

School Board Members Duties Clarification Act (Bill 131)

Law Amendments Committee Presentation

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INTRODUCTION

It has been a tumultuous few years for school boards in Nova Scotia. The Deloitte report on the South Shore school board earlier this year notes some real issues that need addressing. However the proposed amendments in Bill 131 only support the drift towards corporate board governance and the shift away from the school board's key role in democratic representation and public engagement.

In preparing for this presentation, I reviewed the Education Act. In it (section 64) there is an extensive description of the powers and duties of school boards. It already contains the content of the proposed amendments around focusing on student achievement and fulfilling duties outlined under the Act. The crux of the three amendments in Bill 131, then, is the directive to "respect that the superintendent is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school board."

REPRESENTATIVE ROLE

Having just come through the municipal and school board elections last month, it is fair to say that low voter turnout is a concern for all governments. This is especially the case for school board elections, which in HRM as an example, saw only 24% voter turnout. There are many calls for school boards to be eliminated because people do not understand their role. As a school board candidate in this past election, a question I heard many times on the doorstep was "what does the school board do?" and "why should I vote for it?"

In Canada, at all levels of government, participation in government decision-making is generally done by electing representatives who act as advocates for the public's interests. When I stood on peoples' doorsteps and was asked "what is the point of a school board", I explained that school board members are there to hear the concerns of students and families and act as their advocates within the education system – representing their issues and concerns to both the school board administration and the Department of Education. As parents, it is important that we have some say over how our children's days are spent. We have ultimate responsibility for our children's welfare and we need to have our opinions, suggestions and concerns heard and acted upon by the system that owns them for 6 to 8 hours every day. This is the role of an elected school board. In essence, they run parallel to our municipal Councils as grassroots representation closest to the people, and in this case, students. They

use this public input to shape strategic decisions on budget, school boundaries and communities, and general day-to-day issues in schools.

I want to quote the Education Act again. In the introduction, the Act speaks of encouraging meaningful partnerships between students, parents, teachers and the public. It also states that parents have a right and a responsibility to participate in decisions that affect their children.

Yet there is nothing that speaks to this central, vital role of school board members in the proposed amendments in Bill 131. By stating that board members should defer to the superintendent without any mention of their representative and strategic oversight and policy role, the amendments actually appear to put the superintendent in charge of the school board in place of the elected representatives. If elected school board members are to be kept from interfering in the school system, then it begs the question what is the point of an elected board?

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Prior to 1991, school boards were not universally elected in Nova Scotia. Instead they were one-third elected, one-third municipally appointed, and one-third provincially appointed. Universal school board elections were brought in because it was felt to be a better and more democratic way of providing a balanced school board representing all aspects of our society. Twenty years later, this is being eroded through a growing number of school board firings and now legislative changes that appear to reduce the scope of responsibility of legitimately elected board members.

Reducing the authority of those who act as student and public advocates is a surefire way to reduce citizen engagement and voter turnout. If school board members appear to be merely a rubber stamp for the decisions of the administration, it risks being seen as nothing more than a decoy to take the political heat off of the Department of Education for budget cutbacks and school closures. This perception undermines the democratic process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As I noted at the start, there have been some issues with school boards. However the same is true of our municipal and provincial governments and arms-length government organizations. I believe that by and large, our elected school board members are competent, responsible people with a good sense of their role and responsibilities. I propose a better way to address governance issues would be with stronger training and orientation for new board members, rather than the amendments before. If nothing else, should Bill 131 proceed it should include a clause that speaks to the strategic oversight and representative role of board members, to ensure this vital responsibility is not lost.

STUDENTS FIRST NOVA SCOTIA



Statement of Principles

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Students First NS Statement of Principles

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Better schools begin with you. To truly transform education in Nova Scotia, to create a system that puts students' needs first, we need parents, teachers, administrators, politicians, and citizens from across the province to come together, recognize the problems in our system, and work together to overcome them.

We believe:

- Great teachers can make a tremendous difference for students of every background; all children deserve great teachers.
- Students should not need luck to get a good education; every family should be able to choose an excellent school.
- Public dollars belong where they can make the biggest difference; we must fight ineffective programs and bureaucracy.
- Parental involvement is key to improved student outcomes, but the entire community must be engaged in the effort to improve our schools

*IF YOU AGREE, THEN JOIN US and
SIGN ON IN SUPPORT OF THESE FIVE PRINCIPLES:*

PUT STUDENTS FIRST

Education should be first and foremost about the student. No two students are the same and so our system must be flexible and adaptive to the needs of every child.

EMPOWER PARENTS

Every family should have the information and access to choose among quality schools. No student should be forced to attend a low-performing school or be taught by a low-performing teacher.

ELEVATE TEACHING

Great teachers make a difference for children of all backgrounds. All children deserve great teachers.

RAISE STANDARDS

The surest road to mediocrity is lowered expectations. Standards and expectations should be at the highest level for everyone: students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community.

SPEND WISELY

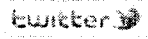
Administrators should use resources efficiently to ensure sustainable spending that puts students first. Schools should be managed through structures that ensure a focus on student results rather than adult interests.

We invite you to join us by signing the pledge and sending your completed form to:

Paul Bennett : membership@StudentsFirstNS.ca

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