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People for Education Conference 2011

What do trustees do and why do we need them?

Notes from the session

Presenters: Catherine Fife, President, Ontario Public School Boards Association, Trustee Waterloo Region District School Board
 Jenny Williams, President, Ontario Student Trustees Association
 Bernard Murray, Past-president, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association Board of Directors, Trustee, Huron-Perth Catholic District School Board

Moderator: Mary Cruden, Vice President for Canadian Parents for French (Ontario) and parent co-chair for FSLAC, TDSB

CATHERINE FIFE: A trustee since 2003, thinks the role of trustee has changed a lot since she first became one. Prior to 2003, trustees had lost the ability to levy taxes. Since 2003, successive governments, locally elected trustees and the shape of school boards have really changed due to amalgamations across the province. The landscape for a trustee is always changing. The role is to respond in a proactive way to changes in the Provincial government.

The province gave governance roles to Boards and set them specific goals to try to achieve in student achievement. Build confidence in public education, close the achievement gap and get graduation rates up. Boards must therefore be adaptive. For instance, they have expanded the definition of what it is to be successful with student physical and mental health.

JENNY WILLIAMS: Her role is very different but in some ways the same. Like many other student trustees they represent the student population, they present that perspective, but the main difference is that they don't have a vote at the board. Over the years the role of student trustee has evolved. Now the voice of student trustees is heard more, other trustees refer to them, they appear on a provincial level with other boards, they represent a variety of constituents. She's very impressed with trustees who work in depth on a local level with different constituents and ask for their opinions and for feedback. She urges trustees to work more with their students using social media and on a one to one basis. She was first brought into the role of student trustee by her trustee who encouraged her to run and once she was elected, showed her the ropes and helped her to find her feet.

BERNIE MURRAY: There are 5 trustees in his board and a variety of schools. He has seen great changes in the time he has been a trustee. He sees his role as being there for the students to develop their potential, academically, spiritually and in every way. The classroom is now giving much more support to struggling students; identification of challenges and diagnoses has helped a lot. "We want to make them productive citizens." A board has to set a balanced budget each year. It is really important to make sure there is equity throughout your region. Important to ensure money does not go to one area over another. They set policy and review policy as well as update policies and set new ones. This year they created the trustee code of conduct. It was important to stress that no

trustee has any authoritative power of his or her own. They have to support any motion passed by the board. The spokesperson is the chairperson of the board. A trustee is simply a bridge. They are taking info from the community to the board and they share decisions from the board to the community. Communication is vital, as is trust and honesty. They have an association of trustees and listen to the concerns of the province and bring it to the attention of the government. They meet often through the trustee association.

Q: *Bill 177, from 2009, made changes to the education act saying that Boards have stewardship of resources and are responsible for student success and that each board will make a 5 year strategic plan. How has that changed what you do and how you do it?*

CATHERINE: Trustees now have a real responsibility. Cathy sees her role as a navigator.

The school system is a big system. It makes a real difference to have someone in your community to speak to in order to make some sense of education. With Bill 177, the expectations from the public have also changed, we are teaching them how to pack lunches and do homework with their kids and discuss sex ed with their kids and giving them social networking/bullying support. The most successful boards have been able to marry the new roles with parent engagement and working for student success.

Once a Trustee is elected, they can bring things forward to board but if the vote doesn't go the way they want, they have to support the vote! Trustees have a collective responsibility to be poster people for public education and be role models for good conduct. We are preparing governance modules for trustees and looking towards getting certification as a board member. If we are representing our communities we need to be accountable.

Q: *What is the work plan for developing a 5-year strategic plan?*

BERNIE: A couple of trustees work with the director to develop the plan, but it is ultimately the responsibility of the director. The trustees are there for history and it takes a lot of time and the process is not etched in stone and directors of education change. It's great to have a map! The overall objective is to arrive at the three goals. Setting student achievement is a hard goal. At a board meeting we might invite a principal or student to come and report what is happening in the classroom so that we feel better connected with them. Things are changing so quickly! Technology – it takes a lot of work to input and time but it is worth it to have everything up to date and to have information available to everyone.

JENNY: It was neat to see how the community consultation was incorporated into the strategic plan, not just coming from staff and above as it was before. There were many more voices at the table. Student councils were consulted.

Q: *Voter turnout is poor for trustee elections; only one out of four voters have a child in the system. How do you ensure the members of the broader community are brought into your consultation?*

BERNIE: We have a newsletter that is published every month; it is circulated, put in churches, libraries. They make an effort, and they also put it online.

CATHY: Voter turnout is horrible for everything. They partnered with student vote to make sure there was a parallel vote in all schools across the district so that students wouldn't just follow their parents and not vote. Some trustees are not elected at all. Some have to fight tooth and nail to get elected, knock on doors and go to debates and ask questions about education. We also need to actively ask others to run for Trustee.

JENNY: Over the past years they have worked on student vote to educate students on their civic responsibility. There are more student councils and senates. More student engagement all round.

