Elected School Boards and High-Quality Public Education

A literature review examining the relationship between high-quality public education systems and governing school boards

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August 2019

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Executive Summary

A recent poll conducted by the Environics Institute found that Canadians are among the most committed in the world to the principle of democracy in which elected representatives govern our public institutions. School boards in Canada are among the institutions that have been an important part of the democratic system. Yet, in Canada and in the United States, school boards have come under criticism. Moves to eliminate or replace the democratically elected school board with alternative structures are being experienced across the country.

When the kinds of criticism directed to school boards are examined, it becomes clear that the response of eliminating or changing structures will not address the concerns. In fact, current research does not support alternative structures. Not only do they compromise participation in processes such as strategic planning, remove direct accountability, diminish access to those responsible for decisions, and threaten transparency, they do nothing to improve student achievement.

Two decades of research have provided a strong basis for supporting the school boards we have traditionally known in Canada. Local elected school boards align with Canadian values, but perhaps even more importantly, when engaged in good governance practices, they make a positive difference in levels of student achievement. Countless studies have been undertaken in the United States, in Canada, and in Europe. They consistently show a significant relationship between a set of attributes of school boards and improved student achievement, even in districts experiencing high levels of poverty.

This paper on elected school boards and high-quality public education makes the case for maintaining school boards as we have traditionally known them in Canada. It goes on to assert, based on two decades of research on student achievement, that building the capacity of school boards is not only a possible, but a promising direction.

Highlights from the paper:

➢ Public schools, to a large extent, embody the values Canadians have for its children and future citizens. In such an important system, where societal values are fundamental to the enterprise, the public served by the schools are those most invested and should be involved in the decision-making.

➢ School boards offer communities the opportunity to engage directly with representatives and to participate in setting a vision for education. Communities can advocate for their educational values and can hold the representatives directly accountable for student achievement and a focus on equity.

➤ School boards reflect the values of the immediate community and usually reflect the populations they serve. Their operations are transparent and through community involvement and open dialogue they are able to build the trust that is necessary for good governance.

➤ Starting in a focused way with the "Lighthouse Study" in Iowa, two decades of research have consistently shown that school boards can make a difference in student achievement. Literally hundreds of studies since then, conducted in many countries around the world, have shown a significant relationship between good school board governance and student achievement.

➤ Research on alternative models to the traditional school board are rare and none have shown the structure has a more positive effect on student achievement.

➤ School boards must engage in good governance, in order to make a positive difference in student achievement. Good governance in school boards involves:
  o Strategic Focus
  o Explicit Equity Focus
  o Shared collaborative leadership
  o Systems Thinking (e.g., collaborative relationships, alignment of resources)
  o Knowledge, Skills and Practices for Improved Learning
  o Evidence and research informed policy and practice
  o Commitment to Board Capacity Building
  o Strong Connections to Communities

➤ Public education has always been important for a democratic society. Some argue that in these times of discord and turmoil around the world, public schools are even more important. As the one institution with the potential to make positive social change, it is a moral imperative that we focus on improving the performance of public schools. To ignore the research on school boards and student achievement is potentially to undermine the ability of our school systems to be responsive in ways that support continued improvements in teaching and learning.

➤ Instead of searching for different structures for governance of education, research strongly supports working with school boards to build their capacity for good governance. There are proven and practical suggestions, rich resources, and working models available for this work. As one researcher asserts "traditional school boards can and do influence academic outcomes, meaning, improving school board governance is a legitimate approach to improving academic achievement (Ford, 2013, p. iii)."

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Introduction

Canadians are among the most committed in the world to the principle of democracy in which elected representatives govern our public institutions (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2019). And, in the Canadian system of representative government, school boards have long been an important democratic institution. Sharing responsibility for governance with the provincial governments, originally school boards were created to take on a local administrative role, essentially running schools. Over time, schools were organized into districts, professional staff were hired to administer districts, and the role of boards became one of overseeing the system. The major concerns of trustees on a board had been operational, decisions about personnel, finance and facilities. As boards evolved, the role began to focus more on creating a vision for education in the community; setting policies and expectations for high quality teaching, learning and special education; and, about achieving equity and excellence.

