

Seeking Election: Evaluating a Campaign for Public School Board Trusteeship

Robin Mueller

University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

Canadian public school board trustees are generally chosen by way of public ballot in civic elections. A comparison of board governance literature to a local narrative account of public school board elections exposes several gaps between espoused democratic ideals and the realities of public engagement in trustee selection. I investigate the nature and extent of this misalignment in order to establish a baseline for future inquiry into public perceptions of school board governance, engagement in school board elections, democratic representation in public school systems, and links between effective governance and educational outcomes.

Key words : governance, school board, elections, trustee, democracy and education

Résumé

Les conseillères et conseillers scolaires des écoles publiques canadiennes sont généralement choisis par scrutin public dans les élections municipales. Une comparaison entre la documentation provenant de la gouvernance d'un conseil scolaire et un compte rendu local sur les élections scolaires, révèle plusieurs écarts entre les idéaux démocratiques soutenus et les réalités de l'engagement du public dans le choix des conseillères et des conseillers. J'ai étudié la nature et l'ampleur de ce décalage dans le but d'établir une base pour les recherches futures sur les perceptions générales de la gouvernance des conseils scolaires, l'engagement dans les élections des conseils scolaires, la représentation démocratique dans le système des écoles publiques, et les liens entre une gouvernance efficace et les résultats scolaires.

Mots-clés: gouvernance, conseil scolaire, élections, conseiller scolaire, démocratie et éducation

Seeking Election: Evaluating a Campaign for Public School Board Trusteeship

It is difficult to imagine selecting public school board trustees in a manner alternative to conventional civic elections. The majority of Canadian school board trustees are elected to represent public interests by way of public ballot; such elections are founded in deeply embedded democratic ideals, and have constituted a normative approach to trustee selection in Canada for almost 100 years. However, as I discovered during my own recent bid for trusteeship, there are some conspicuous misalignments between board governance ideals and civic campaign realities. I investigate the nature and extent of this misalignment through a comparative approach; in this paper, I will synthesize and summarize pertinent school board governance literature and compare the results with my own narrative description of a public school board electoral campaign. This comparison reveals a pronounced divergence between democratic ideals and the reality of public engagement during trustee elections, and invites a further in-depth consideration of electoral conventions with respect to school board trustee selection.

My account of trustee electoral processes is personal and, consequently, subjective. The issues identified and tensions discussed in this paper arise from comparisons involving my own narrative journal accounts, and are reflective of one personal experience as a public school board trustee candidate during one civic election. Throughout the election campaign, I used narrative and journaling as methods of exploring “personal, lived experience in a way that assists in the construction of identity, reinforces or challenges private and public belief systems and values, and either resists or reinforces the dominant cultural practices of the community” (Corey, as quoted in Alexander, 2008, p. 92). In this sense, personal narrative constitutes a point of departure. I do not make any generalized claims based on my own experiences; instead, I engage in a comparative analysis of the narrative in order to establish a baseline from which to engage in further inquiry. The comparison is based on literature that primarily reflects public school board governance in a Saskatchewan context, though I also utilize pan-Canadian literature in order to suggest broader applicability where appropriate. I aim to utilize a combination of narrative and literature review as a means to explore the domain of electoral processes and school board governance, and to better understand dynamics and trends therein.

Context – Foundations for a Reflection on Personal Narrative

I attended my first Saskatoon Public School Board meeting in February, 2009. This was not a voluntary effort; I tentatively stepped into the boardroom in my role as a graduate student, tasked with conducting a field observation to critically assess emerging Saskatoon Public School Board policy issues and governance processes. At that time I was only marginally aware of the purpose of the public school board, and I was not particularly interested in learning more. However, when the meeting began, my interest piqued. I was curious about the board’s approach to governance issues, and interested in how the collective interaction between trustees contributed to educational practice in our city. The dynamic of the meeting engaged me and

resonated with me, to such an extent that, after some further investigation, I decided it would be worthwhile to seek office as a public school board trustee myself. When a Saskatoon Civic Election approached in fall 2009, I officially declared my interest and enlisted as a trustee candidate.

