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REALITY CHECK

Taking Back the Schools:

How to reverse the decline in local education democracy

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Introduction

Elected school trustees in Canada always seem to be in hot water and threatened with elimination. Ontario is the latest to identify the nub of the recurrent problem: the eroded local democratic governance, financial mismanagement, and dysfunctional behaviour of school boards. And it is presently confronting a critical decision on the future of elected trustees—now reduced to appendages of regional school boards.

In November 2025, the Ontario government of Doug Ford proceeded with Bill 33, the *Supporting Children and Students Act*, brushing aside fierce education interest groups lobbying to stave off school board governance reform.[1] It's all part of the evolving plan to improve the public responsiveness of school boards while planning to phase out elected school trustees. That turn of events made it clear: school governance reform is on its way in Ontario and may well spread to other provinces.

Eliminating trustees may, by default, lead to a "takeover of school boards," but there is still a window of opportunity to flip the script and ensure that it becomes a structural reform in the direction of "taking back the schools."[2] This education reform policy paper makes the case that it's an opportune time to survey the policy landscape and retire the existing model of centralized bureaucratic and unresponsive management.

Across Canada, the school system is groaning under the weight of its own bureaucracy. Centralized control, layered administration, and top-down governance have hollowed out the very institutions meant to serve students, families, and communities.[3] For decades, provincial ministries and regional boards have been building an ever-expanding education "apparatus" that too often stifles innovation and isolates decision-makers from the classroom. The wisest choice has never been clearer: If we want schools that truly serve communities, we must flip the system—replacing top-down governance with bottom-up accountability rooted in the schoolhouse.

Centralization and the withering of school board governance

Today's elected school boards suffer from an identity crisis. Over the past three decades, the school district apparatus in Canada has diminished as provincial governments have turned increasingly to pursue what education policy analyst Gerald Galway and colleagues in 2013 aptly described as "an aggressive centralization agenda."[4] Unlike municipal councils, which raise and control their own revenues, school boards have been stripped of their taxing powers and are funded almost entirely by provincial authorities. Education authority in Quebec remained centralized for curriculum and provincial assessment purposes. In major English Canadian urban districts, such as the Toronto District School Board and Vancouver School Board, elected trustees tend to flex their political muscles but soon discover that their powers are narrowly circumscribed under the current governance model. Subscribing to a "corporate governance model" also muddies the waters. Outside of the big cities, most boards are trained to act like an arm's-length corporate board taking a "balcony view" and staying out of day-to-day operations.[5]

Role confusion over just how hands-on school trustees should be underlies many of the problems that plague boards. Misbehaviour, financial ineptitude, and internal rancor plague school boards, triggering outcries that they are dysfunctional and prompting periodic calls for their abolition.[6] When a 2013 Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) report warned that the remaining boards in Atlantic Canada were "sinking ships," it sparked a defensive reaction and went largely unheeded.[7] That essentially sealed their fate in the region.

Erosion of democratic legitimacy

Elected school boards came under fire for their inability to effectively represent local interests, and, over two decades, they gradually lost their democratic legitimacy. School trustees, once the linchpin of local democratic control, are an endangered species.

One of the early warnings that regional school boards were too big to be effective was issued in 2003 by Queen's University education professor T. R. Williams. "Given the present size of boards, the traditional concept of an elected part-time trustee who can fully represent the interests of individual constituents is no longer viable," he wrote. Merged "huge administrative units" became "so large and politicized" that they resorted to formulaic resource allocation—a model he argued was "woefully inadequate as a democratic institution."[8]

Early warnings about the threat to local school autonomy fell on deaf ears. A 2009 report on Canadian school boards dismissed Williams' critique and rejected calls for innovative school-based reform, including publicly funded autonomous charter schools. Ignoring concerns about eroding democratic accountability would prove costly in the long run.

School board consolidation—bigger, bureaucratic, and distant

School district consolidation came in waves, the most dramatic of which transformed Ontario from the early 1960s to early 1970s.[9] In 1961, Ontario Premier John Robarts inherited a system with an estimated 3,700 public and separate boards, many overseeing fewer than 100 students. The Robarts–Bill Davis modernization effort, known as "regionalization," culminated in Bill 44 (1967).[10] By 1969, the number of boards had been reduced from 1,358 to 192.[11]

This restructuring created today's regional boards, along with layers of directors, superintendents, and administrators. Today, there are just 72 "local" public and separate boards in Ontario—a 98 percent reduction from 1961 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Number of school boards

Ontario

School board restructuring and the Ontario Common Sense Revolution (1997–2002)

