



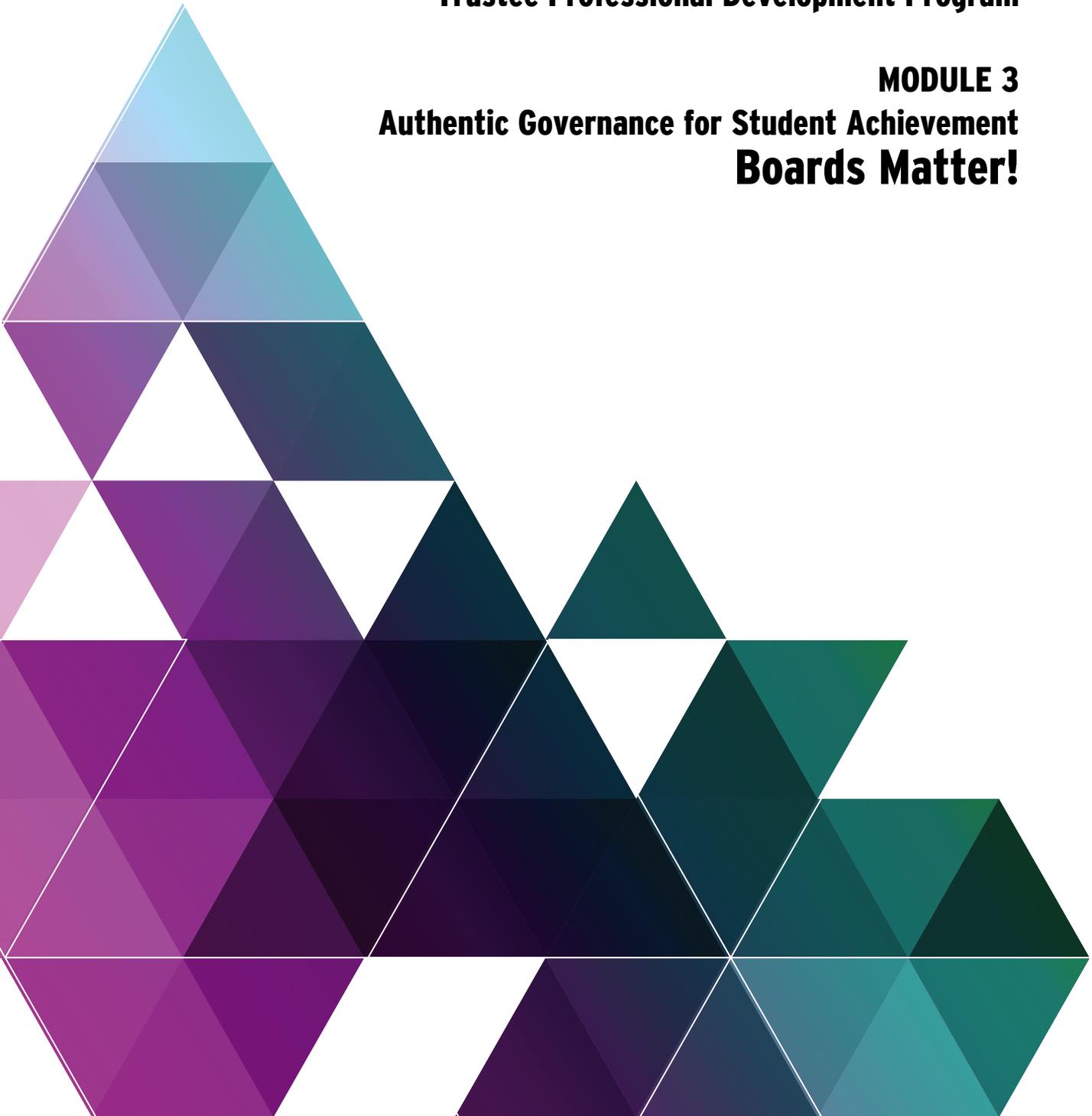
British Columbia
School Trustees
Association

GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR BOARDS OF EDUCATION

Trustee Professional Development Program

MODULE 3

Authentic Governance for Student Achievement Boards Matter!



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Authentic Governance for Student Achievement Boards Matter!

