

Research Note

January 2023

An Endangered Species? The Role and Efficacy of Public School Trustees

In a poll conducted for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) by Stratcom in July 2022 ¹, British Columbia (BC) residents were asked questions related to school trustees' role and effectiveness in providing quality K-12 public education. The poll found:

- approximately half (49%) agree that publicly elected school trustees are an essential part of BC's public education system
- only one-third (33%) agree that school trustees in BC are effective at upholding the rights of all children and youth to have access to a quality education
- just under one-third (32%) agree that school trustees in BC are effective at representing the interests of the public in matters related to education
- most British Columbians do not adequately understand the role of school trustees. Only 30% agree with the statement "I have a good understanding of the role of school trustees in the context of BC's public education system."

¹ The Stratcom survey was conducted with 807 BC adult residents from July 7-12, 2022. The sample of 807 BC residents (18+) was statistically weighted to match the gender, age, region, and proportion of Chinese mother tongue in BC as per the 2021 Census. The data has also been weighted to match the 2020 BC provincial election results. While online polls do not report margin of error, a similar sized probability sample would have a margin of error of +/- 3.4%, 19 times out of 20.

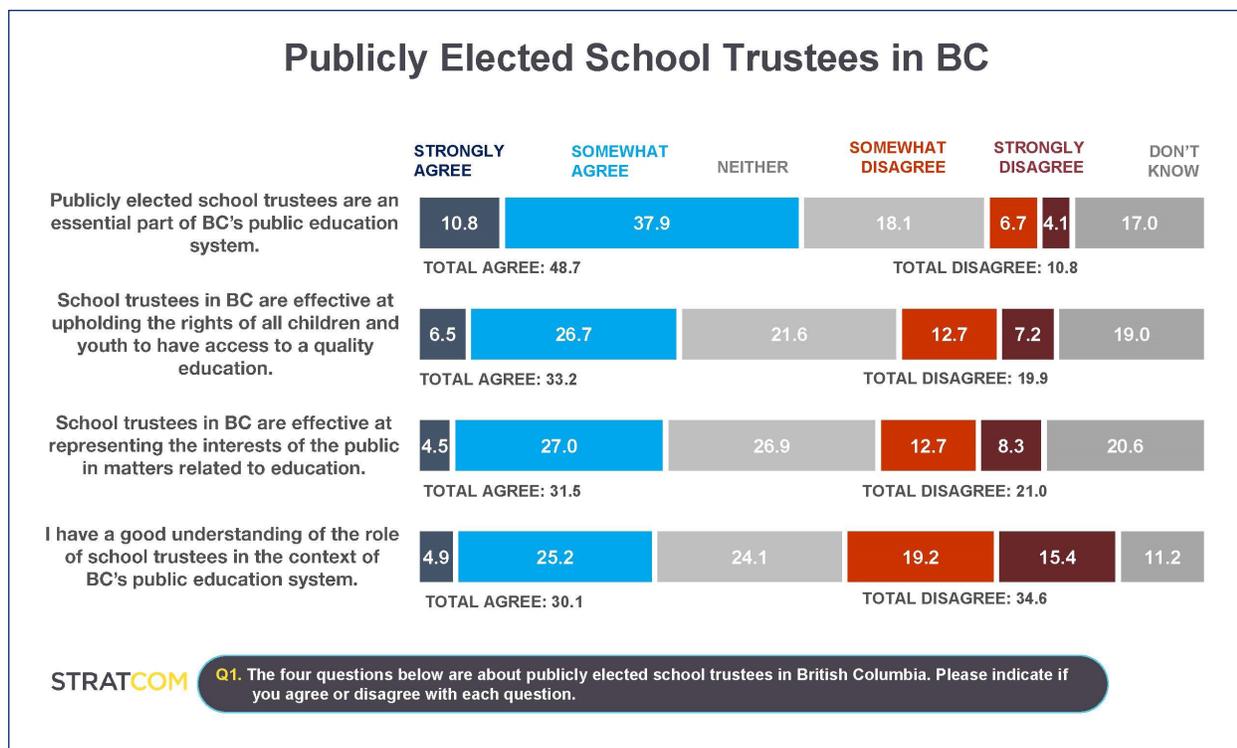


Figure 1: Summary Infographic from Stratcom Survey (July, 2022)

What is the role of school trustees?

British Columbia school trustees are elected members of a school board who “represent the public and advocate for public education in their community” (BCSTA, 2022). The BC School Act outlines the role of trustees as: attending board meetings, setting local school district policy, establishing conditions for employment of school district staff, managing district budgets and capital plans, and hearing public appeals (p. 1).

