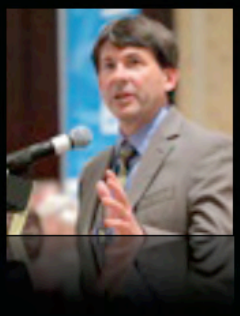

The Report of the Pan-Canadian Study of School District Governance

School Boards Matter

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CHAPTER ONE
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. Further, they propose that effective boards engender trust and a collective vision that serves to focus district energies and resources. Similarly, Sheppard et al. have concluded that school boards matter a great deal to effective public school systems. While there are examples of individual schools that have been successful in bringing about meaningful improvements in student learning, their research shows that such cases are the exception. And even in those exceptional cases, success has been difficult to sustain when key leaders depart the school. They argue that if there is to be meaningful and sustained systems-level change among many schools, the pressure and support of an effective school district/board is essential. Further, they contend that ignoring the potential leadership role of school boards and the districts they govern in bringing about meaningful continuous improvement of teaching and learning, or eliminating them all together as has been the case in a number of jurisdictions, is poor public policy.

Notwithstanding evidence in support of school boards, in recent years there has emerged a growing constituency that have proffered a position that school boards have become wasteful hierarchies whose role in promoting student learning is negligible. Several authors (e.g., Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002; Bogatch & Brooks, 1994; Rusch, 2005; Sheppard et al., 2009; Tewel, 1995) draw attention to literature that is somewhat antagonistic toward school boards, representing them as incidental to meaningful school improvement. For example, Rusch (2005) cites several studies characterizing school boards as centralized institutionalized bureaucracies that are “major inhibitor[s] of the dialogue or problem solving required for system-level restructuring or cross-system organizational learning” (p. 87).

Some of the negativity relating to school boards may be connected to a trend in government policy towards the consolidation of local school districts. Since the late 1980s many countries (e.g., Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa and Sweden) have introduced significant and fundamental reforms to how education is governed in their jurisdictions (Buras & Apple, 2005; Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Louis, Thomas, & Anderson, 2010; New Zealand, 2011; Ranson, 2008; Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011; Williams, 2003). While the design of those education reforms vary from one setting to another (Levin & Wiens, 2003), the changes, for the most part, have resulted

in the centralization of key decision-making powers at the government level, the devolution of particular authority to school-level governing bodies and concomitant decreases in the authority of, or complete elimination of, intermediate governing bodies such as school boards (Ainley & McKenzie, 2000; Ainscow & Tweedle, 2001; Connolly & James, 2011; Farrell & Law, 1999; Karlsen, 1999). In parallel with the trend internationally, some US states have implemented changes to the funding model for school boards by increasing the proportion of education funding provided by the state while assuming greater authority for school governance, increasing accountability requirements and reducing school board autonomy (Malen 2003).

Public education in Canada has not been immune to the changing approaches to educational governance that have been taking place in the US and elsewhere. Although school boards in Canada continue to serve as the predominant local education governance authority, over the past quarter century the number of school districts has been reduced dramatically (Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA), 1995; Cox, 2002; Dibbon, Sheppard & Brown, 2012; Fleming, 1997; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Galway, 2012; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Schmidt & Schlottmann, 2006; Watson, et al., 2004; Williams, 2003). In Canada, since the early 1990s, each provincial government, sometimes with the courts serving as a catalyst, has restructured how education is governed in its jurisdiction. While district amalgamations are typically justified based on an efficiency argument (Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010; Galway 2012) they have been accompanied by significant reductions in the number of school board trustees[1] in each province (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; MacLellan, 2007; Williams, 2003). As well, these restructuring initiatives have routinely included changes to provincial legislation (Schools/Educations Acts) that have simultaneously decreased school board autonomy while increasing their accountability for student learning and district management. The result has been an increase in the number and diversity of students served by school districts, generally accompanied by an increase in the district's geographical area and a significant decrease in the number of trustees serving the local population.

The emergence of larger school districts has made it increasingly difficult for local school board members to connect with their constituents, raising concerns about the ability of boards to carry out their democratic mandate. In Canada, for instance, several provincial governments have responded to a continued decline in student enrolment by restructuring school districts to make them so large that elected school boards are no longer perceived to be the local "voice of the people," thereby creating public concern that boards have lost their raison d'être (Galway, 2006). In light of such changes, there appears to be a growing perception that provincial governments make all the important policy decisions and that the most meaningful public engagement now occurs through school councils (Dibbon et al., 2012).

The restructuring and consolidation of school districts by governments serve as stark reminders that the organization and governance of schools by school districts/boards "is

[1] In this report the terms ***trustees***, ***school board members,*** and ***commissioners*** are used synonymously

a political and organizational invention, not a natural and inevitable phenomenon" (Anderson, 2003, p. 3). In this new, more political context of school governance, there have been numerous recent examples where the political and ideological interests of provincial governments have run counter to the perceived mandates of school boards and the governance roles of elected trustees. In several notable cases governments have intervened to influence or overturn school board decisions. These interventions have ranged from public statements criticizing the policy decisions of school boards to more extreme measures, such as threats to overturn decisions or even the outright dismissal of board members or entire boards (Dibbon et al., 2012).

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. He suggests that a more constructive long-term approach to improving public K-12 education is to ascertain the key attributes of effective school boards, and to determine how these attributes can be replicated in all school districts. Other researchers have raised concerns about the nature of educational decision-making by ministers and senior public servants. Many policy observers across Canada believe that such decisions should be tied more closely to research evidence, and this idea has been gaining prominence over the past decade, as seen through the emergence of publicly and privately-funded knowledge centres, portals, consortia and other 'knowledge brokering' mechanisms (Galway, 2008). However, research on the policy formation practices in ministry-level policy elites in Canada shows a trend towards reliance on broadly defined democratic/political influences – public opinion, advocacy, the mass media and other political and pragmatic pressures (Galway, 2008). These findings are consistent with a policy paradigm that is more reactive than systematic, often requires immediate policy responses, and potentially, intervention in school board actions and decisions.

The present study is intended to improve our understanding of the characteristics of effective school boards and to examine the relationships between school boards and provincial governments in Canada.

Toward these purposes, we examined the following overarching questions:

- What is the nature of educational governance in school boards in Canada? Who are the principal actors and what are their governance roles? Does the governance model vary by region?
- What are the factors and influences that drive policy decision-making in Canadian school boards?
- What are the attributes of effective school boards in Canada? Do these attributes vary by region? How can these attributes be replicated in jurisdictions across the country?

We explored, as well, the extent to which school trustees feel their roles are being shaped by closer monitoring and new accountability and reporting arrangements with provincial governments.

We anticipate that this report will provide at least partial answers to those questions and thereby inform planning and decision making within the Canadian School Boards Association, provincial and territorial school board associations and local school boards throughout Canada. Further, we hope that it contributes meaningfully to a continued public dialogue on the value of school boards in the provision of high quality public education for all children and youth in Canada. Our ultimate aspiration is to facilitate positive dialogue between the Canadian ministries of education and the Canadian School Boards Association that will lead to a sustained national focus on and support for public education through the strengthening of local school boards and the school districts they govern.

CHAPTER TWO
Method and Data Sources

This study was conducted over an 18-month period between December 2010 and June 2012. We adopted a research design that involved two participant groups: school board trustees and school district superintendents[2] from Anglophone school boards in all Canadian provinces and territories. Primary data were collected through a national survey and a series of focus group interviews. We gathered other data and information through a review of existing literature available from traditional academic sources, government reports, websites that include provincial government, provincial school board associations, and randomly selected school boards.

The questions that composed the survey and the interview and focus group protocols were developed through an extensive review of the relevant literature relating to school board governance and through information gathered from three consultation sessions: two sessions with school board members and superintendents of education conducted at the 2012 CSBA Annual General Meeting and one session with interested members of the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration (CASEA) at its 2010 Congress. As well, we pilot-tested the survey instrument using a convenience sample of six individuals who had extensive association with school boards either as a trustee/school board member or senior school district administrator. On the basis of the pilot tests, we made minor adjustments to the survey instrument.

To increase the validity of findings, we took considerable care to collect data from school board members and school district superintendents from all provinces and territories and from those holding office with the CSBA Board. All four principal researchers (with some assistance from graduate students) collected data at different times and in differing locations and circumstances over the twelve-month data collection period (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within each province or region, participant selection was conducted with sensitivity to gender, experience, ethnicity and regional geography.

In total, we conducted 21 interview and focus group sessions. These included ten focus groups with school board trustees, nine focus groups with district superintendents of education and one interview with a superintendent. Focus groups ranged in size from 6 to 12 participants with sessions running between 60 and 90 minutes.

The target populations for the administration of the survey/questionnaire were trustees/school board members and superintendents who were members or affiliates of CSBA. We stratified our survey sampling procedures by three regions: Western (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories), Central (Ontario and Quebec), and Atlantic (Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island). We designed the sampling procedures to yield a

[2] Although the nomenclature for the chief executive officer of school districts varies from province to province (e.g. director or superintendent), in order to maintain consistency throughout this work, we employ only the term superintendent when referring to the senior administrative officer in a school district.

random sampling error of about ±5 % at the .95 confidence level. For trustees, we sought the following sample sizes from each region: Western, 275; Central, 330, and Atlantic, 170. For superintendents, we sought sample sizes as follows: Western, 128; Central, 86, and Atlantic, 22. Surveys were distributed to a random sample of districts accordingly, with oversampling of 10 % to account for those who might choose not to participate. Procedures for survey completion were designed to ensure anonymity. Each school district appointed a survey administrator who was responsible for distributing the materials to each participant. Each participant was provided a separate envelope and asked to seal the envelope before returning it to the designated administrator who returned the sealed envelopes to the researchers. The research protocol was approved in advance by Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and followed the principles outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research involving Humans (TCPS2).

Survey Respondent Demographics

Three hundred thirty-one (331) school board members and 38 district superintendents from across Canada responded to the survey for a total of 369 respondents. Of those respondents, 62% were from the Western region, 22% from Central, and 13% from the Atlantic region. Three percent of respondents did not identify their location. As for gender, there appears to be a reasonable balance, with 50% females and 45% males completing the survey (Table 1); 5% of respondents did not identify their gender. In Western and Central Canada, approximately 10% more females than males responded to the survey. In Atlantic Canada, return rates showed the reverse; 30% more males than females responded.

Table 1
Gender of School Board Members

Gender	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Men	Count	40	97	30	167
	% within Region	44.90%	44.70%	66.70%	47.60%
Women	Count	49	120	15	184
	% within Region	55.10%	55.30%	33.30%	52.40%
Total	Count	89	217	45	351
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

The age of respondents varied from under 30 years (1.5%) to over 60 (33%). The majority of respondents (67%) were over the age of 50 (Table 2). In all regions, a majority of participating trustees (58%) were either a parent or grandparent of a child attending school (Table 3). Interestingly, approximately 11% more of the trustees in the Atlantic Provinces than in Central and Western Canada indicated that they were either parents or grandparents of school-age children.

Table 2
Age of School Board Members

Age	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Under 30	Count	1	3	1	5
	% within Region	1.10%	1.40%	2.20%	1.40%
30-39	Count	5	14	2	21
	% within Region	5.60%	6.30%	4.30%	5.90%
40-49	Count	26	49	9	84
	% within Region	28.90%	22.20%	19.60%	23.50%
50-59	Count	26	85	14	125
	% within Region	28.90%	38.50%	30.40%	35.00%
60+	Count	32	70	20	122
	% within Region	35.60%	31.70%	43.50%	34.20%
Total	Count	90	221	46	357
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 3
Relationship to Child/Children Currently Attending School

Relationship	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Parent/Guardian	Count	31	73	17	121
	% within Region	36.50%	33.60%	37.80%	34.90%
Grandparent	Count	21	56	15	92
	% within Region	24.70%	25.80%	33.30%	26.50%
Neither	Count	33	88	13	134
	% within Region	38.80%	40.60%	28.90%	38.60%
Total	Count	85	217	45	347
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Respondents' occupations were varied (e.g., stay-at-home parents, skilled tradespersons, farmers, fishers, educators, office workers, business owners, health care professionals, clerks, civil servants, managers/executives and retirees). Length of service as a school board member also varied considerably. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated that they had been in their current school board membership for less than five years, 44% for five to twelve years, and 20% for more than twelve years (Table 4). While there is some variation by region, it is clear that the majority of school boards across Canada are composed of experienced individuals who have been in the school board trustee role for more than seven years.

