

ADDRESS GIVEN TO CANADIAN SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION CONGRESS  
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Ed Smith/Banquet Keynote

Good evening ladies and gentlemen -- school board trustees.

It's an honor and a delight to be here. Marion and I are enjoying this time with such a wonderful group of people, and especially to be eating as well as you do! What a fantastic spread! Trustees didn't eat this well in my day.

Thank you for that marvelous introduction. It reminds me of the story of the fellow who was lying in his grave and looking up at his headstone (some suspension of disbelief is called for here, such as when you're listening to a speech from the throne). Anyway, on his headstone was written: "this man did no wrong and was beloved of all".

"Gee," he said to himself, "either someone up there is an awful liar or in the wrong hole."

I'll leave it to you people to decide which it is. Whatever I welcome this opportunity to continue the further education of school trustees from across Canada -- Victoria to Halifax. That's the usual definition of "across Canada" so you trustees from Newfoundland and Labrador are hereby excused. Most of you having heard all my jokes before, you may consider yourselves already well educated.

I've been given only twenty minutes for this presentation. That gives me time for a short introduction, a brief conclusion and nothing at all in between. Since they say people remember only the first and last lines of any speech, perhaps that's not a bad thing. Nevertheless, had I been given even forty minutes I could have done something eminently unforgettable in style and content.

But as Elizabeth Taylor used to say to her husband, "I won't be keeping you that long".

I want to do two things tonight within the context of your theme, leadership, and I'm forced to do them rather quickly. The first is to talk about the relevance of trusteeship in this day and age. The second is to touch on the nature of trusteeship and volunteerism. With the time left over from my twenty minutes I want to discuss the meaning of life and perhaps the nature of God.

What is my experience with trusteeship? That's another way of asking if I know what I'm talking about. It's a legitimate question and I'll try to answer it. It seems to me that for all my professional life I have worked for trustees and been a trustee, usually both at the same time. As a high school principal, a district administrator and principal of a community college, I have worked within the policies of a board of trustees. I was for 15 years chair of boards of trustees in the health care system, usually new boards being set up by government in the amalgamation of geographic areas and/or acute and

community health systems. At the moment, I'm chair of the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Paraplegic Association (NL). So if you decide I don't know what I'm talking about here, you can't blame my lack of experience. Mind you, I don't know what you can blame but it'll have to be something else.

That experience has led me to formulate several interesting conclusions about trusteeship generally. Unfortunately, twenty minutes doesn't give me time to tell you what they are. But it has given me a certain perspective which I can share with you.

Everything is a matter of perspective. Your views and attitudes depend on where you're coming from and where you've been as well as where you are now.

Like the Inuit chap whose lead dog died. Dog teams in northern Newfoundland and Labrador were generally hitched up in line, one behind the other. A team of huskies running along with their tails arched high over their backs was a stirring sight. The most important dog was the lead dog who kept the other dogs in line and was the strongest and most intelligent. A good lead dog was worth its weight in gold.

Anyway, this fellow lost his lead dog and his friend was commiserating with him. "Too bad," the friend said, "that your lead dog died."

"Yes," the Inuit chap replied, "but for the second dog in line it's a most refreshing change of scenery."

It's all a matter of perspective. The perspective I want to bring to that first topic -- the relevance of trusteeship -- was suggested to me by a friend just a couple of weeks ago, and who had no idea I'd be speaking to you people tonight. I think the word is serendipity.

Everyone in this province will remember the name of Roger Simmons. Those of you from outside may not remember that many years ago he was a Liberal federal cabinet minister for a brief period of time. He's been involved in many professions since and today lives on Vancouver Island. Roger and I are cousins, although as we both like to remind people who know us both, very distant cousins. We don't see each other a lot but we do manage to stay in touch.

The other night I got a phone call from Roger, almost Tom Clancy-ish. He couldn't tell me where he was, he said, because of security issues. He did say he was on the other side of the world and involved in teaching political leaders in that country the democratization of their parliament. All very secretive. As usual we were going to have dinner ready talking for a long time. And as usual we reminisced about our early days in Springdale 35 and 40 years ago.

Roger was the first principal of a brand-new school in Springdale, a midsized town of some 3000 people, and he determined to make it unique among schools of its size in the province. He'd be the first to tell you he has his weaknesses. Well, perhaps not the

first or even the second, but Roger's weaknesses do not include a lack of vision, a lack of intelligence or a lack of energy. He has prodigious amounts of all three.

He instituted a full-time music program with one of the best known music teachers in the province on staff, something only a very few of the largest schools had. He made drama an important part of the curriculum and made sure every student received a significant amount of physical education. Each student was given so many "free" periods per cycle to pursue their own interests. The staff had several more teaching units than its size would call for, allowing a much broader curriculum than usual. Where he became superintendent of the board he was responsible for renovations to the building which saw the old gymnasium divided into a large library, and a 400 seat lecture theater, one of only two or three in the province.

As a result, the school became a little Athens of learning. Its drama clubs routinely won regional and provincial competitions. The sports teams were among the best in the province, and won Atlantic and even national titles. Perhaps most important of all, if there were fourteen provincial scholarships in the district, the school routinely took twelve or thirteen and sometimes all of them. One student wrote the US SAT exams and did so well she was offered scholarships from all across Canada and several Ivy League universities. She graduated summa cum laude from Harvard. She was prepared for that experience by that little school.

I can tell you that my ten years as principal of that school were the golden years of my professional life.

Why am I telling you all this? Because of something Roger Simmons said to me in our conversation that night, and remember he did not know I'd be talking to you. Roger isn't slow to take credit for what he achieves, but here's what he said.

