

Commentary



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Unsettling the status quo: Stirrings of reform in the school board trustee battlegrounds

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Public dissatisfaction with governments across Canada, from province-to-province, was running high in the wake of two-and-one half years of pandemic disruptions. As lower-order governments, elected school boards are the closest to the people and often where the rumblings can be more easily detected. Significant student learning losses, mental health stresses, scarcity of resource supports, and unresponsive school systems combined with growing ideological polarization did produce social panic, instability, and a fair share of “crackpots.” So, local conditions appeared to be ripe for an incipient populist and parent-driven revolt to confront centralized, top-down education management to challenge the so-called “woke agenda” and “take back our schools.”

Stirrings of local democratic impulse and isolated “election insurgencies” during the October 2022 cycle of elections produced quite a ruckus in some two dozen of the hundreds of public school districts scattered across Canada. Mainstream media recognized the signs, identified groups of dissidents, and declared a few selected school board contests to be the latest front in a simmering North American “culture war” over the aims and purpose of public education (Maharaj, Tuters, Shah 2022; LaFleche 2022). Forecasts of

a populist revolt against the established education-bureaucratic order proved to be grossly exaggerated and, for the most part, fizzled out in British Columbia, Ontario and Manitoba.

Contrary to most education news reports, the school trustee election insurgencies were not really new, just much better organized, funded, and coordinated than previous isolated local eruptions over the past three decades (Bennett 2020). School trustee Twitter feeds, particularly in British Columbia's interior school districts and in Ontario regions like the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB), were full of anger and rage (Alphonso 2022). All of a sudden, local school boards were no longer just boring political backwaters, sanctuaries for retired educators, or low-risk testing grounds for aspiring politicians (Bennett 2020; Maharaj, Tuters, Shah 2022).



Local conditions appeared to be ripe for an incipient populist and parent-driven revolt.

Education reformers on the political left have long been active in school board politics in in Canada's major cities, particularly in Toronto and Winnipeg. Since the 1960s, they have emerged, often out of local community service work, to set the agenda and forge a consensus around closing the equity gap and expanding student support services. Over the 30 years up until 2012, those left-leaning reformers pursued a vision of "educational improvement" seeking to address, in the words of two sympathetic analysts (Gaskell and Levin 2012), the educational implications of "increasing levels of inequality and diversity by changing what was taught, how it was taught, and how the school system related to the broader community." Community organizing, social work and local NDP activism are still the glue that sustains what amounts to the current status quo in urban school board politics.

Organizing and running "slates" of candidates (Mazur 2018) and announcing "endorsements" of candidates is not really new; nor is attempting to torpedo the campaigns of school trustee candidates who challenge the status quo or the prevailing order of social norms. Everyone who has run for school board office or campaigned for a candidate knows about the pre-election endorsements of favoured candidates by employee groups and special interests, including teacher federations and local labour organizations. Such interventions are commonly used to marginalize incumbents with an independent streak or to block promising new candidates committed to systemic or curricular reform. Socially conservative groups, such as Campaign for Life, have attempted to emulate that practice with limited success, mostly confined to school board races in Catholic separate school boards.

Social panic and public fears

In October 2022, most of the mainstream media, including Canada's established education reporters, took their cue, this time around, from a rather strident political campaign by the Canadian branch of the North American ice cream company, Ben & Jerry's. "The Far-Right is Stacking our School Boards," Ben & Jerry's warned on its website. Markedly similar and exaggerated alarms and fears over a potential for a "far-right" uprising popped up in news coverage of school board elections in British Columbia (October 15), Ontario (October 25), and Manitoba (October 26).

The multinational corporation now owned by Unilever Incorporated applied a broad definition of "far-right" and, in effect, labelled and dismissed a whole swath of Canadian education reform candidates campaigning for democratic accountability and pledging to "take back the schools" (Jivani 2022). That label was then applied to any candidate raising concerns or simply asking questions about board spending priorities, the silencing of parent voices, "critical race theory," the age-appropriateness of sex education, professional teaching standards, or safety in schools.

