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ABSTRACT

Ontario school systems face problems in trustee-professional staff relationships, establishing community involvement in school affairs, developing policies whereby maximum use is made of resources available, and in increasing public awareness of what schools are for and what they are doing. These problems are discussed, and an ideal system for effective school board operation is described. The text concludes with a discussion of the problem of coping with, or the changing of, the organizational structure in which trustees must work. (JF)

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL BOARD OPERATION IN ONTARIO

by Edward S. Hickcox

January 1973

I. Introduction

Complexity characterizes the operation of school boards in Ontario in 1973. Complexity in school board operation means that school systems are large in terms of geographical area and in terms of numbers of students and staff. Complexity also means that programs offered by schools are varied, reflecting a multitude of needs from the community and from the individual students. Complexity also means that political and social pressures on school boards come from a number of sources: the community, the government, professional organizations, outside groups such as businesses and universities, and task forces of various kinds.

Consider some facts about education in Ontario and Canada. In 1971, there were more than two million students enrolled in one hundred and twenty-two public school systems and sixty-one separate school systems in Ontario. There were 92,798 teachers employed by these boards, 5,070 principals, and about 816 administrative officials. More than one billion seven hundred million dollars was spent to operate these school systems--money raised by local real estate taxes and by government grants. From 1962 through 1971, more than one billion dollars was spent on school construction alone in the Province. In Canada, more than eight billion dollars was spent on education during 1971-72, representing eight per cent of our gross national product.

This is a higher level of expenditure than was made by such countries as Japan, the United States, and Russia, in percentage terms.

It is clear that education for us is big business and that the citizens of this country and province place a high value on it. It is within this huge and important operation that the local school board exists and that the role of trustee on the local board is defined.

Our belief is that for trustees to learn how to operate within this context, they must develop some sense of how school boards function and what the relationships are within and without the system. Thus the subject of this presentation is "Understanding School Board Operation in Ontario," and, in large measure, this topic permeates all the sessions of this conference.

II. Current Problem Areas

During the simulated board meeting and subsequent discussion last evening, we explored together a number of practical problems confronting the Richland County Board of Education. Whereas the Richland County Board is imaginary, its problems and the means employed in solving them are typical, in some measure, of all school boards in the Province. Here, in general terms, are the concerns faced by the Richland Board and by all boards in Ontario in 1973.

1. The creation of sound relationships between lay trustees and the professional staff. At this conference, we are particularly concerned with how trustees may operate effectively with officials of the board. This is an old problem which we have addressed many times in the past. But it takes on new meaning with the growth of complexity and with the move toward the

involvement of the community, teaching staff and non-professional staff in decision-making. Over the past year, I have asked a number of chief executive officers around the province what factors contribute to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the job. Almost without exception, the response is that having a group of trustees with whom the official can work cooperatively is a most important factor contributing to satisfaction.

2. Establishing means by which the community can be involved in school affairs. Many trustees in this audience were elected on platforms promising greater and more effective community involvement in education, Many boards have adopted policies promoting this. In this area, however, where we can all agree in principle with the idea, there is a tremendous gap between promise and performance.

3. Maintaining a balanced relationship between the board and the media, and between the board and the public. Last night we saw a potential problem developing with the press at the Board meeting. Whereas trustees generally subscribe to the idea of open meetings and cooperation with the media in various ways, the press is notoriously independent and aggressive relative to school news. How to remain open and at the same time protect the system from unfair attacks and pressures of various kinds requires sensitive understanding and behavior on the part of trustees.

4. Developing policies whereby maximum use is made of resources available. The decade from 1960 to 1970 saw tremendous increases in resources available for school operation. School boards could operate on an incremental basis, increasing their course offerings, and expanding in many directions. That day is past. Whereas resources may increase gradually, the general problem is how to work with what we now have. For the first time in many years, the

adoption of a new program means that the programs must be modified. Or even more painfully, increasing salaries mean some cutback in personnel or materials elsewhere in the system. These decisions are extremely difficult for trustees.

