

Chair's Report – November 21, 2011

This is my review of the past year at Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB).

We can all agree that Trustees take public office to make a difference, especially with regard to improving student achievement. How we govern makes a difference to the whole school board as good governance has a relationship to student achievement and can create an ethical culture and build the public's trust in education. We aspire to be a board that makes a high impact as in Doug Eadie's 2005 study of Canadian High Impact School Boards.

He found they had five habits: high-impact boards concentrate on governing, they develop the capacity to govern, they take an active role in leading innovation and change, they play close attention to the partnership between the Board of Trustees and the Director, and they reach out internally and externally. I will use these categories as a guide to review the past year and assess our performance as a Board in these areas.

Concentrate on Governing

The main governing task of the Board is to see to the improvement of student achievement. This is accomplished through the appointment of a Director who shares the Board's vision, and who then is evaluated regularly; the development of strong Strategic Directions, implemented through Annual Operating plans, that reflect the Board's direction and are monitored through reports requested by the Board; and the use of budget planning and policy implementation to reflect this end. The desire is that most of the Board's business at regular meetings of the Board will be in these areas.

This year the Board received all requested monitoring reports, many substantial, on crucial aspects of the implementation of its Strategic Directions and the associated annual operating plan. These included a review of the success of implementation of the first Annual Operating Plan in this three-year strategic planning cycle, presented in June. Other reports such as the Allocation of Human and Material resources in September, the Professional Learning plan in June, and the Program Strategy of January and the Learning for All HWDSB Program Strategy in June opened up new areas of attention and enquiry. All reports showed progress towards the Strategic Directions set by the Board, many substantial in nature, and indicated work taking place at all levels of the organization in an aligned fashion.

Although the Board has had some difficulties keeping on task at some points of this year because of events arising through the Accommodation Review process, student achievement remains the overriding concern of the Board.

Develop the Capacity to Govern

Development of capacity requires in-service, reflection and monitoring of performance.

This Board takes professional development seriously, and as Trustees we know this improves our decision making. Due to the large number of meetings involved in our five Accommodation Reviews, Trustees have not had as many opportunities for formal learning sessions. Hopefully, there will be a return to this practice once the ARCs are completed. However, many Trustees attended an all-day certificated workshop on governance in December 2010, the Ontario Public School Boards Association conference in February and the Canadian School Boards Association conference in July.

When some community members questioned its governance processes, the Board sought appropriate legal advice in May. This showed that the Board had acted legally, that items discussed in in-camera sessions had been properly discussed there, but that it must remember to bring final decisions of in-camera items into the public domain.

The Board monitors its structures for effectiveness. The Governance committee plays a major role in this regard. This has led to a new Program Advisory Committee being added in February to reflect the Board's strong interest in the instruction of its students and this has been working well. Although the Board has for many years monitored the auditing of the organization through the Financial Advisory Committee, a new stand-alone Audit Committee, as required by the Province, began work in January, after two full days of in-service training.

The existing five sub-committees allow Trustees to develop expertise in different areas and these committees work hard. The Finance Advisory Committee met weekly in March and April to develop the budget in addition to its monthly meetings at other times of the year. The Policy Working Sub-committee meets usually every two weeks and through their work, eight new policies were approved by the Board this year. The Governance Committee brought amended rules and regulations in February and September for approval, as well as leading the appraisal process for the Director. The Human Resources Advisory Committee provides advice to the board on employee relations and working conditions. The new Audit committee brought a work plan for approval.

I would like to extend my thanks to the chairs of these committees: Trustees Robert Barlow, Wes Hicks, Tim Simmons, Karen Turkstra, Jessica Brennan and Laura Peddle.

Take an active role in leading innovation and change

As a Board we set ourselves an ambitious timetable for this year.

We are working on the transformation of our secondary schools, an undertaking that involves the revitalization of our school buildings and changes to how we teach, where we teach, and what we teach in our secondary schools.

As we have a great deal of vacant space in our secondary schools, while our buildings have an average age of over 50 years, almost all our secondary schools are being studied in three accommodation reviews. Community members and staff have been meeting since January. Most are near the end of their committee work, with reports and recommendations expected to come to the Board in early 2012.