School boards have always provided access to important democratic processes that guide public education. But research now indicates that school boards focused on a strong vision for learning and engaged in practices of good governance, make a positive difference to student achievement and to equitable outcomes. If improving the performance of public schools is the goal of those who are currently scrutinizing school boards, then heeding the research and working closely with school boards to build their capacity as critical partners should be the focus of future actions.

School Boards and the Democratic Process

The purpose of public schooling in Canada is to educate citizens for the 21st century and to provide all students with an equal opportunity to be successful regardless of background. Although there are variations to what people mean by this, it is safe to say it almost always involves developing young people who are:

- able to learn and think critically and creatively,
- skilled and can contribute to work and society, and
- aware of and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Public schools are founded on these shared values and the common good. To say this another way, public schools, to a large extent, embody the values Canadians have for its children and future citizens. In such a diverse and complex society, many argue that public schooling is more important than ever. In a world where there is a growing inequity between the very wealthy

and the very poor, where there is growing mistrust in society, and where climate change is threatening the physical world, public schools have the potential to forge unity and pass along values considered to be important in society.

In a system as important as public education, where societal values are fundamental to the enterprise, who is best to be involved in making decisions about the system? In short, the answer is the broader public served by the schools. In the early days of public schools, school boards were created as a means of actively engaging the public in the decision-making. These democratic institutions remain important for the same reasons they were created.

In "Vanishing School Boards", Patrick Rice (2014) argues for keeping school boards in their traditional model saying among other things, "they keep the public in public schools" (p. 93). Public schooling is very much at the core of a democratic society. School boards are embedded in their communities. Board members know their constituents and can engage and involve their constituents in very direct ways. Board members represent regional, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences and are able to advance different ideas and approaches. School boards understand the values and needs of the community – which are likely very different from other communities in the province – and can reflect those values and needs. They are accessible and can be responsive to the concerns and desires of the people they represent. In British Columbia for example, communities with high populations of Indigenous students have elected Indigenous school board members, and in Ontario there is a provincial Indigenous Education Council of Trustees. In Nova Scotia, prior to the elimination of school boards, there was provision for representation of African Nova Scotians and for the Mi'kmaq nation. Now is not a time to silence these voices as we should have learned in history.

The school board can also elevate matters that are important to their constituents. In a system where governance is shared with provincial authorities, school boards have an essential role to mediate the school district and the provincial directions, to shape and adapt provincial policy to meet the needs of the community. In the complex system, trustees have a role as advocates for constituents, giving them voice and guiding them through complicated processes.

A school board can engage the community in creating a vision for the school district and the realization of that vision. Direct participation is possible and priorities from the community can be included in the. Through transparent reporting, the public can monitor progress towards the vision and hold the board accountable for steadfastly maintaining the direction. Through such processes, a local school board can build trust. As the OECD (2016) concluded from their study of school governance and its complexities, stakeholder involvement, open dialogue and trust are some of the most important

> Local school boards play the central role in driving and guiding the process to establish a vision of education for their school systems. Indeed, as representatives of the community and governors of the school system, school boards are the best catalyst for stimulating the dialogue, consensus and actions that can shape a truly dynamic and responsive student achievement plan (Rice, 2014, p. 95).

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elements in an effective governance system. These are elements associated with local school board representation.

School Boards Under Attack

There is a current trend to change, or even eliminate, the democratic representation of elected school board trustees. In the province of Nova Scotia, English school boards have been eliminated; in Prince Edward Island, school boards have been reduced to one Anglophone and one Francophone with appointed members for the English schools; in New Brunswick, boards have been replaced by District Education Councils, and the Ministry of Education has assumed more responsibility for the system; in Quebec, there is talk about eliminating school boards; and, in Manitoba, a review to consider reducing the number of elected boards, or possibly eliminating them, is currently underway. These changes are sounding alarms across the country, and rightly so.

