

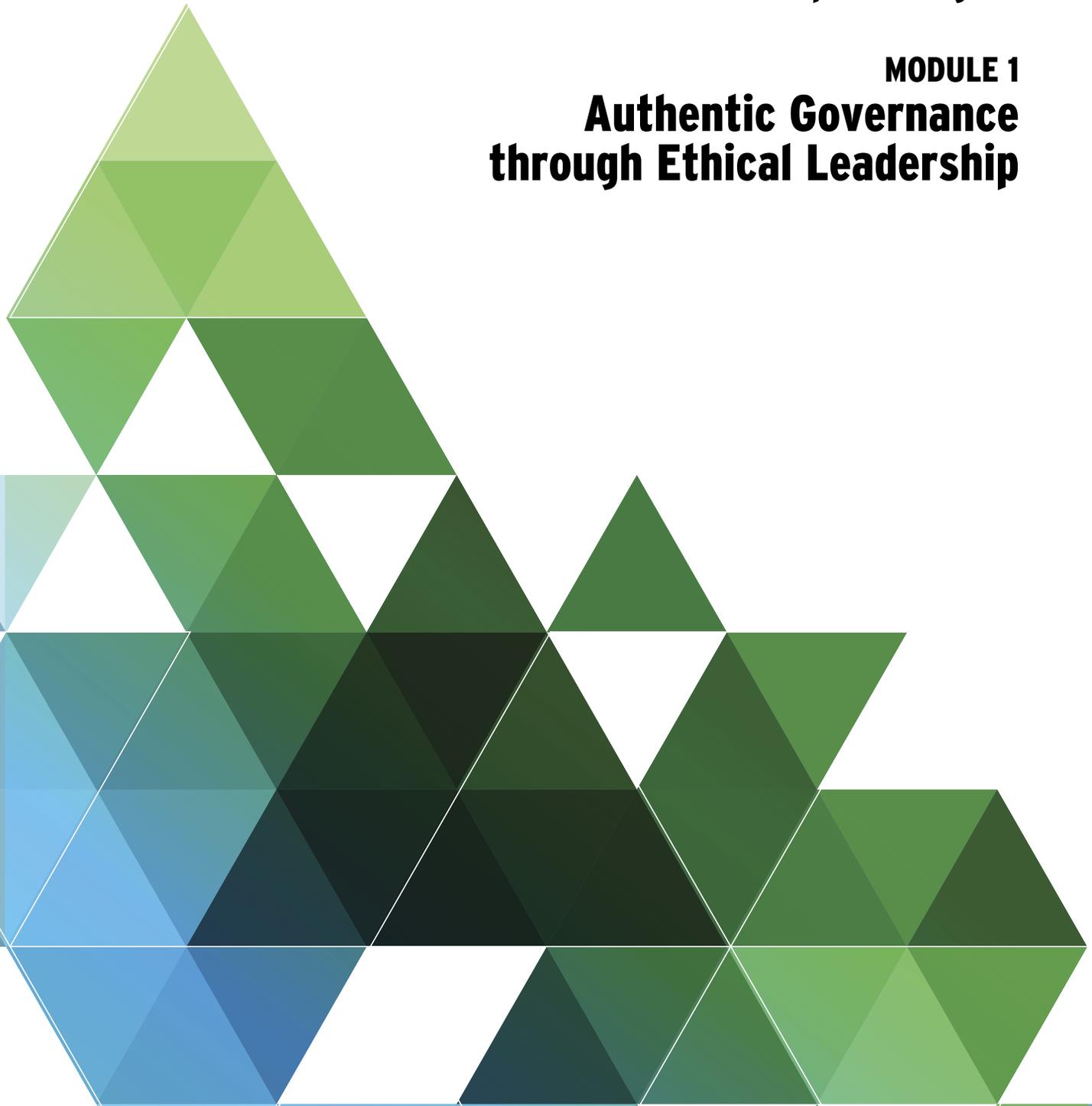


British Columbia  
School Trustees  
Association

# **GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR BOARDS OF EDUCATION**

**Trustee Professional Development Program**

## **MODULE 1 Authentic Governance through Ethical Leadership**



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## MODULE 1

### Authentic Governance through Ethical Leadership

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

- The components of ethical leadership
- The multiple facets of their role as leaders
- Key concepts of Board of Education governance