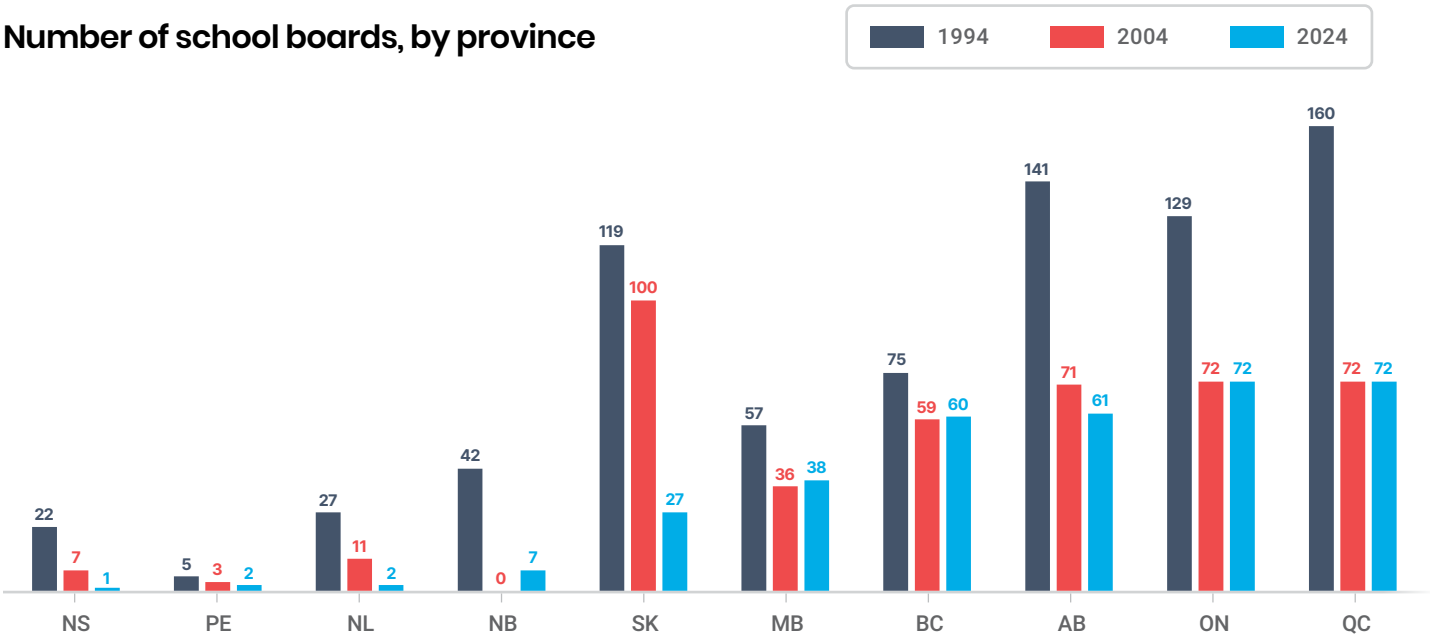
The 1997 *Fewer School Boards Act* (Bill 104) reduced the number of Ontario boards from 124 to 72, removed taxing powers, and reduced trustee stipends.[12] From then on, the province asserted its authority over curriculum and evaluation, diminishing local autonomy and vesting increasing authority in district administration. Recent reforms, including Bill 33 (2025), continue this long-term trend.

Facing the metrics

The amalgamations of the 1990s and early 2000s were not unique to Ontario. The numbers tell much of the story of school board reduction and the waning of local democratic governance. First, we look at declines in the numbers of boards in relation to student enrolments. Figure 2 shows the number of school boards in each province at the start (1994) to end (2004) of those amalgamations, as well as current numbers (2024). Figure 3 presents elementary and secondary school enrolments, which allow for three additional calculations. Figure 4 contrasts the percentage decline in school boards with enrolment trends between then and today; given relatively flat enrolments for two decades, the steep reduction in school boards is that much more pronounced.

