with both board independence and succession readiness, producing a multiplicative rather than merely additive governance dividend. Findings underscore that governance transition is not merely structural but deeply cultural, requiring deliberate, bundled board development investment. Implications for network leaders, philanthropic funders, and education policymakers are discussed.

Keywords: School network governance; founder succession; board design; K–12 accountability; institutional scale; educational leadership; board independence; policy formalisation.

INTRODUCTION

The Governance Challenge of Founder-Led Growth

Founder-led school networks represent one of the most consequential and underexamined organisational types in contemporary education governance. Born from a single educator's or entrepreneur's vision, these networks translate an individual's pedagogical philosophy into multi-campus structures that frequently outgrow the informal systems through which they were first built (Hougaz, 2019). In their earliest phase, governance arrangements in such networks are characteristically lean: decision-making authority is concentrated in the founder, board membership tends to be composed of personal allies and mission adherents rather than independent overseers, and accountability operates through personal credibility and relational trust rather than documented policy (Bainbridge, 2002). These informal arrangements are not simply deficits, they carry genuine advantages. They allow for rapid strategic pivoting, preserve mission coherence, and reduce the transaction costs of formal deliberation during a period when organisational survival often depends on speed and flexibility (Ulrich & Wiersema, 1989).

Yet as campus count grows and staff numbers expand, the same governance informality that once enabled agility becomes a source of institutional fragility. Regulatory compliance demands increase, stakeholder constituencies diversify, financial complexity multiplies, and leadership succession becomes a foreseeable risk that informal systems are structurally ill-equipped to manage (Davies & Green, 2013). The central governance challenge of founder-led school networks is therefore not simply a matter of administrative scale but of institutional identity: how can a network preserve its founding mission while simultaneously developing the structural safeguards; independent board oversight, formalised policy, robust financial controls, that institutional sustainability demands? This tension between mission fidelity and governance formalisation defines the developmental arc of founder-led networks and constitutes the animating question of the present study (Kempster, 2019; Maretich *et al*., 2016).

Board Design and Its Role in Network Legitimacy

The board of directors or trustees sits at the apex of governance in non-profit and charter school networks, yet its composition, independence, and operational competence vary dramatically across growth stages (Leblanc, 2020). In founder-led organisations, boards frequently function as advisory appendages rather than independent oversight bodies. Founders often retain

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disproportionate influence over board appointments, agenda setting, and strategic direction a configuration that may catalyse early growth but that creates systemic vulnerability as networks expand and the founder's personal authority becomes a bottleneck rather than a lubricant (Ranft & O'Neill, 2001). Research in corporate governance and non-profit management consistently demonstrates that board independence, expertise diversity, and active committee structures are associated with stronger financial stewardship, more robust accountability outcomes, and greater organisational resilience in the face of leadership transition. In K–12 educational contexts, however, these associations have been largely unexplored at the network level, creating a significant and practically important gap between governance theory and educational practice (Arshad *et al*., 2013).

The gap is particularly acute given the growth trajectory of multi-campus school networks over the past two decades. As these networks have scaled, some managing dozens of campuses and thousands of students, their governance architecture has in many cases failed to keep pace with operational complexity (Groenwald, 2018). Boards that were adequate for a three-campus network have found themselves formally unchanged yet functionally overwhelmed when confronted with a twenty-campus organisation managing tens of millions of dollars in public and philanthropic funds. The result is a governance lag: structural arrangements that remain anchored in founding-stage configurations while the organisation has moved, in every operational dimension, well beyond that stage. Understanding how board design evolves or fails to evolve across this scaling journey is essential for both governance practitioners and researchers (Johnson, 2007).