#### DESIRED OUTCOMES ARE:

- Clarity on the moral purpose of education: student achievement and well-being
- Stronger understanding of governance as a collective leadership act
- Stronger understanding of one's role as a trustee who represents a constituency and who is a member of the Board of Education
- Stronger understanding of the responsibilities and dynamics of governance within a context of multiple and competing demands
- Stronger understanding of the capacity of a Board of Education to be a force for promotion of public education

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>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Boards of Education have a long, effective and successful history. Taking up the office of Board of Education trustee is a call, not only to carry on that tradition of local democracy, but to improve it. It is an opportunity to leave a legacy that contributes to one of the strongest education systems in the world.

The education system is the cornerstone of a democratic society. The reason Boards of Education exist is to strengthen this cornerstone, to make sure that it is safeguarded and improved.

Setting the conditions that will provide a high quality education for every student to succeed in school and in life is the absolute first priority of a school trustee. Trustees work effectively as members of a team to support the higher moral purpose of the Board of Education. This is forged by the team together and is grounded in the mission of publicly-funded education. This mission, variously expressed by individual Boards of Education, connects to the following goals:

- Increasing levels of student achievement
- Reducing gaps in student achievement
- Promoting public confidence in public education

In his book *All Systems Go*, Michael Fullan describes the moral purpose of education as a belief that every child can learn, and a commitment to having high expectations so that we will raise the bar and close the achievement gap for all children and youth, enabling them to thrive in a complex and interdependent global society: “Moral purpose and high standards are not something stated up front as a general wish. Moral purpose is powerful when it is embedded in all strategies and actions... in a way that automatically and relentlessly reminds people every day that education reform is a matter of moral purpose of utmost importance to us individually and collectively.”

Steve Munby, CEO of National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services in the United Kingdom in an interview about leadership in the public sector put it this way: “In the public sector, it's not just about producing a great product. It's about changing and transforming the lives of children and young people and their families. And that's why every great public sector leader I know gets up in the morning and goes to work.”<sup>2</sup>

This goes to the heart of authentic governance through ethical leadership.

Let us first examine what we mean by Ethical Leadership and then move to the collective exercise of ethical leadership in a model of authentic governance.

## ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Trustees as individuals must balance their role as a representative of the constituents who elected them with their role as a member of a governing Board which is the Board of Education's decision-making body. The elected Board itself maintains a balancing act between local community interests, the broader provincial interest, and the legislated environment within which the Board operates.

As an individual Board member it is important to be clear about one's own values and aspirations. The place to start is self-assessment. This involves asking ourselves questions such as:

- What values should guide my actions as a leader?
- How do I best set an example for others?
- How do I articulate a vision of the future when things are so unpredictable?
- How do I improve my ability to inspire others toward a common purpose?
- How do I create an environment that promotes innovation and risk?
- How do I build a cohesive and spirited team?
- How do I share power and information and still maintain accountability?
- How do I put more joy and celebration into our efforts?
- What is the source of self-confidence required to lead others?
- How do I go about improving my leadership abilities? <sup>3</sup>

The clear message in all of these questions is that leadership is not a solo performance. It is not a style. Indeed ethical leadership is very much a reflection of how we respect and nurture relationships for the common good. How do we move from "I" to "We"? How do we add value so that the successful work of the elected Board as a whole far exceeds what can be accomplished by any single member of the Board acting alone?

