



LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND SERVICE FOR MANITOBA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

October 31, 2017

Honourable Cameron Friesen  
Minister of Finance  
Room 193-450 Broadway  
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8  
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Dear Minister Friesen:

Thank you for this opportunity to share public school boards' perspectives as you embark on the challenging task of setting our province's financial course for the next year and beyond. As the bodies elected to govern Manitoba's public school system, the 38 school boards that comprise this association's membership have an obvious interest in ensuring that the education system is appropriately resourced. Beyond that, however, we all share a fundamental concern for the well-being of all children in every aspect of their lives. The comments that follow will reflect both of those priorities.

#### ***Education finance and related matters***

The brief that we submitted at the time of last year's pre-budget consultations outlined several areas where we believe legislative, regulatory, or other changes could positively impact school boards' ability to deliver improved services, at little or no additional cost to the province or local taxpayers.

In the intervening year, the provincial government has acted on one of those recommendations, namely the elimination of the 20-student cap on class size in kindergarten to grade three classrooms. Research fails to show that such a reduction in class size leads to significantly improved student learning outcomes. What is clear, however, is that the cap came with significant capital and operational costs, and negatively impacted school boards' ability to manage resources. On behalf of school boards, I would like to thank your government for making this change.

Two other major recommendations were included in our 2017 budget brief.

**The elimination on the moratorium on school closures:** Since its introduction, the moratorium has required many school boards to expend money to maintain and upgrade what is effectively surplus space, and to staff classrooms for students who might actually be better served in a larger, nearby facility. We would once again urge the provincial government to introduce the necessary amendments to *The Public Schools Act* to eliminate the moratorium. At the same time, we would look forward to working with the government to establish new school closing guidelines that would ensure that no school is closed without appropriate community consultations.

**Revisions to the funding formula:** Most funding provided by the province to school boards in support of education comes in the form of either block (per pupil) or categorical (targeted) funding. Block funding provides maximum flexibility for school boards in that it allows them to expend funds in support of locally identified needs. Categorical funding, on the other hand, needs to be directed to specific, centrally-determined priority areas, and the monies provided frequently do not cover the full cost of the service being delivered. We would encourage the government to take this view into account in any review of education funding, and work to restore a more appropriate balance of block and categorical funding in a revised formula.

While these are two of the major recommendations contained in our 2017 brief, there are others that we believe remain valid. That brief may be found at <http://www.mbschoolboards.ca/documents/budgetConsultations2017.pdf>.

### ***The well-being of children and youth***

While the mandate of school boards is technically limited to the in-class experiences of school-aged children, their area of concern is much broader. This is reflected in the Manitoba School Boards Association policy on students, which reads, in part, as follows.

Public schools not only provide academic courses of study for students; they also share in the family and community responsibility for nurturing the whole child, and for helping each one grow into a healthy, happy and contributing member of society. To that end, public schools must:

- recognize the critical importance of the early years for children’s healthy development and learning, and support inter-agency cooperation and collaboration to meet the needs of young children and their families.
- mitigate the negative impacts of poverty on students, and ensure that equitable educational opportunities are available to all children and youth, regardless of socio-economic status.
- understand the significant roles good physical and mental health, emotional intelligence and empathy play in overall student well-being and achievement, and support or develop programs and initiatives designed to have a positive impact in these areas.

With this policy position in mind, we would like to comment on some of the specific matters raised in the government’s pre-budget discussion paper and survey.

**Balancing the budget:** School boards fully appreciate the value of a balanced budget. Every dollar spent on interest is one dollar that is not available to pay for valuable services for Manitobans. With the specter of rising interest rates before us, debt reduction becomes even more important.

However, we would caution the government against focusing on cost exclusively. Value is often more important, and when it comes to the well-being of children, that is especially true. Developing children are vulnerable, and even a short-term delay in their access to high-quality health, education, childcare or other needed services can have life-long and devastating effects. Children don’t get a second chance at a good start in life. Therefore, we would strongly caution the government not to balance the budget by reducing supports for children and their families, until and unless there is solid evidence that a particular support is not achieving its intended objective.

**Health care premiums:** Health care is obviously a critical service for all Manitobans, and as such, access to high quality and timely health care needs to be guaranteed. Whether or not such access requires the introduction of a health care premium is a discussion that will, no doubt, engender lively debate, but it is not a debate we wish to enter into at this time. What we do want to state unequivocally is that if health care premiums *are* mandated, they must be structured in such a way so as not to negatively impact children or families.

Manitoba continues to have a high number of children living in poverty. Many more live in families with incomes that, while not technically below the poverty line, make it challenging to provide for all of their children’s physical and social needs. Health care premiums, if introduced, must not increase such challenges for families. They must not be forced to forego nutritious food, appropriate childcare arrangements, or reasonable recreational activities for their children in order to pay mandated health care premiums.

**Cannabis:** The Manitoba School Boards Association submitted a comprehensive statement outlining its views on the pending legalization of cannabis, which is available on our website at <http://www.mbschoolboards.ca/documents/Advocacy/MSBA%20-%20Minister%20Stefanson%20-%20Cannabis%20-%202016%20Mar%202017.pdf>. In the context of the present pre-budget consultation, and as outlined in our March 16, 2017 letter to Justice Minister Heather Stefanson, I would simply like to reiterate that our primary concern is with the well-being of children and youth. Whatever approach it takes to implementing the sale and regulation of cannabis, we would urge the government to make this its priority as well. The potential for the sale of cannabis to generate additional tax revenue for the province must always be a secondary consideration.

Thank you for considering our perspectives on these important matters as you work to develop Manitoba's 2018 budget. We look forward to working with you in the coming months and years to ensure that our province remains a place where all Manitobans, but especially children, can grow and thrive.

Sincerely,



Ken Cameron, President  
Manitoba School Boards Association

cc Honourable Ian Wishart, Minister of Education and Training  
All Manitoba School Boards