THE IMPACT OF CENTRALIZATION

ON LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE IN CANADA[1]

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Across Canada there have been numerous recent examples of incidents where the political and ideological interests of provincial governments have run counter to the mandates of school districts. In this pan-Canadian study, focus groups were conducted with school board trustees and school district superintendents to examine the relationships between districts and provincial governments. Preliminary data suggest that the significance of the school district apparatus in Canada has diminished as provincial governments have enacted an aggressive centralization agenda. We theorize that in a politicized environment, the values, reward systems, and accountabilities against which school board superintendents and trustees operate are likely to differ substantively from those of politicians and bureaucrats, thereby creating a policy environment that is antagonistic to local governance.

Case evidence accumulated over several decades suggests that school districts have the potential to positively impact teaching and learning (Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009). Effective school districts do this by de-emphasizing and delegating perfunctory administrative and buffering processes while creating the conditions for schools to focus on what Elmore (2004) describes as the "technical core" of teaching. But in recent years there has emerged a growing constituency that believes that school boards have become wasteful hierarchies whose role in

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promoting student learning is negligible. Over the past twenty years provincial governments in Canada have introduced a broad array of educational reform and accountability initiatives to address a lingering decline in student enrolment and higher public expectations for schools (Galway, 2007). Some provinces have already restructured and centralized school districts to make them so large that elected school boards are no longer perceived to be the local "voice of the people" thereby creating public concern that boards have lost their "raison d'être." There is a growing perception that provincial governments make all the important policy decisions and that the most meaningful public engagement is through school councils (Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012). These changes are a stark reminder that the organization and governance of schools by school districts/boards "is a political and organizational invention, not a natural and inevitable phenomenon" (Anderson, 2003, p. 3).

Across Canada there have been numerous recent examples of incidents where the political and ideological interests of provincial governments have run counter to the perceived mandates of school boards and the governance roles of elected trustees (Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012). In several notable cases governments have intervened to influence or overturn school board decisions. These interventions have ranged from public statements criticizing the policy decisions of school boards to more extreme measures, such as the outright dismissal of board members. But Sheppard (2012) argues that provincial departments of education (DOEs) are unsuitable proxies for the leadership provided to schools by effective school boards. A more constructive long-term approach is to ascertain the key attributes of effective school boards, and to determine how these attributes can be replicated in all school districts.

To this end, the objectives of this research are to improve our understanding of the characteristics of effective school boards and to examine the relationships between school boards

and provincial governments in the current context of increasing accountability in Canada. Toward these purposes, we examined two overarching questions:

(1)   What are the attributes of effective school boards in Canada?

(2)   What is the nature of educational governance in school boards in Canada—who are the principal actors and what are their governance and accountability roles?

In this paper we report findings from a pan-Canadian study of English school boards relating to these questions. These findings, based on interviews and focus groups, pertain to the ways school board trustees and district superintendents perceive the impact and effectiveness of school boards, their governance roles, and the governance roles of provincial DOEs.

Governance Roles of School Boards and School Board Trustees

Elementary–secondary education in Canada is governed, almost exclusively, at the provincial (ministry or department of education), school board, and school levels (Lessard & Brassard, 2005). When the Canadian federation was established in 1867, the British North America Act granted authority over education to the provinces, subject to particular conditions related to denominational, separate, or dissentient schools (Lawton, 1996; Levin, 2005; Loveless, 2012). As other provinces joined Canada, similar articles were included in their terms of union, thereby resulting in separate education systems for each province. There is no formal role for the federal government in the Canadian system, except for First Nations-controlled schools and federal schools established for children of military personnel (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2007). The federal government does make some investments in second language programs and certain other so-called "boutique" programs, but education is funded almost exclusively by the provinces.

School boards are by legislation valid and legitimate governments in their own right. The authority of school boards is established by provincial legislation which sets out the parameters, mandate, duties, and powers of the boards (Shields, 2007). School boards are responsible for directing the activities of the school district in terms of organization, strategic planning and operations, and accountability for finances and student learning (Seel & Gibbons, 2011). School board members (also known as trustees, or in some provinces, commissioners) do not hold administrative positions, but are members and representatives of the public and are legally responsible for the organization (Shields, 2007). The school board functions as a legal entity which exercises its authority as a single corporate body; therefore, individual board members do not possess any authority as individuals (Carpenter, 2007). However, they make and act on decisions related to the organization's mission, develop policies and monitor their implementation, establish decision-making processes, put in place control mechanisms for the allocation and distribution of power and resources, institute procedures for performing specific tasks, and self-evaluate (Kelleher-Flight, 2005; Ranson, 2008). If tangible assets are involved, trustees legally hold them and are responsible to all interested parties for their good use. School board members are elected by voters within the boundaries of their district for three-year terms in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, and four-year terms in the other provinces (Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010).

