



2021

STUDENT REPRESENTATION ACROSS CANADA

A report by the Ontario Student Trustees' Association -
l'Association des élèves conseillers de l'Ontario

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Introduction

School boards in Ontario serve as crucial governing bodies that shape public education at a local and provincial and set priorities for student achievement and well-being. Creating student representation on school boards allows for the structural uplifting of student voices within a governance structure created to serve them, as reflected through an educational reform made in 1999 by the Ministry of Education that mandated the position of student trustee: student trustees sit on their school board's board of trustees to represent student voice and provide input to school trustees and senior administration. This position has been amplifying student voice in Ontario on 76 school boards for the past 20 years and counting, with student trustees advocating for student directly to their school board on behalf of the primary stakeholders of the education system: the students.

Currently, Ontario and Nunavut mandate student representation at the school board level in their provincial or territorial legislation.^{1,2} Additionally, Ontario is the only province or territory with an incorporated association of student trustees that serves as an official stakeholder to the provincial government. If all provinces and territories in Canada mandate a student representative position in school boards, student voice can be enshrined within boards' governance structures and heard at the same level from coast to coast.



Enhancing Advocacy and Student Voice

OSTA-AECO supports the implementation of the role of student trustee while recognizing the variety of methods provinces/territories can use to enhance student voice, some of which may function more effectively for individual districts and provinces/territories.

School boards across Ontario have different versions of a student leadership group (e.g. Student Senate, Student Trustee Liaison Committee), comprised of students of diverse identities and backgrounds who meet and work with the student trustees. These students represent their schools at monthly meetings. These student leadership groups provide diverse perspectives for the student trustees to more effectively advocate on behalf of all students in the school board. Additionally, these groups often plan leadership initiatives and bring student voice from the grassroots level in schools directly to the board's authority. The size, policies and procedures with these groups is governed differently within each school board in the Ontario.

Student leadership groups are often chaperoned by board staff, including secondary school principals or superintendents, who also act as mentors for the student trustees. OSTA-AECO encourages school boards or their equivalents to have a committee dedicated to collecting student voice from across the region, and incorporate student representation from the committee in decision-making processes.

School boards across Ontario also distribute (on a voluntary basis) student census surveys to gather data from students on their race, gender, or sexuality, (dis)ability, religion, or socioeconomic status. These censuses collect crucial data on student demographics, and support school boards in creating strategic plans that can be tailored to the needs of their students.

The presence of student voice in centralized forms such as student trustees and district student leadership groups is essential to the process of ensuring equity and representation in education. However, these formal positions are not fully representative of the student body, and province and school boards should thus strive to access student voice in other forms. In order to create inclusive and progressive environments for both staff and students, clubs and student-led groups have become a common practice in schools across Ontario. Through the implementation of Gender-Sexuality Alliances, Black Student Unions, and other forms of local student leadership, students are able to organize their voices to uplift their peers and impact their communities. Creating a local environment where students and staff are able to collaborate, better their schools, and project their voices is vital to a functional system of student voice. Provinces and school boards should conduct outreach (e.g. by hosting roundtables and consultations) to school clubs and student groups in order to access feedback and perspectives. This should be done as frequently as possible, when provinces and school boards make major decisions, implement changes, or assess issues.

Implementation of Student Trustees Across Ontario

The position of a student trustee originated in the early 1990s, when Premier Bob Rae's provincial government appointed the Royal Commission on Learning to find ways to revitalize the province's education system. In December of 1994, the commission released their final report titled *For the Love of Learning*. The report included several recommendations, including that "all [school] boards have at least one student member, entitled to vote on all board matters, subject to the usual conflict-of-interest and legal requirements."³

Although the report was tabled after a change in administration, Ontario's new provincial government, led by Premier Mike Harris, delivered on some of the recommendations made in the Commission's report. In 1997, Bill 160 also known as "The Education Quality Improvement Act" was introduced and passed within a few months.⁴ It outlined that all school boards were to include elected or appointed non-voting pupil representatives and by 1999 all school boards in Ontario included at least one pupil representative.