In the last two decades, there has been an expanded set of expectations of accountability, not just for system resources but also for the outcomes, and there has been a growing focus on student achievement. Some Education Acts in Canada now specifically name improved student achievement as the chief purpose for school boards, and they differentiate responsibility for other aspects of the system to other players, such as the provincial ministries or departments of education. The duties are intentionally different from other levels of government to achieve this, such as school closure decisions, and collective bargaining responsibilities.

Along with changing roles and expectations has come greater scrutiny of school boards. In Canada and the United States, this scrutiny has sometimes led to harsh criticisms and the erosion of the model of the publicly elected school board. There are a number of issues critics have used to justify eliminating or changing the structure of school boards. Some have said that the apparent need for greater centralization of such matters as budgets and curriculum have meant that school boards are unnecessary. School boards have always shared responsibility for education with provincial governments, but the school board share of responsibility has been diminished by provincial governments over the years. Low voter turnout for school board elections in many jurisdictions is used to illustrate the lack of interest in or need for such boards.

Others say that school boards have not demonstrated the kind of accountability for the results expected of them. Connolly and James (2011) point out that the criticism of school boards is often a result of dissatisfaction with school performance. Critics also point to high profile news items of boards in trouble because of their lack of understanding of the role of governance,

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confusion over roles of senior staff and trustees, or lack of fiscal efficiency or corrupt financial management. The critics then generalize from these particular examples to claim that all boards are problematic. The upshot of these criticisms is a search for alternative governance models.

Among the alternative models are the elimination of school boards, a move to larger, regional governance boards, appointing, rather than electing school trustees, turning the education enterprise over to private companies, or placing responsibility for education in the hands of the state or a city's mayor, as has been the case in some areas in the United States. These models are not supported by research, and do not represent a coherent response to any of the concerns critics have raised about school boards. There is no research to indicate that alternative models of governance improve education in those jurisdictions where they have been implemented. In fact, the case is quite the opposite

While alternative governance arrangements have had some success in the United States, they have also had negative effects and created more challenges (United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2012, Rice, 2014). According to the United States Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2012), the key issue is whether the board takes coherent action in the best interest of the students. They go on to say that alternative structures, in some cases, have had positive effects on student achievement, but not because of the structure itself.

In recent Canadian experience, provinces have implemented alternative models that involve replacing English school boards with school-based councils, regional councils, or provincially appointed boards. In all cases significant shifts have been made to centralized decision-making for provincial Ministries or Departments of Education with no specific processes or structures that link to the reasons for removing the school board, or care for the loss of valuable components of the School board (minority voices, local representation, etc.). Little research has been undertaken about these new governance arrangements. However, over 20 years of research into school-based councils have shown few positive results for students (Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999 and Global Education Monitoring, 2017). Moreover, an investigation in Saskatchewan (Perrins, 2016) determined that alternative arrangements for governance compromise participation in processes such as strategic planning, remove direct accountability, diminish access to those responsible for decisions, and threaten transparency.

Ironically, as pointed out in Perrins' (2016) recent review of education governance in Saskatchewan, there are constitutional provisions set out to protect the rights and privileges of religious minorities with respect to their schooling. The province is limited in its actions and cannot interfere with these rights. Similarly, when Francophone schools were established in accordance with section 23 of the Federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the same conditions were applied. So, only elected school boards for majority speaking systems (French in Quebec and English elsewhere) are being targeted by provincial governments for elimination.

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In the midst of the criticism and implementation of alternative models, there has been considerable research undertaken that strongly confirms that when school boards, as we traditionally know them, engage in good governance they positively affect student achievement. So, what is the best response to the critics? Rather than adopting a simplistic, relatively unstudied, and possibly flawed solution to a complex set of circumstances, taking a closer look at what school boards can and ought to do to ensure high quality education is the more effective approach.