Figure 2

Number of school boards, by province

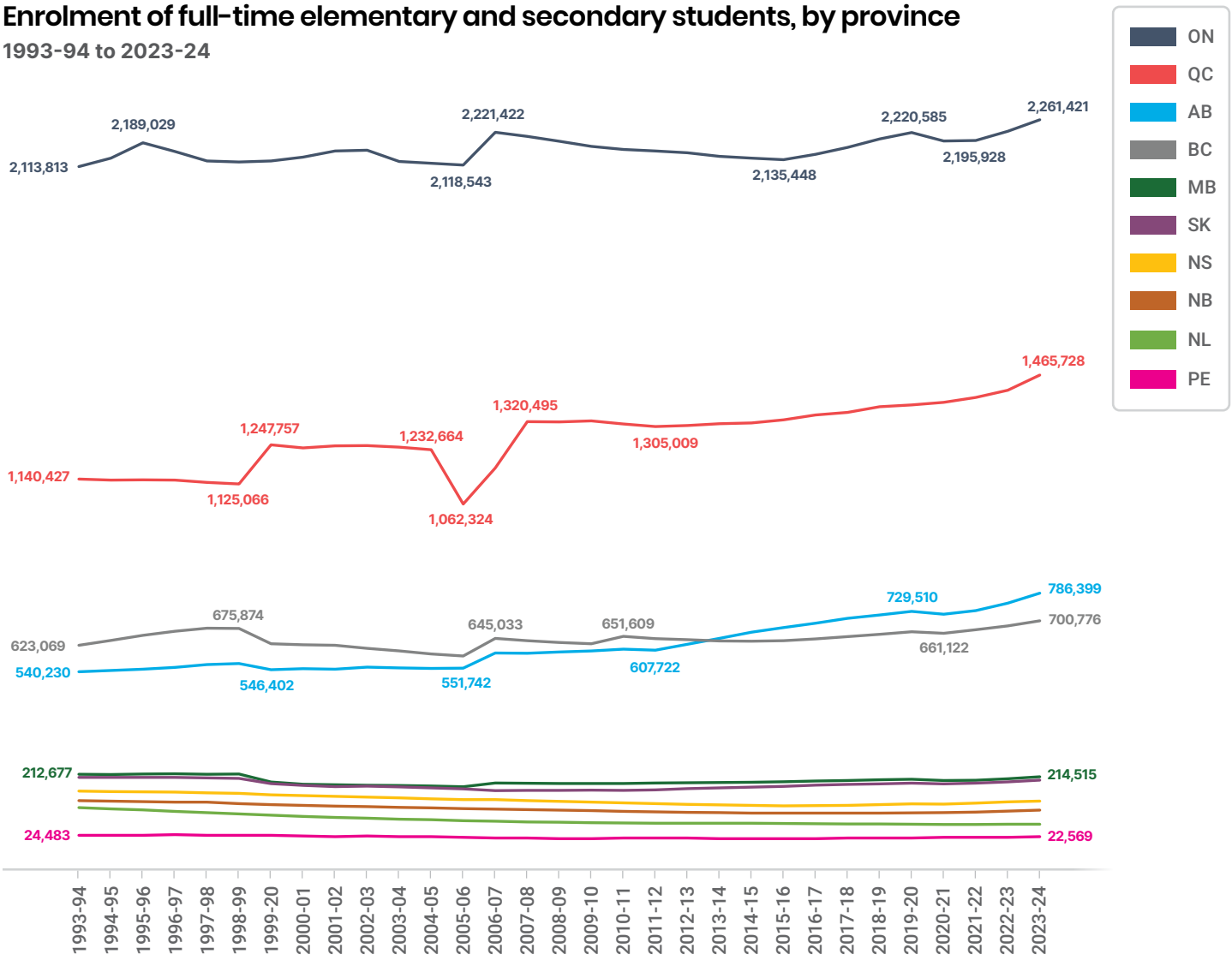


Source: Author's calculations, based on Table A1 in the Appendix.

