

When Do We Talk About Kids?

by Ruth Ann Furgala

The mid-1980s saw the publication of a book by Molly McGee that asked the title question *When Do We Talk About Kids?* This book was an examination of the role and functioning of school boards in the United States, but was and is largely applicable in the Canadian context. The title alludes to the reality that, although most school trustees seek the office because of a genuine desire to serve children, much of their time is spent on issues such as budgets, facilities and labour contracts, important issues but ones which relate *indirectly* to students in the classroom.

In light of the direction that discussions about public schooling have taken in Manitoba in recent years, I think we should answer the question posed by Molly McGee two decades ago with a resounding “*now!*” *Now* is the time that we talk about kids, that we talk about education. And by “we” I don’t mean only school trustees. I mean federal, provincial, and municipal governments, I mean business groups and parents groups, senior citizens and our students themselves. In short, as a community of communities, we all need to enter into a long overdue discussion of just what it is we expect our public school system to accomplish, and what kind of future we want for Manitoba’s children and youth.

It’s not that education, or at least public schooling, isn’t on the minds of some people. A casual reading of newspaper headlines and letters to the editor, especially at school board budget time in March, makes that very clear. However, with few exceptions, debate (or more accurately, criticism) is focussed in one of two areas: either the overall (read excessive) cost of our school system, or the perceived inequities in the way in which that school system is funded.

Over the past number of years, the latter concern has become the topic of some very focussed discussions. In 2001, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) struck a task force to examine education funding in Manitoba. In part as a response to the report of that task force, the provincial government established a Ministerial Advisory Working Group on education funding, which reported in July of 2004. Most recently, AMM has undertaken a public campaign urging the provincial government to remove all education tax from property. We have also seen the establishment of an informal coalition of groups that are seeking 100% provincial funding for public schools, and the complete removal of all property taxes in support of education. The anti-tax coalition’s membership is fluid, but core participants have represented agricultural producers, businesses, and the real estate community.

The individuals involved in these groups have committed an enormous amount of time and effort to their work. In some instances, those efforts have resulted in thoughtful and potentially useful recommendations about how our current reliance on property tax as a source of education funding could be lessened. However, all of these initiatives have shared one shortcoming: they have looked at the question of *how* we fund education without at the same time asking what we *are* funding, and what we *should* be funding.

Perhaps the reason we choose to talk about the how of funding rather than the what of education is that we all assume we know what public schooling is about. That’s a dangerous assumption. Jamie Vollmer is a one-time vocal critic turned ardent advocate for the public school system in the U.S. On his website, he has traced the evolution of public schools in a

document he calls “The Burden.” Decade by decade, for more than a century, he itemizes the increased demands that have been placed on that country’s school system, demands which largely parallel what has happened in Canada. To institutions that once taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills, we have added the responsibility for kindergarten, vocational education, gifted programming, computer education, expanded health and psychological services . . . and the list goes on. The conclusion is inescapable: as a society, we have been requiring more and more of our schools. As individuals, however, we tend to fall back on what we know and how we have experienced the world. If we don’t have any direct involvement in today’s schools through our work or our children, and with no ongoing dialogue about those schools to inform us, we tend to think that schools are still doing the job that they were doing when we were students. And depending on when that was, our views can vary enormously.

What we need to do is take a step back, acquaint ourselves with the reality of today’s public schools, and ask ourselves what value we place on the services they are providing. The dangers of looking at cost absent a discussion about value were graphically illustrated by the recent tragedy on the U.S. Gulf coast. New Orleans’ flood protection system could not withstand the force of a storm like Katrina, a point that had been made many times by many people. The *cost* of improved flood protection would have been enormous, but the *value* of those dollars never spent became clear when we learned about the cost of recovery, a cost that could never take into account the human suffering that has unfolded.

Let’s not create a tragedy of our own. Let’s make sure that we fully understand the value of what is happening in our schools before we place anything in jeopardy. Let’s decide what it is that we think schools should be doing. If that decision means that something will be dropped, let’s decide who will fill the gaps we may be creating in our children’s lives. *Then*, let’s talk about how much all of this is costing us, and how we might make it affordable for everyone. In short, let’s talk about kids and what they need to become the educated and productive citizens who will shape our society in the decades to come.

Ruth Ann Furgala is President of the Manitoba Association of School Trustees and a school trustee in the Evergreen School Division.