5. Increasing understanding of what schools are for and where they are going. The work of the Hall-Dennis Commission was an attempt to establish purposes and objectives for the educational system of the Province. It is a trustee responsibility and concern to see that the local system directs substantial effort toward the setting of purposes and objectives to meet local needs, within the general guidelines developed for the province.

III. A Model for School Board Operation

We are going to describe now an ideal system for effective school board operation. No local board could operate its total system in the manner presented. The general principles, however, are appropriate for every board, and every board can work toward achieving the ideal. Later sessions of this conference will treat in detail some of the general principles stated.

In order to illustrate the nature of the relationships existing between the school board and other parts of the educational and social systems, we shall assume that there are four component parts of the system. These parts all relate to each other in important ways.

1. The Ministry of Education. Education in Canada is a Provincial responsibility. The general responsibility for education in Ontario, therefore, lies with the legislature. The legislature has done two things in delegating authority for the governance of education. First, it has delegated considerable authority to the local school board. Second, it has created a large bureaucracy and reserved to it certain powers relative to the carrying on of school affairs.

In particular, the Ministry of Education distributes resources in the form of grants for operations and construction which constitutes a very large part of the funds available for school board operation--more than half at the present time. Further, the Ministry retains power of certification for the professional staff and approves the appointment of senior officials. In addition, the Ministry provides guidelines for program development and is influential in a number of areas such as textbook selection, course structure, the credit system, and the like.

On balance, it is probably fair to say that the Ministry of Education in Ontario has made a major positive contribution to the fine educational system which exists here. On the other hand, since trustees must adhere to the statutes and regulations handed down from the government, there have been and will be understandable sources of strain in the relationship when local needs and desires for education do not mesh perfectly with the mandates of the government. The effective trustee educates himself as to the function of the Ministry of Education and the relationship of local boards to the government. In a sense, every local board is competing for scarce resources from the legislature and must make an effort to ensure that it receives its fair share of support. The Ontario School Trustees' Council is a mechanism created by trustees to speak to the Ministry on issues and concerns of local boards across the Province.

2. The Community. We can think of the community as consisting of various groupings of individuals with an interest in school affairs. These may consist of parents, the business community, labor groups, political parties, and many others. There are, of course, overlapping memberships in these groups as illustrated in the diagram.

The influence of such groups on school affairs varies with the particular issue at stake. Thus, the ratepayers may be influential on matters of finance

while the church group may be influential on matters of religious education.

The sum total of the attitudes of these groups toward education constitutes the community influence on education. It is easy to see that such influence is varied and complex--as varied and complex as the number of groups. To the extent that there is agreement among groups, the influence and pressure on a school system will be strong.

3. The School System. In the same way that the community is composed of various groupings, the school system is composed of many smaller parts as illustrated in the diagram. These include various schools within the system, the local teacher associations, staff groups, non-teaching unions, and, in some systems, student organizations.

4. The Board. The local board sits somewhere in the middle, between the Ministry, the community and the school system, and thus acts as a kind of buffer or mediator among them. In our view, the board and the school system are, in a sense, imbedded in the community, and surrounded by it. Informally, the community influences all aspects of school operation at the same time, but in a formal sense the community can influence the operation of schools only through interaction with the board of education. This is a crucial point and one that both trustees and lay citizens sometimes ignore.

As an independent system, the school board has internal needs of its own. These have to do with organizing itself for effective operation, reducing interpersonal conflict and adapting to changes imposed from outside. It relates to the community by sending and receiving information in the form of reports and petitions, by the election of members and in many other ways.

Finally the board has both formal and informal relationships with the school system itself. In the days of Egerton Ryerson, this relationship

included everything from the interviewing and hiring of teachers to the purchasing of wood for the pot-bellied stove. In a complex system, however, the formal relationship between the board and the school operates through its professional administrative staff, rather than directly. Trustees still have many informal direct relationships with the school, however. Their children attend school; they know some teachers personally, and they attend school functions.

