

Manitoba Association of School Trustees
Submission to the Commission on Class Size and Composition
November 2001

Introduction

The Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST) is a voluntary association of public school boards in Manitoba. As reflected in the Association mission statement, MAST exists to ensure quality public school education for Manitoba students through effective, locally-elected boards of trustees.

MAST's interest in the work of the Commission on Class Size and Composition is directly related to our mission to ensure quality public school education for Manitoba students. Classroom conditions and experiences are integral to student learning outcomes. At the same time, school boards have a responsibility to the communities they serve to ensure that educational resources are managed in a fiscally responsible manner. In short, school boards and MAST bear a responsibility for both the effectiveness and the efficiency of our public education system. Class size and composition are issues that bear on both these components of our responsibility.

Executive Summary

The Manitoba Association of School Trustees believes that student achievement is closely tied to classroom learning conditions. One of the conditions that affect learning outcomes can be the number of students in a given classroom. MAST concurs with current educational research findings that this is particularly true at the early years level, and for those children who come from depressed socio-economic circumstances.

In light of the evident pedagogical advantages of limiting class size in some circumstances, many Manitoba school boards have implemented policies and practices designed to keep early years classes as small as possible. MAST supports these efforts. However, the Association does not support an across-the-board provincial policy on class size. Local circumstances and needs across Manitoba are diverse, and the management of class size is one of the tools that school boards use to ensure that resources are directed where they are most needed.

Although there are undeniable benefits to smaller classes, those benefits do not come without cost. The financial costs would be substantial; salaries and benefits for additional teachers, and additional classroom space, are just two of the most obvious. Uncertainties about the adequacy of the supply of teachers in the upcoming years further complicate this issue; even if we can afford to hire additional teachers, will we be able to find them in the necessary numbers? Before we commit scarce resources by implementing a provincial class size policy, we need to be certain that it is the best way of improving our educational system. MAST does not believe that the evidence available at this time supports any such contention.

In addition to the financial costs of implementing a provincial policy on class size, we are also concerned about the potential for social disruption that such a policy could create. In order to accommodate all children in classes of the mandated size, historical neighbourhood and community boundaries may have to be put aside. The result may be scenarios such as more children requiring transportation to and from school, and children from the same family being required to attend different schools.

As problematic as a provincial policy on class size would be, one that encompasses class composition would be even more so. It is difficult to envision any policy that could address every possible combination and permutation of class composition, given that the identified needs of individual students can vary so greatly. As well, a provincial policy on class composition has the potential to increase costs in the area of special education, an area that is already significantly under funded by the provincial government.

MAST would also like to take this opportunity to state its strong opposition to making questions of class size or composition matters subject to arbitration. Contract provisions that are included in the collective agreement in one educational jurisdiction as a result of an arbitrator's decision all too frequently are duplicated subsequently in the agreements of other jurisdictions. The end result would be virtually the same as adopting a provincial policy on class size and composition, but in this case, the policy would be determined by a single arbitrator rather than by government. School boards would lose a large degree of flexibility in managing resources, and both costs and local taxes would be driven higher as the result of decisions made by an individual or individuals not accountable to the affected ratepayers.

In those circumstances where research has shown that a reduced class size leads to improved educational outcomes for children, MAST supports limiting class size. In short, MAST believes that class-size reduction initiatives, if undertaken, must be targeted, both for reasons of effectiveness and efficiency. Moreover, MAST believes that provincial funding should be available to cover the full implementation costs of any such initiatives. A provincial policy limiting class size would not only be enormously expensive, it would also be of questionable value in many situations. While MAST cannot support the implementation of an across-the-board provincial policy, we are prepared to work with government and educational partners on a targeted class-size reduction plan where it offers some potential for improving the learning experiences and learning outcomes of children in Manitoba classrooms.

Pedagogical Issues

The impact of class size on student learning has been studied and debated for decades. Intuitively, we believe that smaller classes should mean that teachers become better acquainted with each student, getting to know their individual strengths and weaknesses, and tailoring instructional methods to build on identified strengths and remediate revealed weaknesses. Logically, we feel that smaller classes should translate to more individualized attention, and more individualized attention should mean better learning outcomes. But does recent educational research support our intuition in this regard? The answer to that question is yes, but a yes that includes some important qualifications.

In its public discussion paper, the Commission on Class Size and Composition provided a useful overview of some of the major research findings relating to class size. As noted by the Commission, this “research on class size does not provide unambiguous policy guidance.” This ambiguity is twofold. Firstly, class size research has focused on student achievement almost exclusively, but the goals of education are much broader, including, in the words of the Commission, the social and emotional development of students. Such aspects of personal development have been largely ignored by the research. Secondly, even in the area of student achievement, research findings are at times inconclusive, or even contradictory. Even with these shortcomings, however, we can see some trends in the research that should be considered.

