

Good Governance for School Boards

Trustee Professional Development Program

Module 10 — Advocacy: Engaging the Public

Page last updated in December 2019

IN THIS MODULE, TRUSTEES WILL EXPLORE:

- The components of effective board advocacy
- The relationship between board advocacy and student achievement and well-being
- The relationship between board advocacy and government policy directives
- School board advocacy as local democracy in action

INTRODUCTION

When school board trustees are elected, they assume responsibility for representing their constituents in all education issues related to their school district. A large part of their role as members of the governing board involves setting strategic directions and approving policies that affect such key areas as student achievement and well-being, school programs and services, school climate, budget and allocation of resources. As the voice of publicly funded education in Ontario, trustees take on an equally important role in the realm of advocacy. In their interactions with families, constituents, educators, various levels of government and the general public, trustees are responsible for representing and promoting the best interests of all students of the school board. In doing so they have the opportunity to be champions for public education and to promote the role of school boards in delivering quality education at the local level.

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Publicly funded education operates in a dynamic, ever-evolving environment and must be responsive to changes in government and legislation, societal pressures including parent expectations, the vagaries of the economy, emerging trends in education program and assessment, and technological advances. For years, these forces have reshaped the work of school boards and the role of trustees in Ontario and will continue to have influence in our highly connected world. As the publicly funded education system continues to evolve and policy makers focus on ongoing reforms, the advocacy role of school board trustees becomes even more vital to the future of education in Ontario. Deeper engagement with their communities and interactive communication with their constituents represent an increasingly critical aspect of the role of trustees. The constituents of the school board have entrusted their trustee representatives with the responsibility of providing a first-class education for their children. Trustees must ensure that the voices of school supporters can be heard by government.

A challenge for trustees is to convince the Ontario public that investment in publicly funded education is a prudent investment if we are to build a cohesive society and a prosperous future for Ontario. Engaging all sectors and government levels goes to the heart of the advocacy role that school board trustees must undertake.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Advocacy is active support for an idea or a cause. It can take many forms, but includes speaking up and drawing attention to an important issue. It may also include influencing decision-makers. It usually involves the interests of specific groups or organizations and the interests of the government. In education, advocacy often revolves around topics such as funding, special needs, language delivery, or early childhood education; the common denominator is the interests of students and the value of publicly funded education.

Trustees as Advocates

Trustees possess a range of skills, experience, knowledge, values, beliefs and opinions. Their backgrounds are varied, and it is this diversity that contributes to good decision making at the board table. They bring an awareness of the specific issues articulated by parents as well as the overall interests of their community. They consider the needs of their community when reflecting on a particular issue and encourage their constituents to participate in the school

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system. A portion of trustees' time is spent responding to constituents' questions, requests, and concerns, and helping them to navigate their way towards solutions.

The trustee is a leader and, in many respects, is the kind of leader who may take a visionary position and inspires others. Trustees may advocate for the elimination of child poverty and because of their knowledge of the issue and the passion they bring to it, motivate others to pursue the cause. At other times, trustees can be so caught up in responding to day-to-day issues that the big picture recedes from view. The responsibility that comes with leadership is a complex balancing act, one that demands immediate attention for community needs while keeping one's eye on the major policy issues that affect all the students of the board. Finding time and energy to advocate for change in the arena of public policy is a considerable challenge.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOBBYING AND ADVOCACY?

The terms advocacy and lobbying are often used interchangeably but there are distinct differences in their purpose, method and intent.

Advocacy is about influencing public opinion or attitudes about issues that affect people's lives. The advocate believes in the cause and willingly promotes it. Trustees, as part of their role, may advocate for specific local issues they view as the right thing to do for students. Or they can advocate for larger issues such as environmental sustainability or a national focus on children's mental health.

Lobbying on the other hand refers to efforts to influence politicians and senior government staff with regard to particular legislation with intent to achieve specific change in or outcomes from the legislation.