These then are the basic elements of the system: the Ministry, the Community, the Schools and the Board. The key to the solution to the problems cited earlier lies in the understanding of the relationships among these units and in the acceptance of certain appropriate principles by individuals within each of the units. In the next few minutes, we will focus on the way in which school trustees should behave in such an organization.

Trustee-Administrative Relationships

We shall focus first and most strongly on the area of trustee-administrative relationships. The role of officials in relation to boards is a complex one, especially in large jurisdictions. Historically, the board tended to perform the functions of administration itself. With the growth in size and complexity of school organizations, however, it became necessary to appoint professional school officials to carry out the business of the board.

Although a board will have relationships with several senior officials on its staff, and to an extent with all officials and teachers, the formal relationship between the board and the school system is through the chief executive officer of the system. This official performs two roles: he is an ex-officio member of the board, and he is the chief administrator of the system. In a large district no one man could personally perform all the

duties of a chief executive, so there will be delegation of authority by the top administrator to other members of the system. For example, the chief executive might delegate to his business official the responsibility for reporting to the board on budget items.

The chief executive's role with the school board is an influential one in that he has access to information and expertise essential to school board decisions. His job is to advise the board in all areas. In addition, he initiates ideas and assumes leadership whenever possible, without in any way usurping the functions of the elected and voting board members, who are finally responsible for all decisions.

There are two points here that we would like to emphasize. First, many trustees have been concerned in the past that the business function, in this approach, becomes secondary to the academic function. This means that in all cases the business official reports to the chief executive officer rather than directly to the board. We recommend, in the general case, that the chief executive officer be the secretary-treasurer of the board. Many trustees can recall when there was a dual system, with both the academic official and the business official reporting to the board. This diffusion of responsibility tended toward conflict, and toward inefficient operation. It is more effective, we believe, to house all of the responsibility in the chief executive's office, with provisions that the incumbent must rely heavily on expert advice from his subordinates.

The second point is that trustees must permit the chief executive officer to perform effectively with both the board and the system. Relative to the board, he should be called on for advice and recommendations on every important

issue before the board. He should be involved in agenda construction and reporting. The board does not have to accept every recommendation, but it must call for recommendations in every instance. And relative to the system, trustees must avoid undue involvement in the administration of policies. For example, if a parent calls a trustee to complain about a bus route, the appropriate action for the trustee is to refer the parent to the administration. Only if the trustee contemplates a change of policy does he place a complaint of this type on the floor of the meeting, and then the process should proceed in cooperation with the administrative officials.

The key to trustee-administrator relationships is a feeling of mutual trust and confidence. The achievement of such a climate does not occur by chance. It requires effort and continual sensitivity on the part of all concerned to build the kinds of relationships we have been describing.

Purposes and Objectives.

We turn now briefly to the trustee function in the establishment of purposes and objectives. This topic will be treated in more detail in later sessions.

As representatives of the community, board members have the responsibility to translate the community's wishes with regard to education into statements of educational purpose, giving direction to the school program.

Purposes are philosophical statements designed to give general direction to board decisions. They are idealistic in form, but serve to focus ideas and create a broad framework within which to work. The defining of educational purposes is a difficult task, but the effort can be extremely rewarding and revealing to a board if it will take the time to do it.

The great problem with purposes is that they can easily become "motherhood

type" statements. Here, for example, is a common statement of purpose which many boards in Ontario have adopted. "Our purpose is to promote and foster the growth of each individual so that may make the most of his individual potentialities in the context of our society." Who could object to this? Further, what program or course could not be offered under this general directive? A better approach to stating the system's purposes would be to design a document which specified certain desirable areas of emphasis in program, such as the mastery of basic scholastic skills, exposure to the basics of physical and mental health, or training in the basic elements of Canadian culture. The statement should not only list these areas but it should express some rationale, some reasons why the board and the community wish to move in these directions educationally. It becomes, in fact, a kind of mini Hall-Dennis report.

A second major board responsibility, in cooperation with the administration, is the establishment of objectives. Objectives serve to specify the purposes in sufficient detail so that programs can be developed in the schools themselves.