Table 4
Years in Current Role

Years	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
<= one year	Count	9	14	0	23
	% within Region	11.70%	7.30%	0.00%	7.40%
2 years	Count	12	29	8	49
	% within Region	15.60%	15.20%	18.60%	15.80%
3-4 years	Count	3	26	9	38
	% within Region	3.90%	13.60%	20.90%	12.20%
5-6 years	Count	18	37	5	60
	% within Region	23.40%	19.40%	11.60%	19.30%
7-12 years	Count	26	42	10	78
	% within Region	33.80%	22.00%	23.30%	25.10%
More than 12	Count	9	43	11	63
	% within Region	11.70%	22.50%	25.60%	20.30%
Total	Count	77	191	43	311
	% of Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

We sought to gather the actual demographic data for school board members in each province as a means of determining the extent to which our sample was representative of currently serving trustees in each region. Toward this purpose, we checked the CSBA website, consulted with the executive director of CSBA, reviewed provincial school board association websites, and sent an email request to all provincial executive directors. Unfortunately, we were able to obtain data for only five provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland), and these data were incomplete – the only consistent demographic indicator available was gender. Across those five provinces, 47% of currently sitting board members are women. This percentage is not constant across provinces, however. For instance, in British Columbia, 79% of the board members are women while in Newfoundland and Labrador 72% are men. We cross-referenced these numbers with the percentages of returned surveys from the respective provinces and found them to be consistent, thereby providing a degree of confidence that the survey data gathered for this study are representative of the directionality of the gender distribution of sitting trustees across jurisdictions.

Because of very low return rates among school district superintendents, it was not possible to report separately for school board trustees and superintendents. With the exception of questions specifically targeted at school board trustees, data for district superintendents (about 10% of participants) were pooled with the data for school board. trustees.

CHAPTER THREE
The Place of School Boards in Public Education in Canada

Governance Roles of School Boards and School Board Trustees

Elementary-secondary education in Canada is governed, almost exclusively, at the provincial (ministry or department of education), school board, and school levels (Lessard & Brassard, 2005). When the Canadian Federation was established the British North America Act granted authority over education to the provinces, subject to particular conditions related to denominational, separate or dissentient schools (Lawton, 1996; Levin, 2005; Loveless, 2012). As other provinces joined Canada, similar articles were included in their terms of union, thereby resulting in separate education systems for each province. There is no formal role for the federal government in the Canadian system, except for First Nations-controlled schools and federal schools established for children of military personnel (Young, Levin and Wallin, 2007). The federal government does make some investments in second language programs and certain other so-called "boutique" programs, but almost exclusively, the provinces fund K-12 public education.

School boards are by legislation valid and legitimate governing bodies in their own right. The authority of school boards is established by provincial legislation that sets out the parameters, mandate, duties and powers of the boards (Shields, 2007). School boards are responsible for directing the activities of their school district in terms of organization, strategic planning and operations, and accountability for finances and student learning (Seel & Gibbons, 2011). School board members do not hold administrative positions, but are members and representatives of the public and are legally responsible for the organization of schools (Shields, 2007). A school board functions as a legal entity that exercises its authority as a single corporate body. Within this structure, individual members possess no discrete authority (Carpenter, 2007); however, collectively they make and act on decisions related to the organization's mission, develop policies and monitor their implementation, establish decision-making processes, put in place control mechanisms for the allocation and distribution of power and resources, institute procedures for performing specific tasks, and self-evaluate (Kelleher-Flight, 2005; Ranson, 2008). If tangible assets are involved, a school board legally holds them and is responsible to all interested parties for their good use. Voters within the boundaries of their district elect school board members for three-year terms in Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia, and four-year terms in the other provinces (Bradshaw & Osborne, 2010).

Although individual school board members do not exercise singular authority of the board as a part of the collective body, each has a duty to contribute to the board's mandate of leadership and oversight of public education within their jurisdiction. One of the key duties of a school board is to ensure that all students receive the services to which they have a right in accordance with provincial legislation, regulations and policies (Lessard & Brassard, 2005). In fulfilling this mandate, trustees have a significant influence on the culture of the school district and a duty to develop board

credibility and trust. Shields (2007) suggests that for school board members to be credible they must

> be perceived as accountable and committed to their mandate and their electorate; ensure a level of openness and transparency that allows people to trust in the work done; demonstrate a responsiveness that ensures decisions and actions occur within reasonable time frames …make the best use of their resources; [and] work to mediate different interests for the best outcome.... (p. 17)

The model of governance that seems to be broadly practiced by Canadian school boards is governance through policy formation. In support of this view, Newton and Sackney's (2005) study of trustees in three Canadian provinces revealed that school board trustees view policy making as the primary role of school boards. This is consistent with school board governance models in the US where the National School Board Association and the American Association of School Administrators have jointly defined the school board's role as the establishment of policy in addition to other related functions (Thomas, 2001).

School Board Relevance

School boards are often characterized negatively in the media and, from time to time, their relevance – even their continued existence – has been questioned (Alsbury, 2008; Beckham & Klaymeier Wills, 2011; Land, 2002; Saatcioglu et al., 2011; Sheppard et al., 2009; Williams, 2003). In recent years, some observers have described school boards as anachronistic, dysfunctional and obsolete, and there have been calls for their replacement with a "more appropriate" governance mechanism (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Owens, 1999). Differing explanations have been advanced to account for such negative public perceptions of school boards. One of the most persistent criticisms, dating back to the early 1990s, relates to a perception that they are inattentive to parents (Lewis, 1994; Malen, 2003). Another is that school boards, especially in large districts, have become stagnant and fail to provide strong leadership in helping schools to adjust to changing times (Land, 2002; Lewis, 1994). On a more optimistic note, Chapman (2009) has argued that trustees have the potential to improve the public's perception of the legitimacy and relevance of school boards through demonstrated excellence in the execution of their governance responsibilities.

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). Some critics argue, however, that over the past decade or so school boards have lost their raison d'être as school districts have become large, unwieldy

bureaucracies that hamper the ability of trustees to retain strong connections to their communities and their local values and needs (Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Williams, 2003). For instance, Garcea and Monroe (2011) have observed a decline in the legitimacy of school board trustees among their constituents due to what they perceive as "very low voter participation in school board elections, low levels of accountability, low levels of efficiency and effectiveness in the educational system, and weakness in the face of powerful school bureaucrats" (p. 11). In both Canada and the US, voter participation in school board elections tends to be low. Across the US, voter turnout for school board elections rarely climbs higher than 15% (Plecki, McCleery & Knapp, 2006). Statistics on voter turnout for school board elections in Canada tend to parallel American figures. Although many school board elections are held in conjunction with municipal elections where voter turnout tends to be around 30% (Stockdale, 2010), participation in school board elections tends to be lower except in instances where the vote is integrated with high profile educational issues (Mueller, 2011; Williams, 2003).

Among the factors that may contribute to the bad press experienced by many Canadian school boards is their relationship with the provincial government. Lessard and Brassard (2005) suggest that the actions of provincial governments in further centralizing authority over education has weakened school boards and thereby decreased their political legitimacy among constituents. Similarly, Shields (2007) speculates that a trend towards centralization of power may be sending a message to the public that the value of school boards has run its course and they are no longer able to make a significant contribution to education. Other investigators have questioned the apparent inconsistency between a school board's role as an agent of the state and its simultaneous role as independent advocate and trustee for children and communities. The conflict between school boards and communities over issues such as school consolidation, where the school board is often perceived as the arm of government, for example, raises the question of whether school boards truly act on behalf of communities. In fact, in some jurisdictions, school boards have alienated their constituents during school consolidation efforts directed at improving educational opportunity for students. In several of those circumstances, provincial governments have overturned school board decisions, further weakening public perceptions that their board member is an advocate for their local community (Dibbon et al., 2012; Sheppard, 2012). Minimally, such incidences suggest to the public that school boards have contradictory roles, which reflect negatively on the organization (Plecki, et al., 2006; Williams, 2003). School boards in the US have also been accused of a host of other failings. Researchers have identified a long list of criticisms including failure to take decisive action to improve student achievement, lack of public engagement in school board matters, decisions perceived to run counter to local interests and values, extension of their governance role into district management (particularly in large urban boards), failure to collaborate with superintendents, and problems functioning as a cohesive group (Danzberger, 1994; Land, 2002; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001). One could speculate that some of this negativity directed at school boards in the US may very well impact perceptions of school boards in Canada.

Despite the perceived negativism toward school boards and the generally low voter participation, Shields (2007) contends that overall, school boards in Canada continue to enjoy public support. They are still viewed as representative of democratic governance and are perceived as providing an important link between community values and the professionals who administer the system. Others have observed, however, that this support has been threatened by recent trends towards greater centralization and government intervention into areas of responsibility traditionally held by school boards (Dibbon et al. 2012).

Trends in Canadian Educational Governance

During the last two decades across Canada, educational reform has been a recurring theme as each province has restructured and further centralized its governance model for education. Until the early 1990s there was little evidence of policies or review processes that would signal much in the way of centralized intervention in local school governance. As Lawton (1996) notes, the powers of provincial governments over school boards as written in legislation are almost absolute; however, prior to 1990, they had rarely been used. In the 1990s, however, provinces began to press for educational reforms in six key areas: school district consolidation and boundary changes, changes in roles and responsibilities of school boards, creation of school/parent councils, school choice and charter schools, service delivery through cooperative ventures, and the imposition of measures to promote greater accountability (CSBA, 1995). In the intervening period, according to Galway (2012), the erosion of school board autonomy has continued. Most boards are now required by law to generate strategic/business plans and annual reports that are tabled in provincial legislatures. One of the most publicly visible reforms has been a reduction in the number of school boards and the associated reductions in the number of school board trustees, district administrators and professional staff. In some provinces, the actual school board structure has undergone major change. In 1996, the government in New Brunswick (1997) eliminated school boards completely, while retaining school districts. The province created *district education councils* (DECs) to provide local governance and community input in the education system, but the legislation governing the DECs stipulates that their policies must be consistent with "provincial policies and procedures in matters relating to the authority given to the District Education Council or the superintendent of the school district.". Further, New Brunswick has recently reduced the number of DECs from 14 to seven (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC, 2012). In Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador, district consolidations have been accompanied by constitutional changes that have resulted in denominational school boards having been replaced by language-based school districts in Quebec and by public school districts in Newfoundland and Labrador (Loveless, 2012). Additionally, over the last two decades, provinces have taken steps to facilitate parental involvement in educational governance through the creation of school councils, a majority of whose members are parents (CSBA, 1995; Levin, 2005). With the exception of Quebec, however, school councils have enjoyed only advisory status with no legislated policy role (Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Preston, 2009). Interestingly, in at least one province, Newfoundland and

Labrador, school board members for the Conseil Scolaire Francophone Provincial are selected from each of the five school councils in that school district (Newfoundland and Labrador, 1997). Although school councils were intended to provide parents with a consultative and collaborative relationship with schools, some critics charge that the legislation is soft and "there is little incentive to promote councils" (Duma, 2010, p.14). Others charge that the real motives for the establishment of school councils are more closely linked to the improvement of school-level performance by making teachers and school administrators formally accountable to parents (Lessard & Brassard, 2005). In some jurisdictions–primarily outside of North America–school councils or similar school-based governing groups have replaced school boards.

Decline of School Board Autonomy

As noted, another common trend in governance has been the centralization of power at the provincial level. According to Bradshaw and Osborne (2010), as provincial governments have increased their decision-making authority in education matters, they have simultaneously decreased the authority of school boards. The tendency of provincial governments to centralize power is reflected primarily, but not exclusively, by changes in the way education is funded. Since 1990, provincial governments have reformed the way they fund education by introducing formula-based funding. These changes have generally resulted in a reduction in, or elimination of, the local school board's taxation power such that provinces now provide all, or virtually all of the money allocated to education (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Levin, 2005; Taylor, Neu & Peters, 2002; Williams, 2003). Only Manitoba has retained significant local taxation for education (Garcea & Monroe, 2011). Consequently, most school boards no longer have the ability to raise funds to address fiscal needs. As a result, in provinces where school boards negotiate collective agreements with teachers' unions, their ability to maneuver in collective bargaining has been significantly reduced (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Young & el Nagar, 2011). In Newfoundland and Labrador, there have been other attempts to impose central control over school board functions. Following school board consolidation in 2004, the Department of Education established standardized job advertisements for board executive level positions and draft contracts containing clauses requiring direct financial accountability to the minister as well as the school board (Dibbon et al., 2012).

