

Manitoba School Boards Association
Presentation on
Bill 13: The Preparing Students for Success Act

The Manitoba School Boards Association is a voluntary organization representing public school boards in the province. As such, we are advocates for strong schools that benefit all students, and for the role local governance plays in ensuring that those schools are responsive to community needs.

As advocates for students and schools, we strongly support the intent that is explicit in the title of *Bill 13, The Preparing Students for Success Act*. Furthermore, we also support a number of the specific directions contained in this legislation, several of which parallel those already being taken by school boards. We will be speaking briefly to a number of those directions.

Increasing the compulsory school attendance age

Today, high school graduation is generally viewed as the minimum credential for an individual's future success. School boards share this belief, and have implemented multiple strategies to help make this an obtainable goal for *all* students. The government's decision to raise the compulsory school age from 16 to 18 will provide schools and parents with one more tool to encourage youth to stay in school until high school graduation. However, simply raising the age will not ensure student success.

In *Bill 13*, the government has recognized this reality. It has identified the relationship between student *engagement* and student *success*, it has provided for the possibility of work training programs as alternatives to school attendance, and it has emphasized the role of parents in ensuring that their children attend school regularly. Beyond these structural supports, however, schools will require ongoing operational support to engage students and improve graduation rates.

As mentioned, school boards already use multiple, proven strategies to reach students at risk of dropping out. Although the strategies may vary, many of them share one or more common features, including:

- a reduced student-teacher ratio;

- off-campus location;
- additional material resources; or
- involvement of a third party (such as a post-secondary institution).

Each of these mechanisms has associated costs above and beyond those of the “standard” educational program. Where students who may otherwise have dropped out are staying in school as a result of *Bill 13*, these costs will likely increase as more students avail themselves of specialized programs. The government acknowledged these increased costs in making the 2011-12 funding announcement, noting that “every school division in Manitoba is [was] guaranteed at least a 2.2 per cent grant increase this year in anticipation of higher enrolments due to the province’s pending legislation mandating that young people continue their education until they reach the age of 18.”

As this change in school leaving age is implemented, we would ask two things of government. First, we ask that school completion rates be assessed on an ongoing basis, to ensure that the legislation is having the desired effect of increasing graduation rates. Secondly, we ask that the government monitor the financial impact of this legislative change and work to ensure that schools have the resources they need to meet the laudable goal of student success.

Assessment and promotion

Bill 13 contains two provisions that deal with student assessment and promotion: the granting of regulatory authority to the Minister to determine the form and content of pupil report cards, and a prohibition against school boards adopting policies that require the promotion of pupils who have not met expected learning outcomes, or “social promotion.”

An interorganizational committee, on which this association is represented, is currently working to determine what standardized provincial report cards will look like. We understand that there will be some flexibility in report cards, with different formats for different grade levels, and that the report cards will include a section that may be shaped at the classroom, school or divisional level. While we are encouraged with the direction that seems to be emerging from this committee’s deliberations, we would once again strongly advise the government to monitor the effectiveness of the standardized

reporting process, once implemented. We need to ensure not only that it meets the government's goal of providing greater transparency for parents, but also that it enables teachers to report fully and appropriately on the full range of educational and developmental outcomes that contribute to a student's progress.

Manitoba school boards believe that all students can achieve, and that it is the board's responsibility to provide the resources and supports to make this happen. However, we also know that there are situations where parents and school personnel decide jointly that an age-appropriate classroom placement, rather than one based solely on a student's academic achievement, is the most beneficial. For example, immigrant or refugee students may face language barriers, or may have experienced disruptions in their formal schooling, that prevent them from performing at their typical grade level. In these situations, the best course of action may be a classroom placement with their peers, with concurrent remedial instruction to bring their academic achievement to grade level. So, while we can support the clause in *Bill 13* that would prohibit school boards from adopting blanket social promotion policies, we believe that educators and parents must retain the right to determine the most appropriate classroom placement for each student, on a case-by-case basis.

We also need to ensure that provincial curricula and learning outcomes are respectful of the wide range of students in our public school classrooms, students with many different skills, abilities and strengths, in order that all students can experience success. School boards, educators, and the department of education already have a mechanism in place for monitoring the province's k-12 curriculum, the Interorganizational Curriculum Advisory Committee. We need to continue to support the work of that body so that it can respond to curricular challenges as they are identified.

Scheduling of non-instructional days

Bill 13 will give the Minister of Education authority to make regulations regarding the scheduling of non-instructional days for teachers. While early media reports indicated that any such regulations would require complete standardization of such days across the province, subsequent correspondence from the Department of Education has revealed that this will not be the case. Rather, school divisions and districts will be required to ensure that a certain number of non-instructional days are standard for

all schools within the jurisdiction, and that efforts are made to coordinate non-instructional days with surrounding jurisdictions where practical.

This clarification has been welcomed by school boards, as scheduling flexibility can result in some very real benefits. For example, it enables school divisions to coordinate professional development calendars so that they can share and thus reduce the expenses associated with bringing in workshop presenters, by scheduling sessions on consecutive days in cooperating divisions. However, school boards are still concerned about the possibility of unforeseen challenges arising from this new policy direction. Therefore, we would ask the government to monitor its impact, so that that any such challenges can be quickly identified and addressed.

Early learning and child care facilities

Manitoba school boards fully support the inclusion of early learning and/or child care facilities in public schools, and therefore support amendments to *The Public Schools Act* and *The Public Schools Finance Board Act* that would include capital support requirements for such facilities in new or renovated schools. In 2006, the association passed a resolution asking Manitoba Education to revise then current practice, so that existing school space dedicated to early learning and child care programs—day cares, before and after school programs, and nursery programs—would not be factored into the calculation of official school capacity. Our goal in passing this resolution was to ensure that associated child care and early learning programs would not be displaced when a school was faced with growing student numbers. The government subsequently acted upon that recommendation. We consider the provisions of *Bill 13* to be a next logical step. In tandem with enhancements to staffing and programs, *Bill 13* will help ensure that all Manitoban families have access to quality early learning and child care.

Conclusion

The Manitoba School Boards Association appreciates the opportunity to share its views on *Bill 13, The Preparing Students for Success Act*. Overall, we view the legislation in a positive light, and would like to reiterate our support in principle. As is usually the case with systemic change, there is always the possibility that the ultimate outcomes will not be exactly as anticipated. For that reason, we have

identified a number of areas where we are recommending ongoing monitoring of the impact of the implementation of *Bill 13* provisions, to ensure that the desired goals are being achieved. As always, this association and Manitoba school boards will cooperate fully in this monitoring to assist the government in fine tuning these new policy directions where necessary in order to ensure that every Manitoba student is a successful learner and achieves the goal of high school completion.

Thank you.