

# **A contented oyster never made a pearl**

## **Executive Summary**

*Prepared by K.J. (Ken) Chapman*

### **Introduction**

Governance is the political process through which a society makes its public policy choices. Thus, it goes to the heart of how a free and democratic society empowers and enables citizens to have effective and accountable participation in the development of the society they share. In essence, our governance models help us reach the balance between protecting the rights, roles and responsibilities of the individual while serving the common good.

### **Why Trustees Matter**

Why should school trustees and school boards care about governance?

Because the pace, scope and nature of societal change is going to make school boards much more important and vital to the future of Alberta.

School trustees are certain to be at the intersection of major changes in the way citizens engage in issues; the way top-down governments respond to bottom-up demands; in the way that centralized and decentralized power structures meet and often clash.

The building blocks of governance are representative government, elected or appointed governors, and the act of governing. The mortar is the relationships and spaces between the blocks and how they interact in the political and public policy world. Key questions are where and what is the relative authority and responsibility amongst the three building blocks? And how do those relationships help and/or hinder public education.

Trustees and School Districts can be effective modern governors in a new role of public policy influencers. An Alberta School Trustee as an elected representative, even without conventional political power, still has the opportunity to exert influence on the provincial government about the policies that affect the purposes and practicalities of our public education system.

### **Change and what it means**

School boards were originally set up to deal with educational needs in specific geographic communities with defined political boundaries. But more and more, public education governance pressures flow from communities of interest, not just geographic communities. In fact these communities of interest transcend geography, and usually coalesce around mutual interests, issues and concerns.

Horizontally networked citizens are finding the vertical conventional governance structures inadequate to meet their needs. That's where the ability of School Trustees to influence power, rather than exercise it, becomes critical to rethinking governance in the new networked, constantly connected and collaborative world that has been spawned by the Internet.

This heralds a shift in power to individual citizens away from the traditional governing institutions. It is no longer enough to be elected with statutory authority exercised top down with decisions made behind closed doors by elites then proclaimed to the population with one-way media tested communication techniques. Citizens want a larger, more engaged, more authentic and effective role in the design, development and deployment of the public's business. Influentials and engaged citizens want to be public policy designers not just public policy receivers. The lack of voting reinforces the concept that citizen concerns and impressions that the conventional governing institutions are outdated increasingly tone deaf and unresponsive to their concerns. Conventional governing institutions and governments are responding to this evolving and unnerving context by reverting to a conventional command and control model of centralized government.

### **A renewed and more mature governance model**

We have to change our model of governance but that is going to take a special kind of leadership. It will take more than just different provincial political or institutional leadership. It will require more and better community based leadership as well. Our conventional representative democracy has served us well for about 150 years but our society has changed and the pace of change is also accelerating, thanks mostly to technology.

We have to increase our personal and our shared capacity for reengaged citizenship in the new networked world order. Our problems, at all levels, have never been more complex, more critical or more confounding. And that is precisely why the role of School boards as Influencers, rather than Powerbrokers, is so critical to creating a more generous and inclusive civic discourse, which in turn will lead to a more authentically democratic, inclusive and cohesive society.

What will be the nature of a Trustee's role as stewards, moderators and facilitators for renewed citizenship? The open question is will we see a change in citizen's expectations in exchange for their granting of power and consenting to be governed? Will the responsibility and duty to govern in service of the greater good be more widely demanded and distributed? Will this be about citizenship that requires more of people than merely voting? New Internet tools for collaboration and communications can be used to engage ordinary folks and enable less savvy community organizations to be more directly involved and effective in the public policy governance space. As this space evolves, School Boards and School Trustees have an enormous opportunity to be facilitators and stewards of the public knowledge gained by these governance engagements all around our system of public education. Even more, they can and should become the facilitators and mediators in the inevitable clash between horizontal networks of affiliated and like-minded citizens and that challenging interface with the power based vertical structures of command-and-control conventional governing institutions.

A community-based collaborative governance capacity will require skilful political leadership. It will necessitate political leadership that comes from the servant-facilitator model of leadership. That is where someone has the listening, interpreting, integration and articulation skill to capture and communicate the essences of the often chaotic deliberations and debates of the citizens. They must be talented and trusted Influentials who are connected and embedded in community.