



Submission to the Ministry of Education's Governance Review Committee

February, 2009

Introduction

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide our responses to the topics outlined in the Governance Review Committees' discussion paper. OSSTF/FEESO represents 60,000 educational workers across Ontario including public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, attendance counsellors, and many others in education.

The paper provides a number of questions under four major topics. Although each question is important, OSSTF/FEESO is prepared to respond in a more general way under these topics. We believe this will also serve to provide a direction, which may ultimately lead to positive changes in our governance structures here in Ontario.

Modernizing the *Education Act*

Over the course of the last twenty years, many changes have been foisted on our education system. Changes as to how school boards operate and receive funding have had dramatic impacts on our students, our staffs, our schools and our school boards.

School boards no longer have the ability to raise local taxes that could enhance the learning environment of our schools and better reflect local priorities.

More and more school boards are left to deal with fewer issues relating to important educational decisions.

In spite of these facts, Directors of Education and trustees must be accountable to their communities as well as the province. Their roles are a vital component of the entire systems' delivery of education. However, because of the system of funding their roles and responsibilities are limited to being effective managers of the provincial funding.

One of the problems with the current situation is that there are four distinct publicly-funded systems operating simultaneously and this is ultimately wasteful of taxpayers' money. Instead, OSSTF/FEESO recommends implementing one "confederated school board" system so that this wastefulness is eliminated.

A "confederated school board" system:

- would be composed of the four sectors which are currently funded from the provincial government - English public schools, French public schools, English separate schools and French separate schools;
- would consist of a minimum of four (4) trustees from each of the sectors elected by identified taxpayers in each sector;
- would allow each group of sector trustees to have the autonomy necessary to provide the services set out in constitutional guarantees. The entire group of trustees would be responsible for all matters not under the exclusive jurisdiction of a sector;
- would have one Director of Education and one set of Superintendents and senior administration to oversee the day to day functioning of the board and the schools within its jurisdiction.



The advantages of a “confederated school board” system include:

- Enhanced delivery of services, such as, but not restricted to, bussing, purchasing, school repairs and new school construction.
- Any savings incurred through the restructuring of various aspects of school board administration and functions could be redirected to the schools and classrooms of the province to address the funding shortfall and improve the efficiency and accountability of publicly funded schools.
- Greater program opportunities for students could be generated through a more efficient use of current staff, both teachers and support staff.
- The expensive advertising costs associated with the current expenses of the four sectors competing for a limited student population would be eliminated.
- Confederated school boards could provide for the protection and expansion of many support staff jobs as it would be easier to maintain the OSSTF full service school concept in these larger boards rather than the current trend to contract out services in smaller boards that argue they cannot afford to maintain the service in-house.

Coterminous school boards are already working together to provide such things as transportation services for their students. In an era of declining enrolment in most parts of the province, it just makes good sense to use funding, facilities and personnel more efficiently.

Regardless of the system however, trustees must reflect the needs of their communities. They must have the ability to ask questions and receive proper responses from their board administration. They should also have the responsibility of making sure that their schools properly deliver mandated programs and they must have the ability and responsibility to be an active participant in board decisions surrounding these programs.

Beyond direct action in financial decisions, OSSTF/FEESO believes strongly that school boards have the responsibility to deliver appropriate and meaningful training to their employees.



Directors of Education in many cases define the culture of their school boards, as do Chairs of school boards. This makes it very important for both to work collaboratively in reporting. OSSTF/FEESO believes that School Boards, through their Directors and Chairs must be required to report to the Ministry of Education regularly on program delivery and the proper implementation of provincial funding.

In order to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of boards, Chairs, individual trustees and Directors of Education, a committee should be formed from representatives from each of these positions and from all regions and systems. This committee should also have representation from all unions within the system as well as representation from the broader community.

This committee should have the mandate to define the final roles and responsibilities for presentation to the Minister of Education in a timely fashion and to have these recommendations included in legislation and regulation.

Identifying Effective Governance Practices

As was previously mentioned, school boards no longer have the ability to raise local taxes. This has provided challenges for many school boards. When these boards had the ability to raise local taxes they often chose to spend these monies in areas that addressed local needs and provided programs that enhanced the educational experiences of their students.



Granting some taxing ability to school boards may be a controversial idea in today's political environment. However, the implementation of this would certainly lead to a more fulsome educational experience for students as well as a greater ability to meet the mandated priorities of the government for those boards whose particular fiscal challenges have made their work more difficult during the last decade.

