

# THE STUDENT TRUSTEE TODAY AND TOMORROW

Report of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association –  
Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de  
l'Ontario

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Without the input provided by the Student Trustees of 2004-2005, this report would not have been possible.

Many thanks to the Executive Council of 2003-2004 for laying the foundation of this report:

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Special thanks to the Student Trustees of 2003-2004 for their ongoing support, cooperation and participation.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow report is the culmination of the work of many dedicated individuals over the past three years. We would like to thank the 2003-2004 Executive Council for the initial edition of this report. This project has taken great strides towards a stronger and more united student voice.

Approximately 100 Student Trustees responded to the surveys conducted by the OSTA-AÉCO Executive Council. These responses painted a clear picture of the state of Student Trusteeship throughout the province and allowed OSTA-AÉCO to evaluate where improvements could be made. This feedback was invaluable to our association.

This report is dedicated to the Student Trustees of the province whose continued efforts have resulted in the successful representation of Ontario's 1.9 million students. The work of these individuals has expanded the role to where it is today and ensured that the student voice was heard. May the Student Trustees of Ontario continue to improve the quality of education and represent the interests of the students.

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

October 2005

Minister of Education  
The Honourable Gerard Kennedy

On behalf of the Ontario Student Trustees' Association - l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario, I am pleased to present you with our 2005 report, "The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow". This report offers a concise outline detailing the practice of the current Student Trustee legislation, and recommendations for the current legislature to consider so as to improve the quality of pupil representation.

Today's Student Trustees are exceeding legislative expectations in almost every school board and creating a niche for themselves in Ontario's education system. Student Trustees have accomplished much more than expected in the few short years they have been serving Ontario's students. The legislation introduced in 1997 does not do justice to the role Student Trustees are fulfilling today.

The report has been divided into four sections – responsibilities, integration, resources, and election and term. Each of these sections presents a brief background, the current implementation and recommendations.

Student Trustees have shown Ontario that students value the quality of education they receive and the quality of the institutions they attend. It is time that the role they are fulfilling is recognized and solidified with stronger legislation.

Pursuing Excellence in Education,

Nathan Lachowsky  
2005-2006 President

## PREFACE

When Student Trustees were officially introduced into Ontario's boardrooms as legislated members, Ontario's students were given their first official voice. Shortly thereafter, a provincial association was created to unite the Student Voice and provide resources to these pupil representatives, now known as Student Trustees.

The legislation that created the position of Student Trustee also permitted boards to design local policies that fit their idea of a 'pupil representative'. The legislation laid out guidelines and restrictions; however, school boards were given a great deal of choice in exactly how these new requirements would be met. As a result, the position of Student Trustee varies across the province and is unique in every board.

There are essentially 72 different Student Trustee positions throughout the province. This variation across the province yields difficulties for OSTA-AÉCO in regards to the provision of adequate professional development and resources. Although there are commonalities, it is difficult for OSTA-AÉCO to facilitate professional development that is relevant for every position. Student Trustees require stronger legislation, which would allow them to engage in a more effective role within Ontario's education system. Clearly defined responsibilities would allow OSTA-AÉCO to deliver more effective resources to support Student Trustees in their position. The Education Act requires a fundamental change to provide students with the quality of representation they deserve.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OSTA-AÉCO has been working for the past five years to provide a credible and united voice for the students of Ontario. It is the belief of OSTA-AÉCO that the education system was put in place for the students and thus, the student voice should be heard among all stakeholders. A study that looked specifically at youth involvement in Ontario came to a similar conclusion:

*“No group is more greatly affected by education policy decisions than those being educated, yet the level of student influence on that process ranks behind that of politicians, bureaucrats, parents, and union leaders”.*

The adoption of Student Trustee legislation demonstrated the government was willing to incorporate youth in decisions that directly affect their future. It is our hope that the government will continue to be accommodating in this matter and seriously consider the recommendations contained in this report.

