

Respect for Ontario School Trustees

Part of a series of mini discussion papers prepared for the Education Partnership Table to permit wide input to the direction of education in Ontario.

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The Ministry of Education is committed to building vital, constructive and positive relationships within public education focused on the new 3R's: respect, responsibility and results. Achieving excellence in education demands a genuine partnership in which there is shared respect, mutual responsibility-taking, and agreement about results at every level of the education system. Creating this partnership, and re-building trust and respect in the system following prior years of conflict, will not happen easily or without substantial groundwork. This paper is one of several setting out proposed government policy changes to ensure that the conditions exist for such a partnership to thrive.

SUMMARY

School board trustees are the oldest forms of elected representation in Ontario. Since 1807, generations of community-minded citizens have made decisions on behalf of local publicly funded schools, building the foundation of the system we have today.

Despite this longevity and contribution, the trustee role is widely under-appreciated and misunderstood.

Some of this condition stems from the late 1990s when the previous government removed local tax-levying authority, centralized curriculum, amalgamated school boards and reduced school board grants. Provincial laws established a standard and generally much lower limit on honoraria, as well as personal penalties for non-compliance with provincial requirements. All of these factors contributed to a sense of devaluation and, at minimum, confusion concerning the role.

The current government views the needs of education differently. Sound local decision-making by local representatives is essential to student success. This paper proposes some immediate remedies for several issues that impede the successful exercise of school trusteeship, and also proposes a longer-term process to strengthen and clarify roles and responsibilities at the provincial, school board and school level.

This paper seeks to affirm the standing of trustees as key decision makers by 1) articulating an up-to-date version of the role, 2) increasing the supports necessary to undertake the position, 3) enhancing the decision-making choices for trustees and 4) facilitating a longer-term dialogue.

A NEW VIEW OF THE ROLE OF TRUSTEES

The valuable contribution of local school board trustees can be summarized as providing the five elements of education oversight:

effectiveness, efficiency, community engagement, ethics and representation.

Effectiveness of education programs can only result from insightful allocation of funds, sound policies and innovations that fit the particular needs of local students, and strong evaluation of outcomes at the local level. Provincial outcomes need to be adapted to succeed and the results need to be interpreted if they are to fully benefit students in a variety of settings.

Efficiency of resources. Even the best-functioning professional staff require an informed stewardship to reinforce the best value for dollars provided. Ministry audits and compliance measures, while helpful, are no substitute for good board budgeting and meaningful expenditure controls.

Community engagement to sustain the support and participation necessary for school success is critical for publicly funded education. Parents particularly, but also all members of the community, need to feel a part of the progress and challenges facing students.

Ethics. The word trustee is very apt as there is an essential trust agreement with parents and communities around the education and care of children. Policies and practices to keep them safe and to develop them as citizens in keeping with shared values require interpretation and oversight. Similarly, policies towards staff, parents and community need to reflect the model behaviours that are expected from our learning institutions and from the implementation of the *Education Act* and its regulations, as well as provincial interests in education, and constitutional rights for Catholic and French-language boards.

Representation of the unique local needs of school boards to the provincial government is a key component of the role of trustee. Trustees are an important conduit of communication between school boards and the provincial government and must be provided with the opportunity and forum to convey information and be heard by the provincial government.

INCREASED SUPPORT FOR TRUSTEES

The ministry well recognizes that we have many hard-working trustees that are fulfilling their role through extraordinary effort, but it has identified key barriers that need to be addressed.

Additional time

By adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to governance, the previous provincial government ignored the varying challenges that our school trustees face.

With boards ranging in size from 10 to 250,000 students, budgets from almost \$500,000 to \$2.3 billion and massive geographic variances, there is clearly a basis for a different consideration.

The ministry views the role of trustee as an essentially part-time position, but how much time is minimally required varies according to the complexity of the board. Board effectiveness requires more than knowledge of administration-supplied information. Effectiveness also requires knowledge of conditions in schools and the perspective of parents, students and the public.

While many trustees volunteer considerable amounts of their time, the importance of informed participation requires a more realistic honorarium to ensure sufficient time is available. Since 1997, the honorarium has been limited to \$5,000 per year, with chairs and vice-chairs eligible to receive up to \$5,000 more per year.