Many professional organizations have bodies, which oversee their membership. In education teachers are governed by the College of Teachers and bodies, which oversee their particular disciplines, govern support staff. These entities have developed codes of conduct and ethics over time along with participation from their membership and from the public.

A similar approach for school board trustees may have the consequence of enhancing their image and credibility in the eyes of their communities and the employees within their boards. Many boards already have Codes of Conduct and or Code of Ethics for trustees either in policy or in a school board constitution. These could be gathered and collated to develop a common Code of Conduct and Ethics consisting of the best existing practices.

To accomplish this, a committee should be formed from representatives from all trustee organizations from all regions and systems. This committee should also have representation from all unions within the system as well as representation from the broader community. This committee should have the mandate to develop a Code of Conduct and Ethics for presentation to the Minister of Education in a timely fashion and to have these recommendations included in legislation and regulation.



Supporting School Board Leaders

As a position with only a nominal honorarium, the position of trustee is of course one for which members of the public voluntarily put forward their names as candidates. It is not a full-time job and therefore, where training is offered, participation must be voluntary on the part of trustees.

That said, useful minimal training should certainly include (but not limited to):

- business meeting procedures, meeting “Rules of Order”, how to participate in effective debate and dialogue, how to avoid conflict of interest;
- information on education legislation and regulations, as well as labour legislation and regulations;
- orientation to operating procedures of the various departments within the board;
- orientation to the various employee groups within the board, including introductions to the Presidents of each group.

Wherever professional development sessions are provided for employee groups, especially those concerning Ministry initiatives, trustees should be invited and encouraged to attend and observe, so that they become conversant with not only current educational practice but also with the high quality of the work that all of the employee groups within the system do, especially where the support staff employee groups are concerned. While trustees have at least a rudimentary knowledge of what teaching entails, that is not necessarily so for the other kinds of educational workers necessary to the system. Once trustees become aware of the valuable work that these workers perform, they will see how essential all are to student success.



Strengthening School Board Accountability

The short answer is that, of course, the board of trustees:

- exists to govern the school system in the best interests of its students;
- is accountable to its public school supporters;
- represents the interests of its students, parents, and the community;
- speaks with one voice through its policies and decisions;
- is responsible for defining the expected outcomes and policies essential to meeting the organization’s mission and beliefs;
- holds the Director of Education accountable for implementation of Board policies and Board decisions.

However, OSSTF/FEESO believes that these must never be tied to numerical “targets” for any of the things listed in the discussion questions for all of the same reasons that OSSTF/FEESO opposes “high-stakes testing”: it is counter-productive to good teaching, leads to over-emphasis on the “test” and “test scores” to the detriment of what is really important in education. One only has to look south where the destructive policies of No Child Left Behind are systematically undermining public education across that country.

As Alfie Kohn said in a recent article, “The fact is that real learning often can’t be quantified, and a corporate-style preoccupation with “data” turns schooling into something shallow and lifeless. Ideally, attention to learning signifies an effort to capture how each student makes sense of the world so we can meet them where they are” (“It’s Not What We Teach; It’s What They Learn”, Education Week, September 10, 2008).



Accountability is assured when the board of trustees ensures that the school board:

- operates its schools according to provincial legislation;
- recognizes local needs and priorities;
- sets the board's budget within provincial grants and accompanying regulations;
- implements curriculum according to Ministry of Education policy;
- develops and delivers programs that reflect provincial policies and local priorities;
- hires competent, qualified staff;
- develops effective board policies to guide system operations.

Further, such accountability is accomplished through:

- public access to board meetings which are held in public session as much as possible, excepting confidential legal, property, negotiation or personal matters, and when comprehensive agendas, minutes, reports etc are posted for public access;
- board meetings that are conducted according to established protocols and rules of order;
- a clear Code of Ethics for trustees;
- a clear set of financial accountability measures for trustees;
- consultation with the public and all stakeholders, including and especially the employee groups.



Conclusion

OSSTF/FEESO believes that the questions provided in the discussion paper are important ones. Previous governments have undermined the credibility of many employee groups in education as well as the governing bodies within the educational sector. A comprehensive look into the structures which govern those of us in education has been long overdue.

Once again, OSSTF/FEESO appreciates the opportunity to participate in this review and to provide advice on how to improve the governance of school boards in order to better meet students' needs as well as address the shortcomings of the current governance arrangement.

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