

# **The Student Trustee Today: The Challenges**

A Paper of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association  
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## **Acknowledgments:**

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- The Executive Council of OSTA-AECO, 2007-2008:

Andrew Pawluch	President
Diego Noronha	English Catholic President
Lauren Millar	English Public President (Interim)
Steven Solarz	English Public President
Mark Nouhra	French Catholic President
Dominique Noel	French Public President
Sarah Cipkar	Director of Professional Development
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Jonathan Scott	Director of Communications
Vincenzo Mazza	Director of Policy
Nerissa Kay Bradley	Secretary
Mate Corluka	Bilingual Secretary
Carolina Spagnuolo	Past President

- The student trustees of 2007-2008 who participated in this survey

- The Executive Council of OSTA-AECO, 2008-2009:

Cody Welton	President
Donovan Chong	English Public President
Clemence Emmanuel	English Catholic President
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James Dempsey	Director of Professional Development
Gorick Ng	Director of Operations
Emilia Ling	Chief Financial Officer
Ashley McGuire	Secretary
Riel Warrilow	Bilingual Secretary
Vincenzo Mazza	Past President

- The Policy Committee of OSTA-AECO, 2008-2009:

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**Dedication:**

With thanks for their commitment, determination and hard work, this report is dedicated to the perseverance of student trustees across this decade who carved a place for youth representation in Ontario.

## **Introduction:**

Throughout this decade, school boards have seen the evolution of student representation by student trusteeship.

Student representation is a bold move forward for democracy and for education because it allows students to learn and lead simultaneously. The Ministry, in its vision paper, states, "When students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their potential...As we move forward with our education agenda, we will bring new energy to our efforts to foster student engagement".<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the recently announced Minister's Student Advisory Committee (MSAC) highlights the Ministry's commitment to heeding the student voice. Any effort to strengthen the mechanisms that empower the student voice is a meaningful investment in democracy as it engages students in the civic process.

The opportunity for student trustees to complement the work of adult trustees and board staff comes from the perspective students can bring, the constituents they represent and their ability to relate the board's discussions and decisions to tangible examples. The office is a major, laudable initiative to improve education and strengthen youth's civic engagement.

Efforts to improve student trusteeship are investments in education and democracy. Following a report by the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, entitled "The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow", changes were made to the Education Act to empower student trustees to more effectively serve their peers alongside adult trustees.

The time has come to analyse the effectiveness of those changes and to analyse the demographics of student trustees themselves, to ascertain how effectively students are being represented through this office.

This discussion paper will draw upon a survey undertaken by OSTA during the 2007-2008 term, entitled "The Student Trustee Census". The results of the survey were analysed to provide clarity and a perspective on the strengths, weakness and opportunities of student trusteeship. This paper will present the data sequentially in the categories of demographics, activities and equity, and will conclude with recommendations.

## **Demographics:**

Perhaps the greatest criticism of student trusteeship is the "type" of students who hold the office; there is a concern that student trustees are an "elite". A series of demographic questions were asked in the survey and the results are presented below:

- According to survey results, the average student trustee is a Caucasian male with a grade median of 89% in university courses, from an upper-middle class family. He intends to study political theory at university.
- The secondary "type" of student trustee is a female from a middle-class family in university courses at high school. She intends to study medicine or business and has an average in the high 90%-range.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education. "Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education". 2008.

- There is virtually no representation of students in college or locally developed courses and few students who intend to pursue a college- or workplace-based career.
- Virtually no student trustee is from a lower socio-economic bracket.
- There is, however, a fair range of ethnicity amongst student trustees.

### **Activities:**

According to the survey, most student trustees have a student senate or some other body that represents student concerns. However, these bodies are composed predominately of student council members (indeed, some are known as “presidents’ councils” and only include student council presidents and student trustees).

Meeting once a month, mostly in the late afternoon or evening, these councils are considered to be “productive” and run events throughout the board each year, mostly as leadership conferences or events to highlight a social-justice issue. Student senates are widely respected by adult trustees and discuss a wide array of issues, according to the survey results.

By and large, these representative groups are considered an asset to school boards because of the events run by the senates and the opinions that can be relayed to the board by the student trustees.

Notwithstanding these strengths, senates still represent an “elite” opinion because most senators are members of student council and are therefore students whose voices are already heard and do not necessarily represent the voice of the “average” student. This concern is particularly potent because over 50% of student trustees only consult their senates and student councils to learn the student vision.

Another concern is attendance at these meetings. Most senates report that several schools are consistently absent and therefore not represented. This absence means that the voice of an entire student body is not heard. The vast majority of senate meetings occur at the school board. The meetings follow a casual structure with a written agenda but relative freedom for discussion.

### **Equity:**

Since the changes to student trustee legislation, school boards have been adapting to the empowerment of student trustees. This adaptation has been unequal; this is of concern to student trustees themselves, with many student trustees being denied their rights or being ignorant of their rights under the Education Act. There are many student trustees who have, for whatever reason, no involvement with the provincial association of student trustees; there are many student trustees who are unaware of the equity of access to board resources as adult trustees or even their right to a non-binding vote.

(Although there does indeed exist disparity amongst the adult trustees of the province in terms of rights afforded, this paper is discussing concerns wherein student trustees are being denied equity with the adult trustees at their board; this paper is not seeking to identify disparity between student trustees in different boards.)

