

New Halifax Regional School Board shows early success

By Cheryl Hodder

Late in March, I witnessed a resurrection of sorts and I wanted to share it with you.

But first, I should provide background information. I am a former teacher and am currently a lawyer who practices in the area of board governance. I also chair the Education and Training Committee of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. Since 2007, improving the public Grade Primary to Grade 12 education system has been one of the Chamber's top priorities. Our Committee has researched international best practices in school board governance and has responded to the provincial Minister of Education on this issue.

Like other citizens, I was deeply concerned that the last elected Halifax Regional School Board missed the mark in achieving its mandate. And because of this, our Committee has been watching the performance of the newly elected 2008 board very carefully. On March 31, Irvine Carvery, Chair of the Halifax Regional School Board, and Carole Olsen, Board superintendent, reported extensively to our Committee on recent Board developments.

After the October 2008 election and intensive training sessions, the Board, eight of whom are new members, got to work. First, they showed themselves responsible stewards of public funds by voting against increasing their annual stipend. Recently, they made very tough but carefully considered decisions on school closures. And most importantly, the Board has functioned smoothly – a welcome departure from the last elected board. This early success is due to the hard work of all the board members, Board staff and to the skillful leadership of Irvine Carvery.

The Halifax Regional School Board faces many challenges – tight recessionary budgets, aging infrastructure, demographic shifts, escalating and competing demands. With all these factors to consider, it can be difficult to run a public school board. While it is early in their mandate, Mr. Carvery and his fellow board members have already shown that they have the ability to master this task.

In our research, we found several other cases where school boards rose from the ashes to become educational leaders. The new Halifax Regional School Board shows all the signs of being able to accomplish such a feat.

For their hard work, the Halifax Regional School Board members deserve our praise – and our thanks.

Cheryl Hodder, Chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce's Education and Training Committee, is regional managing partner at McInnes Cooper.