



A Policy Oriented Board of Trustees

Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est

This case study highlights the implementation of Policy Governance at the Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (hereinafter the Conseil du Centre-Est¹). As mentioned in Kenneth Leithwood's 2013 study entitled *Strong Districts and Their Leadership*, districts that have adopted this approach have made even greater efforts to improve student success and wellbeing and, consequently, have performed better than the provincial average. This is why he identified Policy Governance as one of the nine essential characteristics of a strong district.

The underlying principles of Policy Governance showcase a veritable paradigm shift in the governance of school boards that operate in the traditional way. One has to exert considerable leadership, both at the policy and administrative levels, to implement this approach and, above all, to ensure its continuity. The Conseil du Centre-Est is the only district in Ontario to have implemented it continuously for more than 15 years.

A Chaotic Birth

The Conseil du Centre-Est was one of the province's very first French-language districts. For decades, Franco-Ontarians had been demanding full and complete control over their schools. The creation of the Conseil scolaire de langue française d'Ottawa-Carleton in 1989, with both Catholic and public sections, headed by a plenary board, gave the Francophone community hope. The bar was set fairly high for these first school Trustees.

¹ Since 1989, the Conseil du Centre-Est has had various names, as well as various acronyms: Section catholique du Conseil scolaire de langue française d'Ottawa-Carleton (CSLFOC), Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française d'Ottawa-Carleton (CECLFOC), Conseil scolaire de district catholique du Centre-Est (CSDCCE), Conseil des écoles catholiques de langue française du Centre-Est (CECLFCE), Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (CECCE). The official name of the Conseil du Centre-Est is the *Conseil scolaire de district des écoles séparées de langue française n° 66* as per regulations 185/97 and 460/97.

In summary, it was unfortunately a false start. The lack of cooperation between the Catholic and public sections combined with inadequate funding made this two-headed Board ungovernable and unmanageable despite the good will of those involved. In 1994, the Ontario Government admitted the failure and created two distinct French-language boards, one Catholic, the Conseil du Centre-Est, and the other non-denominational (the CEPEO). The financing was also slightly improved. This was a second start for the Conseil du Centre-Est.

Change becomes necessary at the Conseil du Centre-Est...

A team of school board Trustees, new members for the most part, was elected in October 1994 to operate the Conseil du Centre-Est. They were keen to take up the challenge, their expectations were relatively high given that the conditions had improved from the previous five years. In their eyes, the Conseil du Centre-Est not only had to succeed, but it had to be a leader in school management by and for Francophones. Senior management was comprised of the same experienced and competent officers since the 1980s, albeit used to more traditional governance and management.

Many of the Trustees were aware of the changes going on at the governance (i.e. boards of directors) and management levels, both in education as well as in other types of organizations. Furthermore, the Royal Commission on Learning, which tabled its report in December 1994, proposed major changes (see following section). Conseil du Centre-Est Trustees were starting once again to talk about things such as:

- Increasing the responsibility of directors of education (through their annual report),
- Collecting more result data in order to better govern and manage the Board, such as common tests for all students, surveys for parents, etc.
- Making political and administrative decisions based on evidence, studies, analyses, etc.
- Increasing links with parents, ratepayers and the community as a whole,
- Holding Board meetings that are about more than just “rubber stamping” administration reports, etc.

Senior management was taken by surprise by the new expectations of this team of Trustees, and had a difficult time responding appropriately. A lack of confidence in the administration quickly set in and tensions were even felt during Board meetings. A “political” crisis erupted in 1995 when the Board adopted a series of 16 recommendations asking senior management to implement changes aimed at bringing about improved governance and better management at the Conseil du Centre-Est. Senior management was dismayed, saying it had neither the time nor the necessary resources to make those changes.

An interim management team was then nominated and took the necessary measures to respond to the Board's expectations by taking on additional expertise, among other things. It also reported regularly to the Board on the implementation of the 16 recommendations. A climate of trust slowly grew until the end of the Board's mandate, in December 1997.

... and at the provincial level

In December 1994, after 20 months of work, the Royal Commission on Learning submitted its report, entitled *For the Love of Learning* to the Ontario government. It contained 167 recommendations proposing fundamental changes at all levels of the education system in order to fully bring it into the 21st century.

In regard to governance, the Royal Commission wrote that the "role of trustees is policy-making, not hands-on school management". It had indeed been observed that in many school boards, the roles and responsibilities of elected Board members and senior management were poorly differentiated, if at all, and that some boards even had full-time Trustees.

