



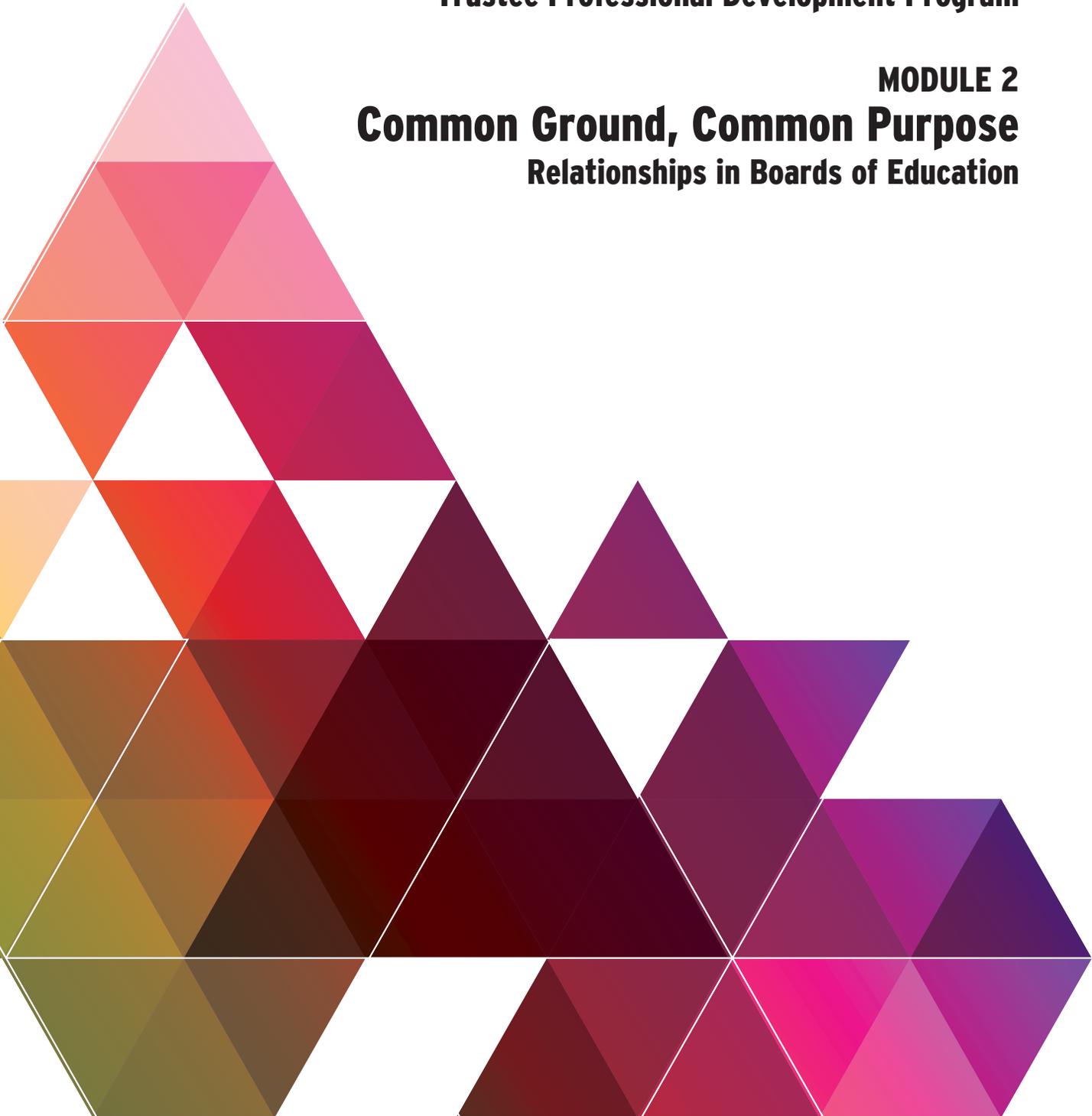
British Columbia  
School Trustees  
Association