Although much of the uncertainty surrounding the inclusion of Student Trustees in the education system has dispersed, concerns still exist as to the quality of the contributions made. There is a direct correlation between the support that is given by school boards to their Student Trustees and the impact Student Trustees have in their board. “Boards that have developed democratic selection mechanisms, provided orientation and support to Student Trustees, and encouraged student participation have found that the benefits of Student Trusteeship quickly overshadowed by their initial concerns”.

OSTA-AÉCO represents students from all four divisions of publicly funded education in Ontario and works to provide a student vision and a united voice within Ontario’s education community. In order to ensure students are well represented in Ontario, OSTA-AÉCO set out to provide a set of recommendations which, if implemented, would allow Student Trustees to serve a more influential role within their school board. These recommendations have been broken into four sections: responsibilities, integration, resources, and election and term. This report provides a broad overview of the current situation and a set of recommendations to improve the quality of student representation.

## **The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow**

OSTA-AÉCO has discovered that the Student Trustee position has been implemented in a number of different ways across the province. In many school boards, Student Trustees have been given responsibilities that surpass the basic requirements found in the Education Act: they are serving as true members of the board, asking relevant questions, bringing forward motions and keeping the board accountable to the needs of the students. In other school boards, the Student Trustee position has been implemented in such a way that the students are not being heard; the pupil representative is not properly integrated as a member of the board or able to participate as an active member of his/her provincial association. In order to ensure that the Student Trustee position is effective in every school board and that a minimum degree of representation is achieved, changes need to be made at the provincial level. OSTA-AÉCO believes that this can be achieved by making improvements in four areas: responsibilities, integration, resources, and election and term.

Since the creation of the position, Student Trustees have developed capabilities beyond what is outlined in the Education Act. In many boards, Student Trustees are exceeding legislative expectations on their own initiative and are looking to see this expanded role reflected in amendments to the Education Act.

Some school boards have seen their Student Trustee use their role to its full potential whereas in other boards the position has been restricted to such a degree it is not effective. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the position, the province must revise and expand the responsibilities of a Student Trustee.

Student Trustees need to be integrated as members of the school board in order to be successful communicators of the students' interests to the board members. Although many Student Trustees participate in open dialogue with their boards, others provide a student perspective only if called upon to do so. Selective participation does not allow the kind of consultation intended by the existing legislation. Student Trustees must be fully integrated to their Boards of Education so that students can receive appropriate representation at the board table.

Student Trustees need the resources necessary to be effective at the board table. In some boards, Student Trustees are allowed the flexibility to use their

\$5000 allotment towards a wide degree of professional development activities, consultation activities and other initiatives to benefit the students of their boards. Others are unaware of the money they have at their disposal, are faced with severe restrictions governing its use, or share the \$5000 of funding between five or more Student Trustees. These circumstances make the allotment ineffective. Student Trustees need access to the allocated resources to effectively report to the school board on behalf of the students and participate in professional development to serve the students better.

In order for the students to have provincial representation, it is essential that the position of Student Trustee be implemented uniformly across the province. School boards who do not give enough responsibility, integration and resources to their Student Trustees hinder the voice of the students on both the local and provincial stage. Student Trustees today have proven themselves willing and able to provide a strong, united voice for the students of Ontario. They are ready for added responsibility, increased opportunity for their voice to be heard and the chance to ensure that student representation is a part of the education system for years to come.

### **Design and Purpose**

To assemble the report, the OSTA-AÉCO Executive consulted with Ontario's Student Trustees on a number of issues. A database was created to measure the implementation of the position in all school boards of the province. With this information, OSTA-AÉCO was able to look at how the legislation has been adopted in our province. Ontario's Student Trustees told us to what degree they felt they were valued, whether they had sufficient resources and what could be improved upon to help them to better represent their peers.

The report is organized into four areas of improvement. The first section, responsibilities, outlines why the role of Student Trustee needs to be clarified and expanded. The benefits of fully integrating Student Trustees as members of the board are discussed in the second section, integration. Thirdly, the report underlines the importance of allowing Student Trustees full access to their resources so that they may fulfill their mandate. Finally, an explanation of the changes to the policies that govern the election and term of a Student Trustee is given in the fourth section, election and term.