We will look at two of the numerous changes that came out of this Commission and that had a direct impact on the governance of the Conseil du Centre-Est. On the one hand, the Commission recognized the constitutional rights of Francophones and recommended full control of French-language school boards across the province. The government acquiesced to this recommendation by creating 12 French-language school boards, eight of which were Catholic, to be implemented as of January 1998. A historical victory! The Franco-Ontarian community is jubilant.

On the other hand, the Education Improvement Commission, established in 1997 to facilitate the reform of the Ontario education system, published a report on the role of school Trustees in December 1997. This Commission was tasked with clarifying the exact role of school Trustees. It even recommended that school boards should discharge their responsibilities through Policy Governance, an approach developed by John Carver that is briefly described in this report.

1998: A new beginning for the Conseil du Centre-Est

Following the November 1997 elections, Conseil du Centre-Est Trustees felt that a great responsibility had been placed upon them: governing the largest French-language school board in the province. Wishing to avoid the troubles of the previous mandate and take advantage of the Education Improvement Commission's recommendations, one of the very first initiatives of the Board, under the leadership of a few Trustees, was to rethink its role and its way of operating. Trustees closely examined the Policy Governance approach, which is focused, among other things, on results and responsibility, two of the previous Board's expectations.

Something unexpected happened in the spring of 1998: the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan announced the implementation of Factor 80 in favour of early retirement. A majority of senior management team members took advantage of this provision at the end of June 1998.

Trustees found themselves having to reconstitute the senior management team, including a director of education. In the summer of 1998, a director of education with knowledge of Policy Governance, recognized for his leadership and level of comfort with a clear delineation between Board and management roles and responsibilities was hired. The conditions were thus favourable for a new beginning at the Conseil du Centre-Est.

In order to implement Policy Governance, the Board hired an experienced consultant trained by John Carver himself. It also adopted a 12-month plan for adopting new policies, reviewing the way meetings are held, developing new report formats and an annual reporting calendar, restructuring Board committees, reviewing the evaluation process for the director of education, etc.

The roles and responsibilities of Trustees within the Conseil du Centre-Est become clearer:

- Represent the interests of ratepayers by maintaining links to the community
- Hire and evaluate, based on predetermined results, the director of education
- Develop policies and review as needed
- Analyze monitoring reports produced pursuant to the implementation of said policies
- Set yearly objectives for the director of education
- Set systemic priorities upon which the annual budget is to be based
- Ensure that the laws and regulations pertaining to school boards are respected.

As for the incumbent director of education, his or her role is also clearer:

- He or she is the only employee of the Board and acts with authority delegated by the Board, to which he or she remains accountable.
- He or she is responsible for the means by which the results set by the Board in its policies are attained.
- He or she must account for his or her activities using the tools, measures and performance indicators provided within the timelines set by the Board.
- He or she must provide the Board with all information necessary to make informed decisions.
- He or she has the necessary room to manoeuvre to creatively and innovatively implement the Board's expectations, and thus ensure that the organization's performance is up to par.

At the beginning of the 1998-1999 school year, the director of education put together a new senior management team that included one senior officer responsible for management's accountability to the Board. The director of education also developed a *Responsibility and Improvement Framework*, the first of its kind in francophone Ontario. The following year, the director of education created a new intermediate officer position responsible for the collection and analysis of data to support accountability and improvement. This initiative had an extremely positive impact.

A unifying policy on success: the student exit profile

Policy Governance includes four general policy categories organized in a logical order. The content of the first three categories is similar to that of every organization using this approach. These policies were drafted in the very first year with the assistance of the consultant.

- **Governance Process** policies that detail the way in which the Board functions, including its philosophy, its accountability, its discipline and the fruits of its owl labour.
- Policies on the **Delegation of Board powers to the director of education**, that focus on the way the Board delegates its authority to staff, by way of the director of education, and the way it assesses the organization's performance by way of the director of education's evaluation.
- Policies on the **Limits of the director of education**, that outline the boundaries of prudence and ethics set by the Board for management to make decisions on the means of obtaining results or, in short, operating guidelines.