Accountability Mechanisms across the Scaling Journey

Accountability in school networks operates simultaneously across multiple levels and domains. At the academic level, networks are expected to demonstrate consistent instructional quality and measurable student progress across campuses (Ehren & Perryman, 2018). At the financial level, they must maintain sound stewardship of public and philanthropic resources, often under the scrutiny of authorising bodies, state agencies, and major funders. At the operational level, compliance with employment law, procurement standards, and data governance requirements imposes a growing administrative burden. At the stakeholder level, engagement with families, community partners, and civic institutions requires deliberate and sustained relational investment. Founder-led networks frequently excel at academic vision—their founding purpose drives pedagogical innovation and strong school culture but exhibit structural weaknesses in financial, operational, and stakeholder accountability, particularly as organisational complexity outpaces the informal systems through which these functions were originally managed (O'Brien & Gallagher, 2021).

As networks transition toward institutional scale typically marked by the establishment of a professional management layer, formalised human resource and procurement policies, diversified revenue streams, and an independent board majority accountability mechanisms must correspondingly evolve. This transition is neither automatic nor guaranteed (Aoki, 2010). Networks can remain in a prolonged governance adolescence: operationally too large for informal management, yet structurally too underdeveloped for institutional accountability (Newman, 2004). The critical variable is not simply time or size but the deliberateness with which governance formalisation is pursued. Networks that treat governance development as a strategic priority investing in board composition, committee structure, policy documentation, and leadership pipeline development navigate the transition more successfully than those that allow governance to evolve reactively in response to crises or compliance demands (Leblanc, 2020).

The Succession Problem and Its Governance Implications

Succession represents the most acute and most revealing governance risk in founder-led networks. The departure of a founding leader whether planned through retirement, unplanned through illness or resignation, or precipitated by funder or board action exposes the degree to which governance has been personalised rather than institutionalised (Brown, 2020). Networks in which the founder has remained the singular repository of institutional knowledge, strategic relationships, and cultural authority face a governance crisis at the moment of succession that no amount of operational competence in the incoming leader can fully mitigate (Chung & Luo, 2013). The crisis is fundamentally a governance crisis: it reflects the board's failure to have institutionalised the founder's knowledge, to have

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developed internal leadership capacity, and to have established the structural readiness to conduct and oversee a leadership search. Succession planning, in this light, is not merely a human resources function but a core board governance responsibility one that many founder-led boards have systematically deferred until it becomes unavoidable (Korine, 2017).

Despite the frequency and urgency of succession challenges in founder-led educational organisations, empirical research on succession governance in K–12 school networks remains sparse (Korine, 2017). The literature that does exist is largely anecdotal, drawn from single-network case studies or journalistic accounts of high-profile leadership transitions. What is missing is a systematic, multi-network empirical examination of succession planning as a governance variable—one that can illuminate its relationship to board capacity, accountability outcomes, and long-term network sustainability across a diverse organisational sample. This study directly addresses that gap.

Research Rationale, Objectives, and Structure

This study is motivated by a convergence of practical urgency and theoretical underdevelopment. Practically, the expansion of multi-campus school networks has outpaced the governance frameworks available to guide them, and network leaders, funders, and authorising agencies increasingly require evidence-based benchmarks for governance assessment (Schiller, 2022). Theoretically, K–12 network governance sits at the intersection of educational management, non-profit governance, and organisational development, a nexus that has received insufficient integrative scholarly attention (Saidel & Smith, 2015). By examining governance development empirically across three network stages, this study contributes to all three bodies of literature while generating practice-relevant findings of direct utility to the field (Adams *et al*., 2017).

The study pursues three interrelated objectives: first, to characterise the governance architecture of founder-led K–12 school networks across three developmental stages using both quantitative and qualitative evidence; second, to examine the relationships between board design variables; independence, composition, committee structure, and succession planning and accountability outcomes; and third, to identify governance transition pathways and the cultural and structural factors that differentiate networks that successfully achieve institutional scale from those that stagnate. The paper proceeds through a structured methodology, presents quantitative and qualitative findings with integrated discussion, and concludes with implications for practice, policy, and future research. All data collection was completed by December 2020, providing a stable pre-pandemic baseline for governance benchmarking.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design in which quantitative findings from a cross-sectional survey are systematically elaborated upon by qualitative evidence gathered through governance document analysis and semi-structured leadership interviews. The philosophical orientation is pragmatic: research questions are addressed through the most contextually appropriate methods rather than rigid adherence to a single epistemological tradition. This design is particularly suited to governance research, where quantitative variables; board independence ratios, succession plan formalisation scores, committee functionality indices can be meaningfully contextualised only through the qualitative textures of organisational culture, leadership dynamics, and institutional history.

