

K-12 Education Governance Review Submission - January 2017

Our Position:

The longest-lasting and most-fundamental responsibility of school boards for more than 100 years has been to bring the voice of the public to publicly funded education so that all children in the province – regardless of where they live or their personal circumstances – have the resources and supports they need to achieve and succeed.

The decisions being made now in Saskatchewan about school board governance could drastically change the historical roles in our system and the future of education. In the Report of the Pan-Canadian Study of School District Governance: “School Boards Matter”, 2013, <http://www.schoolboardsnl.ca/pdf/School-Boards-Matter-Report-Small.pdf> - research shows that local school boards matter:

In recent years there has been a growing evidence base that supports the position that board-governed school districts contribute to successful public education systems (Firestone and González, 2007, Hightower, Knapp, Marsh & McLaughlin, 2002; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Leithwood, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Miller, 2010; Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut and Bajaj, 2011; Sheppard, Brown, & Dibbon, 2009). For instance, Saatcioglu et al. have observed that there is a clear link between school boards and financial and academic outcomes. They conclude that school boards are successful because they manage the ambiguities that arise as a result of outside pressures such as government mandates, monitor district progress, and hold individual schools accountable for student learning. (Page 1)

Some researchers have voiced concerns about an apparent increase in provincial governments’ direct engagement in school board policy and decision-making. Sheppard (2012) contends that provincial departments of education (DOEs), by virtue of their centrality, are unsuitable proxies for the leadership provided to schools by effective school boards. (Page 3)

A particularly important historically recognized role of school boards is to ensure that the governance of public education reflects community and regional values and priorities. In that respect, the fact that a parent or a member of the community can express their concerns to a school board member provides a degree of democratic legitimacy not necessarily present in other public services, except perhaps through an ombudsman (Land, 2002; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; MacLellan, 2007; Mintrom, 2009; Williams, 2003). (Page 10)

The school board governance model works. The public education system in Canada continues to produce students whose performance on international testing is among the highest in the world (OECD, 2010). Furthermore, the present governance structure is designed to connect locally elected trustees to parents and the broader community and to decouple government’s direct influence from local board decisions; that is to depoliticize local educational operations and policies. (Page 43)

Community voice and locally elected boards contribute to a more democratic and transparent education system and Saskatchewan already has the fewest boards and fewest board members in western Canada (number of boards per province: BC 60, AB 63, MB 37 and SK 28).

Our members, the 28 locally elected boards of education in this province and the thousands of local voices we have heard from, have informed this Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) submission to the K-12 Governance Review.

The SSBA encouraged Saskatchewan people to “add their voice” to the discussions happening about the future of the education sector based on the Government of Saskatchewan’s “transformational change” agenda prior to the Dan Perrins Governance report. The SSBA’s two-point position – that school boards should remain locally elected and decisions should be made closer to the communities they affect – was embraced and supported by many of the thousands of residents who liked, shared, commented and otherwise engaged with the position.



“Communities care deeply about the education system in our province and that was evident to us in the responses we received,” said Dr. Shawn Davidson, president of the SSBA. *“The valuable insights we gathered echoed what school board trustees hear every day in their work serving the residents they are elected to represent.”*

In addition to the feedback received from social media, meetings, letters, and emails, more than 1,300 people clicked through from social media and other forums to complete a brief online survey seeking endorsement of the SSBA’s position. About 93 per cent agreed that boards should remain locally elected and that decision-making about education should remain closer to the communities affected.

“I am in a support role and work with staff and students on the front lines. There is no one model or delivery method that works for every scenario and situation. Local boards are best at understanding the unique requirements of their communities and are therefore most qualified to implement education within their areas.” Add Your Voice Survey respondent

Almost 650 survey respondents provided specific comments about their views. Highlights from these comments are included in the attached backgrounder.

As the organization serving locally elected boards of education, serving our communities, it was important to seek the local perspective. We are encouraged to find broad support for our position and to also learn more about areas of concern. The Educational Governance Review Report by Dan Perrins also raised concerns that are consistent with what school boards are hearing across the province about further forced amalgamations of school divisions and the elimination of democratically and locally elected trustees.

Our message is clear:

- ✓ Keep school boards locally elected.
- ✓ Keep decisions closer to our communities – no forced amalgamations.
- ✓ Boards of Education are willing to work in collaboration to make changes and strengthen the system to ensure the best outcomes for students. We believe this is best achieved through the Education Sector Strategic Plan and by focussing on the *Shifts in Governance* outlined in the Perrins report.



