



Southwest Horizon School Division's
Submission to the
Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education
May 2019

Submitted By
Carolyn Cory
Superintendent, Southwest Horizon School Division

John Dewey stated, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.” (Dewey, J. (1907). *The School and Social Progress*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press) Manitoba communities, whether large or small, urban, rural, or remote, will achieve success through the education of the children. Our schools are our communities and so we must pay careful attention to the success of our schools, our students and our staff.

What do we mean by success and how best do we measure it? Literacy and numeracy skill attainment is certainly one measure of success, but students are more than numbers. Successful citizens require broader metrics to measure the quality and success of our school system.¹ Students are critical thinkers, communicators, collaborators, creators, innovators, activists, researchers...the builders of our communities. Doesn't every parent want their child to reach his or her full potential, to become a lifelong learner who is resilient, persistent and independent? Do we not need our children to think outside the box so that they can solve future problems of which we have no current knowledge?

What are the conditions required to achieve these skills, this mindset, excellence in student achievement, and quality of life?

1. Student Learning

Size Does Matter

In Southwest Horizon School Division, we want all of our children to have the opportunity to achieve success, but we want them to have the opportunity to learn about themselves and the world from within their own community, with the support of their community, no matter the size. Our students need equitable opportunities as close to home as possible because a student from a school of 70 students may just well be the next Einstein, the next Chris Hadfield, the next Prime Minister. The positive relationships and opportunities for leadership built in rural community schools is instrumental in student success.

Wrap Around Services

Public schools are the hub of the community in rural Manitoba and classrooms are the equalizer so true wrap around services are vital. Our rural communities need equitable access to health services including Speech Language, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, mental health, counselling, family supports through CFS, RCMP, etc.

Quick access to necessary supports is often road blocked by staff turnover, red tape and lack of funding because each of these supports work in silos. Southwest Horizon and neighboring school divisions have improved efficiency of services to our pre-school children through our partnership with our local RHA called *Promise Years*.² We need to extend this model to address the needs of all students, pre-school to post-secondary. Pooling of funds, sharing of clinicians,

¹ Zhao, Y. (Ed.). (2016). *Counting what counts: Reframing education outcomes*. Bloomington, In.: Solution Tree Press.

² www.shmb.ca

open and swift communication...the model developed by local school divisions and the RHA works so why aren't we using it across the spectrum?

Relevance

“Why do I need to learn this?” If you haven't asked yourself this question you most certainly have heard someone else ask it during your years at school. Today more than ever before, student engagement depends on linking school experience to the 'real world'. Students have unlimited access to the world through the internet and in many cases are learning well beyond the adults in their lives. Our current Manitoba curriculum does not reflect a global classroom. Manitoba students need a 'living' curriculum, a skills-based curriculum, curriculum that is not built in silos but is interdisciplinary.

We need clarity of student expectations in our provincial curriculum. If students can see the target they have a far greater chance of reaching it. If they can identify where they are at it is possible to identify the next step. Our current curriculum does not necessarily make the pathways or purpose of learning clear for students or staff. Consistency of language and cross references within the curriculum documents will assist in clarity of targets.

Manitoba would not have to look very far to find effective and clear curricular targets. British Columbia scores near the top in international assessments so why not consider their work? The current *Numeracy Achievement Project* led by the *Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium*³ and modeled off provincial work in Prince Edward Island is an example of clear targets and pathways, evidenced by marked improvement in numeracy achievement for rural Manitoba students in Grades 6 and 9 since 2018.

The Apprenticeship program and Career Development courses offer on the job, relevant learning experiences. Internships in all career pathways are necessary, not just the trades. All students in Manitoba should have the opportunity to participate in a self-directed approach to teaching and learning such as the M.E.T. school experience.⁴ The disclaimer to all of this real world experience is not that we are trying to prepare our students for particular occupations but that we open up the world of possibilities and ensure they have the skillset and mindset to follow their passion and the opportunities ahead.

Early Intervention

Student readiness is a crucial factor in student success. The development of emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills takes place early in life (0-5 years).⁵ International, national, provincial, and division-based research demonstrates the link between early readiness to learn and long-term student success. Southwest Horizon School Division believes in a proactive

³ <https://sites.google.com/a/manitobarurallearning.org/mrlc/projects-in-progress>

⁴ <https://www.7oaks.org/Met/Pages/default.aspx>

⁵ MASS (2015) *Early Childhood Education and Care: A Position Paper*.

approach to building this equity from the beginning for all of our students. Our division provides full time kindergarten in the second term of each year. Our division works with early childhood centers to provide quality resources and cross training.

