

# School Boards Work: Leadership that Makes a Difference

By Carolyn Duhamel

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**C**orporate and political scandals of the past two decades have engendered wide-spread cynicism in the public arena about the motivations and competencies of business leaders and public officials alike. In this context, school boards charged with the provision of educational programs and services for large numbers of young people and responsible for the expenditure of huge public dollars have been easy targets for the sceptics and the critics who advocate their demise. More than ever school boards as elected public officials and local government authorities must be and be seen to be models of ethical leadership which add value to public education systems in their respective communities.

This critical imperative for ethical school board leadership has typically taken the form of policy requirements and guidelines which focus on legal obligations of school boards and codes of conduct and procedural rules to be followed by trustees. Ethical school board leadership, however, is more than staying on the right side of the law, minimal compliance with the “rules” or passive

oversight of divisional directions and operations. Rather, it is about inclusion and an unwavering commitment to fairness and equity for all students. It is about responsibility and a willingness to take ownership of issues and challenges as well as outcomes, however positive or negative they may be. It is about relationship building and meaningful collaboration with fellow board members, staff, students, parents and community. It is about the ability to reflect deeply and to consider critically both the successes and failures in our schools. It is about transparency and the courage to make hard choices for the right reasons in the most difficult and trying of circumstances and to stand accountable for those choices.

Across Manitoba, public school boards wrestle every day with problems and situations which put their leadership to the test—increasingly diverse student populations and learning needs, shifting provincial education policies and requirements, competing public perspectives about priorities and essential learnings for students, social and economic changes affecting students and families and increasing program/service expectations coupled with resource limitations. The initiatives

described in this article are evidence of the creative and varied responses of Manitoba public school divisions to this myriad of challenges and needs across the province and testament to ethical leadership in action at the local school board level.

## Mitigating the impacts of poverty on learning

The negative impacts of child and family poverty on success in school are widely known and well documented. Understanding this, the **Seven Oaks School Division** Board of Trustees has examined divisional policies and practices through the lens of poverty and implemented several measures to address systemic challenges faced by economically challenged students and families within the division. Initiatives approved by the school board in recent years include:

- Elimination of student fees related to meeting the requirements of the provincial curriculum, i.e. agendas, field trips, activities fees, etc.;
- School-based purchase and management of basic school supplies to reduce costs to students;
- Lunch supervision at no charge to parents;



*LEFT AND BELOW:* Students at Springfield Collegiate—part of the Sunrise School Division—participate in an aboriginal awareness program called Gakina Awiya Biindigeg. Here they are building a Metis Ox Cart.



*RIGHT AND BELOW:* These photos were taken at the Canadian Fossil Discovery Centre in Morden, during the career technology program.



- Free summer programming for English as an Additional Language students;
- No charge universal pre-school language, literacy and parenting programs;
- Breakfast programs;
- Sports camps and summer enrichment programs for vulnerable students; and
- Full credit tuition-free university level programs for eligible high school students.

The school board also maintains a highly visible and vocal advocacy role in the public arena on issues of social and economic policy which impact the well-being of children and families in the province.

### Aboriginal student success

For Manitoba's aboriginal communities, the low levels of school success experienced by aboriginal youth compared to their non-aboriginal counterparts are both alarming and appalling. Cognisant of this reality and mindful of its responsibility for the academic success of growing numbers of Métis and First Nations students attending divisional schools, the Board of the **Sunrise School Division** undertook to develop and to implement a division wide professional learning model which uses Indigenous perspectives and culture to inform teaching and learning in all its schools.

In the first phase of the model, team leaders—one from each school—attended a week long off-site session where they worked closely with Elders and other traditional teachers and were immersed in traditional forms of Indigenous education. Elements of spirituality and ceremony so integral to Indigenous cultures were significant aspects of this experiential learning phase. The program included exploration and discussion of provincial policy and curriculum documents to guide Indigenous education in Manitoba and their comparison to traditional teachings and ways of learning. The second phase of the model involved team leaders sharing their learnings by creating proposals and designing learning experiences for staff and students in their respective schools.