Consistent with restructuring initiatives in other countries, provinces have also tended to centralize curriculum with clearly defined provincial learning outcomes and to implement provincial, interprovincial and international standardized assessments and reporting (CSBA, 2010; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2011a, 2011b; Lessard & Brassard, 2005; Levin, 2005; Levin & Wiens, 2003; Sheppard, 2012). As well, reporting of school-level student achievement scores has become a high profile event in some provinces (Levin, 2005).

School boards in Canada operate within a legal context defined by the respective education acts of the individual provincial and territorial governments. Their essential

function is governance (Carver, 2006). They operate within a defined legal context, develop policies and monitor their implementation, make and act on decisions related to the organization's mission, establish decision-making processes, put in place control mechanisms for the allocation of power, institute procedures for performing specific tasks, and self-evaluate (Kelleher-Flight, 2005; Ranson, 2008). Historically, school boards have been free to make educational decisions independent of the daily machinations of provincial politics, provided they act within boundaries specified in the legislation that governs them. Under the Carver (2006) model of school board governance, the district superintendent is independent from government and accountable only to the school board. This model ensures that a school board's ability to carry out its mandate through the superintendent is not compromised. However, recent research within the Canadian context (Dibbon et al., 2012; Sheppard, 2012) has pointed to several examples where provincial governments have intruded directly into school board operations. For instance, Dibbon et al. profile a number of cases of direct intervention ranging from overturning a decision to close a school (during a provincial election) to dismissal of a school board for failing to balance its books.

Recently, two provinces used their legislative authority to oust several school boards charging that the boards were ineffective. In Nova Scotia, between 2006 and 2012, the education minister dismissed three of the province's school boards replacing them with government-appointed managers (South shore school... 2011). In two cases the boards were fired for internal disagreements, while in the third most recent case, the board was accused of failing to be accountable, when it was revealed that members were resisting a school review process that would have likely led to school closures and individual members were lobbying against some of the closures. In 2011, Prince Edward Island's minister responsible for education dissolved one of its two school boards replacing it with a government-appointed "trustee". In the minister's news release, he suggested that acrimony within the board had taken precedence over its concern for the school system (Prince Edward Island, 2011). Given the political nature of some school board actions and decisions, this kind of interference evokes tensions between the boards and the governments who create and fund them. These examples of government interventions raise questions about the nature of the relationship between school boards/districts and provincial government authorities, the autonomy of boards, and the level of surveillance imposed on school board operations and policy. They also raise questions about whether there has been a tacit change in the governance roles both of school board trustees and the superintendents who administer school districts on their behalf.

In the following chapter, we present the articulated perspectives of trustees and superintendents on many of the issues raised in this chapter. We examine their priorities, their perspectives on student learning, their strategies for communicating with constituents and with one another, and their use of the emerging communication technologies to facilitate their work. As well, we explore trustees' perspectives relating to their professional development needs, their perceptions of school board impact on schools and student learning, and the relationship between their school board and the respective provincial governments.

CHAPTER FOUR
School Board Work in Canada: Priorities and Impact

Local Representation

The findings from this study indicate that local representation is among the most important of a school board trustee's roles. Both trustees and superintendents see the role of the trustee as bringing forward local information, issues and concerns about which senior management and professional staff in the district office may not be aware. Some trustees highlighted diversity in terms of the educational needs of constituents (students and their parents) and talked about their role as a conduit between parents and the professional staff of the district. They expressed the importance of maintaining a local orientation to the policies and operations of a school district and emphasized their essential role as local trustees in translating local needs into district-wide policy.

Others concentrated on the role played by trustees in ensuring schools operate in a manner that reflects local values and needs. They described linguistic differences, regional differences, and cultural-ethnic differences that are particularly important to constituents. Some trustees observed, for example, that communities with a large Aboriginal presence have vastly different needs than those of stakeholders in larger cities with a different ethnic character or those with a large multi-cultural population. One trustee noted, "I think as elected people we are the conscience for the public... I think people look to us to represent them and again be their conscience...." Superintendents echoed these representations. One observed that "trustees are like ombudsmen or trouble shooters who can address or correct local problems when they crop up, for example, a busing issue or a concern about a particular practice in a school."

A number of respondents observed that trustees are stewards of local interests, and therefore, it is essential that school boards maintain their relative autonomy from government in their decision-making. Participants pointed out that local school board trustees are well apprised of the unique sets of regional issues important to parents and citizens. They perceive that an essential aspect of their role is to identify local priorities for consideration at the policy table and to ensure that the resources of the district are deployed to respond to these priorities. Without trustees, one participant observed, the connection to the community could be in jeopardy.

Some trustees focused their comments on the need for local culture and community circumstances to be brought to bear on educational decision-making. One characteristic unique to school board decision-making is the first-hand experience of trustees with community priorities. Several participants noted that board members were effective in keeping the district bureaucrats and government from overriding the values of the community. To that effect, trustees in several regions of the country said they were also situated as advocates for their own regions. As democratically elected representatives they perceive that their voice at the table is the voice of the constituents of their zone. Their role, therefore, is parochial and communicative; they are the liaison

with the public who elects them and whom they represent. One participant expressed the role of trustee in this way:

> We are a voice for the vulnerable and a voice for those who don't speak for themselves; a communicator and ombudsman for communities that don't know how to connect. To me, that's a primary role that we play.

Several trustees noted, however, that parochialism has its place, but after an issue has been debated, a board can only be effective if individuals place the interests of their region in check to avoid divisiveness.

Both trustees and superintendents represented school boards as serving as a "buffer" between government and the public on education issues. Superintendents described a school board's role as acting to shape and adapt provincial policy to achieve the most positive impact for students in the local community. One participant noted,

> School boards become very involved in the policy directions and discussions with the staff in the government and at the bureaucratic level and attempt to modify the direction they are taking so that, in fact, it will work effectively on the ground for students in the schools.

Trustees also identified a necessary mediating role between government and the public. One trustee conceptualized this as both acting for and on behalf of parents and the public, and serving a function of influencing, and subsequently interpreting and acting on the will of government. One observed that school boards have a duty to represent the district's interest with government including lobbying to acquire the educational services and resources constituents feel are needed in the district:

> Well, I see [our role] as advocating for students...to be sure that each district is getting a fair share of the funding pie, and without school boards I think it could be open season – especially in rural areas. I think the big role is advocating on behalf of your own district.

Similarly, several superintendents expressed concerns about loss of authority for decision-making in a more centralized system, since more centralization has the potential to limit the independence of the board and politicize decision-making. One district superintendent speculated that in a more centralized system senior staff would need approval at a political level to even participate in a study such as this one:

> To do this research study you [would] begin with approval from the Minister to see if we, as employees of the Department of Education, could talk to you and whether in fact this was a good thing.

Some superintendents had already been involved in a significant consolidation of several smaller districts. There were concerns expressed that the merger of districts into a larger centralized school district has had the effect of amplifying the number of

local issues that must now be adjudicated by a single school board. Moreover, these larger districts now cover a larger geographic area and their boundaries overlay more electoral ridings. Superintendents voiced the concern that political contact of both trustees and senior professional staff with elected members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) on educational matters had increased. Participants told us that members of provincial legislatures have sought direct access to trustees and board personnel, potentially compromising the independent functioning of the board. As one superintendent observed,

> It is almost like a love-hate relationship with school boards. [Members of the legislature] need school boards to carry out things that perhaps they can't do at a government level because politically it wouldn't be in their best favour, but they also don't like them because they are autonomous and you are a corporation essentially that can say, 'no we are not doing that'. So it's a very fine balancing act between the... political part of government and the...school board.

If one accepts that an essential purpose of school boards is to provide local representation, it is reasonable to conclude that the membership of the most effective boards would be illustrative of the diversity within that local community. In that light, many respondents expressed concern that the trend toward the consolidation of smaller local school boards into mega regional boards covering huge geographical regions might weaken meaningful representation.

In terms of general representation of the community served by school boards, the survey findings suggest that school board membership in most provinces is representative of varied occupations and there appears to be a relatively good gender balance. As well, it appears that there is an acceptable balance of school board membership with respect to association with school age children (Table 3) and experience as a trustee (Table 4). Our findings suggest, however, that a continued concerted effort is required to ensure that an appropriate breadth of representation is maintained with respect to age (Table 2). Of particular note is only 7 % of those under age 40 were represented in our survey. Given that many in this age group are parents of primary and elementary school children, if our sample is representative of the trustee population as we believe it to be, their underrepresentation is of some concern.

Communicating with Constituents through the Emerging Technologies

Given the articulated importance of the role of trustees as a voice for local constituencies, and the concerns raised about the increased geographic size of many school districts, robust communication structures between trustees and constituents appear essential to school board effectiveness. In our current environment, the emerging communication technologies have become the dominant form of communication; therefore, we explored the extent to which school board members rely on those technologies as a means of enhancing their level of communication with their constituents and with one another. As a starting point, we reviewed a random selection

of website homepages for school boards in each province. In provinces with fewer than 10 boards, we reviewed all websites. For those provinces with more than 10 boards, we randomly selected 20 % of the boards, including two boards in each capital city where there exists more than one board. Three website reviewers were asked to rate each site on five categories as follows: Face of the District (the extent to which the website was inviting and informative), Communication (contact information of key personnel and school board members, links to other related agencies such as school councils), Social Media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), School Board Meeting Information (meeting schedule, agendas, minutes, reports), and Current Information (regularly updated).

Although there appears to be some variation across provinces with the websites of school boards in some provinces appearing to be consistently of a higher standard than in others, most of the variation is unrelated to location. The websites deemed to be exemplary are appealing and easy to navigate. Announcements, policies, calendars, reports and other information including links to individual schools and related agencies are entirely visible and accessible through the homepage. Communication information includes telephone numbers, email addresses and other media for district staff and school board members. As well, some websites include a photo and a brief bio of each school board member. Others include a map and search feature to locate individual schools and the district office. District information is also available through the various social media including Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Livestream. School board meeting information is updated regularly and is easily accessible. Those websites are well maintained. They are updated regularly and the time of the latest update is noted on the main page.

On the lower end of the continuum of quality, the *Face of the District* is poorly presented. The homepage is not fully developed and only very basic information such as mission statement, values and vision is available. Although all of our sample school board websites provide access to school board policies, some are quite difficult to navigate. In respect to communication, all include a school directory and provide telephone and facsimile contact details of district staff and school board members, but no email addresses are available. There is no access to the popular social media through those sites, and no school board meeting minutes are available. Although it appears that the websites are updated at least occasionally, the currency of the information is questionable.

We included a review of the CSBA website, as well. The focus of the latter review, however, was not on quality, but on its use by school members. Given the CSBA commitment to "providing tools, leadership, professional development and communication opportunities to trustees and commissioners across Canada," we assumed that the CSBA website would be considered as a source of support and/or information for local school boards. However, we were surprised that only a small percentage of school board members indicated using it, and then only occasionally. Forty-seven percent of our respondents indicated that they never use the website, and another 22% noted that their use is rare (Table 5). Although it is apparent that the

CSBA website is designed to provide important information to others beyond CSBA members, the limited use by local trustees across Canada suggests that the CSBA board should consider ways to make the website more useful to trustees and to promote its use.

Table 5
Trustees' Use of the CSBA Website as a Source of Information

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	33	87	20	148
	% within Region	47.80%	44.60%	45.50%	46.50%
2	Count	11	47	10	69
	% within Region	15.90%	24.10%	22.70%	21.70%
3	Count	11	22	9	42
	% within Region	15.90%	11.30%	20.50%	13.20%
4	Count	8	24	4	37
	% within Region	11.60%	12.30%	9.10%	11.60%
5	Count	3	7	0	10
	% within Region	4.30%	3.60%	0.00%	3.10%
6	Count	2	7	0	9
	% within Region	2.90%	3.60%	0.00%	2.80%
Often	Count	1	1	1	3
	% within Region	1.40%	0.50%	2.30%	0.90%
Total	Count	69	195	44	318
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

In addition to our review of school board websites, we explored school boards' application of other communication technology options including email, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and podcasts. Of the options presented, trustees identified email as their most common means of electronic communication (Table 6). Although responses indicate that the use of the other communication options was less common, it is apparent that the new social media are beginning to play an important role in some members' communication strategies. A number of respondents indicated somewhat routine use of one or more strategies: Facebook, 18 % (Table 7); Twitter, 9 % (Table 8); blogs, 9 % (Table 9); and podcasts, 7 % (Table 10).

