

Chapter 50

Boards of Education—School Board Governance

1.0 MAIN POINTS

This chapter presents selected results from our survey of board members and selected executives of boards of education.¹ We surveyed them in mid-2013 to gain an understanding of the state of board governance in school divisions, to identify issues as perceived by board members and senior management, and to identify opportunities to improve governance practices. Our full report, titled *A Survey of Board Governance in Saskatchewan School Divisions—Practices, Issues, and Opportunities* is available at www.auditor.sk.ca.

The survey results provide an interesting picture of the state of board governance in school divisions and their role vis-à-vis the Minister of Education.

Board members and executives agree, to a significant extent, on many of the issues raised in the survey. Nevertheless, there are areas where the views of the two groups differ. For example, a significant number of board members indicate that board decision making is difficult because some board members represent special interests; almost twice as many executives hold this view. Fewer executives than board members say that the board requires action if the school division's performance is below the board's expectations. Board members and executives have different views on time commitment and attendance issues for board members, as well as on how the board uses the work of board committees, such as the audit/finance committee.

Also, divergent views and uncertainty exist regarding the roles and responsibilities of board members, boards and the Ministry of Education (Ministry). The results point to a desire for improved communication between boards and the Ministry. Board members and executives have expressed the desire for more consistent messages from the Ministry about Ministry priorities and expectations, for the Ministry to consider, to an increased degree, the impact of Ministry decisions and directives on boards, and to obtain more feedback from the Ministry on their planning. Boards have also indicated that they do not think the public understands the role of boards and the issues they face.

We encourage the use of the survey results set out in the full report as a resource for constructive dialogue. School board members may wish to discuss the survey results within their own board and with their executives. The Ministry and school boards could also consider how the survey results could be used to enhance governance training.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents selected findings of a governance survey of 28 school boards, including the Conseil scolaire fransaskois. Effective governance is of particular importance for school divisions due to the crucial role of education in our society, the

¹ In this chapter, we use “board of education” and “school board” interchangeably to refer to the group responsible for governing a school division.



large amount of spending by school divisions (\$1.9 billion in 2012), and changes to education in Saskatchewan.

The study was not an audit or evaluation of school boards; it was intended to increase awareness of current governance practices of these boards. In particular, the purpose of our study was to:

- › Gain an understanding of the state of school board governance
- › Identify issues as perceived by board members and senior management
- › Raise awareness of governance issues and best practices
- › Enable board members and senior management to assess their governance practices against best practices
- › Identify opportunities for improvement of governance practices

3.0 BACKGROUND

There are 28 school divisions in Saskatchewan. Over 168,000 students are in more than 600 Saskatchewan schools each day. For more information regarding school divisions, see our *2013 Report – Volume 1*, Chapters 5 and 8.

The Education Act, 1995 and regulations set out the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry and of school boards. Members of school boards are elected. *The Education Act, 1995* and regulations, as well as *The Local Government Election Act* set out the process and requirements for elections. The fact that school board members are elected adds complexity to the governance model used for school boards.

Also, *The Education Act, 1995* and regulations set out the senior executive positions within school divisions including their key responsibilities and appointment process. For example, the Director of Education is the chief executive officer of a school division and is appointed by the board, as is the chief financial officer (CFO).

4.0 METHODOLOGY

Two surveys were developed by our Office. One survey was designed for board members, while the other was designed for senior executives for each school division who work closely with the board—the Director of Education and the CFO.

The survey took place in May and June 2013. Surveys were completed by respondents and reflect their opinions and experiences serving as board members and executives.

In total, 306 people received surveys and 137 were completed, giving an overall response rate of 45%. 97 board member surveys (39%) and 40 (71%) executive surveys were returned.