While school board members do not exercise individual authority of the board, they have a duty to provide leadership and oversight. One of the key duties of a school board is to ensure that all students receive the services to which they have a right in accordance with provincial legislation, regulations, and policies (Lessard & Brassard, 2005). In fulfilling this mandate, trustees have a significant influence on the culture of the board and district, and a duty

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to develop board credibility and trust. Shields (2007, p. 17) suggests that for school board

members to be credible they must:

> be perceived as accountable and committed to their mandate and their
> electorate; ensure a level of openness and transparency that allows people to
> trust in the work done; demonstrate a responsiveness that ensures decisions
> and actions occur within reasonable time frames . . . make the best use of their
> resources; [and] work to mediate different interests for the best outcome . . .

The model of governance that seems to be broadly practised by Canadian school boards is

governance through policy formation. Newton and Sackney's (2005) study of trustees in three

Canadian provinces showed that trustees were of the view that policy making was the primary

role of school boards. This is consistent with school board governance models in the United

States. The National School Board Association and the American Association of School

Administrators have jointly defined the school board's role as the establishment of policy with

other related functions (Thomas, 2001).

School Board Relevance

According to Chapman (2009), as trustees exercise their governance responsibilities,

they have the potential to improve the public's perception of the legitimacy and relevance of

school boards. This is important because school boards are often characterized negatively in the

media and, from time to time, their relevance—even their continued existence—has been

questioned (Alsbury, 2008; Beckham & Klaymeier Wills, 2011; Land, 2002; Saatcioglu, Moore,

Sargut, & Bajaj, 2011; Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009; Williams, 2003). School boards have

been described as anachronistic, dysfunctional, and obsolete, and there have been calls for their

replacement with a more appropriate governance mechanism (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Owens,

1999). Different explanations have been advanced to account for the negative public perceptions

of school boards. One of the most persistent criticisms, dating back to the early 1990s, relates to a perception that they are inattentive to parents (Lewis, 1994; Malen, 2003). Another is that school boards, especially in large districts, become stagnant and fail to provide strong leadership in helping schools adjust to changing times (Land, 2002; Lewis, 1994).

School boards have historically existed as a reflection of society's deep-rooted belief that educational governance should reflect community and regional values and priorities. The fact that a parent or a member of the community can express their concerns to a school board member provides a degree of democratic legitimacy not necessarily present in other public services, except perhaps through an ombudsman (Land, 2002; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; MacLellan, 2007; Mintrom, 2009; Williams, 2003). But critics argue that unwieldy bureaucracies and limited opportunity for trustee contact, characteristic of large, diverse, school districts, hampers the ability of a trustee to retain connection to community values and local needs (Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Williams, 2003). According to Garcea and Monroe (2011) there has been a "decline in the legitimacy of school board trustees among ratepayers due to what they perceive as very low voter participation in school elections, low levels of accountability, low levels of efficiency and effectiveness in the educational system, and weakness in the face of powerful school bureaucrats" (p. 11). In both Canada and the U.S., voter participation in school board elections tends to be low. Across the U.S., voter turnout for school board elections rarely climbs higher than 15 percent (Plecki, McCleery, & Knapp, 2006). In Canada, many school board elections are held in conjunction with municipal elections (Mueller, 2011; Williams, 2003), which tend to have voter turnout below 30 percent (Stockdale, 2010). Statistics on voter turnout for school board elections in Canada tend to parallel American

figures, except in instances where there the vote is integrated with other high profile educational issues.

Another factor that may contribute to the bad press experienced by school boards is their relationship with the provincial government. Shields (2007) speculates that a trend towards centralization of educational authority may be sending a message to the public that the value of school boards has run its course and they are no longer able to make a significant contribution to education. Lessard and Brassard (2005) suggest that the centralization of power by provincial governments has weakened school boards and thereby decreased their political legitimacy among constituents. Other investigators have questioned the apparent inconsistency between a school board's role as an agent of the state and its simultaneous role as advocate and trustee for children and communities. The conflict between governments and communities over issues such as school consolidation, for example, raises the question of whether school boards—as arms of the government—can truly act on behalf of communities. Such tensions suggest to the public that they have contradictory roles, which reflects negatively on the organization (Plecki, et al., 2006; Williams, 2003). School boards in the United States have also been accused of a host of other failings. Researchers have identified a long list of criticisms including: failure to take decisive action to improve achievement; lack of public engagement in school board matters; decisions perceived to run counter to local interests and values; extension of their governance role into district management (particularly large urban boards); failure to collaborate with superintendents and problems functioning as a cohesive group (Danzberger, 1994; Land, 2002; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001).