Origins of the democratic deficit and parent activism

School boards were ripe for structural reform because, over time, they have become larger, more centralized and distant from local citizens. That process of bureaucratic change and unaddressed public alienation was documented in my 2020 book, *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (Bennett 2020). Pent-up desire for change was gradually building, but it took a pandemic to bring it out into the open in the public square.

One of the sad realities of contemporary K-12 education is that elected school boards, once the anchor of local education democracy, are withering and virtually extinct in Canada's four Atlantic provinces. Centralization of educational policy-making since the 1990s has gradually eroded the governance role and significance of school districts in relation to provincial education authorities (Fleming 1997). Provincial government policies, driven by a metropolitan-centric perspective and a management efficiency ethos, and exemplified in the adoption of testing and accountability regimes, further promoted centralization and school consolidation (Corbett 2014). The trend toward larger and larger school districts ran counter to the core democratic mandate of elected school trustees and district-level governance everywhere.

Elected school boards came under fire for their inability to effectively represent local interests and, over two decades, gradually lost their democratic legitimacy, one province at a time. One of the early warnings that regional school boards were too big to be effective was issued in 2003 by Queen's

University education professor T.R. Williams: “Given the present size of boards, the traditional concept of an elected part-time trustee who can fully represent the interests of individual constituents is no longer viable. The current elected district boards are simply too large” (Williams 2003). Merging of school boards into “huge administrative units” made them “so large and politicized,” as Williams forecast, that they “resort to formulaic approaches to distribute resources.” While regional boards can provide some corporate direction, they were “woefully inadequate as a democratic institution in whose trust resides the development of education of thousands of individual, different learners.”

A 2009 review of Ontario School Governance reaffirmed “respect for trustees” as “key-decision-makers” and, in effect, brushed aside Williams’ pointed critique of the existing regional board system. His appeal to embrace innovative school-based reform plans, including publicly-funded, autonomous charter schools, fell on deaf ears (Johnson and Chevalier 2008; Brown and Rushoway 2015). Blocking-out such growing concerns about eroding democratic accountability would serve to cement the close relationship between school administration and elected trustees at all levels, especially since the shift to focusing on the system-wide and technocratic priorities of school change gurus (Campbell and Fullan 2019).

Erosion of public confidence and legitimacy

Today’s elected school boards suffer from an identity crisis. Unlike municipal councils, which raise and control their own revenues, they have mostly been stripped of their taxing powers and are funded almost entirely by provincial authorities. In major urban districts, such as the Toronto District School Board and Vancouver School Board, elected trustees tend to flex their political muscles, but soon discover that their powers are narrowly circumscribed under the current governance model. Subscribing to a “corporate governance model” also muddies the waters (Bennett 2020).

Outside of the big cities, most boards are trained to act like an arm’s-length corporate board that takes the “balcony view” of operations and stays out of day-to-day school operations. Confusion over just how hands-on school trustees should be underlies many of the problems that plague boards. Public displays of misbehaviour, financial ineptitude and internal rancor plague school boards and, where they exist, spark outcries that they are “dysfunctional” and periodic calls for their abolition right across Canada (Mackinnon 2016; Brown and Rushoway 2015).

When a 2013 Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) governance report warned that the remaining boards were “sinking ships,” it sparked a defensive reaction that went largely unheeded in Atlantic Canada (Galway 2016). That sealed their fate in the region. An influential Nova Scotia report,

Avis Glaze's *Raise the Bar*, recommended dissolution of English language boards which, as constituted, were distant from the governed, ineffective in ensuring accountability and unresponsive to parents and communities (Glaze 2018). Nova Scotia's subsequent January 2018 decision to dissolve its English regional school boards signalled, for a time, their total elimination in Atlantic Canada.

Manitoba school boards were next up and they managed to stave-off abolition. It happened in March 2021 when then premier Brian Pallister unveiled Bill 64, the proposed *Education Modernization Act*, calling for the elimination of the province's 36 elected school boards. Scores of community leaders, backed by county and city councils, passed motions explicitly condemning the plans. More than 500 speakers – a record number in the history of the Manitoba Legislature – succeeded in forcing the government to abandon the enabling legislation and scale down the reform (MacLean 2022).

