

## **Governance in Transformation: Alberta School Board Chairs' Perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

School boards are typically removed from nonprofit sector analyses because they are part of the “MUSH” set of organizations (municipalities, universities, schools, and hospitals) that both stand outside of the more typical nonprofit sector and tend to be closely affiliated with government. Nevertheless, school boards offer a unique opportunity to examine the governance of a large system of regulated activity that affects millions of citizens. How such systems should be governed has been a matter of concern for nearly 40 years. This study presents data from Alberta school board chairs regarding their perception of governance transformation being brought about by legislative changes. Five dimensions of governance are proposed as defining the current and anticipated governance domain within which school boards operate. Tensions within and between these dimensions signify symbolic boundary constructions that need to be scrutinized in anticipation of the governance transformation and boundary spanning activities of school boards required by the new legislation.

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Les conseils scolaires sont généralement retirés des analyses du secteur communautaire parce qu'ils font partie de l'ensemble d'organisations « MUSH » (les municipalités, les universités, les écoles et les hôpitaux); ces organisations se distinguent du secteur communautaire typique et ont tendance à être étroitement associées au gouvernement. Néanmoins, les conseils scolaires offrent une occasion unique d'observer la gouvernance d'un vaste système d'activités réglementées qui affecte des millions de citoyens. La façon dont de tels systèmes devraient être gérés fait l'objet de préoccupations depuis presque 40 ans. Cette étude présente les perceptions de présidents de conseils scolaires de l'Alberta en ce qui a trait à la transformation de la gouvernance apportée par des modifications à la loi. Cinq dimensions de la gouvernance sont proposées pour définir à la fois le domaine de gouvernance dans le cadre duquel fonctionnent actuellement les conseils scolaires et celui dans le cadre duquel il est prévu qu'ils fonctionneront. Les tensions entre ces dimensions et les tensions au sein de celles-ci indiquent des constructions de frontières symboliques qui nécessitent un

examen minutieux dans le but de prévoir la transformation de la gouvernance ainsi que les activités d'expansion des conseils scolaires exigées par la nouvelle législation.

**Keywords / Mots clés :** Governance; School board; Education; Legislation; Transformation; Alberta / Gouvernance; Conseil scolaire; Éducation; Législation; Transformation; Alberta

### INTRODUCTION

School boards have characteristics of both government and nonprofit organizations—they bridge the worlds of the provincial government and local communities at the level of the individual citizen. For nonprofit organizations directly affected by provincial policy, such as service organizations whose funding comes from specific legislation and contracting relationships with governments, the study of school board governance may offer insights into broad system governance. The provincial government's regulations and contracts define how service providers will operate, who they will provide services to, and how much service at what cost will be provided. Therefore, how the Government of Alberta is choosing to articulate governance for school boards should be monitored closely by other systems of service provision in the province as the government seeks to reduce expenses by centralizing and more closely regulating other areas of nonprofit activity.

What kind of governance should be practised by school boards has been under consideration for nearly 40 years in jurisdictions in Canada and around the world. Common areas of concern centre on what it means to be an effective governor and an effective governance body within the context of providing public education. At the root of the concerns is the fundamental question of what is meant by “governance.” In other words, what are the assumptions, values, and practices which are best aligned with the purposes of public education? If school board governance is to be understood from the perspective of the public sector, it would encompass policymaking and the statutory relationships between legislatures, the public service, the judiciary, and others (Stone & Ostrower, 2007). Yet school boards are not government per se. Other definitions of governance may be more appropriate. Graham, Amos, and Plumptre (2003) see governance as a decision-making process that strategically determines direction, engagement, and roles. Gill (2005) defines governance as the “exercise of authority, direction and control of an organization in order to ensure that its purpose is achieved” (p. 15).

The question of what stands as good governance in education is an ongoing interest of both Alberta Education—the government ministry responsible for the delivery of K-12 education—and the two largest school board associations in the province, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and the Public School Boards Association (PSBA). In 2008, the province of Alberta, through Alberta Education, began a thorough review of the *School Act* (R.S.A. 1980). The Act had last been revised in 1988. The 30-year-old legislation was identified as being unable to produce the kinds of educational outcomes the public was seeking from the school system. The Minister chose to pursue perhaps the largest public consultation ever undertaken in Alberta. More than 1,600 students, 7,000 parents with children in special education settings (e.g., gifted learners, persons with learning disabilities), and a further 3,400 stakeholders were involved between 2008 and 2009 (Alberta Education, 2010a). The collective public response “advocated for an informed transformation of Alberta's education system, one that challenges commonly held beliefs and leads to new structures and approaches” (p. 16). With the aim to articulate how an educated Albertan would describe themselves in 2030, three themes pertaining to educational outcomes emerged from the consultations: a Grade 12 graduate would be an engaged thinker, an ethical citizen, and have an entrepreneurial spirit.