All of this evidence, much of it conducted in the American context, suggests that the negative public perception of school boards is complex and likely related to a variety of factors.

Despite these criticisms, Shields (2007) suggests that school boards in Canada continue to enjoy public support. They are still seen as representative of democratic governance, and are perceived as providing an important link between community values and the professionals who administer the system. But this support has been threatened by recent trends towards greater centralization and government intervention into areas of responsibility traditionally held by school boards (Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012).

Trends in Canadian Educational Governance

During the last two decades, each provincial government—sometimes with the involvement of the courts—has restructured its governance model for education with stated goals of improving operational efficiency. One of the most publicly visible reforms has been a reduction in the number of school boards largely through district consolidation (Canadian School Boards Association, 1995; Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012; Fleming, 1997; Galway, 2011; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Watson, DiCecco, Roher, Rosenbluth, & Wolfish, 2004; Williams, 2003). District amalgamations have been accompanied by significant reductions in both the number of school board trustees and the overall number of district administrator and professional staff (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; MacLellan, 2007). In some provinces, the actual school board structure has undergone major change. In 2001 the province of New Brunswick abolished school boards and created district education councils (DECs) that were intended to provide local governance and community input in the education system. However, the legislation governing the DECs stipulates that their policies must be consistent with provincial policies and procedures, in matters relating to the authority given to the DEC, or the superintendent of the school district

(Education Act, 1997). New Brunswick has recently announced its intention to consolidate the 14 existing DECs into seven (Government of New Brunswick, 2012). In Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, district consolidations have been accompanied by constitutional changes whereby denominationally-based school boards have been replaced by language-based school boards in Quebec and public school boards in Newfoundland and Labrador (Loveless, 2012). Other provinces have established school boards to serve their official minority-language populations and, in the province of Ontario, full funding has been extended to its Catholic school boards (Loveless, 2012).

Over the last two decades, provinces have also taken steps to facilitate parental involvement in educational governance through the creation of school councils, a majority of whose members are parents (Canadian School Boards Association, 1995; Levin, 2005); however, with the exception of Quebec, school councils have enjoyed only advisory status with no legislated policy role (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Preston, 2009). Interestingly, in at least one province, Newfoundland and Labrador, school board members for the Conseil scolaire francophone provincial are selected from each of the five school councils in that school district (Schools' Act, 1997). Although school councils were intended to provide parents with a consultative and collaborative relationship with schools, some critics charge that the legislation is soft and "there is little incentive to promote councils" (Duma, 2010, p.14). Others charge that the real motives for the establishment of school councils are more closely linked to the improvement of school-level performance by making teachers and school administrators formally accountable to parents (Lessard & Brassard, 2005).

While provincial governments have taken steps to encourage parents to become involved in their children's schooling, they have been less enthusiastic about parental choice of

schools. Currently, all provinces make provision for home schooling (Luffman, & Cranswick, 1997), but only five provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec) provide at least partial funding to independent schools (Wilson, 2007). Legislation in Manitoba and Alberta makes specific provision for parental choice (Young & Levin, 1999), with charter schools having been established in Alberta (Cymbol, 2009). In Ontario and Alberta, financial support is provided for Catholic schools and school districts thereby offering some choice in selecting either public or parochial schools.

Another common trend in governance has been the centralization of power at the provincial level. According to Bradshaw and Osborne (2010), as provincial governments have increased their decision-making authority in education matters, they have simultaneously decreased the authority of school boards. The tendency of provincial governments to centralize power is reflected primarily, but not exclusively, by changes in the way education is funded. Since 1990, provincial governments have reformed the way they fund education, by introducing formula-based funding. These changes have generally resulted in a reduction in or elimination of the local school board's taxation power such that provinces now provide all, or virtually all of the money (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Levin, 2005; Taylor, Neu & Peters, 2002; Williams, 2003), with only Manitoba retaining significant local taxation for education (Garcea & Monroe, 2011). Consequently, most school boards no longer have the ability to raise funds to address fiscal needs and, in provinces where school boards negotiate collective agreements with teachers' unions, their room to manoeuvre in collective bargaining has been significantly reduced (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Young & el Nagar, 2011). In Newfoundland and Labrador, there have been other attempts to impose central control over school board functions. Following school board consolidation in 2004, the Department of

Education established standardized job advertisements for board executive level positions and draft contracts containing clauses requiring direct financial accountability to the minister as well as the school board (Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012).