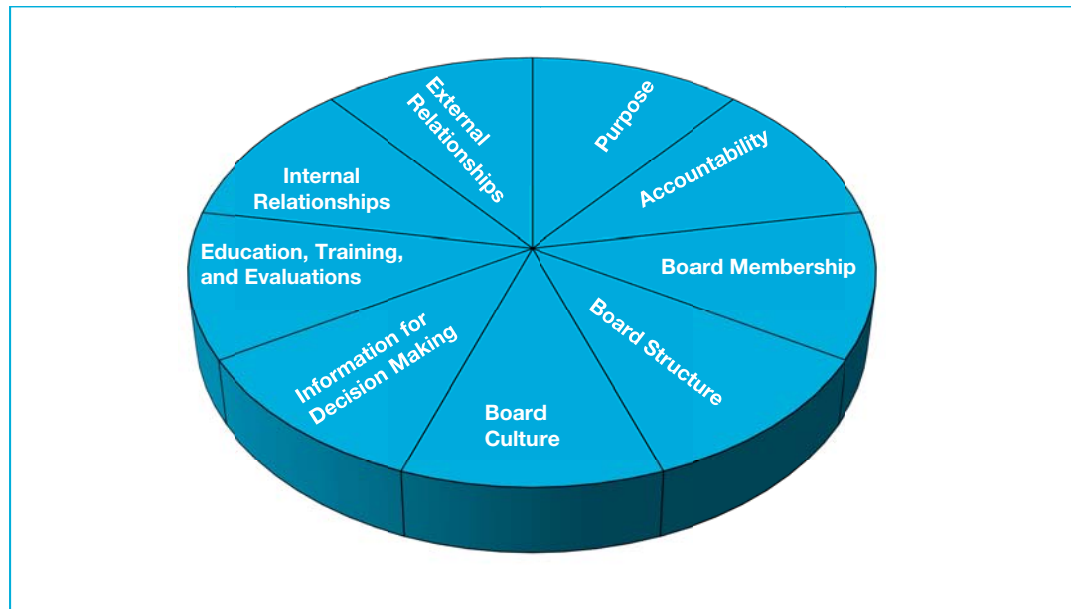
For most questions, respondents were asked to rank how strongly they identified with different statements regarding board governance using a scale of 1 to 5 with values as follows: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral/neither; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. For the purposes of this report, we grouped responses 1 and 2 together as “disagree” and grouped responses 4 and 5 together as “agree.”

The practices reflected in our questions were developed from governance literature and the work of other legislative audit offices. In particular, we referenced governance studies developed by the Office of the Auditor General of Manitoba.

5.0 SELECTED RESULTS

This section of the report is organized around the nine attributes of governance outlined in **Figure 1**. Within these broader attributes, we briefly describe each attribute in the context of school boards (in *italics*) and provide survey results selected to reflect important elements of governance and to illustrate interesting results.

Figure 1 – Nine Attributes of Governance



5.1 Purpose

To govern effectively, it is important that board members clearly understand their role and responsibilities, both as a board and as individual board members. Using this knowledge of their role and responsibilities, boards should establish plans for fulfilling their mandate and meeting the Ministry’s priorities and directives. Boards should be involved in developing plans and not merely ratify plans provided by management. Boards should identify specific performance goals and objectives they expect their school division to achieve. When making decisions, boards should then refer to their plans to determine whether their decisions are working towards the overall goals of their school divisions. As well, it is important that boards receive adequate and timely feedback from the Ministry on their plans.

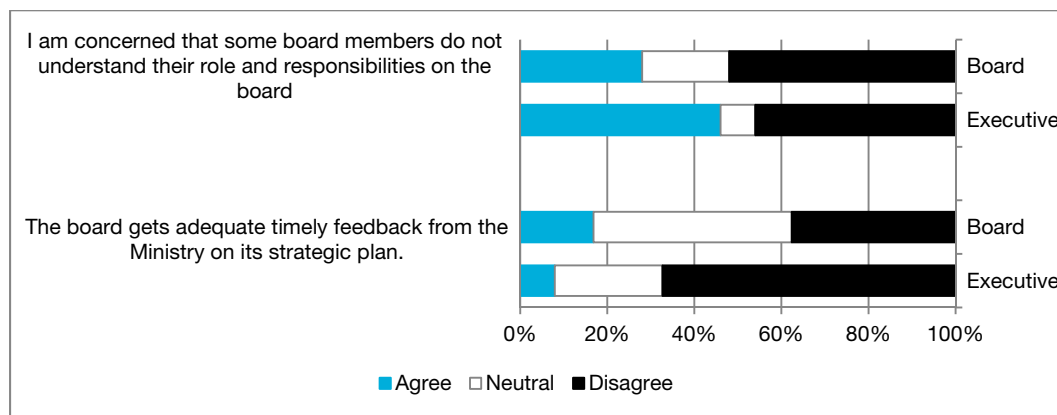


It is also important that boards clarify the values and principles that guide their decisions. Boards should demonstrate high ethical standards that set an appropriate tone for the whole organization.

In general, board members and executives have a positive outlook on the role and mandate of their school board. The survey indicates that board members and executives share a strong confidence in the ability of their board to make decisions regarding the planning, organization, delivery, and evaluation of education. However, a considerable number of board members and executives express concern that some members do not understand their role and responsibilities.

Also, most board members and executives share a positive outlook on their board's use of strategic planning. A smaller proportion of board members and executives indicate that their board gets adequate and timely feedback from the Ministry on its strategic plan.

Figure 2—Purpose



5.2 Accountability

School boards have multiple accountabilities. They are accountable to their electorate. They are also accountable to the Minister of Education as well as to other stakeholders in the education system including students and parents.

For the school board-Ministry relationship to be effective, boards and the Ministry must be clear on their respective responsibilities. It is also important that the Ministry provide clear messages about its expectations and priorities.

