



Gorick Ng

Student Trustees: Redefining Student Engagement

By Gorick Ng

The dismissal bell rings. Before the teacher can even say, “Have a nice day,” half the class is out the door. Some students are dashing home to take care of their younger siblings. Others are heading off to their part-time jobs. Still others are rushing to get their homework finished or running off to band practice. But in each school board, there are a select few who have something else on their minds. Their bags are stuffed with boardroom documents. Their school agendas are filled with board meeting dates. Their minds are thinking of what to say – and what not to say – at the upcoming board meeting. These are not your typical students; they are student trustees.

Many profound changes have occurred both in the role itself and in the lives of the people who have played a part in that role since the position of student trustee was first created in 1997. The first cohort of student trustees is now completing graduate studies or entering the world of work (some even becoming elected trustees themselves). All agree that having been student trustees has affected them and those around them very deeply.

The importance of the influence that a student trustee can have is often overlooked or unappreciated. When we think of a school board, we often imagine a body of adults representing their respective constituents, but we often overlook the lone student – or two or three, depending on the school board in question – sitting in the boardroom. This young person is there to make sure that all the decisions made are in the students’ best interests. Call the role of student trustee one of “sober second thought,” if you will. As debates get heated (often late at night), many times the student trustee is the one who stands up and adds a dab of reality to the canvas of amendments to amendments to amendments. Just as school boards exist for the sole purpose of overseeing the education of young people, student trustees exist to ensure that students’ voices are not lost in the flurry of reports, delegations and motions. But student trustees do more than simply provide feedback.

An increasing number of student trustees are now deeply engaged in policy making and advocacy work themselves. When the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association released the report titled *Equitable Education? The Cost of Extracurriculars in Ontario’s Schools* last year, student trustees from across the province proposed motions at their boards to research the inequities of extracurricular activity fees in their

own schools. Student trustees are proposing their own motions, playing a vital role in school programming and changing the very definition of student engagement.

When these student leaders leave the education system, many take their passion for change with them to their postsecondary pathways of choice. Many become active student-union members, while others go on to pursue degrees in political science and law. Some even return to the education system as policy experts or educators themselves. Because they have been through the system, they are now ready to give back.

The role of student trustee does, however, come with challenges that often go unnoticed. Student trustee legislation, coupled with inconsistencies across the province, greatly limit the success of these elected individuals. Some school boards are still in the early stages of embracing their student trustees, unable to decide whether their presence in the boardroom is a bane or a boon. No matter what the school board, though, the key issue is outreach. How can we ensure that students’ needs are met with a student-to-student-trustee ratio as great as 1 to 125,000 in some boards? Can so few students accurately represent their peers? Can all of education’s issues be solved inside the boardroom?

The answer lies within student councils that promote active citizenship at the grassroots level. Leadership should not be limited to the select few but must be promoted, embraced and nurtured throughout our schools. Involvement should not begin – and end – when a student completes his or her 40 hours of community service. It should be a lifelong learning process that begins early on. It is time to shift learning away from what is on the blackboard to what young people themselves can do. I myself was a math and science fanatic but quickly became interested in politics after being involved at the board level. Many other student trustees will cite similar experiences.

As we look ahead, one thing remains certain: the leaders of today will achieve progress for our nation in the future, both politically and socially. Some leaders are already before us in the boardroom. Others are only waiting for their opportunity. **eti**

Gorick Ng is president of the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association for 2009-2010 and a re-elected student trustee of the Toronto District School Board. He is in his final year at Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute.

Photo: John Papaioannou, Toronto District School Board.

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