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Opinion

Education review commission should heed taxpayers' concerns

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The start of the New Year will provide opportunities for public engagement on your local school division's budget. School boards will spend the first three months of 2020 consulting with students, parents and citizens, in order to inform local choices for our communities. This is a prime opportunity for you to ensure that your needs, wishes, and values are reflected in these budget decisions.

The relationship between communities and their local school boards is foundational to both student success and fiscal responsibility in public education in Manitoba. As a parent who wants the best for your child or a taxpayer who wants the best return on investment, the connection between you and your local school board is key.

Strong local school boards continue to demonstrate positive impacts on student outcomes, and for a highly affordable cost — half a cent on every dollar spent on education today.

Every school board will tailor their annual budget consultation process based on hearing from you, their electorate. At local schools and with parent advisory councils, through round tables or community town halls, and perhaps even through online and telephone surveys, each school board will reach out in an effort to hear from you.

The context for next year's budget will be different, however, than in previous years. While your local school board is getting ready to adopt its budget in March, the final report of the Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education will also be made public. Both will come with significant impact for the future of our public schools.

The prospect of forced amalgamations or elimination of local school boards was present throughout the review. Whether it is bigger divisions, fewer trustees or fewer superintendents, many proposals have been studied by the commission. The only firm indication of the future came through assertions made by the government and review commission that "Manitoba is not Nova Scotia and we are not going to do what Nova Scotia did."

As a reminder, Nova Scotia eliminated its elected school boards overnight, leaving local students, families and staff negatively impacted. By replacing locally informed and democratic decisions with the closed-door meetings of an appointed advisory committee for the entire province, Nova Scotians have quickly discovered that responsiveness of core services has declined and access to key decision makers has also been significantly diminished.

Elimination of school boards is also being proposed in Quebec, which introduced legislation to this effect in October, alongside of prohibitions on the ability of public servants to wear religious symbols. This combination of legal provisions will have the effect of removing the democratic rights enjoyed by all Canadians.

Other provinces, however, understand the value of elected school boards and what they contribute to strengthening school programs for the advantage of students and communities. Prince Edward Island has recently announced the reinstatement of local school boards to serve its people, and the governments of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan have moved to strengthen the mandates shared by local communities through their elected school

boards.

In Saskatchewan in particular, a modern review of school governance demonstrated that efficiencies could be achieved without taking away the rights of communities.

The experience of our western neighbours is all the more reinforced by Manitoba's own experience. At the start of the 21st century, 20 Manitoba school divisions were amalgamated, resulting in the 37 elected school boards we have today. But this did not come without significant challenges. The unfortunate reality is that forced amalgamations during the early 2000s resulted in dollars being spent to save dimes, while meaningful reforms, focused on better student achievement and success, were overshadowed by the need to work through the complexities associated with merging formerly independent school divisions into new organizations.

This holiday season, school boards wish all Manitobans the very best. We invite you to participate in our upcoming budget meetings. At the same time, we also invite you to reach out to your local MLA. Let them know that sweeping change, only for the sake of change, would negatively impact our kids, local schools, and democratic rights.

We cannot let that happen. This does, however, depend upon your voice and your choice being heard today, to ensure that local schools continue to belong to your local communities in the years to come. Manitobans spoke very loudly and very clearly during the K-12 education review: it was undeniable that protecting local school divisions remained a priority for the future. It is important that provincial decision-makers share this same understanding.

Visit www.localvoices.ca to learn more.

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