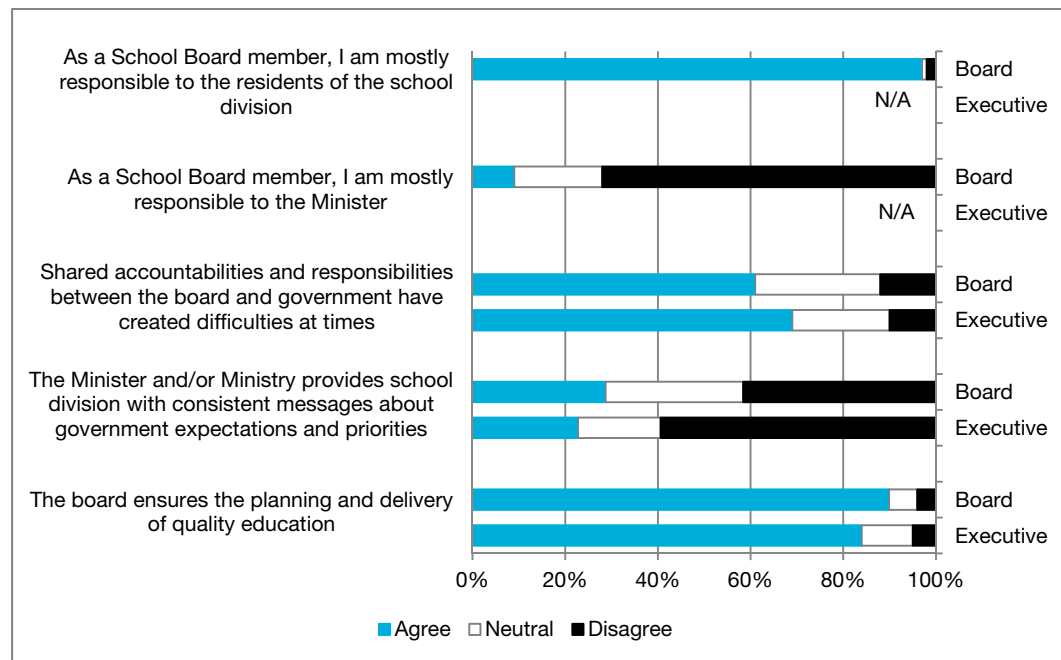
Almost all board members indicate that they are mostly responsible to the residents of the school division, rather than to the Minister of Education.

About two-thirds of board members and executives say that shared accountabilities and responsibilities between the board and government have created difficulties at times. Less than one-third of board members and less than one-quarter of executives indicate that the Ministry provides the school division with consistent messages about government expectations and priorities.

Board members and executives have very positive views of their board's fulfillment of accountability requirements. For example, most board members and executives state

that they are satisfied with the work of their school division in ensuring the planning and delivery of quality education.

Figure 3—Accountability



5.3 Board Membership

Attributes of individual board members and the commitment of board members strongly influences how well boards are able to carry out their duties. While elected boards are not able to recruit new members to address gaps in skills and abilities, they should identify gaps and ensure that they have the advice they need to govern effectively.

To maintain a positive board culture, it is important that members are committed to their role as board members, do not find the time commitment to be excessive, feel satisfied with what they accomplish, and work with equally-committed board colleagues.

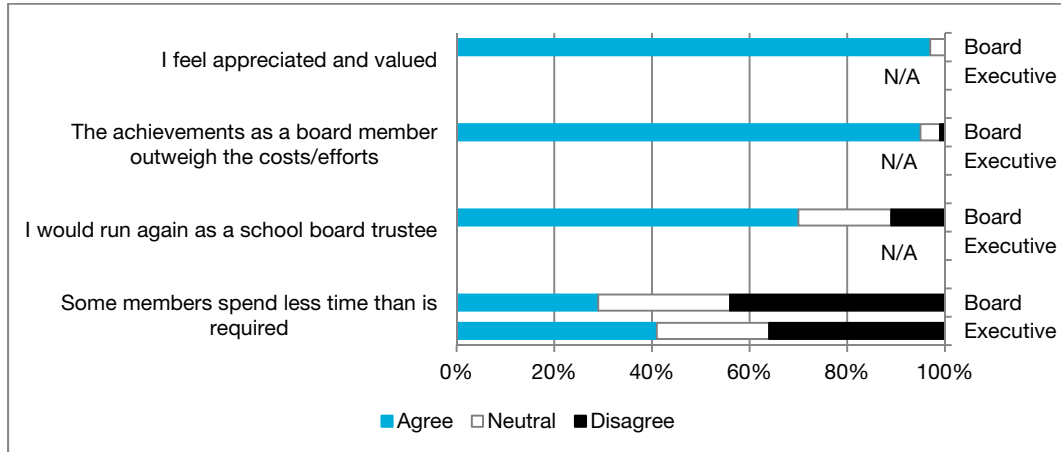
Board members and executives identified the following four skills and characteristics as the most important for board members to possess: representation of community values/ethics, representation of community demographics and diversity, leadership skills, and knowledge of government/public sector. Both groups also indicate that these skills and characteristics are among the skills and characteristics currently most represented on their board.

