

SCHOOL BOARDS: Emerging Governance Challenges

IN THIS ARTICLE WE WANT TO LOOK at the growing pressures on school boards, to actively acknowledge their shifting governance functions, and to explore the implications of these changes for best practices.

The governance role of school boards is not new. Local school boards have governed education in Canada since the 19th century. However, significant forces are impacting on school boards and how they enact their roles and responsibilities. For example, across the country, decision-making has shifted away from local school boards to the provincial government. The trend toward centralized power is evidenced primarily, but not exclusively, by changes in education funding. Over the past several decades, school boards have lost the authority to tax locally; currently, Manitoba school boards are the only boards in Canada that have retained the authority to generate revenue through local taxation. At the same time, provinces have assumed more control over curriculum, academic standards, labour negotiations, and programming.

The past few decades have also seen a significant decrease in the number of school boards as provinces have undertaken board amalgamations in the name of efficiency and cost-reduction. New Brunswick actually abolished local school boards in 1996, replacing them with a three-tiered parent advisory structure; locally elected boards were reintroduced in 2001. Ontario halved the number of its school boards in 1997, and Quebec did the same in 1998. British Columbia, Alberta, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland similarly reduced their numbers of local school boards. As Chalker and Haynes note, this national trend toward downsizing, which began in the early 1990s, resulted in school trustees being further removed from local community issues.¹

The Governance Review Committee's April 2009 report to Ontario's Minister of Education noted major changes affecting school board governance. Although it referred specifically to the situation in Ontario, boards across the country are similarly affected by the changes cited in the Committee's report: changes to education funding; amalgamations and the creation of larger boards; demographic shifts and declining enrolments in some boards; increased societal expectations and demands on schools; increased parental and student involvement; and a marked increase in provincial direction and intervention.² In the wake of such significant changes, the roles and responsibilities of school boards, trustees, administration, and the government have necessarily changed as well.

School boards, not surprisingly, have voiced concerns that there is no longer a clear or shared understanding of their roles or those of individual trustees. And because of this role confusion and lack of clarity, some boards struggle to govern effectively and in ways that foster confidence. A scan of newspapers in every province will likely offer stories of local school boards governing themselves in ways that reflect very poorly on them – stories of misconduct by individual trustees and unprofessional conduct at board meetings; dysfunctional relationships between the elected board and the administration; poor levels of student achievement; and ineffective stewardship. However, as Paul Hill argues, school boards are expected to be, at the same time, interest representatives, trustees for children, and delegates of the state. These are, in fact, conflicting missions which, when combined, expect boards to "serve different masters and accomplish different objectives."³

Some provinces have undertaken provincial reviews of school board gover-

nance in an effort to offer some clarity on the roles and responsibilities of boards and to strengthen board governance. Ontario introduced legislation in May 2009 to clarify the roles and powers of trustees, boards, and directors of education – changes that stemmed directly from its governance review. Nova Scotia similarly undertook a provincial governance review in 2008 for the purpose of strengthening and clarifying the authority of boards and the Minister, specifically relating to addressing the conduct of board members. However, boards need not rely solely on the province to strengthen local governance; they can undertake reviews of their own governance practices and structures to improve their efficiency and remain focussed on their ultimate goal: student achievement.

Although few studies have focused on the link between effective board governance and high levels of student achievement, this is, in fact, the primary responsibility of school boards. The boards that function effectively and efficiently are those that are able to focus on a clear strategic

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EN BREF Des forces considérables s'exercent sur les conseils scolaires et la façon dont ils remplissent leurs rôles et responsabilités. On s'attend à ce qu'ils représentent des intérêts, qu'ils soient les protecteurs des enfants et les délégués de l'État. Il s'agit, en fait, d'exigences contradictoires. Les conseils scolaires efficaces se concentrent sur un plan stratégique clair pour rehausser la réussite des élèves. D'après la recherche, l'environnement externe constitue la plus importante source d'imprévus à considérer lorsque sont pesés différents modèles de gouvernance. Un conseil scolaire évoluant dans un contexte diversifié, incertain ou très politiquement chargé doit probablement fonctionner différemment d'un autre qui se trouve dans un milieu plus stable. La recherche portant sur la gouvernance d'organismes sans but lucratif démontre que les conseils les plus efficaces reflètent leur modèle de gouvernance, font des choix conscients sur la façon dont ils travailleront pour remplir leurs fonctions de base et décident consciemment de la manière dont ils collaboreront avec les dirigeants et leurs autres parties prenantes.