Figure 3

Enrolment of full-time elementary and secondary students, by province

1993-94 to 2023-24

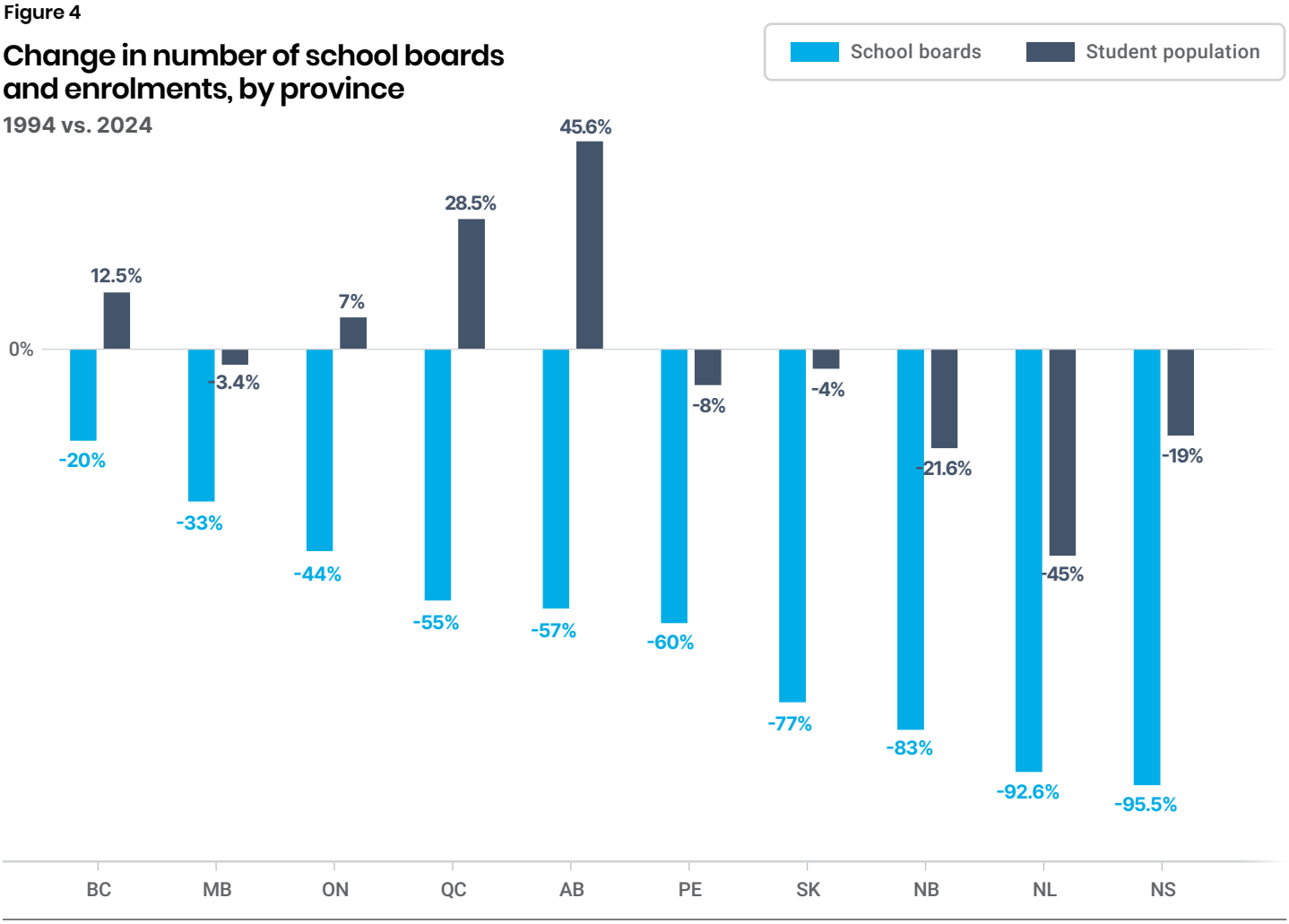


Source: Statistics Canada (2025, 2001)[13]

Figure 4

Change in number of school boards and enrolments, by province

1994 vs. 2024



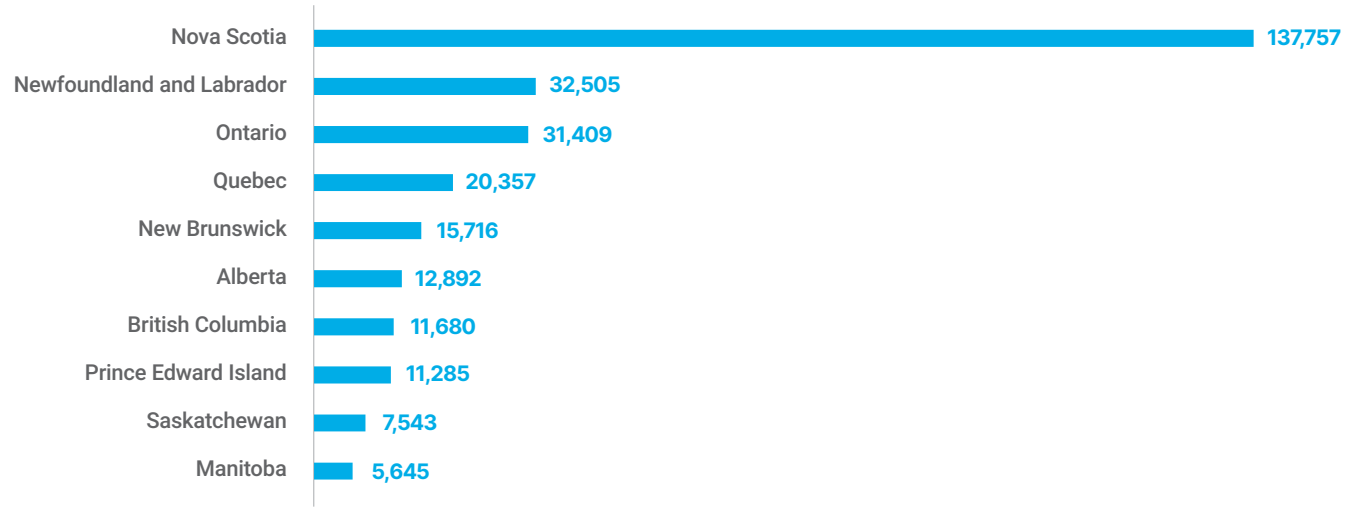
Source: Author's calculations. (See Table A1 and Table A2 in the Appendix for the source data.)

