

The Trustee as Arts Advocate

Education is a community concern. The provincial government has legislative authority for education, but it is the local involvement of citizens in each community that gives public education its heart.

"The members of the board of school trustees of each school district are elected by the residents to govern its public

education in a progressive, farsighted, educationally-sound, and economically-feasible manner", according to the B.C. School Trustee Association manual. While only a board has legal authority to implement policy, a single trustee can and does have the opportunity to become knowledgeable about, and an advocate for, the arts in our schools on an individual basis.

HOW CAN TRUSTEES BE EFFECTIVE ARTS ADVOCATES?

Trustees are leaders in the community. They indicate support for arts programs when they attend arts events and arts classes offered in the district. Trustees can make themselves knowledgeable about arts programs in each school, the curriculum being offered, and the adequacy of support in terms of equipment and facilities to support arts instruction. It is reasonable to expect that each school district has a policy statement on the arts in education, and if no such policy exists, any trustee can propose one.

Trustees can also provide an important link between community arts activities and the schools. In some communities there has been successful joint funding and use of facilities arranged between the school board, and the municipality. School arts groups often perform at a very high level, and can contribute in a meaningful fashion to the quality of life in a community if given the chance and some encouragement.

Trustees can also act as a check to see that Ministry mandated instruction in the arts is carried out in grades 1-8, and offered as electives to secondary students. Both allocation of instructional time, and appropriate staff selection to make arts programs effective should be priorities in each district along with a fair share of equipment and supply budgets. Once these programs are in place, it is reasonable to expect that program evaluations are conducted to ensure the ongoing quality of the programs. The results of these evaluations should be reported to the board.

Trustees often have the ability and the opportunity to communicate to the media, and can publicize the many wonderful learning opportunities and achievements arising from arts instruction and co-curricular activities. Trustees help just by attending events and seeing work that is being done. In many cases, the teachers and the students are involved in rehearsing before school in the mornings, or in the evenings, after everyone else has gone home, to put on a play,

concert, or exhibition. They are encouraged by even a simple, "Well done!" from trustees who they view as educational policy leaders.

Perhaps board meetings would be more interesting with a brief concert or scene from a play to open. District offices or board rooms may be a good location for a display of student art work. Trustees may be able to rally a community to send deserving groups to provincial or national competition so that the teacher can leave fund-raising to someone else, and concentrate on teaching. In brief, the opportunities to help give children access to quality arts experiences are unlimited — any active involvement will help.

WHAT KIND OF TRUSTEE CAN BE AN ARTS ADVOCATE?

It's not necessary that a trustee be an artist him or herself. The kind of trustee who can improve arts education is the one who is interested and committed. Once a person accepts the value of aesthetic education as part of the necessary program on an equal basis with the humanities and the sciences, he or she just needs to be persistent. The goals and learning outcomes are defined, and program evaluation procedures should be in place.

A trustee who is willing to attend and support arts events and classrooms; a trustee who will ask appropriate questions and persist until satisfactory answers are given; and a trustee who values the development of creativity and non-linear thought will be successful as an advocate.

TRUSTEE ACTION PROGRAM FOR THE ARTS

Here are some suggestions for actions a trustee, or group of trustees, can take to support opportunities for young people to learn through the visual and performing arts. All of them

will have an effect — doing some of them will have an effect. Even one will likely make the situation for arts education better than it is at present — the key is action!

ACTION IDEAS:

- Investigate whether your district has a policy which guarantees equal access to arts in education for all students. If no policy exists, institute one. Sample policies are available through the BCSTA or through districts, (such as No. 61), that have a policy in place.
- Request from administration a statement about the status of arts education at each grade.
- Request a program assessment of arts programs so decisions can be made about changes and improvements based on up-to-date data.
- Ask for information about the number of elementary arts specialists and secondary arts specialists on staff and the number of students they work with out of the total enrollment.
- Compare allocations for arts supplies with allocations in other curricular areas.
- Inquire regarding the extent to which arts education is part of gifted education programs in your district.
- Request an assessment of arts facilities and equipment in each school and the impact on the instructional program of any identified deficiencies.
- Ask for presentations on the curriculum in each arts area and at each level. 15 minutes per board meeting bi-monthly could be devoted to an explanation or demonstration of arts learning.
- Develop a relationship with municipal or community arts people with a view to sharing resources and facilities or cooperating on programs.
- Ask to have a specific administrator appointed as the person responsible for supervising and developing arts programs in your district. This should be a Fine Arts Supervisor who has special knowledge and training, but in some districts it may have to be another administrator. (Contact the Arts in Education Council for a monograph on the Role of the Fine Arts Supervisor.)
- Allocate budget funds to the provision of quality professional arts experiences for students. This will add a dimension to the curriculum of schools that they cannot provide for themselves, and will permit your district to receive matching grants for artists in the schools.
- Attend arts events in schools and encourage other trustees to attend. Volunteer to open these events and welcome parents as well as acknowledging the work done by the teacher and students.
- Make awareness of, and sensitivity to, arts education an integral part of the criteria for the selection and appointment of school and district administrators. This criteria should also be applied to the assessment of these educational leaders.
- Encourage your administration to see that trained arts specialists are hired in numbers sufficient to meet curricular needs in the arts for all students.
- Encourage professional development in the arts to help teachers remain aware of new curricula, new methodology, and provincial trends.

Above all, remember that the key is action. A trustee can make a qualitative difference in arts education for the children in the district. Opportunities to learn through the arts enrich the child, and arts education is part of the educational right of every child. Protecting that right is part of the trust.



Arts in Education Council