As Campbell and Fullan (2019) point out, there is much at stake in the success of public schools at this critical juncture, when turmoil, discontent and mistrust characterize society. The need for highly effective governance is immense. They argue convincingly that "a major expansion in the capacity of local entities to bring about significant improvements in learning and the lives of all students under their watch and care" (p. 1) is the right direction for good governance and school districts. They assert the most compelling reason to maintain and build effective school boards comes from the research on the relationship between school boards on student achievement.

School Boards and Student Achievement: The Research

When the accountability era came into full force in the 1990's, researchers renewed their focus on questions about what leads to student achievement. A vast collection of effective schools literature was generated. Effective teaching methods were investigated, compiled, and shared with teachers around the world. Researchers asked how school and district leadership contributed to student success. And the role of school boards in student achievement was studied seriously, perhaps for the first time. Researchers point to the launch of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) in the United States as being a catalyst for this focus, but, Hess (2002) rightly notes that school boards had substantially increased their interest in student achievement during the preceding decade.

Improved student achievement quickly became the focus of schools, districts, and provincial or state education departments, but school boards had been understudied and very little research existed about school boards as they relate to student achievement (Land 2002). What did exist at the time had extreme limitations. Copich (2013) suggests that for many years school boards did not even see their role as having to do with the improvement of student learning. But as she points out, as the expectations were rising and student achievement data were being published, it became clear that school boards needed to examine their roles in this regard.

Responding to this need, in 2000, the Iowa School Board Association commissioned a study to investigate the relationship between school boards and student achievement. The results of a

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study called "The Lighthouse Study" were published in the year 2000. Looking at the links between school boards' actions and beliefs and student achievement, researchers compared what board members do in high and low-performing school districts. The study considered six school districts in Georgia that had very high or very low achievement levels on standardized achievement tests over a three-year period. The districts studied were comparable in terms of enrollment, percent of children living in poverty, spending per student, household income and other factors. Researchers made site visits and interviewed 159 people: school staff, district staff, and board members. The overall conclusion was that school boards that met the following seven conditions made a difference in student achievement:

1. shared leadership,
2. focus on continuous improvement and shared decision-making,
3. ability to create and sustain initiatives,
4. supportive workplace for staff,
5. support for staff development,
6. support for school sites through data and information, and
7. community involvement.

Between 2002 and 2007, the Iowa School Board Association extended this seminal study by simultaneously providing support to five school boards in mid-western states and continuing to study the role of superintendents and school boards. After three years, researchers saw a positive change in the behaviors of superintendents and boards along with improvements in student achievement (Delagardelle, 2006).

Studying the question of student achievement from a slightly different direction, Marzano and Waters (2006) completed a meta-analysis of 27 studies that used rigorous research methods to study the influence of district leadership on student learning. They found a statistically significant correlation between effective leadership and student achievement and outlined five district-level responsibilities that had positive effects. One of the five they outlined was the role of school boards. Specifically, school boards that focus on non-negotiable goals for student learning, ensure they are aligned with district and schools on these goals, and are steadfast in their adherence to the direction, have higher levels of student achievement.

As more studies emerged to confirm and refine the characteristics of effective school boards some authors, such as Scott (2009), argued that good governance also needed to include the creation of a strong equity focus for all school reform. Viewed through an equity context, Scott endorsed earlier research on school boards and student achievement, he also argued that the goal of educational equity needed to be explicitly stated and *used* by boards to "impact policy, administrative action, instructional practice, professional and human development, community and parent engagement and involvement, accountability by all stakeholders, and continual monitoring toward improvement to support high achievement for all diverse students." (p. 6).

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By reviewing many studies including meta-analyses, case studies, and studies that compared school districts, the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) Centre for Public Education (2011) asserted there was a consistent body of research documenting that, " … school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from boards in low-achieving districts" (pg. 1). In some of the studies the researchers compared districts with similarly high levels of poverty to see if school boards were a factor in those with higher performing students. Even in these more extreme circumstances, they concluded the differences could be attributed to approaches taken by school boards. From this research, we know that student achievement is positively affected when school boards:

- commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision,
- have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels,
- are accountability driven, spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement,
- have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals,
- are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement,
- align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals,
- lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust, and
- take part in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Ford (2013) tested the eight characteristics of effective school boards listed above in high and low performing school districts in six states and confirmed that the way in which school boards govern does make a difference in student academic performance. Of the eight characteristics, he noted that a boards ability to plan strategically, collaborate with the superintendent, and effectively mitigate conflict were key to making a positive difference to student achievement. He went on to say that in an era of searching for alternative governance models "traditional school boards can and do influence academic outcomes, meaning, improving school board governance is a legitimate approach to improving academic achievement." (p. iii).

