

Trustees put end to secret ballot for chair, vice-chair

By Tim Whitnell
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The Halton District School Board will no longer elect its chair and vice-chair by secret ballot.

After considering advice from legal counsel, trustees voted at a recent meeting to change a bylaw related to how they elect the chair and vice-chair.

The annual vote to determine which trustees will act as chair and vice-chair of the board for a one-year term now will be public record, meaning those in attendance will know for whom each trustee voted.

By a 5-4 margin trustees voted to have the election of the chair and vice-chair now be done by a show of hands versus a recorded (vocal) vote.

The elections take place the first Wednesday of each December at the annual meeting of the board. This year's meeting will be held tonight at 7 p.m. at the J.W. Singleton Education Centre, beside M.M. Robinson High School in Burlington.

Burlington Trustee Peggy Russell, chair of the board's policy, bylaw and governance committee, told trustees that a conference call

she and Education Director Wayne Joudrie had with a board-retained lawyer determined the board inadvertently had been violating Ontario's Education Act for an unknown number of years by holding secret ballot elections for its chair and vice-chair positions.

Traditionally, trustees have written down the name of their preferred chair or vice-chair candidate in public but two scrutineers would count the ballots in private with the education director announcing the winner. No vote count was ever given.

Russell said current board and previous Halton boards of trustees she was a part of were unaware they were in contravention of the act by conducting secret ballots.

"When you find out you're doing something contrary to the act, you change your practice. The whole idea of a recorded vote is the public has a right to know," said Russell, who noted she couldn't ever recall any objections from the public about previous processes around the secret ballot.

During board debate about the proposed change in voting procedure, Russell indicated it didn't matter what trustees ultimately decided as she would exercise a trustee's right to call for a recorded vote when the elections take place.

Russell said the voting procedural error was discovered as a result of legal counsel reviewing the policy and bylaw committee's work. Trustees are reviewing and updating their bylaws, to be followed by a review of board policies.

The role of the chair at board meetings is to steer trustees through their meeting agendas, try to maintain trustee focus and decorum and make rulings, when necessary, on the protocols to be followed by the board in making decisions.

The vice-chair assists the chair and assumes the chair's role when the former isn't present, has a conflict of interest or wishes to speak on a matter at a public board meeting.

The current chair of the Halton board is Halton Hills Trustee Gillian Tuck-Kutarna; the vice-chair is Janie Hames of Burlington. Elected trustees earn between \$13,000 and \$20,000 per year — the amount varies based on student enrolment and whether they are a regular trustee, the chair or vice-chair.

During their four-year terms all trustees also have an annual expense budget of up to \$5,000, which can be carried over to subsequent years if it's not all spent.

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