Consolidating the data allows us to assess the current state of local education governance. Figure 5 presents each province's average enrolment per school board. Nova Scotia only has one elected school board—the Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial (CSAP), a constitutionally-protected francophone school board—and, thus, has 137,757 students per elected board (although most of these students are in the anglophone system, without locally elected trustees). The second least "local" school boards are in Newfoundland and Labrador, at 32,505 students per board, followed closely by Ontario. Conversely, Manitoba is the most local, at one school board per 5,645 students. And Figure 6 shows the number of trustees (and/or commissioners) per 100,000 residents, using the most recent accessible like-to-like data (2018). Again, Manitoba leads the way as most representative and Saskatchewan is close behind at, respectively, 24.4 and 23.3 school trustees per 100,000 people. By far the least representative is Nova Scotia, with less than two trustees per 100,000 Nova Scotians. (Please see the Appendix for a map and supporting data tables.)

Figure 5

Students per school board, by province

2024

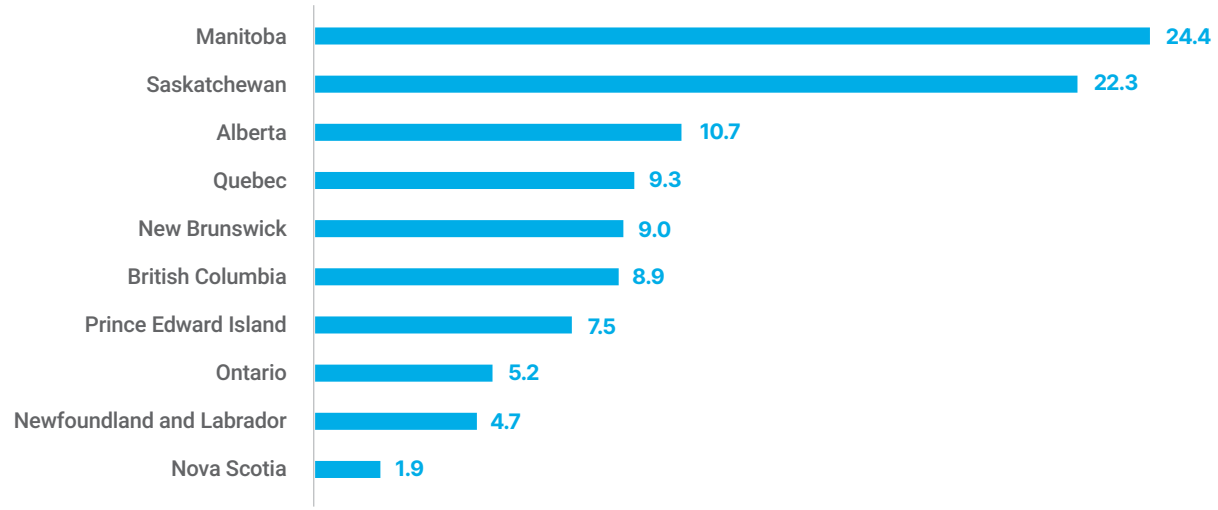


Source: Author's calculations. (See Table A1 and Table A2 in the Appendix for the source data.)

Figure 6

School board trustees per 100,000 population, by province

2018



Source: Author's calculations, based on Statistics Canada (2015) and CSBA (2018). (See Table A3 in the Appendix for details.)

The promise—and abandonment—of school-based management

The central flaw in the current system lies in governance. Provinces cling to structures that vest authority in ministries and school districts, creating distance between those who make decisions and those who live with their consequences. Instead of empowering principals, teachers, parents, and students, our system concentrates power in boardrooms, policy shops, and consulting circles.

Yet there is an alternative, one with deep Canadian roots. Edmonton was the pioneer. Under superintendents Rolland Jones (1967-1972) and, later, Michael Strembitsky (1973-1994), the city dismantled centralized control and shifted responsibility directly to schools. Budgets were devolved, principals were empowered, and parents were offered choice. By the early 2000s, more than half of Edmonton's students were opting for schools outside their attendance zones, revitalizing once-declining institutions and proving that site-based management could deliver results.[14]

This approach—known as school-based management (SBM)[15]—spread briefly to other provinces in the 1980s, including Ontario and Nova Scotia. Yet Canada largely ignored its own success story. The reform momentum for the Edmonton Model soon waned. Consolidation of boards, an explosion of administrative staff, and the rise of standardized testing all worked to recentralize power. By the late 1990s, only a minority of education employees were engaged in classroom teaching. The system, once again, was serving itself more than it served students.