Table 6
Trustees' Use of Email to Connect with Constituents

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	7	20	9	36
	% within Region	9.30%	10.00%	19.10%	11.20%
2	Count	2	0	1	3
	% within Region	2.70%	0.00%	2.10%	0.90%
3	Count	3	12	3	18
	% within Region	4.00%	6.00%	6.40%	5.60%
4	Count	7	23	3	33
	% within Region	9.30%	11.50%	6.40%	10.20%
5	Count	10	21	8	39
	% within Region	13.30%	10.50%	17.00%	12.10%
6	Count	5	21	9	35
	% within Region	6.70%	10.50%	19.10%	10.90%
Often	Count	41	103	14	158
	% within Region	54.70%	51.50%	29.80%	49.10%
Total	Count	75	200	47	322
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 7
Trustees' Use of Facebook to Connect with Constituents

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	43	132	36	221
	% within Region	66.20%	68.80%	80.00%	70.80%
2	Count	2	16	3	21
	% within Region	3.10%	8.30%	6.70%	6.70%
3	Count	4	10	1	15
	% within Region	6.20%	5.20%	2.20%	4.80%
4	Count	5	10	1	16
	% within Region	7.70%	5.20%	2.20%	5.10%
5	Count	2	6	3	11
	% within Region	3.10%	3.10%	6.70%	3.50%
6	Count	3	4	1	8
	% within Region	4.60%	2.10%	2.20%	2.60%
Often	Count	6	14	0	20
	% within Region	9.20%	7.30%	0.00%	6.40%
Total	Count	65	192	45	312
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 8
Trustees' Use of Twitter to Connect with Constituents

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	60	154	42	256
	% within Region	82.20%	80.60%	91.30%	82.60%
2	Count	4	9	2	15
	% within Region	5.50%	4.70%	4.30%	4.80%
3	Count	2	8	1	11
	% within Region	2.70%	4.20%	2.20%	3.50%
4	Count	2	4	0	6
	% within Region	2.70%	2.10%	0.00%	1.90%
5	Count	3	5	1	9
	% within Region	4.10%	2.60%	2.20%	2.90%
6	Count	0	1	0	1
	% within Region	0.00%	0.50%	0.00%	0.30%
Often	Count	2	10	0	12
	% within Region	2.70%	5.20%	0.00%	3.90%
Total	Count	73	191	46	310
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 9
Trustees' Use of Blogs to Connect with Constituents

Scale		Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	56	153	46	255
	% within Region	76.70%	80.10%	100.00%	82.30%
2	Count	3	15	0	18
	% within Region	4.10%	7.90%	0.00%	5.80%
3	Count	2	7	0	9
	% within Region	2.70%	3.70%	0.00%	2.90%
4	Count	4	8	0	12
	% within Region	5.50%	4.20%	0.00%	3.90%
5	Count	5	4	0	9
	% within Region	6.80%	2.10%	0.00%	2.90%
6	Count	3	1	0	4
	% within Region	4.10%	0.50%	0.00%	1.30%
Often	Count	0	3	0	3
	% within Region	0.00%	1.60%	0.00%	1.00%
Total	Count	73	191	46	310
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 10
Trustees' Use of Podcasts to Connect with Constituents

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	61	165	39	265
	% within Region	85.90%	87.30%	90.70%	87.50%
2	Count	2	7	1	10
	% within Region	2.80%	3.70%	2.30%	3.30%
3	Count	1	6	0	7
	% within Region	1.40%	3.20%	0.00%	2.30%
4	Count	1	3	2	6
	% within Region	1.40%	1.60%	4.70%	2.00%
5	Count	3	3	0	6
	% within Region	4.20%	1.60%	0.00%	2.00%
6	Count	1	2	0	3
	% within Region	1.40%	1.10%	0.00%	1.00%
Often	Count	2	3	1	6
	% within Region	2.80%	1.60%	2.30%	2.00%
Total	Count	71	189	43	303
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

We believe reliance on emerging communication technologies by school districts, school board trustees and their constituents will continue to grow and we see this as a positive development. The increasing and ubiquitous use of these technologies has the potential to partially mitigate the concern expressed by focus group participants and others that some school boards have become so large that trustees can no longer maintain the required contact with their publics. As a result of those technologies, communication is no longer limited by time and location. School board members can now communicate and meet with constituents and with one another asynchronously, or in real time. In recent high profile elections in Canada and elsewhere, these technologies have revealed themselves as powerful tools. It is apparent, therefore, that the use of these tools has considerable potential to improve voter turnout and to facilitate ongoing communication between trustees and their school communities. To that effect, CSBA, provincial associations, and local school boards may wish to redouble their efforts to accelerate a migration to widespread use of emerging information and communications technologies. This would include initiatives that would provide greater access by school board trustees to devices such as digital handheld devices and greater use of social media together with support for the use of these applications in communicating with constituents.

School Board Meetings and the Internet

As noted above, school boards in most provinces represent relatively large geographical areas, particularly in rural school districts. Consequently, travel to attend school board and committee meetings in many districts can be challenging, particularly in winter months. We posited that with recent advancements in video and audio conferencing technologies, their use by school boards would be somewhat routine, particularly in rural districts. Somewhat surprisingly, we found that neither video nor audio conferencing is in common use for most school board or committee meetings across Canada (Tables 11-13). We did find, however, that a number of school boards

in each region of the country use either video or audio conferencing occasionally for both board and committee meetings. In fact, several boards in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador indicate somewhat more frequent use. It appears that audio conferencing is more common than video conferencing, as some boards in all provinces indicated frequent or somewhat frequent use of audio conferencing for school board meetings. Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated at least occasional use of this technology, while 57% indicated having used it at least once.

Table 11
School Boards' Use of Video Conferencing for School Board Meetings

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	45	133	33	216
	% within Region	65.20%	67.20%	71.70%	66.90%
2	Count	8	27	9	45
	% within Region	11.60%	13.60%	19.60%	13.90%
3	Count	7	13	1	23
	% within Region	10.10%	6.60%	2.20%	7.10%
4	Count	3	14	2	19
	% within Region	4.30%	7.10%	4.30%	5.90%
5	Count	1	5	0	6
	% within Region	1.40%	2.50%	0.00%	1.90%
6	Count	2	3	0	5
	% within Region	2.90%	1.50%	0.00%	1.50%
Often	Count	3	3	1	9
	% within Region	4.30%	1.50%	2.20%	2.80%
Total	Count	69	198	46	323
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 12
School Boards' Use of Video Conferencing for Committee Meetings

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	54	141	33	234
	% within Region	77.10%	72.30%	73.30%	73.10%
2	Count	5	20	7	32
	% within Region	7.10%	10.30%	15.60%	10.00%
3	Count	2	11	2	16
	% within Region	2.90%	5.60%	4.40%	5.00%
4	Count	1	13	2	17
	% within Region	1.40%	6.70%	4.40%	5.30%
5	Count	4	7	0	11
	% within Region	5.70%	3.60%	0.00%	3.40%
6	Count	3	1	0	4
	% within Region	4.30%	0.50%	0.00%	1.30%
Often	Count	1	2	1	6
	% within Region	1.40%	1.00%	2.20%	1.90%
Total	Count	70	195	45	320
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 13
School Boards' Use of Audio Conferencing for School Board Meetings

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Never	Count	21	99	18	138
	% within Region	30.00%	50.30%	40.00%	42.90%
2	Count	11	23	8	46
	% within Region	15.70%	11.70%	17.80%	14.30%
3	Count	12	33	7	54
	% within Region	17.10%	16.80%	15.60%	16.80%
4	Count	8	22	7	40
	% within Region	11.40%	11.20%	15.60%	12.40%
5	Count	8	13	3	24
	% within Region	11.40%	6.60%	6.70%	7.50%
6	Count	5	6	1	13
	% within Region	7.10%	3.00%	2.20%	4.00%
Often	Count	5	1	1	7
	% within Region	7.10%	0.50%	2.20%	2.20%
Total	Count	70	197	45	322
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

School Board Meeting Priorities and Perspectives on Student Learning

The primary governance work of school boards occurs in school board meetings. In order to determine the priorities of school boards, we asked school board members to rate the importance of 14 selected foci at regular school board meetings within the past year. The rating scale ranged from 1 (not very important) to 7 (very important). The results of this survey are presented in Table 14. The top three priorities of school board meetings in order of importance across the three regions represented in this study are (1) *improving student achievement across the school district*, (2) *financial management and budget related issues*, and (3) *programs and initiatives relating to teaching and learning* respectively. All three of these foci were rated by over 80% of our respondents as meeting priorities. Ninety-one percent of school board members identified improving *student achievement* as their priority. The category, *financial management and budget issues* followed with 88% identifying it as a high priority.

Table 14: Assessing School Board Meeting Priorities*

Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Improving student achievement across the district	88.7%	92.4%	92.0%	91.03%
Financial management and budget-related items	89.0%	92.0%	83.0%	88.00%
Programs/initiatives relating to teaching and learning	82.7%	83.5%	82.3%	82.83%
Programs for safe and caring schools	80.8%	72.8%	72.0%	75.20%
Improving the quality of teaching	60.6%	75.0%	71.0%	68.87%
Closing the achievement gap among sub-groups (e.g., boys, economically-deprived students, etc.)	72.2%	64.0%	58.0%	64.73%
Improving the quality of school leadership	65.9%	74.4%	53.0%	64.43%
School plant and maintenance issues	68.5%	56.7%	67.3%	64.17%
Community engagement/ parent involvement	60.1%	69.4%	50.0%	59.83%
Programs for healthy and active living	55.0%	57.9%	44.9%	52.60%
Preparing graduates for post-secondary programs	48.2%	64.5%	42.0%	51.57%
Personnel-related problems	39.3%	41.6%	43.8%	41.57%
Teacher recruitment	36.0%	43.9%	33.3%	37.73%

*The percentages in this table refer to the number of school board members who rated the listed items as being important to very important (i.e. selected categories 5, 6 or 7 on a seven-point scale)

Eighty-three percent of trustees perceived *programs and initiatives relating to teaching and learning* as a priority area, as well. It is important to note, however, that in Western and Central Canada there is no meaningful distinction in the importance placed on the top two priorities, *improving student achievement* and *financial management*.

Interview and focus group data for both school board trustees and superintendents confirm those priorities relating to student learning and financial accountability. Relating to student learning, there was consensus among all school board members that one of their primary functions is to act to ensure that the quality of education remains high. This function includes the school board assuming an oversight role that extends to the monitoring of professional staff and practitioners as well as operations in order to ensure schools meet local needs while graduating students with a high quality education. In our sessions with superintendents, we heard similar representations: "One of the key roles of trustees is to keep professional staff accountable in terms of outcomes and the results." Many expressed the belief that the role of the trustee has changed in the last ten years since a good deal of what is required of districts by education departments is mandated, and the focus is now on student achievement. The agenda items for school board meetings have changed to parallel the new focus. Commenting on the regulatory environment of school districts, one focus group participant observed,

> Much of what [school board trustees] do, I guess I should say, are required to do, is mandated. Their role has become increasingly about finding ways to fit into the local context, the initiatives that come from the ministries...

Regarding financial accountability, both school board trustees and superintendents were clear that one of the most significant roles of board trustees relates to financial accountability for the use of public funding. Trustees say they are charged with making financial decisions about the allocation of resources throughout the district while accounting for different regional needs. Similarly, superintendents placed considerable emphasis on the role of individual school board members as the local face of accountability for public educational spending in the context of educational outcomes. One superintendent commented,

> People tend to measure provincial investments by how well their neighbour's kid is doing or their own child is doing or what people are saying at the gas pumps or after church and so forth. They make that aspect of accountability real.

When those priorities across Canada are compared to the priorities of school board members in the US (Hess & Meeks, 2010), it is somewhat intriguing that in spite of their focus on student achievement through the *No Child Left Behind* Act, 90% of US school board members ranked budget and funding to be an extremely urgent priority while only 39.7% identified student learning at the same priority level.

Other priorities for Canadian school boards as noted in Table 14 include (4) *programs for safe and caring schools* and (5) *improving the quality of teaching*. In Central

Canada, *closing the achievement gap among subgroups* and *leadership development* were high priorities for board meetings, as well. In Western Canada, trustees ranked *improving the quality* of *school leadership* as a priority somewhat equal to *programs for safe and caring schools* and *improving the quality of teaching*. Although *plant and maintenance issues* are not afforded the same attention as any of the top five issues noted above, these matters demand considerable attention among trustees, particularly in Central and Atlantic Canada with 69% and 67% respectively, noting that it has been an important focus of school board meetings. Among the lowest rated issues considered at board meetings are *personnel-related problems* and *teacher recruitment*.

