



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

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February 11, 2008

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne
Minister of Education
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario
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Dear Minister,

Ontario's public school boards are unanimous in their support of the valid and authentic role for student trustees. We have consistently expressed our support for these young community leaders over the years, in various reports and communications to the Ministry. There remain, however, three key issues which need to be resolved regarding student trustees.

The first of these unresolved issues relates to the area of student trustee safety and supervision when attending professional development sessions designed to improve their performance as members of the school board. As you will be aware, the province's student trustees have organized themselves through an association known as Ontario Student Trustees' Association – l'Association des élèves conseillers and conseilleres de l'Ontario. (OSTA/AECO) OSTA/AECO offers various meeting opportunities each year. In 2005, OPSBA wrote to former Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy outlining concerns about appropriate supervision for student trustees attending OSTA/AECO events. Our member boards continue to be concerned about this issue, with several district school boards choosing to send student trustees only to OPSBA events as they can be accompanied by an adult trustee.

Our 2005 letter asked the Ministry to develop guidelines and provide support for appropriate supervision of student trustees when they attend professional development activities and official board-related events. We ask that the Ministry look again at this important issue and help to ensure a standard of care to allow our dynamic student trustees to gather together with the safeguards afforded by having adults on hand.

The next two issues relate to the inclusion of student trustees in *in camera* meetings. We wish to be clear: OPSBA is not raising concerns about student ability or insightfulness. OPSBA fully recognizes that these young leaders have the ability to appreciate the importance of the issues under consideration. OPSBA raises this issue out of concern about undue pressure on a student, and with respect to the legislated parameters laid out in the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*.

District school boards are entering a very intense period when all teacher contracts are up for renewal. Detailed discussions on contract negotiations and collective bargaining will be occurring in *in camera* meetings. Student trustees are peer leaders, but they are first and foremost students. The relationship between students and teachers can be perceived as a “power relationship”, and as such, student trustees may be exposed to undue pressure once bargaining is in full swing. OPSBA is concerned that student trustees may be placed in very difficult positions. While it is uncommon, experience has shown that labour relations challenges can trickle down into the classroom. Every school has a federation representative. We wish to ensure that our student trustees are not exposed to pressure in their schools on this important issue.

In addition, OPSBA wishes to reiterate previously-raised concerns about student trustees and conflict of interest. The Ministry’s guidelines that were circulated to district school boards identified a mechanism to assist a student trustee to identify a conflict of interest. However, the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act* is only applicable to “members of the board”. Student trustees are not officially members of the board [*Education Act* Section 55(2)]. As such, they cannot be bound by the legislated parameters in place for their elected colleagues. Further, should a student trustee neglect to declare a conflict (either unintentionally or deliberately) there is no legislated mechanism to request that student trustee leave the meeting. They have a legislated right to attend, and only a “guideline” in place to declare a conflict.

This situation allows student trustees the same access to information as their elected board colleagues, without comparable legislative restrictions for situations where conflicts of interest exist. OPSBA is very concerned about the potential ramifications of this situation. Clearly, we do not expect nor do we believe that student trustees are going to deliberately disregard conflict of interest boundaries set in place by their district school boards. Our concern is not related to age. Our concern is related to the fact that the unique status of student trustees places them outside of the legislated boundaries of the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*. If student trustees are to be allowed access to *in camera* information and discussions, they should be bound by the same legislated conflict of interest parameters as elected school board members.

If you require further information on these matters, we would be happy to have a more thorough discussion with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "M. Colleen Schenk".

Colleen Schenk
President

Copy: OSTA-AECO
Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association