School trustees’ primary responsibility is governance, which involves setting vision and values, strategic planning, reporting to government, and maintaining community relations in public education (BCSTA, 2022, p. 3). School boards share a co-governance relationship with the provincial government through the Ministry of Education (BCSTA, n.d.).

The British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) states that boards are responsible for governing school districts “based on the educational aspirations of their local communities” (BCSTA, n.d., p. 1) as well as “in accordance with the policy directions established by the government” (p. 1). As



such, school trustees serve as critical intermediaries between the local community and the provincial government. Further, the BCSTA states that trustees are to engage in decision making that “benefits the entire district while representing the interests of the entire electorate” (p. 2). Those considering running for office must “look beyond personal issues” to make decisions that will “benefit the school district as a whole” (p. 3).

As financial stewards, trustees are responsible for ensuring that district goals, budget, staffing, and resource allocations “are intended to improve outcomes for all students” (p. 2). Trustees are part of a corporate board, which in this context means governance by a collective body—not a financial or business entity (p. 3). As members of a corporate board, trustees do not have authority to act individually and only the board has the authority to make decisions collectively.

Finally, and of significance within the unionized context of BC’s public education system, boards of education represent the Employer in matters related to bargaining (p. 3).

What makes an effective school board?

Effective school trustees maintain quality public education and facilitate vibrant local democratic processes and community engagement. Research into the characteristics of effective school boards (Vukovic, 2022; Overgaard, 2019) suggests that school trustees:

- encourage open dialogue among all staff, students, and community members about aspirations, needed change, and how to provide well-run schools
- run transparent operations
- reflect the values of the community and population they serve.

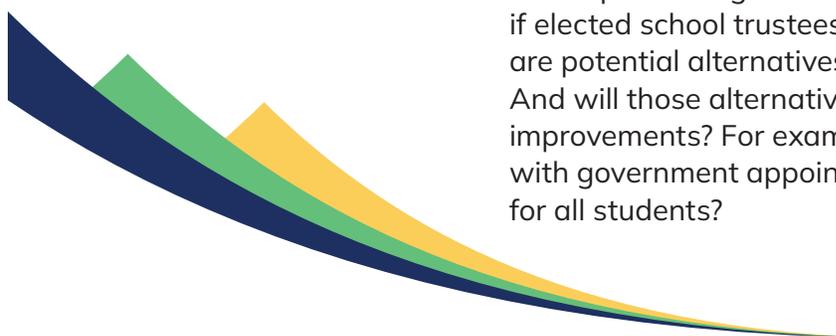
One study of school board effectiveness found that “a diverse school board with varying levels of expertise is likely to enhance the board decision-making processes and allowed for a wider range of perspectives to be heard” (Vukovic, 2022, para. 7). It follows that school boards become ineffective when

they are politically partisan, not accountable to the public, avoid transparent decision making, and are inaccessible to community members (Overgaard, 2019, p. 1). When ineffective, school trustees might resort to imposing and implementing policies through compliance rather than consensus. Good school board governance, on the other hand, maintains strategic focus, attention to equity, shared collaborative leadership, evidence- and research-informed policy and practice, commitment to capacity building of board members, and strong connections to community.

The BCTF considers effective school trustees as those who are able to exercise their democratic, elected responsibilities and obligations to the community without outside interference (BCTF Members' Guide, Procedure 4.02, p. 34). According to the BCTF, elected trustees should actively advocate for adequate funding for public schools and improved learning conditions for students, while opposing government measures that do not enhance learning opportunities for students (BCTF Members' Guide, Procedure 27.24, p. 115). The BCTF encourages local teacher associations to support trustees who commit to actively promoting quality public education and to regular, ongoing consultation on education issues with teachers (BCTF Members' Guide, Procedure 27.26, p. 115).

Are school trustees necessary for public education governance?

Public school boards constitute a long-standing form of elected democratic representation in Canada. However, the last few decades have seen a trend toward the delegitimization of the local school board as a necessary governing structure. Public disinterest, coupled with pressure to centralize education systems in the name of bureaucratic and fiscal efficiency, have some questioning the value of locally elected trustees. However, if elected school trustees are not doing an effective job, what are potential alternatives for governing public education? And will those alternative approaches create meaningful improvements? For example, would replacing elected officials with government appointees result in better quality education for all students?

