

I'm Michael Barrett, President of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. I am proud to serve as a public school board trustee. I welcome you to your new term of office and invite you explore with me the amazing world of public education.

Ontario's education system leads the world. It isn't just the high levels of academic performance that makes us stand out; it is our record of successful outcomes for all students. The achievement gap between rich and poor students in Ontario is among the narrowest in the world - making us one of the few education systems that can boast both excellence and equity. For parents this means that, despite the challenges of program delivery in remote areas, classrooms in dense urban areas where a hundred languages are spoken, and variations in socio-economic conditions, they can be sure that the local public school board offers their children a rich education experience no matter where they live in Ontario.

School trustees are the key to making that happen. Trustees on Ontario's public school boards make decisions that affect more than a million students. They help shape the education experience, the school environment and the future of our children, communities, and the face of Ontario. Locally elected school trustees put the "public" in public education. They are the connectors who bring community voices to the table and make democracy meaningful. They influence children's experiences today and expand their opportunities for the future.

(Spoken by Claire Francoeur): Les membres des conseils publics de langue française veillent à ce que, partout en Ontario, les enfants admissibles aient un accès équitable à une éducation laïque en langue française de qualité supérieure. Ils font en sorte que les élèves réalisent tout leur potentiel à l'école et dans la société, afin de soutenir et de vivifier les communautés francophones.

So, what do trustees do? They make sure that school systems are run well. They plan for the long term and focus on the students in their care. They collaborate with their communities to make sure that education dollars are spent on local priorities. Trustees deal with program delivery, budget, building issues and policies affecting school and workplace environments. They represent the concerns of the local board in meetings with other levels of government and community forums. They know their job is to make great things happen for students and to reach every child who comes through the doors of a school.

So many of the outstanding initiatives that keep students inspired and engaged are due to the passion of Ontario's trustees. They have advocated for arts and sports programs, for co-operative experiences that mesh with the local economy, for innovation and technology, for full-day kindergarten, for funding to support special needs, and for

programs that serve unique needs of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students. They have championed mental health, safe and caring schools, inclusive and equitable environments, and a level playing field in low-income neighbourhoods. They have voted to consolidate schools. They have voted to keep small rural schools open. The deciding factor is always what benefits students the most. They weigh up the dollars and cents but make decisions that are focussed on kids.

They represent neighbourhoods and everyone who lives there, including those who do not have children in school. They work to make sure schools are good neighbours, a hub within the community, and welcoming places for everyone.

Trustees have a direct and personal relationship with their communities - unique in all political life. Trustees come face to face with their public every day - on the street, in the grocery store, at the hockey arena and in the boardroom. They bring accountability to the communities in which they live and to the families they serve and make sure the education system reflects the variety and diversity that makes Ontario unique. Trustees serve as advocates, as ombudsmen, as originators of ideas, as guideposts and hold both the government and school board staff accountable.

Canadians have been electing their peers to local school boards for more than two hundred years. Local trustees are neighbours. They are parents, business people, professionals, tradespeople, artists and volunteers. They have, without exception, taken on the role because they care about the world of tomorrow that is taking shape in classrooms today. They are the key to making education work, to making it an effective force in society.

In all that they do, trustees advocate for the connection between effective public education and the future strength, not just of the economy, but of the social fabric of our province and our country. This is the work of community cohesion and nation-building. This is something to be proud of.