

Revitalizing the Halifax Regional School Board

An Opportunity for Excellence in Student Achievement

**Prepared by the
Education and Training Committee
Halifax Chamber of Commerce
August 26, 2008**

Executive Summary

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a best practice business advocacy organization with a mandate to make Halifax an even better place to work, live and play. The Chamber's 1,700 business members collectively employ over 90,000 people.

In February of 2007, the Chamber struck a Task Force to determine whether the Chamber would assume a role in education, and if so, what that role would be. The Task Force recommended that the Chamber establish a Committee on education and training, and that the Committee's work be regarded as a priority over the next five years. Chamber members expressed their desire to be involved in the education debate, and wanted to contribute to educational matters both within the city of Halifax and the province as a whole. Notably, 61% of Chamber members surveyed in July of 2007 were of the opinion that the P-12 system did not do a good job of preparing students for the workforce.

Once the Committee was struck and began conducting research and speaking with stakeholders, it became apparent that there is no unified vision for education in Nova Scotia that contemplates either economic development or a broader vision of prosperity for the province.

Moreover, as the Committee began to examine the education question, it became clear that the "governance crisis" at the Halifax Regional School Board could not be ignored. In December 2006, the Education Minister "fired" the School Board because of the conduct of certain Board members and the inability of the Board to conduct the Board's business in a productive fashion. The Minister appointed a one person Board to carry out the Board's responsibilities under the *Education Act*.

According to research, strong educational leadership, including a highly functioning School Board, are the foundation for student success and achievement. An essential element of success is a positive working relationship between the School Board and the Superintendent.

School Board elections will be held in October 2008. The Chamber's Education and Training Committee regards the upcoming election as a means to revitalize the Halifax Regional School Board insofar as a new School Board may facilitate both excellence in student achievement and, consequently, greater economic opportunities for the province. To maximize this opportunity, superior School Board governance is essential.

Governance Models

Selecting an appropriate Governance Model enables a Board to design a governance framework that suits its respective mission, size, context, and people. There are a number of elements to consider when designing an effective approach to governance. According to the Institute on Governance:

The elements of a governance framework can be divided into three main areas, although the elements all interrelate and overlap with one another. The three areas are:

1. The formal legislative context
2. Policies
3. Informal governance

The first element, namely the formal legislative context, refers to all relevant legislative frameworks and suggests that relevant legislation must be considered when planning an organization's governance model. Formal legislative frameworks include the *Canada Business Corporations Act* and provincial statutes, as well as bylaws under the legislation.

The second element of a governance framework, namely policies, refers to the fact that a Board ought to institute policies which carefully detail and define how a board should carry out its responsibilities.

The final element, namely informal governance, effectively encapsulates all remaining activities of a Board. The following definition of informal governance is instructive:

Informal governance refers to traditions, organizational values, founding principles and culture that are typically unwritten but that nonetheless prevail in the organization. In practice, a great deal of what happens in governance falls in this area. Informal governance may include things such as how conflicts are managed, how succession planning takes place, decision making styles, and how the Board actually conducts itself in relationship to the organization's values...

(Institute on Governance, online: <http://www.iog.ca/board/governance/html/modelm.html>)

As a whole, models of governance attempt to define what issues fall under the purview of the Board and what issues may be properly delegated to Senior Management. The purpose is to distinguish the Board's "governance" work from Senior Management's "management" work and to define the interrelationship between the Board and Senior Management.

Governance Models for School Boards

Section 64(1) of the *Education Act* outlines the mandate of the School Board. According to the Act:

The Board is responsible for control and management of the public schools within its jurisdiction.

Notably, "control and management" **do not** entail the direct involvement of the Board. Moreover, the Act **does not** include the day-to-day administration of the school system as part of the Board's mandate. Indeed, many governance models suggest that a School Board's role should focus exclusively on governance, not administration:

The theoretical responsibility of the Board of Directors is to set the organization's policies and plan the association's strategic direction. Policy is defined as the overall high level of business operations practice and planning of the association within which day to day business is conducted.