Using the example just cited, if the purpose includes a desired emphasis on basic skills and on physical and mental health, the objectives should indicate in specific terms that basic skills in reading should be mastered by a certain age level for a majority of students, or that the secondary program in physical health should emphasize the acquisition of skills in individual sports as opposed to team sports. The latter statement would, for example, guide the professional staff in designing its secondary school physical education program in a reasonably concrete way. At the same time, the board would not be encroaching on the professional responsibility of the staff to design the details of the programs.

Purposes and objectives really focus attention on what schools are all

about and where they are going. We cannot imagine a more vital role for trustees than to expend thought and energy on setting directions for its schools, consistent with the needs and desires of the community it serves.

Board Decision-Making

Once purposes and objectives have been established, the board has a responsibility for a series of decisions designed to ensure that the objectives are accomplished. We will discuss these decisions in terms of policies, rules, and budget. Detailed work on these will occur this afternoon and tomorrow morning in the group sessions.

Policies. A policy is a guideline for decision-making, based on objectives. For example, an objective might be to provide opportunities for the development of skills in individual sports in secondary school physical education classes. Policies must be developed which will permit this to be done-- policies which outline curriculum goals, teacher qualifications, standards for achievement, and the like. Because board members are not professionals, it is obvious that policies are only guides, permitting the exercise of expertise by professionals in the schools.

Rules. A rule is a statement of action which does not allow the exercise of discretion. In certain areas of school operation, such as salary scheduling, the board cannot allow for the exercise of judgment below the policy-making level, and thus instead of a policy it creates an inflexible rule. In general, boards should avoid creating rules. An excess of rules results in an over-bureaucratized kind of organization in which initiative is stifled and change is difficult.

A special kind of rule relative to the internal operation of the board is a by-law. These are specific statements as to board procedures, time of

meetings, order of business and the like.

Budget. A third area for board decision-making is the formulation and approval of the budget. In a general sense, a budget is a statement in numerical terms of the board's policies and rules. We may think of policies, rules, and budgets as tools for attaining objectives. In this way, the decision-making functions of boards are directly related to influence from the community and to influences from the school system.

Given our basic model of school board operation, it is generally essential for board decision making to be in broad enough terms to permit what we call derivative decisions to be carried out by the administration and by the staff. Thus in setting a budget, a board does not, as I once heard an Ontario board do, specify the exact size and color of desks to be purchased for classrooms. Rather, the board budget should allocate sufficient funds so that enough desks can be purchased, leaving the decision as to the kinds of desks up to the professionals, so long as they stay within the budget.

A final point is that purposes, objectives, policies and rules must be written down. Following this session, you may wish to examine some policy books of selected Ontario school boards which we have collected. If any of these are of particular interest, you can probably obtain copies by writing directly to the boards involved.

Evaluation

A final area of board responsibility is the function of evaluation. There are two aspects of evaluation from the board's point of view.

Administrative Reports. In order to obtain feedback for evaluating the objectives, the board receives various kinds of reports on school programs. The preparation of these reports is the responsibility of the administrative officials. One kind of report may be termed a process report, which is generally a description of progress being made in any area, such as progress on a

non-graded program. A product report, on the other hand, attempts to analyze the extent to which a program has met the objectives under which it was implemented. For instance, a product report on the physical education program might report the extent to which secondary school students have acquired skill in individual sports.

Board Evaluation. A vital function of the board is to examine various reports, particularly product reports, and judge whether objectives are being met. On the basis of these evaluations, the board will either suggest a change in objectives, or a change in policies, rules or budget which will enable the objectives to be better realized.

IV. Educational Structure in Ontario

We have outlined an ideal model for school board operation thus far. In our final section, we turn to the problem of organizational structure, since the exercise of board responsibility in the setting of purposes and objectives and in decision-making occurs within some sort of bureaucratic framework. It follows that trustees need to be aware of the type of structure of their own organization, what alternatives are possible, and some of the consequences of one kind of structure as compared with another.