Consistent with restructuring initiatives in other countries, provinces have also tended to centralize curriculum, with clearly defined provincial learning outcomes, and to implement provincial, interprovincial, and international standardized assessments and reporting (Canadian School Boards Association, 2010; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2011a, 2011b; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005; Levin & Wiens, 2003; Sheppard, 2012). Reporting of school test results has become a high profile event in some provinces (Levin, 2005).

Decline of School Board Authority

Historically, school boards have been free to make educational decisions independently from the daily machinations of provincial politics, provided they act within boundaries specified in the legislation that governs them. Under the Carver (2006) model of school board governance the district superintendent/director is independent from government and accountable only to the school board. This model ensures that a school board's ability to carry out its mandate through the director is not compromised. But recent research within the Canadian context (Dibbon, Sheppard, & Brown, 2012; Sheppard, 2012) has pointed to several examples where provincial governments have intruded directly into school board operations. Dibbon, Sheppard, and Brown (2012) profile a number of cases of direct intervention ranging from overturning a decision to close a school (during a provincial election) to dismissal of a school board for failing to balance its books.

Recently two provinces used their legislative authority to oust several school boards charging that the boards were ineffective. In Nova Scotia, between 2006 and 2012, the education minister dismissed three of the province's school boards replacing them with government-appointed managers (South shore school . . . , 2011). In two cases the boards were fired for internal disagreements, while in the third most recent case, the board was accused of failing to be accountable, when it was revealed that members were resisting a school review process that would have likely led to school closures and individual members were lobbying against some of the closures. In 2011 Prince Edward Island's minister responsible for education dissolved one of its two school boards replacing it with a government-appointed "trustee." In the minister's news release he claimed that acrimony within the board had taken precedence over its concern for the school system (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2011). Given the political nature of some school board actions and decisions, this kind of interference evokes tensions between the boards and the governments who create and fund them.

The above-noted examples raise questions about the nature of the relationship between school boards/districts and provincial government authorities, the autonomy of boards, and the level of surveillance imposed on school board operations and policy. They also raise questions about whether there has been a tacit change in the governance roles both of school board trustees and the superintendents who administer school districts on their behalf. It is within this context that the research reported in this paper has been conducted.

Method and Data Sources

The study was done over a 12 month period between December 2010 and November 2011. We adopted a qualitative research design that involved the participation of two participant

groups: (1) English school board trustees and (2) school district superintendents/directors from nine Canadian provinces (New Brunswick and French Quebec excluded). In total, 21 sessions were held including nine focus groups with school board trustees, and one session with a nationally-representative group, nine focus groups with district superintendents or directors of education and one interview with a superintendent of education. Focus groups ranged in size from 6 to 12 participants with sessions running between 60 and 90 minutes. The questions that comprised the interview and focus group protocols were developed through an extensive review of the relevant literature relating to school board governance and through information gathered from three consultation sessions: two sessions with school board members and superintendents of education conducted at the 2012 CSBA Annual General Meeting and one session with interested members of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration (CASEA) at its 2010 Congress.

To increase the validity of findings, we took considerable care to collect data from school board members and school district superintendents from all provinces and territories and from those holding office with the CSBA Board. All four principal researchers (with some assistance from graduate students) collected data at different times and in differing locations and circumstances over the twelve-month data collection period (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Within each province or region, participant selection was conducted with sensitivity to gender, experience, ethnicity, and regional geography. The research protocol was approved in advance by a university interdisciplinary committee on ethics in human research and followed the principles outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

Governance Roles of School Boards

The preliminary findings reported here relate to how school board trustees and district superintendents perceive the governance roles and effectiveness of school boards, and the governance roles of provincial governments. Several near-synonymous themes emerged from the focus group data relating to roles in maintaining local autonomy including regional representation, maintaining a community-based presence, the importance of local culture, and localized decision-making. Other roles included accountability for student learning, financial accountability, oversight of the professional staff, advocacy and negotiation with government, and serving as a middle layer or buffer between government and the school community.

Although the findings based on our work with superintendents were similar to that of school board trustees in many areas, superintendents focused more on policy roles, the democratic mandate of school boards, and the relationship of school boards and government. Both groups were insistent that school boards serve a vital role in sustaining the success of Canada's education system.

Local Representation

There was significant attention to the importance of local representation. School board trustees expressed the importance of maintaining a local/regional orientation to the policies and operations of a school district. They viewed the role of the trustee as bringing forward school-community issues and concerns about which senior management and professional staff in the district office may not be aware. Some trustees highlighted diversity in terms of the educational needs of constituents (students and their parents) and talked about their roles as a conduit

between parents and the professional staff of the district. School board trustees said that they provide a mechanism to translate those needs into local policy.

