

SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNANCE:

Following the October 15, 2022 elections, every school district in the province installed newly elected trustees to their Board of Education's four-year term in office. Almost one-half of the province's trustees are new to their board, and bring with them different priorities, original ideas, and a range of experiences and political commitments. The future direction of each school and district will be significantly influenced and shaped by the decisions of their new board. For this reason, it is important to understand the governance role of boards and other entities in the education sector, and how they can affect Principals and Vice-Principals in their roles.

by

Ellen Roberts

*Director, Member Support Services
BCPVPA*



WHY UNDERSTANDING THE GOVERNANCE MODEL OF THE BC EDUCATION SYSTEM IS IMPORTANT FOR PRINCIPALS AND VICE-PRINCIPALS

Boards of Education are given the responsibility of governing their school district, not conducting its day-to-day operation. **Governing** is different and distinct from **'running'** the school district. Governance is about the setting the guiding vision, values, principles, and policy that help to shape a school district in response to local needs and priorities. The key intent of this work is to ensure that the needs and aspirations of all students within the school district are met as effectively as possible. This focus and responsibility should be placed above all other considerations for boards.



WHAT DO BOARDS OF EDUCATION DO?

Boards of Education – or School Boards – have four core responsibilities:

1. Setting the educational, financial, capital, and structural **priorities** of the school district based on local input and student needs (e.g. vision, values, and strategic plan).
2. Establishing **policies** to guide the school district, its employees, and students in their intended roles and responsibilities.
3. Providing **oversight** to ensure the responsibilities of employees and district policy are met.
4. Overseeing **processes** and **decisions** regarding the district's finances, capital plan, terms of employment, student and parent appeals, and guiding protections for individuals and groups.

These responsibilities are defined in the B.C. School Act as well as other provincial legislation and statutes.



School districts also have local policies and procedures that help to guide the operation of the board. Individual boards operate and exercise their authority differently from one another, and these differences reflect local context, priorities, personal preference, and tradition.

A key point in understanding the role of trustees is that the authority referenced above is the responsibility of the district's *entire* Board of Education, and not of individual school trustees.

Although a duly elected official and member of a corporate board, an individual school trustee has little authority and no role in directing or overseeing the work or focus of any school district employee, including Principals or Vice-Principals.

A trustee cannot direct the work or decisions of Principals, Vice-Principals, or other staff at the school or district level, nor do they have an individual role in overseeing or judging decisions made at the school or classroom level. Individual trustees should not intercede on behalf of the community, parents, or students when questions or concerns are brought to them. This is important for Principals and Vice-Principals to know, because occasionally community members or parents approach trustees with concerns, and those concerns may come directly to a Principal or Vice-Principal through a trustee. This is not the correct process; it may arise from a misunderstanding of the role of the trustee, and can be easily rectified. In such a situation, the Principal or Vice-Principal should reach out to their district supervisor or Superintendent and make them aware of the situation.

In another situation, a Principal or Vice-Principal may be engaged in casual conversation with a trustee in the community, and may be asked their opinion about decisions, programs, staff members, or other topics of interest in the school or district. It is important for the member to be cautious about how they respond, as this is not the appropriate conduit for a trustee to gain insights about the workings of the district. A member does not have the authority to speak officially about such matters, and would not want to be quoted in a board meeting as having expressed an opinion about a school or district issue.

Principals and Vice-Principals report to the Superintendent – perhaps indirectly through a Director of Instruction, or an Assistant/Associate Superintendent – who is ultimately responsible for the operation, or the 'running', of the district. Before engaging with a trustee, who is responsible as part

of their board for 'governing' the district, Principals and Vice-Principals need to ensure that district expectations for such interactions are being followed.

Not all provinces in Canada have school boards, but BC has retained this co-governance structure. Without boards and locally elected school trustees, governance of BC's school districts would look very different, and would likely fall to a provincial body. Where this has happened in other jurisdictions, there has been a loss of local autonomy and input. Retaining the ability to set local priorities and direction is important for the successful governance of school districts, and speaks to why BC has retained elected school boards.