These distinctions are important to be aware of; however, there are times when an advocacy strategy will include elements of lobbying. For example, advocacy for societal support for safe and caring schools could also involve lobbying for specific changes in Safe Schools legislation.

WHY ENGAGE IN ADVOCACY?

School board trustees are the elected spokespersons for education. They are engaged in their communities, know the interests of their constituents, and have established lines of communication that invite input and allow the trustee to share information about important issues affecting the school

board in particular and education in general. This strengthens the trustee's base for their advocacy role.

School Boards operate in a dynamic and lively environment so very often there are issues that require an advocacy approach. An important role of the trustee is to speak out on behalf of their constituents to ensure that policy makers at the provincial and local levels understand the implications of their policy decisions for individuals.

Those who make public policy at the provincial level must be made aware of the goals of school board constituents and be encouraged to learn where the community and the school board stand on specific issues. By speaking out and advocating for the interests of school boards within the publicly funded education system, trustees can influence government decisions. They can propose solutions to benefit not only their own community, but all communities affected by government policies. By expressing their views they can bring to public attention the issues at stake and provide alternatives to views that they see as harmful to the publicly funded education system.

Public policy can cover a lot of territory and, on the face of it, may seem to be outside the purview of education. It is the job of trustees to be vigilant about what can affect the lives of students, the best work of school boards and the well-being of the community.

High-quality, well-funded public education is an investment in the future of Ontario. By speaking out on education issues, school board trustees not only represent the concerns of school supporters, they serve as advocates for building a strong education system through progressive public policy. Education is a foundational cornerstone of a prosperous democracy, an essential part of the political agenda and a matter of public interest.

PUBLIC INTEREST - THE BIG PICTURE

Because of their political role, trustees are ideally positioned to advocate across the province and at the provincial government level on issues that are matters of public policy. These matters are often directly linked to key aspects of school board governance such as creating optimal conditions for children's achievement and well-being. Indeed advocacy is a critical part of the job description of elected school boards. (See ***Module #3 - Roles and Responsibilities***) Advocacy doesn't just happen; it is purposeful and needs to be provided for in board policy and be a component of the board's multi-year strategic plan. Some illustrative examples of public interest advocacy that are

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taken up by school boards and incorporated in the work of individual trustees are:

Children's Mental Health

Approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge and 70% of mental health challenges have their onset in childhood or youth. ^[1]

What that means for the education system is that one in five children experience a barrier that gets in the way of their readiness to learn. What it means for society at large is that we are failing to provide essential supports that will lead to improved health and prosperity for all our communities. One could take a narrow view and say it is up to the Ministry of Health to deal with this. An advocate for children's mental health may say that we are all responsible and that all Ministries that deal with children, public agencies and school boards have to recognize the reality of their interdependence and collaborate to ensure better life chances for every child.

Child Poverty

Poverty is also an all too prevalent condition that has an impact on the readiness of children to learn and calls equally for concerted efforts and strong levels of advocacy. On 24 November, 1989, the House of Commons resolved to seek "to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." This resolution passed by a unanimous vote of all parties. Twenty five years later, Campaign 2000's report card found that more Canadian children live in poverty today than they did when the House of Commons resolved to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000 (Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada). Four in 10 of Canada's Indigenous children live in poverty and the gap between rich and poor families remains wide, leaving average-income families also struggling to keep up. At the local level school boards can respond with practical supports such as breakfast programs and after-school programs. On a broader level they engage in advocacy work through such organizations as Campaign 2000 or through direct input into the Government's efforts to reduce poverty across Ontario. ^[2]

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Indigenous Education

Advocating for the rights and needs of Indigenous children calls on trustees to gain awareness of the history and legacy of residential schools and the discrepancies in economic, social and education opportunities between Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children across Canada. Due to these historic discrepancies, Canada's Auditor General noted in 2004, and reaffirmed in 2011, that it would take at least 28 years to reconcile and remove systemic barriers to close the education gap experienced by Indigenous students.