- ◆ Research on the effects of class-size reduction has focused on the elementary grades, and primarily the early years (K-4). Information on the effects of class-size reduction in the later grades is largely unavailable, and it may be inappropriate to extrapolate early years findings—when basic skills of

literacy and numeracy are being developed—to those later years.

- ◆ Research has shown that gains in student achievement related to class-size reduction are significant only when the size of classes is reduced to some number fewer than 20 students.
- ◆ Gains in student achievement related to class size reduction do not appear to be constant across the board. Such gains appear to be more significant for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or for children who do not have the benefit of a parent or other adult taking an active role in their informal, as well as formal, education.
- ◆ Changes in teaching methodology must accompany reductions in class size, if students are to realize potential improvements in learning outcomes.

Policies and practices that impact on the number of students in our classrooms need to be assessed in light of research findings such as these. Many school divisions and districts have already done so. In a June 2001 survey of member boards, MAST asked about any deliberate changes affecting class size or composition that had been made in recent years. A number of respondents indicated that special efforts were being made to ensure that early year classes were kept under a certain size, through extra staffing and the splitting of classes. Others indicated that more teaching assistants or special needs support staff had been hired, to provide additional support for early years teachers. Overall, survey respondents revealed a clear understanding on the current thinking regarding class size, especially in the early years, and a definite commitment to establishing divisional and school policies and practices that would benefit their students.

Operational Issues

Manitoba's school boards serve a diverse group of communities, from large urban centers, to small towns and villages, to vast rural and northern expanses. The varying nature of these communities, of their histories, and of the people that reside in them, give compelling reason for the very existence of school boards. School trustees, as both members and representatives of their communities, are in the best position to make many of the policy decisions that shape schools to meet the sometimes-unique needs and desires of local residents.

The provincial government, through Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, mandates the broad outline of public education in Manitoba; local communities, through their school boards, fill in the details. MAST believes that class size and composition are among those details that are best left largely to the determination of local schools boards. The authority to make decisions about class size and composition can and does give boards a degree of flexibility in managing educational resources and meeting student needs. A broad provincial policy on these matters would eliminate that flexibility, and thus the ability of school boards to serve their communities.

In the June survey referenced above, MAST sought the views of member boards on the possible establishment of a provincial policy on class size and composition. Without exception, respondents were concerned about the implications of such a policy. Those concerns varied, as is to be expected given the diversity of local circumstances, but underlying these concerns was a common theme: a provincial policy in this area would seriously compromise the flexibility needed by school boards to manage their resources and meet the needs of their students as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The majority of specific concerns expressed by survey respondents fall into the categories listed below.

Financial Considerations

Financial considerations are at the top of most school boards lists when they are asked their views on the advisability of adopting a provincial policy on class size and composition. In fact, some respondents to MAST's survey on this matter stated that it was virtually their only concern. Those boards went on to say that if the province were to provide, on an ongoing basis, the funding needed to fully implement any such policy, they would support it. However, we do not enjoy the luxury of unlimited resources, and costs *are* a factor.

The most obvious cost of adopting a policy that would limit class size is the cost of hiring additional teachers for the newly created, smaller classrooms. The number of new classrooms, and thus teachers, would be significant. When trying to determine what this number will be, it is important that we not confuse actual class size with pupil-teacher ratios (PTR). The 2000-2001 FRAME Report—Budget gave the September 2000 provincial average regular instruction PTR as 19.0:1. However, this number is determined by including individuals such as physical education, music, and ESL specialist teachers, as well as regular classroom teachers, and thus is significantly lower than actual class size. As well, the

provincial average hides some significant local variations; across the province, the regular instruction PTR ranges from a low of 13.0:1, to a high of 27.1:1.

The cost of hiring new teachers may be one of the most obvious financial implications of a class-size reduction policy, but it is not the only cost, or even the most significant one. Last year, Arizona's Joint Legislative Budget Committee conducted a study to determine the cost of reducing the size of all kindergarten to grade three classes in that state. For the purposes of the Arizona study, two different class-size levels were used: 17 and 20 students.