Some participants concentrated on the role played by trustees in ensuring schools operated in a manner that reflected local values and needs. Trustees described linguistic differences, regional differences, and cultural-ethnic differences that are particularly important to constituents. Some trustees observed that communities with a large Aboriginal presence are going to have vastly different needs than those of stakeholders in larger cities with a different ethnic character or those with a large multi-cultural population. One trustee noted,

> I think as elected people we are the conscience for the public . . . I think
> people look to us to represent them and again be their conscience . . .

Superintendents echoed these representations. One observed that trustees are like ombudsmen or trouble shooters who can address or correct local problems when they crop up, for example, a busing issue or a concern about a particular practice in a school.

Independent Decision-Making

The capacity of boards to be autonomous in decision-making was stressed as a key means of ensuring boards remained effective in representing local interests. Participants pointed out that regional school board trustees are well apprised of the unique sets of regional issues important to parents and citizens. They described part of their role as identifying local priorities at the policy table and ensuring that the resources of the district are deployed to respond to these priorities. Without trustees, one participant observed, the connection to the community could be in jeopardy.

Some trustees focused their comments on the need for local culture and community circumstances to be brought to bear on educational decision-making. One characteristic unique

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to school board decision-making is the first-hand experience of trustees with community priorities. Several participants noted that board members were effective in keeping the values of the district bureaucrats and the directions of government from overriding the values of the community.

Superintendents expressed concerns about loss of democracy in a more centralized system, since more centralization has the potential to limit the independence of the board and politicize decision-making. One district superintendent speculated that in a more centralized system senior staff would need approval at a political level to even participate in a study such as this one:

> . . . [T]o do this research study you [would] begin with approval from the minister to see if we, as employees of the Department of Education, could talk to you and whether in fact this was a good thing.

Some superintendents had already been part of a significant consolidation of several smaller districts. There was concern expressed that the merger of boards into a larger centralized board has had the effect of amplifying the number of local issues that must now be adjudicated by the one school board. Moreover, these larger districts now cover a larger geographic area and more electoral ridings. Some superintendents expressed concern about an escalation of the level of political contact between trustees (and senior professional staff) and elected members of the legislative assembly (MLAs). Participants told us that members of provincial legislatures have sought direct access to trustees and board personnel, potentially compromising the independent functioning of the board. As one director observed,

> it is almost like a love-hate relationship with school boards. [Members of the legislature] need them to carry out things that perhaps they can't do at a government level because politically it wouldn't be in their best favour, but they also don't like [school boards] because they are autonomous and you are a corporation essentially that can say, "no we are not doing that." So it's a very fine balancing act between the . . . political part of government and the . . . school board.

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Accountability and Oversight

Both school board trustees and superintendents were clear that one of the most significant roles of board trustees relates to financial accountability for the use of public funding. Trustees said that they understood their obligation to make prudent financial decisions about the allocation of resources throughout the district, but they felt such decisions must account for different regional needs. In sessions with superintendents there was considerable focus on individual school board members as the local face of accountability for public educational spending. One superintendent commented that,

> people tend to measure provincial investments by how well their neighbour's kid is doing or their own child is doing or what people are saying at the gas pumps or after church and so forth. They make that aspect of accountability real.

Accountability for Student Learning

In addition to their fiduciary responsibility, there was general agreement that oversight of professional staff and practitioners was a significant governance role of school boards. A common theme relating to this finding was that this oversight role extended to monitoring operations to ensure schools meet local needs while graduating students with a high quality education. There was consensus that one of a school board member's primary functions is to act to ensure that the quality of education remains high.

In our sessions with superintendents we heard the same kinds of representations—one of the key roles of trustees is to keep professional staff accountable in terms of outcomes and the results. Many expressed the belief that the role of the trustee has changed in the last ten years since a good deal of what is required of districts by education departments is mandated, and the focus is now on student achievement. Therefore, the agenda items for school board meetings

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have changed to parallel the new focus. Commenting on the regulatory environment of school

districts, one participant observed,

> much of what [school board trustees] do, I guess I should say, are required to
> do, is mandated. Their role has become increasingly about finding ways to fit
> into the local context, the initiatives that come from the ministries . . .

Advocacy

Trustees also interpreted regional representation in terms of advocacy. They expressed

the view that different communities in a regional school board may have very different needs.