# **GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR BOARDS OF EDUCATION**

**Trustee Professional Development Program**

**MODULE 2**

## **Common Ground, Common Purpose** **Relationships in Boards of Education**



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## MODULE 1

### Common Ground, Common Purpose Relationships in Boards of Education

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#### IN THIS MODULE, TRUSTEES WILL EXPLORE:

- Key relationships in the world of Boards of Education
  - Among members of the Board
  - With the Superintendent
  - With the Board Chair
  - With the Board's constituents
- Winning dynamics in relationships
- Building a successful Board team
- Board and Superintendent - an effective leadership team

#### DESIRED OUTCOMES ARE:

- Strengthen collegiality and working relationships among Board members
- Strengthen collegiality and working relationships between the Board and the Superintendent
- Clarify relationship between trustees and the Board Chair
- Clarify expectations in the relationship between the Chair and the Superintendent

"In organizations that have a live conversation about ethics and values, people hold each other responsible and accountable about whether they are really living the values...to bring such a conversation to life means that people must have knowledge of alternatives, must choose every day to stay with the organization and its purpose because it is important and inspires them. Making a strong commitment to bringing this conversation to life is essential to do if one is to lead ethically."<sup>11</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Boards of Education have already done a great deal of work in establishing character attributes or values that describe to the world what makes their schools unique. These are a vital starting point in working out the relationships that are the underpinning of effective Board governance. The following values are representative of those adopted by many Boards of Education: citizenship, cooperation, courage, empathy, fairness, honesty, humility, inclusiveness, initiative, integrity, kindness, optimism, perseverance, resilience, respect and responsibility.

Boards of Education may also enshrine values that guide ethical behavior and norms for relationships among Board members.

Effective organizations are built on strong trusting relationships that incorporate these values.

BC School Trustees Association is the oldest trustee association in Canada (1905). Generations of community-minded citizens have made decisions on behalf of local publicly-funded schools, building the foundation of the system we have today.<sup>2</sup>

## KNOW YOURSELF

As an individual, every trustee brings to their work qualities, talents, and characteristics that will enable them to fulfill the responsibilities they undertook when they were elected to office. In taking on this leadership role in public education, trustees commit themselves to a path of continuous learning and skills acquisition so that they can contribute effectively and creatively to governing a school system that delivers high levels of student achievement. In the process, they have the reward of doing enriching, personally rewarding work in a climate where their contribution is valued.

Making an effective contribution in Board of Education governance requires “a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions.” It means acting with integrity using the lens of your true feelings, values, and commitments and expressing yourself with courage and consideration for the ideas and feelings of others. It means operating from an “abundance mentality” where there is room for everyone to achieve gains.<sup>3</sup> A vital starting point involves examining your beliefs, values, strengths and limitations so that you are very clear who you are in this role and what you stand for. This examination also involves being clear about the strengths you have to draw on and being aware of the skills you need to hone.

To become a trustee required running for election and gaining the support of your constituents for the values you represent and the issues you consider vital to a successful publicly funded education system. The convictions you articulate are what make people choose you as a leader.

In preparing yourself to be a member of a Board of Education, the common ground you share with your constituents strengthens your capacity to take your community’s issues forward to the larger Board and authentically represent them.

## NO “I” IN TEAM, NO “I” IN BOARD

“The best Boards work together as a team, capitalizing on the strengths that each member brings to the table and demanding full engagement by everyone....Board members function most effectively together when they understand what each can contribute and they challenge each other to bring their best. This requires mutual respect and trust. And this takes time. It also involves clarifying the expectations that Board members have of each other and correcting each other when those expectations are breached.”<sup>4</sup>

An elected Board is a collectivity of individual members who can only be effective when they are working together as a cohesive whole. The personality, values, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses of each individual influence how the Board works.