(Belfall (1995), p.101, as quoted in "Strengthening School Governance", SSTA Research Centre Report #99-01.)

To put it differently, the role of a School Board is to focus on policy development, the board-staff relationship and the governance process itself. The day-to-day administration of the school system must be managed by those who are qualified to oversee it, such as the Superintendent and School Board Staff. This opinion was emphasized in a March 2004 study conducted by the Education Policy and Leadership Centre, K-12, Governance Project. The study was entitled "Strengthening the Work of School Boards in Pennsylvania" and conducted that:

Effective boards focus on overarching issues of student's achievement, policy development, and resource allocation to support implementation of district policies that promote achievement. They use data and other information to make decisions and evaluate the implementation of those decisions. **They avoid day to day management of schools that is properly the role of the superintendent.**

There are a number of different governance models commonly used in Canada. Mel Gill of Synergy Associates in Ottawa conducted a series of case studies regarding approximately twenty of these organizations in an attempt to identify some common governance models. In so doing, Mr. Gill concluded that regardless of governance model, the largest imperative is for a Board to maintain a clear focus:

Many of the traditional boards in the research samples suffer from absence of a clear delineation between governance and management roles. Committee structures (finance, HR, programs, PR etc) that parallel management and operational functions invite board intrusion into operational detail. Meeting agendas typically mimic this structure. **The absence of a clear focus on results impairs board ability to add value to the organizational purpose and account meaningfully to key stakeholders.**

In addition, Mr. Gill also determined that a "dynamic hybrid" of various board governance models had evolved for most boards in his research sample. Gill stated:

The results-based approach to governance is an emerging hybrid model. It addresses weaknesses identified in other models through limited use of committees structured around board's rather than management responsibilities.

According to Gill, the "results-based board" reorganizes a Board's structure so as to focus on clearly defined board responsibilities, and to measure the results of organizational activities and management processes.

The Chamber's Education and Training Committee supports development and implementation of a hybrid governance model to enable the new School Board to focus on what truly matters - student achievement. A hybrid model would allow the new Board to assess other governance models, select the aspects of these models which it prefers, and then customize a governance structure which not only clearly delineates the responsibilities of the Board and Senior Management, but which also has the most potential to facilitate student achievement.

In designing a hybrid model, however, the Board must be prepared to rigorously assess its own performance, as well as hold Senior Staff accountable for organizational and management processes and achievement.

Essential ingredients for a highly functioning School Board are clearly defined roles and responsibilities, a climate of trust and candour, rigorous decision making, and a constant desire for improvement and excellence in student achievement. While there is no standardized approach to School Board governance, it seems clear that in order for a School Board to operate effectively, all Board members must be equally satisfied with and committed to the governance model adopted. A governance model cannot be imposed on the new Halifax Regional School Board.

The Board must create and embrace its own unique model. Like all parents - like all residents of HRM - the Chamber's Education and Training Committee expects no less from the incoming Halifax Regional School Board.

The Characteristics of a Good School Board Member

The Education and Training Committee conducted extensive research in order to develop a clear understanding of what personal characteristics enable a School Board member to create effective policy and make decisions that enhance student achievement and excellence in education.

Good School Board members must be passionate about public education and come to the Board table with a willingness to carefully and rigorously weigh different options, engage in respectful debate, and make policy decisions that benefit every child in the education system. Good School Board members commit to learning about educational issues and bring their strategic talent and experience to the Board. Good School Board Members also commit to developing and operating under clear governance processes and policies, and to working collectively as a team while constantly striving towards the goal of excellence in education.