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IN THIS MODULE, TRUSTEES WILL EXPLORE:

- The multiple facets of their role as leaders for student achievement
- The relationship between ethical leadership at the board table and student achievement
- The critical role of boards of education as direct links to their community in ensuring a concerted focus on students

DESIRED OUTCOMES ARE:

- Stronger understanding of how boards govern for student achievement
- Stronger understanding of the responsibilities and dynamics of governance
- Stronger understanding of the capacity of the elected school board to be a force for promotion of public education

“The greatest and most inspiring mountain climbing achievements in history are not so much stories of individual achievement, but are stories of the extraordinary power of a unified, talented, prepared team that stays loyally committed to one another and to their shared vision to the end.”

- STEPHEN COVEY

INTRODUCTION

Elected boards of education make a deep and direct contribution to the improvement of learning for all students through their leadership in building public understanding and engendering the commitment of their communities to valuing and sustaining high levels of student achievement. Enabling sustainable improvements in student learning is perhaps the most important function of a board of education and should be considered in all decisions.

The research is compelling: elected boards of education make a difference! When the board of education moves to the higher levels of authentic governance that is truly student-centered and makes teaching and learning their first priority, changes occur. And this is not dependent on more funding. The research team of Waters and Marzano conducted an analysis of 27 different studies. Here they examined the relationship between school board leadership and student achievement. Essentially, the research showed that elected boards which demonstrate ongoing improvement on this priority were tightly aligned from the board table to the district leadership team to schools. In short, everyone “walked” the student learning road. School board governance operates in the broadest context, providing the structure for success, connecting with communities and advocating for all students in the district. Only a locally-elected board of education can bring this network of conditions together.

A number of further studies found the same themes. One research paper released by the Iowa Association of School Boards, found that “solving the problems of public education will depend upon the leadership of public schools. Issues affecting the conditions of schools that enable productive change are issues of policy. School boards are critical players in the school change process and must be active leaders on behalf of the students in their schools.” Another paper described school board members of successful boards as being very knowledgeable about board programs and practices, having a clear sense of what they wanted to accomplish based on firmly held values and beliefs, and engaging in activities that allowed them to articulate and discuss these values and beliefs.

The research work of Kenneth Leithwood of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education into the “Characteristics of High-Performing School Districts” draws on 31 studies based in the United States and Alberta. This work also reveals findings that underscore the importance of a board-wide focus on student achievement, the use of evidence for planning, organizational learning and accountability, and the positive impact of building and maintaining a culture of improvement.

What does Student Achievement Really Mean?

It has often been said that the goal of education is to create citizens who are “publicly useful and privately happy.” In our current environment we see that education leaders and researchers underscore the central goal of high levels of student achievement. What we mean by student achievement is a fertile topic for examination. It is fair to say that the outcome of that examination for those who work and live in schools points to an understanding of achievement as something greater and more comprehensive than academic scores and rankings on provincial assessments. It goes substantially beyond literacy and numeracy, problem-solving, critical thinking and the development of social and emotional intelligence. Authentic achievement is a combination of academic, social, emotional and cultural, and spiritual wellness.

GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR BOARDS OF EDUCATION

Module 3: Authentic Governance for Student Achievement: Boards Matter!

The Public School system is founded on principles of universal access to education opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds, social or economic status, individual exceptionality, or religious preference. Its unique mandate is to celebrate and reflect the diversity inherent in our society and to welcome all students. In public schools, student achievement occurs in a context of acknowledgement of and celebration for the diversity of belief, values, faiths and language for all students it serves while providing the understanding and basic skills required for active, compassionate participation in the life of the family, the community, the province, the nation, and a global society.

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.²

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

These governance responsibilities are central to student achievement:

Setting the Vision: In this role, boards work based on input from the entire community and staff to establish the vision for student learning and to articulate the beliefs that are the foundation for goals and direction. School board governance reflects the vision in all its decisions including the conditions that affect teaching and learning. Your vision should include consideration of both local needs and perspectives as well as provincial direction and initiatives.

Establishing Goals: As elected officials, boards of education are in the best position to work with the local community to position student achievement as the core belief and to lead in defining what this means to their community. From here, boards set strategic goals. This lays the foundation and indeed drives every aspect of program and board operations. Without this, boards operate in chaos.

Developing Policy: Boards have the task of establishing the structure to support student achievement and they do this through their policies. The directions boards establish through policy have an impact on students, schools and all staff. They in fact create the culture of learning. Boards of education can be described as the architects. Good design is essential.