Even if the school trustee election results in a change of only one member from the previous Board, there is still a whole new Board because every individual matters in the dynamics and balance of strengths of the Board.

Just as it is important for the individual trustee to be clear about his or her own values, strengths and limitations, it is equally vital to the effectiveness of the Board for the members to understand these characteristics in each other. This requires real conversations about ethics and values through which each member of the Board demonstrates who they are and “where they are coming from”. It then becomes possible to build a collective Board where there is strong mutual understanding and shared values. This is what enables effective decision-making that works for the whole Board and for the entire school system.

In the heat of debate around a difficult or controversial decision, the path to agreement is much smoother if everyone around the table understands the values that drive their colleagues, has direct

experience of the integrity of their voice, and knows where they are coming from. An effective Board of Education invests time and commitment in building a team. Trustees bring their personal convictions to every discussion. This dynamic is essential in an environment where the legal decision-making authority resides with the group; contributing to the achievement of a common decision through mutually respectful discussion is how the individual demonstrates effective and ethical leadership.

Taking the knowledge gleaned from a personal review of strengths, limitations and values and sharing this in a full-group session with fellow Board members builds the capacity to work effectively as a group. The synergy of bringing differing perspectives, insights and opinions together can create solutions that are deeper and richer and, most importantly, owned by everyone. The outcome is a team of trustees who are members of the Board, not members at the Board.

The Board as a whole has to take responsibility to resolve potentially dysfunctional situations and strive to build dynamics that demonstrate:

- A commitment to collaborative decision-making
- A commitment to doing the homework and sharing responsibility
- A commitment to contributing to public meetings in a way that earns public confidence in the work of the Board
- A commitment to put the good of the school system before individual political agendas
- A commitment to focus at least as much on assessing the value of initiatives as in controlling costs
- A commitment to be open-minded to the views of fellow Board members

It has to be acknowledged as well that there are Board members who exhibit counter-productive approaches and may not realize they are creating difficulties for the Board as a whole. The first recourse of a leader (and every Board of Education member is a leader) is to take a charitable understanding of the other person's motivations. Wherever possible a colleague-to-colleague approach is desirable. A private conversation that focuses less on the problem, and more on the areas of strength and expertise that the Board member could be contributing can be helpful. Taking opportunities to ask the Board member for their opinions in situations where they can shine is another positive response. It is always productive to listen actively and sincerely. It is never productive to characterize the issue in personal terms. If dysfunctional behavior persists to the detriment of the effectiveness of the Board, the final resort is to the Board's Code of Conduct or similar policy statement.

But first a word in favour of dissidence. While someone who is persistently dissident can be destructive to the effective functioning of the Board, dissidence itself can actually be very productive and has its place in Board dynamics. Dissenting views provoke everyone involved to greater clarity about the positions they are advancing. Dissidents can make sure that the debate, and the information provided as a context for the debate, is comprehensive and well-thought-out. Their dissent may create an opportunity for "sober second thought" or give an opportunity for those who shared the dissent but were reluctant to voice it to speak up. It can deter the negative effects of "group think" and stem the tendency to yield to consensus at the cost of considering alternative and ultimately better courses of action. Finally, dissenters can, by their very dissent, crystallize the alignment of support for the opposing view. To public onlookers, they make it clear that the discussions at the Board table are democratic.

For many of the examples given above, a common feature is that no one is "shut down". It is important for the credibility of the elected Board and for the quality of the decisions that are made, that value is placed on having mechanisms of dissent. Every trustee, regardless of the minority position of the view, or the apparent negative motivation for voicing it, is entitled to take a diverging position.