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These large-scale public consultations generated evidence that stakeholders sought the transformation of education and that substantial change in the policy environment would be necessary. While the public consultation process did not address governance as part of its mandate, the Steering Committee appointed by the Minister to oversee the review did “reflect on the governance implications of what it heard from Albertans” (p. 33). The Steering Committee identified four shifts to align school board governance with the anticipated policy change. First, there would be less focus on the school, education would be less centred on the system, and there would be less focus on the content and less technology to support teaching. Second, there would be more focus on education, and education would be more centred on the learner. Third, education would be focused on building competencies, and fourth, there would be more use of technology to support the creation and sharing of knowledge. The planned policy shifts would be centred on seven principles (pp. 31-32):

- learner centred
- shared responsibility and accountability
- engaged communities
- inclusive, equitable access
- responsive, flexible approach
- sustainable and efficient use of resources
- innovation to promote and strive for excellence

The Steering Committee went further and expanded on how the practice of governance would need to change, moving from predominantly fiduciary and strategic domains of governance to include “generative governance” (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005). Other ideas presented included

- The importance of having governors “engage the whole community in ownership of the education system” (Alberta Education, 2010a, p. 34).
- Linking a broad range of stakeholders into a “governance team,” to guide education in the jurisdiction. The team would be comprised of the school board as well as parents, families, educators, municipalities, cultural groups, professional groups, nonprofit organizations, businesses, employer groups, post-secondary institutions, and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities (p. 35).
- Governors to include those “appointed, or recruited from the community” (p. 35).
- Coordination of community services with the education system.
- A “more public role” for governors aimed at deepening “everyone’s understanding of issues and trends to generate new ideas” (p. 35).

In effect, the Steering Committee was pressing for school boards to move from the governance models of the public sector (Stone & Ostrower, 2007) toward more of a “bridging governance” role as described by Graham et al. (2003) or policy development and implementation role as described by Gill (2005).

For approximately a year these ideas circulated within the education community. As trustees prepared themselves for an election on October 18, 2010, the Alberta School Boards Association initiated research to understand where school boards stood on the ideas being presented. This article is part of the research undertaken by ASBA.

## GOVERNANCE IN THE LITERATURE

Although he was describing the voluntary sector, Frumkin (2002) could have been describing school boards when he said it is the “contested area between the state and the market where public and private concerns meet and where individual and social efforts are united ... at once a visible and compelling force in society and an elusive mass of contradictions” (p. 1). An apparent contradiction was whom school boards were designed to serve. Frequently the expectations of citizens, government, and school boards were in opposition, especially as the provincial government controlled the budgets school boards have to work with. Boards struggled (and continue to do so) to find clarity regarding their primary obligation and accountability. Boards “operated for public benefit have the moral obligation to ‘effectively’ serve the interests of the larger community” (Williams, 2010, p. 298). What is meant by “effective” in the midst of compelling but contradictory demands upon an educational system, and especially the school board, has proven elusive. Nobbie and Brudney (2003) state that the effectiveness of board governance can be both measured and improved. There is, however, no consensus in the literature on the conceptualization of board effectiveness or how such a thing could be measured (Baruch & Ramalho, 2006; Herman & Renz, 1999).

The five governance ideas brought forward by the Steering Committee (Alberta Education, 2010a) and presented above point to an interest by the Government of Alberta in expanding more conventional ideas of school board governance to include exchanges with a broader set of social systems. These exchanges anticipate boundary spanning roles for school board trustees and the creation of new networks such as the “governance team” concept (p. 35). The governance team concept is a form of network governance, which is characterized by a move away from bureaucratic structures in organizations and contracts toward less formal social systems as a way of coordinating complex products and services in uncertain and competitive environments (Powell, 1990; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992; Snow, Miles, & Coleman, 1992). Network governance is a “distinct form of coordinating economic activity” (Powell, 1990, p. 301) within which there is a spectrum of relationships that constitute the systems for policy choice and action (Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2001). Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti (1997, p. 914) define network governance as a “select, persistent, and structured set of autonomous firms (as well as nonprofit agencies) engaged in creating products or services based on implicit and open-ended contracts to adapt to environmental contingencies and to coordinate and safeguard exchanges” (p. 914). These authors go further to identify four necessary conditions for network governance that mirror the conditions within which public education in Alberta is delivered:

- Demand uncertainty with stable supply;
- Customized exchanges high in human asset specificity;
- Complex tasks under time pressure; and
- Frequent exchanges among parties comprising the network.

