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A Policy Oriented Board of Trustees

Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic District School Board

INTRODUCTION

This case study is a brief reflection on the work being done at the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic (NPSC) District School Board in the area of Policy Governance. One of the characteristics of strong school districts presented in Kenneth Leithwood's 2013 study entitled *Strong Districts and Their Leadership* is a policy approach to governance, and while the Policy Governance model at NPSC is aligned to this characteristic, implicit to this approach to governance at NPSC, and at any learning organization, is the characteristic of a broadly shared mission, vision and goals founded on ambitious images of the educated person. So in essence, in focusing on the one characteristic, the development of the other characteristics is inevitable.

POLICY GOVERNANCE MODEL: A FOCUS ON POLICY TO DRIVE SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT

Based on the work of John Carver, author of *Boards That Make A Difference*, this model of governance focuses on the use of board policies as the instruments for creating the vision, establishing the purposes, setting parameters for administration, and evaluating District outcomes. It has major implications for the way that the Board of Trustees relates to the senior administration and to the District's ratepayers and stakeholders.

As suggested by Policy Governance, the role of the school board is to act on behalf of the ratepayers to ensure that the school district achieves what it should, while avoiding what is unacceptable. At NPSC, the Board of Trustees, through its election by Catholic school ratepayers, has been granted the legal and moral responsibility and authority to govern the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board. This is the value that the Board adds to the District's output.

The role of the school board

One of the key principles of the Policy Governance model is that **the Board speaks with "one voice"**. Only the Board as a whole legitimately wields its authority, which is granted by the *Education Act*. Hence, the Director of Education is bound by what the Board corporate says, but never by what any individual trustee says.

This principle of “one voice” is important to the Board’s ability to delegate its authority to manage to the Director of Education. This brings us to a second key principle: **the Director of Education is considered to be the Board’s one employee**. He or she is the one person who is held responsible by the Board for ensuring that the District achieves what it should, and avoids that which is unacceptable. All other employees are hired by, work for, and are responsible to the Director of Education.

These two principles have important implications for board governance and district management. Taken together, they suggest a third principle: **the clear delineation of governance and administration**. Because the Board has its own job to do, the Board and its committees are expected to deal with governance or policy issues, not administrative matters. This means that when it wishes to give direction to senior administration, the Board corporate addresses the Director of Education. The voice of the Board is expressed most clearly and comprehensively through its governance policies. The Director of Education expands on these policies through *administrative policies and regulations*, which give more specific direction to District employees.

On behalf of the ownership

The policy governance model has important implications not only for the Board’s relationship with the Director of Education, senior administration and staff, but also for ratepayers, parents, and other stakeholders. The Board of Trustees is not the ownership of the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board, but as an elected body, **the Board legally represents the moral owners, who are the ratepayers**. The Board speaks and acts on their behalf, a task that requires both knowing who the owners are and what their desires are, and distinguishing “owners” from “customers” (students) and other stakeholder groups. At NPSC, the forging of systematic and coherent links with owners have been a key priority for the Board of Trustees as they embarked and continued on the implementation of this model of governance in our District.

To ensure

The Board of Trustees is responsible to ensure that things come out right, not just to hope they do. Ensuring that things come out right under the Policy Governance model requires three steps. First, **the Board must describe the criteria that would signify the success of our District**. Second, **the Board must hold the Director of Education accountable** for reaching these criteria. This allows the District’s performance to be focused in one individual, although actual performance occurs due to many individuals. Third, the Board must systematically and

rigorously check to see if these criteria are being met; that is, **the Board must monitor performance regularly**. The Board has the option of monitoring any policy, at any time, using one or more of the following three methods:

Internal monitoring report: disclosure of compliance by the Director of Education using data that are sufficiently clear, unbiased, and representative to cause the Board to be confident that a reasonable interpretation of Board policy has been achieved.

External monitoring report: Discovery of compliance information by an impartial, external auditor, inspector or judge who is selected by, and reports directly to the Board.

Direct Board Inspection monitoring report: This is a Board inspection of documents, activities or circumstances directed by the Board which allows a test of policy compliance.

Each year, the Director of Education provides the Board of Trustees with a schedule for the presentation of internal monitoring reports at public Board meetings, throughout the school year. The formal evaluation of the Director of Education's performance is based on the achievement of the Board's Ends Policies (outcomes, results) and compliance with the Board's Executive Limitations Policies, as determined by all monitoring reports.

Achieves what it should

The most important aspect of instructing the Director of Education is determining "*what good is this organization to accomplish, for whom, at what cost or relative worth?*" The Policy Governance model refers to these ways of describing achievement as "**ends**", as opposed to "means". Traditional approaches to governance have seen school boards focus on what **activities** the organization will be engaged in, not the consumer **result** that is to be achieved. The Policy Governance model takes the view that, in order for boards to lead, they must learn that services, programs and curricula have no value except as they produce the desired **results**.