Although many of the specific concerns about equity of legislation enforcement have been communicated anecdotally, the survey found areas where student trustees still do not receive the full benefits of the legislation. Of course, it is important to note that the weakness of this survey is that those students surveyed were those already involved with

OSTA. Therefore, the results are likely skewed to those student trustees who have supportive school boards.<sup>2</sup>

The results of the survey are as follows:

- The majority of student trustees have never requested a recorded vote or put forward a motion at the board or one of its committees.
- Most student trustees surveyed present an oral report at their board meetings and attend all board meetings and several committee meetings each month.
- Student trustees surveyed are generally vocal and raise student concerns at the board table and are occasionally contacted by the media for their opinion on education issues.
- Some student trustees do not receive equitable access to board resources as adult trustees; approximately 19% of student trustees do not receive all copies of board reports, minutes or agendas.
- Although all student trustees surveyed sit at the board table, several are not referred to with their title of “Trustee” and there is a split between student trustees who are invited into in camera meetings when appropriate and who are invited to professional development or “trustee-in-service” meetings.
- Several student trustees do not receive access to their expense account or a copy of their board’s policy manuals, or, several student trustees in boards with multiple student trustees still report that they do not receive individual expense accounts. Instead, as many as three student trustees may be forced to split their 5000\$ expense budget three ways, exhausting the budget on one professional development conference.
- A fair-sized minority of student trustees are unable to attend a variety of conferences.
- Most student trustees do not receive a transitional meeting; very few trustees have access to the Education Act.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Place a poster in each high school explaining the role of student trustee and the student senate so that the office is more widely known, perhaps thereby attracting a greater range of applicants and greater participation at student senate meetings. The more students aware of their voice on school boards, the greater the possibility of involving more students becomes. A similar suggestion is to place the student trustee’s contact information in a school’s handbook or student agenda.
2. Through OSTA and with the assistance of other stakeholders (particularly the Council of Directors of Education), work should be undertaken to share best practices for how to run student senates. A working group on student senates would be a welcome start to ensuring this mechanism for student representation is effective across the province.
3. It is difficult to gain a greater academic diversity in student trustees. The workload requires excellence in studies and dedication. The students who apply for the position already excel in school and are able to handle the additional workload of being at board meetings. What can be expanded is the diversity of students who a student trustee

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<sup>2</sup> The twenty or so English-language boards who have not actively participated in OSTA and whose student trustees did not participate in this survey are an enigma; -we simply do not know how student trustees are treated in these boards.

actively consults; these recommendations seek to improve the scope of a student trustee's student consultations.

4. Some school boards conduct a credit course through correspondence or co-op. The course, often peer leadership or politics, is a meaningful way to fulfill the promise of student trustees to be leaders and learners simultaneously.
5. The nature of student senates as syndicates of student councils can be improved. Rather than a focus on student councils as solely representatives, student trustees need to view student councils as conduits of representation. A focus on surveys that engage a wide variety of students is an effective way to hear more student voices. Boards should be willing to help facilitate these surveys in their schools. Furthermore, student trustees should be encouraged to routinely visit all schools in their area.
6. The Ministry's new student voice forums and the Minister's Student Advisory Committee are effective means to engage students. It is vital that the students involved are of a diverse assortment of all demographics. The committees need to be inclusive and representative of all ethnicities, income levels and scholastic-achievement levels. As such, the conduct of the meetings needs to be informal and conducive to effectively engaging the students.
7. It may be helpful to elect student trustees by geographic area, so that larger boards may receive a more localised view from their regions by three student trustees. Thus, student trustees become responsible for specific schools and can better represent those students individually than they could represent the collective students of the board.
8. To encourage attendance at student senate meetings from all schools, superintendents should liaise with their principals to ensure that each school is sending representation. The student senate should be promoted by senior administration as a secondary means of representation, something of a "junior board of representatives" to the full board. Again, the poster advertising the office of student trustee can serve to highlight the work and importance of student senates.
9. Student trustees need a transitional meeting, ideally with their predecessor, board chair or designate, a trustee and a superintendent. This meeting should explain the nature of the position, the way the board operates and miscellaneous information (such as expense reporting or media relations). OSTA's "Student Trustee Handbook" is a helpful guide to hosting such a transition.
10. Many boards have designated a "student trustee mentor", that is an adult trustee who sits next to the student trustee(s) at the board table to facilitate their participation in the board meeting. This trustee often will move student trustee motions to incite debate on the student's ideas; this is an effective way to create a comfortable environment for a student trustee to suggest motions.
11. The Ministry, senior administration organisations and the trustee associations should continue to update their members on the legislation and the rights it gives to student trustees. In most boards, the Ministry has been effective at sharing the new legislation. In the boards where student trustees do not receive equitable access to board resources, access to in-service or in-camera meetings, or a proper expense account, the Ministry may wish to consider strict measures to enforce the legislation. Of particular concern: the Ministry must enforce that each student trustee is entitled to their own, individual expense budget; no student trustee should be forced to split their

budget with a colleague. No school board should be recalcitrant on implementing the full rights of student trustees; to do otherwise is contrary to the Education Act.

**Conclusion:**

Student trustees are emerging as an effective means to ensure the student voice is heard. Student trustees are an asset to school boards. As student trustees and adult trustees work cooperatively as partners in education, great improvements can be made in the system. Student trustees are a resource and a lens through which one may view students' day-to-day concerns. Student trustees are not an encroachment on the rights of adult trustees to represent their constituents; they are instead a complement to the fine work of adult trustees.

Continuing to improve student trusteeship is good for education. In the words of British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, "The youth of a nation are trustees of posterity".

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