The literature on school board governance demonstrates a long-standing concern with the shortcomings of how school boards go about governing. The complexity of governance in a broad sense, both in terms of what it is believed to be and the context in which it is carried out, is a common consideration. As noted already, in the literature, what is meant by “governance” is elusive. Governance can be defined as if it had much in common with management functions. For example, Cornforth (2003) set out the primary components of governance as systems and processes aimed at organizational direction, effectiveness, and accountability. Governance could also be defined in terms of an application of power. For example, Gill (2005) proposes that governance is the application of authority, direction, and control. When Chait, Ryan, and Taylor (2005) produced *Governance as Leadership*, they charted a different course for understanding and undertaking governance. They note that when boards ask “What *is* governing?” (p. 25, emphasis in original) responses have tended to “envision

governance as the sum of discrete goal-setting and oversight tasks” (p. 25) such as accountability, transparency, predictability, and participation (Gill, 2005). They suggest that these limited tasks and structures have left little open for boards to consider beyond the management functions of governors. Chait et al. propose that in addition to asking, “What is governing?” boards ask, “What is it we’re governing?” It is this additional question that opens a generative space in governance where engagement with the broader world is important and necessary.

Given what the Steering Committee was proposing, it is not surprising that the publication of *Inspiring Education* (April 2010) and shortly afterwards, *Inspiring Action on Education* (Alberta Education, 2010b) signalled that Alberta Education was adopting the approach to governance that Chait et al. suggested. The emphasis on a new kind of governance responsibility and role for school board trustees was viewed as a significant departure from the predominantly fiduciary role—understood as managerial and controlling—that school boards and trustees had fulfilled for the previous decades.

The choice made by Alberta Education to transform governance of school boards is the latest manifestation of the call to change how public education systems are governed. The literature calling for governance change within education systems began to grow in the 1970s with the identification of core issues that ring true today. Burgess (1977), for example, observed that “[i]n education ... democratic decision making has been discouraged by three major groups at the core of the system ... school administrators, teacher organizations, and school boards” (p. 43). In reviewing the literature to that point in time Burgess concluded, “The literature on school boards, teacher unions, and educational bureaucracies, however, indicates that free participation is not a right that is accepted by the educational establishment” (p. 51). Calls began for greater citizen involvement and engagement in and with school boards. For example, Stanwick (1975) identified 10 areas where citizens could have positive impact on school boards:

1. Identifying goals, priorities, and needs;
2. Setting budget priorities;
3. Selecting and evaluating principals;
4. Selecting and evaluating teachers;
5. Evaluating curricula;
6. Evaluating extracurricular programs;
7. Improving community support for schools;
8. Investigating student or parent problems or complaints;
9. Raising money for schools; and
10. Helping in schools as volunteers.

With little response by education systems to the growing calls for greatly expanding citizen engagement and involvement with school boards, demands for change became stronger. Coombs (1985) finds that “existing formal education systems everywhere [are] growing increasingly obsolete and maladjusted in relation to their rapidly changing societies ... [A]ll these systems require major changes and innovations” (p. 21). Some, such as Chubb and Moe (1990), advocated that school boards be eliminated altogether, and that school governance be conducted by individual schools and their patrons.

Other research has focused on the competency of trustees. Brehony and Deem (1995) observed that trustee knowledge “may be derived from many sources including school visits, recollections of school days, the media, political party policy, working in industry and commerce, the experience of bringing up children or living in a particular community” (p. 80). They concluded that while “knowledge can confer upon citizens the power to act

and administer ... we have also suggested that lay governors' knowledge of education may sometimes be insufficient to enable this to occur. As a consequence, many lay governors appear relatively powerless to reshape teaching and learning, though many are able to make a significant contribution towards the administration of the non-educational aspects of school life" (p. 97). As a result, trustees are found to be "exerting considerable influence over the administrative framework of schooling" (p. 95). Van Alfen and Schmidt (1997) examined rural boards and identified similar concerns. "[Rural] boards studied tended to micromanage their districts, generally ignoring the larger leadership function of building consensus and fostering a sense of community" (p. 14). They also found that even when boards were making an effort to govern in a broader sense than the fulfillment of strictly fiduciary responsibilities, school boards were "quickly crushed by the weight of administrative detail. ... Attention to the details of school governance is, of course, essential to board function, but when boards focus meetings and discussions almost exclusively upon budget and personnel, everyone else in the community focuses upon these issues as well. ... Vision blurs and leadership opportunities are lost" (p. 14). The trustee role was seen as administratively focused rather than focused on engaging citizens in the creation of educational opportunity within their district.