Avoid what is unacceptable

Although putting the emphasis on **Ends** is a powerful tactic for Board leadership, the Board cannot forget that it is also accountable for "means" as well. **Means** refers to all aspects of the organization that are not "ends"; most specifically practices, methods, situations and conditions that are allowed to occur or exist.

For boards using traditional approaches to governance, justifiable concerns over the means being used by administration to achieve ends can lead to micro-management

and even meddling. The Policy Governance model offers a way for boards to be accountable for staff practices and situations without interfering with the legitimate role of administration, or trivializing the role of the board.

As in the case of the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic School District, the Board, through its **Executive Limitations Policies**, has stated those means that are unacceptable. Then it demands data that permits it to monitor to ensure that the boundaries thus set are being observed. These proscriptions avoid telling the Director of Education how to manage, but do tell him or her **how not to manage**. Although phrased in negative terms, these limiting statements are quite positive, for they clearly imply: “if the Board has not said you can’t, you can.”

To fulfill its board leadership in this more effective way, the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board operates from four categories of policies in Policy Governance:

- policy about outcomes, results (Ends);
- policies that prescribe how the board itself will operate (Governance Process);
- policies that delineate how governance links with administration (Board/Director of Education Relationship); and
- policies that constrain the Director of Education (Executive Limitations).

The Board of Trustees at NPSC seeks to focus their work on governance matters, including its critical linkage with the ownership to continually sure that the Ends and the vision it has set for the organization reflect the values of its ownership and create meaningful benefits for the community. Policy Governance is a framework for strategic and visionary board leadership and continual system improvement.

THE JOURNEY TO POLICY GOVERNANCE AT NPSC

The journey began in 2004, following the election of a new board, and with a newly appointed senior administration, most within two to three years of experience. The Board of Trustees was made up of some newly elected trustees, some with experience, and others with significant experience/time spent as a trustee. But as a new board, it was very eager to do good work. We had also just completed a system wide strategic planning process, developing a new vision and mission, as well as the design of a new Corporate ID.

At that same time, the Ministry of Education and The Learning Partnership had co-sponsored a timely symposium on Governance, attended by the Director of Education and the Chair of the Board. There were excellent presentations from both

education- and non-education-sector organizations, in-service sessions and workshops on good governance principles. This really piqued the interest of the entire board during the follow-up to the session. Their interest, as well as a demonstrated commitment to learning more about policy governance, was key – they were uncertain, they knew they were taking a risk, but they were genuinely committed to learning more about it.

A trained Policy Governance (Carver) facilitator was engaged to in-service both board members and senior staff. We learned the basic principles, we had read John Carver's book "*Boards That Make a Difference*", and we learned about the many benefits of this model and its simplicity of understanding. The journey then to move in this direction "officially" began in 2005, where the 4 categories of governance polices were developed for NPSC, and continued and ongoing training occurred, with board members committed to their own annual and ongoing education with the financial support of the board's governance funding envelope.

Conditions supporting a move to a policy governance

In reflecting on the journey, the following conditions were present in our context at the time:

- in a period of renewal;
- culture of risk taking among board members, willingness to lead in uncharted waters;
- commitment and openness to new learning;
- sense of pride in governing well;
- understanding the difference between "responsibility" and "accountability";
- Senior staff was very new and at the beginning of their journey in the role, had to be comfortable with a new style of accountability and to be ready to not only provide evidence in support of the achievement of the board's goals, but would also learn so much more about their District in so doing.

Board members convinced

Trustees were convinced to move in this direction for two main reasons:

- The **assurance of the system's performance** and realization of its goals (Ends) through regular monitoring of the performance of the Director/senior staff; and
- Their role of envisioning the future is done through **regular linking with the district's ownership** or community of stakeholders.

Essentially the trustee's job is twofold - linking with the organization's ownership or community of stakeholders and ensuring the achievement of the overall outcomes it sets for the organization through monitoring the performance of the Director.

Professional Development on policy governance model

A critical component of the Board's movement to the policy governance model is willingness and openness to learn and continue to engage in professional development on good governance. The following is a brief summary of the training involved:

- engaging a trained Policy Governance (Carver) facilitator to in-service both board members and senior staff;
- learning the basic principles;
- beginning with reading John Carver's book "*Boards That Make a Difference*";
- understanding the many benefits of this model, and its simplicity and clarity through a very clear distinction of roles;
- developing with the governance facilitator the four categories of governance polices;
- approving the new model to begin in 2006 following a year of ongoing training;
- continued and ongoing training, demonstrating a board committed to their own education, supported financially by the governance funding envelope, and through "**governance coaching**". This involved engaging a policy governance expert, for about 4 years, who provided governance coaching and monthly coaching reports and feedback on board meetings, board planning, ownership linkage activities and Director monitoring reports. This regular, monthly process allowed for an objective observer and coach who would continually provide feedback, advice, and professional development not only to trustees but to staff as well, in continually improving the way we develop and present our monitoring reports.

