

Chair's Report
June 2011

This board report will be about our governance as a board of trustees.

As trustees we seek office to make a difference to Hamilton's education of children and youth, especially with regard to student achievement. Through our governance practices we know that we can make a difference. Good governance can have a high impact on student achievement, can create an ethical culture and build the public's trust in education. "A high impact governing board achieves powerful leadership by focusing board time and attention on the judgements and decisions that involve the highest stakes for its district" (Doug Eadie 2005) Doug Eadie in his 2005 study of Canadian High Impact School Boards found they had five habits: they concentrate on governing, they develop the capacity to govern, they play an active role in leading innovation and change, they play close attention to the board of trustees- director partnership and they reach out internally and externally.

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's trustees place a great deal of emphasis on governance. We have been examining and refining our governance practices, and developing clear strategic directions linked to equity, achievement and engagement. These are implemented through annual operating plans which include further development of parent and student engagement, a plan to have all children reading by grade 3, and increased staff development to enhance classroom practices and thus student achievement. Our annual trustees' work plan reflects the annual operating plan and the appraisal of the director, and determines a large part of our monthly agendas. We believe we are leading innovation and change in many important areas. And we continue to be responsive to parental and community needs.

A clear understanding of a school board trustee's role and responsibilities is fundamental to good governance. Trustees are the democratic voice of the public and the recent changes to the Education Act clarify the responsibility of individual trustees to bring to the board concerns of parents, students and supporters of the board. Roles and responsibilities are part of Codes of Conduct and trustees have once again together been considering this, as they do at the beginning of each new term.

Trustees have no authority individually in the Education Act and so, as the US National School Board Association states, trustees "resolve to govern as a body, not as individuals". When trustees refer to the corporate board, they do not mean to a private corporation, but to this body of trustees working together. Many of the elements in the trustees' Code have been there since 2003, then based on the Saskatchewan Trustee Association's Code of Conduct. This includes Section 6:

"I will accept that authority rests with the Board and I have no individual authority outside the Board. I will abide by the majority decisions of the board once they are made but I shall be free to repeat the opinion that I upheld when the decision was made". "Provided it does not undermine the authority of the Board" was added to this section in 2007.

Trustees working together can always overturn their own decisions through reconsideration or rescinding motions.

There has been confusion about trustees' intentions, and assumptions that there is a change of governance. However, there is no intention to change the relationship between trustees and their communities or to undermine the ability of trustees to work with and speak for their constituents.

Trustees will continue to act on behalf of constituents and help them find resolution to any difficulties. They will bring their concerns to the attention of staff and continue to alter policies and directions based on what they learn.

Trustees will continue to encourage community participation through the lively and effective parent advisory committees, including the Parent Involvement Committee, the Special Education Advisory Committee, French Immersion Advisory Committee and the Rural Advisory Committee.

Trustees will continue to listen to their school councils and to parents and bring their concerns to the Board table. Trustees will continue to value consultation and to consult broadly, especially on policy development. Trustees will continue to help parents navigate through the school system.

When it is time to make a decision, trustees consider the needs of students across all of HWDSB and collaborate and engage together to make a decision in the best interests of the whole community. Once the Board has voted, trustees are legally bound by the majority decision, regardless of whether they supported it during debate.

The trustee role is not changing and trustees expect to continue to operate in the way they have been doing for years.

Few other jurisdictions outside of Canada have a locally elected governance structure for education. Do school boards make a difference? Compared to other countries, international tests show that there is less difference between schools and within schools in Canada than in many other countries. This is because our local democratic structure through school board governance means that local needs are continually considered.

As we move locally to provide better ways to deliver equitable opportunities for all our students in our board, this board of trustees will continue to advocate for our student needs. We aim to be a highly effective, board with an impact on student achievement, and responsive to the special needs of our constituents.