

MANITOBA
School Boards
 ASSOCIATION

Presentation to the
 Manitoba 2017
 Budget Consultations

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www.mbschoolboards.ca

Manitobans know that a strong public education system is the key to a bright future for the province. The children and youth our schools serve embody that future, and schools play a critical role in their lives. Schools equalize opportunity for those who may be otherwise disadvantaged. They both challenge and support students, depending on each child's individual needs. Schools nurture our children, not just academically, but also socially, emotionally, and physically, and as a society, we all count on schools being able to fulfill these varied roles.

School boards know and appreciate that this government understands the value of education. Its support has been evident not only in the words of the Premier and other officials, but also in its actions, as when it implemented the 2.55% increase in education funding that had been promised to public schools by its predecessor. We sincerely hope that the government will be able to continue the practice that has been in place for more than a decade, of tying annual increases in education funding at the rate of Manitoba's economic growth.

We know that the government is committed to preserving front-line services for Manitobans. So too are school boards. They are committed to maintaining the front-line services children and families need—teachers and educational assistants in the classroom, clinical services, busing, custodians and all the other people and resources that ensure every student is able to participate equally in and benefit fully from the educational opportunities provided by public schools. But we also respect that the provincial government, like school boards, is facing fiscal challenges that have the potential to negatively impact its ability to fully meet this goal. By working together, we believe that school boards and the province can address some of these challenges, to the benefit of all Manitobans.

Here are some concrete suggestions to begin that process.

As elected bodies, school boards are accountable to their communities for their decisions, including those relating to taxation and spending. However, school boards are also constrained by the laws, regulations and policies imposed upon them by higher levels of government, primarily the Province. In many instances, those constraints are necessary and reasonable, but that is not always the case. Two specific examples are outlined below.

A moratorium on school closures has been in place in Manitoba for several years. This legislated moratorium means that a school cannot be closed without the consensus of the parents and residents of the area it serves. Such a consensus can be difficult to obtain, which means some very small schools are operating in Manitoba. Very small schools are sometimes necessary, as when population sparsity would otherwise mean unreasonable travel times for students. But in many other instances, appropriate facilities with sufficient space exist only a few kilometers—or in the case of larger centers, only a few blocks—away. Without the ability to manage their capital resources efficiently, school boards are faced with the reality of having to expend money to maintain and improve facilities that they don't actually require.

The moratorium on school closures impacts schools boards' ability to manage capital resources. The 20-student cap on class size in kindergarten to grade 3 impacts both capital and human resources. Since the cap was introduced, over one hundred classrooms, both permanent and temporary, have been added to schools. While the provincial government provides the funding to build these facilities, it falls to the school board to cover

the ongoing operational costs. It also falls to school boards to cover the costs of the additional staff, both teachers and educational assistants, required for these classrooms. This cap on class size was introduced with the stated intention of improving outcomes for young learners. There is no evidence that would support that this has occurred. As well, the effectiveness of class-size reduction initiatives varies significantly depending on the demographics of the students involved—socio-economic status, proficiency in the language of instruction, special needs, etc. A blanket policy on class size is expensive, but it is not necessarily effective. By eliminating this policy and allowing school boards and educators to make decisions about where additional resources will benefit students most, money would be saved and educational outcomes potentially improved.

The very nature of the education funding formula is another and perhaps even more significant problem, as it impacts every school board. The provincial government provides the bulk of funding to school boards as two types of grants: block and categorical. Block grants or per pupil funding is based on the number of students enrolled in a school division. Within the limitations of The Public Schools Act, school boards are able to allot these funds as they deem appropriate and necessary. Categorical grants, on the other hand, are provided for specific purposes, such as improving numeracy and literacy, assisting specific groups of learners, or lessening the financial impact that often comes with the introduction of new initiatives from the province. Categorical grants are targeted funds that must be spent in specific ways. Frequently, categorical grants do not completely offset the cost of the programs they are intended to support, which means that in order to access those funds, school boards need to augment them with additional dollars. Given that categorical grants are proliferating while increases in block funding have been minimal, this issue and the lack of flexibility it entails is becoming increasingly problematic for school boards.

The balance of block and categorical grants is only one of the challenges inherent in the current funding model. School boards, along with other education and non-education partners, are once again expressing a desire to review education funding in Manitoba. Our goal will be to develop a made-in-Manitoba model that retains the strengths of our current system and avoids the pitfalls encountered by other jurisdictions. The ideal model would be both flexible, to allow school boards to manage education resources effectively, and transparent, to enable taxpayers to understand and hold school boards and government accountable for their actions. We believe that the provincial government shares our desire for flexibility and transparency, and we sincerely hope that you will support this review.

Greater flexibility to allocate resources according to local needs and circumstances is one way we can ensure that Manitobans get the greatest possible return on their investment in education. School boards also search for efficiencies by working collaboratively in areas such as shared services or buying agreements. We are hopeful that the New West Partnership may provide further opportunities to explore any possible cost efficiencies that may be brought about through procurement practices or joint purchasing. We would also welcome the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the provincial government about creative and innovative approaches that might be used to control the cost of public education, while maintaining or enhancing the quality of that education for Manitoba's children and youth.

We would also welcome the province's support in minimizing the tax burden that school boards themselves face, a tax burden that removes money from the frontline services we are both committed to maintaining. As an example, many municipalities have expanded their use of levies and fees, rather than actual property taxes, as a source of revenue. School properties that are exempt from paying property taxes are not necessarily exempt

from these fees and levies. As well, the implementation by the province of tax increment financing in 2009 may be serving its stated purpose of revitalizing areas of Winnipeg and other communities, but at a cost to schools in those areas. Under tax increment financing legislation, tax revenue that would normally support local schools is instead redirected to a community revitalization fund that is under the control of the province and municipality.

School boards would also welcome the support of the Province in areas of federal jurisdiction that impact public schools. This includes funding for Aboriginal and Indigenous students attending First Nations schools. From an equity perspective, all Canadians deserve access to a comparable quality of education, but inadequate Federal funding of these schools poses challenges. From a financial perspective, the burden is carried by public schools that need to provide additional resources to support these students when they move to public schools. The recent influx of refugee students into Manitoba's public school system comes with similar costs, and school boards are struggling. Finally, school boards would welcome provincial support in their ongoing efforts to increase the GST rebate to school divisions to 100%, a move that would represent an additional \$8.7 million annually for school boards, money that could support front-line services.

Thank you for considering our perspectives in the development of Manitoba's 2017 budget. We know that the government shares many of these perspectives: a desire to preserve front-line services, the belief that we can achieve more by working together than we can in isolation, and the value of a strong public school system. We look forward to working with you towards these goals, for all Manitobans.