

School Board Trustees - Who are they? Why are they important?

<http://elections.ontarioschooltrustees.org/WhatDoTrusteesDo/SchoolBoardTrustees.aspx>

School board trustees are the members of a school board. They are locally-elected representatives of the public, and they are the community's advocate for public education. They are required to carry out their responsibilities in a manner that assists the board in fulfilling its duties under the *Education Act*.

A trustee's role is to maintain a focus on student achievement, well-being and equity and to participate in making decisions that benefit the board's entire jurisdiction while representing the interests of their constituents. Trustees must also communicate the views and decisions of the board back to their constituents.

This is not as simple as it sounds. Because Ontario is large and diverse, the job of school board trustee varies widely. A trustee is responsible for identifying the needs and priorities of their community and for ensuring these are considered in the decisions that result in practical educational opportunities for students. In doing so, trustees must consider conflicting interests and values. A trustee must do this in collaboration with the other members of the school board by developing policies that work for all students, and ensuring they are implemented effectively. It is the local trustee who makes sure that the community has a direct way to express its views on vital education decisions that affect our day-to-day lives. School trustees play an indispensable role in preserving our democratic heritage.

The school trustee is a member of a team

Only the team (the board of trustees), not an individual trustee, has the authority to make decisions or take action on behalf of a school board. A school board must place all students first when making any decision. Trustees are required to uphold the implementation of any board resolution after it is passed by the board.

Trustees are responsible for establishing policy direction

Policies set out the expectations about what should happen or how services are to be provided within the school board. A well-written policy describes to parents, the public and the board's staff what they can expect. The board of trustees ensures that the Director of Education carries out responsibilities for implementing the board's policies. They entrust the day-to-day management of the board to its staff through the board's Director.

Trustees, as members of the board, are accountable to the province

The board of trustees is accountable to the Province of Ontario for the proper conduct of their duties and powers, including the implementation of provincial policy and the use of provincially allocated funds.

Trustees are accountable to their electorate

As elected officials, trustees must balance the demands of the community with the duties required by the Ministry of Education. By law, they are required to consult with parents, students and supporters of the board on the board's multi-year plan and bring the concerns of these groups to the attention of the board. This can be challenging and takes dedicated leadership coupled with a willingness to seek innovative ideas and the courage to implement them.

School board trustees are community leaders

School board trustees have a responsibility to all the families in their community - not just their neighbours, and not just families with school-aged children. Trustees build and maintain relationships with the entire community.

They work with their school board colleagues and with other community partners to ensure that all the students within the board's jurisdiction have equal opportunities to reach their full potential. Trustees demonstrate their leadership in the following key areas:

- Establishing the board's multi-year strategic plan, which includes the vision to ensure a strong public education system
- Setting goals for student achievement, well-being and equity
- Monitoring progress against the board's strategic goals and priority areas
- Promoting accountability throughout the school board
- Allocating resources in ways that ensure equity of outcomes and demonstrate accountability
- Establishing a respectful, caring, professional climate throughout the school board
- Creating collaborative relationships inside the board and across the community
- Promoting continuous improvement
- Promoting community involvement and establishing communications
- Holding the director of education accountable as they lead, execute and monitor activities on behalf of the board of trustees
- Ensuring effective stewardship of the board's resources which includes passing the budget

Trustees champion equity in education

Trustees work to ensure equity across their school boards so that every student has the opportunity to succeed regardless of background, identity or personal circumstances. The role of school board trustee involves bringing the voice of everyone, including marginalized communities (e.g., Indigenous students, newcomers/immigrants, people coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, etc.) to the board table.

Trustees hold themselves accountable for their conduct

In exercising their role, trustees are required to comply with the board's Code of Ethics or Conduct which sets out standards that govern the ethical behaviour of trustees. This includes the expectation to act with integrity, adhere to high ethical standards and to conduct themselves in a manner that enhances public confidence in Ontario's publicly funded education system. Boards of trustees hold themselves accountable to their codes.

A school board is not:

- A parliament with party divisions. A school board is a single body made up of members, i.e., trustees. A school board should speak with one voice on the decisions it has collectively made.
- Interested only in the opinions of families with children. A school board must recognize that all of society has a stake in public education.
- A sub-committee of the municipality. In fact, school boards govern budgets substantially greater than those of most municipalities.
- A closed or private body. All school boards are public institutions and their meetings are open to the public subject to certain exceptions (see section 207 of the *Education Act*).

Shelley Laskin TDSB Trustee, Ward 8, Eglinton-Lawrence and Toronto-St Paul's

Tel: (416) 395-8787 E-Mail: Shelley.Laskin@tdsb.on.ca www.tdsb.on.ca/laskin Twitter [@shelleylaskin](https://twitter.com/shelleylaskin)

Sign up for my Weekly Update from my website