As the pre-election activity progressed, I found myself surprised by the general confusion surrounding perceptions of school board's purpose. I also became quickly frustrated by an apparent lack of engagement among school board and community stakeholders. In an effort to achieve clarity about the purpose and intent informing my campaign, I started to document my experiences via a series of journal entries. Informally, I also began comparing my experience with espoused ideals regarding the public school board's function and democratic trustee selection. These initial comparisons revealed distinct misalignments between exemplars of trusteeship, democratic ideals inherent in school board elections, and my own lived experience. While such misalignments are naturally to be expected between ideology and reality, the pronounced quality of the misalignment I observed indicated an opportunity to pursue greater understanding of this phenomenon.

The Idea of Trusteeship – Ideals in Education, Democracy, Governance, and Representation

Background: Purpose and structure of public education in Canada.

Contemporary ideals regarding the purpose of Canadian public education are multi-faceted and diverse, informed by principles that underpinned the establishment of the public education system a century ago and have been augmented by current educational trends. Public school supporters in the mid-19th century wanted a system of education in which citizens could acquire valuable knowledge and skill, free of any denominational or cultural influence (Friesen & Lyons Friesen, 2001; Johnson, 1968). In recent years, educational purposes have become increasingly complex, and public schools are now additionally seen as agents for socialization, knowledge production, improvement of social conditions, workforce preparation, and social class mobility (Friesen & Lyons Friesen, 2001; Wotherspoon, 2004). Furthermore, ideas about public schooling are generally informed by John Dewey's espoused ideals of citizenship that characterize the school system as a democratic, participatory, and strategic sub-system of society (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett, 2007). Purposes of public education are locally articulated with differing emphases depending on provincial context. In Saskatchewan, provincial priorities for education include writing and math literacy, equitable opportunity for all students, and effective career and post-secondary transitions (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008).

Development of educational agendas in Canada falls under provincial jurisdiction (Wotherspoon, 2004). Educational mandates are determined within boundaries of provincial/governmental hierarchies. Provincial Ministries of Education, at the peaks of authority, maintain responsibility for guiding public school systems with over-arching recommendations, and schools, at the lower end of hierarchies, are responsible for the delivery of education on a day-to-day basis (Stelmach et al., 2010; Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). School

boards, situated near the middle of most provincial educational hierarchies, serve as intermediaries between Ministries, schools, and constituents (Stelmach et al, 2010; Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). It is the role of public school boards to assist with maintenance of local, community-informed educational practice in light of over-arching aims with respect to the provision of education as a public service (Wickstrom, 1997), and in alignment with provincial priorities for public education (Reimer, 2008).

Canadian public school boards generally govern education in their respective communities (Fleming, 1997; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2006). Governance is defined, in context of this paper, as the process of guiding a particular system. Governance is a complex, process-based activity that includes expression of mechanisms through which stakeholders voice their concerns, articulate interests, and exercise rights (Farazmand, 2004). With respect to school systems, governance “is the integral leadership role and central purpose for the existence of the school board... and a function that *only* the school board can provide” (Reimer, 2008, p. 13, emphasis in original). Ideally, school boards exist to represent community interests in context of the decision-making processes enacted within school systems (Carver, 2002). This over-arching purpose informs particularities of local school board function and responsibility.

School board function and responsibility. While board function varies between provinces and communities, in Saskatchewan it is the responsibility of public school boards to “[establish] direction for the school system, provide a structure by establishing policies, ensure accountability, and provide community leadership on behalf of the school system and public education” (Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2006, p. 32). In addition, the Saskatchewan Education Act (1995) stipulates public school boards have the authority and duty to supervise the network of schools in their respective divisions. The Saskatoon Public School Board responds to these obligations by adhering to a pre-determined set of roles and responsibilities (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2005). The Board establishes school system direction by articulating a vision, which features well-aligned goals, priorities, and outcomes. Policy-related Board responsibilities include needs assessment, policy approval, fiscal stewardship, and policy evaluation. Accountability is maintained by the Saskatoon Public School Board through explicitly sharing information, hearing appeals, facilitating two-way communication with stakeholders, and actively aligning Board processes with principles and interests advocated by the Saskatoon Public School Division. Finally, the Saskatoon Public School Board demonstrates responsibility for providing community leadership through advocacy regarding broad community issues, stakeholder development, and modeling an ethical culture.

Public school board governance models. Local public school board trustee responsibility is determined within each board’s espoused model of governance. The majority of Canadian public school boards align, to varying functional degrees, to models of either policy governance (Manitoba School Boards Association, 2010) or strategic governance, or a hybrid of the two (Alberta School Boards Association, 2010; Nova Scotia School Boards Association, n.d.;

Walker, 2009). Models of policy and strategic governance are those endorsed by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (2005).