WHAT OTHER ENTITIES GOVERN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM?

In addition to local Boards of Education, there are other entities that direct the work of school and school district, starting with the provincial Ministry of Education and Child Care (MoECC). Like school districts, the MoECC also has two distinct sides: the political side led by the Minister of Education and Child Care, and the operational side led by the Deputy Minister. The Minister fulfills the elected role similar to that of a board, but at a provincial level. The focus of the MoECC, through cabinet and the Premier, is to set priorities, policy, strategic direction, and a budget, and to guide decision making, very much like trustees on a school board. The MoECC are the governors of the provincial K-12 education system. The Deputy Minister is the CEO or operational head of the Ministry, and fulfills a similar role to that of a Superintendent

but at a provincial level. These parallel but separate roles mirror the roles and responsibilities of boards and staff at the local level: governance vs. operations.

Another example of this shared governance model is that of the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA). The elected Board of Directors, led by the President, sets priorities through the strategic plan, establishes the budget, and guides decision making. The staff of the BCPVPA, led by the Executive Director, operationalizes the work of the Board of Directors in supporting the very important work that Principals and Vice-Principals do in their districts across the province.

A unique feature of BC's K-12 education system is the distinct role of the BC Public Schools Employers Association (BCPSEA) in defining and setting employment relationships for everyone within the sector, including Principals and Vice-Principals. Principals and Vice-Principals in BC are employed under personal services contracts by their school district, rather than under common collective agreements. Although hired by each school district through a local process, the terms of a Principal or Vice-Principal's employment – including wages and benefits – are governed through BCPSEA.

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS AND VICE-PRINCIPALS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOVERNANCE?

In understanding how Principal and Vice-Principal employment relationships are governed, it is important to know that:

A TRUSTEE CANNOT DIRECT THE WORK OR DECISIONS OF PRINCIPALS, VICE-PRINCIPALS, OR OTHER STAFF AT THE SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEVEL, NOR DO THEY HAVE AN INDIVIDUAL ROLE IN OVERSEEING OR JUDGING DECISIONS MADE AT THE SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM LEVEL.

1. Your supervisor is your school district's Superintendent/CEO, or the person(s) they have charged with that responsibility. Although your work is guided – **governed** – by your local board, trustees do not have the authority to **direct** the work of Principals and Vice-Principals.

2. Although your local board may set the terms of employment – salary grids, for example – for the district's Principals and Vice-Principals, they may only do so within the parameters set by **BCPSEA**.

3. Principals and Vice-Principals are designated as 'management staff' in BC, and therefore have a much more defined **fiduciary responsibility** (e.g. duty of loyalty, good faith, and honesty) to their employer than unionized employees.

BCPSEA is not part of the Ministry of Education and Child Care, but rather part of the Ministry of Finance under the authority of the Public Sector Employers' Council (PSEC). Although responsive to the Minister of Education and Child Care, BCPSEA is ultimately controlled by Minister of Finance. This split of responsibilities can at times add complications to the employment of Principals and Vice-Principals.

The overall governance of K-12 education in BC is a shared responsibility. Through the work of individually

elected school trustees, Boards of Education govern sixty school districts with the intent of providing the vision, values, and strategic direction so that schools may best meet student needs and aspirations. The Minister of Education and Child Care provides governance to the provincial K-12 system on behalf of the elected government; parallel to this, the Ministry of Finance through BCPSEA provides governance to employment relationships within the sector.

As school leaders, it is important for all Principals and Vice-Principals to understand and effectively operate within this context. Misunderstandings about 'who's who in the zoo' can lead to unfortunate or avoidable conflict and confusion. Almost certainly, there will be missed opportunities or a degree of frustration if members do not understand and appreciate the complexity of the governance structure under which they work. Responsible and locally responsive governance is a key factor in establishing and maintaining effective school districts which, in turn, can support great schools. When Principals and Vice-Principals understand and support the governance of their school district, it ultimately impacts their own roles and the success of their students.

For more information, contact a member of the BCPVPA Member Support Services team.