plan aimed at improving student achievement. One American study, for example, found that board members in lower performing districts seemed to focus more on personal issues than those in the better performing districts, and that lower performing districts had multiple, apparently separate, long-range plans. Better performing districts, on the other hand, focused on district improvement more than on personal agendas and had fewer but somewhat related plans that were more accessible to the public both during and after the planning process.⁴ In the interests of student achievement and well-being, it is beneficial for school boards to take stock of their governance practices and review, in the context of their local circumstances, their governance models. As Deborah Land suggests, "[s]chool boards will continue to lose ground unless they re-evaluate their role within the current educational context and refashion themselves accordingly."⁵

Given this complex context, it is important for school boards to rethink their core governance functions and what

governance model they might want to implement given their own unique contexts and situations. The pressures on school boards to think about governance are not unique; all sectors – including the voluntary and corporate sectors – are engaged in similar reflections on how governing boards should function. While some people claim that there is a normative ideal for how a board should work in every situation, we believe that, as long as school boards fulfill certain core functions, how they do so can vary. These core functions include:

- crafting a mission statement that includes expectations for student performance and safeguarding that mission in order to avoid mission drift
- ensuring that there is a multi-year strategic plan in place that is monitored and evaluated, with robust communications about priorities and performance with all relevant stakeholders
- stewarding resources and overseeing their allocation to support the strategic plan, including performance of fiduciary responsibilities, risk management, and ensuring compliance with relevant laws and standards
- establishing policies as needed and monitoring their implementation
- hiring and subsequent performance evaluation of the director or superintendent of education
- self assessment of the boards' own performance on a regular basis



School Board Characteristics	Rural School Board	Large Urban School Board
External Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable funding • Homogeneous community • Shared interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecure funding • Highly diverse community • Multiple stakeholders with different interests • Politically charged
Size and Membership of the School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 to 12 • Similar interests and backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 to 22 • Representative of diverse stakeholder interests
Trustee Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best interests of all the students and ensuring their achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interests of their constituency and those who elected them
Governance Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carver Policy Governance⁸ • Clarity of roles and responsibilities between trustees and staff • Strategic not operational in focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constituency Governance • Less clarity of roles with tensions between interests of trustees and staff • More operational in focus
Board Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus decision making • Agreement to speak with one voice • Shared vision and mission • Short meetings with clear agendas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority votes to make decisions • No commitment to speak with one voice • Mission more politicized • Long meetings and large agendas

It is interesting to examine how the mandates of school boards differ and how they uniquely adapt to their own local differences in accomplishing these core functions. Things as basic as the composition of the board and the length of terms for trustees, for example, vary. In Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, trustees are elected for a three-year term of office, and school boards in the remaining provinces have four-year terms. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Saskatchewan also have First Nations or Aboriginal members appointed to boards in instances where boards deliver education to First Nations students through purchase or tuition agreements. Quebec has parent representatives serving on boards along with elected trustees, and student representatives serve on school boards in Ontario, although not as full members of the board.

Other relevant differences that impact on governance models and practices include:

- size, wealth, age, and location of the school district
- culture, history, and traditions of decision-making, including differences in inclinations for advocacy and political debate and involvement of parents and other stakeholders
- cultural and ethnic make-up of the student body and communities

For example, consider a District School Board covering a geographically large region in the heart of cottage country. After an amalgamation of three boards, it is responsible for 41 elementary schools, seven secondary, and about 18,000 students and has almost 1,300 teachers. The summer residents contribute to the community tax base creating secure funding, and the population is largely homogeneous with shared interests in creating an education system that they say is characterized by "cutting-edge computer technology and the warmth of a teacher's smile."

A school board in a diverse, uncertain, and/or highly politically charged context is likely going to have to work differently than one in a more stable environment.