"Ed, I would never have been able to achieve any of those things that made that school so great had it not been for the wonderful Board of Trustees we had at that time. They listened to my ideas, and encouraged me to dream bigger and enlarged my vision for that school. When we needed more money and more staff they went to bat for me with government. They persuaded the local mining company to give our teachers bonuses, and supported innovation every step of the way. Without these wonderful people nothing special would have happened."

What does that say to you about the relevance of trustees in this modern world? What does that say to you about the value of trustee leadership?

Perhaps some of you here tonight feel you are totally irrelevant to the educational process in your area.

Perhaps you are, but you don't have to be; it's entirely up to you.

Perhaps some of you feel you are only a rubber stamp for the administration.

Perhaps you are, but you don't have to be; that's up to you, too.

Some of you may feel you're nothing more than a small cog in a very large machine and perhaps you are, but you don't have to be; that, too, is up to you.

As one person in that large collective called a board, you are an individual with ideas, values and a commitment to the children in your district, because that's where your commitment lies, make no mistake about it. It is your input as an individual into board decisions that will make it strong and relevant in the education of these children.

You may be thinking that the Roger Simmons story is a great example of trustee involvement, but that happened many years ago. It doesn't work as easily today. Let me give you a more current example.

A little more than two years ago the Canadian Paraplegic Association in this province was quite literally left for dead. Large sums of money missing and the organization was effectively bankrupt. In addition to that, management had been so bad that files and records were practically nonexistent. We formed a new Board of Trustees of 15 people and told them the situation. Each trustee was given responsibilities within a strong committee structure. The board set goals for themselves with a time schedule of two years.

Today the Association has paid off all its debts, totally reorganized its management and office staff and now has not only a modest surplus but also is beginning once again to fulfill its mandate to people with spinal cord injury and mobility challenges. This could not have happened without the full involvement of these trustees, every one of whom took on the challenge and would not rest until we had reached the goals we had set.

Don't tell me boards of trustees are not relevant in the second decade of the third millennium.

At any age and in any time you have the power to make things happen. What fantastic potential for leadership!

We need to get to the second part of what I wish to say to you this evening in a hurry because my 20 minutes will soon be up. We just talked about the relevance of trusteeship and the potential for individual as well as collective leadership. Now let's discuss the nature of trusteeship.

Within that context let me say something about volunteerism. No question but that volunteerism is the crowning glory of our culture. Without it, some of our most cherished societal institutions could not function and would cease to exist. The essential truth of that is obvious.

You may not agree with this next statement but I believe in its basic truth. There are no volunteers in this hall tonight, not one. That's because volunteerism ends the moment

you sign up, the moment you volunteer. From then on, you are committed. You are in a position of trust and your responsibility is at least as great as the CEO of your board who's making the big bucks, at least compared with your salary as trustee! Once you have volunteered you are in a position of trust with that responsibility resting squarely on your shoulders.

John and Martha were enjoying a cup of tea before retiring for the night.

"John," Martha said, "time we went to bed, isn't it?"

"Yes," replied John. "We go to bed every night, don't we?"

"That's not what I mean, John. I mean it's time we *went to bed*. You understand?"

"No, what do you mean, woman?"

"Well," she said, "I was down to see our doctor today. He examined me thoroughly and said that for a woman my age -- I'm barely 80, after all -- I could be *going to bed* two or three times a month. What do you think about that?"

"Wonderful!" enthused John. "I'll volunteer for once."

What John doesn't seem to realize is that his volunteer days ended the moment he said, "I do." Marriage is not a volunteer relationship.

I love that word 'trustee' because of the first five letters. That word 'trust' connects you to everyone in your organization, and beyond to the larger community and everyone in it, every parent, and every child.

I repeat what I've said. You here tonight are no longer volunteers, you are committed and bound in a position of trust.

Since organizers of this banquet are probably wringing their hands and wondering when I'm going to shut up, I'll draw this presentation to a graceful close. In so doing, let me state six principles that I believe are basic to good trusteeship. call them Basic Trusteeship 101.

1. You represent the interests and concerns of the community at large as regards the education of children, utilizing your own good judgment, knowledge and common sense.

2. You function through the board through your input into the decisions of the board.

3. You are not the administration, anymore than the CEO is a trustee. If trustees step outside their roles and encroach on the turf of the administration, there is bound to

be confusion and an ineffective board.

4. You are loyal to your board and overall organization. You can be as critical as hell of board decisions as long as those criticisms are kept around the board table and not voiced to the public. If you cannot in conscience support a decision that's been made, got off the board and exercise your right as a citizen to be critical.

5. If members of the public attend your meetings, you do not play to them. Remember where your basic responsibility lies and keep the 'trust' in trusteeship intact.

6. You have the right to be kept fully informed by your board chair and district administration. You have the right to ask questions and demand answers.

So why are you a trustee? Because you have a desire to maintain and improve the system. Because you have a willingness to serve without thought of personal gain or remuneration.

The late Duke of Windsor -- remember him? -- wasn't universally admired. A biographer once wrote of him that he was at his best when the going was good. A lot of us are like that, and it's only human to blink, swallow hard and hesitate momentarily when it all hits the fan. Boards these days seem to go from crisis to crisis and are challenged as never before.

Today's trustee attempts to rise above the storms and exercise effective leadership within the system. The continuing need to adapt to society's ever-changing conditions and demands is challenging, to say the least.

James Michener in his great book 'Hawaii' has a marvelous line near the beginning. The peoples of an island in the South Pacific have set out to find a land they've only heard of in story and song. They believe it lies somewhere to the north and so they follow the stars, armed only with their courage and confidence in themselves. As they begin their voyage, the chief sits in the stern of his great canoe and sums it all up.

"When the sailor is satisfied that the sails have been well set, and the course adhered to as much as possible, he must be content to ride the storms."

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.