When abiding by policy governance models, school boards function primarily to serve students and the larger community (Carver, 2002). According to this model, a public school board is responsible for ensuring that the school system adheres to purposes defined by its community constituents; boards are accountable to constituents for school performance and effectiveness (Carver & Charney, 2004). However, the scope of this task is generally too large to be managed strictly by board members, so boards of trustees delegate important functional and management tasks to appropriate staff (Carver, 2002; Carver & Charney, 2004). In Saskatchewan, public school board policy governance is consequently characterized by provision of board mandates to divisional Directors of Education, and development of broad policies that accompany these mandates (Walker, 2009). Policy-governance boards focus on articulating over-arching values for the purpose of informing pre-determined ends, consequently providing Directors with practical standards, such that they are able to do the work of management while maintaining accountability to the board (Carver, 2002). Focus on *ends issues* helps policy-oriented boards explicitly link policies with the worth of desired results, and enables such boards to achieve transparent accountability to constituents (Carver & Charney, 2004).

Strategic school board governance is characterized by a focus on articulating concise future vision and aligning board activity with that vision (Light, 2001). In Saskatchewan school divisions, public school boards practicing strategic governance invest their attention “on turning the Division vision and values into reality” (Walker, 2009, p. 40). Instead of merely accepting or mandating strategy, these boards play an active role in *constructing* strategy (Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005a). Strategic boards invest significantly in their commitment to *principled decision-making*; in other words, they are explicit about aligning decisions with pre-determined principles (Walker, 2009). Through strategic governance, public school boards establish *constancy of purpose*, which enables them to make collective, consistently well-aligned decisions (Light, 2001). Strategically oriented boards are proactive, and they are consequently enabled to anticipate emerging issues and react before issues become urgent (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005b).

Advocates for both policy and strategic governance models emphasize need for boards to delegate work in a timely and appropriate manner. Delegation of practical and applied work ensures that trustees are not required to perform “management” tasks that are better suited to, and more appropriately situated with, the Director of Education or divisional staff. While a strategic board monitors alignment between available resources and the work to be done (Light, 2001), neither a policy nor strategic board will engage in managing practical school tasks or functions (Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005a; Carver, 2002; Walker, 2009). Such boards are not concerned with specific activities or methods in schools, but with developing strategy and policy in order to ensure that desired results are met for community constituents (Carver, 2002).

Alternative governance strategies to policy and strategic models are, and have been, used by public school boards in Saskatchewan, but policy and strategic approaches have been established as current governance standards (Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2006;

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008; Walker, 2009). Further, the Saskatoon Public School Board is explicit about its orientation as a hybrid policy/strategic board (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2005). Saskatchewan public school boards have found policy/strategy orientations to be effective governance models; in fact, public school board research in Saskatchewan demonstrated that school boards “who identified with policy and strategic governance features were more likely to perceive and be perceived as highly effective boards” (Walker, 2009, p. 123).

Implications of effective board practice relate directly to previously noted purposes of public education. A demonstrated correlation exists between effective board governance and organizational effectiveness in the corporate sector (Cadbury, 2002), and there is an assumed correlation of similar nature in education (Reimer, 2008; Trenta et al., 2002). This suggests that effective board governance contributes to positive educational outcomes, with regard to both student learning and achievement (Reimer, 2008; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2006). When these outcomes align with established local and provincial vision and purpose, effective board governance then makes a meaningful contribution to school effectiveness.

Role of trustees in public school board governance. Public school board trustees act as functionaries within a collective that maintains public legal authority (Carver & Charney, 2004). This legal right is summarized in the *one voice principal*, which requires trustees to convene as a collective in order to make decisions, and subsequently requires individual trustees to support resulting outcomes (Carver & Charney, 2004; Reimer, 2008). Individual trustees also have responsibilities to fulfill in their role as part of a collective. Board members are obliged to learn about effective governance practices, to understand their school division’s espoused mission and vision, and to be accountable and transparent with constituents about school board processes (Reimer, 2008). In addition, trustees are expected to maintain a focus on their governance role and to resist participating in management tasks and daily functions in schools (Carver & Charney, 2004; Reimer, 2008; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2006).