This survey was conducted to provide the Ministry of Education, school boards and other stakeholders with an overview of how the legislation has been interpreted throughout the province. Increased tools and a more defined role for Student Trustees would allow OSTA-AÉCO and Student Trustees to provide the representation Ontario's students deserve.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that new legislation be introduced granting Student Trustees the power to fully participate at the board table including the power to vote and make motions.
- 2 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended to provide Student Trustees access to portions of in-camera meetings where the issue of school closures, or other issues not providing a conflict-of-interest for the student, will be discussed.
- 3 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act, Regulation 461/97 be amended to replace the title 'pupil representative' with the title 'Student Trustee'.
- 4 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended to include, under Ontario Education Act Regulation 461/97, guiding principles which would ensure that:
  - a. All of the Ministry of Education's grant funding for the business and operations of Student Trustees flow directly to their expense account(s).
  - b. All Student Trustees receive a scholarship, half the amount and level of Honoraria received by the members of the board at the completion of their term.
  - c. Student Trustees have equal access to all board resources as exists for regular members of the board.
- 5 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended to include, under Regulation 461/97, Section 3, Subsection 3, the requirement for boards to set in their Student Trustee policy the implementation of a student advisory committee made up of students from across the board.
- 6 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended under Regulation 461/97, Section 2, Subsection 1, to set a limit for the number of Student Trustees to three.
- 7 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended under Regulation 461/97, Section 3, Subsection 1, to remove the words 'or by

appointment' to ensure that Student Trustees are selected through democratic means by their peers.

- 8 OSTA-AÉCO recommends that the Education Act be amended under Regulation 461/97, Section 3, Subsection 2, to remove the words 'or appointment' to ensure that Student Trustees are selected through democratic means by their peers, as well as to change the date to which Student Trustees must be elected from June 30 to May 30 to ensure that Student Trustees are able to receive the appropriate level of orientation before taking office.

## REPORT

In preparing this report, OSTA-AÉCO reviewed the legislation that defines the role of Student Trustees and determined that in most school boards, what Student Trustees are doing far surpasses the basic responsibilities set out in the Education Act.

The report's four sections - responsibility, integration, resources and election and term - are placed in the context of their historical background and current implementation. By doing so, we can fully explain the rationale behind our recommendations.

OSTA-AÉCO looks to the future, where we see an even greater place for Ontario's students, where the students' voice is protected through legislation and a strong political body. The recommendations presented in this report reflect OSTA-AÉCO's vision for the future of student representation.

## **PART 1: RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Historical Background**

The policies that outline the role of a Student Trustee vary from board to board as a result of the flexibility school boards were given in the development of the position. Some policies require Student Trustees to simply attend board meetings, while others require the Student Trustee to sit on committees, provide reports and chair a student advisory group, in addition to attending board meetings and other school board functions.

### **Current Implementation**

As a result of school board specific policies, some Student Trustees feel as though their position is not an effective way for students to communicate to the board while others feel they have a great deal of influence. Inconsistent policies and "...the absence of standards are barriers to meaningful participation" and prevent the position from being used to its full potential<sup>iii</sup>.

59% of Student Trustees identified an official binding vote as single greatest priority for Student Trustee integration and building a stronger student voice; 24% said that stronger Student Trustee legislation would enhance the weight carried by their position. This opinion is shared with other organizations including the Institute on Governance. Their report examining the influence of youth on policy concluded that "[t]he Ontario government should...grant voting status to Student Trustees<sup>iv</sup>".

Student Trustees, under current legislation, are excluded from all in-camera meetings. At certain times, issues such as school closures, where Student Trustees can be most effective, are discussed behind closed doors. "Legislation should allow for [Student Trustees'] participation in closed meetings, with certain exceptions<sup>v</sup>".

