

# Sailing the "Trusteeship"

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by Mary Hicks

What a voyage! Over the last twenty-three years of my tenure on the Board, the turbulence on the sea of education has increased, both in intensity and in frequency. The relative tranquility of the early years of sailing has all but disappeared.

But first let me explain in an analogical way who the helmsmen are. I see the Board, which is composed of seven individual trustees, as the Navigator. The seven members are duly elected every three years. The term "trustee" contains the word "trust". We are entrusted to make decisions that are in the best interests of our students. We are also entrusted to be fiscally responsible to our ratepayers.

However, no individual trustee has any power on his/her own. Only the Board, as a whole, has the authority to guide the direction the educational system should take. We determine policy, both formally through a policy manual and informally through regular motions passed by the Board. Our role is all about direction. We set the course!

The Director and Senior Administration are the Captain and the Crew. They look at schedules, availability of crew, regulations, mode of transportation, sea worthiness of proposals, etc. We (the Board) rely on them to tackle all the technical details. If there are any unforeseen glitches, they may recommend alternate routes or, perhaps, not to take the trip at all. Unpreventable outside influences (financial, parental, governmental, and community) may also alter the course.

However, when all is said and done, it is their duty to carry out the policies made by the Board.

Some may argue with this analogy and say "Hey, you've got it backwards. The Board is the Captain and the Director is the Navigator." Perhaps. There is a fine line between the two. But one cannot operate without the other. Someone must determine the direction, while the other makes sure that all is in place in order to reach the destination.

The duties of the Board as outlined in The Education Act are quite extensive. The shall clauses state what must be done. A few examples are:

1. Provide and maintain school accommodations
2. Employ qualified teachers
3. Prescribe age and time pupils are admitted to kindergarten
4. Provide necessary transportation
5. Keep a full and accurate record of proceedings, transactions, and financial affairs of the Board.

The Education Act also outlines a number of may clauses. Some examples are:

1. Provide scholarships
2. Invest surplus funds
3. Enter into agreements with specified groups
4. Close schools
5. Furnish educational supplies and food services.

There are many more shall and may clauses too numerous to list. These are merely a sampling.

Our backgrounds coming into the position of trustee are varied. We are all considered “lay” people regardless of the fact that some trustees have considerable experience in education. As a result, some of the Board’s duties have been “watered” down by giving the Director and Administration the authority to carry them out. For example, the employment of staff, appointment of Principals and Vice-Principals and transfers of teachers is done through the Director and Administration. They are the professionals who can best determine the qualifications necessary for each position. The exception is the appointment of the Director and Superintendents; which is done directly by the Board. The Board does, however, give final approval to all appointments in order to comply with The Education Act.

As I said before, there is a fine line between the Navigator (Board) and the Captain (Director). Great care must be taken to ensure that one does not invade the territory of the other. This is not always easy. If it happens inadvertently it can be corrected with a few choice words. However, if the Director allows his/herself to be manipulated by a trustee or group of trustees, it can cause not only great frustration but could also be detrimental to the system.

The same holds true if a trustee or group of trustees is manipulated by the Director. Proof is difficult, if not impossible. Such actions can only lead to hard feelings, a lack of trust and a dysfunctional Board and school system.

The Board and the Director should never simply “rubber stamp” each other’s recommendation. Questions should be asked and answers should be sought. All of us, not only students, should be critical thinkers. The bottom line is, can the final decisions reached be fully explained and justified to our public.

Now that we have established who controls what, it’s back to the journey.

Our “passenger list” has changed considerably. The cost of the trip has increased dramatically but subsidization (government grants) has not kept pace. Some ports of call have remained the same; others have changed, while many new ones have been added.

The Education Act has been amended and created a few drops of change like adding the provision for bargaining working conditions for teachers. But the flood of changes has come about due to societal pressures and the changing composition of the Board.

Floods tend to set afloat a myriad of debris. The flood alone causes a waterlog, while the debris creates navigational difficulties. I say this not to suggest that what is being done now is all negative or useless, but rather to illustrate that the purity of the Educational mandate has become tainted. We have over the years taken on far too many issues that should be the responsibility of others. Society has used us as a dumping ground, a fix-it shop, a “sick bay” of sorts where all of the ills of society should be cured! And we, in turn, are also to blame for our reluctance to say “no”!

Most people will agree that the school, in terms of the facility, is the best place to deal with all but a few of the problems confronting children today. The "Role of the School" study will probably bear that out.

What is contentious is the financing and the personnel available. Although the school is expected to "educate" all children, the means to that end can become complex. Particularly when the school system is also called upon to "ready" the children before any formal education can take place. Some examples of these difficulties are:

Multi-handicapped Children: Funding does not adequately cover the costs. Along with transportation costs, we must also hire staff to deal with medical conditions. There is a greater demand through agencies, professionals and parents for inclusion which requires paraprofessionals on a one-to-one basis. Supplying the teachers is our responsibility but surely the other staff required should be the responsibility of the Health Department.