Almost all board members feel appreciated and valued as board members and that what they can accomplish as a board member outweighs the costs and efforts. Most board members say that they would run again as a school board trustee.

Under one-third of board members and under one-half of executives say that some members on their board spend less time than is required to do an adequate job.



Figure 4—Board Membership



5.4 Board Structure

Board structure is the framework within which board governance takes place. Board practices, such as the number of meetings per year and conflict of interest policies, agenda setting, and the use of committees shape board structure. Annual work plans, for example, help boards focus on meeting their governance requirements and responsibilities.

The chairperson is responsible for setting the board's meeting agenda, and he or she should work with management in performing this task. It is important that board members do not play a passive role, but have the opportunity to contribute.

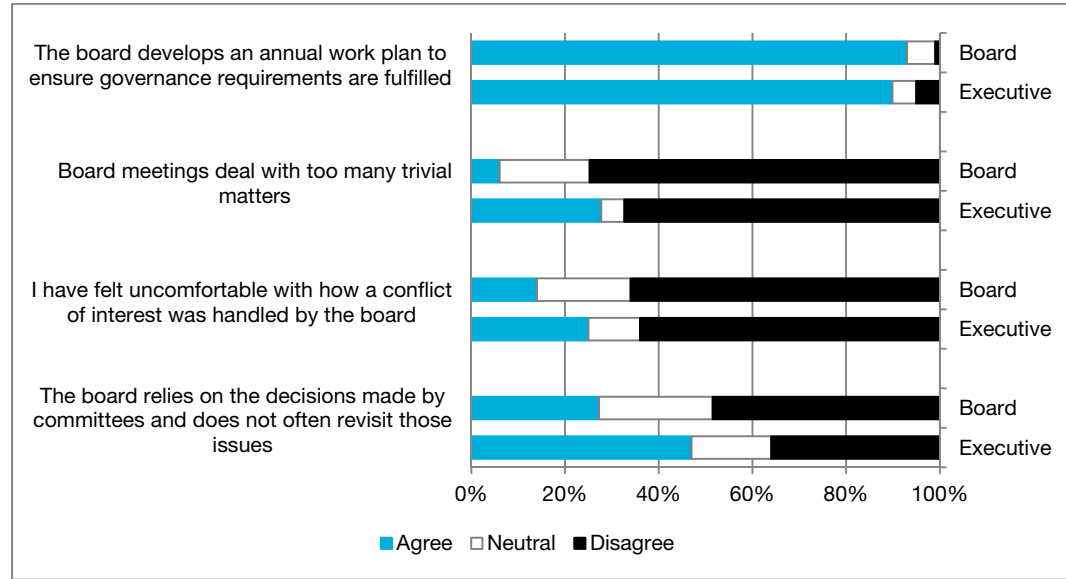
The mandate and authority of each committee should be clearly articulated and periodically reviewed so that the work of committees can remain focused. An annual evaluation of the performance of each committee can help support their effective functioning.

Board members and executives express satisfaction with most board practices. For example, the majority of board members and executives are satisfied with their board's work in developing an annual work plan to ensure governance requirements are fulfilled.

Board members and executives are generally satisfied with the agenda setting practices of their board. However, while few board members think that board meetings deal with too many trivial matters, over one-quarter of executives claim this to be the case.

Few board members express concern with how conflicts of interest were handled by the board. More executives indicated concern.

Significantly more executives than board members are of the view that the board relies on decisions made by committees and does not often revisit those issues.

Figure 5— Board Structure

5.5 Board Culture

Board culture is affected by, and has a strong influence on, board member participation, debate, and ultimately, decision making. Boards should foster a culture of participation and diversity of opinion. Board members should not feel constrained or reluctant to ask questions or participate in discussions. Differences of opinion and opposing viewpoints should be expressed to permit the board to come to informed decisions. Boards must also ensure that they are comfortable evaluating management's suggested solutions and alternatives, and ensure that they do not merely "rubber-stamp" decisions.

A capable chairperson is necessary to facilitate board meetings and help ensure that the business of the board is being appropriately conducted. The chairperson plays a key role in maintaining positive team dynamics, managing conflict on the board, and ensuring that all board members participate in productive discussions and debates.

Overall, board members and executives indicate that board member participation is strong. For example, most board members and executives agree that their board works well together as a team.

Board members and executives appear to have a positive view of their board's debate and decision-making processes. For example, most board members and executives say that their board's decision-making process facilitates considered and informed decisions.