A turn in the literature is noted once we enter the 2000s. Research suggests that "community leadership" (Ofsted, 2003, p. 20) is a dimension of school board governance that is valuable and necessary. In the U.K., "Community leadership was the most important element of maintaining an effective education service. All of the LEAs [Local Education Authorities] judged as good were characterized by strong and efficient community leadership. ... The key to creating strong community leadership depends on collective and corporate commitments from all departments" (Ofsted, 2003, p. 20). Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin, and Smith (2005) found that "school governance in many respects remains significantly unrepresentative of some of its significant parent constituencies" (p. 357). Electoral structures are found to "take away incentives for board members to act in the interest of education" (Cabico & Harrison, 2009, p. 20). Further, as noted by Cabico and Harrison (2009), "Given the current school board structure, elections are probably not the best mechanism for choosing education policy leaders" (p. 20). Concerns about the administrative focus of school boards continue to occur. School boards are found to "lack the expertise, familiarity, and electoral mandate to act as intensive hands-on managers; they should be focusing on district-level policy and vision-setting, not intrusive micromanagement of superintendents and educators" (p. 20).

How boards establish interpretive frames that determine how and if they will entertain new information, including that coming from public delegations to the board, begins to appear in the literature only recently. Rusch (2005) reviewed several studies that found the entire structure of a school district, which would include the school board, administration, and staff, is a "major inhibitor of the dialogue or problem-solving required for system-level restructuring or cross-system organizational learning" (p. 87). Newton and Sackney (2005) found that school boards create a "tacit-collective" (p. 449) knowledge structure that determines how information coming to the board from the public will be received. When the board knows or believes that a delegation coming to board holds a different interpretation of facts, activities, or events than the board holds, then the tacit interpretation scheme of the board was "a powerful determinant of the types of new knowledge that the group would admit" (p. 450). Consequently, school boards tend to reject information or perspectives that do not fit within the tacit-collective knowledge structure of the board.

In summary, this overview demonstrates that concerns about school board governance have grown over the past 30 years. The areas of concern cluster in the following ways:

- definition of "governance"
- engagement and involvement of citizens in the broader education system

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- relationship between school boards, educational systems, and society
- singular focus of school boards on administrative tasks rather than educational leadership
- ways to ensure that trustees are knowledgeable about the educational system and the role of education in society
- ways to overcome procedural or knowledge structures that limit public input into school board governance.

Each of these areas is opened up for discussion in the Alberta ministry of education documents—*Inspiring Education* (2010a) and *Inspiring Action on Education* (2010b). These documents provide evidence that there is political leadership to create the foundation for changes in school board governance. This is significant for this research because even where there are indications of school board leadership, we must heed Ofsted's (2003) warning that "strong leadership by officers cannot compensate for poor political leadership" (p. 20).

### THEORY AND METHOD

The intent of the project was to gather the perceptions on governance practices through interviews with sitting school board chairs prior to the October 18, 2010, municipal elections. Using school board contact lists from the Alberta School Boards Association, we contacted all school board chairs to participate in the research. Out of 62 possible school board chairs, 43 were interviewed (69%). Two research questions guided the study:

1. How do chairs of school boards perceive the governance role of their board up to October 2010?
2. How do chairs of school boards anticipate the roles and responsibilities of their school board to change with the new legislation?

A qualitative grounded theory approach was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach is appropriate for this research because of its use of comparative analysis, which allows for insights into areas not well addressed in the literature. As well, grounded theory can reveal a common social issue that is not necessarily articulated by the group studied (Hutchinson, 1993). We conducted interviews between August 15 and October 8, 2010. The sample was divided between the two authors on a roughly equal basis (20 and 23 interviews). Consent was received from participants before booking and conducting the interview. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and shared with school board chairs prior to the interview. The interviews were not recorded; however, extensive note-taking took place for each interview. The two authors independently reviewed the interview results and used comparative analysis to identify conceptual categories. A common set of conceptual categories was developed for the full sample using "same or similar" categories occurring in each of the subsamples. Through comparative analysis, different contexts, causes, contingencies, consequences, co-variances, and conditions (Glaser, 1978) were compared and their differences built into theoretical propositions about the governance framework within which school boards operate. We term these theoretical propositions "dimensions of governance."

The dimensions of governance were then tested and refined by considering them with other comparison groups in the sample. This helped ensure that the dimensions "fit" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with the governance phenomena. The dimensions were also presented to four of the participating school board chairs to ensure that they worked to explain and predict what was being studied and that the emergent dimensions of governance were relevant to governance practices of school boards (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## EMERGENT DIMENSIONS OF GOVERNANCE

The following section describes the dimensions of governance arising from interviews with school board chairs. Taken together, the dimensions represent a governance domain within which school board governance is being transformed. These dimensions of governance provide insight into how school boards in Alberta are orienting themselves to the anticipated changes in governance as a result of the pending legislation.

### Dimension 1: Achieving role clarity

Across the interviews, a common theme was the role of school boards and of trustees. Two clusters emerged within the data: one group saw an opportunity to expand roles by engaging a broader community; a smaller group saw a threat that challenged existing roles and powers. The first group was optimistic that new kinds of relationships could be forged using the “governance team” idea proposed by the ministry, which could improve education in their jurisdiction. The second group was skeptical that the ministry would follow through on the legislation and a fear that if the ministry did follow through, long-standing powers and roles would be diminished, with negative effects on education. Across the entire sample, most chairs stated that their support of or opposition to the new direction being set by the ministry was contingent on clearly understanding what was changing and what was staying the same.