In contrast, consider a large urban school board, such as Toronto, which is the largest in Canada. With more than 270,000 students in 558 schools, 10,000 elementary school teachers, and 5,800 at the secondary level, it is dedicated to its mission "to enable all students to reach high levels of achievement and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values they need to become responsible members of a democratic society."⁶

Given this range of differences between school boards, we do not believe it makes sense to argue that there is one ideal model of governance or one way that a board can effectively fulfill its key governance functions.

Contingency theory, which is informing thinking about governance in other fields, is also relevant to educational and school board governance.⁷ The basic argument of a contingency approach is one of 'fit', and the theory says that if an organization fits or aligns with certain contingencies, it will be more effective. As the contingencies change, the organizations that adapt and stay in alignment will succeed. Thus, to be effective, an organization or board that operates in a context of environmental certainty will tend to be characterized by a more bureaucratic structure (including top-down, centralized decision making, clear job descriptions, and more formalization, including stable committees), a task oriented culture, and a more directive managerial style. Similarly, the organization's strategy will be clearly defined, stable, and defensive. On the other hand if the external environment is turbulent and unpredictable, contingency theory suggests that an effective organization and board will be characterized by an organic or flexible structure, a democratic/participatory style of management, a culture that values self actualization, and a strategy – called 'prospector' – which is more proactive and based in learning and identifying opportunity.

Research suggests that the nature of the external environment is the most important contingency factor to consider. Therefore, a school board in a diverse, uncertain, and/or highly politically charged context is likely going to

have to work differently than one in a more stable environment. In contexts characterized by stability, for example, members of a school board can engage in long-term planning and clearly define roles and responsibilities between trustees and directors of education. In a context of instability and unpredictability, the members of the board may have to juggle different constituencies' interests and create more flexible structures to respond to these pressures (e.g. special task forces). The table on page 48 outlines the range of differences in how the core functions of governance may be addressed in two very different contexts.

In conclusion, we are suggesting that all school boards need to perform certain core functions. However, how each board operates, and the governance model it adopts, will vary depending on its context and other factors. It is important to note, however, that we are *not* suggesting that 'anything goes' in terms of governance. While there may not be one governance model that will work in all situations, there will be more and less effective governance. Research in the field of non-for-profit governance has shown that the most effective boards reflect on their governance model, make conscious choices about how they will work to fulfill their core functions, and consciously decide how they will work with the staff leaders and their other stakeholders.

An organization that is not in alignment with its environment and context will be less effective than it could be. And so, we argue for the need to explore different models and approaches to school board governance. Debates about the one and only best approach risk taking us away from the goal of creating good governance and create unnecessary tensions. Allowing for differences is healthy, but we need to reflect on, evaluate, and share the practices that best fulfill the core functions of effective governance. |

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Notes

- 1 Donald M. Chalker and Richard M. Hayes, "The Vanishing School Board," *The American School Board Journal* (September 1997): 26-28.
- 2 *School Board Governance: A Focus on Achievement – Report of the Governance Review Committee to the Minister of Education of Ontario* (April 2009): 10-11. The report is available on the Ministry of Education's website at www.edu.gov.on.ca
- 3 Paul Hill, Kelly Warner-King, et al, *Big City School Boards: Problems and Options* (December 2002), 3. Paper Sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore MD. Center on Reinventing Public Education, School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, Seattle
- 4 Louis Trenta, Luvern Cunningham, Sharon Kruse et al, *Characteristics of Higher and Lower Performing Urban School Districts in Ohio: Furthering the Development of Criteria Useful in Evaluating Urban School Governance* (Unpublished research paper supported by a grant from The Dewitt Wallace Fund, University of Akron, 2003).
- 5 Deborah Land, "Local School Boards Under Review: Their Role and Effectiveness in Relation to Students' Academic Achievement," *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 2 (2002), 229-78.
- 6 http://tdsb.on.ca/_site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=171&menuid=668&pageid=534, accessed October 18, 2009.
- 7 For more information about this approach, see Pat Bradshaw, "A Contingency Approach to Nonprofit Governance," *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 61-82.
- 8 John Carver first developed his notions of policy governance in a book entitled *Boards that Make a Difference* (Jossey Bass, 2006), and many school boards have implemented his approach successfully.



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