School board trusteeship is characterized by what could be considered several authoritative responsibilities, some of which may differ depending on provincial context. Generally, school boards are collectively accountable for six core responsibilities: (a) guiding the school division’s over-arching mission, purpose, and goals; (b) monitoring and assessing key initiatives and student outcomes; (c) hiring the director and key divisional administrative/leadership staff; (d) overseeing distribution of material and human resources; (e) reflecting a positive educational image and actively representing community interests with respect to divisional educational development; and (f) ensuring governance, fiscal, legal, administrative, and programmatic accountability (McCormick, Barnett, Alavi, & Newcombe, 2006; Renihan, 1991; Resnick, 1999; Smoley, 1999). In Saskatchewan, according to the Provincial Education Act, school boards are additionally responsible for general supervision of division administration, maintenance of school infrastructure, appointment of school principals, determining general timelines for school entry age, prescribing division attendance requirements,

defining district boundaries, approving divisional curriculum, and enforcing disciplinary action (Stelmach et al., 2010). In regulatory and legal terms, then, public school boards have no responsibility for oversight or implementation of school-based educational delivery and programming.

Public school board trustees ideally accept their responsibilities in order to collectively serve the best interests of a community (Panas, 1991; Reimer, 2008; Smoley, 1999). A knowledge of, and commitment to, community constituents is widely cited as an integral part of responsible governance (Carver, 2002; Chait, Ryan & Taylor, 2005a; Light, 2001). In Saskatoon and many other Canadian municipalities, the community served by the public school board includes students, teachers, administrators, parents, and citizens within constituent wards. Saskatoon constituents hold a sizeable stake in public education, as the Saskatoon Public School Board maintains fiscal responsibility for distribution of over \$84 million in tax revenue (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2009). Distribution of these funds primarily impacts students: in Saskatoon, 53 primary and secondary public schools serve almost 160,000 students (Saskatoon Public Schools, December 2009). Through strategic planning and policy articulation, the Public School Board exerts additional influence in the community through a diverse range of processes and initiatives, from construction of public infrastructure to job creation in local schools (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2009). Saskatoon residents, then, have much at stake in selecting public school board trustees who hold responsibility for governance processes that determine these outcomes.

Democratic ideals in public school board trustee election. In Canada, public school board trustees are selected democratically within school districts during civic elections (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). Public school boards in Saskatchewan were formally established in the early 1900s, and board electoral processes were established in parallel to the formation and growth of stable communities and schools (Horsman, 2009). Public school systems were modeled on principles of participatory democracy in an effort to resist American and religious controls, with a goal of achieving community autonomy and locally informed schools (Wotherspoon, 2004). A democratic ideal was mirrored in the public school system, and in early stages of the system's establishment, schools "gradually took on the hues of our developing social democracy" (Johnson, 1968, p. 3).

Selection of public school board trustees by public ballot serves an additional purpose informed by democratic ideals. Since it is not possible for the thousands of residents in any given school division to collectively govern their local school system, a democratic process has been established so citizens can engage in their right to choose representatives (Melvin, 2006). Founded on democratic principles that move beyond formal politics, trustee selection is undergirded by a belief that people should have some influence in decisions that affect them (Levin, 1994); it is informed by participatory notions suggesting that individuals have a right to engage in "formation or expression of the common will" (Dewey, in Benson et al., 2007). As public institutions, school boards reflect values embedded in democratic processes, and school

board trustees function as representatives and guardians of public interests and trust (Reimer, 2008).

Character of alignment between ideals and reality in trustee election.

Selection of public school board trustees through public ballot is clearly a process rooted in the historical development of Canadian school systems, and one philosophically informed by democratic ideals of representation. I suspect that, for many proponents and supporters of public education, the electoral process seems a measured and fair means of selecting representative school board trustees. However, my experience as a trustee candidate during a civic election campaign has supported my understanding that there is a marked misalignment between the realities of democratic process with respect to trustee selection and the function that trustees are intended to serve. This misalignment is additionally augmented by a demonstrated lack of public understanding regarding the role of school board trustees, and a widespread public disengagement from civic electoral processes.

Misalignments Expressed During Campaign for Public School Board Trustee

Public perception of school board role and function. As I engaged in a campaign for Saskatoon Public School Board trusteeship, I noticed several misalignments between my own experience and ideals of board function, democratic processes, and trustee selection. During and immediately after the election I constructed a narrative account of my experience, and in doing so was able to contrast my own observations with aforementioned ideals. My observations took several aspects of the election campaign into consideration, including print material distributed by candidates, verbal discourse at candidate panels, one-to-one conversations with constituents, formally arranged candidate activities, and questions directed to me by media, constituents, and other agencies.