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership Model by Kouzes and Posner outline five core practices of effective leaders:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process (Status Quo)
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

These practices align as well with the framework described by Freeman and Stewart in *Developing Ethical Leadership*. <sup>4</sup>

There are some specific ways that these two frameworks reveal themselves in the world of Boards of Education.

### MODEL THE WAY

Each individual trustee brings with them their personal values, beliefs, strengths and limitations. How they express their views and the actions they take at the Board table and in their daily interactions demonstrate consistency with their values and beliefs. In the words of Freeman and Stewart, they "tell a compelling and morally rich story but also embody and live the story." This evident consistency, this matching of hand and heart, inspires trust in their colleagues.

Individual credibility is built. Through a “living conversation about ethics, values and the creation of value for stakeholders,” 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.

### **INSPIRE A SHARED VISION**

Everyone who runs for office as a school trustee does so for a reason beyond themselves. The initial impetus can be as broad as a passion for improving public education or as specific, initially, as a conviction about how special education services should be delivered. The common factor is that they have a vision of something better. As a leader their challenge is to articulate the vision, describe how it will bring improvements and, through sincere dialogue, inspire their colleagues, Board of Education staff and the community to share the vision. As Freeman and Stewart point out: “Ethical leaders are ordinary people who are living their lives as examples of making the world a better place. Ethical leaders speak to us about our identity, what we are and what we can become, how we live and how we could live better.” <sup>5</sup>

### **CHALLENGE THE PROCESS**

This leadership skill involves being open to innovation, to exploring different approaches, to turning an inquiring mind to alternative solutions and to questioning any response that says: “that’s the way it’s always been done.” In asking “What’s new? What’s next? What’s better?” they can forge new paths. This also creates risks and the possibilities of mistakes, but it is done in a climate of trust and openness to learning. It is important to make room for mechanisms of dissent, to avoid a process that leaves people feeling thwarted and unable to express diverging views.

### **ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT**

Ethical leaders are not driven by personal ego. They step outside themselves and focus on success for the organization or community. They invest in fostering relationships, building teams and empowering others to take action. “Leaders work to make people feel strong, capable and committed. They enable others to act not by hoarding the power they have but by giving it away. Exemplary leaders strengthen everyone’s capacity to deliver on the promises they make. When people are trusted and have more discretion, more authority, and more information, they’re more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results.” <sup>6</sup>

### **ENCOURAGE THE HEART**

Working as a team, Trustees come to know and, to a great extent, share the values and beliefs of their colleagues. Even where they do not totally see eye to eye with their colleagues, they learn how best to work together. They come to know what developments will inspire and what developments will dishearten them. An ethical leader acknowledges the impact of events on their colleagues, demonstrates appreciation, celebrates victories small and large, and expresses empathy in tough times. This leads to the creation of collective capacity and the conditions for collaboration.

Doing this work leads to levels of awareness of self and others that can only positively reinforce the capacity of the elected Board to effectively fulfill the roles of authentic governance and raise the bar in what can be accomplished.

## WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?

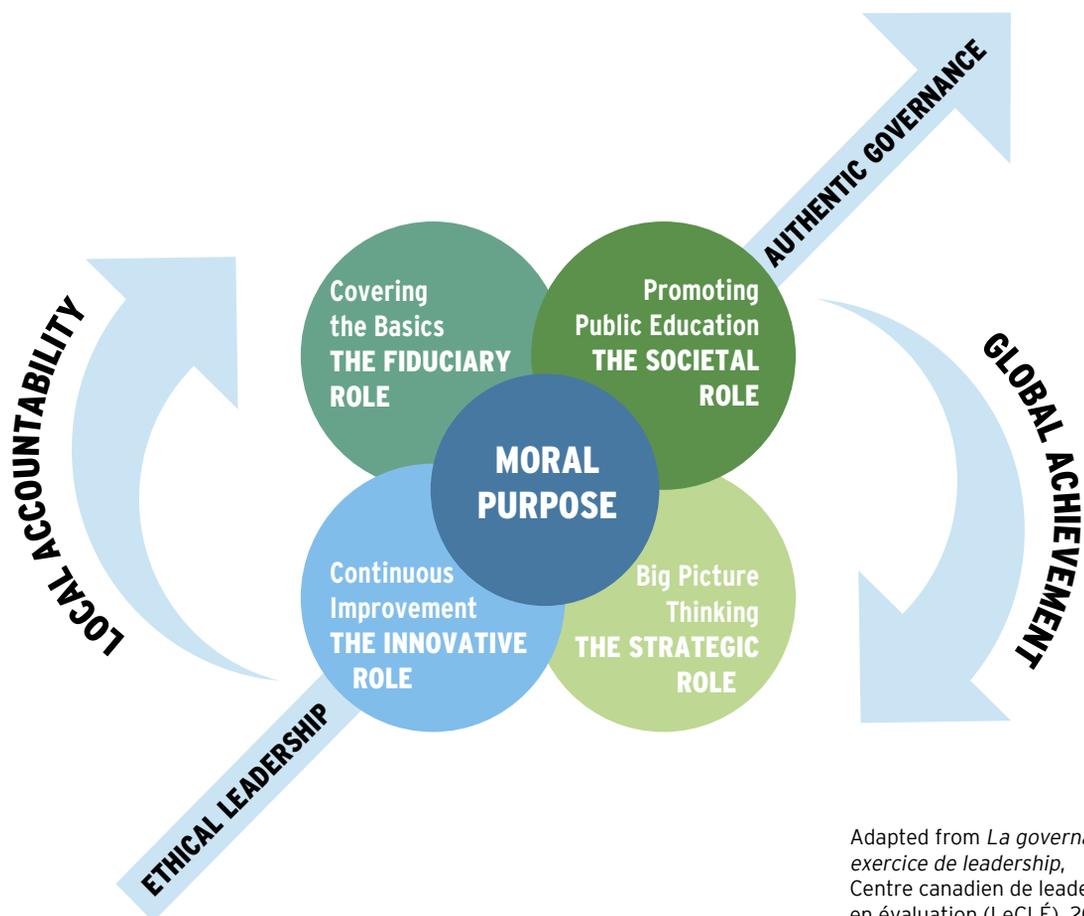
The elected Board is responsible for the success of the organization in terms of its purpose. It does this by providing oversight, direction setting and decision making through a governance process which includes defining roles, relationships, structures and processes.

Governance embraces the highest levels of effectiveness and, for each trustee, it involves a commitment to ethical leadership, to continuous learning and to long-term development.

In order to be effective in focusing the organization to be successful, the elected Board plays four broad roles:

Authentic Governance: The Roles of a Board of Education

- I. Covering the Basics: The Board's Fiduciary Role
- II. Big Picture Thinking: The Board's Strategic Role
- III. Continuous Improvement: The Board's Innovative Role
- IV. Promoting Community Engagement: The Board's Societal Role



Adapted from *La gouvernance... exercice de leadership*, Centre canadien de leadership en évaluation (LeCLÉ), 2008

## **I. COVERING THE BASICS: THE BOARD'S FIDUCIARY ROLE**

The elected Board of Education has the responsibility to competently protect the interests, image and credibility of the Board of Education, to ensure its financial viability, and to act in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations and policies governing the Board or enacted by the government.

These are significant and complex responsibilities that require trustees to quickly acquire education sector expertise and skills to effectively handle the range of information that requires decisions, and to exercise vigilance about the impact of developments and decisions on students, families and the broader community.

Undertaking these responsibilities goes far beyond fiduciary oversight. It requires engagement as a leader in determining the effectiveness of the undertaking. It involves asking questions such as: Does the budget reflect our priorities for students? Is it ethical? What can we learn from our audit? Are we treating staff fairly and respectfully?