In Arizona, with a total population of 5 million people, it would cost \$441.8 million to reduce class size to 17 students in grades K to 3. The Budget Committee identified four major cost areas: salaries and benefits for new teachers, new classrooms, classroom equipment, and janitorial expenses. New classrooms and classroom equipment would account for a combined total of \$318.8 million, or 72% of the total cost. Salaries and benefits for teachers, and janitorial expenses, would total \$123 million, or 28% of the overall cost. Some of the new classroom and classroom equipment costs would be one-time expenses, but the human resource costs of salaries and benefits, and costs associated with intermittent upgrading of additional classroom space and equipment, would be ongoing.

Manitoba's population is approximately one-fifth that of Arizona. In order to get a better idea of the financial impact of reducing class size in our province, MAST has, with the cooperation of members of the Manitoba Association of School Business Officials, prepared a model. This model makes several assumptions; these are outlined below.

1. Only kindergarten to grade 4 classes have been adjusted, to a maximum of 18 students per class. September 30, 2001 enrolments have been used.
2. No consideration has been given to class composition.
3. Existing empty classroom space has been considered as available for new classes; existing alternate space (e.g. multi-purpose rooms) have not been re-designated as classroom space.
4. An average cost of \$100,000 for each High Quality Re-locatable (HQR) classroom has been used.
5. Divisional average teacher salaries have been used to calculate staffing costs.

For our study, we selected three school divisions of varying size and location: River East, St. Boniface, and Turtle Mountain.

Model Results: Sample School Divisions

Division	K to 4 Students (FTE)	Current K to 4 classes	Increases				
			Additional HQR's	Additional Teachers	Cost of Classrooms (\$)	Cost of Staffing (\$)	Total Costs (\$)
River East	4082.0	182.0	45	67.5	4,500,000	3,759,750	8,259,750
Turtle Mountain	396.5	23.5	2	4.5	200,000	228,600	428,600
St. Boniface	2160.5	93.5	20	28.5	2,000,000	1,596,000	3,596,000
Total for three divisions:	6639.0	299.0	67	100.5	6,700,000	5,584,350	12,284,350

We extrapolated our findings to the entire province, using two different methods. Both extrapolations are based on the percentage of total K to 4 students in the province that the three divisions under study serve. In the first extrapolation, we used the overall average of the projected needs and costs of those three divisions. For the second extrapolation, we divided the three divisions under study into a rural group and an urban group. We then averaged the projected needs and costs of those two groups, and applied those figures to the number of rural and urban K to 4 students in the province, respectively. The two approaches gave slightly different, but reasonably consistent, results. Those results are shown below.

Provincial Extrapolations (Methods 1 and 2)

Increases				
Additional HQR's	Additional Teachers	Cost of Classrooms (\$)	Cost of Staffing (\$)	Total Costs (\$)
<i>Method 1: Extrapolation based on average costs/needs of sample divisions, and applied to provincial K to 4 enrolment of 61,798.5 students</i>				
623.7	935.5	62,366,313	51,981,391	114,347,703
<i>Method 2: Extrapolation based on average costs/needs of sample divisions divided into urban/rural groupings, and applied to provincial K to 4 enrolment of 35,382.07 urban and 26,416.43 rural students</i>				
501.7	843.9	50,166,371	45,586,286	95,752,657

In this model, the classroom costs would be one-time costs, while the staffing costs would be ongoing, annual costs. Additional costs that have not been considered in this model include furniture, fixtures, and equipment for the additional classrooms, repairs, maintenance, and utilities for the additional classrooms, transportation, and TRAF contributions by the government for additional staff.

Community Implications

In addition to the financial considerations outlined above, a class size and composition policy could have a significant impact on community dynamics.

Within many Manitoba school divisions, the demographic profile varies substantially from one area to the next. In the city of Winnipeg, for example, many older, established neighbourhoods have aging populations, with a concurrent decline in the number of school-aged children. This shift in the age demographic sometimes means a surplus of classroom space, as schools built decades ago to house a burgeoning youth population are now oversized relative to the number of children and youth in the neighbourhood today.

At the other end of the spectrum, many of Winnipeg's newer, suburban neighbourhoods have a growing youth population, and a resulting shortage of classroom space. Newly built schools are quickly filled to capacity, and sometimes beyond. When school boards have considered addressing this issue by busing students from their own neighbourhood to one where excess classroom capacity exists, parents have made it very clear that they want their children to attend their own community school. School boards make every possible effort to accommodate parental wishes, in part because they recognize that the school is more than just a place of learning—it is also a major social institution in a child's life.

Where a rapidly rising student population outstrips the supply of classroom space, a hard and fast provincial policy on class size and composition would seriously compromise a school board's ability to accommodate students in neighbourhood schools. Once all available classroom space in a specific school was being used to house classes of the maximum size, there would be no option but to look beyond that school for additional space. The end result could be more transported pupils (at an additional cost), with the very real possibility of children from the same family being required to attend different schools.