In Ontario at the present time, there are four broad patterns of organizational structure in school systems.

Pure Area Type. In this case, the system is organized according to areas, perhaps geographically or perhaps according to elementary and secondary grade levels. The chief executive officer is the top official. Each of the area superintendents reports to the chief executive officer and is responsible for

all the schools in his area. Principals report to their area superintendent. This is not a very common arrangement at the present time.

Tiered Type. This is the most common arrangement in large systems. In this case, there are functional superintendents for particular responsibilities, such as superintendent of instruction, superintendent of curriculum, superintendent of business. Below these on the organization chart are area superintendents, each responsible typically for all the schools in a geographical area. Principals report to their respective area superintendents. In general, if a principal requires assistance in a functional area such as curriculum, he makes the request through his area superintendent. We should note that in this structure there tends to be a considerable distance between the principal in the school and the locus of power in the central office. In some systems, there may be as many as seven administrative levels from top to bottom.

Combination Type. Although this structure is not too common at present, it appears to be growing in popularity. In this case, the functional superintendents combine functional responsibilities with area responsibilities. The superintendent of curriculum, for example, would also coordinate a group of schools within the system. Since he can put less effort into his area responsibilities than in the tiered situation, the effect is to increase the autonomy of the local school and the local school principal.

Functional Type. In this structure, which is characteristic of many smaller systems in the province, the area superintendent has been eliminated. Responsibility for coordination of areas or families of schools is given over to the principals themselves. The central office superintendents concentrate wholly on functional specialties. In this situation, principals generally go directly

to the functional superintendents for assistance. One superintendent may have responsibility in a hierarchical sense for all the principals in the system, ensuring that they organize effectively to maintain communication and a coordinated program.

Within all these structures, there are typically administrative groupings which consider policy-implementation questions and which recommend policies to the trustees for approval. There may be a small executive council composed of the senior officials. Then there may be a larger administrative council with representation from superintendents, principals, and occasionally teachers. There are many variations of groupings, many titles and functions of these groups across the province; but they are crucial for the carrying on of the business of the system, and it is important for trustees to be aware of what they are and how they operate.

Trustees should concern themselves with structural questions such as these:

1. Are we in favor of a large measure of autonomy for our principals? If so, does our structure permit them to operate autonomously?

2. Are the functional responsibilities assigned to superintendents reflective of the purposes and objectives set by the board?

3. What role do area superintendents play in our system, and how does this affect the role of the principal?

4. When vacancies occur, should we change our organizational structure?

5. Do the administrative groupings permit the smooth flow of information up and down the system, including information to and from the individual schools?

6. Where is the power in our system located?

These are only a few of the organizational questions which trustees

should consider.

V. Conclusion

What has been discussed in these remarks is a general model for school board operation. In summarizing the assumptions of this model, the following points are pertinent:

1. School boards do not operate in isolation. They are influenced formally and informally by forces from the community and from the school system under their control. Similarly, their actions have formal and informal consequences for the community and the schools.

2. The broad functions of school boards include the setting of purposes and objectives, the making of decisions, and the evaluation of programs in terms of the objectives.

3. Officials have a dual role. On the one hand, they participate in the functions of the board. On the other, they function as part of the school system and in such a role they co-operate with setting of objectives, make derivative decisions and evaluate programs, all within the framework of actions taken by the board.

4. Although there are areas of overlap between parts of the system and among the different levels, the functions are essentially different in each part and in each level. Thus citizens cannot become directly involved in school board functions, and school board members cannot function directly in school system decisions. Each part exerts its influence through the formal and informal links with the other parts. For example, the administrative official in every case translates board policy into policy for the school system. The board does not do it directly.

5. Finally, the model for school board operation demands a constant effort on the part of trustees and officials to develop a climate of mutual trust and cooperation. Trustees must permit officials a large measure of discretion within the framework developed by board decisions. Officials must be guided by the board's policy decisions or else seek their revision. In so doing, each promotes the effectiveness of the other, serving the best interests of the board, the school system, and the community.