In 2006, the provincial government under the leadership of Premier Dalton McGuinty amended the Education Act, filed a regulation, and issued new guidelines for school boards to follow. The position was officially renamed to "student trustee", and the new legislation outlined guidelines for elections, terms of office, attendance and participation, voting rights, and other general information.⁵

The new guidelines ensured that all student trustees are directly or indirectly voted upon by students in their respective boards. Student trustees were granted the right to attend board and committee meetings unless specified in the Education Act, including in-camera meetings that discuss, "... the disclosure of intimate, personal or financial information in respect of a member of the board or committee, an employee or prospective employee of the board or a pupil or his or her parent or guardian."⁶

Although student trustees remain non-voting members of a school board, they have the right to have their vote recorded. A student trustee may call for a recorded vote wherein a school board records the resolution, including the student trustees' non-binding votes, before moving to the binding vote. Student trustees were also granted the right to suggest a motion which could be brought to the board as a resolution.

Student trustees receive a \$2500 honorarium for their contributions if they serve for the completion of their term. Additionally, student trustees are to be reimbursed for preapproved out-of-pocket expenses, as they receive "the same status as a board member with respect to access to board resources and opportunities for training".⁷ Ontario's funding formula provides school boards with \$5000 to help compensate for professional development of all trustees, including student trustees.

After concluding a governance engagement in 2017, the Ministry of Education announced regulation changes that came into effect for the 2020-2021 academic year.⁸ School boards are expected to have between two to three student trustees and may choose to provide them with a one or (staggered) two-term position (corresponding election deadlines apply). All school boards in Ontario amended their policies to reflect these new changes for the 2020-2021 academic year, which came into effect January 1st, 2020.

The Student Trustee

Roles and Responsibilities

Prior to the implementation of the student trustee position, decisions at the board level were often made without student input, leading to a significant gap in communication between staff and students, as student voice was not consulted or adequately reflected on important decisions directly affecting students. As a result, the student trustee position was implemented to represent student voice within Ontario's education system.

At the board level, student trustees serve as the voice of the student population. By sharing ideas and participating in meaningful conversations at the board table, student trustees advocate for the needs and wants of their constituents. Board meetings are also crucial opportunities for student trustees to bring ideas, questions, and initiatives to their adult trustees and administrators. From attending board meetings to spearheading student leadership groups, to advocating on behalf of students at their school board, student trustees have several responsibilities to fulfill. A student trustee's primary duty is to advocate on behalf of the students in their board and serve as a liaison between students and board personnel. This is done by attending committee meetings, community advisory meetings, and policy consultations. Through these commitments, student trustees can ensure that decisions being made at the board are in the best interest of students.

Student trustees can also advocate for students across the province through provincial associations such as OSTA-AECO, which works with provincial educational stakeholders across the province.

Specific responsibilities of a student trustee vary by board and are outlined in school board policies. However, the main responsibility of student trustee is to advocate for the interests of students at their respective school boards.

In recent years, school boards such as the Toronto District School Board and Thames Valley District School Board have implemented an Indigenous student trustee position (elected or appointed by procedures that differ between boards) to represent the interests of Indigenous students. OSTA-AECO applauds this critical initiative and supports substantive efforts made by school boards to improve advocacy and representation through affirmative policies.

Though not provincially mandated, some school boards also have an Indigenous student trustee position, of which the election process varies from board to board. They represent Indigenous student voice and often provide perspective on the unique experiences of Indigenous students within the school board system or on unique barriers posed to Indigenous students. OSTA-AECO applauds this critical initiative and supports the substantive efforts made by school boards to improve advocacy and representation through affirmative policies. OSTA-AECO also encourages school boards to continue uplifting the voices of Indigenous students through means such as Indigenous specific student advisory groups.

Election of the Student Trustee

In Ontario, student trustees are either elected directly by the general student population of the board or indirectly through student representatives such as student councils or student leadership groups.