Contested terrain: The October 2022 school board skirmishes

What changed in October 2022 was that movements to challenge the status quo, mostly – but not exclusively – leaning to the right, got better organized and mounted credible campaigns with clearly-articulated policy positions (Beuckert 2022). Most school trustee incumbents, nominally autonomous but often captive of school administration, were terrified since “acclamation” was normally the route to re-election. Confronting slates of candidates, running under the banner of ABC Vancouver and Parents' Voice BC, or the Ontario “Blueprint for Canada” platform or endorsed by the “Vote Against Woke” coalition made it all-to-real and sparked the usual education backlash, closing ranks against outsiders.

British Columbia

Municipal political parties have long been present in BC education politics, mainly concentrated in the Greater Vancouver region. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), forerunner of the NDP, entered civic politics in the mid-1930s. A municipal political party known as the Non-Partisan Association (NPA) was established by the city's business leaders in 1937 to challenge CCF-backed candidates in that year's municipal election. Since its founding, the NPA has steered a centre-right course, appealing to local business interests, and running slates of school board candidates against a succession of social democratic municipal parties.

One of the recent centre-left iterations, Vision Vancouver, founded in 2005 by former Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) members, swept into power in 2008 as a green-progressive coalition under Gregor Robertson

(2008-2018) (Vision Vancouver 2008) and gained control over the Vancouver School Board under Patti Bacchus and her Vision team (2008-2014). Bacchus was ousted as board in 2014 by newly-elected NPA trustee Christopher Richardson. After being defeated narrowly in the 2018 Vancouver election, NPA party leader Ken Sim broke away from the party and formed a more centrist version, known as ABC Vancouver. Under Sim, ABC Vancouver swept every seat from the Mayor's office to the school board in October 2022, electing a roster of mostly novice school trustee candidates. More typical of BC urban school board politics is the Greater Victoria School Board where indirect support from the Greater Victoria Teachers' Association (GVTA) and public sector unions is critical to getting elected or re-elected as a public school trustee (Grossman and Bell 2022).

“ *The fledgling ParentsVoice BC campaign aroused fierce and vocal opposition.* ”

What really upset the status quo in British Columbia in October 2022 was the appearance of a centre-right coalition, ParentsVoice BC, fielding some 28 candidates in eight different school districts from the Vancouver suburbs of Surrey up the Fraser River to the BC interior (ParentsVoice BC 2022). Over the course of four months, a well-organized and funded provincial campaign, spearheaded by two politically conservative organizers, a devout Catholic from Abbotsford, BC, Marc Vella, and seasoned political organizer Fritz Radandt, created a considerable stir. Running under the slogan “Take Back Our Schools,” the party campaigned to reverse what it claimed was the “politicization of classrooms” on a six-point platform committed to putting students first, independence from “special interests,” public transparency, reflecting community values, respect for parents as first educators, and aspiration to academic excellence. “We’ve tapped into a vein that feels our school system is broken,” Radandt told CBC News. “And specifically, we feel that the school systems are dictating to the parents what they want, and are not listening to the parents and communities.”

The fledgling ParentsVoice BC campaign aroused fierce and vocal opposition, echoed and amplified in the mainstream provincial media and widely-read online publications, including *The Tyee* and *Georgia Straight*. Most British Columbians first heard about the school board party through a rather sensational CBC News story from September 28, painting its entire slate as a crop of candidates with “obscured views” and identified a few with links to “anti-vax and conspiratorial views” (Walker 2022). Five days before the October 15 election, Tyee education reporter Katie Hyslop issued a “special report” alerting readers to the news that a new “right-wing” party was “waging a ‘parents rights’ cam-

paign against sex education and SOGI,” with SOGI standing for BC’s Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity policy.

Four years after a decisive 2018 election that mostly rejected a “social conservative push” against “gender and sexuality inclusion in school,” Hyslop reported that it was back again. With a global pandemic “wreaking havoc on education and the advancement of gay and trans people,” she sounded an alarm that “school board candidates continue to bring up SOGI... and related issues, often paired with concerns about school boards not seeking parents’ consent on decisions.” In addition, some of the same candidates were “spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, saying mask-wearing is unhealthy, and that vaccines are dangerous and unnecessary for young people” (Hyslop 2022).