The following is an overview of some of the fiduciary expectations as articulated in British Columbia's School Act. More detailed orientation to these responsibilities is provided in BCSTA's Successful Governance Guide.<sup>7</sup>

The responsibilities of Boards of Education include:

- setting local policy for the effective and efficient operation of schools;
- employing the staff necessary for school district operations, such as teachers, school principals, supervisory personnel, aides, clerical and administrative personnel, custodians, building maintenance staff, bus drivers, etc.;
- establishing conditions of employment for employees within the framework of collective bargaining for unionized staff and the regulations regarding compensation for exempt staff;
- preparing and approving the school district's operating budgets and capital plans;
- hearing appeals from parents and students where a staff decision significantly affects the education, health or safety of a student;
- approving local courses and resource materials for use in the school district;
- attending Board and committee meetings;
- approving annual school plans; and
- establishing district literacy plans and achievement contracts for improving student achievement.

By statute, BC's publicly-elected Boards of Education have a co-governance relationship with the provincial government. The School Act is premised on the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education working together to achieve the goals and purposes established by the province for the public education system. Boards of Education represent the educational aspirations of their communities and serve as a link to the provincial government. They are also the means by which the public education system is held locally accountable. Through this co-governance relationship the Ministry of Education and Boards of Education share a focus on improved learning outcomes for students, and a demonstrated commitment to respect, integrity, public service, accountability and the effective management of public resources within their respective jurisdictions.

The Superintendent is the sole employee who reports directly to the elected board. Assignment of duties to district staff flow through the Superintendent as does information from district staff to the trustees.

Elected Boards make sure that services and programs that are vital to children, families and the broader community are in place. The exciting challenge for Boards of Education is to accomplish this through visionary long-term planning, meaningful involvement of students, staff, parents and the broader community, and through continuous building of public confidence in publicly funded education.

## **II. BIG PICTURE THINKING: THE BOARD'S STRATEGIC ROLE**

The elected Board's strategic role relates to the larger moral purpose of publicly-funded education. It is about having a vision and planning purposefully to ensure that the children within the Board's jurisdiction will have every opportunity to succeed in school and in life, and to give their parents confidence that schools provide a caring and safe environment for their children.

"Public education needs visionary Boards of Education that can speak forcefully about the integral role of public schools in our democratic system and engage the community in support of excellent schools and robust programs for all children. Positive and inspiring visions require the widespread involvement of those whose lives will be influenced and shaped by the vision. Powerful visions are the product of endless hours of discussion and dialogue among key stakeholders." <sup>8</sup>

Each Board of Education, in consultation with their community, with parents, with staff and with students will define vision, mission and values that describe what these outcomes for children and families will look like within their Board. As leaders, the elected Board takes on the responsibility for thinking in terms of the success of the entire system and engaging the whole system in developing a strategic plan or roadmap which will move the Board of Education towards realization of the vision and achievement of the mission in a context of shared values.

Creation of strategic plans takes trustees outside of the day-to-day activities of the Board and requires focus on the big picture of what the Board is doing and where it is going. The higher level thinking involved in exercising this role provides clarity about what the Board of Education wishes to achieve and how it plans to get there. It seeks to answer questions such as:

- Who are we as a governing Board?
- What environment are we operating in?
- What capacity do we have to create positive change?
- What are the issues we want to address?
- What difference do we want to make?
- How do we know that we are governing effectively?
- What are the critical or priority issues to focus on first?
- How should we direct our resources?

