

Playing fair with children's futures

by Yolande Dupuis, President, Manitoba Association of School Trustees

In the mid-1980s, Manitoba school boards asked the provincial government of the day for an ongoing commitment to fund 80% of public school operating costs. The remaining 20% of needed revenue would be raised locally, through the education property tax. For more than 20 years, school boards have continued to advocate for this position, even as the share of provincial operating funding in support of public schools has steadily dropped from over 70% to 60 % or less today.

Over the years, school boards have not been alone in looking for increased provincial funding for education. Two major studies—the Association of Manitoba Municipalities task force report “Rethinking Education Funding: Challenges and Opportunities 2001,” and the Report of the Minister’s Working Group on Education Finance (2004)—both included, as a fundamental principle, an 80/20 split in provincial and local contributions to education funding. Organizations such as the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce and Keystone Agricultural Producers have or have had official organizational positions calling for a similar split.

So there is widespread agreement in Manitoba: we are overly reliant on property tax to support education. Given this consensus, a number of individuals and organizations are perplexed or frustrated at the reluctance of school boards and their provincial organization, The Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST), to embrace Let’s Pay Fair, a campaign of the Manitoba Education Financing Coalition aimed at eliminating all property taxes in support of education.

As a school board member, I am unwilling to head down that path. Here’s why.

A fundamental assumption of Let’s Pay Fair is that the provincial government is both able and willing to ante up all funds needed to maintain the level of educational services currently offered by Manitoba’s public schools. According to the campaign’s website, “The Manitoba government can find ways to fund education with existing revenues, and by being more efficient.” This view runs contrary to the findings of the Minister’s Working Group on Education Finance.

In its final report, that group—with representation from business, municipal governments, and the province’s own finance branch, as well as the education sector—determined that with *modest increases* in provincial revenue streams such as sales tax, the provincial government would be able to fund 80% of public school operating costs from general revenues. That finding is significantly different from the Let’s Pay Fair claim that 100% of operating costs could be funded from *current* provincial revenues.

So at best there are mixed opinions about the government’s *ability* to fund more of public school operating costs without some form of tax increase. What of its *willingness* to do so?

Given that nearly a quarter century of pressing this cause with successive provincial administrations has met with virtually no success, I think it’s safe to say that the issue is not a provincial priority. And if we look to other jurisdictions where an initial commitment to 100% provincial funding of education has been made, the story is not a positive one. In Alberta, for example, where the only funds school boards have at their disposal are those provided by the education ministry, a recent independent study uncovered a \$1 billion shortfall in infrastructure alone—many schools are simply crumbling from neglect. Significant funding shortfalls have also been identified in Ontario, another province where schools are solely dependent on provincial funds.

Given the evolution of education funding in Manitoba, and its recent history in other provinces, can we simply assume that somehow, schools will receive the money they need? The Manitoba Education Financing Coalition would have us believe so. School boards have to “stand up and be counted,” “draw a line in the sand,” or “play hardball.” Pick your favourite cliché, they all amount to the same thing: school boards cutting services and programming in order to reduce costs and eliminate the need for increased property taxes. The government, the theory goes, will “see the error of its ways,” “come around to our way of thinking,” and “cough up the cash.” The theory may sound good, but can we afford to test it? I don’t think so.

I don’t think we can afford to play what amounts to a game of chicken with our children’s futures. Until and unless we have a commitment from the provincial government that the funds needed to maintain current educational standards are and will continue to be forthcoming, I will not be supporting calls for property tax freezes or reductions. Put another way, I am not prepared to abdicate my responsibility as a trustee of my community’s public schools, or my responsibility to the children they serve.

Many of the views of the Manitoba Education Financing Coalition, as articulated at letspayfair.com, resonate with school boards. We can all agree that “the government’s practice of adding more responsibilities to schools—such as social services—without matching grants to support these new initiatives is unfair,” that “public education is everyone’s responsibility,” and perhaps most importantly of all, that “public education is priceless.”

School boards part company with the coalition, however, when the discussion turns to what needs to be done to preserve the good and remedy the ills of our public school system. School trustees refuse to remove students from a discussion that all too often focuses on dollars before people, on costs before value. That doesn’t always make us popular, but trusteeship isn’t a popularity contest; it’s about doing the right thing for the right reason. That reason is the students and the communities whose interests we are elected to represent.