The primary challenge for a School Board member is to balance the interests he or she may have in his or her "constituency" against the best interests of the education system overall. In order to affect this balance, the School Board member must acknowledge his or her interests and commit, after fulsome debate, to do the right thing and speak with one voice even if his or her "constituency" does not benefit to the extent that he or she may prefer. School Board debates are held in public. The Board Member has an opportunity to speak then on behalf of their constituents. The Board Member however also has a broader responsibility to the people who did not elect them, i.e. other constituents.

Once elected, a Board Member must ensure their decisions are taken for the benefit of the broader constituency - all of the children in the system who cannot vote. This is their fiduciary responsibility. A holistic, consistent and uniform approach is essential in order for a School Board to promote and enhance the education system overall.

The People Issues

Even the best governance model cannot assist a board in functioning appropriately if the right people are not at the table. Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, in an article entitled “What Makes Great Boards Great”, Harvard Business Review, September 2002 states:

We need to consider not only how we structure the work of a board but also how we manage the social system a board actually is. Boards need to be strong, high-functioning work groups whose members trust and challenge one another and engage directly with senior managers on critical issues facing corporations.

Sonnenfeld believes “what distinguishes exemplary boards is that they are robust, effective social systems”. Effectively this means a Board must support a “virtuous cycle of respect, trust and candour”. Indeed, Sonnenfeld continues:

It is difficult to tease out the factors that make one group of people an effective team and another, equally talented group of people a dysfunctional one; well-functioning, successful teams usually have chemistry that can't be quantified. They seem to get into a virtuous cycle in which one good quality builds on another. Team members develop mutual respect; because they respect one another, they develop trust; because they trust one another, they share difficult information; because they all have the same, reasonably complete information, they can challenge one another's conclusions coherently; because a spirited give-and-take becomes the norm, they learn to adjust their own interpretations in response to intelligent questions.

In order to create a climate of respect, it is imperative that the CEO, Chairperson, and board members take a leadership role. Sonnenfeld articulates this point in stating that:

Perhaps the most important link in the virtuous cycle is the capacity to challenge one another's assumptions and beliefs. Respect and trust do not imply endless affability or absence of disagreement. Rather, they imply bonds among board members that are strong enough to withstand clashing viewpoints and challenging questions. **The CEO, the chairperson and the board in general need to demonstrate through their actions that they understand the difference between dissent and disloyalty.**

School Board members must be prepared to remind each other what type of behaviour is appropriate, what type of behaviour is expected, and what type of behaviour will not be tolerated. This holds true not only in the context of internal Board meetings, but also in situations when the Board is being represented in public.

In order for the “new” Halifax Regional School Board to work effectively, each Board Member must sacrifice personal or political interests or agendas, and must focus absolutely on a commitment to respectful debate and a relentless focus on the best interests of our students. The Chambers notes that this has not always been the case.

Attached at Appendix “A” is a more detailed list of the preferred characteristics of a School Board Member.

Role of the Superintendent and Senior Staff

It is difficult for a Board to oversee an organization and to monitor its performance if the Board does not receive appropriate information on a timely basis. If the Halifax Regional School Board is to function under a hybrid policy model, the Board must insist that it receive adequate information from the staff, through the Superintendent, on a timely basis.

It is vital for the new School Board to resist going directly to managers within the organization with issues or requests for information. Indeed, all requests must come through the Superintendent. If Board members go directly to staff with their issues, it may appear as though these Board members are excessively political and will create the impression they are trying to circumvent the Superintendent’s authority. Board members must be cognizant of this fact, and go through the appropriate channels to address any concerns or facilitate requests for information.

The Role of the Chair

The Chair of the School Board is an extremely important role. The Chair must be a strong leader who is not only prepared to set the tone for Board behaviour, but who is prepared to be an exemplary role model. The Chair must be a consensus builder, who is prepared to “referee” differences among Board members, and who is equipped to keep any “renegade” board members in line. Further, the Chair must have a strong and respectful working relationship with the Superintendent. This relationship is essential because part of the Chair’s role will be to liaise between the Board and the Superintendent. Finally, the Chair must be capable of listening to all points of view, and must have experience running Board meetings. One of the first tasks to be performed by the new Chair is to work with the School Board to establish procedures to govern the Board's work.