Further studying the effect of school boards on school districts in California with high levels of poverty, Plough (2013) demonstrated that there were statistically significant correlations between student achievement levels in boards with a commitment to student achievement, to board training, and to connections with community. She concluded that supporting boards to develop better understanding of the factors that make a difference would be beneficial to student success in low poverty areas.

While much of the research about school boards was being undertaken in the US, Canadian researchers were also tackling questions about the relationship between school boards and student achievement. Similar studies were undertaken with similar conclusions. For example, Campbell and Fullan (2006) studied eight school districts in Ontario and were able to isolate four main variables in effective school districts: purpose and focused direction, coherent strategy for implementation and review of outcomes, shared responsibility in leadership, and developing knowledge, skills and practices for improving learning.

Leithwood (2013) was commissioned by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education and The Institute for Educational Leadership to write a paper summarizing evidence about effective school districts. Reviewing dozens of research studies, he outlined nine characteristics of strong districts, among them organizational alignment to clear district purpose and direction, including a shared mission, values and goals; a policy-oriented board of trustees, and quality relationships.

> The research concluded that school boards matter a great deal for the delivery of effective public education and that exemplary school boards focus on student achievement, direct responsible management of finances towards programs and initiatives that are related to the improvement of teaching and learning, and base policy decisions on reliable data.
>
> (Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Weins, 2013)

A Pan Canadian study of school board governance (Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Weins, 2013) was conducted using overarching questions, including one about the attributes of effective school boards in Canada. School board members and Superintendents from school districts across the country provided data through interviews and focus groups. The research concluded that school boards matter a great deal for the delivery of effective public education and that exemplary school boards focus on student achievement, direct responsible management of finances towards programs and initiatives that are related to the improvement of teaching and learning, and base policy decisions on reliable data.

Internationally, too, the question about the value of school boards in relation to student performance has been studied. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016) studied twenty-one countries and their school governance practices. Focusing on the complexity of education systems with their diverse stakeholders, accountabilities and high expectations, and system tensions, they arrived at five elements of successful governance across education systems, including schools, districts, state or provincial ministries and other stakeholder groups such as labour unions. From this broader perspective, successful governance:

- focuses on processes, not structures;
- is flexible and can adapt to change and unexpected events;
- works through building capacity, stakeholder involvement and open dialogue;
- requires a whole system approach to align roles and balance tensions;

- harnesses evidence and research to inform policy and practice; and
- is built on trust.

An international review of studies on school boards and educational quality (Honingh, Ruiter, and van Thiel, 2018), starting with a data base of over 4000 studies, selected a final set of 16 studies that they considered to meet the standards of robust research. They caution, as have others, that we cannot say a particular school board characteristic (e.g. a collaborative climate) is a direct cause of increased student achievement. They also criticize the narrow notion of school achievement that is measured, most often through large-scale standardized tests. The review points to the limitations of many studies, and to the finding that research does not demonstrate a direct link between school board beliefs and actions and student achievement.

Others (Whitehurst, Chingos, & Gallaher, 2013) argue that even a relatively small effect size of district influence (1% to 2%) compared to those of schools, teachers, characteristics and individual differences of students makes a considerable difference to student achievement as measured in test scores, "large enough to be of practical and policy significance" (p. 2). While the study focussed on the larger unit of school districts, it is safe to conclude that elected boards influence the actions in a school district.

