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TRUTH AND TRADITION

Canada's School Boards Are in Trouble, but You Can Do Something About It

By John Hilton O'Brien, 3 October 2022

Any reader of horror fiction will tell you that you need to be careful what you wish for. It's no less true in education.

School boards are "governing" boards, rather than "managing" boards. A governing board only has one employee: a [superintendent](#), whose job it is to realize the board's wishes. In practice, this means that a board can't decide things like whether a particular child or group of children can be admitted, or how exams will be administered. All they can do is set policy, which is a set of general guidelines. It's like Aladdin's Genie—you make a wish, and the genie makes it happen.

But wishes can go wrong. In the horror classic "[The Monkey's Paw](#)," the three wishes came with terrible costs. Using the monkey's paw to wish for money resulted in the death of the protagonist's son—the money came in the form of an insurance payout. Wishing him back to life... well, the only solution was to wish that the second wish had not been made.

In recent years, we wished to protect kids from [bullying](#) for reasons of [gender expression](#). While this may be a laudable goal, its outworking has come with a cost: unprecedented levels of [secrecy](#) in which many teachers are now literally forbidden to tell parents about earthshaking decisions in their kids' lives. The spectacle of the [Ontario teacher](#) with heroically-sized prosthetic breasts that recently made headlines was simply part of the package. It's less genie than paw.

Confusion about board powers is part of the reason why school board elections, currently underway across much of Canada, are in trouble. There are variety of [other reasons](#)—trustee compensation is low, news coverage is limited, there are no political parties to pool resources, and no tax deductions for contributing to a school board campaign. Information about candidates and issues simply isn't as available as it is for a general election.

The result? Campaigns aren't on the same level as a provincial, federal, or even municipal election. The candidates don't know how to campaign effectively, they lack any meaningful budget for advertising, and have few means to recruit volunteers to spread the word. At the school level, the campaigns that are supposed to bring you information are simply absent. That means low turnout, election after election.

The negative consequences are obvious. When we look at the news, we sometimes wonder if the lunatics are running the asylum. There are a lot of vested interests when it comes to school boards, including from some local unions, consultants, education academics, and bureaucrats—enough people to win an election if turnout is low. And when your school board gets ambitious at your expense, these vested interests get more power, prestige, and money. When these are the most motivated voters, we cannot be surprised when the school board reflects their needs. It's like giving the monkey's paw to someone who really wants to make a wish.

The good news is that if you want to make a genuine difference, *you can*—but you need to step up. There are four profoundly effective things you can do.

The first thing you can do is stand for office. That would let you throw the monkey's paw into a drawer and lock it up. But you need to [campaign well](#). That means learning how, spending the money required, and thinking about issues in ways that translate to policy. Think about the next election *today*. There are lots of groups like Parents for Choice in Education that offer training and resources for candidates—take advantage of them.

Donating money is the next most powerful action. In my experience, a winning trustee campaign [spends](#) around \$3,500, from literature to data. A good trustee might happen to win without that budget, but you don't want to leave it to chance! The money is small enough that \$100 or so has a shot at getting *someone good* elected.

If you have more time than money, volunteers make outsize contributions. Political campaigns need more than a candidate—they need a [team](#). It raises money, organizes volunteers, gets the candidate to events, puts up a website, and responds to questions in social media. Ten hours makes an enormous difference—and lifelong friends.

The last and most important thing is to vote effectively. With so few effective campaigns, this means *homework*. Search the board website, internet, and newspaper to

find the background and plans of all the candidates. It takes at least two hours to figure out who is a good candidate, who is lackadaisical, and who really represents a vested interest. To whom will you give the genie's lamp? Then go to the polls, ask for the ballot, and vote.

Sometimes it seems like the special interests and the crazies are the only people making headway. But it doesn't have to be—and it's up to you to put the good people in office. So don't sit at home. Plan to vote, and *plan to win*. And be careful what you wish for.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

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