Board Responsibilities

The School Board itself has obligations. As the governing body of an organization with a general fund budget of \$380 million and with responsibility for 52,600 students and 5,400 teachers and support staff, the Halifax Regional School Board must have governance processes that are above reproach in order to maintain a high degree of public confidence. From an internal perspective, the Board is responsible affirming its mission, approving its goals and strategic direction, and monitoring its performance in order to ensure accountability. The Board must consistently reaffirm commitment to good governance practices, and must regularly commit to training, educational and organizational initiatives. This will require the Board to implement a comprehensive orientation program regarding financial management, risk management, and succession. The Board is also responsible for selecting and evaluating an appropriate Superintendent. Finally, the Board is responsible for overseeing programs of instruction and reviewing the requisite data related to school performance.

From an external perspective, the School Board's responsibilities involve connecting with stakeholders, engaging in effective public communication, and participating in public engagements. The Board must also provide leadership and assist management in obtaining necessary resources to facilitate the overall success of the education system.

The School Board's internal and external responsibilities are equally important in order to achieve effective operation, strong educational leadership, and the promotion of student success and achievement.

Written Mandate

In addition to the responsibilities outlined above, the School Board must adopt a written mandate which explicitly acknowledges its oversight responsibilities. At a minimum, the Board's mandate must outline appropriate Board governance principles and guidelines, and means by which the Board may receive feedback from stakeholders. Board orientation, education, and evaluation must also be addressed. The mandate must reflect on strategic planning, and must identify principal risks faced by the Board and appropriate means by which these risks may be managed. The Board's mandate also entails implementing a Code of Conduct, developing a succession plan, and adopting a suitable communications policy. Finally, the Board's written mandate must outline position descriptions and criteria by which to assess the performance of the Superintendent.

Concluding Comments

The School Board is not in our classrooms, nor should it be. It is not in the administration of our schools, nor should it be. Yet the Board's effective operation enables student success and achievement as surely as if its members were in front of students every day.

Governance is not often seen by the broader community as a topic that would be essential to quality education - but it is.

Success in governance will breed success in every aspect of the operation and delivery of our provincial education system.

Unless and until effective governance is in place, we are avoiding the responsibility for a top community and Chamber priority: the proper education of our children.

Appendix A

Characteristics of a Good School Board Member

Passion and Commitment

- Strong belief in the value of public education
- Willingness to learn about the Province's vision of education
- Interest in working with the Board on its vision, goals and objectives and to understand the interests served by the board
- Willingness to spend time learning about the Board, education issues, people involved in education, parents and related organizations
- Willingness to bring a positive, constructive outlook
- Belief that improvements can be made
- Willing to commit the necessary time required to make good decisions

Integrity and Leadership

- Willingness to represent the interests served by the Board
- Willingness to represent the Board and to stand up for its decisions
- Conceptual thinker, linking seemingly independent issues
- Ability to see the big picture
- Ability to set aside differences and personal opinions to act in the best interests of the students
- Possessing core values of integrity and reliability
- Possessing impact and influence skills; high degree of self-awareness
- Ability to think independently and act courageously, even in the public eye
- Process-oriented; having ability to make decisions and seek outcomes by applying a consistent application of logical sequence of steps
- Open-minded and information-seeking

Interpersonal Strengths and Teamwork

- Ability to work in a team towards shared goals
- Seeks constructive conflict, with the intention of moving the board's decisions forward
- Willingness to delegate, as well as to share the load
- Ability to identify 'group think' and move forward
- Ability to participate in a positive manner
- An effective communicator with excellent listening skills
- Possessing common sense and using it
- Ability to tolerate ambiguity and remain positive
- Possessing useful skills and talents that will add to the perspectives of the Board