Leithwood and Azah (2017) suggest that expecting district leadership, either professional or elected, to have a direct effect on student achievement is not reasonable, based on the ways in which leadership at all levels of the system are strongly mediated by school and classroom conditions (p. 37). Where elected district leaders *do* have a positive effect is on features of school districts known to improve student achievement: "… the extent to which Elected Leadership is related to, or influences, important characteristics of districts may come as a surprise to those who remain skeptical about the value that trustees add to districts' efforts to improve student achievement when they enact their policy-oriented roles …" (p. 38).

> **Figure 1 – Characteristics of Effective School Boards**
>
> - Strategic Focus
> - Explicit Equity Focus
> - Shared, collaborative leadership
> - Systems Thinking (e.g., collaborative relationships, alignment of resources)
> - Knowledge, Skills and Practices for Improved Learning
> - Evidence and research informed policy and practice
> - Commitment to Board Capacity Building
> - Strong Connections to Communities
>
> Scott (2009), National School Boards Association (2011), Ford (2013), Leithwood (2013), Plough (2013), Sheppard, Galway, Brown and Weins (2013), OECD (2016), Fullan and Campbell (2019)

Repeatedly throughout the research, the relationship between the board and the superintendent was found to be a key element for good governance and student achievement. Campbell and Fullan (2019) are explicit about this and focus on the importance of alignment, trust, and collaboration. Others (Alsbury and Gore, 2015) in referring to good governance,

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further describe an important understanding and delineation of the different roles of the professional and elected leaders in school districts.

Over the past two decades, essentially the same characteristics of school boards (see Figure 1) have been found in school boards with high levels of student achievement -- across Canada, the US, and countries in Europe. These findings are sufficiently robust to conclude soundly that school boards can, and do, make a positive difference to student achievement. The findings are also robust enough to provide direction for school boards. In fact, many researchers have moved the focus of their research from identifying characteristics of effective boards, to using those characteristics to improve boards' performance. Studies following these efforts show improvements in board performance are associated with improvements in student achievement. (Alsbury and Gore, 2015).

The School Board Governance and Student Achievement Centre was specifically established to help boards improve student achievement. Researchers there have developed a psychometric assessment instrument which they use to determine statistical relationships between school boards' leadership, community relations, and governance skills and student performance. In three statewide surveys, they found statistically significant effects of the board characteristics on student performance (Van Buskirk and Levine, 2015). They now offer services to boards to conduct surveys, analyse results, and provide training in areas identified as needing strengthening.

School Boards, Accountability and Transparency

The most compelling reason to maintain and build effective school boards, then, comes from the research on the relationship between school boards on student achievement. This position has widespread and legitimate support, but can sometimes lead to downplaying other important roles school boards. Campbell and Fullan (2019), for example, argue that we should stop "merely extolling the democratic principles underlying [local education governance]" (p. 1). But, in a country where citizens are among the most committed to democratic institutions with elected representatives it is not a point that should be entirely ignored.

School Boards are directly accountable to the community and in these times of growing mistrust in public institutions, having direct accountability is essential for the important role of public schools. Trustees are entrusted with oversight of the finances and resources in a school district, including budget approval, monitoring, and audit responsibilities. Although the provincial governments allocate the complete funding package, once it is in the district, the school boards decide on specific allocations. Most school boards have a public process where constituents are consulted about their priorities. Boards then, in collaboration with staff, set an annual budget for the district, and often have levels of both internal and external auditing mechanisms. When boards undertake this responsibility with knowledge and diligence,

taxpayers can be assured that the public purse is in good hands. The accountability is immediate and direct.

At the community level, the public can influence decisions and can question the school board members about their work and direction. Monitoring student achievement through reports provided by staff and boards, they can hold the board accountable for school performance. They can also ensure that test scores are not the only measure of performance and can influence what student success looks like for the students in the community.

School board meetings, for the most part, are accessible. The important business of a school board is conducted at open meetings. The general public can attend, can sign up to speak, and can expect answers to their questions. "School boards allow the community to stay connected to its schools" (Rice, 2014, p.99). Such connection also means transparency, with access to decision-making processes, outcomes, and public records. The public can influence decisions, follow results, and gauge the effectiveness of a school board. And, finally, if they are unhappy with a board member's performance, they can collectively remove the members of the board come election time.