The irony is that Edmonton's model, introduced in the 1970s, gained global attention, even as it was neglected at home. Eventually New Zealand adopted "Self-Managed schools" in the late 1980s. The World Bank began championing SBM in 2003-2004 and promoted SBM across Asia and Africa, pointing out that education is far too complex to be delivered effectively through rigid, centralized hierarchies. Results have been mixed overseas, often due to resistance from entrenched interests, but the lesson remains: when authority is vested in communities, schools become more responsive and more accountable.[16]

The solution: a made-in-Canada model

Here in Canada, defenders of the status quo *still* claim that elected school boards are the bedrock of democracy. But, as Ontario educator Peter Hennessy once observed, school boards have become so disconnected from families that governments were compelled to create parent councils as a corrective measure—to give families *some* voice.[17] Clinging to boards that no longer function as true conduits of local democracy is missing the point.

But the reality is that regional school districts with elected trustees are simply too big and more distant than ever from students, parents, teachers, and communities. The "band-aid" of parent councils has not worked, as school systems have further centralized and succumbed to so-called "controlling politics" of the "new managerialism" in public education.[18]

The solution is to restore democracy in school governance. A made-in-Canada model of community-school governance would start by replacing regional boards with autonomous school councils, made up of parents, educators, and community representatives.[19] School budgets would be determined locally, with provincial funds following students to their chosen schools. Joint service consortia could handle special education services, transportation, purchasing, and most back-office functions, achieving efficiencies without stripping local schools of their authority. Regional development councils, involving trustees and municipal leaders, would provide oversight and ensure fair resource distribution.

Beyond structures: humanizing education

But decentralization, on its own, is not enough. Reform must also focus on people. If flipping the system means only re-arranging budgets and administrative charts, then the exercise will disappoint those the system is intended to serve. True reform must also humanize education, strengthen teaching, and deepen parental engagement.

First, schools must be scaled to human dimensions. Research from Britain and rural Canada shows that smaller schools foster stronger relationships, better engagement, and improved outcomes.[20] The relentless consolidation of schools across rural and urban Canada has too often undermined these benefits, creating institutions too large to know students well.

Second, teaching must be restored to the centre of schooling. Teachers are not passive functionaries to be managed from above. They are the lifeblood of education. Democratic reform movements such as *Flip the System*, led internationally by classroom educators, remind us that teachers need both professional autonomy and accountability rooted in evidence.[21] Re-establishing teacher agency is vital if reforms are to reach beyond structures and into learning itself. Teachers must regain professional autonomy, while joining in the important work of improving teaching and learning.

Third, parents must be embraced as true partners, not passive consultees. Too often, "parent engagement" is little more than lip service, framed in ways that reinforce school-centric authority. A family-centred approach—"walking alongside" parents rather than "building capacity"—is essential, if we are to break through and make schools more responsive at the school level.[22]

Conclusion: seize the moment

Instead of top-down mandates imposed by ministries and boards, we need to reclaim bottom-up accountability rooted in communities. Students, teachers, and parents would be at the centre, with administrators serving them—not the other way around.

Centralization has produced efficiency in name only, while draining vitality from schools. School board reduction was most pronounced in Atlantic Canada over the past fifteen years. Eliminating elected boards in Nova Scotia in April 2018 deepened the democratic deficit because it did not build in any apparatus to re-invigorate local voice or engagement.[23] Parents felt sidelined, teachers felt disempowered, and students remain caught in the machinery of a system designed to manage, not to educate. Ontario now faces the same dilemma.

