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Motion to defer vote on the public school board's policy governance model defeated

By DENNIS SMITH

Special to The Champion

Trustees have been drilled for months on policy governance, but some fear its effect remains unknown.

Chair Ethel Gardiner has described policy governance as trustees developing and monitoring policies, then holding the edu-

cation director responsible.

But Oakville trustee Drew Currah said trustees should serve as general managers of the Halton District Board of Education and not be lumped together as a cheering squad.

He also disagreed that policy governance is needed to make the board more efficient. "Efficiency and effectiveness are not part of democracy," he said. "Democracy is

messy and democracy is needed."

Policy governance will increase red tape, he added. "I have 4 to 5 pounds of paper here and this will add more paper and more bureaucracy."

Mr. Currah said trustees should be allowed to abstain from voting if they don't have enough time to read and understand information. "It has happened to me."

The new form of governance was actual-

ly approved last September by the board, but Mr. Currah and Burlington trustee Peggy Russell said it's still difficult to grasp after six months of training.

They argued the governance model slated for a vote recently be deferred until October to allow more opportunity for public feedback on the issue.

"I'm not afraid of unpopular decisions, but I am opposed to making rushed decisions that have not had the full consultation process," said Ms Russell.

She said policy governance hands much responsibility over to the director and staff. "We need to be sure we're not delegating responsibility to the director and putting ourselves in jeopardy legally," she said.

"And I'm fearful that under policy governance my community will lose its voice and become marginalized."

Citizen delegate Wendy Burton said policy governance muzzles trustees by insisting they speak with one voice, limiting speaking time and potentially the distribution of materials to trustees.

"... this will emasculate trustees, concentrate too much power in the hands of the director and disenfranchise the public," said Ms Burton, the former school chair of Oakville Trafalgar High School.

She said dissent is integral to democracy and can lead to new, improved policy.

"This board faces problems of real differences in interests and philosophies... north vs. south, consolidation vs. decentralization, special programs vs. common programs," she said. "These are problems best solved through the balancing act that is politics."

She expressed concern the proposed policy governance model will make negotiating teams accountable to the education director, give him control of the budget and make the education director responsible for hiring all supervisory officers.

"All it allows trustees who want to be involved in hiring is to act as advisors to the director," said Ms Burton.

Board rushing, says citizen

She indicated the board is rushing to pass its policy governance model without considering the full range of options, holding public discussion or obtaining an independent legal review.

Debbie Downs, the board's governance and bylaw committee chair, reminded trustees policy governance has already been approved by the previous board.

"Policies will be made by consultation and group interaction," said Downs. "For many constituents this is not a big surprise. Trustees are working with school councils and the public on this."

She added governing policies aren't carved in stone and will be amended on a regular basis.

"It will be advantageous for moving forward in terms of clear-cut policies that all can understand — trustees, staff and the public," she said.

Bylaws have not been amended in a huge manner other than to allow for changes in the structure of meetings.

"They will include public input more than they exclude public input," she added.

The deferral motion was defeated 7-3. Subsequent motions to adopt new governing bylaws and policies were approved.

The new bylaws will replace the former procedural bylaws in September.

Community meetings to outline the governance model will be held throughout Halton in October.



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