Sample Selection and Network Characterisation

The target population comprised multi-campus K–12 school networks operating under non-profit or charter frameworks, with a minimum of three campuses and at least five years of operational history. A purposive sampling strategy ensured representation across three governance stages: Stage 1 (Founder-Led): fewer than eight campuses, founder still serving in the executive role; Stage 2 (Transitioning): 8–20 campuses, active leadership succession or formal governance restructuring underway; and Stage 3 (Institutionally Scaled): more than 20 campuses, professional management structures and an independent board majority in place. A total of 120 networks were recruited, yielding 40 networks per stage. Network size ranged from 3 to 62 campuses; operational age ranged from 5 to 31 years. All data collection and analysis were completed by December 2020.

Data Collection Instruments and Variables

Three instruments were deployed. First, a 48-item Governance Assessment Survey (GAS) was administered to board chairs and executive directors, operationalising six dimensions: Board Independence (12 items), Succession Planning (8 items), Financial Oversight (7 items), Stakeholder Engagement (6 items), Policy Formalisation (8

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items), and Accountability Mechanisms (7 items), all on a seven-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.77 to 0.89 across subscales. Second, a 24-item document audit checklist assessed governance document quality from publicly available bylaws, strategic plans, and annual reports. Third, semi-structured interviews (N = 36, 12 networks, 4 per stage, M = 52 min) were analysed thematically in NVivo 12 with inter-rater reliability at $\kappa = 0.82$.

Primary independent variables were the Board Independence Score (BIS), Succession Planning Index (SPI), and Board Committee Index (BCI). The primary dependent variable was the Accountability Composite Score (ACS), the weighted mean of financial oversight, stakeholder engagement, policy formalisation, and accountability mechanism subscales. Control variables included network age, total campus count, geographic concentration, and revenue source diversity.

Analytical Procedures

Descriptive statistics were computed for all subscale scores, disaggregated by network stage. One-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc correction tested mean differences across stages on each governance dimension. Bivariate Pearson correlations were calculated between governance dimensions and ACS. A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in three blocks: Block 1 (control variables: network age, campus count, geographic concentration, revenue diversity); Block 2 (main governance predictors: BIS, SPI, BCI); Block 3 (two-way interactions: BIS × SPI, BIS × Network Stage). Regression assumptions were fully satisfied: VIF < 3.2, residuals normally distributed (K-S $p > .05$), Cook's distance < 0.08. Qualitative data were coded inductively (Cycle 1) and deductively using a priori governance constructs (Cycle 2), integrated with quantitative findings via joint display methodology.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents mean governance dimension scores disaggregated by network stage along with ANOVA test statistics and effect sizes. Statistically significant differences were observed across all six governance dimensions and the accountability composite (all $p < .001$), with large effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.45–0.62$) confirming the practical magnitude of inter-stage differences. Succession planning exhibited the steepest inter-stage gradient, with Stage 1 networks averaging 2.40 (SD = 0.92) compared with 5.40 (SD = 0.71) in Stage 3—a 3.0-point increase representing nearly two full standard deviations of gain and the largest raw difference of any dimension. Board independence showed a similarly pronounced trajectory (Stage 1: M = 3.10; Stage 3: M = 5.60; $\eta^2 = 0.56$), confirming that structural board autonomy develops most dramatically over the course of network scaling. Stakeholder engagement showed the smallest inter-stage gradient (Stage 1: M = 3.80; Stage 3: M = 5.20; $\eta^2 = 0.45$), suggesting that founder-led networks invest in external relationships earlier than in structural governance infrastructure. The accountability composite score improved from 3.35 in Stage 1 to 5.52 in Stage 3, producing the largest F-statistic in the analysis ($F = 96.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.62$).

