

School Board Elections Are Dirty—But They Don’t Have to Be

By John Hilton O’Brien, 2 November 2022

School board elections this year were more organized—and dirtier—than ever.

Teachers’ unions ran sophisticated campaigns to elect slates of “progressive” trustees, complete with vitriolic attack websites, as angry parents began to organize in response to progressive excesses. Stakes are high: School boards control billions in public spending, and can [indoctrinate children](#) with their chosen ideological perspective. The conflict is getting out of hand, but a recent innovation in British Columbia may offer a solution.

Recent [political financing laws](#) are probably at the root of the increased tension. Government legislation has largely eliminated political participation by corporations. Unions, whose business is the mobilization and control of their members, are largely unaffected by the new finance regulations. While a corporation might not be able to make donations, the union can simply direct its members to do so. The political balance of business and labour has tilted decisively in labour’s favour.

B.C.’s [school board elections](#) demonstrated the new pattern of board politics. The Chilliwack Teachers’ Association endorsed a slate of candidates, also backed by the Labour Council and other unions. A [fundraiser](#) for the slate collected money for the union candidates. An anonymous website [affiliated with the Vancouver Labour Council](#) accused non-union candidates and organizers of being [anti-vaccine homophobes](#). The

1,800 members of the Teachers’ Association formed a voting bloc with a quarter of the votes needed to elect a trustee, plus other union members—enough to make a clean sweep of the at-large election.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) ran slates of candidates across Ontario. They had a [campaign](#) manual worthy of a major political party, a [manual](#) for candidates, and even a campaign [platform](#). Of the local races we examined, associates of OSSTF ran 88 candidates in jurisdictions with 129 seats in total, winning 58 and thus controlling some of Ontario’s largest jurisdictions. They endorsed more candidates than we could track. It was a resounding success for machine politics that would leave a political party giddy with victory.

Ontario repeated B.C.’s patterns. Endorsements echoed from unions to labour councils, creating cascades of favourable publicity. An “anti-hate” [website](#) funded by the federal government ran attack pieces on non-union candidates. While Ontario has no public database of contributions, we know that OSSTF challenged Ontario’s \$600,000 spending maximum for third-party advertisers [in court](#) during the spring’s provincial election. OSSTF reports surpluses in the millions; winning school board campaigns is almost trivial.

B.C. introduced a new wrinkle: [Civic parties](#) enabled parents to organize and introduced some accountability. A new party, [ParentsVoice BC](#) (PVBC), even won three seats—including one

of two against the Chilliwack machine. The [mathematics](#) of such races means their victory in Chilliwack could only come from a deeply divided electorate.

It was driven partly by parental anger about gender ideology and critical race theory. Current stories like the Ontario teacher with massive prosthetic breasts, whose inappropriate dress was defended by the board as a right to “gender expression,” added immediacy. PVBC shared dozens of [intense union attacks](#) with me, including letters to union members, attacks on union-affiliated websites, and biased news articles. It was personal, vicious, and barely short of slander. PVBC’s gains made in spite of the machine’s well-funded attacks provides real hope for parents.

School board elections will become more intense. Parent groups will become more organized and better funded. In response, they will face the same poison that was spewed at ParentsVoice BC. It’s a recipe for dysfunction: Boards will become battlegrounds, and elections will descend to the pit.

Parents can’t hide in independent schools or home education. Exempt from unionization, they threaten union power. The educational establishment calls private schools an “[assault on public education](#)”; home education is [even worse](#). Controlling public boards won’t just let unions indoctrinate children—public money will be used to lobby for banning independent schools and home education.

Citizens who care about local control over education have only one option: They need to run for school boards, learn to manage campaigns, and coordinate volunteers. Engaged citizens must volunteer for trustee campaigns and donate money to offset the unions' massive financial advantage. The inexpensive political training, campaign tools, and supplies offered to parents by groups like [Parents for Choice in Education](#) will become increasingly important.

At the provincial level, fixing school board dysfunction is a policy problem. A province could choose to appoint school boards, as Quebec does, or do

away with local boards altogether, as Newfoundland does. However, as Alberta's Jason Kenney found out, teachers' unions seeking power can [influence provincial politics](#). And without elected trustees, schools are run by bureaucrats further removed from the parents most impacted by local education policy.

Dirty school board politics are probably best approached with the B.C. laws for civic political parties. Clarifying election financing and activities, they put parental organizations on the same footing as unions and encourage accountability across the board. Every provincial government should have a close look

at the B.C. legislation before the next school board election.

Until we do, school board politics will become scorching hot. And everyone will get burned.

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