

As Ont. takes over school boards, trustees are under scrutiny. What do they do and what happens without them?

Centralization of education has reduced role of elected trustees over time, says prof



[Jessica Wong](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 07, 2026 4:00 AM EST | Last Updated: March 7

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Ontario Education Minister Paul Calandra has put eight boards under supervision, accusing them of mismanagement, and talked about eliminating elected trustees. Critics decry his actions as politically driven and undemocratic. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

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On Thursday, Ontario Education Minister Paul Calandra increased the list of school boards he's taken over, [adding York Catholic and keeping Peel District under supervision](#) "in response to serious concerns about infighting and long-term financial unsustainability," [the ministry said in a statement](#).

The two join six others over [the past year](#), including public and some Catholic schools in Toronto, Ottawa and London.

Last fall, a new [Ontario law](#) gave the education minister [more latitude to take over school boards](#). It arrived after high-profile cases of misspending, including one board's [approval of a \\$40,000 administrator retreat to Toronto](#) and another's \$100,000-plus [art-buying trip to Italy](#). Other boards have come under his fire for their [financial decision-making](#).

For months, Calandra has [repeatedly talked](#) about [eliminating trustees](#). Critics [decry the minister's actions](#) as politically driven, saying most boards are struggling financially due to chronic provincial underfunding.

Amid renewed scrutiny of school board decision-making, CBC News asked education experts, past and current trustees across Canada about what trustees do and why the role is in the spotlight.

What are trustees, and what do they do?

Trustees (also known as board members or commissioners in some areas) are locally elected members of the public who collectively make decisions to run a school board.

That typically means things like setting and administering an annual budget or boardwide purchasing.

They also determine local school policies, for example maintenance projects, [equity initiatives](#), or hiring staff to support students with special needs, says Nokha Dakroub, a parent who was a Peel District School Board trustee for eight years.



Parent Nokha Dakroub served as a Peel District School Board trustee for eight years, concluding her two terms in 2022. (Craig Chivers/CBC)

They must be Canadians over 18 (although some boards have student trustees), residents of the geographical area covered by the board and typically receive an honorarium for their service, which varies across Canada.

Historically, trustees were involved in all facets of schooling, from hiring teachers to setting curricula, says Sachin Maharaj, an assistant education professor at the University of Ottawa.

Yet as provinces increasingly consolidate education, the role is “a lot more circumscribed than it has been in the past and it continues to be that way.”



A Upper Canada District School Board meeting in Kemptville in 2017. School trustee meetings are usually open to parents and community members, which serves 'a real democratic function,' says education researcher Sachin Maharaj. (CBC)

Trustees today are “a nexus” between provincial governments and schools, he said, connecting with parents and community members and reflecting their concerns at the table, offering "[local voice ... into the decision-making](#) processes of these large school systems.”

They also often make space for parents to speak, Maharaj said.

“The fact that these meetings take place in public... provides a level of transparency.”

What don't trustees do?

“They do not set curriculum. They do not decide any collective agreements with teachers,” former trustee Dakroub said, noting “the big stuff is all decided” by provinces.

In her experience, education funding is earmarked to be spent in specific ways, so the budget that trustees have free rein over is actually “a very small amount” of the total received from the province.

Dakroub also said trustees can't directly intervene in operational matters concerning an individual student.

“You don't really want a system where you have a parent calling an elected official and an elected official calling a principal and telling them what to do,” she said. “There are checks and balances.”

WATCH | Toronto school board under supervision opens support office:



Ontario school boards open parent support offices

January 19|

Duration1:31

Parents and students in the province now have a new way to address issues with their school boards. The Ontario government has opened Student and Family Support Offices across five boards, including the TDSB, to replace some of the work of trustees.

Does every region have elected trustees?

Most jurisdictions have locally elected trustees to govern school boards, according to Alan Campbell, president of the Canadian School Boards Association, as well as a parent and trustee in Manitoba's Interlake School Division since 2010.



Alan Campbell, president of the Canadian School Boards Association, is a parent and Manitoba school board trustee since 2010. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

Not every region has elected school boards, Campbell said, pointing to Nova Scotia for example, which [dissolved them in 2018](#) and established regional education centres led by unelected directors who report to the province.

In Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec, he pointed out, only the minority-language schools have elected boards.

Why have trustees come under scrutiny?