Table 1: Mean Governance Dimension Scores by Network Stage (N = 120)

Governance Dimension	Stage 1 Founder-Led (n = 40)	Stage 2 Transitioning (n = 40)	Stage 3 Institutional (n = 40)	F	p	η^2
Board Independence	3.10 (0.81)	4.20 (0.76)	5.60 (0.68)	74.32	< .001	0.56
Succession Planning	2.40 (0.92)	3.70 (0.84)	5.40 (0.71)	91.48	< .001	0.61
Financial Oversight	3.50 (0.78)	4.50 (0.69)	5.80 (0.62)	82.15	< .001	0.58
Stakeholder Engagement	3.80 (0.74)	4.10 (0.72)	5.20 (0.66)	48.27	< .001	0.45
Policy Formalisation	2.90 (0.88)	4.30 (0.79)	5.70 (0.65)	89.63	< .001	0.60
Accountability Mechanisms	3.20 (0.83)	4.40 (0.74)	5.50 (0.67)	78.91	< .001	0.57
Accountability Composite	3.35 (0.72)	4.32 (0.68)	5.52 (0.60)	96.74	< .001	0.62

Note: *Values are M (SD). All Tukey post-hoc comparisons between stages significant at p < .001. F = ANOVA F-statistic; η^2 = partial eta squared.*

Figure 1 translates these mean scores into a radar visualisation, providing an intuitive polygon portrait of each governance stage. The Stage 1 polygon is compressed and notably irregular, with the most pronounced deficits appearing at the succession planning and policy formalisation

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vertices precisely the dimensions that require sustained, deliberate investment rather than organic relational development. The Stage 2 polygon expands outward across all dimensions but retains a slight asymmetry, with stakeholder engagement and financial oversight somewhat ahead of board independence and succession planning, suggesting that relational and transactional governance functions develop earlier than structural and fiduciary ones. The Stage 3 polygon approaches a large, balanced hexagon with high scores across all six vertices, indicating that institutionally scaled networks achieve not merely elevated but balanced governance capacity. The visual contrast between Stage 1 and Stage 3 is striking and reinforces the quantitative message: the governance journey of a founder-led network is one of substantial, multi-dimensional development.

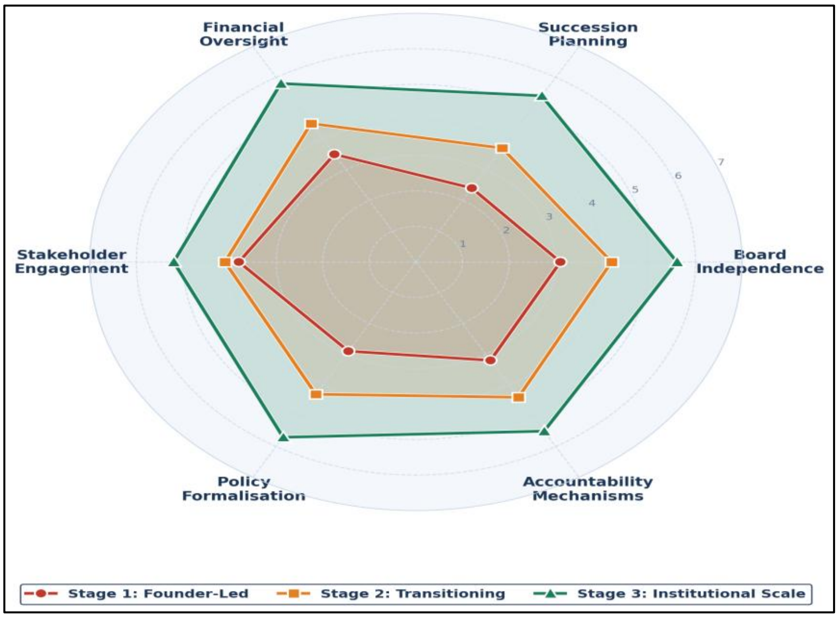

Figure 1: Governance Capacity Radar Chart by Network Stage. Mean scores across six governance dimensions (Likert scale 1–7) for Stage 1 (Founder-Led), Stage 2 (Transitioning), and Stage 3 (Institutionally Scaled) networks (N = 120).