The workshop was now open to questions:

Q: *A lot of people don't understand what the role of a trustee is (Voter turnout). There needs to be more education of the people to let them know what they do, this is a great opportunity for that.*

CATHY: There is more info now on what school councils are. How parents can get involved and impact Boards through PICS. There is a trend afoot that people are disengaging from society in general. Less and less people seem to care. How much energy should we be investing in this?

BERNIE: There was only one election in our board, but there is a lot of apathy

Q: *How is funding allocated? Why more to some areas and less to others?*

BERNIE: A lot is specified by our Board, most boards are strapped though and overspending so it turns into, "where do we get the money we need from other areas?" Money is fundraised, throughout school, but some has to come through the board, if there is an area of need, we will answer the call, one school will get more than another.

CATHY: The only way we can generate money on our own is to sell property. The LOI (Learning Opportunity Index) Grants determine some of that allocation. Between 80-80% of our budget is on staff. The rest is earmarked for strategies or for envelopes. There used to be funding reserves.

JENNY: The priorities are basically reflected and the students feel consulted. We are quite underfunded though especially when we look at how the buildings are falling down. But we are trying to do the best we can and students understand that, we are happy.

Q: I would like to ask all the trustees in this room (there were a few in the audience), what are the crucial issues you are dealing with this fall and what galvanises them?

Lori Lukinuk (Lakehead): Mental health.

Kevin Larson (Bluewater): \$4m budget cuts and two accommodation reviews.

Jennifer Mackenzie, (Ottawa-Carleton): Empowering everyone in an organisation.

Cathy Abraham (Kawartha Pine Ridge): School closures and mental health, distance challenges.

Don Vrooman (Halton): Funding. Equity and inclusion, mental health, special education, poverty, accommodation, Not enough room for the kids. %60 of inventory of schools are 50 years old and need work to bring them up to spec.

Donna Blackburn (Ottawa- Carleton): Equity, Pride Parade, too many portables, too much overcrowding.

Michele Locke (Simcoe county): Focused on the growing populations of underserved, mental health, aboriginal community challenges , 16-20 drop outs,

Linda Ward (St Clair Catholic) : Trying to balance the budget. Mental health.

Lisa MacLeod (Napean- Carleton), Education critic: Accommodations and mental health. Funding by enrolment means less money.

Q: What did we hear? Mental health! What can the combined efforts do about this? We have a mental health collation, we are lobbying very strategically, raising the profile around stigma, we are a huge supporter of the three silos working together, health, education and child and youth services. We will benefit from Minister Broughton's past work.

JENNY: We put together our charter of rights, a guide for how we work with mental well-being in our students. We released our student survey, we discovered 1/3 students don't know where to go for mental health support. Access conversations came out of that.

Concern that so much has been said about mental health that one woman is baffled as to if it is mental health or something else, learning processes? Traditional teaching out the window, too much technology? Why?

1/5 students suffer from some form of mental health illness. This effects our students and the culture of our schools. The suicide rate has not changed, each year two jumbo jet's worth of planes represent the # of youth suicides. The conversations with students is so important. Education does not want to own the mental health portfolio. But we can open the doors, tackle the stigma and, make resources available.

Q: *Are the mental health problems as a result of the school? At which point does your interaction occur? When do I call you?*

CATHY: Trustees take care of policy issues, not systemic or children to children issues. Have that conversation in a public setting.

BERNIE: You can call us first, we can direct you where to call. If I am not the person you should speak I do know the order of protocol.

Q: *What can we do with school lands, as they anchor neighbourhoods? How do you balance the community use of lands as paid for with our taxes? How do you engage parents into the discussion to bring the education act into the 21st century?*

CATHY: The challenge: If enrolment is declining...well being and student achievement, programming is difficult to offer. We do need parents to stand up and declare that they need that land. But we do need better solutions and more money. We need a broader conversation around looking at the funding model.

Q: *Trustees are volunteers? Really?*

There is a base pay of \$5000 and then based on enrolment, trustees get certain amount more per student.

Q: *Is there a way we can make the trustee role be taken more seriously as a society? Pay them more so we can attract more qualified people to the role? Give them more power? How can they do that job with no wage or benefits?*

CATHY: Good point. It also comes down to representation. The trustees association are going to government to ask for fair representation.

We have to be honest that there are only so many dollars around.

Q: *Parent engagement: Is there a role for trustees to engage parents in new ways? How can it take a new form, get the people you usually don't find but are very concerned about their kids? What are your ideas?*

CATHY: Social media, is going to make a big difference, we do have a responsibility to do that. Going out to schools and community events. Trustees are politicians; they have a duty to consult the public. Some boards have consulting policies. Food, childcare, translators, we are trying everything.

BERNIE: I don't know really.

JENNY: Engage the students and the parents will follow.

Q: *Our Board's dress code policy is needing to be reviewed, what are the steps involved in getting it reviewed?*

CATHY: Sometimes it takes a year, sometimes 4 months, but call your trustee.