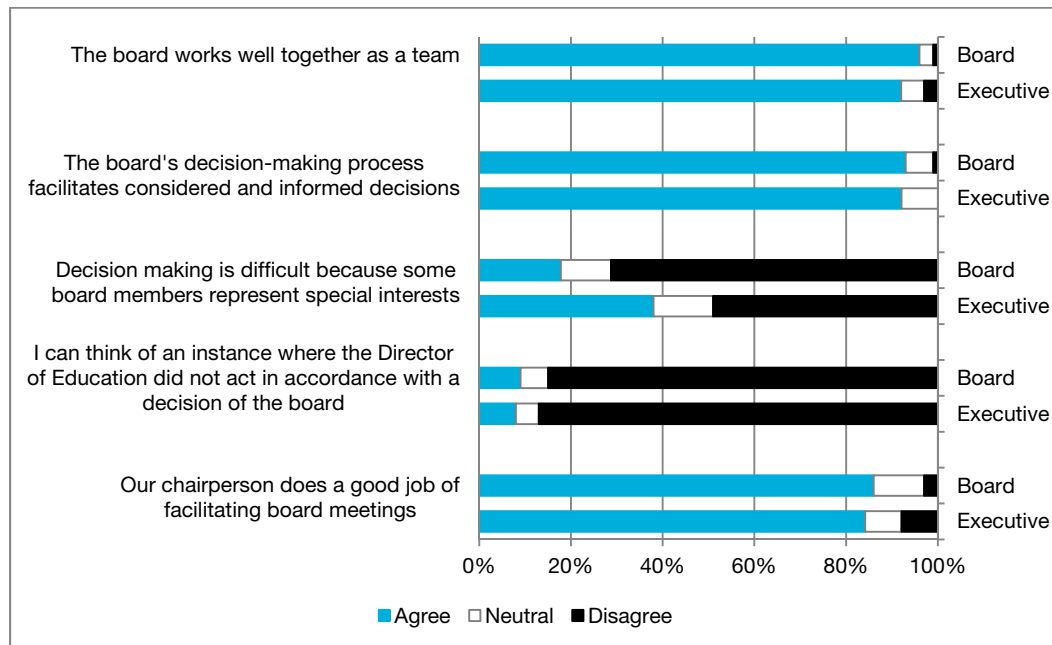
A significant percentage of board members indicate that decision making is difficult because some board members represent special interests. The percentage of executives indicating concern on this issue is even higher.

Board members and executives generally had a positive view of management's role in decision making. For example, few board members and executives could think of an instance where the Director of Education did not act in accordance with a decision of the board.



Board members and executives express a positive view of their Chairperson. For instance, most board members and executives say that their Chairperson does a good job of facilitating board meetings.

Figure 6—Board Culture



5.6 Information for Decision Making

It is important that boards identify the information they require to make well-informed decisions. Boards must not be passive in accepting information. Rather, boards should assess their information needs on a regular basis, communicate these needs to management and ensure that management fulfills these needs. Information provided to boards should be timely, clear, and relevant.

Adequate monitoring of a school board's performance involves analysis of financial information. Thus, management needs to provide boards with appropriate financial information. Since financial expertise varies, management must clearly explain the financial information presented to boards.

Boards should regularly include issues related to risk management on agendas and specify the scope and frequency of risk reports to be received from management. Boards should be clear about the risks they have decided to accept.

About one-fifth of board members indicate they would like more information than what management provides. A similar number of board members and somewhat more executives indicate that the Minister and/or Ministry provides their board with the appropriate information needed to do an adequate job. About one-fifth of board members and executives say that their board receives information from the Minister and/or Ministry in a timely fashion.

Interestingly, while almost all board members and executives say that the material required for board meetings is pre-circulated to board members within a reasonable