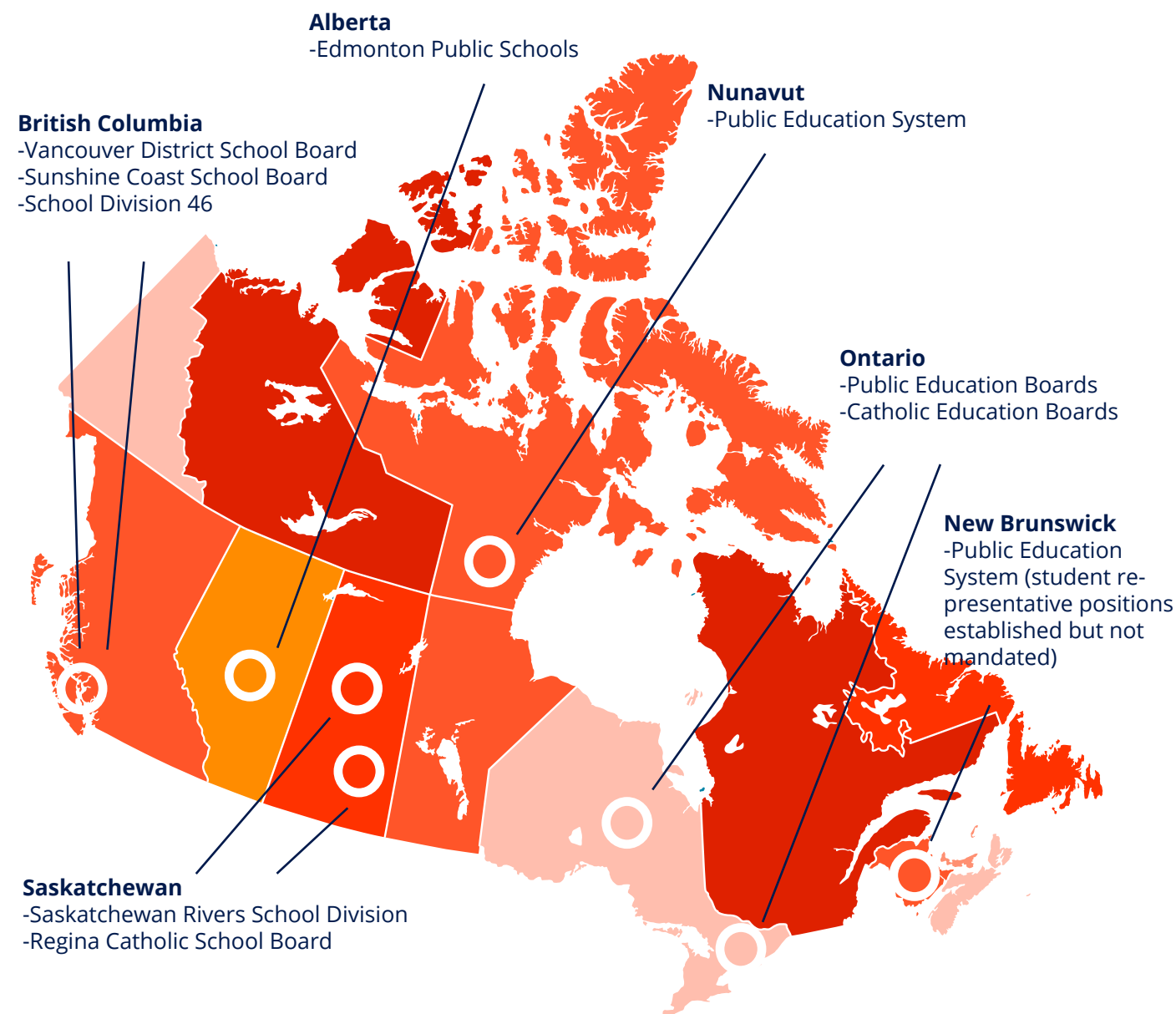
School boards who choose to have a one-term system are expected to complete student trustee elections by February 30th each year to create time for mentorship and transitioning between the incoming and outgoing student trustees. School boards who choose to implement a two-term system must complete elections by April 30th, and are advised to stagger their student trustees' terms where possible. Student trustees' terms begin on August 1st the year they are elected and end on July 31st. Specific election procedures and term lengths for student trustees vary depending on their school board policies.

Ontario's student trustees comprise of a diverse group of students engaged in building the education system of tomorrow.



Student Representation On School Boards Across Canada

District boards or provincial/territorial education systems across the country with student trustees or similar representative positions:



About OSTA-AECO

The Ontario Student Trustees' Association (l'Association des élèves conseillers et conseillères de l'Ontario), officially branded as OSTA-AECO, is a registered non-profit, nonpartisan organization and the largest student stakeholder group in Ontario. The organization's members include student trustees from publicly-funded school boards across the province.