Almost immediately after nominations for trustee candidates ceased, and prior to meeting other Public School Board trustee candidates in my ward, campaign brochures began appearing in my mailbox. The brochures clearly reflected candidates' strengths and experiences, but in many cases also revealed that candidates had, at least in part, based their election platforms on issues that were not directly connected to Saskatoon Public School Board function nor established trustee roles. One candidate, for example, expressed his intention to "*provide* diverse educational programming to reflect the needs of a changing society" within a particular ward (Waldron, 2009, emphasis added). While the Saskatoon Public School Board influences curricular direction taken in local schools through over-arching policy, and while school boards are responsible for maintaining productive school/board relationships (Smoley, 1999), provision and delivery of school programming is mandated to educators and their administrators within immediate local school contexts (Phillips, Raham, & Renihan, 2010; Reimer, 2008). In another campaign brochure, a candidate alluded to expanding the offering of several practical opportunities for students within a particular constituent ward (Banks, 2009); this campaign material was also suggestive of the candidate's belief that, as a trustee, she could have direct

influence in day-to-day function and operation of school programming. These examples of written discourse support Smoley's claim that "to have so much responsibility, school board members are often remarkably ill-prepared for service" (1999, p. xv); during my campaign experience, these materials constituted early indications of misalignment.

As the campaign progressed I received many telephone calls from interested citizens who sought my opinion about a variety of school board campaign issues. Questions were diverse and varied, and included inquiries about potential for school voucher systems, public-private partnerships, learning styles in school classrooms, standardized testing, assessment of student learning, teaching strategies, particular student disability assessments, regulations about recess times, strategies for dealing with school bullies, and concern about classroom sizes. While some of these questions were policy-oriented in nature, many fell outside immediate jurisdiction of the Saskatoon Public School Board. Implementation of a broad provincial initiative such as education vouchers in the school system, for example, would be considered and assessed by the Provincial Ministry, while accommodation of learning styles would fall under control of individual classroom teachers. As I received an increasing number of inquiries regarding my campaign, it became clear that multiple misunderstandings were at play regarding the actual legal and authoritative roles of Saskatoon Public School Board trustees.

During the election campaign, the Saskatoon Public School Board hosted trustee candidate forums in each municipal ward. At the forum in my ward, most candidates reaffirmed misunderstandings regarding school board function indicated in their campaign brochures. In their speeches and verbal responses to questions, many candidates indicated belief that, as public school board trustees, they would exercise influence over school specific matters such as the kinds of activities scheduled for recess times, decisions regarding extra-curricular sports, and context-specific advocacy for individual students. The only over-arching policy and governance issue pertinent to boards that was discussed by trustee candidates was the Province's newly implemented public school system funding structure. Constituents in attendance also engaged candidates with questions that were not pertinent to Saskatoon School Board trustees, and further indicated confusion about what it was that trustees were expected to do.

Constituent disengagement from electoral process. In weeks prior to the election I came to understand that it was virtually impossible to gain campaign traction by developing an informed platform based on knowledge of the Saskatoon Public School Board's governance principles and my ability to help effect policy as part of the Board's collective. In retrospect, I recognize that I arrived at this conclusion as a result of a developing disconnect between my belief in the prevalence of *rational choice* as method for constituents' electoral decision-making, and my direct experience of the contrary. While I acknowledged constraints to rational choice models of decision-making — or rational processing of all available alternatives — I truly believed that people did their best to seek out as much information as possible during election campaigns, such that they might make the best representative choice to maximize their own interests (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). However, much research regarding political engagement suggests that voters, while they are interested in making good choices, invest as little in doing so

as possible (Arceneaux & Kolodny, 2009; Lau & Redlawk, 2006). As an alternative to rational choice models of decision-making, it has been suggested that people utilize cognitive heuristics, or shortcuts, as means of determining a choice based on relatively little information (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006); this is referred to as *low information rationality* or *bounded rationality*. In Saskatoon, this model of decision-making was illustrated during my election campaign through several constituents' admission that they voted based primarily on name recognition.