Potential pitfalls

As with any change in practice or change process in a new direction, there are some insights NPSC has gained and has recognized some potential pitfalls to avoid in moving to a policy-oriented model of governance. Some examples -

- When things get difficult, there has to be a great deal of discipline on the part of the whole board, but especially on the part of the Chair and Director, in not reverting back to previous practices.
- Caution to CEOs, that while there is a clear distinction of roles, and certain areas, such as operations, are in the purview of the CEO and executive team, this means that more than ever the board must be kept informed of issues arising. While the Board may not be making decisions on certain such items, or it may not be part of their "job" or role, it is vitally important for it to

- understand the kinds of issues or challenges, to offer advice and insights, and, equally, to understand the kinds of successes, the system is experiencing.
- Don't do it on your own – invest in a highly knowledgeable trainer/facilitator of the Policy Governance model (we chose someone who was highly skilled in the Carver model). This includes training, the development of new governance policies, and consider even regular coaching. If you don't stay current and continually learn about what it means to govern well, it is easy to slide back to previous habits.

FOCUS ON RESULTS vs “ACTIVITIES”

The Policy Governance model refers to ways of describing achievement as “Ends”, which describe *what results, for whom, and at what cost*. In our school district, these results, or Ends statements, are clearly, well-stated and detailed outcomes for students. In essence, they portray “ambitious images of the educated person”, a characteristic of strong districts, as presented by Leithwood. Categorized into **knowledge and skills, faith formation, healthy and positive attitudes, responsibility and respect for the world**, at NPSC, these are the goals and outcomes for our students on which we as system leaders provide evidence of achievement to the Board of Trustees on an annual basis.

System leaders are always compelled to stay closely connected to what has to be occurring in schools and in classrooms, and we must ensure that we can measure and demonstrate the impact of all this work. At NPSC, the evidence of Ends achievement, presented to the Board, is gathered primarily from:

- EQAO and other assessment data (knowledge and skills);
- Report card data;
- Credit accumulation in specific programs areas;
- Teacher observations from specific initiatives and activities;
- Student voice opportunities and feedback,
- Exit surveys in Grade 8 and Grade 12 (including the ENDS relating to attitudes, to responsibility, respect, faith development, social justice);
- Principal and teacher surveys;
- Monitoring through regularly scheduled superintendent and director school visits, etc.

It is through this accountability system that our system leaders authentically connect to and see themselves in the work of student achievement and well-being. This is much different than reporting on the participation in a long list of activities the system has engaged in; instead, the focus is on what results were achieved from

all the work that has been undertaken (and through the resources allocated), and the evidence that demonstrates this achievement.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND LINKING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

The relationships that matter the most in strong school districts are the ones that demonstrate a commitment to communication and collaboration. In a policy-oriented board, the community/stakeholder relationship-building strategies that demonstrate the most impact on improved student outcomes are those that focus on the future. In order to ensure that the organization's goals for the future reflect the values of its ownership and creates meaningful benefits for the community, a key role for the Board of Trustees is to link with the community, and with its owners.

NPSC's Board of Trustees and senior administration systematically engage in an ongoing 4-year cycle of planning for ownership linkage. Over the last four years, focus groups and dialogue opportunities were planned and held with a variety of stakeholder groups, including Aboriginal community partners, post-secondary institutions, parent representatives, Labour Market Group, and Catholic community representatives. The focus groups offer dialogue opportunities for us to gather insights and perspectives on our Ends or goals from outside the organization, through questions that focus more on "what" than "how". Some examples of questions asked during linkage dialogue sessions include:

- *What do you believe will be the most significant challenges facing Catholic education over the next 5-10 years?*
- *If this were 2025, and we were looking back over the last 10 years, what would you like to be able to say is different in our community in 2025 because the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic DSB has been here in those 10 years?*
- *One of the results or goals (Ends statements) the Board has currently set for the organization to achieve is: "Students have knowledge & skills, appropriate to their age and learning ability, to reach their full potential". What does this mean to you? What specific results would have to be achieved to ensure this happens?*
- *What values and skills would you hope that our Catholic secondary school graduates integrate as they matriculate through your post-secondary education system?*
- *What is student success in the 21st century?*

In the fourth year of each four-year cycle, which coincides with the final year of the Board's current term, the Board's Ends are reviewed and revised based on linkage input and feedback it has received during the course of its term. This ensures that that there is perpetual strategic leadership in creating a future for our school district that reflects the values of our "owners". Solid relationships are built on trust and support, which, in turn, depend on meaningful involvement and influence.

CONCLUSION

The Board of Trustees and senior administration have worked diligently over the years to examine the Policy Governance model and then to develop the model for our organization. Since its formal implementation in January 2006, NPSC has recognized that the adoption of the model is just the beginning and that the development and refinements of the Policy Governance model is a never-ending process and a key responsibility of trusteeship and strategic executive leadership. We believe that this is a step in the pursuit of excellence in the governing process itself, an in executive leadership, and that this must be a perpetual task of any strong school district that looks for excellence throughout its organization.