In the past, Canadian education ministers have occasionally ousted trustees or put boards under supervision amid [clashes over financial management](#), [controversial decisions made](#) or due to [fractious relations within boards](#).

Dakroub believes a lack of guidance and clear definitions about the role are issues.

Educational consultant Avis Glaze, who drafted reports analyzing the school systems of [Nova Scotia](#) and [Manitoba](#), agreed that more training would help trustees.

The role doesn't require a particular skillset and people's motivation for running may vary, Glaze said, from B.C., although she noted the majority want to improve the system.



Maharaj, an assistant professor of education at the University of Ottawa, thinks friction between provincial governments and particular boards is more often to blame when school board governance comes under scrutiny. (Michel Aspirot/CBC)

Serving as a trustee today is indeed tough, noted researcher Maharaj, and challenges like reduced authority and increased complexity (given more schools in fewer boards) make it harder to recruit and retain them.

"The way the job is currently constructed, it's just not attractive to a lot of people."

- [Powers of anglophone school councils curtailed under proposed reforms](#)

Yet Maharaj thinks friction between provincial [governments and particular boards](#) is more often to blame when school board governance comes under scrutiny.

"Increasingly, provincial governments view school boards as an impediment to implementing their provincial education agenda."

What happens without trustees?

In Nova Scotia, where Maharaj has researched the [dissolution of elected boards](#), people "feel like they don't really have anywhere to turn to when they have problems," he said.

- [Education advocates disappointed in N.S. plan to improve school advisory councils](#)

People he interviewed described the school system as "less transparent, less responsive, and [they] wanted to have some form of local representation returned," he said, noting that some places that removed elected trustees over the years — like Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick — later reintroduced them.

LISTEN | Sachin in a 2025 interview:



Ontario Today 51:38 Do we still need elected school boards?

As Ontario's Minister of Education talks about reviewing the future of school board trustees, we hear your reaction with Sachin Maharaj, an Assistant Professor in the University of Ottawa's faculty of education.

A proposal to [overhaul Manitoba education](#) in 2021, including replacing elected school boards, was [eventually dropped](#) amid significant [public backlash](#), said Campbell, the Manitoba trustee.

"We elect school boards to have direct responsibility over what happens in public schools, just like we elect municipal councils to have direct responsibility for what happens with our local utilities and our local infrastructure," he said.

- [Scrapped education bill brings 'global sigh of relief' to Manitoba educators, advocates](#)

WATCH | What does a Calgary trustee do?:



What do school trustees do?

October 20, 2025 |

Duration: 1:45

Voters in Calgary's municipal election will get a second ballot to choose a school trustee for their ward. They represent either the public system or Catholic school division. But what exactly does a trustee do? The CBC's Elise Stolte explains.

Is there an alternative?

Dakroub, who ended two terms as a trustee in 2022, thinks the current system is flawed. [Acclamation](#) — when just one candidate runs — has kept longtime trustees in place, she said, while too few trustees have kids currently in the school system and elected boards aren't necessarily reflecting the students impacted by their decision-making.

- [School board trustee elections see only about 1% voter turnout](#)

“The selection mechanism for the people around the table is not working, which is why we're ending up with these lapses of judgment” in Ontario, said Dakroub, who would prefer trustees to be appointed.

Glaze, the education consultant, thinks a mix of appointments and elected officials could avoid simply “top-down” decision-making.

“We need to get people who know what improving systems are about ... [appointed] based on their skills and their history and what they have done in their own organizations,” she said.

“At the same time, people want some sort of grassroots input. Why can't we have both? It doesn't have to be either/or.”

Glaze thinks a coalition of groups, including parents, teachers, principals, education researchers and unions, must be consulted for any reform.



Education consultant Avis Glaze, seen here in 2018, is a former Ontario student achievement officer who drafted reports analyzing school systems in Nova Scotia and Manitoba. (Jean Laroche/CBC)

Manitoba trustee Campbell rejects that an appointee is a better choice than an elected official.

“If [trustees] are making poor decisions, then they should be held democratically accountable by their constituents, 100 per cent,” he said.

But replacing elected trustees, “removes democracy from the equation,” he continued, noting that low votership has plagued municipal and provincial elections, as well.

Maharaj also favours elected trustees over government appointees.

One of the original reasons trustees don’t run under specific political parties “is because it was viewed that ... schools should be somewhat insulated from regular partisan politics,” he said.

“That’s increasingly becoming less the case as school boards and school board trustees are diminished.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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