OSTA-AECO strives to advocate on behalf of students at the provincial level, working closely with the Ministry of Education and other educational stakeholders. The association also provides profes-

sional development for Ontario's student trustees in the form of three annual conferences.

The association was founded in the year 2000 by student trustees from English-Public, English-Catholic, French-Public, and French-Catholic school boards. They came together to better advocate for the students of Ontario and held their first Annual General Meeting in May of that year. The association has worked on several different advocacy projects (viewable on osta-aeco.org) and seen some great successes since its inauguration.



Structure of OSTA-AECO

The Executive Council guides the vision and advocacy priorities of OSTA-AECO as a whole. It is comprised of 11 student trustees and two former student trustees (in the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Financial Officer positions) who, depending on the role, are either elected by the General Assembly or appointed by the incoming Executive Council. All members of the Executive Council have a binding vote on motions tabled during their monthly meetings.

The Public Board Council (PBC) and Catholic Board Council (CBC) are responsible for advocacy initiatives in the interest of students in Public school boards and Catholic school boards, respectively. Members of the General Assembly are automatically members of PBC or CBC as per their school board designation. The Presidents and Vice Presidents of PBC and CBC are elected by Public and Catholic student trustees, respectively, and sit on the Executive Council representing their board council. The board council Presidents and Vice Presidents then appoint members to the PBC and CBC cabinets, which are responsible for enacting PBC and CBC advocacy initiatives.

Working Groups, led by two Co-Chairs and composed of members of the General Assembly, focus on specific areas of advocacy or internal work. Portfolios include, but are not limited to: communications, advocacy, Indigenous relations, environmental sustainability, and student well-being.

The organization's General Assembly is made up of student trustees representing Public and Catholic school boards across Ontario. The Executive Council, elected by the General Assembly or appointed, is the organization's governing body. The Board of Directors, composed of adult OSTA-AECO alumni, supervise conferences and oversee the organization's legal and financial affairs.



Corporate Finance

Under the supervision of the Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer of the Board, OSTA-AECO's advocacy projects and operational expenses such as travel, infrastructure, and technology are financially supported through the annual membership fees paid by our member school boards.

OSTA-AECO's membership fee is determined through a funding formula that constitutes a flat fee and an additional variable rate that is directly proportional to a school board's pupil enrollment. This variable funding model equilibrates OSTA-AECO's need to remain financially stable while also ensuring that smaller school boards can justify the membership fee. The periodically reviewed funding model is devised to ensure that each school board contributes a fee that is an equitable proportion of their operating budget. Given that school boards are funded on a per-pupil basis through the GSNs, the OSTA-AECO membership fee model is primarily based on per-pupil projections taken from the Ministry of Education spring enrolment figures for the year preceding the membership year. Receiving funding from school boards, instead of direct payments from the Ministry of Education ensures that OSTA-AECO can remain an independent and non-partisan organization whose advocacy work does not need to be beholden any single political party or third-party stakeholder. OSTA-AECO is the representative of Ontario's students and student trustees alone, and the membership model is designed to recognize this principle.

In order to ensure fiscal transparency, the organization has put in place numerous financial policies and procedures that clearly delineate and quantify acceptable line items that can be expensed, and the proper procedure for doing so. The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer of the Board collaborate with the members of OSTA-AECO to ensure that all financial transactions are in line with the relevant policies. All financial transactions are carefully approved and recorded in compliance with the accounting standards for non-profit organizations (ASNPO). Additionally, accounts are annually audited by an external auditor. The auditor's reports and management letter are made publicly available on the OSTA-AECO website.