*Character also means putting the greater good of the organization and society ahead of self-interest. It's about worrying about "what is right" rather than "who is right."*

*- NOEL TICHY AND WARREN BENNIS*

## CODE OF CONDUCT

Some Boards of Education choose to establish trustee codes of conduct. Trustee codes of conduct are not required under the *BC School Act*. A Code of Conduct serves to define acceptable behaviours, clarify the rules of civil engagement, promote high standards of practice, and provide a framework for professional conduct and responsibilities. This would be incorporated in Board policy. Codes of Conduct should reflect the principles that many Boards of Education already incorporate in their expectations of trustee conduct or ethics. These generally cover such issues as:

### **Integrity:**

- All decisions will be based on putting students first.
- Trustees will carry out their responsibilities in accordance with the *School Act*, regulations and Board policy.
- Trustees will make all decisions based on available facts and their independent judgment, and shall refuse to surrender that judgment to individuals or to special interest groups.
- Trustees will act with the highest standards of professional integrity and in a manner that inspires public confidence in the Board.

### **Respect:**

- While trustees will express their individual opinions on issues under consideration by the Board, in doing so they will respect the differing points of view of colleagues, staff and the public and thereby enhance public confidence in the work of the Board.
- Trustees will carefully review all information packages in preparation for discussion at all scheduled meetings of the Board of Education and its committees.

### **Confidentiality:**

- Trustees will maintain confidentiality of privileged information; including information discussed in closed sessions.

### **Responsibility**

- Once the Board of Education has voted, trustees are bound by the majority decision and will publicly uphold the Board's decisions.
- Trustees will recognize that the expenditure of Board of Education funds is a public trust and will ensure effective stewardship of the Board's resources in the best interests of the students.

### **Conflict of Interest**

- Trustees will voluntarily and immediately declare any pecuniary conflict of interest (direct, indirect or deemed) in matters before the Board or a committee of the Board.

## Relationships

- Trustees will speak as the voice of their entire community (including people who do not have children in the school system or people outside of their direct constituency) at the Board table.
- Trustees will work with other trustees in a spirit of respect, openness, courtesy, and cooperation in spite of differences of opinion that may arise during debate. Trustees will refrain from gossip.
- Trustees will refrain from any negative commentary (public or private) about the Superintendent or other members of district staff. Board.

## THE ESSENTIAL PARTNERSHIP – BOARD AND SUPERINTENDENT

The Board and the Superintendent of Schools are partners together in leading a school system that is the heart of the community, and it is critical that they have a positive, productive, mutually-supportive working relationship. This relationship unites the wisdom of the electorate with the expertise and advice of trained professionals.

The foundation of a positive working relationship between the Board and the Superintendent is clarity on roles and responsibilities. The engine that drives the relationship from that point is open, direct, two-way communication based on mutual trust. The Board and the Superintendent need to have a mutual agreement about how they communicate with each other. How will the Superintendent report to the Board and convey information to the Board and individual Board members? How will the Board request reports and direct the flow of information it wishes to have? The answers to these questions must be determined by the entire Board and the Superintendent and ideally become a matter of policy.

As education partners who have worked together on the Board's vision, mission and strategic plan, the members of the Board and the Superintendent have laid the groundwork for moving forward in the same direction and have built the capacity to inspire the confidence of the community that the education of the community's children is in good hands. It is essential, therefore, that they speak with one voice and rely on one spokesperson to convey their key messages to the public.

### Relationship between Board Members and Senior Staff

The other non-voting members of the school district governing team are the Superintendent, Secretary Treasurer and sometimes Directors and the executive assistant. Trustees need to remember that no one trustee, not even the Chair, has the authority to direct the Superintendent or other staff. The Superintendent reports to the whole Board.

Under the *School Act*, both the Superintendent and secretary treasurer report to the Board, and either or both may be required to report to the Minister at the Minister's request. In addition, at the district level, senior education administrators must maintain the respect and loyalty of the other district staff, yet follow policy directions mandated by the Board of Education, as well as the Ministry of Education.

### Superintendent

The most critical and strategic relationship in a district is between the Board and the Superintendent of Schools - the senior administrative officer of the district.