At the same time we want to bring our secondary programs more into the 21st century with an emphasis on a responsive and personalized approach to student learning, examined through an equity lens as we continue to explore what real inclusion means. Trustees received the Program Strategy in January and a further expansion of this document in the Learning for All HWDSB Program Strategy in June. These important documents will be shaping the future of secondary education in the Board, in what we hope will be revitalized schools.

We also started two elementary ARCs to review schools in the Dalewood and King George review areas in January, and the King George ARC has already submitted its report to the Board. The Dalewood ARC will report later. Next year, reviews have been approved for the Hill Park, the Mount Hope and Bellmore, and the Sir Winston Churchill associated clusters of elementary schools.

Since 2007, the Board has been considering what to do with its Education centre. It is too small for its entire administrative staff who are housed there and in three other buildings, which all require expensive renovation and up keep. After failing to get Ministry of Education support for a business plan involving McMaster and the City in 2009, we continued to try to find ways to remain in the downtown. This in the end proved unaffordable. So this year we are pleased that in September we were able to move ahead with a plan to build a new Education Centre at our Crestwood site, and to approve a tentative agreement of purchase and sale regarding the sale of our present site to McMaster University. We fully expect to have the sale fully ratified in the future as conditions are met, and to be able to tender for the Crestwood site and obtain Ministry authorization for the demolition of the present Crestwood School.

Other important changes this year to our facilities were the opening of the new Guy Brown School in September, the naming of two schools being constructed in Winona and Binbrook that will open next year, and approving a contract in April for the Waterdown High School addition and renovations. We were also pleased to be able to offer more transportation in September to our grade 6 to 8 students so that busing is provided to those living 1.6 km from the school, compared to the previous 2.4 km. This was possible because of savings accrued through the Transportation Consortium.

Equity is important to Trustees. It is a lens through which the whole organization is now being viewed. So in 2011 we began to consider how equity might apply to the distribution of human and material resources.

Trustees have been supportive for many years of the development of a research department, E-BEST, that can help direct the Board towards evidence-based practice, and transfer knowledge from research to the organization.

E-BEST has played a strong role in the development of a mental health strategy within HWDSB. The Board has been supportive of these initiatives, faced with many students who will never reach their potential without first addressing their mental health needs. So as a Board, we are proud that HWDSB will be leading the direction of the ASSIST program for the province in the three-year Mental Health Plan being implemented.

Finally, the Board has been actively supporting changes to instructional practices.

The full- day kindergarten program is in its second year. Although there are some problems with provincial funding, the Board is supportive and excited by this innovative program, and expects to see it having an impact on instruction in the primary grades.

We are also in the second year of an HWDSB initiative to have all our students reading by Grade 3 with supports for all, some, and few students as needed. Preliminary results in the Kindergarten to Grade 2 strategy report received in October look very promising.

We have also embarked on a large teacher- development undertaking that stresses collaborative learning and reflection in teams of teachers and principals. A report on the Professional Learning Plan in June was well received.

Adolescents who are non-readers are being supported by the Wilson and Empower secondary reading programs, which have proved successful. In addition, we continue to support projects that aim to engage and draw adolescents to school. The November Student Achievement report indicates that our graduation rate is improving, our English Language learners do well, that our special education students are improving, that our programs for at risk students show success, and that there have been gains in our elementary EQAO results. We know there is more to accomplish so that all our neediest students graduate. But the Board is pleased that our improvements have led the Ministry of Education to declare HWDSB a Board that is on the move.

The Board believes it is supporting innovative practices which are drawing Provincial attention, and that its initiatives with secondary schools will transform secondary education.

Board of Trustees – Director Relationship

Trustees have excellent relations with this Director.

Trustees appoint the Director and, through him or her, direct the organization. His appraisal is important and is taken very seriously by Trustees. To accomplish this, the Governance Committee develops with the Director an approved appraisal framework and timeframe, approved by the Board. This appraisal involves the delivery of public monitoring reports to which reference has already been made.