Table 2 presents bivariate Pearson correlations among governance variables and the results of the hierarchical multiple regression predicting ACS. At the bivariate level, BIS was most strongly correlated with ACS ($r = .71$, $p < .001$), followed by SPI ($r = .65$, $p < .001$) and BCI ($r = .58$, $p < .001$). Notably, BIS and SPI were also highly intercorrelated ($r = .68$, $p < .001$), signalling that these dimensions tend to develop in tandem rather than independently. Network age and campus count each showed moderate positive correlations with ACS (.31 and .44 respectively), confirming that time and organisational size contribute independently to governance development beyond stage classification alone.

In the hierarchical regression, Block 1 control variables explained 18% of variance in ACS ($R^2 = .18$, $F = 6.42$, $p < .001$). The addition of governance predictors in Block 2 produced a dramatic increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .44$, $p < .001$; total $R^2 = .62$), confirming that governance architecture variables capture substantial accountability variance beyond organisational demographics. Board independence emerged as the single strongest individual predictor ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$), followed by succession planning ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$) and the board committee index ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = .003$). The interaction terms entered in Block 3 contributed an additional 9% of explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .09$, $p < .001$; total $R^2 = .71$). The BIS × SPI interaction was significant ($B = 0.11$, $\beta = 0.19$, $p = .007$), indicating that the accountability returns to board independence are amplified when succession planning capacity is simultaneously strong—a multiplicative rather than additive governance effect. The BIS × Stage interaction was also significant ($B = 0.09$, $\beta = 0.15$, $p = .018$), suggesting that the relationship between board independence and accountability outcomes varies in strength across developmental stages.

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Table 2: Pearson Correlations and Hierarchical Regression Predicting Accountability Composite Score (N = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	B	β	p
1. Board Independence (BIS)	—					0.38	0.41	< .001
2. Succession Planning (SPI)	.68**	—				0.29	0.34	< .001
3. Board Committee Index (BCI)	.54**	.59**	—			0.18	0.22	.003
4. Network Age (years)	.31*	.28*	.22*	—		0.04	0.11	.048
5. Campus Count	.44**	.41**	.38**	.52**	—	0.06	0.14	.021
Interaction: BIS × SPI						0.11	0.19	.007
Interaction: BIS × Stage						0.09	0.15	.018
Model Summary	Block 1: $R^2 = .18$	Block 2: $R^2 = .62$	$\Delta R^2 = .44$**	Block 3: $R^2 = .71$	$\Delta R^2 = .09$**	Full model $F(9,110) = 29.74$	$p < .001$	

Note: **p < .05; **p < .001. B = unstandardised regression coefficient; β = standardised coefficient. Block 1 includes control variables (geographic concentration, revenue diversity, network age, campus count).*

Figure 2 visualises the synergistic relationship between board independence and succession planning in producing accountability outcomes through a three-dimensional surface plot. The surface rises steeply in the upper-right quadrant where both BIS and SPI are high, confirming the multiplicative interaction identified in the regression model. In the lower-left quadrant where both dimensions are weak, characteristic of Stage 1 networks, the surface is flat and low, indicating that weak board independence and weak succession planning together produce accountability outcomes substantially below what either predictor individually might suggest. The colour gradient from deep purple (low accountability) through magenta to bright yellow (high accountability) provides an intuitive visual encoding of the governance dividend available to networks that develop both dimensions simultaneously. The surface further reveals that networks with high BIS but low SPI (or vice versa) achieve only moderate accountability outcomes, reinforcing the bundled investment logic discussed in the Discussion section.

