



## CHAPTER 2

### Board Governance

#### Background

School boards are responsible for the provision of publicly funded education within their jurisdictions. As such, trustees are leaders in their communities and in the province. School boards represent the community's interests in setting high standards of student achievement, and well-being. They carry out this responsibility within relevant statutes and regulations. Through their local governance, school boards exercise their leadership to set policy and strategic direction, hire and appraise the

performance of the director of education, approve allocation of resources, and engage with the public. This governance role is fundamental to setting the conditions for students to develop into adults who are successful, productive and engaged citizens. Effective governance ensures that the education system remains accountable to the people of Ontario.

#### What Is Governance?

Governance is how the board operates and conducts itself. It establishes a framework and processes for decision-making and holds leaders

responsible for modeling and exercising ethical leadership. School boards are the embodiment of local governance in action. Through their decisions and policies, they demonstrate accountability and effective stewardship of public resources in the interests of all students, stakeholders, 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. The

law, particularly as outlined in the *Education Act*, helps to define governance structures, powers, and processes for school boards.

A board's governance practices can have significant effects on students, staff, parents, and the broader community. Effective school board governance can be seen in the level of public trust in a board, the ways a board continues to improve, the strategic direction of the board, and the quality of the board's leadership.

Good governance begins with well-defined roles and

responsibilities, and clear decisions about how the board will govern. This includes clarity around the goals it aims to achieve, the strategies it will employ to achieve them, and the role of the director of education to manage all aspects of implementation of board direction. A clear understanding on the part of the school board with regard to its system of governance will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of its policy development, decision-making and business practices, and adherence

to legal obligations. It will also influence how the public perceives the efficacy of the board and its value to the community.

The true test of any board's governance structure is its effectiveness in continuously working toward a high standard of student achievement and well-being. Good governance is established by accomplishing goals designed to bring positive results to all of the board's students and staff, and building public confidence by demonstrating accountability to the public and the ministry. The report





of the School Board Governance Review Committee (2009) reflects the input from trustees across the province and offers the following principles of effective school board governance:

- The board of trustees has a clearly stated mission that includes high expectations for student achievement.
- The board of trustees allocates its resources in support of the goals it has set.
- The board of trustees holds its system accountable for student achievement through its director of education by regularly monitoring evidence of student achievement.

- The board of trustees engages with its constituents in the creation of policies that affect them and communicates its progress in raising student achievement.
- The board of trustees monitors its own performance and takes action to continually improve its governance processes.

### **Balancing Accountabilities**

In carrying out their role, trustees have the very real challenge of balancing their responsibilities and allegiances as representatives of their communities with their role as education leaders within the decision-making

body of the board as a whole. This dual responsibility can mean that the ultimate decisions made are at variance with the specific interests of a particular geographical constituency, demographic population, or interest group. All trustees are expected to act in the best interest of the board and its students as a whole.

Effective board governance is dependent on a clear understanding of, and respect for, roles and responsibilities. As trustees communicate with their communities and hear their concerns, they must at the same time convey that changes to existing board policy require consideration by the full board. Trustees, as individuals, do not have authority to make decisions or take action on behalf of the board.

Trustees can facilitate the addressing of concerns of their community members by advising them as to which board staff can answer their questions or deal directly with their concerns. In some cases, trustees may bring issues that affect the entire jurisdiction to the board for discussion, and where appropriate, resolution.

### **Evidence-Informed Decision-Making**

Board decisions must be evidence-based and informed by research that supports

educational goals. Boards should base their decisions on a wide variety of evidence and current research to ensure the best strategic and policy approaches are followed. Socioeconomic and demographic data about the board's communities should be collected, analyzed and considered by staff when making recommendations to the board. Ministry data will complement board data to inform decision-making and support board staff in developing systems to track achievement, equity, and well-being. The use of data also helps school boards monitor trends in a variety of areas such as human rights claims and grievances, as well as track trends in hiring and promotion, and parent involvement.