Supporting Success:

Supporting and providing services to all 28 school boards, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA), as a democratic and voluntary organization, ensures advocacy, leadership and support for member boards of education by speaking as the voice of public education, offering opportunities for board and trustee development and providing information and services. In addition to the professional development opportunities offered at our assemblies and gatherings, in 2013, the SSBA began governor training in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Brown Governance Inc. and the Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy.

While there is a cost to governance in school divisions, it provides democratically and locally elected board members and school community councils important input into and oversight by bringing the voice of the community to the school system. Governance costs make up only 0.5% of expenditures of all 28 school divisions (see attachment).

The SSBA is a leader in encouraging unique collaborative Saskatchewan approaches with partners to produce successful outcomes. One of our main guiding principles is to value and respect the role of all education and community partners. We are very proud the partnerships we have worked hard to establish and maintain. Education and community partners include:

Public Schools of Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Catholic School Boards Association
Saskatchewan Teachers Federation
Saskatchewan Ministry of Education
Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials
League of Educational Administrators, Directors, and Superintendents
Saskatchewan High Schools Athletic Association
Federation of Sovereign Indian Nations
Métis Nation – Saskatchewan
Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association
Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities
Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce
University of Regina – Faculty of Education
University of Saskatchewan – College of Education
Saskatchewan Polytechnic

Gabriel Dumont Institute
First Nations University of Canada
Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies
Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education
Canadian School Boards Association
British Columbia School Trustees Association
Alberta School Boards Association
Manitoba Association of School Trustees
Ontario Public School Boards Association
Prince Edward Island School Trustees Association
Quebec English School Boards Association
Nova Scotia School Boards Association
Newfoundland & Labrador School Boards Association
Martin Family Initiative
Saskatchewan Alliance for Youth and Community Well-being
CUPE Education Workers Steering Committee
SEIU West

The Association also has long history of adapting to members' needs and offering a variety of services that enable school boards to save money by working together for the benefit of students. The SSBA is in a great position to explore and offer services and support at a provincial level – at a lower cost – something that would be difficult for government to replicate in a cost effective way. Today, these include Employee Benefits, Insurance, Legal Services and Strategic HR:

- The SSBA's Employee Benefits Plan is designed specifically for employees of school divisions. Cost savings can be demonstrated for all school divisions that belong to the SSBA Employee Benefits Plan. Some divisions can realize savings of up to \$100,000 or more depending on their size. The SSBA Employee Benefits Plan covers approximately 7,400 non-teaching employees.
- Student safety is the top priority for school boards. The SSBA supports school divisions in this regard through risk management work in conjunction with co-ordination of the SSBA General Insurance Program. The Program provides comprehensive coverage for more than 760 schools and more than 180,000 students, insuring \$9 billion in value.

- Insurance premiums are the lowest they have been in decades – at about \$8.1 million total. All school divisions in Saskatchewan participate in the Program, which enables boards to work together in order to receive the most competitive rates possible for their coverage.
- SSBA Legal Services provides a team of lawyers uniquely experienced in the practice of law in the education sector within Saskatchewan. Legal Services deals with a broad range of issues and is used every month by the majority of board chairs, directors of education, superintendents and members of SASBO. The cost of all SSBA Legal Services are all included within SSBA membership fees.
- The Strategic HR department provides expert advice in Human Resources and Employee Relations matters to SSBA member boards. The Provincial HR Data Warehouse is unique in Western Canada, offering salary grids and other information in one searchable site. The cost of these services is also included within the membership fees.

The Path Forward:

School boards are committed to continuing to improve education in the interests of all students and we think ‘transformational change’ is best achieved through the success we are seeing with the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) and other initiatives – and not by eliminating local, democratic decision-making. We want to ensure we are creating an environment for success and working together – and believe strongly boards of education and the SSBA play a key role in supporting future success.

The education sector has a long history of working together for the benefit of students and our member boards are working collaboratively towards collective results. While there are challenges facing education, we feel strongly that the focus should be on efforts to strengthen and improve governance and not on significant restructuring that doesn’t save money and is very disruptive for students and school communities.

