

Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.

KOFI ANNAN

School Board Trustees – Who are they? Why are they important?

School board trustees are the **members** of the district school board. They are locally-elected representatives of the public, and they are the community’s advocate for public education. They are required to carry out their responsibilities in a manner that assists the board in fulfilling its duties under the *Education Act*.

A trustee’s role is to maintain a focus on student achievement and well-being and to participate in making decisions that benefit the entire board district while representing the interests of his or her constituents. Trustees must also communicate the views and decisions of the board back to their constituents.

This is not as simple as it sounds. Because Ontario is large and diverse, the job of school board trustee varies widely. A trustee is responsible for identifying the needs and priorities of their community and for ensuring these are considered in the decisions that result in practical educational opportunities for students. In doing so, trustees must mediate among conflicting interests and values. A trustee must do this in collaboration with the other members of the school board by developing policies that work for all students, and ensuring they are implemented effectively. Whether it is consulting with communities on how the board will provide French Immersion programs or offer before and after school programs or name a new school, it is the local trustee who makes sure that the community has a direct way to express its views on vital education decisions that affect our day-to-day lives. School trustees play an indispensable role in preserving our democratic heritage.

The school trustee is a member of a team

Only the team (the Board), not an individual trustee, has the authority to make decisions or take action. A school board must place all students first when making any decision.

Trustees are required to uphold the implementation of any board resolution after it is passed by the board. In exercising their role, they are required to comply with the board’s code of conduct.

Trustees are responsible for establishing policy direction

Policies set out the expectations about what should happen or how services are to be provided within the school board. A well-written policy describes to parents, the public and the board’s staff, what they can expect. The Board of Trustees ensure that the director of education carries out responsibilities for implementing board’s policies. They entrust the day to day management of the board to its staff through the board’s director of education.

Trustees, as members of the board, are accountable to the province

The Board of Trustees is accountable to the Province of Ontario for the proper conduct of their duties and powers, including the implementation of provincial policy and the use of provincially allocated funds.

Trustees are accountable to their electorate

As elected officials trustees must balance the demands of the community with the duties required by the Ministry of Education. By law, they are required to consult with parents, students and supporters of the board on the board’s multi-year plan and bring the concerns of these groups to the attention of the board. This can be challenging and takes dedicated leadership coupled with a willingness to seek innovative ideas and the courage to implement them.



School Board Trustees are community leaders

School board trustees have a responsibility to all the families in their community – not just their neighbours, and not just families with school-aged children. They work with their school board colleagues and with other community partners to ensure that all the students within the board’s jurisdiction have equal opportunities to reach their maximum potential.

Trustees demonstrate their leadership in the following key areas:

- Establishing vision to ensure a strong public education system
- Setting goals for student achievement
- Undertaking assessment to measure progress
- Promoting accountability throughout the school board
- Allocating resources in ways that ensure equity of opportunity and demonstrate accountability
- Establishing a respectful, caring, professional climate throughout the school board
- Creating collaborative relationships inside the board and across the community
- Promoting continuous improvement
- Promoting community involvement and establishing communications

What are the Time Commitments for a School Board Trustee?

Attending Board Meetings and Committee Meetings

Trustees are expected to prepare for, and participate in, all board meetings and all meetings of board committees of which they are members. Preparing for a board meeting by reviewing all the material can be time-consuming. Attendance at board meetings can be in person or through electronic means. Board meetings are not, however, the only time commitment for trustees. To get a full picture of board-related requirements, candidates should check with their local school board office.

Other duties at the School Board

There are other obligations for school board trustees to undertake in their role as a school board member. Some of these are statutory (meaning mandated by the province) and some are not. Statutory duties include the appointment of a trustee to various committees such as the Special Education Advisory Committee, to board-based quasi-judicial committees such as those responsible for conducting proceedings dealing with the suspension or expulsion of students, to the Audit committee, the Supervised Alternative Learning committee and the Parent Involvement Committee. The board may also establish non-statutory committees or working groups as needed and these will have trustee membership.

Attending Community Meetings as a representative of the School board

One of a trustee’s key responsibilities is to facilitate communication between the board and community groups. Trustees may be asked to attend meetings such as: school council meetings, community groups, municipal councils and municipal committees, meetings with MPPs and MPs, and other community agencies such as district health councils and library

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boards. Community meetings are often held at night to enable working parents to attend.

Attending school events and community functions will give candidates a fuller picture of the role.

Responding to the concerns of parents and others

A trustee is often the first point of contact for parents and community members who have questions and/or concerns about their local school. While individual trustees do not have the authority to direct board staff to undertake any particular action they can help in answering questions, finding solutions or facilitating interaction with the school and board administration.

Communications

Responding to telephone calls or e-mails, meeting requests and queries from constituents is an important part of the trustee role and requires some time commitment.

Time commitments will vary but it is not uncommon for a trustee to spend an average of 15 hours per week on all the activities associated with the role.

Can anyone be a School Board Trustee?

A person is qualified to be elected as a school board trustee if the person is qualified to vote in a school board election and is a resident of the school board district. When filing a nomination a candidate must meet all of the following requirements:

- a resident within the jurisdiction of the board;
- a supporter* of the board;
- a Canadian citizen;
- at least 18 years old;
- Roman Catholic (if running for a separate school board);
- not legally prohibited from voting; and
- not disqualified by any legislation from holding school board office.

(*“Supporter” refers to the individual’s support for one of the four publicly funded school systems. A list of supporters for each system is kept by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation.)

Note: A candidate, if nominated, must remain qualified throughout the election and, if elected, throughout the term of office. The term of office is 4 years. School board candidates should confirm that they have the qualifications described in section 219 of the *Education Act*. It is the responsibility of the candidate to determine whether he or she is qualified to be elected to and hold office.