Teacher Supply

Quite apart from financial considerations that arise from the number of new teachers that would be required to implement a provincial policy on class size and composition, there are additional concerns that arise as a result of the current uncertainty surrounding teacher supply.

In Manitoba, a teacher shortage has been anticipated for more than a decade. This situation is not unique to our province; similar concerns exist in other regions of Canada, and in the United States, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. However, the exact nature of any existing or pending Manitoba teacher shortage is still unclear. We do know that in some subject areas, and in some regions of the province, school boards are facing increasing difficulties in recruiting and retaining the teaching staff they require.

In an attempt to clarify our understanding of teacher supply and demand dynamics in Manitoba, the Minister of Education, Training and Youth directed in December 2000 that a meeting of stakeholders be held to review and discuss the matter. As a result of that meeting, an interorganizational working group was formed to investigate the issues and to develop a report for the Minister's consideration. That report has not yet been released.

In light of the unknowns surrounding teacher supply and demand in Manitoba, it would seem to be premature, if not unwise, to implement a policy that might substantially increase the number of teachers needed in our classrooms. Any movement in that direction should be postponed, at the very least, until the report of the interorganizational working group examining the issue of teacher supply has been tabled and assessed.

Class Composition

There is little hard research data on the issue of class composition, although anecdotal reporting of students, parents, and educators suggests that this may be a greater concern than class size per se. And while a provincial policy on class size would be extremely problematic, one that encompasses class composition would be even more so. The range of special needs evidenced by students in our schools is vast. At one end of the spectrum are gifted students, who require additional challenges and stimulation to make school a worthwhile experience for them. At the other end of this spectrum are students with

severe physical and mental disabilities, who may require the one-on-one assistance of an aide simply to achieve those small successes of day-to-day living that most students can take for granted. A recent arbitration decision underlined this complexity when it defined an exceptional student “as any child needing special programming and/or a special learning environment because of physical, intellectual, emotional, behavioral or social handicap, or because of giftedness.”

The specific needs of these individual students vary greatly, as does the amount of additional instructional time they may require. A provincial policy that could foresee and accommodate every possible situation would need to be so complex as to be unintelligible, and as such unenforceable.

There are also financial issues that need to be considered when contemplating a provincial policy on class composition. The cost of special education services is already growing at a rate greater than regular instruction. Regular instruction cost increases are, in turn, outstripping the general rate of inflation and increases in educational funding provided by the provincial government. Local ratepayers are making up the shortfall through their property taxes. A provincial policy on class composition has the potential to further drive up special education costs, and exacerbate an already untenable situation.

Class Size and Composition and Collective Bargaining

Although the mandate of the current Commission is to examine issues of class size and composition, the same legislation that mandated the Commission’s formation contains a sunset clause whereby, six months after receiving the Commission’s report, a legislative prohibition excluding the issue of class size from arbitration will be repealed. As the voice of Manitoba’s public school boards, MAST has an obligation to express as strongly as possible our opposition to this eventuality.

Binding arbitration is a final dispute resolution mechanism that has served Manitoba’s public education system reasonably well for more than 40 years. Since its adoption, students and their parents have been secure in the knowledge that instructional days will not be lost due to labour disputes. Binding arbitration is not, however, without its shortcomings. In the two most recent rounds of collective bargaining, arbitration boards demonstrated a willingness to award clauses in a number of areas that were without precedent, not having been negotiated by the parties into any collective agreements.

School boards are accountable to the communities they serve. They negotiate with teachers and other employee groups accordingly. Boards seek to balance their responsibility for managing the resources with which they have been entrusted in a prudent manner with the need to provide an appropriate level of compensation and such working conditions as will enable them to attract and retain qualified employees, including teachers. When the teacher collective bargaining process is stalemated and a contract dispute goes to binding arbitration, that balance is sometimes lost.

Arbitrators are not responsible to an electorate for the allocation of funds raised through taxation. Arbitrators are not always sensitive to local conditions, and since the passage of Bill 42 in 2000, have not been required to take into account a school division or district's ability to pay when rendering a decision that will have financial implications. Moreover, the school board's ability to tax is sometimes cited as the rationale for arbitrators' decisions in making collective agreement awards. This is exemplified by one recent award where the arbitrator stated that "on a per-taxpayer basis . . . the cost [of his decision] was relatively modest" as "the average homeowner would pay an additional \$12 per year." This situation is compounded because many clauses that first find their way into one contract as a result of an arbitrator's decision are then often duplicated in subsequent agreements governing teachers in other jurisdictions. What may have started as a decision that would affect only one small corner of the province can and does snowball, along with the concurrent cost.