The fourth policy category, called Ends policies, provides a means by which the Board may exert more strategic leadership – what is in fact its main responsibility – by clearly defining, for the “owners²”, the needs it aims to satisfy, for whom and at what cost (or value):

² The notions of « owner » and « beneficiary » are central to Policy Governance. Governance is related to the “owners”, who are the equivalent to stockholders in a private corporation. Trustees are elected and act in the interest of the “owners” who are, in the case of the Conseil du Centre-Est, Francophone Catholic ratepayers residing on its territory. Some of the owners have never had or no longer have any children in school and do not receive any educational services. They do, however, have a say in the direction of the Board in their capacity as “owners”. Other “owners” include parents with children in the schools. Parents who are ratepayers are “owners”, but they are also “beneficiaries” (or clients). The Board's Ends Policies identify the Board's beneficiaries and the benefits it is required to provide to them. The director of education is responsible, by delegation, to implement the Ends in the schools. It is therefore the director of education, and not the Board, that is responsible for day-to-day service delivery and all the challenges that it entails. The Board does, however, preoccupy itself with the treatment of beneficiaries and it has adopted a policy in that regard, Policy 3.3 – Treatment of parents and students. The director of education reports to the Board on an annual basis on the implementation of this policy, as well as of the Ends Policy.

- **Ends** policies identify the benefits the Conseil du Centre-Est must produce, to whom they are destined and the value they bring (or the cost they incur) for everyone.

Conseil du Centre-Est Trustees have thus undertaken, with the support of the administration, an analysis of the trends in education along with an enhanced consultative process with ratepayers, parents, staff, students, community members, etc. In 2001, at the end of this two-year process, which included numerous Board meetings dedicated solely to setting the Ends, the Board adopted a Mission Statement (a “mega-End”), Ends policies in education – in the form of a student exit profile with five paths – as well as a Vision Statement.

Ends Policies, better known as a “student exit profile” by staff and parents, represent the vision of student success at the Conseil du Centre-Est. This vision has been a unifying one as it was developed by the Board through a process of in-depth reflection and discussion. With its five paths (educational, personal, professional, Catholic and Francophone), the profile also expresses a global vision of success, that is a vision that is not strictly focused on academic competencies. It contains elements such as the development of a Francophone and Catholic identity and the acquisition of various personal, social, employment, civic and environmental competencies

Challenges of implementation

The two greatest challenges the Conseil du Centre-Est has encountered with respect to the implementation of this model of governance have been at the level of the director of education and not at the Board level. These challenges include obtaining the buy-in of all 2,000 staff members with respect to the vision of student success described in the Ends Policies, specifically the actualization of the student exit profile. We mustn’t forget that the director of education is accountable to the Board and that it is subject to an annual evaluation based on policy results. We must thus “join the head to the body” for governance to add value to the success of Conseil du Centre-Est students. To do this, senior management called upon several innovative strategies. Here are two examples.

In 2005, the Conseil du Centre-Est developed the concept of “professional liability” that confers onto each staff member the responsibility for developing and implementing appropriate measures to contribute to reaching the results set by the Board. This professional liability was reinforced through the systematic implementation of professional learning communities (PLC) in schools, with staff being asked to work in small collaborative teams with the learning data of their pupils in order to improve their performance.

In 2007, the Service d'imputabilité [Liability Service] was able to profile the results of each school, which were fully in line with Board expectations of the director of education, including the five paths of the exit profile of students. With minimal success standards, this profile allowed the schools to set local improvement priorities in order to increase the performance of all Board students. Thus all of the Conseil du Centre-Est efforts were concentrated on the same goal.

An assessment after 15 years of Policy Governance

Ever since adopting the Ends Policies in 2000, the Conseil du Centre-Est has operated fully in through Policy Governance. Through a strategic process of consultation and reflection, the four policy categories have been reviewed on several occasions by the Board, including the Ends Policies, in 2004, 2009 and 2014.

Moreover, governance operations themselves (e.g. meetings, report structures, performance indicators, assessment of the director of education's liability) have also been refined since 1998 with a view to continuous improvement. Like a learning organization, the Conseil du Centre-Est has been able to help its Policy Governance approach evolve over time, but the principles have always remained the same.

Proof of success

For 15 years, the Conseil du Centre-Est has had numerous objective and renowned successes. Here are some of them.

- A major reorganization of its school communities between 1998 and 2004: closure of 24 schools, renovations to 27 others (at a cost of \$78 million), adoption of the 7 to 12 organizational model, opening of 7 new schools, etc.;
- Full-time junior kindergarten (4 years old) and kindergarten (5 years old) to all students as of the year 2000, the first Ontario school board to offer such a program;
- Continued improvement in student test results at with the EQAO, the Conseil du Centre-Est was first in the province with success rates over 80% in practically all subjects evaluated;
- Several schools placed first in the yearly EQAE rankings published by the Fraser Institute;
- The Board was recognized by researchers Dr. Michael Fullan (in 2005) and Dr. Kenneth Leithwood (in 2010) as being one the strongest boards in the province;
- Parent satisfaction rates of over 94%;
- Grade 12 graduation rates of 95%;
- A 33% increase in school populations from 16,200 students in September 1998 to 21,500 in September 2014;
- The 2008 nomination of a Conseil du Centre-Est president as co-president of the provincial committee tasked with reviewing school board governance;

many of this committee's recommendations were inspired by Policy Governance and have now been incorporated into the *Education Act*.