A candidate for school board office cannot be a clerk, deputy clerk, treasurer or deputy treasurer of a municipality within the jurisdiction of a board.

The following persons **are disqualified** from being elected to school board office:

- any person not eligible to vote in the municipality;
- an employee of any school board unless he or she
 - (i) takes an unpaid leave of absence before being nominated, and
 - (ii) resigns, if elected to the office; (See additional note below*)
- a judge of any court;
- a member of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, a Senator or a member of the House of Commons; or
- an inmate of a penal or correctional institution under sentence of imprisonment.

Note: An employee of a school board who wishes to run for office on any school board must take an unpaid leave of absence prior to being nominated. If elected, the employee must resign. A person may not be employed by one school board and hold office on a different school board. A clerk, treasurer, deputy clerk, deputy treasurer of a municipality wishing to run for office on a school board must also take unpaid leave prior to being nominated and resign if elected. An employer is required to grant a leave of absence.



Experience and Knowledge that would be good to have

Trustee candidates do not need to have a background in education. However, the following skills and experience would be assets for potential trustee candidates.

Basic understanding of official meeting procedures and governance policies

Candidates should review a copy of their board's bylaws, governance policies and Code of Ethics or Conduct. They could also observe board meetings to get an understanding of the process.

Basic understanding of a Trustee's role as a member of a Board

Under the *Education Act* trustee power lies solely in membership on the corporate school board. The corporate board of trustees is legally accountable to the public and to the Minister of Education for the collective decisions of the board and for the delivery and quality of educational services. This means that once the Board of Trustees has voted, it is a trustee's responsibility to act in a manner that promotes and upholds the board's decision and to communicate the board's decision back to the constituency.

Some awareness of the legal, political and legislative parameters in which school boards operate

School board operations are often highly prescribed by legislation or regulation or other forms of provincially driven policy. Candidates need to be aware of this fact, especially when making campaign promises.

Willingness to learn

A newly-elected school trustee has a fairly steep learning curve, and must be willing to spend time becoming familiar with existing board policies and relevant legislation.

Acceptance to serve on a school board assumes an awareness of the legislated expectations and responsibilities conferred through legislation, provincial policy, contractual agreements or any other mechanism. Trustees must act within these parameters, and be aware of the consequences of decisions that don't respect these commitments. Anyone considering candidacy for school board membership should carefully consider these accountability relationships and responsibilities when making the important decisions to serve, or continuing to serve, on a district school board.

Orientation for School Board Trustees

At the start of the term of office, each school board provides an in-depth orientation session for trustees to acquaint them with roles, relationships and responsibilities within the board and to provide an overview of the specific environment of the school board.

If you are thinking of running to be a school board trustee, you are invited to visit: www.ontarioschooltrustees.org. This website offers a comprehensive set of resources about the role of today's school board trustee.

Honorarium for School Board Trustees

School Board Trustees are entitled to be paid an honorarium while in office. The amount varies from board to board and is guided by Ontario Regulation 357/06. The honorarium is made up of an annual base amount, an amount related to the school board's enrolment, an amount payable to the trustee for attendance at meetings, and a distance amount in the case of boards covering large areas. The chair and vice-chair of a board are entitled to additional amounts for the responsibility of their office. An honorarium is not intended to be a salary; the honorarium amount across Ontario ranges from \$6,000 to \$26,000.

Education gives citizenship broader meaning, giving us the tools to face today's challenges and the will to meet them head on. To shape the world, we must first and foremost shape our place in it.

MICHAËLLE JEAN, former Governor-General of Canada

Board Administration

The chief executive officer of the board is the director of education. One of the most important leadership relationships in the school system is the one that exists between the Board of Trustees and the director of education. While their roles are distinct and different, they must also be complementary for the system to operate effectively. Each board's success depends on the direction provided by the board and on the leadership of the director of education. Each director of education's job is greatly influenced by the successes the board achieves and by the challenges it faces. Both parties need to be cognizant of their inter-dependence, and willing to work cooperatively for the successes of the system and the students in the schools.

Organizational structures differ among boards. However, the school board's administration manages the day-to-day functions of operating the school system.

Trustees, School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees (PICs)

Trustees and School Councils

Effective trustees establish regular and consistent communication with their school councils. Through the use of email, e-newsletters, social media such as Twitter, websites, meetings and other public forums, trustees and school councils can remain in constant communication. Increasingly, trustees are creating online journals, websites or blogs to help them communicate with their constituents. Trustees who facilitate communication among school councils within their jurisdiction are better able to speak on their behalf at the board table.

School councils are provincially-mandated advisory bodies, providing advice to the school principal and, where appropriate, to the school board. Their

structure and responsibilities are determined by government regulation. A trustee that has open and consistent communication with school councils is creating a climate of inclusion that benefits the board and the students in its schools.

It is important to note that a trustee's responsibility is to advocate for decisions which will better serve the board's entire jurisdiction, while school councils advocate almost exclusively for their own students in their own schools. This is an important point to remember when determining what advice one should consider.

Parent Involvement Committees

Every school board in Ontario has a Parent Involvement Committee (PIC). A key part of the PIC role is to encourage and enhance meaningful parent involvement across the board to improve student success in school and in life. They do this by:

- Providing information and advice to the Board of Trustees on parent engagement
- Communicating with and supporting school councils, and
- Undertaking activities to help parents support their children's learning at home and at school

Most members are parents and the committee is chaired by a parent. The director of education and a trustee representative also sit on the committee. This helps communication flow both ways. It helps the school board communicate with parents and makes sure that parent voices are heard by the board.

Ontario Regulation 612/00 sets out the mandate, structure and functions for both Parent Involvement Committees and School Councils. More information can be found at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/getinvolved.html>.