MAST respectfully requests that the government amend the *Public Schools Act* so as to legislate an ongoing prohibition against the referral of matters related to class size and composition to arbitration. In fact, we would go even further. MAST does not believe that class size and composition are matters that are best determined through the collective bargaining process. Collective bargaining in Manitoba's education system has evolved as a largely adversarial process, often marked by entrenched positions and inflexibility. Class size and composition are among the fundamental determinants of students' educational success. Everyone who has a stake or interest in that success should have an opportunity to influence local practices in these important areas; this includes parents and the broader community, as well as educators and school boards. Many school boards that have adopted policies or procedures governing class size and composition have done so only after considerable consultation via mechanisms such as board-teacher liaison committees, administrator councils and discussions with parent council representatives. The resulting policies are more likely to have the support of the entire school community, as they arise out of understanding and consensus, rather than from the confrontation of labour negotiations.

Class Size: An Alternative to Provincial Policy

For the reasons outlined above, the Manitoba Association of School Trustees is opposed to the implementation of a provincial policy mandating a maximum class size. However, as we have also stated in this brief, we do recognize that class size can be an important determinant in student success. This is especially true in certain grades, and for children in specific socio-economic circumstances. Therefore, MAST would like to propose an alternative to an across-the-board provincial policy in this area, one which we feel will address those legitimate concerns we have expressed in this brief, while still benefiting Manitoba's school children.

Many of our concerns about a provincial policy on class size can be traced to financial considerations. If the province and school boards had access to an infinite supply of financial and human resources, many of our objections would be nullified. However, that is not the case, and so we have to ensure that we spend those dollars that are available in a way that will maximize the benefits to our students. The costs of implementing a province-wide policy on class size are real and well documented; the benefits are, at best, uncertain. Instead of a provincial policy, MAST would encourage the province to consider a strategy whereby it would enable school boards to reduce class size in specific circumstances. MAST believes that the cost of such a strategy, as opposed to a provincial policy, would be reduced substantially, and that dollars could then be spent on those students most likely to benefit from the reduction in class size.

We envision a program whereby the provincial government, through Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, would make available funds that school boards could access, upon successful application, to offset the costs associated with reducing the average size of classes in specific grades or schools. We would suggest that, in keeping with research outcomes, such a strategy target the early years (K-4). An interorganizational group, composed of educational partners and guided in their deliberations by current research and experience, would establish the criteria upon which applications would be judged. School board applications would be developed in consultation with teachers, administrators, parents, and the broader community, to ensure that they reflect communities' needs and concerns regarding their children. This approach would have the added benefit of addressing our concern, raised elsewhere in this brief, about the need for policies on class size to be developed through collaborative means rather than adversarial ones such as collective bargaining.

Funding criteria and application procedures would be two important aspects of a targeted program to reduce class size. The third crucial element would be a long-term, ongoing evaluation of the impact of any such program, to ensure that students are in fact reaping the benefits that we are envisioning. Such an evaluation will serve a two-fold function. Firstly, it would help determine whether the expenditures earmarked for the purpose of reducing class size are helping to achieve the goal of improved student outcomes. Secondly, an ongoing process of evaluation would ensure that the criteria for funding remain relevant, and continue to serve as a useful guide for making necessary revisions and adjustments to class sizes in the early years.

Conclusion

The dual responsibilities of school boards that were outlined at the beginning of this brief—the provision of quality public school education and the management of resources in a fiscally responsible manner—underlie the thinking of the Manitoba Association of School Trustees on the issue of class size and composition.

In those circumstances where research has shown that a reduced class size leads to improved educational outcomes for children, MAST supports limiting class size. Such circumstances include early years and, more specifically, children in the early years who face social and economic disadvantages. In short, MAST believes that class-size reduction initiatives must be targeted, both for reasons of effectiveness and efficiency. A provincial policy limiting class size would not only be enormously expensive, it would also be of questionable value in many situations. As such, MAST cannot support the implementation of any such policy.

MAST is, however, prepared to work with the provincial government and other educational bodies to explore and develop ways in which targeted class size reduction initiatives can benefit the children of Manitoba. In this brief, we have offered some suggestions that we feel may serve as a starting point in any such discussions. We believe that such an approach has great merit; we hope that the Commission on Class Size and Composition, and ultimately the provincial government, will agree.