In 2015, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was issued. Its **94 Calls to Action** [<http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf>](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf) represented the Commission's blueprint for Canadians to work together to build a better future for Indigenous people in Canada. Two Calls in particular are focused on Education – **Calls 62 and 63** [<http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf>](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf).

With the support of their communities, school boards have an obligation to ensure that there are specific programs and supports in the boards' schools for Indigenous students, including the provision of safe spaces, culturally responsive curriculum, and that all students learn about Indigenous cultures and histories. It is equally important to build cultural competency among all staff. *For more information, see **Module 20 – A Journey Towards Truth and Reconciliation**.*

Services for Immigrant Children and Youth

Ontario receives approximately half of the immigrant families who arrive in Canada each year. The children from these families attend publicly funded schools and their needs may extend beyond what is typically found in the education funding envelope. The focus of school board advocacy, and sometimes direct lobbying, in this area is on capacity to provide the services that new families may need to settle into life in Ontario.

Environmental Sustainability

In an age of increased awareness of our interdependence and interconnectedness, trustees are advocates for not only their local community but for the larger society. A good example is how well practices that promote [Click here to begin tracking your progress](#)

environmental sustainability are entrenched in Ontario schools. Students are leaders in recycling and school boards continue to advocate for supports for the “greening” of schools. Environmental education is infused in the curriculum. This is an advocacy area that reaches out from the local community to span the globe.

SPECIFIC INTERESTS OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS

All of the examples of public policy advocacy above are, or can be, included in the advocacy plans of school boards in Ontario’s four publicly funded school systems. Each system will incorporate in its plan advocacy issues that are specific to its needs.

In engaging its public, the public school system emphasizes its commitment to inclusiveness and universality, promoting the dignity and equality of every individual regardless of culture, race, life circumstances, religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Public schools are represented as a place where all students and their families are equally welcomed, where they interact and learn about each other in an environment of respect, tolerance, and understanding, and where the pursuit of learning is characterized by the spirit of exploration.

The advocacy efforts of Catholic trustees, school boards and their provincial school board association are always mindful of the goal of promoting and protecting the future of Catholic education and involve building partnerships with dioceses and Catholic organizations including the Institute for Catholic Education. Challenges include building understanding among the general public about the value of a distinct Catholic school system. In his book *Catholic Education: Ensuring a Future*, James Mulligan talks about the need to raise the consciousness of parents and ratepayers about how Catholic education contributes to the common good of society and the role of trustees as stewards of Catholic education: “Stewards in Catholic education are creative caretakers serving the Catholic community. ...The long road that Catholic education must walk demands the strategy and stamina inherent in Catholic stewardship.” ^[3]

Two of the four publicly funded education systems in Ontario operate French Language schools. The right to education in the French language is enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The province’s francophone community and its schools are partners in sustaining a strong francophone community in a minority environment. The province’s francophone community looks to its schools to protect, transmit and enhance French language and culture. The schools, in turn, look to the francophone

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organizations and agencies in the broader community to be their partners in building a strong francophone community. Advocacy can focus on support for an environment that addresses the importance of sustainable French language and culture with regard to its impact on maintaining high levels of student achievement and well-being.

BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE - BUILDING CAPACITY

Advocacy should be a continuous process and is developed over a long time. It can be subtle and often involves putting the larger good before individual interests. Building good relationships in communities and with local and provincial politicians is a vital part of good advocacy practice.

Communities

The dialogue with communities is an essential starting point for identifying the issues that people are concerned about. This can be achieved in a range of ways. Invitations for input can be board- or trustee-generated through community meetings, public forums, open houses or surveys. The forum for dialogue may involve trustees of the board attending community-initiated meetings organized around specific issues. The desired outcome is building broad-based support for public policy issues and adding authority to advocacy efforts.

The Municipality

Trustees and municipal councillors share a constituency base and have a mutual interest in the resources in the community. Schools are a vital community resource and the advocacy work of school board trustees should include building relationships with municipal councillors so that they can connect with each other more effectively and work together for the community in areas such as shared recreational facilities and libraries, alternative use of school space for community agencies or a plan that supports good use of green space.

