

WHAT DO WE ELECT A SCHOOL TRUSTEE TO DO?

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On Oct. 28, Manitobans will once again elect the people who serve on our local school boards. School trustee races rarely attract the attention given to other elections. Yet school boards are among our most immediate forms of representative democracy.

Before asking who should be a school trustee, perhaps we should ask a more basic question:

What, exactly, are we electing a school trustee to do?

Trustees are elected to govern a school division. They are not elected to run it.

That distinction is fundamental.

A school board represents the community. It establishes direction, approves budgets, sets priorities, monitors results and holds the superintendent accountable for the administration of the division. It also develops the governance policies that define how the board itself will exercise its responsibilities.

This is different from developing the educational and administrative policies by which a school division operates. Those policies properly draw upon the knowledge and recommendations of the education professionals charged with running the system.

A board may ultimately adopt or approve such policies, but approval should not be confused with authorship. Trustees govern the system; they do not replace the professional expertise responsible for designing and administering it.

One common misunderstanding about elected office is that election confers individual authority. On a school board, it does not. A trustee has a voice, a vote and a responsibility to listen, question, deliberate, challenge and represent. But an individual trustee does not run a school division. Authority rests with the board acting collectively. The superintendent is accountable to the board as a whole, and teachers, principals and divisional staff are not employees of individual trustees.

This is not bureaucracy getting in the way of democracy. It is democracy. Representative government depends not only upon elections, but upon elected people understanding the nature and limits of the authority citizens have entrusted to them.

There is another important boundary. School boards are created by provincial law and exercise the authority the province gives them. Trustees may strongly disagree with a provincial law or policy. They may criticize it, advocate for its amendment and urge government to change course. That, too, is democracy.

What they cannot properly do is transfer their disagreement with government onto the education professionals required to administer the law. Superintendents do not enact provincial legislation, and administrators do not choose which laws a school division will follow. Pressuring them to resist legal requirements mistakes administration for political decision-making. Democratic disagreement is legitimate — even essential — but it should be directed toward those with the authority to change the decision.

The same principle applies to everyday operations. A trustee may hear a concern about a principal, classroom, staffing decision or program and sincerely want to intervene. But good intentions do not erase good governance. When individual trustees bypass established processes, direct employees or intervene in operational matters, they can undermine professional responsibilities and cause real distress to people simply trying to do their jobs.

Governance boundaries protect people. They also ensure that trustees do the work only trustees can do. No superintendent, however capable, can substitute for the independent judgment of elected trustees acting on behalf of their community. And while a trustee is doing someone else's job, no one is doing the trustee's.

That job is enormously important. Trustees must look across an entire division and toward its future. Are students being well served? Are resources being used wisely? Are some students being left behind? What does the community value? Where should public education be five or 10 years from now? Where should trustees advocate to the province for change?

Trustees must also govern on behalf of the whole community, including people whose beliefs differ from their own. That requires judgment, humility and the ability to disagree without treating disagreement as disloyalty. A strong trustee can ask difficult questions without being disrespectful. Respect for professional expertise does not make a board a rubber stamp, any more than democratic accountability makes trustees managers.

So, as we consider candidates this fall, we should ask:

Do they understand the difference between governing and managing? Can they work as one member of a board rather than as an independent authority? Can they listen to disagreement and ask hard questions without becoming personal? Can they respect professional expertise while providing meaningful oversight? Above all, do they understand that elected office is not simply the acquisition of power, but the acceptance of a public trust?

School boards sit at an important intersection of education and democracy. The people we elect are entrusted with governing our schools wisely on behalf of us all, while their day-to-day operation is entrusted to highly qualified educational professionals whose knowledge, experience and judgment deserve our respect.

Good public education depends upon both — trustees who govern well and professionals who are trusted and supported to do the work for which they are qualified.

This October, we should choose trustees who understand and respect that partnership.

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