Achieving what the elected Board has determined to do and following through on a plan demands what Michael Fullan refers to as "resolute leadership":

"Successful schools, districts, and larger systems have 'resolute leadership' that stays with the focus, especially during rough periods, and these leaders cause others around them to be resolute.....This is hard, persistent work but it is not overly complex. Resolute leadership is

critical near the beginning when new ideas encounter serious difficulty, but it is also required to sustain and build on success.”<sup>9</sup>

The strategic role also involves the Board of Education in determining how it will address its accountability to students, staff, parents, the broader community, and the province. In answering the questions already outlined, the Board will have dealt with only one side of the equation - describing the situation and the desired outcomes. The other side of that equation is knowing when the Board has achieved the desired outcomes and that the Board has a well-understood system for objectively measuring the milestones along the way to achievement of the outcomes. Again, Michael Fullan has good advice:

“Accountability is needed in order to reassure the public that the system is in good hands and progressing well; it is also needed to help implementers know how well they are doing while providing the feedback and help to do even better. Our concern here is with what actually works to move the whole system along - not what should work, but what does work. Intelligent accountability in essence involves building cumulative capacity and responsibility that is both internally held and externally forced.”<sup>10</sup>

The elected Board will have to approve a framework of intelligent accountability that allows it to continuously monitor progress, analyze evidence and reliably report out on results to its stakeholders.

Exercising the strategic role involves the Board in:

- Internal and external consultations
- Examining the internal and external environment to identify issues
- Reviewing reports on results
- Facilitation and dialogue
- Developing strategic thinking
- Considering strategic options
- Engaging stakeholders through approaches such as open forums
- Inquiry that respects the strengths of those being consulted
- Considering assessment frameworks

Elected Boards of Education are no longer merely overseers of school systems focusing on compliance with specific fiduciary duties; they are leaders of public education in their communities and in the province. They are charged with the responsibility to create the conditions within their school districts that enable students to meet high standards of achievement within a school environment that ensures their safety and promotes their well-being. Undertaking these responsibilities requires the Board of Education to understand issues deeply, align resources, and foster a culture within the system that supports all those charged with improving student achievement and promoting student well-being. It involves the elected Board articulating its education mission and garnering public support and resources needed to achieve that mission.

### **III. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: THE BOARD'S INNOVATIVE ROLE**

This role calls on the elected Board to exercise creativity and innovation so that the Board of Education, as well as the whole school system, can maintain or increase their relevance in a constantly changing environment. It involves a long-term perspective, with collective brainstorming and thoughtful dialogue to help understand the meaning of the current

environment and emerging developments, and the elected Board's role as an effective leader in this context.

"Those who will be successful will be driven by the vision of creating more equal, prosperous societies. They will also have know-how – strategies with the potential of actually getting there. Because the goal is so critical and because there is a practical promise of success, strong leaders never, ever give up hope even though the frustrations of getting somewhere, especially at the beginning, can be enormously disheartening." <sup>11</sup>

Continuous improvement goes beyond quality management; it is less about employing techniques and tools to analyze problems and find solutions and much more about establishing a culture that is consciously looking for better and more effective ways to evolve. An effective Board of Education is not interested in being average; it wants to be the best. An effective Board of Education is willing to encourage experimentation and innovation, to pilot new ideas and be supportive through potential setbacks as they are tested. As leaders the members of the Board need to be not only open to ideas presented to them by staff, but to be critical about their own processes and ideas and the degree to which they are immersed in routine. To what extent is the Board agenda dominated by routine items? Does the agenda show that the Board promotes the thinking and planning that produces innovation? What topics are under consideration that could be said to be focused on increasing the relevance of what happens in schools to our rapidly changing world?

An example of a shift in thinking might be this commentary on competition and continuous improvement featured in the NSBA Key Work of School Boards Guidebook (2009):

"The idea of comparing one district to another, one school to another, one classroom to another has been resisted and often labelled unfair. Such resistance is grounded in the tradition in education that comparison must result in winners and losers. If one team wins, the other loses. If some students are in the top 10 per cent of the graduating class, others are not. If some students are accepted to a college, others are rejected. By contrast, the concept of continuous improvement does not require someone to fail in order for others to succeed. If an organization embraces the culture of continuous improvement, they understand there is much to be learned from competitors that can improve not only their own organization but also the overall business.