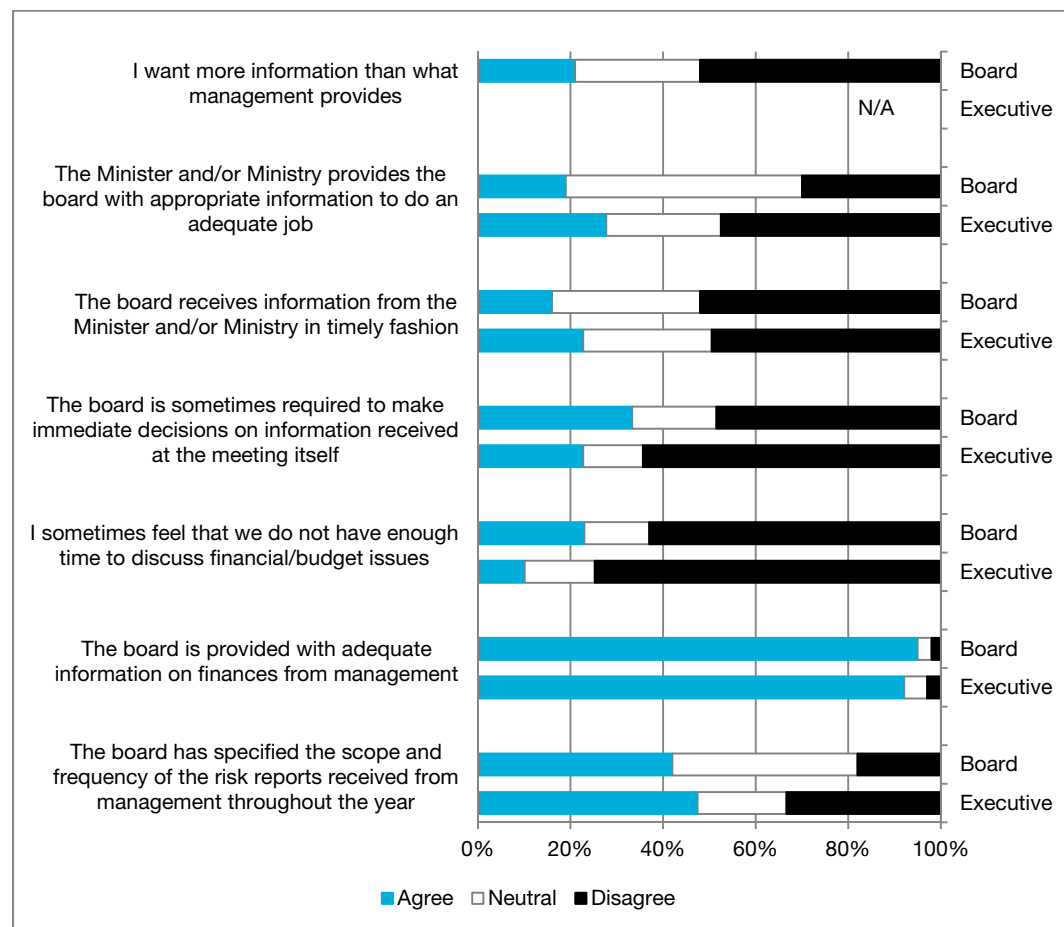
time, about one-third of board members and more than one-fifth of executives indicate that boards are sometimes required to make immediate decisions on information received at the meeting itself.

The majority of board members express satisfaction with the information they receive. When given a list of information-related attributes, a large majority of board members strongly agreed that the information they receive contains an appropriate level of detail and monitors performance and progress against plan.

The large majority of board members and executives indicate that their board is provided with adequate information on finances from management. However, close to one-quarter of board members sometimes feel they do not have enough time to discuss financial and/or budget issues.

Also, board members and executives generally had a positive view of their board's risk management processes. However, less than one-half of board members and executives state that their board has specified the scope and frequency of risk reports to be received from management throughout the year.

Figure 7—Information for Decision Making





5.7 Education, Training, and Evaluations

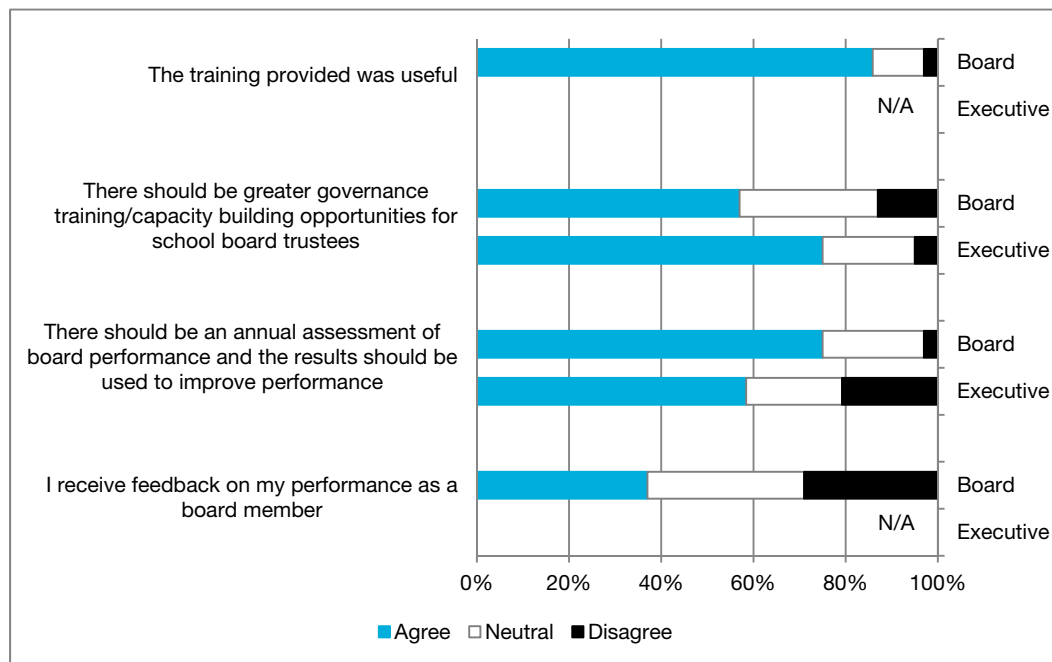
The provision of education and training to board members is an invaluable way to increase the effectiveness of school boards. Education and training not only increase board member knowledge, but promote a common understanding of the goals and work of their organization and the sector.