Allocating Resources and Assuring Accountability: School boards are the stewards who shepherd education resources at the local level. It is the job of boards as stewards, to provide clear direction about priorities and to insist that the allocation of resources is aligned with the goals and the strategic plan of the board. The best boards distribute dollars in ways that allow the superintendent to ensure that the lowest performing schools get the support they need and that all staff have the training they need to deliver high quality instruction. They ask the tough questions during budget deliberations. It is also their duty to monitor budgets to ensure that the right services are being provided to students at appropriate costs and for measurable benefits. This is the board's core fiduciary responsibility. Successful boards demonstrate their accountability further by acknowledging poor performance, examining the evidence-based contributing factors, and taking positive, supportive steps to address the issues.

FOCUSING ON STRENGTHS - KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Boards of education are elected to govern. In electing board members, the public signifies a trust that the individual trustees and the collective board will conduct their work ethically for all the students served by the board. This is at the heart of authentic governance. Turning the research findings into action and establishing a position of strength as a leader in student achievement will require boards to engage in considerable discussion and commit to relevant training and professional growth. **Successful school boards focus their board meetings on improving student learning.**

In representing the views of the constituents they serve, individual trustees bring forward a rich perspective on student achievement needs. Each will bring information, evidence, data, and questions about the issues as they understand them to inform a shared understanding around the board table. The "Power of One" to add value and dimension can be remarkable as school board members talk to each other to clarify shared understandings and implications of the reports being presented to them. They model a willingness to learn and to be clear about what is important for the board as a whole. Furthermore, this enables the board and individuals to advocate together for students and translate moral and resolute leadership into action.

Important Questions for Boards to Maintain a Focus on Strengths

1. How can our board build a collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what trustees believe and seek to create?
2. What questions should our board ask to develop a clear picture of achievement across the board?
3. How do we determine our progress?
4. How can our board effectively and authentically link to our communities?
5. Does the board have a specific and limited set of priorities for improving student achievement that are clearly articulated for all stakeholders?
6. Does the board ensure there is equity in the allocation of resources through providing additional supports in areas of higher need?
7. Does the board see the budget as a vehicle for accomplishing strategic priorities rather than a spending plan?
8. Are the tough decisions that need to be made being addressed in a timely manner?
9. Is the superintendent managing in such a way that the curriculum and program initiatives are directly aligned with student achievement priorities?

(Adapted from *Key Work of School Boards*, NSBA, 2009)

MOVING FROM INTENT TO ACTION FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

"Team work is not a virtue; it is a choice, it is a strategic decision."

- PATRICK LENCIONI

The substantive body of research referenced earlier is clear on the common governance responsibilities of elected boards which have experienced success in addressing the challenges related to raising achievement and supporting well-being for all students. There are clear actions that boards can take which have direct impact. All of them can be linked to the board's governance practices and all of them can be addressed in this context.

Key success factors included:

- Creating a cohesive collective team within the board of education
- Good working relations between the board of education and its superintendent
- Support for the superintendent in creation of an effective organization
- Clear priorities for budgets and resource allocation
- Use of evidence to set vision and to inform decisions around student achievement

Creating a cohesive collective team within the board of education

To govern effectively, an elected board of education must work as a collective body to develop its vision, strategic directions and goals for all the students and families in its jurisdiction. Individual trustees will come to this work with their own values and beliefs and with the issues that are pressing in their own constituency. The job of the collective board is to work together, accommodating diverse viewpoints, and to come to agreement on the broad strategic directions which will guide decision-making as they go forward through their mandate. While strong and diverging views will always be part of debate in the democratic forum of a board meeting, the board's established strategic directions provide the framework for arriving at decisions and the decisions must be consistent with the goals the board has

set for itself. This is what ensures staying the course on the issues of fundamental importance and what inspires continuing public confidence in the work of the elected board. This means that individual trustees must, at times, take a view of what is best for the school district as a whole even if their own local constituents may be unsupportive of the direction taken. With a strategic perspective trustees will focus on the big picture and act in terms of what is best for the system overall.

