



Institute On Governance

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**Policy Brief**

*Youth Involvement  
in Policy-Making:  
Lessons from Ontario School Boards  
by Elder C. Marques*

## Background

If an engaged and interested citizenry is at the heart of a strong democracy, then current talk of youth indifference to the political process is troubling.<sup>1</sup> Youth apathy has implications for the development of public policy today and the quality of our citizens tomorrow.

Commentators cite the lack of adequate civics curricula, the effect of the news media, and the negative tone of political debate as causes of youth apathy. Proposed solutions focus on political education, but an equally important response is the expansion of opportunities for political participation. Apathy may well be the response of young people to their political marginalisation and a culture that does not tend to value their input.

Political institutions in Canada have shown little interest in engaging our youngest citizens. Even in cases where participation mechanisms have been implemented, they have often been seriously flawed. This may be worse than having no mechanisms at all because poorly designed models of youth participation reinforce cynical attitudes about the political process and fuel the apathy that they were meant to dispel.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, "Civics Is Not Enough: Teaching Barbarics in K-12," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 29, n. 1, March 1996; Claire Hackett, "Young People and Political Participation," in Jeremy Roche and Stanley Tucker, eds., *Youth in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (London: SAGE, 1997); Stephen Earl Bennett, "Young Americans' Indifference to Media Coverage of Public Affairs," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 31, n. 3, September 1998 and "Why Young Americans Hate Politics and What We Should Do About It," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 30, n. 1, March 1997.

Education, which is targeted almost exclusively at young people, is a good example of their political exclusion. 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. There are important reasons for including students in educational governance, such as:

- Making better decisions, and being able to implement them more easily
- Raising awareness of political issues among students
- Providing students with opportunities to assume leadership roles and gain skills
- Demonstrating "who does what"
- Promoting an appreciation of the value of debate, lobbying, and compromise in our democracy
- Demonstrating the importance of the public sector, rather than lecturing about it

The *Education Quality Improvement Act*, passed by the Canadian province of Ontario in 1997, represents a modest effort to provide greater student input into decision-making. The legislation mandated the creation of non-voting student representatives on school boards across the province. The Act, however, left it to individual boards to decide how the representative would be selected and how much influence he or she would really have.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The only guidance that school boards were given with regards to student trustees was the legislation and its complementary Regulation 461/97.

In 1999, the Institute On Governance (IOG), in partnership with the Ontario Secondary School Students' Association (OSSSA), studied different models of youth involvement in public policy development.<sup>3</sup> One case study evaluated various student trustee models developed across Ontario in response to the legislation. School boards were asked to provide the IOG with copies of their student trustee policies, and administrators, trustees, and students were interviewed about their experiences with student trusteeship.

This Policy Brief presents the findings of this evaluation and proposes recommendations for legislative changes and improved implementation strategies. Although targeted at the Ontario situation, it also has general implications for the design and implementation of other youth participation models.

## **Findings**

The legislation on student trustees is badly flawed and has been poorly implemented by many school boards.

To be sure, there are cases where student involvement has been a success. 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 any of their initial concerns.

Across the province, however, the general picture is cause for concern.  
Implementation of student trusteeship

indicates that student engagement remains a low priority for public officials in a time of significant reform in the education system. Key concerns include:

### **1. Legislative and regulatory limitations on student trustees and the absence of standards are barriers to meaningful participation.**

Provincial legislation and regulation limits the ability of student trustees to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process. First, students are not allowed to cast votes. Their participation in school board decision-making is limited to making arguments before the board. Second, student trustees are excluded from meetings that are closed to the public. On many school boards, important debate and compromise takes place in such meetings. While there are times where sensitive personnel issues could represent a conflict of interest for students, in most cases this would not be an issue.

The legislation is also weakened by its lack of detailed standards for student trustee policies, leaving the success or failure of student trusteeship dependant on the goodwill of individual school boards.

### **2. The government's commitment to its own policy is questionable.**

The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training has not collected data regarding implementation of the student trustee policy, nor has it shown any intention of acting against isolated failures to abide by the new policy. Some school boards have not yet instituted student trusteeship or even a policy for next year. One board does not allow student representatives to participate in regular board meetings, even though the regulation indicates that they are entitled to

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<sup>3</sup> Phillip Haid, Elder C. Marques, and Jon Brown, "Re-focusing the Lens: Assessing the Challenge of Youth Involvement in Public Policy," IOG, 1999. Available on the IOG website at <http://www.iog.ca>.

the same participation rights as regular board members. The government has failed to respond to these contraventions of the legislation.

### **3. Many selection models reflect a lack of faith in the ability of youth.**

Most of the 66 boards studied by the IOG fail to use a democratic board-wide selection process.<sup>4</sup> In our society, few citizens would accept a system in which they had no input into the election of their “representative,” yet this is the kind of system that in many cases is provided for students.

