

## **School boards matter**

In the crossfire between teachers and government, trustees speak for students, parents and the community

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Parents, students and other citizens caught in the crossfire as British Columbia's teachers squared off against the government this fall may have questioned where they fit in, and who was representing their interests.

Many supported the teachers' position that Bill 12 didn't improve learning conditions that include too-large classes with inadequate support for students with special learning needs.

Some were concerned about teachers breaking the law, while others were simply overwhelmed by child care arrangements, juggling shift schedules and worries about students preparing for exams and university applications.

But the question remains: Who speaks for the broader community, including parents and students?

It's a timely question as we prepare for Saturday's school board elections. School trustees are elected to set school district policies and allocate provincial spending grants -- and they are accountable to citizens.

Under the B.C. School Act, school trustees also perform a range of duties: Establishing and/or closing schools, managing schools and property, establishing rules regulating enrolment procedures, ensuring appropriate rules of conduct are in place in schools, setting or adjusting school calendars and ensuring student records are appropriately maintained.

Trustees represent the interests of parents, students and their communities and are accessible to those with concerns, advice, questions and suggestions.

Perhaps the most difficult task in recent years for trustees has been dealing with budgets that must, by law, be balanced. With costs rising faster than available funds, trustees may engage in extensive community consultation, hearing concerns and advice, while trying to ensure the learning needs of all children are met.

That experience leads some trustees to do a significant amount of lobbying for more education funding.

Longtime Vancouver school trustee and present school board chair Adrienne Montani says that in an average month she fields 10 to 15 calls, e-mails or letters from parents and responds to each one personally, except on the rare occasion she asks a staff member to respond with specific information.

During budget time or when a hot issue is percolating, she can receive hundreds of calls, e-mails and letters.

Montani's experiences are echoed by her predecessor, Barbara Buchanan, who chaired the Vancouver school board until 2002. Buchanan says with evidence showing parent involvement increases student achievement, it is important to elect trustees who work well with parents.

"The school board is the last place of appeal," she explains. "It's important for trustees to provide fairness for parents, students, teachers and staff."

Buchanan says she considered it a privilege to be a trustee -- a role in which one must always put the needs of students first, sometimes in the midst of conflict.

Montani says trustees hear from parents about issues ranging from individual student placement and support to broader issues such as budget decisions, program changes, advertising policies and school fees. Parents also contact trustees about expanding or retaining specific programs and issues regarding safety and access to school district facilities.

Buchanan says that with each trustee having designated "liaison schools," parents can get prompt, personal responses, something citizens are less likely to find at any other level of government.

As she completes her final term on the VSB, Montani says her most important contribution was helping all stakeholders be well informed, included and valued in school district decision-making. To accomplish that, she says, she listened to all partner groups and voices and shared information proactively.

During an election campaign, parents can find out about trustee candidates through many channels -- reading news media coverage, attending all-candidates meetings and other campaign events, and submitting specific questions to candidates by e-mail, phone or letter.

Sample questions: What is your opinion on class sizes? What role do you see for trustees in terms of class sizes? Are we meeting the needs of children with special education requirements? What would you do to ensure the needs of each child are met in our schools?

Drawing on her many years as a school trustee, Montani advises: "Find out if candidates are passionate or really care about public education. Expect them to be accessible, to listen respectfully and to put real effort into answering questions thoroughly. Monitor how they vote on issues of importance to you."

Get out and vote on Saturday for school trustees who will represent the interests of you, your children and your community.

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