

Scrap the Boards?

By John Bachmann

What a mess! As this is being written, Education Minister Elizabeth Witmer is about to appoint supervisors for the Toronto and Hamilton school boards, with Ottawa/Carleton's supervisor already in place. Trustees at all three boards have been in a very loud and public struggle with the provincial government — a struggle with strong partisan political undertones, given that a number of the 'rebel' trustees have already declared their intentions to run for the Liberals or the NDP in the next election and have strong union backing. On the other hand, by careening between confrontation and conciliation, the provincial government has appeared neither caring nor competent.

For years, OQE has called for elected trustees to challenge board administrators about poor student learning results as evidenced by provincial test scores. Occasionally, one or more trustees have asked tough questions about what students were learning. But board administrators, backed by a compliant majority of trustees, have simply weathered a few stormy board meetings and thereafter maintained a steady 'progressive' course.

It is the height of irony that when trustees finally stood up to their administrators, they did so not to insist on improved student learning but to fight to keep janitorial jobs unionized! Our public school systems truly are dysfunctional — and in many more ways than provincial auditor Al Rosen could ever realize.

What's the answer then? Ditch the boards?

That's not a simple question to answer because 'boards' consist of two parts that need to be addressed separately: a) the elected board of trustees and b) administration and staff. While we have all met and cheered on a few good trustees who truly care about student learning, the vast majority of trustees operate in one of two modes: compliant minions of administration or (more so recently) defiant defenders of partisan political positions. In neither mode are the trustees discharging their primary responsibility of ensuring that students are being adequately prepared to participate in society to their fullest capabilities.

What about the argument that elected trustees are a vital democratic link between the public and administration? If voter turnout is any indication, the public doesn't see the trustees as 'vital' at all. The small number of voters gives the teachers' federations significant influence over trustee elections, as a number of trustee candidates who publicized their OQE connections have discovered.

Members of fringe groups like the Communist Party are regularly elected to school boards. A few years ago in Mississauga, a fictitious candidate drew enough votes to influence who got on the board. In London, a man named Smith who made no attempt to campaign whatsoever was actually elected. The evidence is pretty convincing that democracy will not suffer if we do away with elected trustees.

What about administration?

Because of economies of scale, it makes sense to provide services such as payroll, the procurement of supplies, and building maintenance at a multiple-school or regional level. This list might also include special education assistants, psychologists, and curriculum support staff.

But as Martha Harron, a former member of the Ontario Parent Council, suggested recently, schools should not be forced to use the services of their own boards. They should be free to choose other service providers if they feel that by doing so they are getting better value for their school budget dollars. For example, some school districts have obtained significant savings by contracting out janitorial services. Individual schools or groups of schools should be able to do the same.

Phasing in the needed changes

As tempting as it might be, given the current trustee shenanigans, moving too quickly to get rid of elected trustees and uncoupling individual schools from their boards will leave a vacuum that will have to be filled, at least in the short term, by the ministry of education. Do we really want ministry staff stepping in and trying to micromanage our schools? Anyone who has spent any time dealing with the ministry can attest that this is one of the few scenarios guaranteed to be worse than the existing one.

What about allowing individual school communities to take over the governance of public schools through school councils? In theory, this should improve local autonomy and accountability, as well as provide much more parental influence. The reality is somewhat less promising. Today, despite years of talk about encouraging parental involvement, most school councils exist and operate purely at the pleasure of the principal. Parents brave enough to start asking questions about improving student learning (instead of organizing protests at Queen's Park) are blacklisted with a thoroughness that would make Joe McCarthy proud.

In a recent message, I reported on a visit to the Ontario Principals' Council that was established when public school principals were forced to leave the teachers' federations. I mentioned a number of positive developments, and I remain optimistic that these will improve the competence and confidence of principals — but this will involve a culture change and take considerable time.

Organization for Quality Education, September 2002

In the meantime, it is unrealistic to expect that the school councils at every school in Ontario are ready to replace elected trustees as the democratic link in the system. But there are some principals, confident in their abilities to lead rather than command and control their schools, who would welcome the chance to have their school councils become a true partnership between educators and parents.

The political climate is right for the minister to do something that OQE has been advocating for a number of years: establish a provincial school council office and encourage a few forward-thinking school communities to move ahead as pilot projects for demonstrating the governance potential of school councils.

These pilot sites must also have the ability to choose to operate independently of their school boards, either partially or completely, if they find the board uncooperative or unable to provide services that the school community deems essential, e.g., curriculum specialists familiar with direct instruction.

Will this result in the disbanding of all boards of trustees and the outsourcing of all services currently handled by board administrators? Probably not. But we can almost guarantee that any board trustees or administrators still around after a number of communities have demonstrated the viability of school-level governance will be far more responsive to the real needs of parents and, much more importantly, their students.

The Discomfort of Principals

OQE has been an active participant, through membership in a 'Client Group,' in the development of the new performance appraisal system for Ontario teachers. It would be nice to think that we had significant influence on the final outcome, but perusal of the new Teacher Performance Appraisal Manual indicates that almost none of the concerns that Frank Gue and I raised on OQE's behalf have influenced the final document.

There is no attempt to use student test scores (on a value-added basis) as part of the appraisal process. We argued for simplicity so that the time required to do the evaluations would be reasonable — a major concern voiced repeatedly by time-pressured principals and vice-principals.

Instead, the evaluation form instructs evaluators to "look for" more than 130 different behaviours, only a handful of which are related to student learning!

Despite a strong consensus in the client group that parental input should cover the teacher's communication and teaching ability, as well as the respectfulness of the teacher's behaviour towards students, parents will be asked to comment only on teachers' communication skills.

Several months ago, as the project was progressing towards the first training sessions with principals, members of the client group asked to be present in order to see how the people who were going to be using the evaluation tools reacted when introduced to them. This was a very reasonable request given the hours that the group had invested in the process.

Permission was denied on the grounds that the principals wouldn't be comfortable discussing the process with 'parents' in the room. Even when ministry staff explained to the principals that we were not 'just parents' (we had a few university professors among our number), the objection stood.

For a group that puts so much stock in the development of student self-esteem, perhaps principals should do some soul-searching about the origins of their own paranoid insecurity.