

Canada's School Boards

Fighting to keep the “public” in public education

BY KIM ARNOTT

WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATION governance, the national trend in recent years has been towards a troubling centralization of decision-making power, despite research that suggests school boards provide an effective way to improve student learning and increase local participation in school management.

“Communities historically have had lots of input into what transpires [in their schools] but over time, for a whole lot of reasons, we’ve started to move decision making further and further away,” says Floyd Martens, president of the Canadian School Boards Association. “But when it comes to the education needs of our children, is it one-size-fits-all? Not in the least.”

Heartened by last year’s public outcry from Quebecers in defence of community voice in education (see below), Martens says efforts need to be made to strengthen and improve the political process for electing school boards across the country.

“Does it delegitimize our federal government or our provincial governments because voter turnout isn’t what it should be?” he asks. “It really comes back to having a community voice in education. Local boards are closer to the ground, closer to what’s taking place, and are able to make choices about what’s best for the overall interests of all students.”

Across the country, school governance is a live issue in a number of provinces.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSBA

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FLOYD MARTENS
President, Canadian School Boards Association

Newfoundland and Labrador

Advocates of local governance hope that the school board elections in November 2016 will be a turning point in Newfoundland, after three years of limited public input into education.



*Brian Shortall,
executive director,
Newfoundland and
Labrador School
Boards Association*

In 2013, the provincial government reorganized the province's school boards to create two provincial districts. One large English board was created by amalgamating four regional school boards, while a smaller French board administers francophone education. Elected trustees from the amalgamated boards were replaced with a board of trustees appointed by the province. While many of the appointees were previously elected trustees, the promised subsequent elections didn't materialize.

In the 2015 provincial election, the platform of the Liberal Party, which won office, included a promise to return to elected trustees. "The boards had been calling for a return to elected school board members for years," says Brian Shortall, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador School Boards Association.

The amalgamation significantly reduced the role of the association, which once played a pivotal role in collective bargaining, advocacy and professional development, says Shortall. "We've had a much scaled-down role over the past three years."

With decades of increasing consolidation of political and financial power in the hands of the province, Shortall is hopeful that trustee elections will mark a shift back towards local input. "Power and control is a big challenge in a centralized environment," he says. "It's quite a struggle for school boards to politely remind themselves, their

clients and also the government that there is a role for the public in public education.

"Education is not something like a mail service or a road service. It is something that has to involve the public in day-to-day decision making and day-to-day measures of accountability and direction."

Prince Edward Island

Without warning or consultation, the P.E.I. government dissolved the province's English school board in November 2015. Provincial employees now administer the delivery of education for the province's English students.

In 2012, P.E.I.'s two English school boards were merged. Elected trustees were replaced with a board of 11 trustees and one chair appointed by the province for a three-year term beginning in January 2013.

Tasked with developing new policies to govern the amalgamated provincial system, the appointed board was a group of committed and credible people dedicated to the betterment of education, says former trustee Colleen Parker. "Our focus was that we were doing the work for the next elected board, which was what was promised."

However, the province unexpectedly dissolved the appointed board in November 2015. "It would be an understatement to say that we were surprised by the sudden dissolution of the Board of Trustees, because we were so actively engaged in the work that government had asked us to complete, and because each of us had agreed to extend our terms until school board elections were held in 2016," the group of former trustees wrote in an open letter to the Charlottetown *Guardian*. "As an appointed board, we deeply valued and supported the move to elected school board representation."

Parker believes that little public outcry arose over the abolition of the board because people don't generally understand how educational governance operates in the province.

New Brunswick

Recent elections have highlighted the need for public education about the role and importance of the province's new District Education Councils.



Photo Courtesy of District Education Councils

Stacey Brown, manager, District Education Councils

After decades of amalgamation and change in New Brunswick education, the province is now settling into its second term with elected trustees representing four English and three French District Education Councils (DECs). The DECs were created in 2001 when the province reintroduced local education elections, five years after abolishing them in 1996. While 14 districts were originally established, those were amalgamated to seven (four English, three French) in 2012. "We've gone from 422 local school boards (in the 1960s) to seven," says Stacey Brown, manager for the Anglophone District Education Councils. "It's not an immediate change but it's been a gradual paring down."

The DECs hold monthly meetings and operate using a policy governance model, focusing on setting budgets, policies and goals. Each council has between 7 and 13 elected members, but during the most recent election held in May 2016, almost half of those positions were filled through acclamation or appointment, says Brown.

