



Community Voice

Getting your message out

The Role of a School Board

One of the communications challenges facing many school boards is that they work in relative obscurity. Unlike other levels of government, their mandate—while incredibly important—is narrow: K-12 public education. So if people aren't somehow connected to the school system—if they don't have kids in school, work in the system themselves, or know someone that does—they may not give schools or school boards a moment's thought.

*For school boards to be viewed as the trusted community voice on education that they should be, they have to become better known to their communities—not just as a group of elected individuals, but as a relevant and important body that adds significant value to the public education system. Only then can school boards be truly effective at **getting their message out**.*

The primary role of school boards is a simple one: to create the conditions that support success for all students. That role sometimes seems to take a back seat to controversies about tax rates, school facilities, or transportation, but students are at the centre of everything a school board does. School boards know that simple, powerful truth, but they need to ensure that their communities share that understanding.

You can start building that understanding by taking a look at your school board meeting agendas and minutes. You may not think of these as communication tools, but they are. For many people, those documents will provide their first and perhaps only insight into what it is that a school board actually does. What do yours say about you? Is the agenda student and learning-focused? One way to test this is to look at each agenda item, and ask yourself the question: does this matter to kids and learning?



If your answers are mostly “yes,” great! If not, it might be time to reassess your board’s focus.

And while you’re assessing your agenda’s student-focus, don’t forget to examine it and your minutes for clarity. Ask yourself this: if I had no background knowledge about what’s going to happen at this meeting, would this agenda make sense to me? And what about the minutes arising from the meeting—do they provide an understandable overview of what actually happened? If not, why not, and what can we do to improve them? And remember, when it comes to minutes, concise is good, but cryptic isn’t!

Of course, not everyone attends school board meetings or checks out online agendas and minutes, but as a school trustee, you are constantly interacting with your community in other, unofficial ways. And from time to time, you are going to be asked about your role as a school trustee, usually along the lines of “what exactly do you do?” Be prepared to answer, and in a way that will resonate with people! Whether it’s a 10-second sound bite or a 30-second elevator speech—and you’ll find more about those elsewhere in this video series—be ready with an answer that puts kids and learning right where they belong—at the centre of every school boards’ work.

Research shows that effective, high-functioning school boards have a positive impact on student achievement. That’s the message that communities need to hear, and the message school boards and school trustees need to convey.

This Division Dispatch series and other e-learning resources can be found at www.mbschoolboards.ca.