In light of personal time constraints, lack of means to assess the benefits of democratic representation, the complexity of political campaigns, and a relative lack of understanding about politics, a bounded rationality approach to decision making with respect to voting makes perfect sense (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). I witnessed examples of such an approach on many occasions. As I met and dialogued with constituents in my ward, it became apparent that the majority did not understand the role of the Saskatoon Public School Board, and most could not identify how the election of a school board trustee was relevant to them. I realized then that their identified strategy of using name recognition at the polls constituted their best effort at rational choice, given the limited information they had at hand.

My experience of better understanding constituents' limited information rationality choices at the polls was augmented by what I construed as a broader sense of public disengagement from the process of trustee selection altogether. Given the impact that public school board decisions have within communities, my assumption was that many community members would play an active role in exercising choice when determining who would serve as their Public School Board representative. However, voter turnout in Saskatoon civic elections hovers at around only 27%; during the 2009 civic election, voter turnout in my ward was substantially lower than this, and the number of voters who indicated a choice of school board trustee candidate at the polls was lower still (City of Saskatoon 2009 Election Results). Voting trends in the city indicate that apathy increases with each subsequent civic election (Klein, 2009); such patterns are echoed across Canada (Fleming, 1997). This trend was further reiterated for me by the startlingly low constituent turnout to candidate forums; in my ward, less than a dozen constituents participated in the trustees' forum, in a ward populated by several thousand eligible voters. As I toured my ward, delivering flyers and knocking on doors, constituents did not seem to care too much about the imminent election, and many people indicated that, for a variety of reasons, they likely would not cast a vote.

Misalignment Between Ideals and Reality of the Public School Board Trustee: Is There Actually a Problem?

My experience running for election as a Public School Board trustee provided me with opportunity to critically assess, according to one perspective, a gap between democratic ideals and campaign realities in processes of trustee selection. If further inquiry confirms this gap and indicates validity and consistency with respect to my single, localized observations, one key

question still need be addressed – does it matter? Is this, in fact, a problem? Even if our civic elections fall far short of delivering on ideals of well-reasoned representation, does this have any significant impact on school boards? Do public misunderstandings about school board function and roles affect quality of governance in any way? Do the misalignments noted herein ultimately exert any negative causal influence broadly, in terms of overall quality of education or learning outcomes in our public education system?

While reasoned, in-depth inquiry beyond the scope of this paper would be required to address many of these questions, researchers have asserted that the presence of pronounced inconsistencies between democratic ideals and realities does indeed suggest a problem. First, if trustee candidates themselves are ill-informed of (or ill-suited to) the ideological purposes and value of school board governance, then upon election to trustee roles they will not be properly equipped to negotiate the authoritative responsibilities that they are liable for as trustee (Smoley, 1999), thus hampering the collective ability of the school board to govern effectively. Second, there is a problem inherent in the notion of *voting correctly* (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006); in other words, if voters are not informed enough to make voting decisions that accurately represent their interests, there is a danger that elected officials will not, in fact, be representative of their constituency. The process of democratic trustee selection would then be philosophically confounded. Third, given the theoretical links between governance and educational efficacy, if the misalignments noted herein indicate parallel similar misalignments between school board governance and school efficacy, then there may be broader implications with respect to overall quality of education and student outcomes.

Implications for further inquiry. Throughout my experience campaigning as a public school board trustee candidate, differences that I noted between public perception of school boards and the reality of school board function were particularly striking. In an effort to compare my reflective narrative with literature investigating public perception of school board function, I discovered a paucity of peer-reviewed research pertaining to the matter. Implications of this are twofold. First, it is imperative that the importance of further understanding this phenomenon with respect to school board governance is clarified and explicated; an increased level of awareness among educational and political practitioners is essential in order to better comprehend the true nature of the problem. Additionally, an immediate opportunity for further research is apparent. Does misalignment between public perception and realities of board governance extend to other wards, municipalities, provinces, or countries? If so, what are the persistent patterns of misalignment? What are the factors at play with respect to such misalignment? Much inquiry would need to be conducted in order to fully articulate trends, consistencies, and anomalies in this area.

Conclusion

The observations made and conclusions reached in this analysis reflect a comparison that is limited in many respects. The local experience captured in my narrative reflection is

punctuated by an inescapable personal bias. It is likely that my subjective disappointment in the integrity of campaign processes for school board trustee election is transparent, and this may be construed as inherently confounding. However, since I make no claim to generalizability, I view it instead as an opportunity to generate a deeper curiosity about the causes of and contributors to the misalignment I have described.