Boards should conduct regular assessments of their performance and use these results to improve their performance. Individual board members should also receive feedback on their performance to enhance the overall functioning and capacity of the board to govern.

The majority of board members report that they have attended governance training offered by the Ministry of Education or the Saskatchewan School Board Association; most of these board members found that training useful. The majority of board members and executives also say that there should be greater governance training/capacity building opportunities for school board trustees.

While three-quarters of board members are satisfied with their board's work in conducting and utilizing annual board performance assessments, fewer executives, although still a majority, are satisfied. As well, just over one-third of board members say that they receive feedback on their performance as a board member.

Figure 8—Education, Training, and Evaluations



5.8 Internal Relationships

Senior management is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school division while boards are responsible for overseeing management's performance and for questions of governance. It is important that the two groups have a positive working relationship. Board members and executives must share a common view of the school division's priorities and clearly delineate their separate roles and authorities. Management must advise the board about issues or challenges facing the school division so that board members can make informed decisions. Board members, meanwhile, should focus on issues of governance and not become involved in day-to-day management decisions.

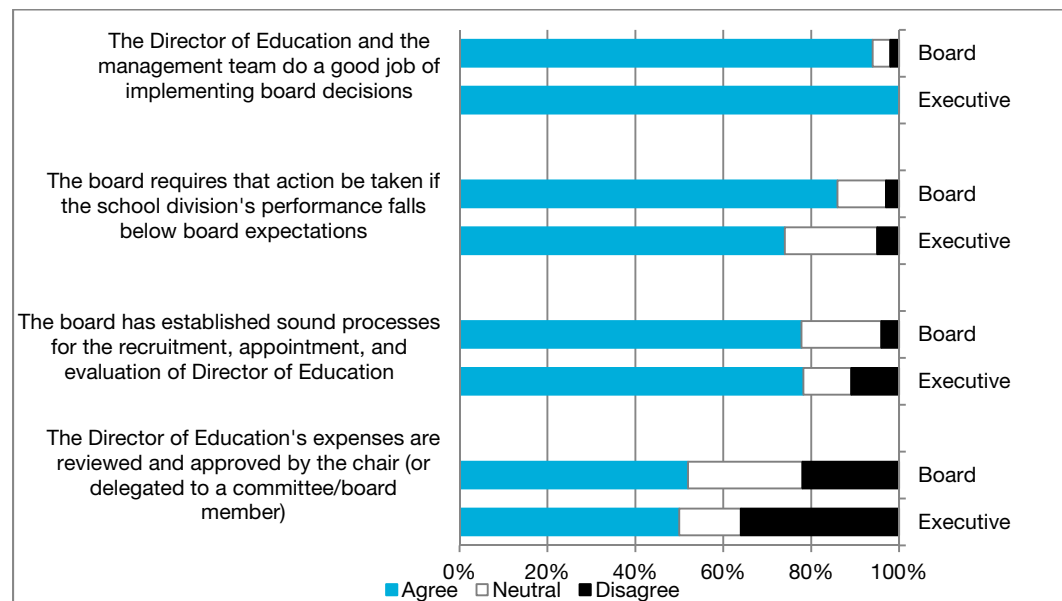
As part of their responsibilities, boards are also responsible for evaluating senior management, ensuring there is a succession plan in place for senior management, and establishing sound processes for the recruitment, appointment, and evaluation of the Director of Education. It is also important that boards establish clear, measurable expectations for their Director and conduct annual performance evaluations. Boards must also take or require that action be taken if the Director or school division is not meeting board expectations.

Board members and executives state that they have a very good relationship. For example, almost all board members and all executives agreed that the Director and management team do a good job of implementing board decisions.

Fewer executives than board members say that the board requires action if the school division's performance is below board expectations.

Most board members and executives are satisfied with their board's work in establishing sound processes for the recruitment, appointment, and evaluation of the Director of Education. However, only around one-half of board members and executives indicate that the Director of Education's expenses are reviewed and approved by the board Chairperson (or delegated to a committee or board member).

Figure 9—Internal Relationships





5.9 External Relationships

One role of local boards for school divisions is to help the Government identify and consider local educational needs in decisions about education. Without adequate consultation and communication with the public, the education system runs a greater risk of being unresponsive to needs.