The first cycle of appraisal of the Director since his appointment has just been accomplished. Trustees commend the Director for his emphasis on and attention to implementation of directions and academic optimism. Trustees are agreed that the Director has demonstrated strong leadership in the strategic planning process, that this process has produced aligned Annual Operating Plans and budgets, and that these directions are understood by the organization. Trustees commend the Director for the strong relationships he is developing within HWDSB, building trust and a respectful environment, and his initiatives to strengthen parent and community engagement. They commend the Director for orchestrating deliberate changes in the culture of the organization, moving towards more collaboration with an emphasis on professional growth and development. Trustees are appreciative of the Director's advocacy for HWDSB. They commend him for his willingness to inform himself on all aspects of the Board's operations, and for his accountability to Trustees, including the report on the first Annual Operating Plan. Above all the Trustees applaud the Director for the energy he provides to his role as an instructional leader. They commend his initiatives, his focus on improving student achievement, and interrelated to this, student engagement.

The Board is appreciative of the Director's work and the positive relationship between Trustees and the Director has a powerful impact on the HWDSB.

Reaching out... internally:

The Board reaches out internally in several important ways. Each Board meeting has a place for acknowledging the achievements of staff and students within the Board. Recognition of staff is also given at annual events such as Profiling Excellence, the Recognition of Coaches, and new this year, the Recognition of Extra Curricular work. The Board hosts an annual event for staff honouring retirees and those with 25 years of service. Board members attend many school and system events including graduations, music, art, drama and social justice events. The Human Resource Advisory Committee plays an important role by keeping watch on our relationships with staff.

The Board has placed a higher value on student engagement by requiring an annual report on activities in this area, received in November this year. It appreciates its two student Trustees who play an important role. They bring us insights from Student Senate and also help us reach out to students. Their annual student surveys conducted through the Ontario Student Trustee Association (OSTA), added to HWDSB's involvement with "Tell them From Us" surveys, provide the Board with valuable information about students' perspectives, many of which are followed up in each school. Our appreciation to past Trustees Micaela Corcoran and Susan Tian and our present Trustees Jacquie Janus and Judy Shen.

Reaching out.. externally:

The Board knows that reaching the potential in all students cannot be achieved by working alone. It needs the help of others, particularly parents. Trustees monitor the effectiveness of communications to parents and the community, now in many formats using social and other media, through the annual Corporate Communication plan, this year presented in September.

Our partnership with parents is valued. The Parental Involvement Committee (PIC) is very active, providing us with input from school councils and specifically regarding Board policies. They helped organize an effective outreach to parents through the Focus 4 Family events at Parkview School in April, and school council training events this month. PIC's volunteer appreciation event was another highlight of the year. The Council of Home and School Associations is also a valued partner. Parents also provide recommendations to us through advisory committees such as the Rural Advisory

Committee, the French Immersion Advisory Committee and the Special Education Advisory Committee. Parents also communicate directly with Trustees, or connect with them via the web, and are provided support to access the system and to know their rights. Trustees use parental input to inform policy directions.

Consultation is taken seriously by the Board. All policies before final approval have a consultation process, and there are explicit requirements for community involvement in the Naming of Schools Policy, and the Accommodation and Review Policy. Better ways to inform and consult about the budget are being considered for 2012. There is also a process for delegations to the Board, and questions for clarification at the end of all our public meetings.

The Board has an important role in linking the HWDSB to the community. There is an annual recognition event for all its partners who are numerous. The Community Engagement plan in April showed for the first time the number and complexity of partnerships with community agencies. Individual Trustees have been involved with immigration issues, attended cultural events of different groups, sat on the Hamilton Aboriginal Education Council, Youth Strategy and Best Start Network, and attended numerous community events hosted by our partners. Trustees also meet with the City through the City/Board Liaison Committee, to discuss matters of mutual concern. This is a Board that reaches out to its community.

So in conclusion, in terms of governing, improving our capacity to govern, innovation and planning, relations with the Director and internal and external relations we believe we are an effective innovative Board with a strong commitment to student achievement. This Board is putting its energy into providing the conditions for all students to reach their potential.

I have had the honour to hold the position of chair for five terms. I will not be seeking re-election for chair next year. I would like to thank Vice Chair Tim Simmons for his unfailing good humour and support through this period, and for all the help of staff within the Director's office. Heather Miller particularly has been a rock, competently on top of the daily business of the Board. It has been a pleasure working with John Malloy.

Thank you to the hard working Trustees on this Board as we move together to create a high impact Board impatient to make a difference for our students.