I have outlined pertinent literature with respect to the purposes of public education, ideal roles of governance in our educational system, and democratic principles that inform local public school board trustee electoral processes. Public school boards are meant to govern local school systems; their purpose is to guide the development and delivery of education in local contexts according to overarching provincial educational goals. In Saskatchewan, most boards align to either policy or strategic governance models, which focus on ends-oriented policy, aligning strategy with purpose, and delegating the management of school systems to appropriate administrative staff. Boards are responsible for directing the division towards meeting overarching goals, monitoring and tracking activity within the system, hiring and supervising the Division's Director of education, overseeing the allocation of divisional resources, developing a positive image in the community, and ensuring accountability. Public school board trustees are selected via civic public ballot, in accordance with democratic principles of just representation. A comparison of my narrative reflection with literature regarding school board purpose, function, and trustee selection has revealed that, in my constituency, ideals of school purpose and democratic representation are misaligned from realities of political process. In my experience, both candidates and voters had limited information about the role of public school boards in our education systems; many assumed that school boards participate in day-to-day school function and were largely ignorant of policy and strategic governance mandates. Trustee candidates in my ward sought election according to preconceptions that frequently did not align with the actual responsibilities associated with representing their communities in matters of educational significance. Constituents that I interacted with were not engaged in their school system nor in their civic electoral processes; many admitted to using arbitrary standards of choice to cast their civic vote for school board representatives.

Although the differences between ideals and reality are clear in context of this one local narrative example, further inquiry is needed to deepen understanding with respect to the nature and extent of misalignment on a broader scale. A rich opportunity exists to engage in further research, even simply to establish base-line data in reference to public perception about school board function. The ultimate significance of this inquiry lies in the connection between effective public school boards and effective public schools. If, as Reimer (2008) asserted, governance is a "function that *only* the school board can provide" (p.13), and if effective governance is indicative of effective educational practice, then it is vitally important to assure selection of appropriately equipped school board trustees and to ensure that those trustees are indeed representative of voter interests. This educational governance issue, then, is not of trivial nature and is clearly worth further pursuit of understanding.

References

- Alberta School Boards Association (2010). *Welcome aboard: Serving on a school board*. Retrieved from <http://www.asba.ab.ca/files/pdf/trustee-handbook/elected-trustee-handbook.pdf>
- Alexander, B. K. (2008). Performance ethnography: The re-enacting and inciting of culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Arceneaux, K., & Kolodny, R. (2009). Educating the least informed: Group endorsements in a grassroots campaign. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 755–770. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00399.x
- Banks, D. (2009). *Donna Banks Ward 3: Public School Board trustee*. Campaign brochure, Saskatoon civic election, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- Baum, M. A., & Jamison, A. S. (2006). The Oprah effect: How soft news helps inattentive citizens vote consistently. *Journal of Politics*, 68(4), 946–959. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00480.x
- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett, J. (2007). *Dewey's dream: Universities and democracies in an age of education reform*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Cadbury, A. (2002). *Corporate governance and chairmanship*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carver, J. (2002). *On board leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Carver, M. & Charney, B. (2004). *The board member's playbook*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Chait, R. P., Ryan, W. P., & Taylor, B. E. (2005a). *Governance as leadership: Reframing the work of nonprofit boards*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Chait, R. R., Ryan, W. P., & Taylor, B. E. (2005b). *The effective board of trustees*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- City of Saskatoon 2009 Election Results. Retrieved from <http://www.saskatoon.ca/CITY%20COUNCIL/Elections/Pages/2009ElectionResults.aspx>
- Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2008). *Education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/64/EducationCanada.en.pdf>
- Farazmand, A. (2004). *Sound governance: Policy and administrative innovations*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