Trustees in several regions of the country said they were also situated as advocates for the

communities within their own "zone." As democratically-elected representatives, they viewed

their voice as the voice of the resident in their particular constituency. The role, therefore, is

parochial and communicative; they are a liaison with the public who elected them and who they

represent. One participant expressed the role of trustee in this way:

> We are a voice for the vulnerable and a voice for those who don't speak for
> themselves; a communicator and ombudsman for communities that don't
> know how to connect, to me that's a primary role that we play.

Several trustees noted, however, that parochialism has its place, but after an issue has been

debated, a board can only be effective if individuals place the interests of their region in check to

avoid divisiveness.

Negotiating and Mediating

Both trustees and superintendents represented school boards as serving as a "buffer"

between government and the public on education issues. Superintendents described a school

board's role as acting to shape and adapt provincial policy to achieve the most positive impact

for students in the local community. One participant noted that

> school boards become very involved in . . . the policy directions and discussions
> with the staff in the government and at the bureaucratic level and attempt to
> modify the direction they are taking so that, in fact, it will work effectively on
> the ground for students in the schools.

Trustees also identified a necessary mediating role between government and the public. One

trustee conceptualized this as both acting for and on behalf of parents and the public, and serving

a function of influencing, and subsequently interpreting and acting on, the will of government.

One observed that school boards have a duty to represent the district's interest with government

including lobbying to acquire the educational services and resources constituents feel are needed

in the district:

> Well I see [our role] as advocating for students . . . to be sure that each district
> is getting a fair share of the funding pie and without school boards I think it
> could be open season—especially in rural areas. I think the big role is
> advocating on behalf of your own district.

Role of Provincial Education Authorities

There is a strong consensus view that the significance of the school district apparatus in

Canada has diminished as provincial governments (cabinets and DOEs) exert greater direct

influence over local educational matters. School district superintendents suggested that school

boards were struggling to define their role in a new governance arrangement where different,

external actors were not only setting the broad educational agenda, but also involved in local

operations. According to one participant, school districts are in danger of "losing their voice in

education" as there is now "very little governance left." Among the cited examples of

operational changes that are believed to have eroded school board autonomy are centralized

labour negotiations and province-wide collective agreements; an increase in targeted funding; centralized student information systems; direct intervention by ministry bureaucrats, and; the requirement for ministerial sign-off on certain school board policy decisions.

Both school board trustees and superintendents expressed the view that, increasingly, school board policy is being driven "from the centre." Participants from both groups expressed concern about the intrusion of political actors in school board policy, with one trustee noting that when school boards operate at arm's length from government the governance arrangement works to "remove the politicization of decision making." One of the factors responsible for eroding school board autonomy in policy making is the accountability relationship with government. One trustee observed that parents and the public expect school boards to make policy in the local interest, but boards are limited in the kinds of decisions they can make because governments "control the purse strings" and scrutinize decisions through a political lens. In another session superintendents cited examples where school boards were brought to task by the DOE for "decisions that shouldn't have been made."

Another problem identified by trustees was the apparent contradiction between strict oversight of school district operations at one level, and the claim, made by governmental authorities, that school boards operate independently. Trustees expressed concerns at the progression of ministry contact with school boards from macro-level to micro-level oversight. In the following exchange, two trustees discuss financial directives that had been imposed on school boards:

> Speaker 1: In Quebec, I would say in the past three to four years our funding has become so targeted and there is no wiggle room in so much of the funding that we receive that . . . it has taken away all of the voting power.
>
> Speaker 2: I would say today that even your travel budget was targeted by the province.

Speaker 1: The travel budget was cut 25%, the travel budget, PD, and there are a whole bunch of other things administratively that are cut two for one—so if one retires, two retirees you can only replace one. It is huge.

Speaker 2: That's micromanaging.

Superintendents in a number of sessions echoed the perception that school boards are now more restricted in fulfilling their mandates and this tightening of flexibility is not only financial but extends to program focus. The following exchange typifies how district superintendents represented the relationship between government and school boards:

Speaker 1 . . . they control the purse strings; they really do dictate what the board can and cannot do whether it is a capital project or a curriculum implementation or even the hiring of staff. It's really all under the direction of the department.

Speaker 2: They determine the funding, that's right.

Speaker 3: The funding for programs for everything.

Speaker 1: A hundred percent of our dollars come from government.

Speaker 2: And . . . we are developing our strategic plan but it has to be linked with the strategic plans of the department so you just can't do whatever you want you know. You got to contribute to that plan, the government's plan.