Another indicator of priorities of school boards is their expressed preferences for committee membership. Toward that purpose, we sought to learn of preferences related to three committees: *student programming and curriculum*, *finance*, and *personnel and hiring* by asking trustees to rate their preferences on a scale of 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree). The largest percentage of respondents for all of Canada preferred *finance (70%)*, followed by *student programming and curriculum (60%)*, then *personnel and hiring (54%)*.

Given the priority that trustees place on student achievement, it is intriguing and somewhat paradoxical that only 38% identified teacher recruitment as a priority focus of their meetings. Similarly, it is surprising that the least preferred committee among trustees was the personnel and/or hiring committee. This finding is even more perplexing in light of the fact that when asked to indicate the importance of various approaches for *improving student achievement* (the highest ranked priority), 99% of the respondents in all three regions of the country identified *aggressively recruiting the right teachers* as the most important strategy (Table 15). One explanation for this apparent contradiction may be that teacher recruitment and other personnel issues are considered to be more in the realm of administrative responsibilities, rather than a governance concern, although this is speculative.

Table 15. School Board Members' Perspectives on Improving Student Learning

Rank	Approach for Improving Student Learning	N	Mean	Important[1]	Very Important[2]
1	Aggressively recruiting the right teachers	365	6.36	99%	57%
2	Improving the quality of leadership across the district	364	5.93	98%	35%
3	Investing in learning resources and school facilities	366	5.85	99%	30%
4	More focused teacher professional development	365	5.70	96%	30%
5	Use of data to guide decisions	366	5.69	96%	28%
6	Introducing programs to increase parent engagement	365	5.47	94%	24%
7	Allowing schools greater autonomy /flexibility	365	5.07	88%	12%
8	Establishing breakfast and hot lunch programs	366	4.79	82%	15%
9	Reducing class size	365	4.57	76%	14%
10	Increasing schooling options (e.g., charter schools, etc.)	366	4.44	73%	13%
11	Reducing teacher workload	364	4.30	74%	6%
12	Increasing pay and benefits for teachers/professionals	364	3.84	62%	4%

[1]Percentages in this column include totals from 4-7 on a scale of 1-7.
[2]Percentages in this column include response totals from 7 on a scale of 1-7.

When asked to indicate the importance of a series of approaches for *improving student achievement*, with some minor variations by individual school boards and provinces, there is general consensus among respondents across Canada of the strategies deemed to be the most important. In addition to *aggressively recruiting the right teachers* noted above, the strategies that respondents deemed to be within the important to very important range (mean >5 on a scale of 1-7) are as follows: (1) *allowing schools greater autonomy*, (2) *programs to increase parent engagement*, (3) *frequent use of research and assessment data in support of decision-making*, (4) *more focused professional development*, (5) *increased investment in learning resources and school facilities*, and (6) *a focus on improving the quality of leadership across the school district*.

The lowest ranking of all approaches to improving student learning is *increasing pay and benefits for teachers and professional staff (mean score of 3.84)*. Four other strategies were ranked just above the midrange of importance with means that ranged from 4.30-4.79. These include (7) *reducing teacher workload*, *increasing alternative schooling options such as charter schools*, (8) *reducing class size*, and (9) *establishing breakfast and hot lunch programs*. Interestingly, each of these latter strategies has been somewhat common in most Canadian provinces over this past decade or so. Certainly, class size reduction and breakfast and hot lunch programs have been common strategies in many provinces in the last several years. While there is little doubt about the necessity of and commitment to nutritional programs in schools (82% perceive it as important), it appears that many trustees have come to realize that such programs have only indirect effects as they help set the conditions for a child to learn. They recognize that other more direct learning strategies are required, as well. Finally, it is important to note that even the lowest ranked strategy for improving student learning (i*ncreasing pay and benefits for teachers and professional staff*) was perceived by 62% of school board members across Canada as important.

The merits of the above noted strategies and the establishment of a central focus on student achievement and improved programs for teaching and learning that are supported through good administrative and financial management have been well recognized in the academic literature for many years (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Harris, 2009; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Levin, 2005, Sheppard & Dibbon, 2011). Within this context, it is not at all surprising that Canadian students continue to perform exceptionally well on international tests (Bussière, Knighton, & Pennock, 2006; OECD, 2010). Clearly, setting priorities that are focused on improving conditions that will facilitate meaningful, authentic students learning and making them the focus of school board meetings are essential to school board effectiveness. School boards must be constantly aware of their leadership role within a huge complex distribution of leadership that contains both positive and negative forces. Discovering their place as educational leaders in optimizing the potential of this *distribution of leadership* to facilitate learner success and acting upon it is a challenge that each trustee, school board, provincial school board association, and CSBA must face is they are to remain (and perceived to be) truly relevant in the existing 21st century context.

School Board Decision-Making

Given the importance placed on data-driven decision-making in recent years, we sought to determine the general categories of decisions that are most prevalent across the country and the extent to which school board members perceive that they are making decisions based on research evidence and other related information, such as high quality educational data and indicators. Prior to asking respondents to indicate the extent to which specific factors have influenced school board decision-making, we asked each to think of specific policy-relevant decisions or recommendations that s/he made during the past year and to briefly describe that issue. While providing a context for their thinking about their decision-making process, the responses provide a glimpse of the decision-making priorities of school boards across the country (Table 16). It appears that the primary focus of school board policy decision-making relates to programs, school development, and assessment. The second most commonly identified was actual engagement in policy development and miscellaneous governance roles. Other common foci included the provision of safe caring schools, transportation, school restructuring, human resources, technological innovation, strategic planning, engaging families and community, budgeting, and resource allocation.

Table 16. Categories of Policy Decisions

Categories	Frequency	Percent
Programs, School Development, Assessment	78	25.6
Policy Development & Governance	48	15.7
Safe Caring Environments	28	9.2
Transportation	26	8.5
Restructuring & School Closures	18	5.9
Trustee & School Board Internal Issues	17	5.6
Human Resources	16	5.2
Technology & Innovation	16	5.2
Strategic Planning & Oversight	14	4.6
Family and Community	13	4.3
Budgeting, Finance, Resource Allocation	12	3.9
Infrastructure & Maintenance	5	1.6
Department of Education Issues	5	1.6
Aboriginal & First Nations Learners	4	1.3
Religion	3	1
Public Relations	2	0.7
Total	305	100

In general terms, only 12% of trustees overall had strong feelings that data-driven decision-making existed in their district (Table 17). An additional 44% agreed that data-driven decision-making existed in their district and another 33% responded in the "somewhat agree" category. These responses suggest that although reliance on data may not be an established approach to all decision-making in boards across Canada, it has been ensconced as a meaningful aspect of school boards' decision-making process.

Table 17. Decisions Are Data-Driven

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	0	0	0
	% within Region	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Disagree	Count	3	3	2	8
	% within Region	3.40%	1.30%	4.00%	2.20%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	15	17	3	35
	% within Region	17.20%	7.60%	6.00%	9.70%
Agree Somewhat	Count	27	69	21	117
	% within Region	31.00%	30.90%	42.00%	32.50%
Agree	Count	33	103	21	157
	% within Region	37.90%	46.20%	42.00%	43.60%
Strongly Agree	Count	9	31	3	43
	% within Region	10.30%	13.90%	6.00%	11.90%
Total	Count	87	223	50	360
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

To obtain a more specific understanding of the factors that influence school board decision-making, we presented trustees with 20 potential factors/ influences and asked them to indicate on a seven-point scale, the extent to which each has had an effect on specific decisions or recommendations that they have made as trustees (Table 18). The range of individual responses within each of the provinces in respect to the influence of the majority of the potential factors was substantial, varying from "did not at all influence" to "influenced to a great extent."

Table 18. Factors that influence school board decision-making

1	Personal or professional beliefs and values	338	5.68
2	Potential to directly influence student outcomes/student learning	334	5.66
3	Advice of district staff and/or colleagues	340	5.28
4	School board's strategic plan	337	5.17
5	Past experience with this issue or with a related issue	334	4.96
6	Potential to advance the reputation of the school district or board	338	4.86
7	Research or indicators prepared in-house by district staff	334	4.74
8	Budget considerations	337	4.54
9	Representations of teachers and/or administrators	334	4.23
10	Representations of students and/or parents	337	4.15
11	Ministry/department of education's strategic plan/overall direction	335	3.94
12	Research conducted by outside agencies	333	3.72
13	Provincial government research or assessment information	335	3.65
14	Decisions of other school boards	337	3.31
15	University - based research	333	2.92
16	Public opinion/avoidance of negative media attention	335	2.91
17	Pressure from government (ministry/department of education)	336	2.85
18	Situation or event someone told you about	323	2.76
19	Pressure from special interest or lobby groups	338	2.73
20	Representations of business/private sector	330	2.47

Analysis of the data by province reveals, however, that there is very little variance in the factors that influence school board decision-making in school boards from province to province. The top five factors are as follows: (1) personal or professional beliefs and values, (2) potential to directly influence student outcomes/student learning, (3) advice of district staff and/or colleagues, (4) the school board's strategic plan, and (5) past experience. We also report here on six factors reported as having the least influence on decision-making: (1) representations of business/private sector, (2) pressure from special interest or lobby groups, (3) a situation or event someone told you about, (4) pressure from government (ministry/department of education), (5) public opinion/avoidance of negative media attention, and (6) university-based research.

The following factors fall within the moderate range of perceived impact: (1) potential to advance the reputation of the school district or board, (2) research or indicators prepared in-house by district staff, (3) budget considerations, (4) representations of teachers and/or administrators, and (5) representations of students and/or parents. Other items fall just below the midrange of our rating scale of "no influence" to "considerable influence" and therefore might reasonably be considered to fall within a category of having only a slight influence. These are as follows: ministry/department of education's strategic plan/overall direction, research conducted by outside agencies, provincial government research or assessment information, and decisions of other school boards.

It appears that Canadian school boards may be less attendant to political and pragmatic influences, such as public opinion, advocacy, and the mass media in making decisions than are government power elites (education ministers and senior bureaucrats) (Galway, 2006). Our survey findings suggest that school board decision-making tends to be more dependent upon personal beliefs and values, and experiential factors supplemented by the advice of professional staff and in-house research/indicators as deemed necessary. Survey responses suggest that there is limited reliance on external data and university-based research. As a matter of fact, the latter is ranked 15th of the 20 possible decision-making influence factors.

Our focus-group protocol also involved an in-depth probe of the factors influencing policy decision-making. Accordingly, we were able to assess this measure, separately for school board trustees and superintendents. In the focus group sessions, we presented each participant with a list of potential factors and influences on decision-making (similar, but not identical to the list of factors provided on the survey). The list was a slightly modified form of the same instrument used in Galway's (2006) study of educational decision-making among Canadian ministers and senior public servants. We asked trustees and superintendents to identify and rank, in order of importance, the top five factors/influences on their own policy practice. Although the two lists were not identical, findings from the focus group data with trustees and superintendents (*n*=51 and *n*=31, respectively) generally paralleled the findings based on the survey data with some minor variations. Trustees tended to place more value on the *representations of students, parents and constituents*, than did superintendents while superintendents ranked *past experience* and *external research* somewhat higher than did trustees. Otherwise there was close alignment between the rankings of trustees and CEOs with the following factors all ranked high: *Advice of the CEO and senior staff, school board's own research and indicators, budget considerations* and *Government/Department of Education's overall direction.* The lowest ranked factors for both groups were *Representations of individual teachers and administrators, representations of special interest groups* and *other miscellaneous factors* such as anecdotal reports and economic goals for the region. With regard to research utilization, our focus group sessions with school board members and superintendents provided further understanding into school board decision-making processes and revealed a somewhat different and insightful perspective. In Quebec, commissioners (trustees) noted that frequently they work closely with researchers at Concordia and McGill in determining

policies and programs. The following response to our question, "What kind of research, if any, do you value when making policy decisions?" appeared to receive the general endorsement of all focus group participants:

> It depends on the policy. Our board has a policy on policy development. We don't research that very much. But when we have our policy for dealing with children with special needs then we use a lot of research of our university partners, McGill and Concordia. Doing our policy on digital citizenship, …we took a lot of research from the Internet [and] we went out to people who implemented things before. Our policy on fieldtrips …is based on the law and insurance requirements, so it really depends on the nature of the policy, but we will do a fair amount of research as appropriate.

