

Editorial sent to Winnipeg Free Press for consideration – October 2018

This week's elections will see each voter use their democratic right to choose how education is delivered in this province. Public education is an important public service that impacts the lives of over 207,000 kids and their families across our province. It further impacts 31,000 people who work to provide our students with bright futures. This is why public funding to support our schools is second, only after healthcare. Planning excellence in the delivery of education could therefore not be more important to most Manitobans. And this is where every Manitoban plays a key role, through our democratic way of life. As voters, when you go to the ballot box to cast your vote for school trustee, you choose who among us will share responsibility for ensuring that the needs of Manitoba's students and schools continue to be met.

One size does not fit all when it comes to planning for such a big school system. This is why Manitoba has 37 school divisions, each with its own elected school board, to represent every community in our province. Northern and southern, rural and urban, English and French, to name just a few. Yet, there are so many more than that. Winnipeggers for instance, know that their city alone is one community made up of many neighbourhoods. Each one of Manitoba's school divisions thus ensure that school needs are met at the local level, where decisions are made that provide the best education for students. In this respect, local voices and local choices still matter and do make a difference.

There has been some talk recently about changing how school divisions and their school boards represent communities. We wanted to find out more about what Manitobans thought of these proposed changes. A month ago, our association asked some important questions. Did the people of Manitoba wish to keep their local school division to serve the people of their community, or create bigger school divisions? Did they want to protect their right to elect school boards, or give up those rights? The results are very telling.

According to the scientific research poll conducted by Probe Research, a clear majority, or 56 percent of Manitobans, indicated that keeping local community school boards was their first choice. Less than a quarter, or 23 percent, wanted to amalgamate school boards to create larger sized boards. And only eight percent— not even one person in ten— wanted to abolish school boards altogether, in favour of the planning and delivery of education by the provincial government alone. All other respondents either couldn't say which of these options they preferred or had no opinion on the subject.

These were not the only findings. Over 80 percent of Manitobans felt that electing their own trustees to oversee public schools remained an important democratic right. For those who continue to believe this is their right, casting your vote this week will be important. But for those who also favour keeping their local neighbourhood and community school boards, staying engaged in the days, months and year ahead will be as important.

Once all votes have been counted, every Manitoban must speak up to have their voices counted as well. They can do so in light of the online pre-budget survey that the government has published just last week, as well as during next year's review of the public education system. These opportunities will provide all Manitobans with the ability to share their opinions with the government concerning local democracy, to ensure that the future of public schools remains bright for all Manitobans.