Media alerts and public fears turned out to be false alarms. When the October 2022 school board results were in, only three of the 28 ParentsVoice BC candidates won election, in two outlying school districts, Chilliwack and Nechako Lakes (ParentsVoice BC 2022). In more urban and multiethnic districts, such as the Surrey School District, the dominant Surrey First bloc of candidates swept all seven seats, once again, with 6.8 to 8.7 percent of the total vote, and Lisa Dawn Alexis of ParentsVoice BC, earned 31,626 votes (5.9 percent), a few thousand ballots off the pace. ParentsVoice trustee candidates, Dupinder Saran and Jasbir Narwal, mounted a spirited campaign for seats, campaigning in Urdu and English, but fell short in the district-wide vote with some 21,900 votes (4.1 percent).

Ontario

The whole approach of Ontario’s Waterloo Region Regional School Board (WRDSB) to advancing educational equity and anti-racism policies made that school system with 65,000 students ground zero in a major ideological battle of the current education culture war (Alphonso 2022). Since 2021, under recently-appointed Director of Education, Jeewan Chanicka, it has reached a fever pitch, pitting the Director, Board Chair Scott Piatkowski and a ruling faction of trustees against veteran Black trustee Mike Ramsey and a rival group opposed to the imposition of a so-called “woke” agenda over the objections of large numbers of local citizens and parents (Ramsay 2022a).

Trustee Ramsay, a 28-year veteran, first elected in Kitchener in 1988, began raising objections as “a person of colour” to the board’s wholesale adoption of anti-racist and gender identity policies and practices. It all came to a head in February 2022, when WRDSB elementary teacher Carolyn Burjoski was shut down by Chair Piatkowski and the elected board while attempting to raise concerns about two books in elementary-school libraries and, specifically, the age-appropriateness of sections referring to asexuality and transgender young people.

After Ramsay was censured and suspended for speaking-out against the WRDSB board’s actions, he and his supporters rallied against Piatkowski and

his mostly centre-left faction. In October 2022, they mounted an organized campaign to oust most of the incumbent trustees. The populist group led by Ramsay and his key ally Cindy Watson of Cambridge ran for re-election with a coalition of mostly novice parent voice advocates. While the group was labelled “anti-woke,” their main message spoke more to restoring “balanced decision-making,” working as partners with parents, focusing on ensuring student success, supporting at-risk students, and “promoting transparency, accountability and unity within the entire educational system.” The October 2022 election saw the re-election of Ramsay but produced a shake-up with the defeat of staunch Piatkowski ally and former WRDSB senior administrator, Jayne Herring, and the election of six new faces to the board (Williams 2022).

Outside of the Waterloo school board, populist groups challenging the prevailing “woke” agenda failed to make a breakthrough. Governing school board factions in two other hot spots, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) and Trillium Lakelands District School Board (TLDSB) up in in the Kawarthas, easily succeeded in beating back dissenting voices. Two outspoken “Stop the Woke” trustee candidates, Shannon Boschy (Zone 6) and Chanel Pfahl (Zone 8), tapped into social media to speak out against gender-affirming medical care, such as puberty blockers and transition surgery. After being roundly criticized by LGBTQ2S+ advocates for alleged transphobic remarks on social media, they were easily dispatched in the election.

Founder and architect of the ambitious “Blueprint for Canada” platform, Peter Wallace was also trounced in his bid for a Trillium Lakelands seat by Lindsay’s Colleen Wilcox, appointed to that board in 2015 when former trustee Karen Round was expelled for Code of Conduct infringements, including posting on Facebook the voting records of fellow trustees (Miller 2016). In all-too-common school board fashion, Wilcox was acclaimed in October 2018 and benefited from a low October 2022 voter turnout. Unmoved by Wallace’s intervention, the status quo remained secure.