In education we do not spend nearly as much time as we should seeking out effective practices and using them as benchmarks for improving teacher, student, and school performance. Boards need to be asking the Superintendent and staff to identify comparable school systems that are performing better and use that information to set reasonable progress goals for their own system by drawing on the experiences of others. When we stop thinking about comparison in terms of winners and losers, we begin to see comparison as the driver of continuous improvement. When we believe in the culture of continuous improvement, we can embrace the core belief that all children can succeed. We can deliver the mission of quality education."

This approach aligns with Michael Fullan's concept of collaborative competition. Undertaking this role involves a way of thinking and acting that is never satisfied with the status quo. Continuous improvement questions existing practice, not to find fault or micromanage but to stimulate thinking that leads to adopting the most effective strategies. It is a truism that the strength of an organization lies in the people who work there. What opportunities does this present for Boards of Education? For example, does the culture promote an understanding among staff about the purpose of their jobs and how essential each staff member is to the achievement of the Board's goals?

Clarity around the purpose of the Board and every individual's contribution to achieving that purpose builds collaborative relationships and fosters a climate where high achievement is valued and celebrated.

An orientation to continuous improvement creates dynamics in the work of Boards of Education that promotes:

- Thinking, researching, questioning
- Contextual and authentic leadership
- Dialogue and openness
- Valuing diversity
- Non-linear, divergent, out-of-the-box and creative thinking
- Exploring new concepts
- Developing scenarios
- Non-routine and sincere conversations

#### **IV. PROMOTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: THE BOARD'S SOCIETAL ROLE**

This role requires a deep and sincere commitment to collaboration, cooperation and ethics – first among trustees, in order to establish the elected Board of Education as a body focused on its place in society, and then in a larger context, to actively engage with the community and with other groups and organizations that share a common purpose. As such it involves an opening to the wider community or even to the world. It encourages the recognition and appreciation of the interconnectivity and interdependence among organizations.

A Board of Education and its schools are not isolated entities. They are intricately linked to the lives of families, to the local community, to the parallel organizations that also form part of that community; they are connected as well to the provincial government structure through channels of mutual responsibility and accountability; and they are connected to the nation and world at large through the dual responsibilities of ensuring that children graduate from school with competencies to be successful in a global economy, and with the values and character that equip them to contribute to a civil society. "Boards of Education and school district leaders must build networks of collaborative relationships that bring key stakeholders into the process of solving the challenges facing public education. Building collaborative relationships like every other challenging task is easier to talk about than it is to accomplish. Often referred to as 'an unnatural act performed by unconsenting adults' collaboration is difficult because it requires going beyond simply sharing knowledge and information. Moreover, it is more than relationships that helps each party achieve its own goals. The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular part.'<sup>12</sup>

#### **What collaborative relationships does a Board of Education need to build?**

##### **Families first and foremost**

Parents are a child's first teacher. Parental involvement in a child's education is directly linked to the child's success in school. The evidence on this is irrefutable. Parents can significantly boost the efforts of the school when they understand what is happening, when they are clear about the Board's educational goals. Their influence as a supporter has ripple effects beyond the immediate school and permeates the community. Effective Boards create structures that allow parents to be meaningfully involved.

### **Other levels of local government and community agencies**

The opportunities for interdependent action are fertile in the communities within a school district. Engaging in partnerships and concerted action, for example with municipalities and community agencies, not only creates economies but adds a great deal to community cohesion. This interaction also provides the elected Board with opportunities to hear from their constituents.

A key outcome of collaboration is increased appreciation of the role of public education as a factor of community life and the successes that can be achieved through a concerted approach in pursuit of a common purpose.