Past Initiatives

In January of 2001, OSTA-AECO was officially given stakeholder status by the provincial government. From 2001 onward, the organization has implemented several initiatives and released reports and position papers to advocate for Ontario student voice. [The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow](#), in which recommendations were made to improve the position of student trustee, was published in 2005; many of these recommendations were quickly implemented.⁹ In 2010, OSTA-AECO released their first [The Ontario Student Survey: Summary Report](#) in partnership with Student Vote and Scholarships Canada.¹⁰ Other notable initiatives include the *Student Trustee Handbook*¹¹ and *A Turning Point for Education: The Student Platform*¹² among a multitude of other reports and papers (accessible at <https://osta-aeco.org/our-work/publications/>) published in the last decade.¹² More recently, OSTA-AECO has published documents such as [The Students' Vision for Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document](#)¹³ outlining recommendations for Ontario's education system based on student needs and [eLearning: The Students' Perspective](#) providing students' perspectives on the Ministry of Education's mandate within "Education that Works for You — Modernizing Classrooms" requiring mandatory credit acquirement via eLearning.¹⁴

Today, OSTA-AECO continues to offer rich professional development for their members and strongly advocate for student voice at the provincial level. The organization is now the largest student stakeholder in Ontario and works with the provincial government and other key education stakeholders to ensure that students have a meaningful voice in their education system.

Calls To Action

In 1999, Ontario became the first province in Canada to mandate the position of student trustee. Two decades later, only Nunavut and Quebec have followed suit with equivalent roles in school governance.

OSTA-AECO is calling on all school boards or their equivalents in Canada to:

- 1.1: Provide opportunities for students to strengthen the decision-making process of the education system designed to serve them by implementing policy frameworks to allow for student representation on school boards
- 1.2: Seek student perspectives and feedback as frequently as possible in its decentralized and local forms, e.g. consulting school clubs, hosting roundtable discussions with students, conducting ThoughtExchange surveys

OSTA-AECO is calling on all provincial and territorial governments, specifically Ministries of Education, throughout Canada to:

- 1.3: Mandate, within provincial or territorial legislation, positions of student representatives on all publicly-funded school boards (or equivalent governing bodies)
- 1.4: Aid student representatives in the development of incorporated associations for student representatives
- 1.5: Aid school boards in the integration, implementation, and optimizing of the student representative role





**Canadian School Boards Association
Statement on Student Voice in the Governance of School Boards**

The Canadian School Boards Association supports student voice in the governance of school boards through authentic participation and input of students into the decision-making at the school board level, and empowering students to be involved in matters that affect their education. Students have the greatest stake in their education and provide important perspectives into decisions about their education and how it is delivered.

Student voice must be inclusive and engage and represent a broad range of students in the community, including those who are not traditionally engaged in school leadership roles. Hearing from multiple voices is important: those who may be marginalized, those learning English as an additional language, those with disabilities, and those who tend not to be engaged. Input should not be reduced to tokenism. Seeking authentic voice needs to be intentional, with effective structures put in place. Some ways to ensure authentic student voice:

- Be clear about the school board's vision and commitment for student voice.
- Support schools to be involved in encouraging student involvement. Ask them to provide information about school boards, their purpose, and the role of a trustee. Ask them to seek out diverse candidates.
- Offer training for students so they can effectively participate in the governing structures and develop as young leaders.
- Assist students who become involved in governance to conduct surveys seeking input from a variety of voices.
- Make use of student advisory groups where students are selected to represent a range of voices in decisions that influence policy.
- Include more than one student representative on board committees or other governing bodies.
- Support student conferences, associations, and professional development opportunities, where input from a larger number of students can be solicited.

The Canadian School Boards Association believes the benefits of student voice in the governance of education offer great value and enhance the delivery of education to meet student's needs. All school boards in the country are encouraged to find ways to embed student voice in their decision-making to demonstrate their commitment to student-centered education.



**Déclaration de l'Association canadienne des commissions/conseils scolaires concernant
la voix étudiante dans la gouvernance de commissions/conseils scolaires**

L'Association canadienne des commissions/conseils scolaires appuie la voix étudiante dans la gouvernance de commissions/conseils scolaires par la participation véritable et l'apport des élèves dans la prise de décisions au niveau de la commission/du conseil scolaire, ainsi qu'en permettant aux élèves de s'investir dans les enjeux qui touchent leur éducation. Les élèves sont les premiers intéressés en matière de leur éducation et contribuent d'importantes perspectives aux décisions concernant l'enseignement et comment il est dispensé.