Within this governance dimension are a series of subcategories that express particular areas of concern and insight:

1. *Ambiguity about the role of the board and trustee.* Across the interviews, respondents were unable to label their role(s) as a board or as trustees. While clusters of activity that could be associated with a role were listed without hesitation (e.g., having oversight, setting budget, communicating), respondents almost without exception did not or could not generalize a role from these specific activities (e.g., board as manager or board as leader).
2. *Governance and management.* Many of the descriptions of the work of the board suggest a management versus a governance paradigm. Phrases such as “develop budgets,” “address busing concerns,” and “negotiate contracts” suggest, at best, a fiduciary focus.
3. *Clarity on the role of the chair.* The chair role was understood as a media contact, spokesperson, meeting manager, coach, leader, peacemaker, and facilitator. Some described the role of the board chair more specifically as one of running meetings, representing the board publicly, and signing legal agreements and cheques.
4. *Ambiguity about the role(s) of the public.* Most board chairs used “voters,” “community,” and “parents” somewhat interchangeably when speaking about the need to inform and respond to community needs. Perhaps the fact that 62% of the trustees were acclaimed negated their thoughts of voters as a distinct constituency. For the majority of chairs, their perceptions of the public, especially in multiple-ward systems, appear to be received by way of school councils (a parent-school body at every school in every jurisdiction in Alberta), with trustees believing that their attendance at these meetings was of prime importance. Board chairs also expressed frustration that the public was not truly aware of the role that school board trustees have no individual power. Power, they stated, rested in the “corporate board.”



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5. *Representation.* A common concern of chairs was that trustees should arrive at the board table prepared to represent and speak to education for the jurisdiction as a whole. Board chairs pointed to multiple allegiances of trustees, such as to a faith-based, cultural, or language community. Frequently chairs expressed frustration with trustees who ran and were elected or acclaimed on a single issue, such as terminating a principal, getting special programs approved, or stopping a school closure. Those chairs working within a multiple-ward system are more likely to experience trustees coming to a board with a narrow personal, geographic, or voter-initiated agenda. As one chair stated, “Trustees generally are ignorant of the complexity of the system ... they can’t be hands-on.” Chairs also expressed concern where the membership of the board did not represent the diversity of the jurisdiction, especially where Aboriginal people were concerned.
6. *Erosion of board powers.* It was common for respondents to believe that powers of boards are being bargained away by the government to the Alberta School Boards Association or to the Alberta Teachers’ Association. Specifically, many expressed concern that the government was bargaining directly with the teachers’ union, thereby further eroding the traditional powers of boards. Many chairs perceived that this particular loss of power was occurring because the provincial government “desires a stable labour environment for the next two years,” in the words of one chair.

Board chairs also expressed concern about the perceived continued erosion of board powers in the future and the suggestions in reports such as *Inspiring Education* and *Inspiring Action on Education* that boards, in their present form, may no longer exist. They cited the example of the lack of consultation in the government’s sudden “claw-back” of school authority reserves (financial reserves held to offset unforeseen changes in the budget such as an increase in heating costs), in an uneven fashion, as proof of the school board’s lack of power and inability to plan for the long term. Other examples cited were the belief that boards had no power regarding capital funding, the suggested appointment of trustees, and the use of language such as “governor” and “governance team,” all of which they felt spelled the end of school boards.

7. *Autonomy of school boards.* Board chairs viewed the suggestion in *Inspiring Education* of increased local autonomy positively, but with a certain degree of skepticism, noting that they have witnessed a trend toward increased centralization and accountability. The increased requirement to report to the ministry on a variety of programs and the increased use of “enveloped funding” were cited as examples of this trend. Many viewed the possibility of boards achieving “natural person powers” as a key to achieving autonomy. Board chairs were of the opinion that increased local autonomy would allow boards to respond better to their own local community needs, but also realized that this might add a degree of complexity to their decision-making roles.
8. *Relevance of school boards.* *Inspiring Education* uses terms such as “governors” and “governance teams” when describing school jurisdiction governance. This report also suggests that increased community input into decision-making could be accomplished through the appointment of trustees, particularly from under-represented groups. Several board chairs supported the notion of appointed members, provided that boards were selecting the appointee. They drew attention to the present practice where school jurisdictions that border First Nations communities have appointees that serve as trustees on the school board. They also cited the example of the audit committee of the board, which may have community appointees with particular expertise in financial matters, as an example of a governance team. These chairs were

of the opinion that the diversity of backgrounds would bring different voices to the table and would help to engage those constituents whose voice was not normally heard.