One example of this is student consultation. In most school boards, Student Trustees serve as the chairs of a board wide student advisory committee. This committee, which may be known as a Student Senate or Student Trustee Advisory Committee, meets regularly and takes part in discussion on the current business of the board. The Student Trustee is responsible for reporting this committee's findings to the school board. In 22% of school boards, no student

advisory group of any kind exists and Student Trustees are given no means of consulting with students in their board. Where school boards “acknowledge the importance of student opinion by supporting initiatives to gather student input<sup>vi</sup>”, they actively demonstrate their belief in the student voice.

Student Trustees are responsible for attending all regular board meetings. For most Student Trustees this means bi-weekly meetings. In boards where Student Trustees participate in committee meetings, it is not uncommon for Student Trustees to have four meetings a month.

School boards are free to have as many Student Trustees as they wish. In some school boards, more than five Student Trustees serve at the board. It is difficult for each Student Trustee in a large group to establish him or herself as a member of the board, especially when there are a comparable number of Student Trustees to regular trustees. This is especially true of school boards where the Student Trustees share the Student Trustee seat at the board table through rotation. This makes it very difficult for any one Student Trustee to accomplish anything as he/she must divide time at the board table and the \$5000 allotment.

### **Recommendations**

59% of Student Trustees feel that an official binding vote is the most pressing factor to increase effectiveness in representing the students’ interests. Since the major reforms to education funding in Ontario, the focus of the position of trustee has switched from representing a tax base to representing citizens who have a stake in education. Students are the largest group within the education system and “no group is more greatly affected by education policy decisions...yet the level of student influence on that process ranks behind that of politicians, bureaucrats, parents, and union leaders<sup>vii</sup>”. Students have the greatest at stake in the education system and are entitled to shape their education system.

- 1 That new legislation be introduced granting Student Trustees the power to fully participate at the board table including the power to vote and make motions.

A number of issues discussed behind closed doors do not provide a conflict of interest for the Student Trustee as a regular student of the board. The presence

of a Student Trustee in in-camera discussion is essential when debating issues such as school closures. An invitation to attend portions of in-camera meetings where a conflict of interest is not presented will help integrate Student Trustees more fully as members of the board. The more responsibility, trust, opportunity and inclusion a Student Trustee is given, the more successful that Student Trustee will be in providing advice from the students' perspective.

- 6 That the Education Act be amended to provide Student Trustees access to portions of in-camera meetings where the issue of school closures, or other issues not providing a conflict-of-interest for the student, will be discussed.

## **PART 2: INTEGRATION**

### **Background**

When the position was first created, Student Trustees were widely considered to be simply a student to whom trustees could direct questions. Student Trustees have since expanded their role to become what they are today. Some school boards have embraced their Student Trustees; encouraging them to participate, extending a multitude of resources and treating them as full trustees where others have, subconsciously or otherwise, belittled the position of Student Trustee, excluded the Student Trustee from school board functions and discouraged their full participation.

### **Current Implementation**

Most school boards in the province refer to the pupil representative as 'Student Trustee' while other school boards use the title of 'pupil representative' or 'student representative'. When asked, 100% of Student Trustees would like to see the office to be referred to as 'Student Trustee' in statutory law. This would recognize the contributions that Student Trustees have to make and their capacity to influence change.

Student Trustees are integrated within their school board at different levels. Many boards give equal consideration to their Student Trustee as they do full trustees; however, some do not take the contributions of Student Trustees seriously. Although 93% of Student Trustees feel as though they are allowed to speak as equally and regularly as full Trustees, this means that not all students are being properly represented. It is extremely important that this standard is achieved by all boards.

Some school boards segregate their Student Trustees from the full trustees during board meetings. This is not the norm; however, it is a barrier that prevents the integration of Student Trustees.

50% of Student Trustees feel that barriers exist to their integration with their board of regular trustees. Improvement has been seen in the time since the position was created, yet it is not acceptable that Student Trustees are being afforded less respect than regular trustees. Of those who felt they were not integrated, the barriers identified were the inability to vote, an unfair Student

Trustee policy and restricted access to board resources. Lack of access to in-camera discussions was also identified as a factor contributing to the disenfranchisement of Student Trustees.