"One of our priorities for the next four years is to increase both candidate turnout and voter turnout for the 2020 elections," she says. Brown believes that educating the public about the role of the DECs is necessary to achieve that goal. "People are familiar with school boards; 'DEC' hasn't made it into the common vernacular yet. It's definitely an area we need to address."

Quebec

The province's French and English school board associations are celebrating their success in convincing the province to back down on Bill 86, which would have abolished school board elections. But discussions continue about new legislation that will reduce the powers of elected representatives

and increase the Minister's ability to intervene in school board operations.



Photo Courtesy of QESBA

Jennifer Maccarone, president of the Québec English School Boards Association

In December 2015, following school board elections that saw low voter turnout (4 percent for French boards, 17 percent for English boards), the province introduced Bill 86. The legislation planned to eliminate elected school commissioners and put power in the hands of school councils composed of parents, staff and community members. The proposed legislation united the province's educational groups in opposition and raised concerns among the public about the loss of local voice in school governance.

"We were unanimous about keeping school trustees and keeping democracy."

JOSÉE BOUCHARD

Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec

English boards, which have constitutional protection as representatives of a minority group in Quebec, feared the changes would make their schools vulnerable, says Jennifer Maccarone, president of the Quebec English School Boards Association (QESBA). The association received more than 5,000 letters and emails from community members outraged by Bill 86. "This was really big. I've never seen anything like it," she says.

The QESBA worked alongside its francophone counterpart, the Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec (FCSQ), to mobilize opposition to the legislation. "Solidarity was the key word of this challenge," says Josée Bouchard, president of the FCSQ. "We were unanimous

about keeping school trustees and keeping democracy.”

Faced with united opposition from educational groups and parents, the province abandoned the legislation. But last summer it brought forward a replacement, Bill 105. The new proposal would retain school elections but transfer powers from elected officials to administrative staff and give the education minister ultimate veto power over any school’s operation or existence.

It’s a plan that is again facing challenges from both school board associations, which have testified about their concerns before a legislative commission studying the bill. In particular, the proposal to remove budget control from elected officials is unacceptable, says Bouchard. “We are accountable to the public. We have the responsibility to adopt that kind of decision.”

While low voter turnout may have spawned the discussion about school governance, both associations are disappointed that the province has made no move to consider proposals for online voting or for synchronizing school elections with municipal votes. Both initiatives, they say, would likely increase public engagement in the process. Bouchard also notes that the province spent only \$35,000 promoting the last school election, as compared with the \$500,000 it contributed to promoting municipal elections.

Saskatchewan

The province’s recently re-elected provincial government has promised that transformational change is in the works. School boards are waiting to see what this might mean for them.



Photo Courtesy of SSBA

Darren McKee,
executive director,
Saskatchewan School
Boards Association

As in most provinces, Saskatchewan’s school boards have seen several rounds of amalgamation over the last 20 years. While the centralization has resulted in some service improvements, particularly for students in rural areas of the province, the amalgamation process is invariably a distraction from educational outcomes, says Darren McKee,

executive director of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association.

But as Saskatchewan’s 28 school boards elected new trustees in October, McKee warned that he sees “a foreshadowing of further amalgamations” in the province’s plans for transformational change. “To me, it’s fundamental that we continue to allow local communities to have voice in high-quality education for their kids, and that’s currently manifested through locally elected boards,” he says. And, besides, he believes school boards – which tend to attract more demographically representative numbers of female, Indigenous and immigrant candidates – play a key role as a starting ground for aspiring politicians. “You can’t undervalue what that means for democracy in our country.”

British Columbia

The decision by the provincial government to fire Vancouver’s school board trustees has divided the education community.

In mid-October, Vancouver’s nine elected school trustees were fired by the Minister of Education for failing to approve a balanced budget as required by law. A high-level Ministry employee and former superintendent, Dianne Turner, was appointed to replace the board for at least one year, although the province has been silent on whether new trustees will be elected before the next scheduled civic election in October 2018.

With political party affiliations in play in B.C. school elections, the Vancouver board had been deeply divided. A motion in spring 2016 to approve a balanced budget, requiring nearly \$22 million in cuts, failed on a 5-to-4 vote.

While many parents have expressed outrage over the board’s dismissal, at least one of the fired trustees has publicly welcomed the province’s move as a necessary step. The B.C. School Trustees Association also suggested provincial intervention was understandable, adding that the province’s other 59 school boards passed a balanced budget “while still firmly advocating on behalf of public education.” ▲

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