However, many board chairs viewed this language and the potential appointment of trustees by the government as the “thin edge of the wedge” or the first step in following a path toward centralization that they saw happen in governance in the Ministry of Health and Wellness. For some chairs there was a question about the relevance of the school board as an agent in the educational system. As one chair put it, “I think that school boards have seen their day.” Many expressed concern about the potential for “politicization” of school board governance through government appointments and wondered if this was not a further attempt by members of the legislature of Alberta to exert authority. Many worried that the view of board governance as partnership with government, as described in *Inspiring Education*, was going to be lost. For example, some perceived that government was setting up school boards to be a “buffer” between government and communities. The school board-as-buffer idea was seen as the way government would protect itself from negative public reaction to its own “inadequate planning.” Several board chairs from smaller jurisdictions with declining enrolments expressed concern that their division might be amalgamated with another to gain efficiencies, as has been done in the past.

## Dimension 2: Public engagement

School board chairs talked about the importance engaging the public in public education and yet frequently stated that the board was disengaged—that the public did not participate in board-led initiatives such as open school board meetings. Nearly every chair interviewed stated that the greatest challenge faced by school boards was how to engage the public in conversations about public education. Many were of the opinion that the community did not want to be involved. That there was often insufficient parent involvement to form a school council at a school was cited as evidence of public disengagement with public education. The chairs pointed to a growth of the “drop-off” society, with an increase in single-parent families or both parents working, and with parents seeing their only educational responsibility as getting their children to school. Many board chairs described community engagement in terms of the trustees attending school council meetings and school celebration events. Most were of the opinion that community engagement required a large-scale effort by the school board. Many board chairs were of the view that they did not have the time, capacity, or expertise within their school board to lead large-scale community engagement events. Only a few board chairs described community engagement as a strategic or generative mode of governance by the school board.

The majority of chairs defined community engagement as a priority but were skeptical as to the possibility that they could be successful in increasing public participation. One chair stated, “We are really responsible to the community except we don’t have any connections except on emotional issues such as school closures.” For example, board chairs pointed to limited success with “town hall” meetings in various communities because the participants who attended either over-represented the system itself (e.g., teachers) or were identified as “special interest” groups. Nearly all chairs indicating this as a concern talked about the need for special interest groups to take a broader perspective or to take into consideration the whole school system. The board’s role, they felt, was not to focus on what were seen to be “special interests” but to focus on the system as a whole. Board chairs frequently painted the picture of single-interest parents or communities taking over the agenda at public meetings or pursuing their special interest so vigorously that the board and/or administration chose to address the concern through legal means and terminate the public process. It was common for parents alone or collectively to be identified as being a special interest group. Many board chairs articulated a reluctance or complete refusal to work with or hear anyone identified by administration to be a special interest group. Many board chairs commented that they had been in a situation of facing a large group during a crisis situation or a

school closure meeting and felt that large-scale community gatherings frequently deteriorated to situations with members of the public challenging them personally or taking “potshots” at the board.

### Dimension 3: Optimism toward change

As board chairs considered the ministry’s evolving position and major documents (i.e., *Inspiring Education* and *Inspiring Action on Education*), there was a general, though not strong, optimism about where education was heading in the province. There were strong cautions about certain policy directions and ideas, including the makeup and governance of school boards. Specific subcategories of this governance dimension are as follows:

1. *Already there.* Most chairs felt that their boards were already operating at the high level of governance intended in *Inspiring Education* and *Inspiring Action on Education*. While they could not give specific examples of what “good governance” looked like—though most indicated such things as democratic process and good meeting management—chairs were confident that their current practices were at a high level. Invariably they portrayed their system as “advanced” in governance practices: placing students at the centre, reducing the number of policies, and suggesting that the separation of duties was accomplished by having only one employee—the superintendent. Most spoke of governance not in terms of practice, but in terms of structure. Chairs commonly stated that they were a “Carver board” (i.e., a policy-governance board), a policy-driven board, or that they used the ASBA policy model. Responses regarding the number of wards or the appointment of trustees also suggested a structural bias. When probed as to how these structures affected governance practices, they reverted to descriptors of activities that the board participated in. Those who felt that some change would be needed suggested that all that was required were minor improvements to their current board practices.
2. *Dramatic change.* A minority of chairs expressed their belief that *Inspiring Education* and *Inspiring Action on Education* signalled the need for transformational change. One chair stated: “Generative governance is how things should be. Over the years many boards eroded to undemocratic, disengaged groups.” All chairs in this minority group suggested that present school board governance practices would no longer meet the needs of twenty-first-century learners. They pointed to the skills of problem solving, creative thinking, and conflict resolution that trustees would need to develop, since a more autonomous jurisdiction would bring increased complexity to the board. They saw the possibility of creative ways of organizing to engage their publics and increased creativity through collaboration. They indicated that boards should be leaders in this change, rather than waiting for government to develop the blueprint. These chairs spoke with passion and excitement about future possibilities that change would bring for their jurisdiction. Chairs in this group appeared to have a very good understanding of the vision described in *Inspiring Education*, and many had participated in the community dialogues or online engagement offered by the ministry, ASBA, or the Public School Board Association of Alberta (PSBAA), for example.
3. *Preservation of core values/beliefs.* Many chairs described board culture in terms of the values and beliefs that were at the core of their jurisdiction and its communities. Some recalled the challenges of change in the early 1990s, when some jurisdictions were amalgamated or regionalized, and the long-lasting effects of attempting to merge two or more cultures. Those recalling these challenges indicated that such a cultural change was a difficult and on occasion unsuccessful process. Some chairs of jurisdictions that remained unchanged during that period in the 1990s spoke to the importance of the legacy and responsibility of belonging to a culture that was established close to