Provincial Politicians

The local Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) is a key partner to consider when developing an advocacy strategy. They are the closest link to the policy makers in the provincial government. Although the Ontario Ministry of

Education, or the Minister's office, might seem to be more direct targets for advocacy and, where needed, lobbying initiatives regarding public policy and funding decisions, the most responsive audience is often the local MPP because trustees and MPPs serve many of the same constituents.

By initiating public forums on issues such as parent engagement, community safety or sustainable environment, the board of trustees offers an ideal opportunity to engage politicians in discussions about public policy in ways that focus on the priorities and needs of their constituents.

Media Relations

Establishing good relations with the media is another strong component of successful advocacy. Since most people learn a great deal of what they know about schools and about the broader issues of public policy through the media, the board of trustees should ensure that their local media have the information they need to present a balanced picture of public education and the societal issues boards are dealing with.

Some Cautions

A passionate voice in advocating for issues of importance is not the same as stirring up public anger or fear in order to bring pressure to bear on the issue in question. The latter tactic can have unwelcome results. This includes the eroding of confidence in publicly funded education. The public's willingness to support and invest in education may suffer fatigue if they are frequently presented with "the sky is falling" scenarios. A government that is subject to competing pressures around the spending of tax dollars may find cause to rethink the priority it gives to the education sector. It is wise to keep the long-term goals in mind rather than focus attention on a troublesome but temporary - and manageable - issue.

CONCLUSION

Trustees as community leaders can expect to be energized, frustrated, overwhelmed and inspired by the complex range of demands of the job. The trustee is often the first point of contact for parents seeking solutions to a problem or in demand to support community initiatives. At the same time trustees have a full schedule of board activities and meetings and a pressing need to keep on top of issues as they emerge. This can leave one feeling there is little time left to pursue the high ideals, including advocating for a

better world for Ontario's young people. Trustees, however, are called to advocate for principles that are important to society. Principles such as diversity, inclusion and respect for all are integral to our schools not just because they are values in themselves but because they are the building blocks of a civil and cohesive society. In addition, Catholic, French and Public school board trustees have the responsibility to be stewards and guardians of the distinctive beliefs and values of their respective education systems. How does one do it all? It has a lot to do with vision, setting priorities and not getting consumed by details at the expense of the bigger goals.

Advocacy creates the inspiration for change. Through their advocacy work, trustees can use their extensive experience to build public support for the conditions that will give Ontario's young people the greatest chances in life. In the process, they will also help to create public policy that strengthens the fabric of our society.

REFERENCES

Effective practices of many school boards in Ontario were relied upon in the development of this module. This is gratefully acknowledged by OESC-CSEO.

The advocacy work of school board associations in Ontario also informed the content of this module:

Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO) [www.acepo.org <http://www.acepo.org/en/>](http://www.acepo.org/en/)

Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC) [www.afocsc.org <http://www.afocsc.org/?lang=en>](http://www.afocsc.org/?lang=en)

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) [www.ocsta.on.ca <http://www.ocsta.on.ca/>](http://www.ocsta.on.ca)

Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) [www.opsba.org <https://www.opsba.org/>](https://www.opsba.org)

See also each association's guidebook on Good Governance: [https://ontarioschooltrustees.org/Guides.html <https://ontarioschooltrustees.org/Guides.html>](https://ontarioschooltrustees.org/Guides.html)

Minority Language Educational Rights, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: [https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csjsjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art23.html <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csjsjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art23.html>](https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csjsjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art23.html)

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Rights – Education, Roman Catholic minority, Canadian Constitution
www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/ca_1982.html
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NOTES

- <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/english/specialneeds/mentalealth/index.aspx>
[<http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/english/specialneeds/mentalealth/index.aspx>](http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/english/specialneeds/mentalealth/index.aspx) ↗
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- *Catholic Education: Ensuring a Future*, J. Mulligan, 2005. ↗

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