Some trustees were concerned that local programs could be affected if the centralization trend continued. There was a view expressed that some local programming is specifically designed to address particular needs that are situated in the local community. Trustees shared numerous examples of localized programming that had been developed at the urging of a school board representative. Some trustees felt that if the imbalance between regional and central authority continued, some of these local programs would be at risk of never having been developed:

We still do a lot of stuff around programming and things that are unique and I think in British Columbia; [one of these is] the Haida Gwaii immersion program to keep kids engaged in schools to make sure they graduate. That's

not going to come out of central office somewhere where it is planned in Victoria that has to come from a local community. So there is still a role [for school boards], but these [are] tensions that have developed because of other centralizations.

Superintendents in several sessions were more direct in articulating a centralization agenda and represented some governments as firmly focused on the elimination or substantial consolidation of existing boards. On several occasions we heard fears expressed about plans to substantially reduce the number of districts and frustration with multi-year funding reductions announced by government in response to enrolment decline. In one session participants expressed the view that governments have been able to "beat up on school boards" because there are "no votes in education."

Other district superintendents were more measured in their assessment of the relationship between governmental authorities and school boards. Considerable value was placed on fact that trustees are elected regionally and, in a large geographic school board, they bring the values and interests of different constituent groups to the policy table. There was consensus that this function would be jeopardized in a completely centralized system. However, in several sessions there was recognition that governments were generally sensitive to the importance of that role. Participants described a need for a balance between the will of the ministry of education and the representations of the local community. While it was felt that these two are often in alignment, there are circumstances where local needs or values might be compromised without the work of school boards. One superintendent talked about the importance of balance in governance responsibilities:

> You need defined responsibilities and defined rights and powers at the local levels just as you need those definitions at the . . . central level by government. So you know school boards are an important part of the living out of that vision of a balancing of the rights and responsibilities. A good

> school board can have the impact of enhancing student learning I believe
> [and] has a better chance to welcome and to accommodate local diversity.

School Board Effectiveness

Many of the research participants, from both groups studied, conceptualized effectiveness in terms of the culture and climate of a school district. There was a strong view expressed that school boards play a significant part in shaping the organizational climate of a district and this, in turn, influences effectiveness. According to some trustees how well a school board accomplishes its mandate, is influenced by whether the board perceives its role in political terms or in educational terms. One trustee observed that board composition can have a strong impact on the extent to which a district is innovative and student-focused.

From the perspective of effective governance and relevant decision-making many trustees talked about the importance of their personal connections to schools and school councils. Several trustees mentioned the value of visiting schools, attending school events, and meeting with the student council or the advisory council of a school. We heard that a common practice in school districts is to assign trustees to schools as a means of maintaining an "elected" presence in the local community. Trustees were strong in their defence of this practice charging that the needs of local constituencies could be lost if administrative arrangements were more technocratic in nature. One speaker felt that policy needed to be connected to the community. The view was expressed that the hired professional staff are more dispassionate and often do not have any personal connection to local circumstances. One trustee observed,

> We hire very good technical people, who know lots about the pedagogical
> world, but you have to have a community that supports what you are doing
> and we are that interaction with the community.

Notwithstanding the fact that the school board presence and scope of responsibilities had been dramatically reduced in some provinces, some trustees felt that school boards still maintain an important local role in governance. In one instance, a trustee acknowledged that school boards had undergone significant consolidation and a diminished governance role, but she still considered the role of school boards to be relatively independent of government:

> [The ministry] give[s] us the funding, but we have a tremendous input as boards ourselves in how we allocate that funding—not hiring teachers because that is now the place of the province—but the actual programming and the actual facilities that they maintain. You know we have a very hands-on [approach]; we are the ones who really develop all of that. . . .

However, not all trustees felt that school boards were maintaining the local relevance they consider to be vital to their continued existence. Trustees in all the focus group sessions identified their roles variously as advocating for students, setting broad policy for the board, vying for public funding and ensuring accountability for its expenditure, and representing local interests. But in some regions, there was a view that governments have demonstrated a fundamental lack of clarity related to what school districts do. One trustee observed that "there is a lot of misunderstanding about the role of school boards."

Gradual centralization of authority was also blamed for changes in the perceived relevance of school boards. The movement away from local taxation in some provinces, as well as a profound increase in the number of provincially mandated procedures and governance requirements was seen as a radical shift in authority over education. Whereas, in the past, financial management, collective bargaining, and governing authority rested more with school boards than with government, the participants in this study felt that provincial ministries of education had appropriated authority in these areas away from school boards, thereby weakening

their relevance in the community. The following excerpt describes how one trustee described the impact of these changes on school boards:

> In Quebec we are experiencing less and less connectivity and there is a lot of questioning about the relevance of school boards so I'm not so sure that the community supports us as they once did.