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100 years ago. Chairs stated that caution should be exercised during times of change to preserve religious, cultural, and language rights. Some indicated that chairs would have to be active in ensuring that good works done by their boards would be preserved through the forthcoming period of change. Chairs also discussed the increased importance of keeping all trustees engaged in democratic board processes.

4. *Chairs as champions.* In the sample, chairs tended to have been serving on their school board longer than the average trustee. Although many chairs expressed confidence that they were prepared to lead through a period of change, others suggested that moving forward, chairs would require an increased skill set, including enhanced leadership and facilitation skills. One chair commented, "The chair provides leadership to the board, but it's not always clear what that is." Many suggested that the difficulty would be to encourage fellow trustees to embrace change.
5. *Uncertainty, doubt, skepticism.* Many chairs expressed doubt about whether the *Inspiring Education* initiative would result in anything more than the report. They cited examples of previous reports in health and other ministries that were never acted upon or the fact that not all of the recommendations of the 2004 Alberta Commission on Learning were implemented. They also drew attention to the fact that there have been four different education ministers in the past six years, each with an agenda for education and learning that was never fully implemented. The majority of chairs suggested that there was no clear direction for the transformation of the education system, with *Inspiring Education* at the "big picture" or visionary level and *Inspiring Action on Education* at the operational or tactical level. They also suggested that the draft *Education Act* document was more of a framework than a call to action. The majority of chairs had adopted the wait-and-see position as to whether this minister would continue as minister and the new Act and its regulations would be passed.

### Dimension 4: Understanding governance

Nearly all chairs interviewed talked about governance as if it were an administrative task. Chairs that identified boards as having superior governance practices proceeded to describe a set of administrative tasks performed in a largely routine and predictable fashion. For example, common responses representing good governance by school boards included reporting to the ministry, monitoring the budget, setting the budget, and implementing policy. At best this set of tasks would fall within the fiduciary domain of governance, however, how these activities were described suggested that the higher-level consideration associated with governance was largely lacking. For example, reviewing budgets and implementing policy are the tasks of administration, whereas monitoring budget performance and monitoring policy effectiveness are governance responsibilities. The chairs talked about technical processes, incremental decision-making, and board practices that seemed focused on detecting errors and correcting them. This governance dimension includes two specific subcategories:

1. *Administrative bias.* Across the interviews chairs most often described governance in terms of tasks and activities such as setting the budget, reviewing the three-year plan, attending school council meetings, or addressing transportation issues. Many chairs shared their frustration of attempting to move the conversation and tasks to a higher level, only to be thwarted by trustees who focused on "micromanaging" the system and its people. One chair reflected, "Trustees often arrive with management knowledge and feel frustrated when they cannot manage the system." Chairs sometimes identified the superintendent and senior leadership team as encouraging boards to focus on management concerns, since it was frequently administration that constructed the

board agenda. For example, some chairs stated that the agendas for board and committee of the whole meetings were most often focused, sometimes exclusively, on day-to-day management issues. One chair commented, “The three-year plan is not a board plan; it is a superintendent plan.” Chairs shared their frustration at long agendas and long meetings and how “busy” the role of the trustee has become. Chairs were unanimous in their belief that students needed to be placed at the centre of the system, but only two could cite examples where they engaged students to help the board set direction.

2. *Absence of a governance mindset.* The majority of chairs used language that would, at best, describe governance as oversight of the system, largely focused on the fiduciary responsibilities of trustees. A few chairs focused on language of long-term strategic planning. Most, however, did not view their jurisdiction’s three-year plan as the board’s strategic plan. The language used by the ministry, such as “setting direction through key system performance indicators” or “establishing over-arching principles,” was seldom used by chairs in the interviews. Some chairs pointed to the government focus on accountability as “pushing” boards into more of a fiduciary role. Chairs were aware that they needed to increase board governance capacity and suggested that they needed to increase engagement with their communities and to learn more about generative governance.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Our proposed dimensions of governance (achieving role clarity, public engagement, optimism toward change, and understanding governance) define the space within which the transformation of school board governance is taking place in Alberta. The transformation of education and education governance specifically as expected by the ministry of education and the thousands of Albertans who were engaged in defining the necessary kinds of educational transformation is unprecedented in magnitude. The roles of the trustee, the school board, a wide range of community stakeholders, and government will need to change and the relationships between them be renegotiated.