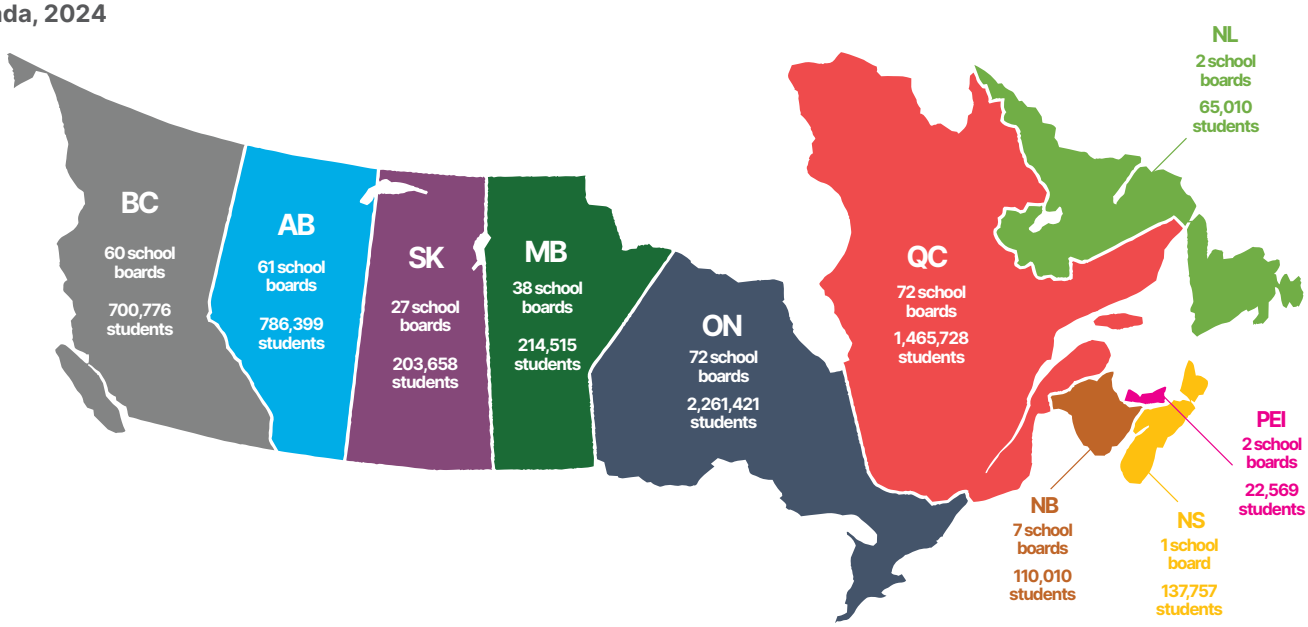
Flipping the system is not about nostalgia for one-room schoolhouses. It is about putting learning first. It is about building a responsive, democratic governance model. It is about reclaiming schools from bureaucrats, consultants, and central planners who rarely set foot in classrooms. Most of all, it is about ensuring that Canadian education reflects the voices of those who know children best—their families, their teachers, and their communities. The time has come to re-engineer public education—one school at a time.

Appendix

Figure A1

Map of school boards and enrolment (full-time elementary and secondary)

Canada, 2024



Source: Based on author's calculations and Statistics Canada (2025).

Table A1

Number of school boards, before/after 1990s–2000s amalgamations, by province

	Implementation	Legislation / Reference documents	Count before	Count after	Count today
British Columbia	1996	-	75	59	60
Alberta	1994, 1995	-	141	71	61
Saskatchewan	1998, 2004	-	119	100	27
Manitoba	1993, 1998, 2001	Bill 14: Public School Modernization Act	57	36	38
Ontario	1997	Bill 104: Fewer School Boards Act	129	72	72
Quebec	1997	Bill 109	160	72	72
New Brunswick	1992, 1996	-	42	0	7
Nova Scotia	1996, 2000	School Board Boundary Review (2000)	22	7	1
Prince Edward Island	1994	-	5	3	2
Newfoundland and Labrador	1996	Bill 8 (Royal Commission 1992)	27	11	2

Source: Author's calculations.[24]

Table A2

Enrolment data of full-time elementary and secondary students, by province, 1993-94 to 2023-24

	1993 / 1994	1994 / 1995	1995 / 1996	1996 / 1997	1997 / 1998	1998 / 1999	1999 / 2000	2000 / 2001	2001 / 2002	2002 / 2003	2003 / 2004	2004 / 2005	2005 / 2006	2006 / 2007	2007 / 2008	2008 / 2009
Ontario	2,113,813	2,140,085	2,189,029	2,161,483	2,131,871	2,128,642	2,131,626	2,143,599	2,163,108	2,164,941	2,129,742	2,123,904	2,118,543	2,221,422	2,208,771	2,193,381
Quebec	1,140,427	1,137,560	1,138,677	1,137,122	1,130,037	1,125,066	1,247,757	1,237,980	1,244,691	1,244,943	1,240,821	1,232,664	1,062,324	1,175,469	1,320,495	1,319,697
Alberta	540,230	544,561	548,459	553,726	563,170	566,361	546,402	549,633	548,124	554,397	552,594	550,983	551,742	599,316	598,386	602,031
British Columbia	623,069	638,111	654,351	667,070	677,270	675,874	628,269	624,618	622,827	613,227	605,538	596,166	589,380	645,033	637,557	631,644
Manitoba	222,038	221,747	223,045	223,826	222,136	223,013	197,067	189,912	188,907	186,891	186,285	184,353	182,373	193,761	193,332	192,201
Saskatchewan	212,677	212,666	212,986	212,941	211,062	209,768	192,885	186,588	183,024	184,605	182,130	178,710	175,587	169,713	171,189	170,526
Nova Scotia	169,805	168,507	167,960	167,162	164,715	163,122	158,205	155,874	153,450	150,600	148,515	145,395	142,305	142,725	139,428	137,151
New Brunswick	140,378	138,306	136,776	135,254	135,154	130,801	127,002	124,941	122,793	120,600	118,869	117,147	114,819	112,524	111,630	109,722
Newfoundland & Lab.	118,595	114,445	110,901	106,494	102,074	98,129	94,116	90,234	86,970	84,336	81,510	79,482	76,806	75,180	72,933	71,493
Prince Edward Island	24,483	24,481	24,704	24,814	24,688	24,441	24,087	23,151	22,842	23,241	22,905	22,392	21,948	21,411	21,063	20,595
Territories and other	22,311	22,330	23,948	24,663	24,125	24,499	25,314	24,189	24,057	24,258	24,357	24,420	24,033	23,694	23,373	23,106