- Friesen, John W., & Lyons Friesen, V. (2001). *In defense of public schools in North America*. Calgary, AB, Canada: Detselig Enterprises.
- Government of Saskatchewan (2008). *Saskatchewan education indicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=609,135,107,81,1,Documents&MediaID=6109&Filename=Web+Version+2008.pdf>
- Horsman, K. Education. *Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*. Retrieved from <http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/education.html>
- Johnson, F. H. (1968). *A brief history of education in Canada*. Toronto, ON, Canada: McGraw Hill.
- Klein, G. (2009, November 5). Apathy carries high price tag. *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestarphoenix.com/news/Apathy+carries+high+price/2185973/story.html>
- Lau, R. R., & Redlawsk, D. P. (2006). *How voters decide: Information processing during election campaigns*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levin, B. (1994, February). *Democracy and education, students and schools*. Paper presented at the Conference "Under Scrutiny Again: What Kind of Secondary Schools Do We Need?", Vancouver, BC, Canada.
- Light, M. (2001). *The strategic board*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Manitoba School Boards Association (2010). *A guide to school boards and trusteeship in Manitoba*. Retrieved from http://www.mbschoolboards.ca/aboutschoolboards/documents/A%20Guide%20to%20School%20Boards%20and%20Trusteeship_Sept_2010.pdf
- McCormick, J., Barnett, K., Alavi, S. B., & Newcombe, G. (2006). Board governance of independent schools: A framework for investigation. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44(5), 429–45. Accessed from www.emeraldinsight.com/0957-8234.htm
- Melvin, C. (2006). *Saskatchewan school boards association: 1980 – 2005*. Saskatchewan School Boards Association, Regina, SK, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.saskschoolboards.ca/old/ResearchAndDevelopment/ResearchReports/Governance/06-01.pdf>
- Nova Scotia School Boards Association (n.d.). *School boards in a democratic society*. Retrieved from <http://www.nssba.ca/new/upload/1193840910BrochureSchool%20Boards%20in%20a%20Democratic%20Society.pdf>
- Panas, J. (1991). *Boardroom verities*. Chicago: Precept Press.

- Phillips, S. Raham, H. & Renihan, P. (2010). The role and responsibilities of the principal. In B. Stelmach & D. Burgess (Eds), *Legal and institutional contexts of education* (6th ed.). Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan.
- Reimer, L. (2008). *Leadership and school boards: Guarding the trust*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Renihan, P. (1991). *School board self assessment principles and processes*. Regina, SK: Saskatchewan School Trustees Association Research Center.
- Resnick, M. A. (1999). *Effective school governance: A look at today's practice and tomorrow's promise*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/da/51.pdf
- Saskatchewan Education Act (1995). Regina, SK, Canada: The Queen's Printer.
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2008, May). *Pre-K – 12 Continuous improvement framework: A guide for school division strategic planning*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=201,135,107,81,1,Documents&MediaID=4483&Filename=Continuous+Improvement+Framework+Ver+3+Aug-08.pdf>
- Saskatoon Public Schools (2005). *Board policy handbook*. Retrieved from http://www.spsd.sk.ca/files/board/Board_Policy_Handbook.pdf
- Saskatoon Public Schools (2009). *Budget report: September 1, 2009 – August 31, 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.spsd.sk.ca/files/public/Budget0910.pdf>
- Saskatoon Public Schools (2009, December). *Student enrolment over time*. Retrieved from <http://www.spsd.sk.ca/division/ourresults/enrolment.html>
- Saskatchewan School Boards Association (2006). *Handbook for school board members*. Retrieved from http://www.saskschoolboards.ca/educationservices/Handbook06_09.pdf
- Smoley, E. R. (1999). *Effective school boards: Strategies for improving board performance*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Stelmach, B., Burgess, D., Carr-Stewart, S., Cottrell, M., Prytula, M., Renihan, P., & Walker, K. (Eds.)(2010). *Legal and institutional contexts of education*, 6th Edition. Saskatoon, SK, Canada: University of Saskatchewan.
- Trenta, L., Cunningham, L., Printy, S., Kruse, S., Griswold, P., Hunn, D., & Aquila, F. (2002, October). *Governing learning in Ohio's urban school districts: An exploration of five sets of governance issues that appear related to student achievement*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association. Columbus, OH. Retrieved from

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/8a/3f.pdf

- Waldron, B. (2009). *Elect Bruce Waldron*. Campaign brochure, Saskatoon Civic Election, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- Walker, K. (2009). *An examination of school board governance in Saskatchewan*. Saskatchewan School Boards Association, Regina, SK, Canada. Retrieved from <http://saskschoolboards.ca/old/ResearchAndDevelopment/ResearchReports/Governance/08-04.pdf>
- Wickstrom, R. (2008). The top ten reasons for supporting school boards. In Burgess et al., *Legal and institutional contexts of education*, 5th Edition. Saskatoon, SK, Canada: University of Saskatchewan.
- Wotherspoon, T. (2004). *The sociology of education in Canada* (2nd ed). ON, Canada: Oxford University Press.