Early Childhood Education should be a provincial priority if we intend to create lifelong success for our children. At the very least, Kindergarten should be mandatory. Kindergarten children should have the option of attending Kindergarten on a full-time basis and early childhood programs and curriculum should be directly linked to school aged programs. Although we work together to transition students from early childhood to school aged programs, gaps in training, programming, and funding remain.

2. Teaching

“Teachers.... are in the game to maximize and accelerate human potential.” (Frey, Hattie, Fisher. (2018). *Developing Assessment Capable Visible Learners*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, p. 149) Isn't this the purpose of education? If we accept this as our purpose, then it stands that it is necessary to maximize and accelerate the potential of staff in the education system as well. Frey, Hattie and Fisher go on to explain that learning is accelerated under 3 conditions; skill, the will to learn, and the thrill of learning. (p. 10) If learning is to happen for our students, we must create these same conditions for our staff.

Learning as The Focus

Global research and local stakeholder feedback agree that the classroom teacher is key to student success. How can we support the classroom teacher? Teachers are expected to be experts and to improve at many things including a wide variety of curriculum, research methods, best practice, child developmental theory, understanding the effects of socio-economic factors, etc. But we cannot expect them to be the expert at everything without support or to improve in multiple areas simultaneously.

We must provide teachers with easily accessible evidence-based research and high-quality resources. Each Manitoba School Division endeavors to provide this for staff but this is an area where the Manitoba Education System would benefit from leadership at the Provincial level. We need clear leadership from the Department of Education in providing high quality curriculum and clear leadership in providing quality professional learning. Currently, the *Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium* provides the high-quality professional learning model that best supports teachers' needs. The Consortium consults with school divisions who determine professional learning needs based on student data and professional input, and then the MRLC responds and plans accordingly. Teacher professional learning must be directly linked to the needs of the current students and not necessarily to the teacher's individual area of interest. We must find a balance between teacher autonomy and responsive intervention.

Teachers need relevance (Is this learning relevant to my students in their context?), ease (How close is this to my work?), and feedback (How quickly will I know if it is making a difference for my students?).⁶ A system requires clarity of targets and best evidence-based practice to reach

⁶ Simon Breakspear: www.LearningSprints.com

those targets. We need time for professionals to work together to improve practice through high quality learning opportunities.

Collective Efficacy

John Hattie's work has solidified collective efficacy as one of the most influential strategies for student success.⁷ Collective efficacy is the belief by a group of teachers that what they do impacts student learning. It's the belief that together they can make a difference and results in the constant search for improving that ability.

Collective efficacy is built on relationships. It requires time for teachers to study, to think and talk about their students' strengths and needs, to research, to inquire...in short, to be professionals. Teaching is no longer an individual activity but a team effort because student needs reflect society and currently are extremely complex. The necessary strategies or solutions are not achievable by a lone teacher.

In the midst of the numerous negative influences outside the control of the public school are the expectations for high achievement for all students! Teaching is a complex profession and a social craft. Our Provincial Government must recognize that reduction of funding will result in staff reductions which will reduce collective efficacy which will have a negative impact on student achievement. Reduction of funding is counter intuitive to increasing student achievement.

Teacher Training

The public school classroom is the great equalizer but requires the classroom teacher to facilitate learning for students with abilities across at least three grade levels in any one classroom, for students who do not have enough to eat, clothes to wear, a safe place to sleep the previous night, students who have suffered a wide variety of traumas, or have parents who have suffered trauma...students suffering with physical illnesses, mental illness, drug related challenges, behavioral challenges, poor attendance...the list goes on and on.

Ongoing Provincial leadership and resources focused on the most effective strategies to address these many needs would be a start. Increased focus in pre-service training for teachers on child development, learning, and teacher impact, and less emphasis on curriculum content is required. If a teacher is trained in these areas, he/she will have greater flexibility in teaching.

Teachers are learners as well, but our students deserve the best professionals. Schools are places of learning first, not teaching first, and not places of employment first. Increased accountability for poor professional performance will serve our students best and save a great deal of resources.

Mentorship/Critical Friend Network

Our system would also benefit from a mentorship program for the development of instructional leadership, a structure in which leaders have access to a critical friend with no

⁷ Hattie, J. (2012) *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. New York, NY: Routledge Inc.

evaluative agenda.⁸ A critical friend is an educational professional who is committed to providing support to a school. A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but is also able to provide constructive feedback, forming the basis for collaborative work. Critical friends may advocate for the school, help to problem-solve, model effective processes, identify relevant resources, help to set goals, provide feedback, and help to interpret data.