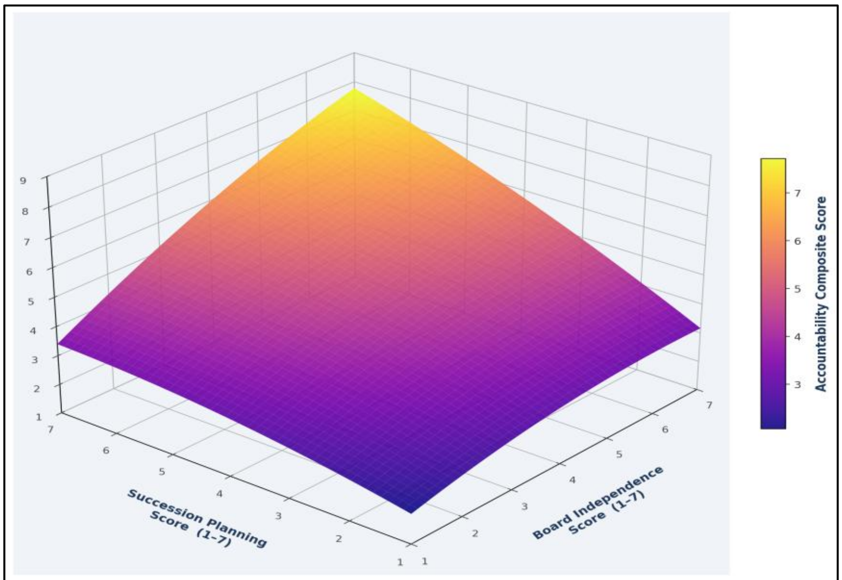

Figure 2: Three-Dimensional Surface Plot: Board Independence Score × Succession Planning Score as joint predictors of the Accountability Composite Score. Surface modelled from Block 3 regression coefficients. Colour gradient from purple (low) to yellow (high) encodes accountability composite intensity.

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Table 3 integrates governance document audit results with the dominant qualitative themes emerging from the 36 interview transcripts. The document audit reveals a clear and dramatic progression in formal governance adoption across stages. Fewer than one-fifth of Stage 1 networks (18%) possessed an independent board majority, and only 12% had a documented succession protocol—the lowest adoption rates of any indicator across all stages. By Stage 3, 93% and 88% of networks had adopted these features respectively, demonstrating near-universal uptake at institutional scale. Board self-evaluation processes showed the greatest raw inter-stage difference: only 8% of Stage 1 networks reported this practice, compared with 86% of Stage 3 networks. Written conflict-of-interest policies showed the highest Stage 1 adoption rate (35%), suggesting that this instrument—often mandated by funders or authorising bodies—is adopted earlier under external pressure than internally motivated governance instruments.

The qualitative themes illuminate the cultural dynamics underlying these structural patterns. Across all four Stage 1 interview sites, the dominant theme was the perception of the founder as an irreplaceable institution rather than a steward of a replaceable role. Board members described their relationship with the founder in terms of personal trust and shared mission rather than fiduciary duty and structural accountability, a framing that systematically undermined the perceived legitimacy and urgency of formal governance investment. Stage 2 networks reported progress in structural adoption but frequent performativity: governance instruments existed on paper but were rarely activated in practice. One board chair described the conflict-of-interest policy as "more of a cultural artefact than a working document," a phrase that captured the Stage 2 condition precisely. Stage 3 networks, in contrast, described governance formalisation as the codification of what the founder had always known intuitively, a process of translating personal authority into institutional authority without sacrificing mission integrity.

Table 3: Governance Transition Indicators: Document Audit Results and Dominant Qualitative Themes by Stage (N = 120)

Governance Indicator	Stage 1 % Present	Stage 2 % Present	Stage 3 % Present	Dominant Qualitative Theme (Stage 1)
Independent board majority (> 50%)	18%	58%	93%	Authority concentrated in founder persona; independence conflated with disloyalty
Documented succession protocol	12%	47%	88%	Founder perceived as institutionally irreplaceable; succession seen as premature
Functional audit committee	22%	63%	97%	Financial oversight delegated informally to trusted individuals, not structures
Written conflict-of-interest policy	35%	72%	98%	Relational trust treated as adequate substitute for formal policy documentation
Board self-evaluation process	8%	41%	86%	Board accountability treated as optional or implicit rather than structural
Multi-year strategic plan (board-led)	27%	64%	95%	Strategic vision held personally by founder, not embedded institutionally
Diversified board expertise	20%	55%	91%	Homophily dominates early board recruitment; mission alignment prioritised over skill diversity

Note: Percentages reflect proportion of networks within each stage with the governance indicator present in audited documents. Qualitative themes derived from N = 36 interview transcripts, second-cycle deductive coding; κ = 0.82.