Without a compelling reason for major change, the Dan Perrins Governance report appears to outline the following key points as the drivers for change:

- The Ministry of Education does not have the legislative authority to direct Boards of Education.
- Operations inefficiencies, inconsistent staffing levels and compensation practices for trustees and administrators must be addressed.
- Student outcomes are not improving at the desired rate needed to achieve the goals for education in the Saskatchewan Plan for Growth.
- The current provincial fiscal situation and financial sustainability in education.

Process audits conducted by the Office of the Provincial Auditor (OPA) were also identified and mentioned in the Perrins report. It is worth noting that anytime boards have gone through a process audit with the OPA, and concerns were identified, they were taken very seriously and addressed. We believe there is opportunity for the SSBA to further support board development and learning by working closely with all divisions so the improvements can be shared and applied across the system.

Education in Saskatchewan is a shared responsibility and school boards believe that, if the above are the driving concerns for the Ministry of Education, these can be addressed without significant governance restructuring or further amalgamations.

School boards are also seriously committed to the *Principles of Good Governance* outlined in the Perrins report and in fact they align well with the principles for good governance in our newly released *SSBA Governance Handbook* available online at: <http://ssbagovernancehandbook.ca/>. The SSBA is committed to strengthening and working with the Ministry and boards to ensure that board governance training is targeted and consistent across the province.

The Perrins report also identifies (on pages 20-21) *Shifts in Governance* that should occur to address the key challenges for the system as a whole (public, separate and francophone) – recognizing that these governance shifts will require amendments to legislation, regulations and ministry policy. Boards of education are open to conversations and recognize the need to look at legislation, regulations and ministry policy changes with the assurance that any changes to the education system will consider the system as a whole, respect partnerships with First Nations and Métis, and are done with consultation and in collaboration with the sector and locally elected school boards.

The following comments related to the recommended *Shifts in Governance* are intended to highlight the position of the SSBA with a genuine effort from boards of education to explore and work collaboratively on a path forward that includes changes and improvements that support student achievement and success:

1. *Strategic Direction and Accountability:*

- *redefine the roles of the Minister in the legislation and regulations to enhance the ability to provide direction in relation to outcomes and standards and to assess the extent to which they are achieved;*
- *examine the number of members per board for public and separate system;*
- *standardize expectations of boards in relation to required competencies of board members; require mandatory board training.*

Redefining the roles of the Minister may diminish the role of locally elected boards. Boards are of the view that outcomes and standards are agreed to, monitored, and reported on in the ESSP. There is not consensus on a defined number of members per board. There is continued support for board training; however board training should not be a prerequisite for trusteeship.

2. *Effectiveness:*

- *renew and strengthen the emphasis on education outcomes through an ongoing focus on the ESSP and consideration of an Education Quality Council with responsibility for monitoring system performance.*

Boards affirm their commitment to the ESSP. It is unclear what role an Education Quality Council would take, and questions arose regarding the added costs and accountability structure for this proposed entity; therefore boards do not support the creation of this structure. Educational standards and outcomes are in the ESSP and it is the role of boards to monitor and report – this is where quality and improvement focus should remain and there may be some further role for the Ministry to support data collection and analysis.

3. *Efficiency:*

- *enhance the focus on lowering the cost curve, creating enhanced value in the system, and improving services to students through efficiency, shared services and continuous*

improvement initiatives in keeping with the work already underway in the PLT (centralize business functions such as central IT, financial, HR, payroll, procurement and purchasing).

Boards of education have led the way, and remain committed to finding efficiencies while doing everything in their power to ensure students are not negatively impacted. School boards have identified approximately \$9 million in accumulated efficiencies for the recent school year – see attached or view details online at: <http://saskschoolboards.ca/wp-content/uploads/Efficiencies-Data-Collection-Consolidated.pdf>.

Going forward, efficiencies must be based upon strong business cases. Recognizing that centralized services are not always efficient or effective (e.g. federal government centralized payroll system, or centralized modular classroom purchasing a few years ago). Also recognizing that any centralized services must be offered in French and that centralized purchasing can impact rural Saskatchewan businesses.

4. *Consistency/Standardization:*

- *standardize governance costs, including remuneration rates, annual maximum remuneration for board members and rates for travel and sustenance (taking into account northern areas), professional development, and maximum number of board meetings;*
- *standardize administrative costs, including consideration of a provincial pay grid for out-of-scope positions and standards for the number of central office staff in relation to school-based staff; and,*
- *consider additional standardization of locally-bargained terms and conditions.*

Boards support looking at standards for board member travel (meals/mileage) rates, and the SSBA is already looking closely at locally determined terms and conditions. A maximum number of board meetings is not supported as it should be determined based on the work and local circumstances. There is not consensus on the remaining areas in this section. There are unique situations in the province that propose challenges to standardizing administration (e.g. housing availability in the North).