Social Pressures: There is an increasing number of children who require the services of a Social Worker. We employ a few Social Workers, but shouldn't this be the responsibility of Social Services? There is some cooperation but far too often there are children who fall through the cracks or children who have so many different workers and agencies working on their behalf that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. What a waste of resources!

Young Offenders: There are a number of children who become involved in criminal activity. It is not uncommon to have them "sentenced" to school. At one time, the schools were given no information about the young offender. Recently there has been one improvement in this area. The principal, at least, is now alerted to the type of offence the student was involved in (i.e. arson), so that precautions may be taken to protect other students. Unfortunately, that one step forward has been negated to some degree with the reduction of Resource Officers in our schools.

Financial: Costs have risen and government grants have decreased. Property tax payers are becoming restless. Although the refusal to pay the education portion of property taxes has not yet hit Regina, there is always the fear that the contagion may spread to our city.

The preceding examples clearly exemplify the need for integrated services. It has been talked about for years with very little movement taking place. If the Departments of Health, Social Services, Justice, Education and Finance would work cooperatively with one another, it would be beneficial to everyone and reduce financial costs.

We are also faced with many other problems, some of which could come under the previous headings but I will list them separately.

Learning Disabilities: These disabilities range from mild to severe. We have tried to address these issues by providing learning assistance, adaptation classes, and alternate education. The visual and hearing impaired also require specialization. A peculiar element has also entered the fray. Fewer students are considered "average". More

parents are demanding special attention for their children. The number of classroom aides is rising rapidly to meet these demands. So is the cost.

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Violence: Playground skirmishes are sometimes deemed as declarations of war, with some parents threatening legal action. Our "Safe Schools" program is attempting to tone down, if not eliminate, violence but the interpretation of student violence varies widely, particularly at the lower end of the scale. We have also had to introduce Behavioural Classes. Unheard of a few years ago, we now find ourselves unable to keep pace with the need.

Fresh Start: This is a program developed to deal with the emotional and social problems of some teens in grades 10-12.

Pre-Kindergarten: The push for this program has not stopped with an attempt to provide this service in all schools. There is also a call to introduce pre pre-kindergarten (in other words, classes for 3 year olds). How these children would get to school is a mystery. Allowing children this age to walk to school or to take a bus is unconscionable.

University Credits: Special interest groups are strongly suggesting, if not demanding, that more credits are required to obtain a degree in education. Can a five-year course be far behind?

Enrolment: With few exceptions, the Public Board was assured of the attendance of all non-Catholic students at the elementary level. Today, there is no such assurance. Children go back and forth between the two systems as though they were both public. Clarification as to the intent of establishing Catholic schools and their mandate is being sought by public Boards in the province.

Lobbying: Where once we were advocates pleading our cause in an assertive, yet dignified manner, now we are lobbyists demanding our rights in an aggressive, unprofessional style.

Programs: There is a steady stream of new program requirements along with the ever-changing curricula. With so many "old" programs still in place, we are becoming waterlogged. A systematic weeding process needs to take place.

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a small sampling of the unsettling climatic conditions we face.

The changing composition of the Board has altered our course as well. A political fog appears to have settled over our educational sea. Motions have been put forward and comments have been made which can be interpreted as political maneuvers. Some motions have passed, others have not. Some comments have been challenged, others have not. Some examples are:

- Joining the coalition on gun control
- System-wide lunch program
- Surtax on the newer suburban areas
- Verbal attacks on the Chamber of Commerce, City, and Provincial Government.
- Strongly opposing all school closures

- Personal views which are expounded through the media
- Ignoring the recommendations of the Committee on Smoking on School Property. (This committee included a number of Health officials.)

These examples could be construed as political grandstanding, attempts to gain “Brownie Points” with some segments of society. It does cause divisiveness in the community and can tarnish the unbiased image we are trying to project.

I don't wish to leave the impression that we are drowning, or in danger of drowning in a virtual cesspool. Many good excursions have taken place. Certainly, our ship has been buffeted by high winds and rough waters, but our navigational skills, although somewhat erratic, have brought us into many welcome harbours. Some examples are:

- ◆ Reserve Fund: Although the objective has been to have at least 10% of the annual budget in reserves, the 9.5% (11 million) that exists today is not a dramatic decrease considering the difficulties we've faced. The reserve is used to offset the void created during the early part of the year before government grants kick in and the bulk of property taxes are turned over from city coffers. It helps to eliminate the cost of borrowing to cover monthly bills and also pays interest in the latter part of the year when it is replaced.
- ◆ Cost of New School Sites: A long and difficult battle ensued during the 1980s when city council determined they would no longer share the cost of school sites. We could not accept that either financially or morally. Our perseverance paid off and city council finally relented and agreed to a 50-50 cost sharing arrangement.
- ◆ New Employees' Reception: For years this was a reception to welcome new teachers only. We came to recognize that our “educational family” consisted of all employees. Everyone needed to feel needed and wanted. It has been a welcome change.
- ◆ Central Portico: The entire school could not be saved. Yet, the thought of total demolition was unbearable. A committee was established to consider the plausibility of transplanting the façade as an entrance to a new high school (Winston Knoll Collegiate), as a way to preserve a little of our history. Through private donations, it became a reality without costing the taxpayers a dime.
- ◆ Alex Youck Museum: Initially some members saw no merit in the development of an educational museum. Fortunately, after several presentations, the Board agreed to house our historical past. Alex Youck (a former teacher) provided most of the memorabilia, oversees the management, coordinates the volunteers who conduct tours and classes and generally tends to its upkeep. It is a “working” museum and a priceless contribution to our students and the community.
- ◆ Volunteer Coordinator: We need more volunteers in our schools. This person is charged with bringing this about in a meaningful, organized manner.
- ◆ Summer School: This a cost-recovery program that draws high school students not only from Regina but from other Saskatchewan school divisions as well. Subject

areas are determined by student interest as well as student enrolment. A summer computer class for elementary students is a recent addition and appears to be popular.

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- ◆ Marks: A few years ago the Administration proposed that marks should only be issued in grades 10-12. It was not accepted and a compromise was reached so that marks or letter grades would start in grade 4. There was also some controversy regarding failing grades. I contend that failing at something is not the problem. We all fail at things on a regular basis. Learning how to cope with failure is far more important.
  
- ◆ Joint Facilities: Twenty-five years ago a small committee of ratepayers (including me) tried unsuccessfully to get the two Boards and Provincial Government to join forces to build a "linked" high school in north Regina. We argued that the area could not support two high schools and that a high school was needed in East Regina and eventually one in the north-west. Our prediction came true and Sister McGuigan closed after less than 20 years. Financial woes have forced the government to re-think the joint concept. As a result the two Regina Boards were put in a position of either agreeing to a joint facility or no facility at all. Total sharing of this unique school falls short of what many of us envisioned, however, it is a start in the right direction.
  
- ◆ Programs: A number of highly acclaimed new "in school" or "pilot" programs have been introduced. My knowledge in this area is limited. Teachers are in a far better position to determine how beneficial to students these programs are.

I have deliberately left out the Ward System because it is difficult to know what category it falls under. To me, the move towards the Ward System is a gigantic mistake, a detriment to our school system. Children will be used as pawns either consciously or subconsciously by some trustees in order to ensure their re-election in their small wards. The global picture will be lost. A good example is school closures. What trustees would vote for the closure of a school in their area, even if, in the wide scheme of things they knew it should be done. Proponents of the Ward System have argued that it provides better representation and simplifies voting. The debate (at large vs. ward) has been heated and protracted at the Board level but there has been very little involvement by the public. The 4-3 split in favor of the "at large" system was reversed last year and the Ward System will be a reality climaxing in this October's civic election.

The media must shoulder some of the blame for the drift into uncharted waters. Board meetings used to be well covered by the press, radio and even TV. The public was well informed about the system. The result was a more understanding and sympathetic community. Today, only very controversial issues are considered worthy of coverage. The public has a skewed view of the issues. Isolated, usually negative, now and then reports can not paint an accurate universal picture of the status of education. The upshot is, that this lack of understanding has caused some groups and individuals to make unrealistic demands with a total disregard of the ramifications of these actions. Some others complain privately to friends and family, particularly when it comes to property taxes, while others have simply become so apathetic that education has become the lowest rung on their ladder of priorities. We must not forget that 70% of ratepayers do not have children in school.

I don't see the removal of the hazards facing educational navigation taking place anytime in the near future. Growing demands, lack of adequate funding, slow progress in the movement towards integrated services and the changing face of the Board will continue for some time.

In particular, the seven personalities of the navigator will continue to vary every three years with each new election. A more homogeneous group may effect a smoother, straighter course. The dilemma is, that regardless of media coverage or attendance at the public portion of Board meetings, the thorny issues, the ones that bring out the best and worst of people, are usually discussed in closed sessions. Trustees are not at liberty to "rat" on their fellow trustees and thus cannot reveal any debates or comments that take place behind closed doors.

Yes, it's been quite the voyage. I've been "seasick" fearful, agitated and pessimistic, calm, relaxed, happy and optimistic. And because, unlike the media and public, I am privy to both public and closed session meetings. I can say unequivocally that my time spent on the "trusteeship" has been anything but a ~~droll~~ collection of "BORED" meetings. *dull*