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Conclusion

There is significant concern being expressed across the country about the current trend to eliminate or weaken the leadership of school boards through alternative models. At risk is not just a democratic institution that Canadians appreciate; it is not just local voice in the educational enterprise. To ignore the research on school boards and student achievement is potentially to undermine the ability of our school systems to be responsive in ways that support continued improvements in teaching and learning.

In response to a variety of criticisms about public schooling and its governance, provincial governments in Canada, and jurisdictions in the United States and other countries, are searching for alternative models to the traditional elected school board in a community. But, when these criticisms are analysed, alternative models for governance do not adequately address the concerns. Nor do they acknowledge the strong values Canadians have for democratic institutions or the important role that boards can play in bringing a strong equity focus to the work of school districts. Further, the work of improving student achievement belongs collectively to all elements of our school systems – from classrooms to provincial Ministries or Departments of Education – merely making changes to English school boards without critically examining the role of other elements runs the risk of removing important perspectives from the real work of innovation and system accountability.

> Only boards, because of the democratic power they derive from the people, because of their close links with the people, and because of their stability, can provide the leadership required to redesign and sustain over decades school districts that provide equity and the results for all children. That most have chosen not to do so is not an argument for stripping them of their power. Rather is an argument for showing them how to exercise their power.
>
> (McAdams, 2005, 11)

If the greatest criticism of schools and school boards that are responsible for them is about apparent performance compared to expectations, then focusing on what makes a positive difference in that regard is the direction in which provinces should be heading. If individual school boards are not functioning effectively, then they should be given support to build their capacity to make a positive difference to school performance.

Based on two decades of research on student achievement, building the capacity of school boards is not only a possible, but a promising direction. Based on their years of research on leadership and effectiveness, Campbell and Fullan (2019) have dedicated a book complete with practical suggestions for the improvement of school district governance. As already noted, in the US, there are agencies to support research on and training of school boards to enable them to make a positive difference to student achievement. Research to date is promising in this regard.

By focusing on the characteristics of school boards that are statistically significant for improved student achievement, school boards can build their capacity. This is the same principle behind high quality professional development for teachers and school or district leaders, and should also be an expectation for provincial education leaders. The OECD (2016) and others such as Campbell and Fullan (2019) have confirmed that involving the whole system and taking actions to align roles and responsibilities among the various elements of an education system - the Ministries or Departments of Education, school district staff and elected boards , schools, parents, and even students – improved school and student performance are more than possible, Campbell and Fullan (2019) say, this is a critical time in society "with formidable, seemingly impossible obstacles with respect to both physical and social climate" (p.2). Schools are "the one social institution that has the potential to make a major difference for humanity in a troubled world" (p.9). Therefore, it is a moral imperative to address the need for more effective school boards.

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education and the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) have taken a promising approach. In 2019, the two parties re-signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Grounded in the co-governance model outlined in legislation, the MOU sets out to delineate the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and BCSTA through a positive working relationship. It confirms the important role of school boards in this co-governance model. It emphasizes the importance of student success and acknowledges the need for collaboration, cooperation and communication. Along with this MOU, the BCSTA has been provided with some resources to offer professional learning to school trustees and district staff leaders in the important skills required to be successful in improving student outcomes, especially in strategic planning. As the BCSTA has said, "While school boards are under attack in some other areas of our nation, BC continues to take positive steps forward in highlighting that local voices matter and that communities are best served by democratically elected boards acting with the best interests of their constituents in mind" (BCSTA website, 2019).

This Canadian example should be followed and may prove to be the most effective model for other jurisdictions. Other provincial school board associations, as leaders in education governance, are working to support school boards. The Ontario Public School Boards Association, for example, has developed an extensive set of professional development modules on good governance for Trustees. Ministries would be wise to leverage such initiatives, and create the conditions for Boards to help lead, contribute to, and implement policies for improvements in student outcomes.

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