



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

439 University Avenue, 18th Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 1Y8
Tel: (416) 340-2540
Fax: (416) 340-7571
webmaster@opsba.org
www.opsba.org

Michael Barrett
President

Gail Anderson
Executive Director

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OPSBA Submission to Toronto DSB (TDSB) Governance Advisory Panel

The TDSB Governance Advisory Panel was assembled in response to the governance concerns raised in Margaret Wilson's report and a subsequent recommendation to review the governance structure at the TDSB. While this may be the panel's mandate, this consultation is of great interest across the entire province as the findings and recommendations may have an impact on trustees and school boards.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) has a strong history of advocacy for student achievement and well-being and takes pride in the contributions that have been made to shape the education policy in Ontario. The *Education Act*, through 2009 amendments, clarified that school boards are responsible for not only student achievement but also student well-being.

As an Association, we annually develop and collectively approve the priorities for our advocacy work. In addition to those that support student achievement and well-being, we also ensure that a significant amount of consideration is devoted to trustees and building their leadership capacity.

We have, and will continue to promote and support the role of the locally democratically elected trustee -- the only publicly elected official with the responsibility for the education of Ontario's children. Within OPSBA, there are more than 300 such individuals. In addition, we have many boards that also appoint First Nations trustees who represent the interests of those students and advocate for First Nation, Métis and Inuit education for all students. Further to this, we support our student trustees who are elected by their peers to bring the student's voice to the table.

Governance

OPSBA has provided a number of professional development resources for our trustees including *Good Governance: A Guide for Trustees, School Boards, Directors of Education and Communities*. In this reference book an entire chapter is devoted to Board Governance, which states,

"Governance provides a framework and a process for the allocation of decision-making powers. Good governance is the exercise of these powers through ethical leadership. School boards are the embodiment of local governance in action. Through their decisions and policies they demonstrate to their communities effective stewardship of the board's resources in the interests of students and the community as a whole.

Ultimately, governance is the exercise of authority, direction, and accountability to serve the higher moral purpose of public education. A governance structure defines the roles, relationships, and behavioural parameters for the board and its staff.

In education, the true test of any board's governance structure is its effectiveness in promoting and sustaining a board's achievement standards, accomplishing goals designed to bring positive results to communities, and demonstrating accountability. Effective board governance relies on a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Trustees, as individuals do not have authority to make decisions or take action on behalf of the board. They are members of the board and it is the board as a whole that exercises authority and makes decisions and does so in the interests of all students of the board. Trustees are required to uphold the implementation of any board resolution after it is passed by the board. As trustees communicate with their constituents and hear their concerns, they must at the same time convey that changes to existing board policy require consideration by the board as a whole. Trustees facilitate the concerns of their constituents by advising them as to which board staff can answer their questions or deal directly with their concerns. In some cases, trustees may bring problems that affect the entire jurisdiction to the board for resolution."

As captured above, good governance can only be successful if roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. We believe this extends beyond the board of trustees and their chair and must include the director of education and senior team members.

The effectiveness of any board of trustees' governance model will be influenced by a wide variety of factors including economic, political, public policy and social factors. Effective governance models have built-in mechanisms to evaluate and adapt the model on an ongoing basis. Governance should be fluid, flexible and adaptive to the varying pressures that school boards experience. Governance should not be punitive, restrictive or controlling.

Most Boards have their own governance practices and specific policies and procedures to enhance good governance that allow them the flexibility to work in their own unique environment. Many have a standing committee and/or ad-hoc committee structure that works well because it allows for issues and reports to come to Board after being fully researched and prepared for final decisions. They have codes of conduct/ethics and they have procedures and policies in place to support their decision making process (i.e. a policy that clarifies the intent and governing principles for Board policies). Some boards may have a governance manual and some have a separate governance committee.

It must also be noted that a board is an organic, interactive entity and each time that dynamic changes through the election of even one new trustee, a new board is formed, bringing with it a new dynamic that influences the trustee team.

Why are elected trustees important?

The *Education Act* lists the roles and requirements for trustees as well their collective boards. These responsibilities include:

- operating schools according to provincial legislation;
- having a vision statement that reflects the board's philosophy and local needs and priorities;
- the development of a multi-year strategic plan;
- setting the board's budget within the provincial grants and accompanying regulations;
- making provision for resources and for the hiring of teachers, other staff;
- accountability to the public for implementing curriculum according to ministry curriculum policy;
- developing and delivering other programs that reflect provincial policies and local priorities;
- providing for the hiring of teachers and other staff required in their schools;
- providing for the maintenance of school buildings and property with regard to student safety and in accordance with provincial legislation;

- monitoring the policies of the schools and the achievement of students and, through the director of education, holding the entire system accountable for meeting provincial and board standards;
- hiring and performance appraisal of the director of education

This is not an exhaustive list. But of paramount importance, trustees are the crucial link between the school board and their local community. Trustees are of the community; they live in their communities, know their community and advocate for their community.

There is local control that ensures a centralized bureaucracy does not lose sight of the ability to have our education system reflect our varied and diverse communities. Trustees serve as advocates, as ombudsmen, as originators of ideas, as guideposts and hold both the government and staff accountable. Advocacy for a mental health strategy, a coordinated ministry approach to education and services, for equity within aboriginal education and funding, fairness in special education funding, inclusiveness and technology in the classroom are a few of the ways that trustees make a difference.

And trustees do not do this for the money. The honorarium has been frozen since 2006. Trustees contribute long hours attending committee and board meetings, reading and reviewing board/ministry correspondence and interacting with their constituents in a variety of ways (email, face to face, telephone and public meetings).

Trustees are interpreters and messengers for government initiatives. They provide and allow for local perspectives. They help families navigate complex rules to get children the support they need from their schools. They initiate innovative and effective programs that improve student achievement and well-being.