5. *Participation:*

- *reinforce the value of school community councils; and,*
- *enable First Nation representation on boards.*

There is a SSBA resolution adopted by the membership to review School Community Councils (SCCs), and that work should be done to provide the evidence needed to guide future directions of SCCs. There is value in their role as currently defined in legislation/regulations. There is great concern if Government diminishes the number of elected trustees and enhances the role/expectations of SCCs as we have heard from SCCs that they want to be involved in day to day support of the operations of the school, not system-wide governance. If SCCs take on a larger role, recognize that there will be increased professional development costs for SCCs, and there are also known recruitment challenges for SCC positions. There is general agreement with the enhancement of First Nation representation on boards, and boards are open to a more focused approach in this area – we believe this enhances and strengthens our governance. There are great examples of model partnerships in place and we have worked hard over more than 10 years to establish the SSBA Aboriginal Council. There is a strong and growing First Nations and Métis voice in education and there is great opportunity to work closely together.

Conclusion:

For more than 100 years of history – the SSBA, our members and their communities, have endured difficult times of war, drought and depression – but still the longest lasting and most fundamental responsibility of school boards is to bring the voice of the public to publicly-funded education.

Members have consistently faced changing and evolving issues related to language, immigration, funding, taxation, teaching days, size of school units, the education act, teacher supply and salary negotiations, amalgamation and legislation.

Every “section”, every perspective – each and every vote, resolution, and appointment that has shaped our association and our education system – was fueled and lead by committed and passionate individuals who care about students and their communities. They are the locally elected trustees who make up boards of education in Saskatchewan.

The mission of the SSBA is to, “Provide leadership, coordination and services to member boards of education to support student achievement.” SSBA services have changed and evolved over the years, but our association has continued to be a leader and a partner in the sector to manage through good and bad times – by bringing boards together for shared services and efficiencies that today include: insurance, legal, employee benefits, First Nations and Métis education, human resources, employee relations, communications, collective bargaining, and board development services and support.

The SSBA is an excellent position, with strong partnerships in place, representing all 28 boards in Saskatchewan, to support continued success. We are committed to further sharing promising practices and building on the principles of good governance, Student First and the ESSP. We are committed to improvements to ensure student success.

The SSBA and our member boards know that the delivery of education is complex. We value and respect the role of all education and community partners and strongly believe that the path forward is about building on the foundation that has served our system for over 100 years and to keep working together to ensure that all students have the resources they need to achieve and succeed, regardless of where they live in the province or their personal circumstances.

Backgrounder

SSBA “Add Your Voice!” Survey – Highlighted Comments



- “Each community has a unique culture that is only really understood by people who live, work and recreate there. This culture is mirrored in the schools. Our school boards need to understand and support the unique characteristics of the community.”
- “Right now, local school board members see our children as children and if we change that I am almost sure my child will become just another number on a piece of paper. Things are going great as they are. Why try to fix something that is not broken? Leave well alone and keep our local school boards.”
- “I am a teacher and am deeply concerned about the possibility of school boards being amalgamated.”
- “Locally elected trustees and school boards are critical to the governance process necessary to ensure local student needs are met and to ensure senior level officials are held accountable to supporting these needs effectively. We are seeing improvement in student learning and in efficiencies sector-wide. This practice needs to be maintained and a shift away will not support the growth the province is experiencing.”
- “As a principal from a rural school, I see no benefit in moving the boards farther away from the communities.”
- “I appreciate having a locally elected official as a school board trustee so that when there is an issue in my child’s school, I know who to talk to about it. A local face makes you feel someone is going to bat for you versus someone the government puts in place who may not understand the demographics of my area.”
- “Boards must represent local interests and must be elected. I believe that is called democracy.”
- “As a mother of two small children that will be entering the school system soon and as a teacher, it irritates me when I hear that there is consideration that school districts will amalgamate even more than they already are. I live in a very small rural area and even though we are small, we have an opinion, a voice, and our children’s education is very important.”
- “I am in a support role and work with staff and students on the front lines. There is no one model or delivery method that works for every scenario and situation. Local boards are best at understanding the unique requirements of their communities and are therefore most qualified to implement education within their areas.”
- “A province-wide school board does not know what the smaller communities need. Locally elected school boards keep their finger on the pulse of what is happening in the schools. You take them away, you take away what students really need.”
- “If decisions are taken away from locally elected boards, many communities will be forgotten.”
- “Education is an investment and I believe the local taxpayer continues to pay between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of the cost of education in this province. As long as local ratepayers are paying the education portion of property tax, they should be choosing who governs the education system locally.”
- “Nothing is more inefficient than centralized bureaucracies that evade public input.”
- “We must all work together to maintain our local school boards who support the complex and diverse needs of our schools, and most importantly, the needs of our students.”

