

LETTER: Abolishing elected school board trustees will undermine democracy

'Trustees are the direct link between our communities and our education system. The removal of this link will undermine democracy and erode community trust'

Letter to the Editor about 22 hours ago



Jay Aspin was elected to chair the Near North District School Board. Photo by David Briggs

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Editor's note: Mr. Aspin writes this as an open letter to Premier Doug Ford. For context, read the BayToday story [Province seizes control of troubled Near North District School Board.](#)

Dear Premier Ford

I am a proud and grateful Ontarian who has had a strong passion for our education system for my entire life. Of my 45 years in elected public office, including a term as MP, 21 have been spent as an elected public trustee.

First, I provide you with some pertinent background in the context of my continuous desire to contribute to improvements in Ontario's education system. Over this long period, I have had the distinct privilege of working with such fantastic Education Ministers as Bill Davis in my early years and, more recently, Stephen Lecce. For my service, I have been fortunate to be recognized by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association with an outstanding trustee award, as well as invested into the Order of Ontario by our province for extensive contributions to public life in 2023.

Full disclosure: The first decade of those years, I served with the Nipissing Board of Education with Mike Harris as Chair, and more recently, the Near North District School Board. In August of this year, I rejoined the Near North for a fourth time during the last year of their mandate out of concern for the extreme difficulties they faced during the last year of this term. In mid-November, I was elected Chair and began to implement a last-ditch effort to attempt to extract the board from the serious governance and management leadership problems it experienced during this past term.

The point of my concern: I am writing to you directly to share my concern about Minister Calandra's apparent desire to eliminate locally elected school board trustees. Trustees are the direct link between our communities and our education system. The removal of this link will undermine democracy and erode community trust. Ontarians will be very upset to lose their democratic voice in decision-making. Replacing trustees with Student and Family Support Offices may improve customer service for parents, but will not replace the governance, accountability, and advocacy functions that trustees provide. Without elected oversight, Ontario risks a system where local voices are reduced to complaint channels rather than replacing decision-making. To succeed with this option, the government would need to expand the mandate of these offices beyond just complaint resolution to include democratic accountability, broad oversight, and community representation that trustees have. Otherwise, this change will encounter strong public resistance and will replicate the problems seen in Nova Scotia, where trustees were eliminated. See Student and Family Support Services relative to the current responsibilities of Trustees in the appendix to this letter for a full comparison and identification of concerns.

The disastrous Nova Scotia Approach: Nova Scotia decided to abolish elected school board trustees in 2018. This solution was a dismal failure, resulting in continually escalating problems. Eliminating trustees has had the impact of centralizing power in the provincial government, which removed local democratic input and sparked continual criticism. By 2023, there was a

significant movement to restore local elected boards, resulting in legislation being introduced to bring them back. The province found it eroded local democracy and community voice, which was a big price to pay, resulting in an educational upheaval that will likely take decades to repair. In this case, “the proof has been in the pudding,” as they replaced locally elected school board trustees with government-appointed advisory councils, which did not work. I fear that if Ontario proceeds along this path, it may face the same cycle of dissatisfaction and reversal.

The positive proactive approach of Alberta and British Columbia: Faced with similar challenges with governance in education, the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia have taken a positive, proactive approach of enhancing the role of elected trustees, which has strengthened accountability, equity, and student success. Ontario would be wise to consider undertaking three fundamental initiatives to modernize and strengthen the local democratic component in our education system.

1. Clarity on trustee roles so trustees remain meaningful community advocates
2. Boost public engagement by increasing awareness of trustees,
3. Protect local democracy by positioning trustees as defenders of public education

Both provinces have managed to modernize and restructure governance by balancing provincial oversight with effective local democratic input, avoiding the erosion of public trust.

Alberta establishes a **Clear Accountability Framework** by mandating boards to produce Education Plans and Annual Education Results Reports (AERRs), measuring student growth, teaching quality, and governance. Ontario could adopt similar standardized reporting to ensure trustees are held accountable for outcomes.

British Columbia focuses on **Professional Development and Advocacy**. Their school trustee’s association, the BCSTA, provides mandatory ongoing professional training, advocacy, and governance support. Trustee training should be prioritized and fortified in Ontario. Thus, adopting B.C.’s model could professionalize the role, thereby improving decision-making and defining trustee roles tied to student achievement.

Our public-school trustee structure, through the local voice, has stood the test of time since 1841... nearly 185 years. Like any system, its effectiveness requires continual upgrades to reflect changing times to enable Ontario to stay at the forefront of education in Canada. I look forward to a positive proactive change and assurance that we are very careful that we “don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”

I would be more than willing to discuss this matter further with you directly at any time that you are available.

Respectfully submitted,

Jay Aspin

North Bay

Former MP Nipissing -Timiskaming

Editor's note: Mr. Aspin supports a petition that has started, demanding that trustees remain an integral part of Ontario's education system. You can read about it. [Petition demands school board trustees remain as elected officials](#)