### **Recommendations**

In order to ensure that Student Trustees are successfully integrated as members of the board, the title of 'Student Trustee' must be stated in statutory law. Some school boards do not recognize this status and do not give the appropriate amount of respect the student voice deserves as a result.

- 7 That the Education Act, Regulation 461/97 be amended to replace the title 'pupil representative' with the title 'Student Trustee'.

The voice of students needs to be considered in certain in-camera discussions. The exclusion of Student Trustees from these portions of board proceedings is a barrier to the full participation of Student Trustees as members of the board.

- 2 That the Education Act be amended to provide Student Trustees access to portions of in-camera meetings where the issue of school closures, or other issues not providing a conflict-of-interest for the student, will be discussed.

## **PART 3: RESOURCES**

### **Historical Background**

It is important that Student Trustees have access to all the resources that are pertinent to their role. This can be achieved by having the appropriate level of funding, flexibility, staff support and a means of consulting with students as outlined by legislation and board policy.

Each school board is allocated \$5000 for use by their Student Trustees. This money comes directly from the Ministry's School Board Administration and Governance Grant. The legislation states that Student Trustees may be reimbursed in part or in full for the costs associated with fulfilling their job depending on the policy the board wishes to create. Most Student Trustees are made aware of this funding. Most school boards have severe restrictions in place that limit how Student Trustees can use this funding. Despite this generous Ministry grant, Student Trustee projects are often denied as a result on the basis of costs and the whole \$5000 allotment is rarely used. Such limitations prevent Student Trustees from fulfilling the potential of their position.

### **Current Implementation**

Across the province, there are inconsistencies in the ways that Student Trustees can access their funds. Usually school boards either dedicate only a portion of the Ministry grant or establish policies making it difficult for Student Trustees to make use of the funding. This can be rationalized because the Ministry funding is not specifically mandated. Student Trustees who cannot access these funds miss out on professional development activities and are restricted in the local projects they can undertake. Student Trustees need a budget at their disposal in order to provide credible and relevant advice to school boards and the flexibility to attend various orientation and consulting events throughout the year.

Student Trustees are often unable to work a part time job due to the commitment demanded by their position. Most serve their term in their last year of high school while they are attempting to save for university, meet entrance requirements and secondary school graduation requirements. Despite the fact the Education Act does not award an honorarium to Student Trustees, some boards grant a bursary to acknowledge the contributions of Student Trustees.

Student Trustees need to be given adequate and fair financial compensation for their work, just as regular Trustees are remunerated. Where honorariums for full trustees exist, Student Trustees should receive a commensurable bursary.

Some Student Trustees have a Trustee mentor or a board staff member that is appointed to help him/her discover the potential of his/her role and carry out any projects he/she may choose to undertake. This is an extremely beneficial way of introducing Student Trustees to their role. However, this is not the case in most boards and it prevents Student Trustees from taking full advantage of the resources their school board offices have to offer.

For most Student Trustees, their role within their board is the first time they have gained practical and realistic experience in the political process. As such, drafting policy initiatives, preparing agenda items and participating at the board table can be extremely intimidating and overwhelming. If Student Trustees can be given orientation previous to the commencement of the term, they will be much more effective throughout their term. OSTA-AÉCO events offer professional development for Student Trustees in a variety of ways at the Fall and Annual General Meetings; however, introduction and support at the board level is essential.

Under current legislation, Student Trustees are expected to speak on behalf of all students of their district. Currently, 22% of school boards have no forum for student input. This renders the job of a Student Trustee much more difficult; seeking out the opinion of students in every school within their board is often near impossible without some form of organized meeting.

In some school boards, the disconnection between the Student Trustee and his/her peers is increased by the appointed, rather than elected, nature of their position. The appointment process is undemocratic and undermines the concept of the Student Trustee representing the students. Only 8% of Student Trustees are elected by their student body; 38% are elected by student representatives from each school; while an astonishing 46% are appointed by a group of pre-selected students or by trustees.

