

## **The changing role of school boards**

### **Executive summary**

*Prepared by Steve Cymbol*

Publically elected school boards are creatures of the legislature and can only perform those tasks that are permitted to it under provincial statute. In Alberta, school boards have been created by the province to provide educational programs and services to its resident students and to other students that might attend its schools. However, the province retains the ultimate authority over public education and the manner in which it shall be provided to Alberta's children. It is the province that decides what school boards can, or may, do.

There is no requirement, or opportunity, in law that gives the public the right to have a school board. School boards exist, and will continue to exist, only for as long as the provincial legislature believes that they play a useful and significant role in the delivery of education and have sufficient community support to generate the necessary political capital to retain survival.

The brief review of the historical record provided in this document illustrates that publically elected school boards have been an important component of the educational system in Alberta since their establishment in 1884 with the passage of the first *School Ordinance* of the Northwest Territories to the present date. Although many changes in the structure, responsibility, accountability, and funding of local school boards has occurred over this period, the fundamental role has been retained. Publically elected school boards exist for the following reasons:

1. To ensure every resident student has access to an educational program that is consistent with provincial requirements and standards and the needs of the student.
2. To apply and implement provincial policy and direction within its jurisdiction in the manner that is consistent with, and supportive of, community wishes and norms.
3. To advocate on behalf of its community, parents, students and staff. School boards are aware of what is needed within their jurisdiction and must be prepared and courageous in their efforts to secure the necessary supports and continue to lobby on behalf of public education.

As conditions have changed over time, school boards have been forced to adapt their priorities, policies and procedures in order to accommodate new demands and circumstances. For example, the removal of board's ability to tax real property to fund the education of its students has changed the relationship between the board and its supporters. Taxes have a way of generating both interest and discussion. Now for the large number of Albertans that do not have children in school, a significant motivator for interest in the activities of the local school board has been removed. This now means that boards have to find new ways to engage the members of the public in a meaningful and constructive manner. The recent Alberta School Board Association initiative, *Putting the Public Back in Public Education*, is an effort to identify and implement new strategies to accomplish this.

The institutionalization of choice within the Alberta system has also changed the relationship between parents, schools and the board. If a parent is unhappy with the opportunities provided at the local school, or by the local board, there are alternatives. There is no real need for a parent to lobby for change in the local system if there are other opportunities that can be accessed. If the parent accesses educational services from an agent other than the local board, there is really no incentive to be actively engaged in the activities of the local board.

School boards have to devote their attention to ensuring that every student that is enrolled in a school under its jurisdiction has access to a high quality education that is provided in an environment that is positive, safe and caring. School board policies and actions must hold the schools within its control accountable for the results achieved. Jurisdiction resources must be devoted and directed to the achievement of identified goals and priorities. There must be alignment between provincial goals and priorities and those of the board that reflect community values and expectations.

This document has noted what might appear to be a lack of interest on the part of the citizens in the activities of the local publically elected school board. The absence of hotly contested elections for the position of trustee and participants at board meetings are often provided as evidence of a decline in support. However, parents are more involved in, and identify with, the school their children attend. As school jurisdictions have increased in size, the board is somewhat more distant and its role and responsibilities are not always clearly understood. The board's role is to ensure that that school plays a vital role in the lives of parents, students and the community in those matters that are of local responsibility.

The publically elected school board has a responsibility to develop a positive culture throughout the jurisdiction. It must welcome input into the formulation of its policies, plans and procedures. Public input must be sought in those areas that are of jurisdictional interest. Items of local interest are best left at the local level. The school board must also highlight the achievements and **successes of the educational system**. There is no news like "good news".