Elected trustees are devoted to public education and want to make changes to improve the system for all children. We know this because we recently conducted our first ever exit survey and asked those trustees who didn't seek re-election about why they became a public school board trustee. Here is a sample of their responses:

- *To make a difference. To contribute.*
- *To influence the future.*
- *In order to try to improve public consultation, increase focus on marginalized kids especially those in poverty, to serve parents uncertain how to navigate.*
- *It has been important for me to improve educational opportunities for all students (regardless of any and all differences). Public Education is the highest call to service in our society.*
- *I felt I could add to the discussion and ensure public input to important decisions.*
- *Mainly because trustees are the only elected official who represent the interests of children.*
- *As a social worker I was concerned about the under-achievement of Aboriginal students and children-in-care.*
- *After being an educator for 32 years and having had six years' experience as a municipal councillor I felt that I wanted to further contribute to education as a policy maker.*
- *To give back to my community, to make a positive contribution to public education, and to offer small business perspectives to educating our youth and developing employable students*
- *To make a difference in the local policies and governance.*
- *Because I believe a good public education system is absolutely vital to a well-functioning democracy. I became a trustee because I wanted the school board to listen to community representatives. I had children in the system and cared about their education. I cared about disadvantaged kids who often have no advocate.*
- *To improve education in schools and help students. I care about our youth.*
- *I want to see that we are providing the best we can for all the students of the province.*

- *To help effect change and influence policy decisions at the board level and advocate for parent and student voice.*
- *I wanted to make sure the voice of my community was heard in all board discussions. I grew up in my community and I wanted to make sure the parents and students were well represented.*

Municipal Elections 2014

It is worthwhile noting that last year's municipal election was an important event for trustees and school boards. With financial support from the Ministry of Education, we, along with our partner school board associations in the province developed a suite of bilingual election resources to promote the role of school board trustee and encourage voter participation in the 2014 school board elections. These included the above mentioned Good Governance guide, a pre-election candidate information guide, a guide to hosting an all-candidates meeting, Public Service Announcement videos, promotional materials and a dedicated School Board Election Website. The government saw this as an important initiative as did we. We agree that more work needs to be done to raise the profile of the locally elected trustee.

Following the election, there was a joint orientation/professional development (PD) session held for all trustees. Mandatory training would be highly valuable but could prove difficult to enforce. We at OPSBA strongly encourage all trustees to attend our PD events and also promote the 14 modules that make up our Trustee Professional Development Program - these are online learning opportunities that support them in their governance role. The PD opportunities continue throughout the trustee's term and evolve to meet the needs expressed by our members.

Strong Leadership

Effective boards are composed of people with individual and collective competencies that complement each other. Healthy boards have a high level of trust and honesty, clarity around roles and determination to set aside members' personal interests to serve the interests of students and the district as a whole. A school trustee is a member of a team – the board of trustees. Only the board of trustees has the authority to make decisions or to take action. A chair is chosen by the board of trustees as someone they are proud to have as a leader who represents them. Although the chair assumes a leadership role, it is important that he or she adheres to the board's directions and not act unilaterally. It is the role of the director of education to display excellence as an educational leader, to be politically sophisticated, to be aware of and active in legislative developments, to have an extensive knowledge of relevant provincial laws, to be an exemplary educator, and to personify effective communication.

The elected board's most influential governance relationship is the relationship they have with the director of education. A trusting, respectful and cooperative relationship between the board of trustees and the director of education and a mutual understanding of their distinct roles lead to effective policy implementation.

It has been also been recognized that directors of education need professional development in their leadership role as well. Directors need support in understanding the governance model, e.g. it is their responsibility to act on the direction and decisions made by the collective Board of Trustees rather than on the direction of one trustee, including the Chair.

In our 2009 submission to the Governance Review Committee, we recommended Professional Development for directors should include:

- *Components of effective meetings*
- *Building board agendas (i.e. consent agendas)*
- *Reporting format to boards*
- *Managing financial accountability reporting*
- *Effective team building*

- *Strategic planning skills*
- *Parliamentary procedures*
- *Facilitation Role training*
- *Strategic management courses (either before becoming a director or after)*

There also continues to be discussion about the current qualifications needed to become a director of education. Given the complexities in school board management, we suggest there be future discussions about adding business knowledge or courses taken to complement this expertise.

Current Consultation Process

With regards to the work of this panel and the current public consultations, the feedback we have received raises concerns for us as to how the sessions are being presented and conducted. A majority of the meetings are not located in or near schools where parents live and can easily attend. The questions and conversations are presented in a negative way instead of an open dialogue. We would be very interested in the results of the public sessions and the findings sent online.

The Future

We are hopeful that through your consultation the importance of the locally elected school board trustee will become evident. We would submit that if trustees were “appointed” they may have no established connection to the school communities or contact with schools and parents. School councils play an important role but they are not elected by the larger community. It is the elected trustee who is passionate about reaching out to all of their communities, about equity for all those who contribute inside and outside of the classroom, about ensuring the voices and needs of our children are being heard; and about reform, visioning and results.

Through the school boards that they elect, parents and other taxpayers can participate meaningfully in their community schools, contribute to school values, priorities and needs and help shape the future of the province which is embodied in the students who are in our schools today.

Trustees and school boards are doing amazing and wonderful things all across the province. We need to make sure we are not losing sight of accomplishments that are making a huge difference to the success and life chances of our students. To do this, good governance and strong leadership are essential.

Sincerely,



Michael Barrett,
President of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario. Together our members serve the educational needs of almost 70% of Ontario's elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA believes that the role of public education is to provide universally accessible education opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds, social or economic status, individual exceptionality, or religious affiliation.