Saskatchewan School Boards Governance Costs Review 2016

As locally elected boards, school divisions have the autonomy to set their own budgets in order to be responsive to the challenges of local needs. In 2015-16, approximately \$1.7 billion in operating grants were provided to school divisions from the Government of Saskatchewan.

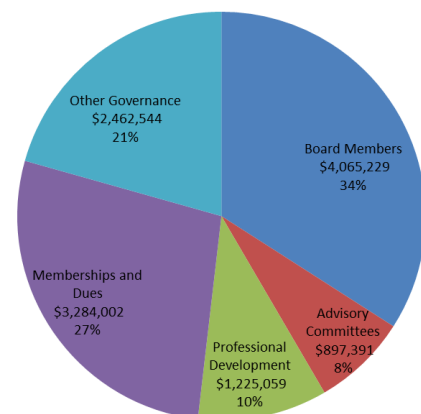
Expenditures for school divisions are allocated to the following categories: Instruction, Plant, Transportation, Governance & Administration, and Other.

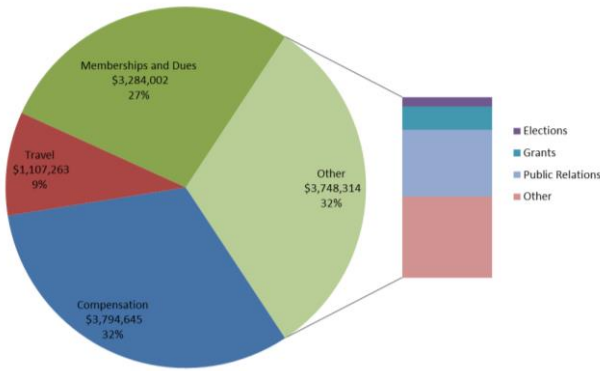
Governance and Administration comprise of around 4% of the entire expenditures for school divisions. Governance and Administration includes the costs incurred primarily for governance purposes and for conducting the business administration activities of the school division. Based on the recent 2015-16 audited financial statements for all 28 school divisions, only 0.5% (\$11.9 million) of expenditures is spent on governance.

Governance is about setting the strategic direction of the School Board (through the plan and budget), and then being confident that the School Board is moving in that direction by monitoring and evaluating results. Locally elected Board Members act on behalf of the citizens they represent and have the authority and oversight of the school system and its resources.

Expenditures for the governance of the school division include the costs of conducting the activities of School Boards and School Community Councils. Governance costs for all 28 school divisions can be identified into the following categories:

- x Board Members Expense t includes travel and compensation for Board Members and other meeting costs
- x Advisory Committees t includes travel and compensation for Advisory Committees, grants to School Community Councils and other meeting costs
- x Professional Development t includes professional development fees, travel and indemnity for Board Members and Advisory Committees
- x Memberships and Dues - include SSBA, SAMA, CEFP, and other membership costs that are incurred for governance related purposes.
- x Other Governance Expense t includes costs to run elections, negotiating fees, research fees, SSBA memberships and dues, public relations, and more.





Less than 0.2% (\$3.4 million) of 28 school division expenditures is paid to Board Members and Advisory Committees as remuneration for attendance at authorized meetings and activities for the school division.

Less than 0.1% (\$1.1 million) of 28 school division expenditures is for travel expenses incurred in the performance of their duties or professional development, such as mileage, meals, and hotels.

Locally elected Boards of Education are an important part of the democratic process that provides the connection between the community and the education system. While there is a cost to governance in school divisions, it provides locally elected board members and school community councils important input into and oversight by bringing the voice of the community to the school system.