The Superintendent is the person responsible and accountable for standards of conduct and achievement in a district. He or she serves as the senior education officer and the executive administrator who in most cases oversees all staff and is responsible for the implementation of curricula and programs.

The Superintendent is the senior policy and program advisor to the Board and is central to all planning and the effective implementation of the Board's mandate, policies and operational decisions. The Superintendent and Secretary Treasurer are the Board's two corporate executive officers and, as a team,

guide implementation of all the decisions of the Board through the education and business services of the district. If the district has a unitary structure, the Superintendent serves as the chief executive officer who is ultimately responsible for the whole organization and supervision of all staff.

The Superintendent is key to establishing relationships with members of the school community and the general public through public relations, advocacy and modelling a high standard of community service. This requires extensive training, experience and the professionalism of an effective educational leader. The *School Act* requires that a Superintendent of schools be a certified teacher. Boards of Education should maintain a current comprehensive and clear job description for this key position.

Assignment of duties to Board staff flow through the Superintendent. Boards may, however, have practices that provide for direct communications between Board members and senior staff. In these cases, it is important to have a policy and/or clearly understood lines of communication that guide these interactions. The Superintendent has a whole system overview and needs to be kept informed of such communications. In an environment of often scarce resources, this allows for determining who is the best source for any information required or, indeed, whether the information has already been prepared and is available. The time and effectiveness of staff to complete their assigned duties must be considered at all times. It ensures the information is offered in a fully-rounded Board perspective and also allows for sharing the information with the Board of Education as a whole where this is useful and relevant.

### **Secretary-Treasurer**

The Secretary Treasurer is the statutory corporate financial officer of the Board of Education, responsible to the Board and the Ministry of Education for financial statements, corporate records, minutes and procedural documents of the district.

The *School Act* requires the Secretary Treasurer to preside over the official records of the district, including Board minutes, all legal documentation and the budget. As such, the Secretary Treasurer can be requested to report directly to the Minister of Education.

In most districts, the Secretary Treasurer is also the chief business official, and heads the district's business division, which is responsible for finance, facilities and support services.

The Secretary Treasurer attends all Board meetings and officially endorses all corporate minutes, documents and financial transactions.

In some districts, the Secretary Treasurer and the Superintendent serve as a team of equal executive officers, both reporting to the Board with a clear division of responsibilities. However, in most school districts, the Secretary Treasurer reports to the Superintendent except on matters relating to the role as corporate financial officer. Regardless of the structure approved by the Board, clarity of role and responsibility is essential.

In most districts, the Secretary Treasurer, Superintendent and Board work together closely to prepare agendas, schedule meetings and ensure that the Board and its administrative staff execute their responsibilities effectively. For this team process to work well, trustees must ensure that clear, open communication prevails, and that there is a cooperative working relationship.

## THE BOARD CHAIR

The role of the Board chair is critical both in ensuring effective meeting processes and in setting the tone of the Board.

Trustees elect the Board Chair. Sometimes the Chair remains in office throughout the Board's term while in other cases Boards elect a new Chair annually.

The Chair presides over the Board's deliberations, enforces appropriate procedures and parliamentary processes, and often acts as the spokesperson for the Board. The Board Chair is an equal, with no more power or authority than any other trustee. However, the Chair does have an additional function and responsibility to speak for and represent the positions and decisions of the Board. Thus the Board Chair may represent the Board at events, hearings and meetings with representatives from other governing bodies and organizations. Here again, the Chair's role is limited to speaking only for what the Board has already decided, to receive input and to bring matters back to the Board for consideration.

The scope of the role as a spokesperson for the Board varies from district to district. Check your Board's policy for detailed information.

### Chair and Superintendent

These two leaders will need to communicate frequently to discuss many matters including:

- Items to be placed on the Board agenda, the order or sequence of agenda items and what Board action is recommended for each item;
- What role the Superintendent (as well as the Secretary-Treasurer or other senior staff) will play at Board meetings and how union representatives outside consultants may participate in Board meetings;
- How to handle emergency situations that might arise;
- Dealings with the news media and the role of the Chair as spokesperson for the Board.