Similar to Quebec commissionaires, a focus group of school board members in Saskatchewan agreed on the value of evidence in support of their decision-making, as well:

> I think that's what validates. I mean that's where…you can separate the politics and…become evidence-based…. When you do that then you've got substance based on evidence and people can stand behind it. It's not so much public opinion and private opinion; it's more a matter of some form of evidence-base.

In Prince Edward Island, one superintendent responded, "It depends on the issue. If it is something to do with student achievement then I think we look at university research, scholarly work and evidence more closely than we ever have." These responses suggest that school boards will likely employ research evidence if they are aware of its existence or they deem it relevant to their circumstances. Given the increased emphasis on community-university partnerships, community engagement and knowledge mobilization within universities (ACDE, 2010), we are hopeful that current research evidence will more readily available and that school boards will increasingly engage as partners in research initiatives such as the one between the authors of this report and CSBA.

Professional Development and Training

It appears that school board members value professional development and training in support of their varied responsibilities related to the governance in education. We provided nine professional development and training categories and asked trustees to indicate their status regarding each through the selecting of one of 4 options: (1) Completed training (*Complete*); (2) Completed some training but would like more (*Like More*); (3) Have not had training but would like some (*None but Wanted*); and (4) Have not had training and don't feel it is necessary (*None Required*). The responses are summarized in Table 19.

Table 19. Professional Development and Training

Trustee Training Needs	None Required	None but Wanted	Like More	Complete
Roles and Responsibilities	3%	4%	37%	56%
Financial Management and Budget	6%	24%	44%	26%
Legal And Policy Issues	4%	23%	52%	21%
Community Engagement	6%	22%	50%	23%
School Board Operations	4%	11%	48%	37%
School District Strategic Planning	4%	13%	45%	38%
Leadership Skills	9%	18%	45%	29%
Student Achievement Issues	4%	21%	51%	24%
Research On Student Learning	6%	29%	49%	16%

In light of the relatively small percentages (all below 30%) indicating that they have not had training, but would like some, it is abundantly evident that the various agencies that fund and/or support school boards such as provincial governments, the provincial school board associations, and the Canadian School Boards Association have been successful in addressing the ongoing training and professional development needs of school board trustees. In spite of this success, or perhaps because of it, the majority of our respondents indicated a need for more professional development in all categories with the exception of *roles and responsibilities*, and even in this category, 41% indicated a desire for professional development. Within this context, however, the priority of professional development and training needs identified by more than 70% of survey participants are as follows: *Research on Student Learning* (78%), *Legal and Policy Issues* (75%); *Community Engagement* (72%) and *Student Achievement Issues* (72%). Notwithstanding current efforts and the relative success in the delivery of professional development and training, it is clear that the huge majority of school board members indicate a desire for continued and enhanced support for professional development and training to enable them to provide effective, efficient and equitable governance in an increasingly educated, accountability-driven, litigious society. In light of the fact that improving student achievement was the first priority of respondents across the entire country (see Table 14) and given that a large majority of trustees indicated they would like to have additional training in *student achievement* issues (72%) and *student learning research* (78%), it is evident that these should become professional development priorities for provincial school board associations and CSBA.

School Board Relevance and Impact on Schools

Believing that it is important to assess school board members perceived impact, we assessed school trustee perceptions of school board relevance and impact. We asked trustees to indicate on a six-point scale the extent to which they agree that school boards have a major impact on what goes on in schools. We asked, as well, if they perceived that schools in their district have improved over the last 3 years. Collective responses from all provinces reveal that 84% of school board members perceive that school boards make a difference (Table 20) and 92% perceive that schools have improved over the last 3 years (Table 21). However, as can be seen from each of the two previous tables, respondents' views of the extent to which school boards make a difference, or that they have improved, varied across categories (agree somewhat,

agree, strongly agree). It is noteworthy that only 29% strongly agree that their schools have improved over the last 3 years and even fewer (24%) agree strongly that school boards make a difference.

Table 20. School Boards have a major impact on what goes on in schools

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	1	2	3	6
	% within Region	1.10%	0.90%	6.10%	1.60%
Disagree	Count	3	7	6	16
	% within Region	3.40%	3.10%	12.20%	4.40%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	10	21	6	37
	% within Region	11.20%	9.30%	12.20%	10.10%
Somewhat Agree	Count	21	57	14	92
	% within Region	23.60%	25.10%	28.60%	25.20%
Agree	Count	31	83	12	126
	% within Region	34.80%	36.60%	24.50%	34.50%
Strongly Agree	Count	23	57	8	88
	% within Region	25.80%	25.10%	16.30%	24.10%
Total	Count	89	227	49	365
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 21. Schools in our district have improved over the last three years

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	1	0	1	2
	% within Region	1.10%	0.00%	2.00%	0.50%
Disagree	Count	1	3	0	4
	% within Region	1.10%	1.30%	0.00%	1.10%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	6	13	5	24
	% within Region	6.70%	5.70%	10.00%	6.60%
Agree Somewhat	Count	19	52	7	78
	% within Region	21.30%	22.90%	14.00%	21.30%
Agree	Count	32	93	28	153
	% within Region	36.00%	41.00%	56.00%	41.80%
Strongly Agree	Count	30	66	9	105
	% within Region	33.70%	29.10%	18.00%	28.70%
Total	Count	89	227	50	366
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Many trustees and superintendents conceptualized effectiveness in terms of the culture and climate of a school district. There was a strong view expressed that school boards play a significant part in shaping the organizational climate of the district and this, in turn, influences effectiveness. According to some trustees, how well a school board accomplishes its mandate is influenced by whether the board perceives its role in political terms or in educational terms. One trustee observed also that board composition has a strong impact on the extent to which a district is innovative and student-focused.

From the perspective of effective governance and relevant decision-making, many trustees talked about the importance of their personal connections to schools and school councils. Several trustees mentioned the value of visiting schools, attending school events and meeting with the school council or the advisory council of a school. We heard that a common practice in some school districts is to assign trustees to schools as a means of maintaining an "elected" presence in the local community. Trustees were strong in their defense of this practice, charging that the needs of local

constituencies might not receive due attention if administrative arrangements were more technocratic in nature. One respondent felt that policy must be connected to the community, noting that the hired professional staff are more dispassionate and often do not have any personal connection to local circumstances. Another trustee observed,

> We hire very good technical people, who know lots about the pedagogical world, but you have to have a community that supports what you are doing and we are that interaction with the community.

Notwithstanding the fact that the school board presence and scope of responsibilities have been dramatically reduced in some provinces, some trustees feel that school boards still maintain an important local role in governance. In one instance, a trustee acknowledged that school boards had undergone significant consolidation and a diminished governance role, but she still considered the role of school boards to be relatively independent of government:

> [The ministry] gives us the funding, but we have a tremendous input as boards ourselves in how we allocate that funding –not hiring teachers because that is now the place of the province – but the actual programming and the actual facilities that they maintain. You know we have a very hands-on [approach]; we are the ones who really develop all of that….

However, not all trustees felt that school boards have been able to maintain the local relevance they consider to be vital to their continued existence. Although trustees in all focus group sessions identified their roles variously as advocating for students, setting broad policy for the board, vying for public funding and ensuring accountability for its expenditure, and representing local interests, some expressed concern about a growing lack of clarity around the role of trustee in their own province. For instance, one trustee observed that her provincial government has demonstrated a fundamental lack of clarity related to what school boards and their districts do, and consequently, "there is a lot of misunderstanding about the role of school boards."

Gradual centralization of authority was also blamed for changes in the publicly perceived relevance of school boards. The movement away from local taxation in some provinces, as well as a profound increase in the number of provincially mandated procedures and governance requirements were seen as examples of a radical shift in authority over education. Whereas in the past, financial management, collective bargaining and governing authority rested more with school boards than with government, the participants in this study felt that provincial ministries of education have appropriated authority from school boards in these areas, thereby weakening their relevance in the community. The following excerpt describes how one trustee described the impact of these changes on school boards:

> In Quebec we are experiencing less and less connectivity and there is a lot of questioning about the relevance of school boards, so I'm not so sure that the community supports us as they once did.

Several trustees voiced concern over the impact of rapid change in education and greater demands on school districts in a range of areas. There was agreement that parents and the community have become more restless – particularly in urban centres. Both participant groups held the view that educational governance is now under greater public scrutiny, resulting in increased questioning of school board relevance. One superintendent suggested that school boards have not adapted their practices to respond to new public demands for schools:

> So now society is more questioning. Not that they disagree; they just have high expectations of the system. So they are asking questions and we haven't invited the community in and [have not] engaged them. We are still behaving in a way that was for a different time [and] that makes a disconnect.

Another participant added:

> That is in part because of the increased centralization and … that's a common theme across the country, that local autonomy that we had as trustees of school boards which could be very reflective of the community has been interrupted by a very politicized and centralized direction from our provincial governments which compromises quality.

Responses to several survey questions provide additional insight into the extent to which the above comments related to centralization and the increased bureaucratization has negatively impacted school boards' perceived relevance or impact. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1-6 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed (1) your school district size is too large and centralized, and (2) there are few barriers to improving student achievement in your school district. Regarding school district size and level of centralization (Table 22), most trustees (81%) felt comfortable or at least somewhat comfortable with the current arrangements. With respect to barriers/resistance to their efforts at improving student achievement (Table 23), however, 50% of respondents recognize this as a problem area.

Table 22. Our school district is too large and centralized

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	25	86	16	127
	% within Region	28.40%	38.10%	32.00%	34.90%
Disagree	Count	26	85	10	121
	% within Region	29.50%	37.60%	20.00%	33.20%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	14	28	7	49
	% within Region	15.90%	12.40%	14.00%	13.50%
Somewhat Agree	Count	13	14	8	35
	% within Region	14.80%	6.20%	16.00%	9.60%
Agree	Count	7	8	5	20
	% within Region	8.00%	3.50%	10.00%	5.50%
Strongly Agree	Count	3	5	4	12
	% within Region	3.40%	2.20%	8.00%	3.30%
Total	Count	88	226	50	364
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 23. There are few barriers to improving student achievement in our district

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	10	15	4	29
	% within Region	11.10%	6.60%	8.30%	7.90%
Disagree	Count	25	36	9	70
	% within Region	27.80%	15.90%	18.80%	19.20%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	20	54	10	84
	% within Region	22.20%	23.80%	20.80%	23.00%
Agree Somewhat	Count	11	46	10	67
	% within Region	12.20%	20.30%	20.80%	18.40%
Agree	Count	12	53	12	77
	% within Region	13.30%	23.30%	25.00%	21.10%
Strongly Agree	Count	12	23	3	38
	% within Region	13.30%	10.10%	6.30%	10.40%
Total	Count	90	227	48	365
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

We assumed, as well, that the level of public participation in school board elections is indicative of their perceptions of school board relevance. Although we did not seek provincial statistics for voter turnout in the last school board elections in each province, we heard through our focus group sessions that in general, participation was low across the country. To provide further confirmation, we asked our survey respondents to indicate the extent to which they perceived the voter turnout to be good in their school board jurisdiction. Overall, 88% of our respondents perceive voter turnout to be less than desirable (Table 24). In parallel with their observations about voter turnout, 85% of school board members expressed their concern regarding the level of engagement of parents/guardians in their children's education (Table 25). Although a majority of the member respondents indicate that they have sought to engage the community in determining district priorities for improving student learning (67%) and regularly reported on progress in improving student learning and other district priorities (80%), they appear dissatisfied with the results of their efforts. Only 15% agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the level of parent/guardian engagement in their children's education. Similarly, only 15% appear confident (responding agree or strongly agree) that the community as a whole is meaningfully engaged in learning issues (Table 26). In spite of these concerns relating to parent and community participation in public education and an overall increase in public scrutiny, most school board members (74%) responded positively that they feel valued by parents, the general public, and teachers (Table 27).