> Several trustees voiced concern over the impact of rapid change in education and

greater demands on school districts in a range of areas. There was agreement that parents and the community have become more restless—particularly in urban centres. Both participant groups held the view that educational governance is now under greater public scrutiny, and this has had an impact on the relevance of school boards. One superintendent suggested that school boards have not adapted their practices to respond to new public demands for schools:

> So now society is more questioning. Not that they disagree; they just have high expectations of the system. So they are asking questions and we haven't invited the community in and engaged them and we are still behaving in a way that was for a different time that makes a disconnect.

Another speaker added that:

> That is part because of the increased centralization and . . . that's a common theme across the country, that local autonomy that we had as trustees of school boards which could be very reflective of the community has been interrupted by a very politicized and centralized direction from our provincial governments, which compromises quality, I think.

Discussion: Implications for School Board Governance

This study attempts to connect the understandings from several strands of governance and policy research and to address questions relating to the relevance of school boards in an interventionist education policy environment. Earlier research (Galway, 2006, 2008) on the policy formation practices in ministry-level policy elites in Canada (education ministers and senior bureaucrats) shows a trend towards reliance on broadly defined democratic/political

influences—public opinion, advocacy, the mass media, and other political and pragmatic

pressures. These findings are consistent with a policy paradigm that is ambiguous, politicized

and risky (e.g., Majone,1989; Kingdon,1995; Levin, 2001; Stone, 2002)—inclusive of personal,

political, experiential, and altruistic motives. This paradigm supports the conceptualization of a

policy environment in Canada that is more reactive than systematic; and driven, to a great extent,

by public opinion, advocacy, and the mass media, which often call for immediate policy

responses and, potentially, intervention in school board actions and decisions.

The findings from this research show that both school board trustees and

superintendents are gravely concerned about the ability of school boards to be effective in a

climate of faltering government support. While superintendents identified numerous examples of

how their school districts had enacted programs and initiatives to remain effective and relevant

(e.g., policy consultations with constituents, opportunities for parents to engage with the board

on matters of student learning, enhanced communications, and a strategic focus on student-

centred teaching and learning) in some jurisdictions, they were less than optimistic about the

long-term prospects for school boards. One superintendent expressed the view that collaboration

between the school board and the province was highly unstable, while another characterized the

relationship as lacking trust. There was general consensus that the public expected school boards

to provide a strong local/regional voice in broad educational policy making; however,

participants from both groups felt that trustees could only be effective in that role if governments

do not circumvent them or openly criticize their work. School board trustees, meanwhile,

provided numerous examples of instances where DOEs made decisions that directly impacted

school board operations without any form of consultation. They also cited examples where the

school board was charged with defending or taking responsibility for questionable decisions into which they had no input.

Among the questions not addressed in Galway's (2006) study is the extent to which the recent policy interventions by governments into school board operations observed by Dibbon, Sheppard, and Brown (2012) are related to political risk. The research presented here shed some light on this question. The findings of this study reveal that school board roles and responsibilities have changed and continue to be shaped and marginalized by new accountabilities and new arrangements with provincial governments. Elsewhere Galway and Dibbon (2012, p.1) have described the educational landscape in Canada over the past quarter century as unsettled and risky; punctuated by "commissioned studies, program reviews, accountability and performance initiatives, and strategic plans, all of which fed significant reform of education systems . . . as policymakers tried to negotiate the problems of fewer students, unstable budgets, and new expectations for schools." They suggest that these kinds of actions, particularly the widespread reform of education systems also serve as public demonstrations of government legitimation. Beck (1997) points out that in risk society there are many competing special interests all vying for inclusion on the public education agenda. Public expectations for what school systems can deliver have never been greater and these expectations are constantly changing and being redefined, creating a chaotic and uncertain political policy context.

Based on these new data, and consistent with risk theory, we speculate that, in the present education policy environment, the political and ideological interests of elected governments may run counter to the democratic mandates of school boards. We theorize that in a politicized environment, the values, reward systems, and accountabilities against which school

board trustees and superintendents operate are likely to differ substantively from those of politicians and senior bureaucrats, thereby creating a policy environment that is antagonistic to local governance.

Our judgment, based on the findings from this research, is that the continuation of meaningful local educational governance in Canadian jurisdictions requires that elected school boards evaluate how they are situated in relation to the governments that create and fund them and the public who elect them. The options appear to be quiet acquiescence to the centralization of educational governance versus some form of productive opposition to these forced changes. School boards have the authority to begin a public discourse on local governance in education; perhaps it is preferable to take action to save a sinking ship than to quietly allow nature to take its course in the hope that it will be spared.

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