On 18 boards, the selection process is either completely or partially controlled by school staff, board staff, or trustees. In another 18 cases, there is no board-wide selection, meaning that candidates need not seek the support of students from outside their school.

Without a democratic selection process, student trustees lose legitimacy in the eyes of students. More importantly, cynicism about politics is reinforced. On the other hand, policies based on student election tend to increase awareness about the position, which encourages more students to compete for it, and also sets the stage for a better consultation process after the election.

### **4. Most school boards fail to provide orientation to their student trustees.**

Across the province, many student trustees begin their terms without any training. They attend their first meeting understanding neither meeting procedure, the board jurisdiction, nor their own role, rights, and responsibilities. Student trustees often

spend their first months learning how the board operates and are only able to play a meaningful role towards the end of their term.

### **5. Student trustees are often excluded from the debate and compromise that is part of decision-making.**

Many student trustees feel that their participation in the decision-making process is limited to their formal role during public meetings. They feel that their input is not sought out informally when trustees discuss issues and seek support for their positions. This situation is aggravated by their exclusion from closed meetings and their non-voting status, which means that trustees never need their political support. Given their steep learning curve and the three-year cycle of the board, the shorter term of student trustees also makes their full participation difficult.

### **6. Most student trustees do not have adequate consultative mechanisms.**

While many student trustees meet regularly with student council presidents, these meetings tend to be infrequent and not policy-focused. Part of the problem is that presidents are often more interested in local school policies than in broader education policy issues. On boards where the selection takes place only at the school level, there are no incentives for the student trustee to seek input beyond his or her own school. The situation is aggravated by a lack of co-ordination with student groups, which are in a position to provide fora for the gathering of student opinion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The IOG’s “Re-focusing the Lens” includes a breakdown of selection models at the school and board levels on an individual board basis.

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<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is the case of the Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO), which brought student trustees together with other student leaders at a conference in 1999.

## Recommendations

Both policy-makers and youth must change the way they look at decision-making in education. In particular, they must re-think how young people can be involved. The following proposed reforms are a step in this direction:

- 1. The Ontario government should amend its student trustee legislation in three key areas.** First, it should grant voting status to student trustees. Second, legislation should also allow for their participation in closed meetings, with certain exceptions.<sup>6</sup> Third, standards should be established for the democratic selection and participation of student trustees. Boards should be monitored and these standards enforced.
- 2. Representatives from the Government of Ontario, provincial student groups, and school board associations should form a provincial task force to develop a province-wide framework for student involvement in educational governance.** In particular, this framework would co-ordinate the efforts of student councils, student trustees, and provincial student groups in order to ensure communication and accountability. The current system is outdated and does not recognise the potential role of student trustees and student groups as a resource for students and decision-makers alike.
- 3. The Government of Ontario and school boards across the province**

**need to make a commitment to provide necessary funding for training and communication.** In particular, financial support should be provided to provincial student groups for the development of a student trustee orientation package, annual training, and communication between student councils, student trustees, and student associations.

- 4. Boards should acknowledge the importance of student opinion by supporting initiatives to gather student input. In addition, boards should record how student trustees would have voted on motions until legislative changes grant them full voting privileges.** School boards need to recognise student participation as a resource rather than a threat.

## Conclusion

In Ontario, with the amalgamation of school boards, a reduction in their responsibilities, and a cut in the salaries of trustees, many local school governance issues are being revisited. As the rights of parents are being re-affirmed, it is important to remember that policy-makers must be accountable not only to those who pay taxes, but also to those who are most directly affected by their decisions. In this light, those involved in educational governance need to re-evaluate the role of students and begin to recognise their value not as clients in a system, but rather as partners in decision-making.

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, exclusion from personnel discussions in which they would have a conflict of interest.

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The Institute On Governance (IOG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1990 to promote effective governance. From our perspective, governance comprises the traditions, institutions and processes that determine how power is exercised, how citizens are given a voice, and how decisions are made on issues of public concern.

Our current activities fall within six broad themes: citizen participation, Aboriginal governance, building policy capacity, and accountability and performance measurement, information technology and governance, and youth and governance.

In pursuing these themes, we work in Canada and internationally. We provide advice to public organizations on governance matters. We bring people together in a variety of settings, events and professional development activities to promote learning and dialogue on governance issues. We undertake policy-relevant research, and publish results in the form of policy briefs and research papers.

You will find additional information on our themes and current activities on our website, at [www.iog.ca](http://www.iog.ca).

The following policy briefs are also available at our website: [www.iog.ca](http://www.iog.ca):

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**Policy Brief No. 2: Public Good, Private Gain: Senior Bureaucrats and “Exemplary” Companies in Canada**, by Mark Schacter (April 1999)

**Policy Brief No. 3: Means... Ends... Indicators: Performance Measurement in the Public Sector**, by Mark Schacter (April 1999)

**Policy Brief No. 4: Building Trust: Capturing the Promise of Accountability**  
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