	2009 / 2010	2010 / 2011	2011 / 2012	2012 / 2013	2013 / 2014	2014 / 2015	2015 / 2016	2016 / 2017	2017 / 2018	2018 / 2019	2019 / 2020	2020 / 2021	2021 / 2022	2022 / 2023	2023 / 2024
Ontario	2,177,688	2,168,094	2,162,604	2,157,126	2,146,026	2,140,152	2,135,448	2,152,479	2,174,391	2,200,749	2,220,585	2,194,014	2,195,928	2,224,845	2,261,421
Quebec	1,322,439	1,313,169	1,305,009	1,308,171	1,313,754	1,316,289	1,325,913	1,341,285	1,349,301	1,367,106	1,372,902	1,380,759	1,395,771	1,418,646	1,465,728
Alberta	605,355	610,896	607,722	626,343	645,012	664,296	678,966	692,538	707,391	717,750	729,510	720,681	731,493	755,157	786,399
British Columbia	628,020	651,609	643,686	640,899	637,089	635,643	637,284	643,410	650,496	657,372	665,676	661,122	672,036	684,141	700,776
Manitoba	192,381	192,711	194,148	195,171	195,432	196,341	198,132	200,226	202,545	204,249	205,908	202,089	203,238	207,864	214,515
Saskatchewan	171,810	171,078	172,551	176,085	178,479	181,545	183,894	187,536	189,999	191,994	194,367	192,036	194,364	198,213	203,658
Nova Scotia	134,544	132,423	129,774	126,981	125,463	123,999	122,799	123,120	123,990	126,165	128,556	128,001	131,142	135,201	137,757
New Brunswick	107,718	105,723	104,007	102,459	101,364	100,362	99,726	99,738	99,774	99,984	101,175	101,427	103,194	106,458	110,010
Newfoundland & Lab.	70,398	69,600	68,688	68,313	68,403	68,250	67,764	67,329	66,477	65,766	65,178	64,512	64,779	65,223	65,010
Prince Edward Island	20,202	21,432	21,120	20,700	20,427	20,256	20,073	20,475	20,691	20,970	21,399	21,756	22,080	22,179	22,569
Territories and other	22,683	22,653	22,614	22,638	23,226	23,604	23,727	23,955	24,465	24,876	25,269	25,545	25,467	25,662	25,617

Source: Statistics Canada (2025, 2001).[13]

Table A3

Calculating trustees per 100,000 population

	Population (2015)	Students (2015)	Trustees (2015)	Trustees per 100,000 pop.
British Columbia	4,683,139	557,571	416	8.9
Alberta	4,196,457	620,475	450	10.7
Saskatchewan	1,133,637	173,548	253	22.3
Manitoba	1,293,378	182,073	316	24.4
Ontario	13,792,052	1,844,217	716	5.2
Quebec	8,263,600	959,925	772	9.3
New Brunswick	753,871	98,906	68*	9.0
Nova Scotia	943,002	119,383	18**	1.9
Prince Edward Island	146,447	20,131	11	7.5
Newfoundland & Lab.	527,756	67,293	25	4.7

Notes:
- *District Education Council (DEC) members in New Brunswick have limited statutory authority.
- **Nova Scotia adjusted for abolition of English language school boards in April 2018.

Source: Author's calculations, based on Statistics Canada (2015) and CSBA (2018).[25]

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About the Author

Dr. Paul W. Bennett, Ed.D., is director of the Schoolhouse Institute and a contributor to the Aristotle Foundation for Public Policy. He has authored ten books, including *The State of the System: A Reality Check on Canada's Schools* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020)—and produced over two dozen policy research papers for six Canadian think tanks. Earlier in his career, Dr. Bennett was twice recognized for history teaching excellence, produced three nationally acclaimed Canadian history textbooks, served as an elected public school trustee, and headed two of Canada's top-performing schools. More recently, he founded researchED Canada (2017-2025), taught as an adjunct professor, and served on the Canadian Association for Foundations in Education (CAFE) national board. He is also an education columnist for *Brunswick News* and a well-known commentator in the national media.

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