### **External partners - business leaders**

Many trustees have a successful background in business and this is a useful skill they bring to the table. It is helpful as well to engage the broader business community. Whether or not business leaders have children in the school system they have a vested interest in the value added to a community where there is a well-functioning school whose students are attaining high levels of achievement. Beyond the more practical considerations of a community asset that attracts newcomers and ensures that its graduates will be productive contributors to the Canadian economy, most businesses have a corporate 'giving-back to the community' side to their business. If asked, they may provide business community input to the Board's strategic planning process or other relevant operations issues. This will entail relationship-building that asks Boards of Education to be open-minded about examining their practices and actively listening to the advice they receive.

### **Political Leaders**

The citizens of the community also elect Members of the Legislative Assembly and Federal Parliaments. While education is a provincial jurisdiction, there are still issues impacting on schools that flow from the exercise of government at the federal level (e.g., First Nations education, immigration, copyright, GST). However, the provincial government holds by far the greatest influence on Boards of Education. This is evident through legislation, regulation, how schools are funded, mandatory policies to be implemented in schools and, to a great degree, how Boards of Education govern. Successful Boards of Education build collaborative relationships with political leaders, both federal and provincial.

Many of these politicians ran for office for reasons that were largely unrelated to education. It is the job of the local Board of Education members, as part of a well-articulated communications plan, to keep them well-informed about the issues affecting schools locally and the broader picture of education across the province. By doing this in their local ridings, trustees are raising awareness among the members of the Legislative Assembly, and cabinet members, who will vote on legislative matters affecting Boards of Education. There is an opportunity as well to demonstrate the case for local Board of Education autonomy. The Board of Education can invite local politicians at all levels to discuss their strategic plans; they can keep them informed on specific challenges facing schools in the community and they can share the good news of student successes with them before they read about it in the local press. Effective Boards of Education will give public recognition to political leaders who have played a role in supporting progressive public policy that ultimately benefits the Board's students.

## **IN SUMMARY**

When the elected Board actively exercises its role of promoting community engagement there are immediate benefits for students and schools. These benefits include public support, recognition, and additional social, emotional, and experiential resources that can raise student achievement to heights that may not be achievable by Boards working in isolation.

Effective Boards make deliberate, ongoing efforts to establish and maintain protocols and processes that actively seek the community's voice and enlist its commitment to public schools. Seeking - and hearing - the community's voice and enlisting its support are effective strategies for balancing competing interests and moving toward a productive consensus within the school system, and in the wider community that is grounded in the interests of all students.

In a broader context, through community engagement and partnership development, the Board of Education builds allies and promotes public confidence in publicly funded education. Exercising this role strengthens a societal commitment to the value of a vibrant, successful education system, not just as a vehicle for educating children, but as a force for social cohesion, equity and prosperity that benefits society as a whole.

"Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development."<sup>13</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

This module supports trustees in exploring the concepts of ethical leadership and how to apply these concepts in their work as members of their Board of Education. The module also supports the complex, multi-layered roles that trustees and Boards of Education have in serving students, families, and communities, and ensuring the successful future of public education in British

Columbia.

## NOTES

1. James B. London, Public Education Public Pride, 2005
2. Interview with Stephen Munby in In Conversation, Fall 2009 - Volume II:Issue 1
3. James M. Kouzes & Barry Z. Posner "The Leadership Challenge", copyright © 2007 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
4. R. Edward Freeman and Lisa Stewart, Developing Ethical Leadership. BRIDGE PAPER
5. Ibid.
6. Kouzes & Posner, op. cit. (p.21)  
(The section on Ethical Leadership adapts the model of Kouzes and Posner to the school board)
7. Successful Governance: Learning modules for Boards of Education: [learn.bcsta.org/successful-governance](https://learn.bcsta.org/successful-governance)
8. From the National School Boards Association (NSBA): The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook (2010)
9. Michael Fullan, All Systems Go
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. David Chrislip & Carl Larson in NSBA Key Work of School Boards Guidebook (2009), p.68
13. Statement by Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General, United Nations

The model of governance roles is adapted from: Lise Lortie, The Fiduciary Role of an Elected Board, (Le Clé)

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.