DISCUSSION

Governance Maturation as a Nonlinear Developmental Process

The results of this study challenge any linear or purely structural conception of governance development in K–12 school networks. While the quantitative data confirm that governance capacity improves significantly across developmental stages, the rate of improvement is uneven across dimensions, and the qualitative findings reveal that structural change is necessary but insufficient (Levy & Fukuyama, 2010). Networks in Stage 2 that had adopted formal governance instruments written conflict-of-interest policies, functional audit committees frequently reported in interviews that these instruments were performative rather

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than functional, existing in documents that board members rarely consulted and that carried no behavioural weight in actual governance practice (Dafinone, 2015). This suggests that governance maturation involves not only the adoption of formal structures but the cultural internalisation of accountability norms, a process that resists acceleration through policy mandate alone (Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden, 2004). The nonlinear surface revealed in Figure 2 reinforces this interpretation: accountability gains are steepest when governance structures are adopted in combination, not incrementally in isolation (Papadopoulos, 2014).

The Primacy of Board Independence in Accountability Outcomes

Board independence emerged as the single strongest predictor of accountability outcomes in this study, consistent with agency theory's prediction that independent oversight reduces information asymmetries and self-dealing risks associated with concentrated leadership authority (Bue, 2006). In founder-led networks, the concept of independence is complicated by the founder's ongoing operational role. Several Stage 1 interview participants described their board members as deeply committed to the mission and therefore independent in spirit, if not in structural terms. This conflation of mission alignment with governance independence represents a significant conceptual risk: boards that are ideologically homogeneous with the founder may fail to surface critical questions about succession readiness, financial sustainability, or programmatic scaling. Philanthropic funders and authorising agencies would do well to assess board independence not merely by director categorisation but by evidence of substantive dissent, structured questioning, and autonomous committee action (Reiser, 2007).

Succession Planning As a Governance Multiplier

Perhaps the most practically significant finding of this study is the multiplicative interaction between board independence and succession planning in predicting accountability outcomes. Networks that invest in board composition reform without concurrent investment in succession planning infrastructure achieve only partial governance gains (Schepker *et al*., 2018). Conversely, succession planning in the absence of an independent board risks producing a carefully documented plan that no truly independent body is equipped to implement or oversee (Rothwell, 2015). This bundled investment logic has direct implications for governance reform sequencing: board independence and succession planning should be developed concurrently rather than sequentially. The qualitative theme of founders being perceived as institutionally irreplaceable underscores the urgency of this finding; when this perception is shared by the board itself, succession planning becomes structurally impossible regardless of its formal existence on pape (Kazi, 2008)r.

The Cultural Dimensions of Governance Transition

The qualitative findings introduce a dimension absent from structural governance frameworks: the role of organisational culture in either enabling or obstructing governance formalisation. In founder-led networks, relational trust the founder's personal credibility, philanthropic relationships, and moral authority among staff functions as an informal accountability mechanism that may mask structural deficits during periods of strong leadership (Block & Miller-Stevens, 2021). This shadow governance is stable only as long as the founder remains effective and present. Stage 3 networks described governance formalisation as a process of codifying what the founder had always known intuitively, suggesting that successful transitions involve translating personal authority into institutional authority without losing the animating mission, a cultural as much as a structural achievement.

Stakeholder Engagement as an Early Governance Signal

Among the six governance dimensions, stakeholder engagement showed the smallest inter-stage gradient, with Stage 1 networks already averaging 3.80 substantially higher than their scores on board independence (3.10) or succession planning (2.40). This pattern suggests that founder-led networks invest early in external relationships with families, community partners, and funders, even when internal governance structures remain underdeveloped. Stakeholder engagement in early-stage networks may function as a resource mobilisation strategy, generating the social capital and philanthropic support needed for campus growth. Over time, the relative weight of stakeholder engagement stabilises as structural dimensions accelerate to close the governance gap. This trajectory implies that early-stage networks are not ungoverned but differently governed: their accountability architecture is externally oriented and relationally grounded, with structural

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formalisation emerging later as a scaling imperative.

Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings carry actionable implications across the K–12 governance ecosystem. For network leaders and boards, the study provides an evidence-based staging framework for diagnostic use and investment prioritisation, with the bundled intervention logic pursuing board independence and succession planning concurrently offering a more strategically coherent approach than piecemeal reform (Zielezinski, 2017). For authorising agencies, the finding that formal governance documents are often performative in Stage 2 argues for compliance frameworks that assess governance functionality rather than document existence alone (King, 2017). For philanthropic funders, the study provides grounds for conditioning multi-year programme grants on governance development milestones, particularly for Stage 1 networks approaching growth inflection points. For leadership preparation programmes, the findings call for expanded curriculum on governance literacy equipping future network leaders to design accountability structures that can outlast their own tenure (McKenna & Walpole, 2013).

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

This study carries several limitations that constrain the generalisability and interpretive scope of its findings. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference: while regression models identify significant governance predictors of accountability outcomes, reverse causality whereby stronger accountability cultures enable more effective board recruitment cannot be ruled out. The Governance Assessment Survey relied on self-report data from board chairs and executive directors, introducing social desirability bias particularly pronounced in Stage 1 networks where founders may overestimate board independence or succession readiness (Pitcher *et al.*, 2000). Purposive sampling limits statistical representativeness; findings should be treated as indicative rather than definitive for the broader population of K–12 school networks. The December 2020 data collection boundary, while providing a stable pre-pandemic baseline, means that pandemic-era governance reconfigurations are not captured. Finally, the study did not examine student academic outcomes as a downstream variable, leaving unresolved the critical question of whether governance stage translates into measurable differences in educational quality.

Future research should address these limitations through several methodological extensions. Longitudinal panel designs tracking the same networks over five to ten years would enable causal modelling of governance-to-accountability pathways and allow observation of how specific governance interventions alter accountability trajectories in real time. Studies incorporating student outcome data would clarify whether governance quality has a meaningful downstream effect on instructional quality and student achievement, a question of direct policy relevance (Heck, 2000). Research should examine governance dynamics in for-profit and faith-based networks, which may carry structurally distinct accountability cultures. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs leveraging regulatory changes that mandate governance reform would provide stronger causal evidence. Cross-national comparative research would illuminate whether the governance transition dynamics documented here are universal to founder-led educational organisations or shaped by specific regulatory and cultural conditions (Busenbark *et al.*, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first systematic, empirically grounded characterisation of governance development across three stages of founder-led K–12 school network growth, integrating quantitative governance scoring, document audit evidence, and leadership interview data gathered through December 2020 from 120 multi-campus networks. The findings confirm that board independence and succession planning are among the strongest and most interactively powerful determinants of accountability capacity: their governance dividend is multiplicative rather than additive, such that networks investing in both dimensions simultaneously achieve accountability outcomes substantially superior to those investing in either alone. The near-universally low governance scores of Stage 1 networks particularly onboard independence (M = 3.10) and succession planning (M = 2.40) underscore the structural vulnerability endemic to the founder-led phase, while qualitative evidence reveals that cultural factors, the perception of the founder as an irreplaceable institution, the substitution of relational trust for formal policy are as consequential as structural deficits in sustaining governance fragility. Stage 2 networks demonstrate that formal governance adoption is

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achievable but frequently performative, reinforcing that governance reform is a cultural as much as an architectural endeavour. Institutionally scaled Stage 3 networks exhibit balanced, high-capacity governance profiles where structural independence and succession preparedness are nearly universal and mutually reinforcing. For network leaders, funders, and policymakers, the message of this study is clear and urgent: governance investment in founder-led networks must be deliberate, bundled, and sustained prioritising board independence and succession infrastructure concurrently rather than sequentially if the promise of these organisations is to outlast the tenure of their founders and endure as accountable, mission-driven institutions in service of generations of students.

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