3. Accountability

Students are more than scores on standardized assessments and our system is far more than what is measured by these assessments. Learners in Southwest Horizon School Division are unique as learners are in every region of our province and it is our duty to balance their learning to be relevant to both local and global needs. Local voice and local relationships are vital in achieving this balance.

What difference in student learning might we find if we could broaden collective efficacy of teachers as a province? In order to achieve this province wide efficacy, we need to develop an irrigation system for staff learning based on small wins and no blame. Provincial achievement scores will not improve by simply pointing fingers and wishing it so. Achievement scores will improve with clarity of targets and curricular pictures of best practice followed by time to practice, availability of evidence-based research and reciprocal relationships at all levels. The Department of Education has taken positive steps through the work of Senior Assistant Dr. Rob Santos and the Coordinator of the Continuous Framework Review. Continued teamwork between Department of Education staff and division staff will increase alignment of goals and strategies.

International, national and provincial data is useful at the systemic level, but teachers know that continuous improvement is informed in the classroom through daily formative assessment and feedback. This is where responsive teaching takes place and student growth occurs. Small wins add up to improved big picture data.

Finally, it is vital that Provincial Leadership recognize and address the factors (approximately 50% of all factors) that influence student achievement in schools is beyond the influence of the school.⁹ Wrap around services are improving but there is much work to be done in this area. Poverty, transiency, mental health needs, health needs, justice...government agencies must work together to provide our students with the safety net they deserve while avoiding duplication of services.

4. Governance

Southwest Horizon School Division stakeholders believe that education is a shared responsibility between home, school and community. Evidence of this belief is abundant; regular

⁸ <https://sites.google.com/a/manitobarurallearning.org/mrlc/what-we-are-learning/what-we-are-learning-from-action-learning>

⁹ Simon Breakspear. Learning Sprints Summit for Manitoba School Leaders, 2018.

stakeholder feedback in person and via technology, Parent Advisory Councils, Student Advisory Committees, Trustee representation on local recreation district boards, communication with local municipal councils and MLAs, schools used as a hub for community events.... all of this work is based on the relationships developed over time between home, school and the community. We believe that decisions made within context of the community, by the community, best serve the needs of the community. Regardless of the size of future school divisions, it is vital that local voices are represented.

The Department of Education has a role, but it too will only work if it is based on a strong relationship with the people on the ground, within the context of each classroom, and not from the context of an office on Broadway or Portage Avenue.

5. Funding

The ability for school divisions to tax locally has resulted in increased opportunities, engagement and success for students in Southwest Horizon. Local tax dollars along with a 3-5 year financial commitment from the Provincial Government is vital to the future of our students. We know our students and our communities and are best placed to be fiscally responsible in providing their education.

6. Long Term Vision

In Southwest Horizon School Division, we believe it is our moral imperative to create learning conditions that result in precise, pragmatic improvement for all students. We want our students to learn from and with our provincial and global neighbors. We recognize that this will take commitment to action, community context, continuous improvement cycles and continuous reflection. We believe that this will require increased, regular collaboration across all levels of leaders in education.

Students need to have confidence in their ability to problem solve, to think creatively, to collaborate, to be critical, and to use their voice. This is best learned in the real world, so we must find ways to take the classroom outside of school walls and bring the world into the classroom.

Appendix

Southwest Horizon School Division Foundational Belief Statement

SHSD believes in high levels of success for all students.

All students are capable of learning when provided with the best opportunities, tools and resources that match their strengths and needs, enabling them to be critical, dynamic thinkers.

It is the role of the school to respond to individual needs with dignity and respect, so that every student and staff member strives for success every day.

SHSD believes that learning is our core purpose.

We will promote a cycle of continuous improvement for students and staff, based on the identification of strengths and the use of relevant data and research.

Our schools are places where students and staff are passionately engaged in dynamic, flexible and relevant learning.

With the guidance, tools, and strategies provided by our schools, learners become responsible for their own learning.

Education and learning are for everyone but not the same for everyone.

SHSD believes in strong connections.

Public education is a shared responsibility between school, home, and community; every voice will inform our decisions.

SHSD will partner with community stakeholders to enhance learning beyond the walls of our schools and beyond ages 5-18.

Positive relationships are fundamental to success.