Table 24. Voter turnout for school board elections is very good in our jurisdiction

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	27	33	18	78
	% within Region	30.00%	14.60%	36.70%	21.40%
Disagree	Count	19	85	16	120
	% within Region	21.10%	37.60%	32.70%	32.90%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	21	66	7	94
	% within Region	23.30%	29.20%	14.30%	25.80%
Agree Somewhat	Count	13	29	8	50
	% within Region	14.40%	12.80%	16.30%	13.70%
Agree	Count	9	9	0	18
	% within Region	10.00%	4.00%	0.00%	4.90%
Strongly Agree	Count	1	4	0	5
	% within Region	1.10%	1.80%	0.00%	1.40%
Total	Count	90	226	49	365
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 25. Trustees are satisfied with parent/guardian engagement in education

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	7	15	7	29
	% within Region	7.80%	6.60%	14.00%	7.90%
Disagree	Count	21	56	17	94
	% within Region	23.30%	24.50%	34.00%	25.50%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	20	67	15	102
	% within Region	22.20%	29.30%	30.00%	27.60%
Agree Somewhat	Count	22	58	8	88
	% within Region	24.40%	25.30%	16.00%	23.80%
Agree	Count	18	29	3	50
	% within Region	20.00%	12.70%	6.00%	13.60%
Strongly Agree	Count	2	4	0	6
	% within Region	2.20%	1.70%	0.00%	1.60%
Total	Count	90	229	50	369
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 26. Community engagement in public schools and student learning issues

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	1	2	3
	% within Region	0.00%	0.40%	4.00%	0.80%
Disagree	Count	15	21	9	45
	% within Region	17.20%	9.30%	18.00%	12.40%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	28	80	19	127
	% within Region	32.20%	35.40%	38.00%	35.00%
Somewhat Agree	Count	29	93	12	134
	% within Region	33.30%	41.20%	24.00%	36.90%
Agree	Count	14	29	8	51
	% within Region	16.10%	12.80%	16.00%	14.00%
Strongly Agree	Count	1	2	0	3
	% within Region	1.10%	0.90%	0.00%	0.80%
	Count	87	226	50	363
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 27. Our school board is valued by parents and the general public

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	1	4	5
	% within Region	0.00%	0.40%	8.00%	1.40%
Disagree	Count	9	9	9	27
	% within Region	10.00%	4.00%	18.00%	7.40%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	18	32	13	63
	% within Region	20.00%	14.20%	26.00%	17.20%
Somewhat Agree	Count	31	83	15	129
	% within Region	34.40%	36.70%	30.00%	35.20%
Agree	Count	24	83	7	114
	% within Region	26.70%	36.70%	14.00%	31.10%
Strongly Agree	Count	8	18	2	28
	% within Region	8.90%	8.00%	4.00%	7.70%
Total	Count	90	226	50	366
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

School Boards and Provincial Government Authorities

There is a strong consensus view that the significance of the school district apparatus in Canada has diminished as provincial governments (Cabinet and departments of education) have been exerting greater direct influence over local educational matters. In consultation sessions with CSBA members during Congress 2010, we heard many general statements from trustees throughout the country that there exists considerable tension between school boards and their respective provincial governments. These sentiments were echoed once again during our formal focus group sessions across the country. Both school board trustees and superintendents expressed the view that increasingly school board policy is being driven "from the centre." A common perspective articulated by school district superintendents was that school boards are struggling to define their role in a new governance arrangement where differing external players are not only setting the broad educational agenda, but are also involved in local operations. Consistent with this view, a trustee opined that school districts are in danger of "losing their voice in education" as there is now "very little governance left." Among the cited examples of operational changes that are believed to have eroded school board autonomy are: centralized labour negotiations and province-wide collective agreements; an increase in targeted funding; centralized student information systems; direct intervention by ministry bureaucrats, and the requirement for ministerial sign-off on certain school board policy decisions.

One of the factors responsible for eroding school board autonomy in policy making appears to be the accountability relationship with government. One trustee observed that when school boards operate at arm's length from government, the governance arrangement works to "remove the politicization of decision-making." In such circumstances, school boards can meet parents' and the publics' expectation that policies will be developed in the context of local interests. When this is not the case, boards are limited in the kinds of decisions they can make because governments "control the purse strings" and scrutinize decisions through a political lens. In support of this argument, superintendents cited examples in which school boards were brought to task by the provincial department of education for "decisions that [department officials or the minister believed] shouldn't have been made".

Another challenge identified by trustees is what they perceive to be the apparent contradiction between strict oversight of school district operations at one level, and the claim made by governmental authorities that school boards operate independently. Trustees expressed concerns at the progression of ministry oversight of school boards from macro-level to micro-level control. In the following exchange, for instance, two trustees discuss financial directives that had been imposed on school boards:

> Trustee 1: I would say in the past three to four years our funding has become so targeted and there is no wiggle room in so much of the funding that we receive that ... it has taken away all of the voting power.

Trustee 2: I would say that today, even your travel budget is targeted by the province.

Trustee 1: The travel budget was cut 25%. The travel budget, PD and there are a whole bunch of other things administratively that are cut two for one. So if two persons retire, you can only replace one. It is huge.

Trustee 2: That's micromanaging.

Superintendents in a number of sessions echoed the perception that school boards are now more restricted in fulfilling their mandates, and this limiting of flexibility is not only related to financial matters, but extends to program focus, as well. The following exchange typifies how district superintendents represent the relationship between government and school boards:

Superintendent 1: They control the purse strings; they really do dictate what the board can and cannot do, whether it is a capital project or a curriculum implementation or even the hiring of staff. It's really all under the direction of the department of education.

Superintendent 2: They determine the funding, that's right.

Superintendent 3: The funding for programs for everything.

Superintendent 1: A hundred percent of our dollars come from government.

Superintendent 2: And ... we are developing our strategic plan, but it has to be linked with the strategic plans of the department so you just can't do whatever you want you know. You got to contribute to that plan, the government's plan.

Some trustees were concerned that local programs could be affected if the centralization trend continued. There was an expressed view that some local programming is specifically designed to address particular needs that are situated in the local community. Trustees shared numerous examples of localized programming that had been developed at the urging of a school board representative. Some trustees felt that if the imbalance between regional and central authority continued, some of these local programs would be at risk of never having been developed:

We still do a lot of stuff around programming and things that are unique and I think in British Columbia; [one of these is] the Haida Gwaii immersion program to keep kids engaged in schools to make sure they graduate. That's not going to come out of central office somewhere where it is planned in Victoria. It has to come from a local community. So there is still a role [for school boards], but these [are] tensions that have developed because of other centralizations.

Superintendents in several sessions were quite direct in articulating that they perceived a centralization agenda throughout all jurisdictions in Canada. They offered the view that some governments were firmly focused on the elimination or substantial consolidation of existing boards. In several sessions we heard fears expressed about plans to substantially reduce the number of districts, and frustrations with multi-year funding reductions announced by government in response to enrolment decline. In one session participants expressed the view that governments have been able to "beat up on school boards" because there are "no votes in education".

Other district superintendents were more measured in their assessment of the relationship between governmental authorities and school boards. Considerable value was placed on the fact that trustees are elected regionally. There appeared to be consensus that in school boards that represented large geographical regions, regional representation allowed trustees to bring the values and interests of the local constituent groups to the policy table. There was consensus that this function would be jeopardized in a completely centralized system. Participants described a need for a balance between the will of the ministry of education and the representations of the local community. While it was felt that these two are often in alignment, there are circumstances where local needs or values might be compromised without the work of school boards. One superintendent talked about the importance of balance in governance responsibilities:

> You need defined responsibilities and defined rights and powers at the local levels just as you need those definitions at the…central level by government. So you know, school boards are an important part of the living out of that vision of a balancing of the rights and responsibilities. A good school board can have the impact of enhancing student learning, I believe, [and] has a better chance to welcome and to accommodate local diversity.

In light of a consistent apprehensive tone in trustees' and superintendents' responses regarding the existing relationships between school boards and their provincial government, we were somewhat surprised that (1) merely 31% of school board members across all regions indicated in their survey responses that government interferes with school board work whenever it is convenient for them to do so (Table 28); (2) 66% indicated feeling valued by government (Table 29), and (3) 85% of our survey respondents indicated that their own board has a good working relationship with their provincial government (Table 30). Although our survey results confirm our interview and focus group conclusions that there are many trustees and superintendents that perceive their boards' relationship with government to be less than ideal, our findings suggest generally positive relationships between the majority of school boards and their respective provincial governments.

Table 28. School Boards perceive that government interferes with their work

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	9	13	3	25
	% within Region	10.70%	6.00%	6.50%	7.20%
Disagree	Count	29	47	13	89
	% within Region	34.50%	21.80%	28.30%	25.70%
Disagree Somewhat	Count	26	80	18	124
	% within Region	31.00%	37.00%	39.10%	35.80%
Agree Somewhat	Count	19	54	8	81
	% within Region	22.60%	25.00%	17.40%	23.40%
Agree	Count	1	19	4	24
	% within Region	1.20%	8.80%	8.70%	6.90%
Strongly Agree	Count	0	3	0	3
	% within Region	0.00%	1.40%	0.00%	0.90%
Total	Count	84	216	46	346
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 29. School boards are valued by our provincial government

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	3	7	5	15
	% within Region	3.30%	3.10%	10.00%	4.10%
Disagree	Count	10	13	7	30
	% within Region	11.10%	5.70%	14.00%	8.20%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	17	47	16	80
	% within Region	18.90%	20.70%	32.00%	21.80%
Somewhat Agree	Count	32	86	12	130
	% within Region	35.60%	37.90%	24.00%	35.40%
Agree	Count	21	58	6	85
	% within Region	23.30%	25.60%	12.00%	23.20%
Strongly Agree	Count	7	16	4	27
	% within Region	7.80%	7.00%	8.00%	7.40%
Total	Count	90	227	50	367
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 30. Our school board has a good relationship with the provincial government

Scale	Score Description	Central Canada	Western Canada	Atlantic Canada	Total
Strongly Disagree	Count	0	2	1	3
	% within Region	0.00%	0.90%	2.00%	0.80%
Disagree	Count	6	9	5	20
	% within Region	6.70%	4.00%	10.00%	5.50%
Somewhat Disagree	Count	9	11	12	32
	% within Region	10.10%	4.80%	24.00%	8.70%
Somewhat Agree	Count	30	66	14	110
	% within Region	33.70%	29.10%	28.00%	30.10%
Agree	Count	32	103	11	146
	% within Region	36.00%	45.40%	22.00%	39.90%
Strongly Agree	Count	12	36	7	55
	% within Region	13.50%	15.90%	14.00%	15.00%
Total	Count	89	227	50	366
	% within Region	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

While there appears to be some degree of tension between most boards and their respective provincial governments, the majority of our study participants appear to believe that governments are generally sensitive to the importance of school boards in representing local interests in public education. There are, however, clear exceptions to this more positive view. In some jurisdictions there is clearly an absence of trust between the school board and government. Fortunately, incidences of such unhealthy and unproductive relationships seem to be anomalies in Canada.

Amidst the constant "push and pull" of local and provincial interests, the relationship between school boards and governments appear to be one of healthy tensions that result from a mixture of shared and competing goals. Within that context, we sense a general consensus among trustees and superintendents that they are willing to work with their respective governments toward the accomplishment of shared goals for excellence in public education and for the public good. However, they are clear in their position that school boards can only be effective if governments do not circumvent them or openly criticize their work.

CHAPTER FIVE
Implications for School Board Governance

Over the two year period from the initial conceptualization of this study to the conclusion of this final report we have engaged with numerous trustees and commissioners, district superintendents, and education researchers from across Canada; we have closely examined the educational literature pertaining to school board governance, and we have pored through reams of data representing the views of individuals comprising these groups. The main finding from this work is that school boards matter a great deal for the delivery of effective public schooling across Canada. Contrary to the view that the school district apparatus is a centralized hierarchy that inhibits organizational growth and the conditions for student learning, as some have argued, our findings suggest that effective school boards facilitate these goals. As a matter of fact, in a country such as Canada where there is no national Department of Education, school boards through each of their provincial associations and the Canadian School Boards Association facilitate organizational learning and professional growth, not only within their districts, but also within their respective provinces and across the country.

Another significant finding relates to the value placed on local representation and the widely held belief that decisions about education should be commensurate with the local needs and values of those in the communities served by the school district. In all interview and focus group sessions held, participants stressed the importance of retaining local democratic authority for education. An interesting observation is that although both groups (trustees and superintendents) vehemently defended the need for a strong local voice in education, the data demonstrates clearly that the overall direction of government and ministries of education weighs heavily in the evidence that is brought to bear on school board decision-making. It appears, therefore, that school boards are committed to aligning their operations with the general goals and direction of the provinces, but believe that the education of children is best served when the diversity of community local needs and aspirations is taken into account. They are convinced that this community orientation can only be maintained in a governance model that is based, in large part, on local democratic authority.

Our survey of the literature and the empirical data from this study support a position that school board consolidation and restructuring coupled with increased government control and oversight have compromised the ability of school boards to focus on authentic student learning and to meaningfully connect with their constituents. In spite of these challenges and the considerable frustration expressed by some participants, school board trustees and superintendents of education remain steadfast in their commitment to quality public education in Canada. Moreover, despite the trend towards greater centralization of influence over education, governments and school districts continue to maintain relatively strong working relationships. The findings from this study underscore the importance of preserving these relationships, but not at the expense of further erosion of the school board governance model.

