

# Who's in Charge?

*In adopting the Carver model, Halton trustees may be making a grave mistake.*  
By Diane Leblovic

Last November, the Halton District School Board unanimously passed, with little debate and no public consultation, a motion to implement a new governance model for the board and to spend up to \$20,000 for a U.S. consultant to assist with this move.

The move has the potential to dramatically change the way the system is run and in trustees having less ability to help parents with individual problems. In addition, controversial decisions, such as which schools should close and which should stay open, could be made by non-elected board officials.

The model chosen by the board is generally referred to as a policy governance model based on the writings of the U.S. theoretician, John Carver.

Here's how it would work in the context of a school board. The trustees would establish broad policy direction for the board based on the mission statement, beliefs, values and goals for the system. The director of education as chief executive officer would be responsible for implementing these policies and for all the day-to-day operation of the board's business.

Currently, trustees influence board decision-making through initiating notices of motion and approving specific proposals.

Under Carver, trustees would review operational matters only if there were a contravention of the policies or of any specific limitations imposed on the director's authority. This would result in a significant increase in both the power and the discretion of the director.

Under the model, agendas for board meetings would look significantly different and contain only those items that refer to the results of the board's policy directions, governance or how the board proposes to redefine its policy direction.

Consequently, much of the business at board meetings would involve planning, monitoring, developing and writing policies and processes, and there would be very few formal votes.

The current board committees that deal with hard-edged issues such as labour negotiations and finance would be replaced by committees focusing on more nebulous matters such as governance, visioning, and community relations.



The main benefit claimed for the Carver model is that a board will reach decisions in a more effective way as a result of the clarification of the respective roles of trustees and senior administrators.

Parents and others who view the trustees as their representatives and advocates may, however, be alarmed as the model leaves little room for trustees to pursue individual issues or complaints raised by their constituents.

This initiative by the Halton board is not unique in Ontario. A very similar approach was recommended to school boards in the recent review by the Education Improvement Commission (EIC).

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board adopted a variation of the Carver model some time ago. In speaking with the chair of that board, it is apparent that the implementation of this model requires both a tremendous time commitment on the part of the trustees to continually formulate appropriate policies and an attitude change that would see them leave all the old ways of fulfilling their roles parked at the door.

In speaking to trustees in several surrounding boards, there appear to be no current plans, despite the EIC recommendation, to adopt the Carver model. As well, it should be noted that there is no move by other elected bodies such as municipal councils to move in this direction.

The Waterloo Catholic board spent a significant amount of time learning about the model. Based on discussions with several of the local trustees, including the chair, it is apparent that in-depth study has not taken place in Halton however.

In fact, it is puzzling why the trustees appear to be rushing to implement a change with such significant long-term implications during the last year of their term.

An observer of the Halton board might conclude that the primary motivation for the move to the Carver model is not to become a more effective board but to become a life-line for a group of trustees who appear unable to make the tough decisions, such as those involving school closures.

On the other hand, a cynic might also view this as a move, justified by the EIC's recommendation, to concentrate more power in the office of the director and to further marginalize the trustees' roles at the board table.

*(Mrs. Leblovic is a public member of the governing council of the Ontario College of Teachers and a former chair of the Halton Board.)*