In considering the relationships between the domains of governance, we propose a fifth dimension of governance: boundary spanning. The trustee and school board will have to develop the capacity—already in evidence by the actions of some school boards—to become active boundary spanners (Seel, 2007). The tension in appearing to widely engage stakeholders while creating structures (e.g., three minutes to present a concern in front of one particular school board) or processes (e.g., not allowing “special interest” groups to engage the board) reflects one side of boundary spanning. Another aspect of boundary spanning is the movement of school boards from an administrative space to a governance space that allows trustees to realize public engagement as a major component of the trustee role.

This research highlights the significance of understanding boundaries to the governors engaged in the transformation process, independent of whether or not they support or oppose the changes being brought about by the ministry. The questions regarding the kind of “order” that will exist during and after the governance transformation recalls Wuthnow’s (1987, p. 69) statement that “[o]rder has somehow to do with boundaries. That is, order consists mainly of being able to make distinctions—of having symbolic demarcations—so that we know the place of things and how they relate to one another.” Symbolic boundaries are the demarcations that include, define, and provide identity for some while excluding others (Epstein, 1992). Symbolic boundaries create distinctions that “enforce, maintain, normalize, or rationalize” social boundaries, which in turn objectify “social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (Lamont & Monlár, 2002, p. 168). When school boards, therefore, state that they need to engage the public while acting to segregate that public into preferred (e.g., those passively accepting of what

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the board proposes) and not preferred groups (e.g., those that challenge the board's tacit-collective knowledge structure in some way [Newton & Sackney, 2005]), they give evidence of:

- how embedded symbolic boundaries are in the structures (e.g., the space where the board holds its meetings, which places the public at a distance and often below the trustees) and/or processes (e.g., the minimal time given to the public to address the school board);
- the asymmetric power relationship between the board (which is seen to wield the power in an educational jurisdiction) and the public (which because of established processes and structures is powerless); and
- the enormity of the task to effect a change of culture within the school board and jurisdiction.

With this evidence, the question of how a school board could approach crossing established boundaries becomes more specific. The main lines of transformative activity that school boards need to engage in see to be the following: making symbolic boundaries and related processes more permeable; addressing the power imbalance; and changing organizational culture. Adopting a different approach to governance that would encourage transformative activity would support the changes. One possibility is offered by Ringeling (2005), who distinguishes four "governance models" (p. 193). Each of the four models describes a point along a continuum of governance experiences that were commented on by the school board chairs in this research:

1. *Command and control*. The governing body defines the problems and solutions and uses "direct regulation as the main instrument" (p. 193). Other stakeholders comply with the standards set. At this end of the continuum, the instruments of governance (e.g., policy, regulations, administrative structure) are the most normative.
2. *Governance along main policy lines*. The governing body "designs only the main lines of the policy, giving other actors the opportunity to specify the policy" (pp. 193-194). This approach is characterized by governors that set "framework laws and obligatory goals" (p. 194).
3. *Selective governance*. The governing body "intervenes only in certain crucial matters" that can change a course of events (p. 194).
4. *Facilitating governance*. The governing body addresses the question of "how to enable the self-governance capacities of other actors" (p. 194). The need to understand the problems facing stakeholders, their capacity to engage, and barriers that have to be addressed, for example, becomes a primary activity of the governing body. This end of the continuum is least normative, with openness to alternative perspectives being part of the governance culture.

Ringeling's continuum speaks both to the school board's boundary spanning activities with their public stakeholders and to the ministry's boundary spanning activities with school boards. The degree to which there is greater symmetry in terms of power, the more the relationship will have characteristics of facilitating governance (Ringeling, 2005) or generative governance (Chait et al., 2005).

## CONCLUSION

This research drew on the perceptions of chairs of school boards who could reflect on the governance culture of their boards in the past and who could anticipate what effects the new legislative context would have into the

future. The five theoretical categories developed establish a “governance domain” for school boards. Little in terms of the concerns with school board governance has changed since the 1970s. By introducing legislation that compels governance reform across all 62 school boards in the province of Alberta, the Minister of Education is taking a bold step to ensure broader stakeholder engagement in public education that is deeply unsettling for the majority of school boards. As school boards work to meet the required changes, they will have to address the symbolic boundaries that define the current governance culture. This difficult work could result in improved relations as the trustees, government officials, and other stakeholders learn to span boundaries rather than defend them.

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