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. One of the benefits (or costs, depending on one's perspective) of a model like this is that it allows policy making to be debated and struggled over–not handed down "in tablets" by provincial ministries of education. Participants in this research pointed out that regional school board governance rejects a one-size-fits-all approach to educational decision-making and allows for a "marketplace of ideas" and options to be tabled, vetted, and decided upon by local representatives of the public.

The above does not imply that we believe that all is well in public education in Canada and that all school boards are of high quality or even that the best school boards should not strive to improve. Although we have uncovered elements of school board governance that appear exemplary, we found others that we believe to be inhibiting, and some of these findings concern us deeply. For instance, the fact that a majority of trustees preferred to serve on finance committees rather than on committees that address matters of teaching and learning is concerning. The finding that trustees are relatively indifferent to teacher welfare issues while believing that aggressively recruiting the right teachers is central to improving student learning is somewhat contradictory. The observation that many school districts and trustees are underutilizing emerging information and communications technologies signals a need for boards to become more proactive and innovative in connecting with schools and the community. And the finding that very few trustees rated breakfast and hot lunch programs and parent engagement programs as 'very important' for improving student achievement shows a disconnect with the evidence relating to successful schools.

On the other hand, exemplary school board members serve as ombudsmen, stewards of local interests, and mediators between government and the local community. They have first-hand experience with community priorities and values, advocate for their respective regions, and lobby to acquire educational services and resources that constituents feel are needed. To maintain this level of connection with their communities, they strive constantly to ensure high-quality communication networks. Exemplary school board trustees are focused on improving student achievement across the district and closing the achievement gap among various subgroups. They are concerned about providing responsible financial management while establishing programs and initiatives related to the improvement of teaching and learning. They are concerned about provision of safe and caring schools, parent engagement with schools, student nutrition and improving both the quality of teaching and the welfare of teachers. Also, effective school boards ensure that the ongoing professional development needs of all trustees are met and that their policy decisions are informed by research and high quality data.

Overall, it appears that school board trustees across Canada have a strong sense of efficacy in respect to their governments and schools. In spite of the apparent challenges to educational governance in provinces throughout Canada, it is encouraging that a large majority of currently sitting school board members believe that they play a significant role in the effectiveness of the Canadian school system. In general, school board members feel valued by their constituents and are confident that they are having a positive impact on education in their respective school districts and provinces. Many, however, expressed considerable concern about what they perceive to be increased government intrusion in their mandate as trustees of their local schools. They feel that as a result of government restructuring and increased geographic size of their district, it has become increasingly difficult to fulfill their mandate.

Of critical importance to the future of school boards, therefore, is reversing an apparent weakening of political legitimacy among their constituents (as evidenced by low voter participation in school board elections) and the intrusion of provincial governments in governance areas traditionally held by the boards. As well, the conflict between school boards and their publics over issues such as school consolidation have led to questions about the ability of school boards to represent the interests of local communities. Since the two are not always in alignment, we believe it is important for school boards to maintain an appropriate balance in mediating the government agenda and the representations of parents and the community. School boards are not ministries of education; they must be free to make ethical decisions that are free of the myriad political influences that are, for good or bad, brought to bear on government departments. If school boards make informed, ethical decisions based on clearly articulated criteria in support of their primary mandate–quality education for each child–their choices will be respected in the long-term. In this regard, school boards are similar to all other democratically elected bodies.

As for conflict between school boards and differing levels of government, this appears to be a normal aspect of a healthy democracy. Given that the respective provincial and territorial education/schools acts define the rights and responsibilities of school boards, governments have direct control over their level of autonomy. However, where new provincial legislation impedes the work of school boards in a way that might negatively impact public schooling or where it can be determined that a provincial government has dismissed a school board or overturned a school board decision without just cause, it may be appropriate for the particular provincial school boards association and CSBA to investigate and, if warranted, become involved.

In Canada, school boards like provincial governments and their ministers, answer to the public. A strong public education system is important to each individual's personal welfare and to the existence of a competitive economy and cohesive society. With the continued emphasis on international testing at the possible expense of other purposes such as healthy and active living, global education and study of other languages, etc. (Sheppard, 2012), an important role for school boards, the provincial associations, and CSBA is to lead a public discourse on what Canadians expect of their public school system. Waiting for provincial departments of education to lead such a discourse has

the potential to limit the discussion to existing agendas and may fuel the apparent growing public apathy toward school boards. The findings of this study support our previous conclusions that school boards matter a great deal to the existence of successful public education. Their continued existence, however, may depend on their assuming a stronger public role.

CHAPTER SIX
Recommendations

In an increasingly centralized educational environment school boards are relevant only if they are efficiently governed, sensitive to local issues, and perceived to contribute to high quality public education. School boards must focus on excellence in the execution of their governance responsibilities, but also on improving the public's perception of their legitimacy and relevance. To remain effective school boards should redouble their efforts to communicate and strengthen connections with parents and the general public (p. 2, p. 10, pp. 15-17).

Recommendation 1: *Because schools are the main points of contact with the broader community, trustees and superintendents should consider ways for the district/school board to be a more visible and supportive presence in schools.*

To be effective, the composition of school boards should be representative of the character and diversity that exists within region/community they represent. While school boards in most provinces of Canada seem to be generally representative of occupation and gender, at present, they are composed of a disproportionate number of older trustees. With more than nine out of ten school board members over the age of 40, there are far too few younger parents of school-age children serving on boards (pp. 6-8).

Recommendation 2: *School boards, school board associations and CSBA should undertake measures to ensure an appropriate representation of school board membership is maintained, including efforts to recruit younger citizens to run in school board elections.*

A key finding from this study is that school board trustees perceive local representation as their most important role. Trustees are perceived as stewards of local interests; therefore, it is essential that they maintain a level of relative independence from governments, particularly in respect to decisions that affect local and community interests. Although in many, perhaps most cases, the interests of governments and the interests of schools and the local community will intersect, school boards must be autonomous enough to have a meaningful governance role on all matters for which they are responsible and accountable, especially student learning (pp. 12-17).

Recommendation 3: *School boards, school board associations and the CSBA should undertake a process to differentiate and define their roles in representing the interests of learners and their parents from the roles of ministries of education, and furthermore, these roles should accentuate robust advocacy and policy components.*

Recommendation 4: *School boards, school board associations and the CSBA should seek ways to publicize their roles or to otherwise publicly demonstrate the active fulfillment of their roles in educational governance.*

The trend toward the consolidation of smaller local school boards into large regional boards covering far-reaching geographical areas has the potential to weaken meaningful community representation. Given the articulated importance of the role of trustees as a voice for local

constituencies, and the concerns raised about the increased geographic size of many school districts, robust communication structures between trustees and constituents appear essential to school board effectiveness *(p. 17).*

> ***Recommendation 5:*** *School boards and school board associations should examine and adopt practices to foster regular and effective two-way communications between trustees and their constituencies, including school councils, parent groups and the wider community.*

Voting levels in school board elections remains extremely low. While not a specific focus of this study, in many of the focus groups trustees described lackluster voter participation in the election process. School board elections need to be simplified and voting made more accessible to parents and the wider community. The use of the emerging information and communication technologies has considerable potential to profile school board candidates, improve voter participation and facilitate ongoing communication between trustees and their school communities *(p. 21)*.

> ***Recommendation 6:*** *School boards, provincial associations, and CSBA should act to simplify the school board election process and redouble their efforts to accelerate a migration to widespread use of information and communication technologies as a means to increase voter participation in school board elections.*

The findings from this research show that that school board decision-making in Canada is largely influenced by personal beliefs, values, and experiences supplemented by the advice of professional staff and in-house research. They also reveal that most decisions are made with limited attention to external and university-based research. Given the increased emphasis on community engagement and knowledge mobilization within universities, we are hopeful that research evidence will become more highly valued evidence for educational decision making. This means that school boards, school board associations and ministries of education should become active partners with university communities in research initiatives such as the one between the authors of this report and CSBA (p. 30 & p. 43).

> ***Recommendation 7:*** *Efforts should be made on the part of school governance authorities and faculties of education to formalize research and policy relationships such as the establishment of research alliances and other mechanisms to increase the availability and use of research for school board decision making.*

A consistent finding across the entire country is that school board trustees identify the improvement of student achievement as their first priority. However, trustees seem to prefer to focus their attention on financial and other structural issues. In accordance with this focus on student achievement, trustees also understand the value of recruiting the *right teachers* for schools, yet a minority of trustees identified teacher recruitment as a priority focus of their meetings. (pp. 23-26 & p. 31).

Recommendation 8: *Given that a large majority of participants indicated they would like to receive additional training relating to student achievement issues and student learning research, these should become professional development priorities for provincial school board associations and CSBA.*

Recommendation 9: *Future training for school board trustees should include information derived from research evidence relating to exemplary school boards and the development of successful schools.*

Recommendation 10: *Trustees should broaden their participation in school board committees to include those committees with responsibility for enhancing teaching and student learning.*

In spite of the apparent challenges to educational governance in provinces throughout Canada, it is encouraging that school board members generally feel confident that they are having a positive impact on education in Canada. However, many of the participants in this study expressed concern about increased government involvement – even intrusion – in their mandate as trustees of local schools. Of critical importance to the future of school boards, therefore, is clarifying their roles and stabilizing their political legitimacy among their constituencies *(p. 44).*

Recommendation 11: *School boards, provincial school board associations, and CSBA should identify a strategy to lead a public dialogue, at both the provincial and national levels, on what Canadians expect of their public school systems.*

Recommendation 12: *Commensurate with their legislated authority, school boards, provincial school board associations, and the CSBA should assume a stronger public role in setting the agenda for public education in Canada and in contributing to public discourse about education.*

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Dr. Gerald Galway is an associate professor and associate dean in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. Formerly, he has been a public school teacher, a program consultant and a senior executive with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Over a long career in public service, Gerald provided education research support and policy advice to cabinet ministers and other decision-makers in government. He has served on numerous national education committees and working groups and is the recipient of several educational awards and distinctions. His recent co-edited book, *Education Reform, From Rhetoric to Reality* examines the educational reform movement in Newfoundland and Labrador and abroad. His research interests include evidence-based policy/decision making, education governance, planning and demography, public sector accountability and educational reform.

Dr. Jean Brown is a professor in the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. She has been involved with policy and leadership studies within the faculty for over 25 years. A firm believer in collaborative research with practitioners, most of her work has been conducted in partnership with colleagues both in the Education Faculty and in the field of education. Jean's most recent research project was as principal investigator of a large 5-year project, *Creating Community in the New Learning Environment,* funded as a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) project by Canada's national funding body, the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada (2006-2012). She has published multiple papers and book chapters, and is a co-author of *School District Leadership Matters* (2009).

Dr. John R. Wiens is a professor and former Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. He has strong links to the education community not only in Manitoba, but also across Canada. He has worked as a teacher, counsellor, work education coordinator, principal, school superintendent and university lecturer. John is an active educational leader and has served as president of the Manitoba Teacher's Society, the Canadian Education Association, the Manitoba Research Council, and the Manitoba Educators for Social Responsibility. He also spent a number of years as the chair of the Universities' Grants Commission and as the director of the Canadian

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APPENDIX

Attributes of Effective School Boards

Effective school boards matter a great deal in the delivery of effective public schooling across Canada.

- They claim their rights and responsibilities as valid and legitimate elected governing bodies in their own right, and seek to find a reasonable balance between their role as agents of the state and advocates for children and communities.

- They are akin to ombudspersons. They are
  - stewards of local interests.
  - mediators between government and the local community.
  - advocates for their respective regions and they lobby to acquire educational services and resources that constituents feel are needed.

- They have first-hand experience with community priorities and values and ensure that their governance of public education reflects those local values and priorities.

- They focus on developing their credibility and trust among constituents and are cautious not to extend their role into district management.

- They adapt successfully to a constantly evolving political landscape.

- They strive constantly to ensure high-quality communication networks.

- They value and engage in
  - professional development that is focused on their trustee role.
  - informed, data-driven decision-making.

- They are focused on
  - improving student achievement across the district.
  - the provision of responsible financial management.
  - establishing programs and engaging in initiatives related to improving teaching and learning.

- They are concerned about
  - the provision of safe and caring schools.
  - improving the quality of teaching.
  - closing the achievement gap among various subgroups.