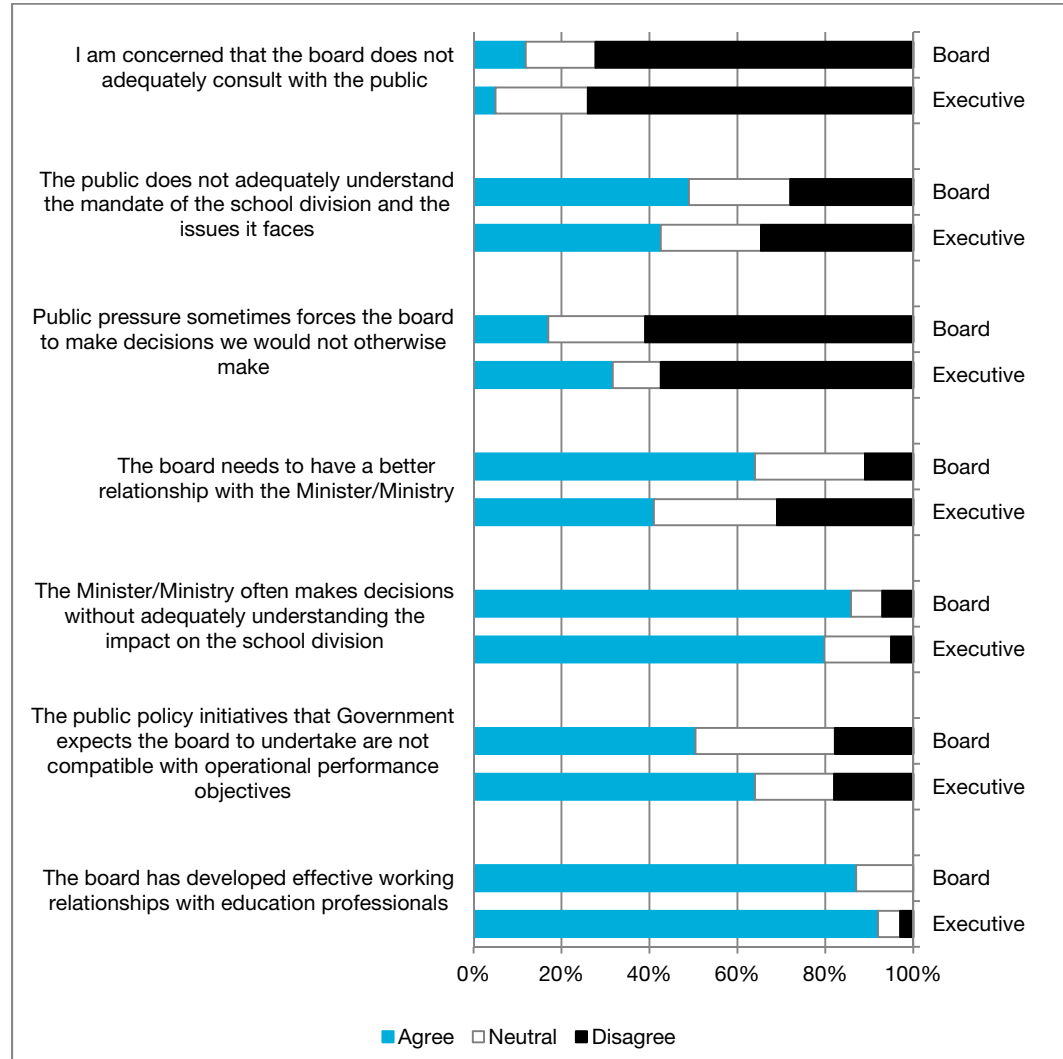
As described earlier, boards of education are not only accountable to their electorates, but to the provincial government through the Ministry of Education. Effective governance of the education sector requires school divisions and the Ministry to work collaboratively. Also, to identify and manage changing needs and priorities, it is important for boards to work with other school divisions and education organizations to improve the effectiveness of education programs and delivery, and to reduce costs. Furthermore, school boards need effective working relationships with education professionals.

Few board members and executives express concern that their board does not adequately consult with the public. However, a significant percentage of board members and executives indicate that the public does not adequately understand the mandate of the school division and the issues it faces. Just under one-fifth of board members and almost one-third of executives say that public pressure sometimes forces their board to make decisions it would not otherwise make.

A significant percentage of board members and executives state that their board needs to have a better relationship with the Minister and/or Ministry. Most board members and executives indicate that the Minister and/or Ministry often makes decisions without adequately understanding the impact on the school division. Over one-half of board members and executives say that public policy initiatives that the Government expects the board to undertake are not compatible with operational performance objectives.

The survey results show that school boards are generally of the view that they have good relationships within the education sector. For example, most board members and executives are satisfied with their board's efforts to develop an effective working relationship with education professionals.

Figure 10—External Relationships



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