



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

LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS ENHANCE EDUCATION AND EMBODY DEMOCRACY

Winnipeg

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For immediate release

In the final weekend of the provincial election campaign, the topic of potential school division amalgamation has emerged. The Manitoba School Boards Association believes that all electors must be aware of the facts when it comes to this critical subject.

"Research shows the significant connection between the work of local school boards and student success", said Alan Campbell, president of the Manitoba School Boards Association. "School boards provide leadership that enhances educational quality, at a cost of less than half a cent of every dollar spent. Additionally, total administration costs for school divisions account for less than four cents of every dollar of expenditures, meaning that critical resources are kept in the classroom," continued president Campbell. "Manitoba is the only province in Canada that actually caps spending on administration, meaning that divisions are constantly looking for efficiencies that enable them to contain spending," explained president Campbell.

School boards' focus on the classroom is the reason behind their impact on student success. "Through monitoring and direct communication with teaching staff, school boards work to understand what's happening in classrooms," noted president Campbell. "They then work to provide professional development that addresses identified needs, and support professional learning communities that facilitates the sharing of best practices between classrooms, schools, divisions and communities," he said.

School boards also provide students, community members, teachers and staff with opportunities to engage directly on the best path forward for local schools, but amalgamation or elimination of school divisions would mute those voices.

"All factors should be carefully weighed by Manitobans when they consider the implications of school division amalgamation," concluded president Campbell. "The reasons most often cited for amalgamation centre on economies of scale and effectiveness. I would argue that with their focus on classrooms and administrative cost containment, school boards share and are constantly acting on those priorities. The question becomes whether Manitobans are prepared to undertake a major restructuring of a school system that already counts among the world's best for no discernible benefit, but at a significant diminishment of their democratic representation."

The attached backgrounder is a ten point response to address the many arguments that are often made in favour of amalgamation. Visit www.localvoices.ca to learn more.

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For more information or to arrange for an interview, please contact:

Alan Campbell, President
acampbell@isd21.mb.ca
(204) 886-7121

Josh Watt, Executive Director
jwatt@mbschoolboards.ca
(204) 594-5162

Manitoba School Boards Association

Backgrounder on School Division Amalgamation in Manitoba

1) FOCUS ON STUDENT SUCCESS IS PLACED AT RISK UNDER AMALGAMATION: All decisions made concerning the children of this province need to focus on doing what is best for them. Many research studies demonstrate a positive relationship between local community governance of public schools and student achievement and success. Time and again, this relationship is supported by the evidence. What is not supported by the evidence, is any link between student success and amalgamated governance structures. The reason for this ought to be readily apparent: we will not improve as a province if teachers, principals, superintendents and school trustees are focused on restacking jenga blocks or playing tetris with our students' futures as they redesign and rebuild school divisions. Improvement can only be secured if all hands remain on deck to focus on student success and achievement, as they are now. Because of this, our last results under the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program, a standards test administered by Ministers of Education nation-wide, showed that of all provinces, only Manitoba showed improvement in each of reading, math and science. No other province has that distinction. Canada remains the leading nation in the English speaking world in terms of the academic achievement of our students. Manitoba makes a significant contribution to helping maintain this important international standing.

2) EVERY COMMUNITY IN MANITOBA BENEFITS FROM LOCAL PROGRAMS, SUPPORTS AND SERVICES: Throughout 2018 and 2019, our association has gathered multiple examples from across our school divisions of those programs, supports and services that have been designed, established and perfected by local school divisions to respond to the particular academic, social, cultural, economic and sustainability needs of their community. From specialized language programs that reflect the particular cultural heritage of select communities, to the athletic, arts, drama, music, technical-vocational and workplace-based programs that they offer, each division is a reflection of its own community. As decisions become centralized into larger and bigger structures, such programs are placed at risk. We have seen cuts to such programs time and again across our country as megaboards balance budgets over greater geographic territories. In Manitoba, the needs of St James are different from those of St Vital. Flin Flon and Frontier school divisions represent distinctive communities. Turtle Mountain is as far from Turtle River as Morden is from Winkler when it comes to the character and programming of each community.

3) MAINTAINING LOCAL SCHOOL DIVISIONS HELPS MAINTAIN LOCAL INTERESTS: Local businesses and industries depend on the purchases and procurement policies of their local school divisions. In Manitoba, educational services account for 21 percent of provincial spending and 5.6 percent of our GDP in Manitoba. How this money is invested in communities depends on strong local voices to ensure communities continue to benefit from this level of investment. Local business and industry also depend on the work experience programs and other community connections that have been promoted by their local school division.