### Chair and Members of the Board

There is a strong collegial relationship between the Chair and the members of the Board. In electing a fellow trustee to this leadership position, they are placing confidence in the Chair to facilitate the Board in its work. They expect that the Chair will:

- ensure that they have the information needed for informed discussion of the agenda items;
- share with them in a timely way relevant information that comes to the Chair's office on emerging issues that affect schools and the community;
- collaborate with colleague Board members around the role of Board spokesperson (e.g. issues where particular Board members have specific expertise);
- set a tone for Board meetings that stimulates respect and focused discussion on the issues;
- ensure that meetings are run effectively and that all voices are heard;
- be impartial in handling the business of the Board and in professional relationships with all trustees;
- maintain the confidence of all colleague trustees;
- provide leadership in the professional development of Board members and ensure regular review of the effectiveness of the collective Board;
- provide leadership in fostering positive relationships between the Board and the Superintendent and senior staff, where appropriate.

## **THE BOARD AND ITS CONSTITUENTS**

### **What Communities Should Expect**

A key responsibility of the Board of Education is to represent the public's voice in publicly-funded education and incorporate the community's vision in the Board's goals for student achievement. This relationship requires effective, transparent and accessible mechanisms for involving community members in advising the Board as it makes policies and develops strategic plans.

Full Board meetings must be held in public unless the Board decides that it is in the public's interest to hold a private session (closed or in-camera meeting). The Board of Education can achieve the collective aim of promoting public understanding of and confidence in the school system by encouraging attendance at Board meetings and highlighting the issues that will be under discussion. They can be proactive in letting the community know by a variety of communication means, including websites, if something particularly important or controversial is coming up. They can make background information available to the public, and where appropriate, hold public information meetings. When the elected Board proves itself to be a credible source for information about difficult issues, the public are more likely to listen when the Board wants to share its good news.

Beyond the public interactions available through Board meetings, the Board can build more sustained relationships with the community through inviting their membership on school councils, parent involvement committees and encouraging dialogue through formal liaison and advisory groups.

In their relationship and in their communications with the public, the Board should always strive to be:

- honest and forthright
- clear
- calm and respectful
- alert
- prepared
- proactive

All Board constituents need and have a right to know about what children are learning and how well they are learning. They also have a right to know how their tax dollars are being spent and a right to participate in discussions on the allocation of education resources in their community.

### **What Boards Should Know About Their Communities**

Individual Board members may be very knowledgeable about the profile of their particular community. However, to be effective as a contributing decision-maker at the Board table, it is important to have a broad perspective on the issues that affect the entire public within the collective Board's jurisdiction, such as demographic information, knowledge of issues affecting the local economy, or the views of employers about what students need to know. This information has a bearing on the development of policies and the creation of multi-year strategic plans. It is important in helping the Board to reach out to its public and to establish authentic relationships with its communities.

## A RELATIONSHIPS CHECKLIST

- ✓ Do we have clarity about the roles and responsibilities of all parties?
- ✓ Are our policies up to date and included in orientation materials for new trustees?
- ✓ Are we getting complaints from members of various stakeholder groups, or are there any patterns in the complaints that we should be paying attention to (e.g. increasing in numbers, disproportionately relating to one issue or area, etc.)?
- ✓ How is our group process in the Board meeting? Is everyone being heard and have we done an annual self-assessment that includes a focus on group dynamics?
- ✓ Is conflict constructive and are dissenting voices heard with respect?

## NOTES

1. R. Edward Freeman, Lisa Stewart: Developing Ethical Leadership
2. James B. London, Public Education Public Pride, 2005
3. Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People
4. Jim Brown, The Imperfect Board Member

BCSTA would like to thank the Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA) for sharing their Trustee Professional Development materials and for allowing us to adapt the materials to the context of British Columbia.