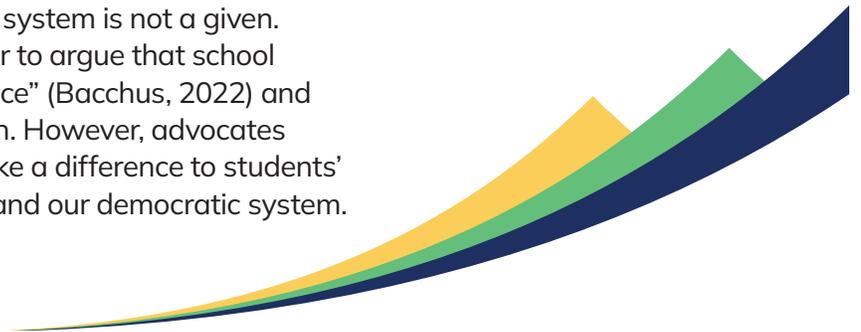


There is little research to date that suggests alternative forms of governance justify moving away from an elected school board model (Overgaard, 2019). That has not stopped certain political stakeholders from making moves toward a government appointee model. For example, a 2020 Manitoba Commission (Manness & MacKinnon, 2020) concluded that appointing trustees would enable the government to staff educational authorities with a wider and more diverse range of individuals than an elected model. The report argued that the democratic purpose of elected school boards is negated when there are “high levels of acclamations, lack of competition, and low voter turnout” (p. 122) in municipal elections. In response to the commission, the Manitoba provincial government approved legislation to replace 37 school divisions with 15 regions overseen by a provincial oversight body. Instead of elected school trustees, a “Provincial Education Authority” made up of appointed members would be established to deliver K–12 education and oversee duties including collective bargaining and workforce planning (D’Alimnote, 2021). The legislation was later revised due to intense public criticism, backing away from the elimination of school boards (MacLean, 2022).

The consultant to the Manitoba Commission that recommended the new governance structure, Dr. Avis Glaze, was also lead commissioner in a Nova Scotia Commission. This commission made a similar recommendation regarding the elimination of elected trustees (Glaze, 2018) and Nova Scotia’s local school boards were replaced by a provincial advisory council appointed by the Ministry of Education.

How might the roles and efficacy of school trustees be strengthened?

Overall, public opinion, research literature, and recent events in various Canadian provinces suggest the continuity of elected school trustees in BC’s public education system is not a given. Ineffective school trustees make it easier to argue that school boards are “the worst form of governance” (Bacchus, 2022) and to justify moving them toward extinction. However, advocates maintain that effective trustees can make a difference to students’ educational experiences, communities, and our democratic system.



Within the literature (Vukovic, 2021; Sheppard et al., 2013), suggestions for safeguarding the role and enhancing the efficacy of school trustees include:

- fielding diverse and abundant candidates in local elections
- encouraging strong voter turnout for school board elections
- co-ordinating opportunities for community dialogue about public education
- providing ongoing learning opportunities for trustees to develop effective leadership and governance capacities.

Without committed cultivation of trust and engagement in public school governance, British Columbia school trustees may well be in danger of losing their longstanding place within our democratic landscape.

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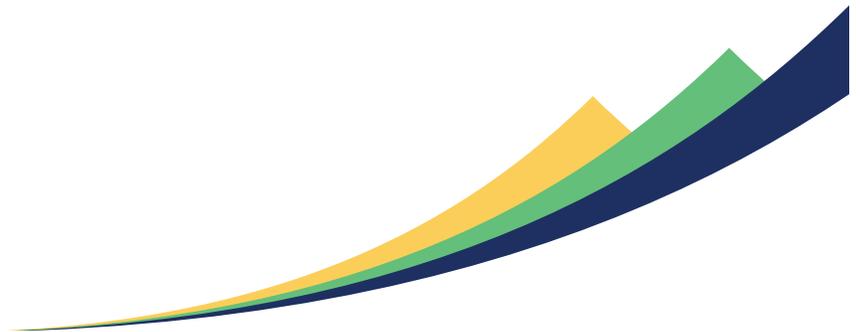
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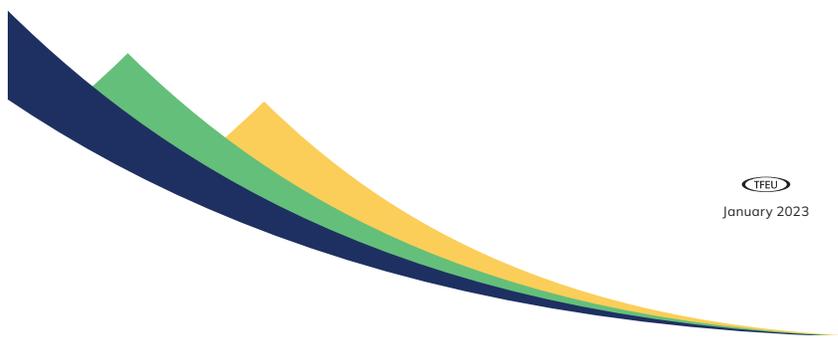
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