### **Recommendations**

If boards of education desire to attract knowledgeable and keen individuals, greater recognition of the work they accomplish must be given. Financial and practical resources intended for Student Trustees need to make it into their

hands in order for them to receive adequate orientation and to report to the board effectively.

- 4 That the Education Act be amended to include, under Ontario Education Act Regulation 461/97, guiding principles which would ensure that:
  - a. All of the Ministry of Education's grant funding for the business and operations of Student Trustees flow directly to their expense account(s)
  - b. All Student Trustees receive a scholarship, half the amount and level of Honoraria received by the members of the board, at the completion of their term.
  - c. Student Trustees have equal access to all board resources as exists for regular members of the board.
  
- 5 That the Education Act be amended to include, under Regulation 461/97, Section 3, Subsection 3, the requirement for boards to set in their Student Trustee policy the implementation of a student advisory committee made up of students from across the board.

## **PART 4: ELECTION AND TERM**

### **Historical Background**

Under the current legislation, school boards are required to maintain a standing policy which outlines a process for the selection of the Student Trustee and defines their role. This legislation also specifies that Student Trustees are required to be selected before June 30. The number of Student Trustees was left to the discretion of each school board, as was the selection process, and the length of term. Some school boards hold a board wide election, others hold an election where representatives from each school vote, and others chose a process where the board appoints the Student Trustee. Some terms begin in September, while others begin on June 30.

### **Current Implementation**

The position of Student Trustee is both undemocratic and under-promoted in many boards. The policies are inconsistent and do not reflect democratic principles held by students or Student Trustees themselves. Since the implementation of Ontario Education Act Regulation 461/97, at least four methods by which Student Trustees are chosen have emerged, none of which have become dominant throughout Ontario. OSTA-AÉCO, along with the Institute on Governance, believes that “[s]tandards should be established for the democratic selection...of Student Trustees<sup>viii</sup>”. A democratic selection process would ensure the position is one that is truly representative. Allowing the students of the board the opportunity to elect their Student Trustees legitimizes the position, giving Student Trustees a mandate from the people they represent. Without a democratic process, the Student Trustee has no mandate from his/her peers. In fact, one of the first reports to call for the development of a Student Trustee position suggested the position be elected: “...all boards should include at least one student member, elected by fellow students<sup>x</sup>”.

34% of Student Trustees in the province are selected after June 1. This makes them unable to attend professional development held for their benefit at OSTA-AÉCO’s Annual General Meetings. Late selection of Student Trustees makes the transition more difficult as these Student Trustees are unable to attend the last school board meetings of the year. It is usually during these last few meetings that outgoing Student Trustees pass on information.

Regular trustees and their provincial associations benefit from the ability to hold introductory sessions for all new trustees after the announcement and commencement of new trustee terms. OSTA-AÉCO is unable to provide a similar level of training as Student Trustee terms start and are announced at varying times between the last months of the school year and September.

### **Recommendations**

In order to provide uniformity across the province, a genuine mandate and to allow Student Trustees a period of transition, Student Trustees need to be chosen through some sort of democratic mechanism by their peers and be elected before the end of May.

- 8 That the Education Act be amended under Regulation 461/97, Section 3, Subsection 2, to remove the words 'or appointment' to ensure that Student Trustees are selected through democratic means by their peers, as well as to change the date to which Student Trustees must be elected from June 30 to May 30 to ensure that Student Trustees are able to receive the appropriate level of orientation before taking office.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup>Institute on Governance. *Policy Brief No. 5. "Youth Involvement in Policy Making: Lessons from Ontario's school boards."* July 1999. <  
<http://www.iog.ca/publications/policybrief5.pdf> >.

<sup>ii</sup>Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Institute on Governance. *Policy Brief No. 5. "Youth Involvement in Policy Making: Lessons from Ontario's school boards."* July 1999. <  
<http://www.iog.ca/publications/policybrief5.pdf> >.

<sup>ix</sup> Ontario. Royal Commission on Learning. *For the Love of Learning.* January 1995. Toronto: The Commission, 1994.