4) THE DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS OF COMMUNITIES MUST REMAIN ONE OF THE FIRST PRIORITIES: When it comes to amalgamation, our association's official policy remains that every community should have the right to choose whether its locally elected school board should be eliminated. We believe that it should be left to the people of every community to make that decision. It is not a decision that should be made arbitrarily on Broadway. Recently, our association interviewed local veterans on the subject of the rights held by all Manitobans in relation to their democratically elected school boards. Time and again, these veterans affirmed the importance of protecting and defending these vital rights.

5) LOCAL VOICES AND LOCAL CHOICES STILL MATTER:

Local voices and local choices still matter to effective, responsive, and quality public education. Amalgamation places these at risk by removing community access to decision-making regarding schools and programs. Decisions under an amalgamated school structure mean decisions are made further away from the people and communities that depend on them for effective, responsive and quality education.

6) BIGGER IS NOT BETTER, NOR IS IT COST-EFFECTIVE: Bigger is not necessarily better and certainly is not more cost effective. Amalgamation of school divisions is not about dollars and cents. In 2000/01, twenty school divisions were eliminated by the Government of Manitoba. In 2005, an independent follow-up study by the Frontier Centre for Public Policy concretely demonstrated that dollars were spent to save dimes to undertake that amalgamation process. The only thing that was achieved in the end was the removal of local community voice and choice from neighbourhoods and communities across Manitoba. The study also found that focus on student success and achievement took a backseat to divisional reorganization and restructuring. We cannot return to the past to inform the way forward. Manitobans must learn from the lessons of the last round of amalgamations very carefully.

7) COST SAVING IS NOT THE HAPPY ENDING OF AMALGAMATION: You cannot save costs by running a larger school division with a lesser number of classrooms, school buses, principals or administrators. The only way to do so is to give kids longer bus rides, to close schools, or to eliminate accountability and oversight concerning the second largest system in Manitoba after healthcare. Over 180,000 students and 34,000 employees directly depend on local school divisions. Every other citizen depends on protecting strong local school divisions and those who graduate from them. As our province grows and expands, strengthening local responsiveness and ownership will become even more important, not less.

8) SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE REMAINS AFFORDABLE, EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE: School boards cost half a cent out of every dollar spent on public education in Manitoba today. The overall cost of operating all 37 school boards in this province is less than the annual operating cost of Winnipeg's City Council alone. The people of Manitoba need to be aware of how much time and effort their school trustees invest in promoting the right local context for delivery of responsive and quality education to students, and how cost effective they remain, when doing so. Trustees in Manitoba are not full-time but they do represent their communities' interests in all decisions that are made concerning education.

9) AMALGAMATION IF NECESSARY BUT NOT NECESSARILY AMALGAMATION: One of the key tests that has been used across North America to determine whether or not school division amalgamations are necessary is to study equitable and fair access to programs, supports and services within each school division by its students and communities. In Manitoba, equity, accessibility and fairness have been promoted through school division partnerships and cooperation in joint and collaborative delivery of education. Combining our resources helps ensure that the needs of every student are met, while also protecting local community ownership and control of public education. We do not need to amalgamate school divisions to promote greater access and equity when it comes to educational opportunities for our students. Schools of choice, shared services and regional consortia all achieve the same outcomes as amalgamations, without loss of community independence and autonomy in responding to need.

10) EVERYTHING THAT IS MEASURED MUST BE COUNTED BUT NOT EVERYTHING THAT COUNTS IS MEASURED: Last September, Probe Research conducted a public opinion poll in which respondents were informed about the real outcomes of what school board amalgamation would actually mean for their community. Nearly six out of ten people indicated that they would prefer leaving school divisions exactly as they are, to serve the needs of local neighbourhoods and communities just as they do now. This is because the other option under an amalgamation scenario is to create bigger boards, and only two out of ten indicated that they would accept that outcome. The other two out of ten either wanted to see 100 percent control by the government over education or did not have any opinion. Further, Probe Research's last poll showed clearly that eight out of ten people believe that electing local trustees to oversee their local schools remains an important democratic right. We think that these results remain very telling and informative. Notwithstanding any other research or poll that may be conducted, what really counts is how Manitobans respond when provided with an explanation of what amalgamation will actually mean for their local communities and neighbourhoods.