The ministry proposes a three-part means to support trustees to have sufficient time to discharge their varying responsibilities, subject to the approval by the Legislature of Bill 78 and the making of required regulations:

- 1) Every board has similar requirements for meeting attendance; for example, the ministry proposes this should form a common base honorarium or “directorship allowance” to compensate trustees for attending board meetings, for reading materials and for attending key functions. The base would be the existing \$5,000, updated for inflation to \$5,900.
- 2) A variable amount based on the number of students per trustee to reflect the complexity for understanding issues and the volume of work, to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency and the number of individual contacts to create and maintain community engagement.
- 3) A per diem, in strictly limited circumstances, to recognize time for travel to meetings in very large boards and for participation in ministry-mandated hearings, such as school closures or expulsions.

The new proposed maximums, if adopted by all school boards, would increase annual honoraria to an average of \$10,000, with a range from \$6,000 for the smallest board to an upper limit of approximately \$26,000 for the largest board.

In addition, the chair and one vice-chair would be permitted an additional \$5,000 and \$2,500, and would also be eligible for a small pupil-based adjustment to recognize their additional time and responsibility requirements by board size, reaching a total of \$10,000 and \$5,000.

The resulting honorarium would be consistent with the maximums proposed by the 1995 Royal Commission on Learning and with those to be found at other school boards across the country. (Please see Appendix A)

Community-involved process

Authority for setting trustee honoraria would therefore rest with local boards up to the new maximums.

The ministry proposes that the boards establish a citizens’ advisory group to make recommendations about 1) the suitability of the new provincial limits for its board members and 2) any changes in specific expectations for trustees that should be added to board policy, should there be enhanced support.

The group would complete its work in time for the board to consider it ahead of the next school board election in November 2006. The group appointed would be comprised equally of parents selected by parent board representatives or school council chairs, if the board doesn’t currently have a board-wide organization of parents or school councils, and members of the community at large.

The final decision on compensation limits and policy for trustees would remain with the board.

Transition

Reflecting the period of time that it has taken to bring forward legislative change, provisions would be made for a partial payment to existing trustees. In light of the fact that boards have already set 2005-06 budgets, the ministry would bear the cost of the retroactive increment for this year, equal to one-half the cost of the proposed limits out of ministry administrative savings. Moving forward, the ministry will work with boards to identify specific cost savings from administration to offset the local costs of enhanced trustee compensation beyond September 2006, with some special provisions for small boards.

If fully implemented, the additional costs of trustee support would be \$4 million province-wide, with a total cost of \$7 million - \$11 million below costs prior to 1997.

Consideration will also be given to allowing trustees access to benefits as provided to Ontario non-teaching, part-time staff.

More accessible information

One of the greatest challenges for trustees is to have sufficient information about provincial and board initiatives to support their decision-making.

The minister will issue regular, direct bulletins to trustees as fellow elected officials and the ministry has set up a special Trustee Resource Centre to respond to trustee inquiries.

The ministry also proposes to work with boards to greatly simplify the 'reconciliation' of financial information about grants and spending, so that trustees, as well as parents and members of the public, can readily see where choices exist for funding and programming and where needs could be for provincial investment.

One of the key responsibilities as governors of Ontario's publicly funded education system is for trustees to maintain a long-term perspective on school improvement. The ministry proposes to work with boards to ensure that there are resources for high quality, longer-term planning.

Support and development: Trustees must be provided with the supports and training they need to develop in their capacity to lead and influence effectively. The ministry must take steps to ensure that such support is available, and complementary to the vital support provided by local school boards and the provincial trustees' association.

Better public appreciation

The importance of the trustee role needs to be explained to the public so that a more vigorous and respectful relationship can be sustained.

In the 2003 trustee election, there were signs of potential apathy in low voting and a high number of acclamations.

Acclamations by system:

English Public	37%
English Catholic	55%
French Public	85%
French Catholic	73%
Province	54%

Trustees deserve to be treated, and be seen to be treated, with greater respect if the public is to understand their role appropriately. The ministry proposes to eliminate the extraordinary personal penalties to which trustees who did not follow provincial direction enacted by the previous government, including fines and restrictions on participation in future elections.

In between elections, it is important that trustees are able to take up their role as prime leaders of community engagement. The future for education is to create an atmosphere of openness and transparency. This can only be achieved through readily accessible information and convenient access for parents and members of the public to ask questions and participate.

The ministry's new parent involvement policy requires boards to establish Parent Advisory Groups to give parents a clear sense that they are listened to on an ongoing basis, and to improve both participation of parents in their children's schools and the level of knowledge among parents of educational challenges. The policy is intended to complement board function and assist in board relations.

To sustain public confidence in education, trustees are asked to ensure ample opportunity for board supporters to have a voice in decision-making. The education system can only benefit from full and open public debate and consensus-building. In all parts of the province, trustees are in a unique position to facilitate such debate and to gain greater insight

into the unique issues, needs and concerns of the communities they represent.

SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

As local educational leaders, school trustees are important partners in the larger network of community services. Trustees will most effectively serve the larger community by ensuring that schools are fully utilized as community hubs, and that educational services are well-integrated with complementary services offered in the community.

The McGuinty government has confirmed a longer-term vision to see various children's services integrated at the school. This confirmed direction for provincial policy will need to be taken into account in the evolution of school boards in the future.

MORE LOCAL DECISION-MAKING FLEXIBILITY

While much has been made of the loss of "taxing power" of trustees, less is said about the considerable potential "spending power." This is partly because in the previous era of cutbacks, the only choices available were about money savings and reductions.

We are now two years into an extraordinary four-year investment in education which is providing school boards with more funding to address local needs. The current period of much-needed education investment opens up additional possibilities.

Currently across the province, school boards have total control over \$3.9 billion without strict requirement to address local needs. The ministry further intends to create a new era of local flexibility and autonomy by empowering trustees in local funding and policy decision-making.

The first step was taken on March 2nd when the government tabled the Student Performance Bill (Bill 78) which would, if enacted, introduce the authority for government to make regulations to promote the Provincial Interest in Education (PIE).

The bill would permit regulations to clarify ministry and board responsibilities related to significant goals, such as:

- effective use of resources
- student outcomes, including elementary literacy and numeracy and high school graduation rates
- parental engagement
- special education
- health of pupils
- safety of pupils and staff
- publication of reports.

As the bill is considered, the ministry will embark on a special consultation with trustees and other education partners around the nature of provincial outcomes and which areas of increased flexibility should be opened up. One size does *not* fit all. This consultation will look at the way in which provincial outcomes and flexibility will vary across the province according to the unique local needs and challenges facing school boards. Paramount to each of these discussions, is the shared desire to sustain momentum and progress in publicly funded education.

In a reciprocal effort to ensure a true partnership and an enhanced way for trustees needs to be heard and the government to be held to its responsibilities, a standing committee on education will be established. The committee will review and provide input on education policy and programming matters in Ontario.

Future Dialogue

In addition to discussions about provincial outcomes and increased local flexibility, clarifying the role and responsibility of schools,

school boards and the ministry will be a central topic.

MODERNIZING GOVERNANCE

A trustee's role is distinct from the rest of board administration. Discussions will seek to clarify the role and the responsibility of trustees, as well as the link between trustees and schools, school board officials and the ministry. Ongoing strategic discussions will also be shared to deal with relevant issues as they emerge.

Dispute resolution: Policy makers at all levels need to enter into dialogue to resolve concerns. Should alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, based on the principles of mediation, be put in place to ensure that the time and expertise of trustees remains focused on student achievement?

First Nations trustees

The government recognizes that First Nations have their own education systems and, in certain instances, purchase educational services from provincially-funded school boards and school authorities through tuition agreements.

The ministry wants to see meaningful change to ensure the educational success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Would provincial initiatives such as trustee orientation for First Nations trustees, cultural awareness training for board staff and supports to boards and First Nations in developing tuition agreements, help to foster productive relationships between school boards and First Nations?

Such mechanisms have proven to be effective in increasing trustees' awareness and mutual understanding, leading to positive change in our collective undertaking to close the gap in student achievement for Aboriginal students.

Student trustees

The government believes it is important to increase the effectiveness of student voice, and proposes a more fulsome and engaged role for the approximately 100 student trustees currently holding office. Legislation has been introduced proposing to expand rights of student trustees. The government's proposition on this matter will be described further in the mini-discussion paper "*Respect in Ontario Schools: Student engagement, character and citizenship development.*" Feedback on this discussion paper will be welcomed and solicited.

Elections and function of trustee

The government could consider changes to guide the election process for trustees, which is currently regulated by the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*. Areas of consideration include:

- Specific to trustees, should contribution sources and revised spending limits include the elimination of donations by corporations, unions or education-related associations?
- Should the declaration of campaign donations required of city councillors and MPPs apply to school trustees?
- Should boards amend an oath of office to formalize and clarify the mandate and responsibilities of the trustee, and demonstrate a commitment to standards of conduct on behalf of constituents?
- Are current conflict of interest guidelines, as set in the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act*, effective and appropriate?
- Should a *code of ethics* be established to govern individual and collective conduct and include provisions referring to board solidarity after a decision is made, as well as relationships with stakeholders and staff?