Good working relations between the board of education and its superintendent

The elected board and the superintendent working together are the board's leadership team and this team is an essential driver of effective governance. To make board-wide improvements that meet community expectations, the board and the superintendent need to spend time learning together and agreeing on approaches to building leadership that will have an impact on achieving the board's goals. Based on this learning process clear expectations on the part of both the board and the superintendent can then be set. Well-defined, clearly articulated role descriptions of both the superintendent and the board are critical to a productive relationship. Regular communication and dialogue strengthen the foundation that has been established and ensure a board-superintendent relationship that increases the effectiveness of the system as a whole. While trust and collaboration are essential, the board of education also plays an evaluative role in its responsibility to provide feedback to the superintendent on his/her performance.

Support for the superintendent in the creation of an effective organization

When the board of education sets strategic directions and goals that are directly focused on student achievement, the center of meaningful activity is at the school level. The governance job of the board is to ensure that the superintendent establishes an organizational structure that reinforces partnerships between central office and schools to support the efforts of the schools in improving student achievement. The clarity and consistency of expectations in this regard reduces administrative layers and increases the involvement of all staff of the school board district in attaining the board's goals. With the increasing complexity and uncertainty in the environment of all organizations today, it is essential for the district school board to be supported and managed by the superintendent and secretary-treasurer in such a way that decisions can be made effectively and efficiently. Taking this approach means that all staff of the school board are speaking the same language and there is the scope for clearer communication and expectations between staff and board.

Clear Priorities for Budgets and resource allocation

Effective management of the school board's budget is an outcome of clear articulation of the elected board's priorities. When the board establishes its strategic directions and the goals it plans to achieve year-over-year, the board is also making a commitment to spending decisions that allow those goals to be achieved. In terms of monitoring accountability for how the budget is spent, the priorities of the board become the measuring stick. The lens of support for student achievement must also be applied in every case. This process is an essential component of effective governance.

Use of Evidence to set vision and to inform decisions

A key governance practice of elected boards is setting its vision and strategic directions in support of the belief that "all students can learn". This must be done in a way that involves consultation with, and input from, the school board's communities. Here, consideration of appropriately aggregated data is critical. This includes a broad range of information including demographics, academic achievement rates, retention and graduation rates, data on numbers of students requiring special supports and services in place to provide supports. Elected school boards that have a reputation for sound governance practices do not set strategic directions or engage in any form of decision-making in the absence of comprehensive, reliable and relevant data. Data alone will not be helpful. Analysis and

interpretation is required. With the interpretation, different stories can be told, examined and debated. Then effective action plans can be generated with goals that are achieved.

In working with the superintendent, the board of education receives advice on how the data can be interpreted to assist the board in setting goals which take into account equity of outcomes for all students. The real work lies in the elected board's commitment to improve achievement and success in school for all the students of the board. In working with students, staff, parent and community groups, the board of education can consider the challenges that may be experienced among particular groups of students and receive advice about how to overcome the challenges. Addressing this in the setting of the board's strategic directions is a significant step in raising expectations and building confidence. Elected boards can expect the superintendent to set high standards, to push for excellence and equality and to ensure all groups are challenged.

Carrying out the fiduciary responsibilities of school boards means that elected boards will also require the superintendent to establish and maintain necessary sources of data and to provide the board of education with regular reports that are based on these data.

CONCLUSION

Boards of education, composed of publicly-elected members of local communities, are the natural group to bring the community together in various forums to create a vision, to set goals for student achievement, to direct resources, to hold the system accountable and to build public confidence in an education system committed to quality for all students.

Today's school boards work with diverse communities which expect that students will meet increasingly higher standards. At the provincial level they are frequently confronted with an ever-changing agenda and new priorities. The future will demand talented and ethical board leaders who are focused in their efforts and supported, not just by a strong administrative team, but also by education leadership at the provincial level that is responsive to the challenges of local governance and a ready partner in the long-term vision that puts students first.

"Education is a promise of freedom. The freedom to choose, the freedom to understand, explain, create, be filled with wonder, and improve."

**- RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN,
FORMER GOVERNOR GENERAL OF CANADA**

REFERENCES

Effective practices of many school boards in Ontario were relied upon in the development of this module. This is gratefully acknowledged by OESC-CSEO.

The following works of reference also helped inform this module:

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TRUSTEES MAY FIND THESE RESOURCES HELPFUL

The School Act

The Independent School Act

The Teacher Act

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.