It would not be fair to attribute all Conseil du Centre-Est successes to Policy Governance. The implementation of this approach did indeed create an environment suitable for change, for improvement and for innovation in the Board, which led to the creation of several practices identified by Ken Leithwood as also being characteristics essential to strong boards:

- shared mission and vision
- high expectations with regards to student success
- a coherent educational approach
- systematic use of data
- processes focused on learning improvement
- structures, procedures and budgets aligned with the mission and objectives of the Board, etc.

It is possible, however, to affirm that the exceptional leadership of Trustees since 1998, through their governance approach, has played a major role in the Board's performance. Without this leadership, it is highly unlikely that the Conseil du Centre-Est would have attained such a high level performance.

Success Factors

The last 25 years of governance at the Conseil du Centre-Est have been rich in learning of all kinds. In conclusion, here are 10 determining factors to the success of the Board through the implementation of Policy Governance. Boards that would like to adopt such an approach are invited to take note of them.

1. Appropriate conditions

It will be very difficult to change the governance approach of a board where there are significant differences (if not conflicts) with regard to values, or in a board which is going through a period of political or administrative dysfunction.

2. Climate of trust

Similarly, there must be a climate of trust and mutual respect between Trustees and senior management in order to change the governance approach. A climate of distrust is an obstacle to any change.

3. Change leadership from the Board

The choice of the governance model is up to the Board. The impetus for a change of approach should therefore come from members, not the director of education or some other external authority. One or more "champions" should be named from Board members in order to convince, mobilize and engage other Board members in the project. If most Board members are comfortable with their way

of doing things, it will be very difficult indeed to engage them in a profound and durable change in governance approach.

4. A shared desire for change

In Policy Governance, it takes two to the tango: the Board and management. To successfully implement Policy Governance, it is thus essential that the director of education and his or her team fully commit to the approach and recognize its benefits: less intrusion in management and procedures on the part of the Board, more managerial autonomy, more room for manoeuvre for new initiatives, etc. On the other hand, this team must be prepared to be frequently and rigorously accountable to the Board for results.

5. Informed coaching

As with any new learning, coaching by someone with proven expertise (e.g. a qualified consultant, someone from the inside, someone from another organization) with Policy Governance and the theoretical principles on which it rests is an essential factor for success. The work of Board members and senior management in policy development and in the review of the way Board meetings are held will be greatly facilitated. It will also be possible to identify and avoid divergences and pitfalls.

6. An investment in time

The Board will need to make time, outside its regular meetings, for training and policy development. Intense meetings dedicated solely to this (e.g. a retreat) will be more effective than adding time (e.g. an hour) to regular meetings. However when the approach has matured and is working well (normally after two years of effort), Board meetings will more than likely be shorter and more satisfying than in the traditional governance approach.

7. An effective support system

It is preferable that the core group of people who assist the Board president and the director of education in preparing for meetings be proficient in Policy Governance: Session secretary, committee resource, monitoring report writers and data collection, etc. These people should become internal "specialists" who stay informed on the subject, can propose improvements to the governance approach and ensure a certain level of stability during transition by acting as a sort of "corporate memory".

8. Well-planned transitions

It is likely that school Trustees will change at election time and directors of education and senior management are likely to change fairly regularly given that they often assume their respective roles near the end of their careers. The succession for these key roles must be carefully prepared in order to ensure proper management and the durability of the governance approach.

9. Engaging leadership from senior management

With Policy Governance, the director of education and senior management are faced with a daunting challenge: translating Board policies into strategic planning and into educational operations, directives, processes, procedures, approaches, etc., in order to be effectively implemented in the field. It is also a staff mobilization effort that requires that senior management demonstrate a high level of leadership. Having the right people on this team is a success criteria that must not be overlooked.

10. Quick-fire successes

“So? What does it give us?” will most likely ask the skeptics. When an organization undertakes such a dramatic sea change, it is heartening and necessary to quickly underscore some of the gains or successes, as small as they may be. Thus it is important that the Board be able to receive, in the short term, positive feedback on the investment in Policy Governance. Failing this, the Board should be asking some serious questions about the added value of implementing this mode of governance.