Manitoba

Education observers in Manitoba predicted a spurt of public interest in school board elections in Manitoba, following the 2021 provincial stay-of-execution. That democratic surge turned out to be largely confined to Greater Winnipeg (Macintosh 2022). Thirty-five candidates surfaced for nine seats on the Winnipeg School Division board, the largest number since the late 1990s, and, on election day, only two of the 25 seats on the three largest boards, Winnipeg, Louis Riel and Pembina Hills. Much of this might be attributed to a well presented “Why Your Vote Matters” campaign by the Manitoba Teachers’ Society (MTS) aimed at reducing the number of seats filled by acclamation or vacant and filled by appointment (MTS 2022).

Public interest in running for Manitoba school board seats remained anemic. With almost all school divisions reporting their results in late October, a majority of trustees were again acclaimed and 17 percent remained vacant, requiring appointments. The overall appointment rate was expected to be 10 percent, roughly three times the rate in 2018. All local trustees in 13 Manitoba school divisions were acclaimed, up from six in the last election (Macintosh 2022). Most telling of all was Interlake School District, home board of Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) president Allan C. Campbell. While campaigning for more democratic accountability and participation, he was acclaimed, again, and every seat in his own board will be filled by acclamation or appointment. Without any visible campaign to disrupt the prevailing status quo, Manitoba continued to be what is dubbed a “sleepy hollow” in school board politics.

Teasing out the lessons

School board wars have arrived in a couple of dozen districts in Canada but will not likely mirror what has happened since 2020 in school systems across the United States. Progressive values hold much bigger sway here, especially on social and moral questions, and social equity provision is embedded in human rights legislation – and that explains the fierce backlash (Rushowy and Noor 2022). There is, however, significant confusion over the expected and actual role of elected trustees in the system (Piscitelli, Perella and Payler 2022). Elected trustees are often torn between the three competing roles: to represent the public; to support the administrative functions of the school board, and to ensure educational outcomes and/or student success.

Social conservatives engaged in Canadian K-12 education have learned, for the most part, to sublimate their inner-most thoughts and conceal their views, for fear of being exposed (Walker 2022). Being “outed” for holding such sentiments can bring consequences. That’s why many trustee candidates endorsed by the Ontario “Vote Against Woke” coalition either ran for cover or asked that their names be removed from the list (LaFleche 2022).

The Canadian mainstream media, with a few exceptions, is openly hostile to school trustee candidates daring (or foolish) enough to voice “anti-woke” sentiments with respect to matters of gender identities and rights (Montpetit and Ward 2022). Many education news reporters have also proven to be cool to those questioning the rise of “critical race theory” (Alphonso 2022) or advocating diversity and respect for, and acceptance of, one another, regardless of skin colour, race, or creed (Ramsay 2022b). It is never acceptable to express racist, misogynist or anti-trans views. Having said that, those who seek to identify enemies of the “far-right” or “woke-left,” label opponents, or silence a sizable proportion of the population are not helpful and do damage to public discourse and responsive, representative local government.

Looking back over the recent school board elections, it's clear that Canadians deserve better from the mainstream Canadian media, online news outlets, and participating organizations, whatever their stripe. School board democracy was threatened long before the October 2022 municipal skirmishes. Revitalizing a healthy school board democracy will require a public discourse more inclined to fairly represent causes, interests and organizations spanning the political spectrum (LaFleche 2022). When school boards and the popular media are open to all views, it should be applauded as a vital component of a healthy, energetic and functioning local democratic culture. If the 2022 school trustee elections are any indication, we are a long way from that set of conditions.

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Since 2009, Dr. Bennett has emerged, born again, as a nationally-recognized author, education historian, policy analyst and commentator. He has authored or co-authored ten books, and most recently *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (2020). Paul has also produced more than a dozen policy research papers for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS), the Northern Policy Institute, and the Institute for Research on Public Policy. His commentaries appear regularly in *IRPP Policy Options*, *The Hub Canada*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Chronicle Herald*, and *The Conversation Canada*. For the past five years, Paul has been National Coordinator for researchED in Canada. His education commentary blog, Educhatter, was recognized as the top Education Blog in Canada in 2018 and 2022

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