La voix étudiante doit être inclusive, puis mobiliser et représenter un large éventail d'élèves dans la communauté, notamment ceux qui n'assument pas traditionnellement des rôles de leader à l'école. Il est important d'entendre une multiplicité de voix : les élèves marginalisés, ceux qui apprennent l'anglais comme langue supplémentaire, ceux présentant des handicaps et ceux qui ont tendance à ne pas s'investir. Les rétroactions ne doivent pas être purement symboliques. La quête d'une voix authentique doit être intentionnelle et se faire en présence de structures efficaces. Voici quelques façons de garantir une voix étudiante authentique :

- Garder clairement à l'esprit la vision de la commission/du conseil scolaire et son engagement envers la voix étudiante.
- Encourager les écoles à favoriser activement la participation des élèves. Leur demander de fournir des renseignements sur les commissions/conseils scolaires, leur raison d'être et le rôle d'un commissaire/conseiller, puis de rechercher des candidats d'origines diverses.
- Offrir de la formation aux élèves afin qu'ils puissent participer efficacement aux structures de gouvernance et grandir à titre de jeunes leaders.
- Aider les élèves qui s'investissent dans la gouvernance à effectuer des sondages qui cherchent à obtenir les commentaires d'une multiplicité de voix.
- Tirer profit des groupes consultatifs d'élèves où les élèves sont choisis pour représenter une multiplicité de voix dans les décisions qui influent sur les politiques.
- Inclure plus d'un représentant des élèves aux comités de la commission/du conseil ou autres organes directeurs.
- Appuyer les congrès, associations et occasions de perfectionnement professionnel pour les élèves, où les commentaires d'un plus grand nombre d'élèves peuvent être sollicités.

L'Association canadienne des commissions/conseils scolaires estime que les avantages de la voix étudiante dans la gouvernance de l'éducation présentent une grande valeur et améliorent l'enseignement en vue de répondre aux besoins des élèves. L'ensemble des commissions/conseils scolaires au pays sont encouragés à trouver des moyens d'intégrer la voix étudiante à leur prise de décision afin de démontrer leur engagement envers l'enseignement axé sur les élèves.

Appendix

The Education Act: Ontario Regulation 7/07 in the Education Act concerns Student Trustees in school boards. The regulation can be found at <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/070007>

Student Trustee Policy Examples: Exact policy and guidelines regarding Student Trustees differ from school board to school board. District School Board of Niagara (<https://policy.dsbni.org/A-01>) or the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (<https://weblink.ocdsb.ca/WebLink/ElectronicFile.aspx?docid=2936367&dbid=0&repo=OCDSB>) are linked for as examples for reference.

Website: For more information on the Ontario Student Trustees' Association and for additional resources and publications from the organization, please visit www.osta-aeco.org.

References

- ¹ 38th Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Student Trustees*, Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2006).
- ² 2nd Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, *District Education Authorities, Student Participation*, Nunavut Education Act, September 18th, 2008.
- ³ Royal Commission on Learning, *For The Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning*, vol. 4. (Toronto: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 1994), recommendation 143.
- ⁴ 36th Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Representation of Pupils on Boards*, Education Quality Improvement Act, (Toronto: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 1997).
- ⁵ 38th Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Section 6*, Education Statute Law Amendment Act, June 1st, 2006. (Toronto: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 2006).
- ⁶ 36th Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Access to Meetings and Records, Closing of certain committee meetings*, Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1997).
- ⁷ 38th Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Student Trustees, Participation*, Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2. (Toronto: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 2006).
- ⁸ 41st Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Student Trustees*, Ontario Regulation 354/18, May 3, 2018. (Toronto: Queen's Printer For Ontario, 2018).
- ⁹ OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *The Student Trustee: Today and Tomorrow*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2005).
- ¹⁰ OSTA-AECO Executive Council, Student Vote, and Scholarships Canada. *The Ontario Student Survey: Summary Report*. (Ontario: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2011).
- ¹¹ OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *Student Trustee Handbook*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2011).
- ¹² OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *A Turning Point for Education: The Student Platform*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2018).
- ¹³ OSTA-AECO Executive Council, *The Students' Vision for Education: OSTA-AECO Vision Document*. (Toronto: Ontario Student Trustees' Association, 2019).
- ¹⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education that Works for You - Modernizing Classrooms*. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2018)

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