CONCLUSION

It is a great credit to trustees that publicly funded education in Ontario has turned a corner toward progress in the last two years. The accomplishments achieved by the entire system have much to do with dedication of the elected people who work tirelessly on its behalf. Students are the beneficiaries of this hard work and commitment, and Ontario will be the beneficiary of their success.

As the need for education increases, so too must the support for trustees as essential contributors to the Ontario Education Advantage.

ABOUT ONTARIO EDUCATION DISCUSSION PAPERS

These papers are prepared by the Ministry of Education to solicit ideas and solutions to combat challenges facing Ontario students before formal policy decisions are made by the ministry. They are discussed by the Education Partnership Table, which is composed of provincial representatives from several education stakeholder groups, including parents, students, teachers, trustees, principals, education support workers and other components of the education sector. Members of the table assist in problem-solving discussions at meetings and help to disseminate papers to their respective members and solicit their feedback.

The ministry also invites input directly from the public. Parents, students, teachers and those interested are invited to join the interactive Ontario Provincial Education Network (OPEN) online and register to receive electronic updates on important education initiatives, meeting notices and opportunities to provide instant feedback on proposed policies. This way, perspectives are continuously represented from education stakeholders across the province.

Your feedback is welcome and solicited.
It should be directed to:

Gerard Kennedy, Minister of Education, 900 Bay Street, Toronto,
ON, M7A 1L2 minister@edu.gov.on.ca

Appendix A

Proposed Limit on Trustee Honorarium

Board	Proposed Limit on Trustee Honorarium based on (\$5,900 + [\$1.75/pupil ÷ # of trustees])* \$
Algoma District School Board	7,869
Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board	8,002
Avon Maitland District School Board	9,360
Bluewater District School Board	9,764
Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board	8,987
Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board	6,934
Conseil de district des écoles publiques de langue française No 59	7,305
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Grandes Rivières	7,326
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Centre-Sud	7,517
Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'est Ontarien	8,374
Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales	5,994
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Centre-Est de l'Ontario	8,372
Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Nouvel-Ontario	7,090
Conseil scolaire de district catholique Franco-Nord	6,808
Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest	6,939
Conseil scolaire de district du Centre Sud-Ouest	6,821
Conseil scolaire de district du Grand Nord de l'Ontario	6,237
Conseil scolaire de district du Nord-Est de l'Ontario	6,091
District School Board of Niagara	12,356
District School Board Ontario North East	7,384
Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board	19,232
Durham Catholic District School Board	11,266
Durham District School Board	16,436
Eastern Ontario Catholic District School Board	9,414

Board	Proposed Limit on Trustee Honarium based on (\$5,900 + [\$1.75/pupil ÷ # of trustees])* \$
Grand Erie District School Board	10,738
Greater Essex County District School Board	12,266
Halton Catholic District School Board	11,694
Halton District School Board	13,153
Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board	11,336
Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board	14,214
Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board	9,348
Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board	7,591
Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board	7,006
Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board	12,378
Keewatin-Patricia District School Board	7,020
Kenora Catholic District School Board	6,315
Lakehead District School Board	8,415
Lambton Kent District School Board	10,268
Limestone District School Board	10,073
London Catholic District School Board	10,530
Near North District School Board	8,546
Niagara Catholic District School Board	11,022
Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board	6,812
Northeastern Catholic District School Board	6,479
Northwest Catholic District School Board	6,213
Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board	12,669
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board	15,790
Peel District School Board	25,526
Peterborough Victoria Northumberland and Clarington Catholic DSB	9,494
Rainbow District School Board	9,250
Rainy River District School Board	6,671
Renfrew County Catholic District School Board	7,330
Renfrew County District School Board	8,170
Simcoe County District School Board	14,297
Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board	10,534
St. Clair Catholic District School Board	8,536
Sudbury Catholic District School Board	7,799
Superior North Catholic District School Board	6,061

Board	Proposed Limit on Trustee Honarium based on (\$5,900 + [\$1.75/pupil ÷ # of trustees])* \$
Superior-Greenstone District School Board	6,390
Thames Valley District School Board	16,959
Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board	8,241
Toronto Catholic District School Board	18,678
Toronto District School Board	25,993
Trillium Lakelands District School Board	9,600
Upper Canada District School Board	11,559
Upper Grand District School Board	11,534
Waterloo Catholic District School Board	10,287
Waterloo Region District School Board	14,912
Wellington Catholic District School Board	8,271
Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board	10,902
York Catholic District School Board	14,675
York Region District School Board	20,671

* Increased support for trustees may also include a per diem, in strictly limited circumstances, to recognize time for travel to meetings in very large boards and for participation in ministry-mandated hearings.