Consultation and engagement are vital so that a diversity of voices and perspectives are heard. Consultation and collaboration with families, staff, students, community members and diverse stakeholders provide information that will support the best decisions to be made.

Boards can also review current research and best practices in order to ensure board decisions reflect the best thinking in the field of education, community outreach, and child development.

### **Board Self-Assessment**

Good governance doesn't just happen. It requires

the elected board to take responsibility for the effectiveness and continuous improvement of its governance practices. Effective boards will have a governance review policy that includes processes that can contribute to meaningful change. Self-assessment is a valuable process that results in a range of benefits. In addition to improving communication among board members and building an understanding of the effectiveness of the directions taken by the elected board, the key outcome is greater certainty around what works for the benefit of students.

The process that boards undertake to review their performance will vary from board to board. Collection of



the information to inform the review can occur in a number of ways including:

- Surveys of board and committee members
- Focus groups with community members and other stakeholders
- Interviews with board members and the director of education
- Use of an outside facilitator/consultant.

## Establishing a System of Governance

All school boards have a governance model in place which they have adapted to their local context. New trustees should become familiar with their board's governance model. Boards may choose to review their governance model by looking to the governance models of other boards for ideas. School board associations have access to professional and organizational development resources that can be helpful to your board in assessing the effectiveness of its governance model.

Each new board, with its returning and new members, should take the opportunity to review its governance structure to ensure that the board members can take ownership of the planning, policy, and decision-making processes.

In *The Road Ahead II: A Report on the Role of School Boards and Trustees*, the former Education Improvement Commission proposed a process for school boards to follow in establishing and assessing their system of governance. It recommended that each district school board:

- **Create a vision** in consultation with its staff and community
- Appoint a director of education who will **share the vision** and has the skills to work with the board to realize the vision
- **Establish policies** critical to achieving the vision
- **Establish a budget** consistent with the priorities set out in the vision and policies
- **Develop an organizational model** for senior staff and assign responsibilities, so that the vision and policies are implemented throughout the system
- **Establish procedures** for monitoring the implementation of its policies, and tie these procedures to the performance appraisal of the director of education
- **Communicate** its performance to the community and the ministry; and **re-assess its vision** (on a regular basis).

Governance literature offers many governance models. Choosing a model for a particular school board and adapting it to local circumstances requires a thorough examination of the board's vision, priorities, and governance goals. Each board will find both merits and challenges in every governance model it considers.

## Supplementary Resources on Governance

Additional information about effective governance can be found in the following resources:

- **Good Governance for School Boards – Trustee Professional Development Program.** This online resource, developed by Ontario's school board associations, offers a full range of professional development modules designed specifically to support school board trustees in their governance role. It is available at: <http://modules.ontarioschooltrustees.org>.
- **The Road Ahead: A Report on the Continuous Improvement in School Board Operations (2013).** This report results from operational reviews of Ontario's 72 district school

boards. The paper is available at:  
<http://www.opsba.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Operational%20Reviews%20Report.pdf>.

- **Strong Districts and their Leadership (2013)**

Kenneth Leithwood. This study associates strong school district performance with elected boards of trustees whose practice adheres closely to a “policy governance” model. The study can be found at: <http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/downloads/Strong%20Districts-2.pdf>.

- **School Boards Matter, The Report of the Pan-Canadian Study of School District Governance (2013)**

This report reviews the role of board-governed school districts in contributing to successful public education systems. The report can be found at: <http://www.schoolboardsnl.ca/pdf/School-Boards-Matter-Report-Small.pdf>.

- **Key Work of School Boards**, is a governance model focused on improving student achievement. You can learn more from the

National School Boards Association website at <http://www.nsba.org/keywork>.

- A good resource in the area of corporate governance that has some relevance for the education sector is the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s **OECD Principles of Corporate Governance**, which can be found online at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/32/18/31557724.pdf>.