Additional program elements (academic and arts curricula, mentorship

programming, anti-racism education, Indigenous teachings and games) have since been integrated into existing curricula to consolidate and to extend these earlier learnings. Data gathered from students, staff, parents and community are being used to assess the impacts of the model as a tool to improve the learning outcomes of Indigenous students and as a sustainable and effective approach to professional learning within the school division.

### The early years—building the foundation

The critical importance of early development and learning as the foundation for success in school and in life is now well established in research circles. In Manitoba, successive years of data collection using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) confirm this linkage and underscore the importance of early child development and learning initiatives.

In the **Division scolaire franco-manitobaine**, school board leadership has placed a heavy emphasis on the provision of French language child care and pre-school services to ensure school readiness for students and at the same time, to support the preservation of the French language and culture in Manitoba. Since 2001, the school board has passed 88 motions in support of various early child development initiatives.

Full-time kindergarten is offered in all of the division's schools and pre-school programs are available in 19 of 20 schools. Seventeen French-language child care programs across the province operate in DSFM schools with school principals as active participants and voting members of each child care board. Family resource centres exist to date in eight schools within the division, with the ultimate goal being a similar centre in every school. Here as well, school principals work in close collaboration with child care directors and centre coordinators to assess needs and to plan and organize services and programs for the community school.

The division contributes to two ongoing research projects in Early Childhood Development and the school board remains strongly committed to ongoing support for innovative early child development programming in its schools.

### Embracing diversity

Diversity and inclusion are common themes in public education today and priority issues for many Manitoba school divisions welcoming record numbers of immigrant and refugee students from every corner of the world. In the **Louis Riel School Division** where more than 45 language and cultural groups have now been identified, school board leadership is dedicated to fostering safe, inviting and inclusive learning environments and developing responsible global citizens

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through respectful partnerships between home, school and the community. The René Deleorme Centre serves as the divisional hub for a range of programs from pre-school to adult, all aimed at honouring and supporting diversity within the school community and at the same time providing resources for enhancing teaching capacity across the division to address a wide range of learner readiness and needs.

The Centre's offerings include a Newcomer Family Reception Centre and a multi-faceted intake program

for newcomer students in grades 6 to 12 to facilitate their inclusion and integration into the school system and the broader community. Additional programs and services address English language learning needs for students and adults within the division, life skills development for delayed middle years students, an aboriginal education resource centre, a support intervention program for struggling grade 9 to 12 students, and child care services operating in nine school sites across the division.

Beyond these initiatives which speak to linguistic, racial and cultural diversity, the Louis Riel School Division also offers a unique program for cognitively challenged special needs students at the high school level. Bistro in the Park is a fully functioning restaurant which serves as a community training facility where students can develop employability, social and communications skills. The program, which began in 1999, places up to 70 students a year in "real work, in the real world, for real pay" and was recognized by the Manitoba Council for Exceptional Children (MCEC) at its 2008 awards event.

### Human rights and anti-discrimination

In 2003-2004 the Manitoba Theatre for Young People presented "Other Side of the Closet," a play which explored the issue of discrimination based on gender identity and the realities of sexual minority youth in schools and society. The **Winnipeg School Board's** efforts to address this aspect of discrimination within its own schools provoked a volatile and protracted public debate which extended far beyond the schools and the constituents of the division, drawing intense media attention which ultimately led to legal action against one offending media outlet.

Notwithstanding extreme public pressure and very vocal opposition, the school board held fast to its anti-discrimination stance, instituting policy changes and mandatory professional development for all divisional staff with regard to human rights legislation and obligations and effective strategies for addressing acts of discrimination within the division. In each new school year, all new staff participate in this mandatory professional development program. The division has also invested in the development of curricular supports and resources for human rights education in its schools and provided additional monies to all schools for the acquisition of library resources on human rights and anti-discrimination education.

### The arts in education

Harold Gardner's work on multiple intelligences and a vast body of research on the importance of the arts in learning



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has not gone unnoticed in the **Frontier School Division**. While many members of the public question the value of arts programming in schools and these programs are often the first to go in tough economic times, the Board of Trustees of the Frontier School Division has demonstrated strong and sustained commitment to arts education programming in its schools.

Given the division's geographic territory and the remote locations of many of its schools, dedicated art teachers and formalized music education programs are significant achievements. Local artists in the schools, an annual juried art show, a drama festival and a music jamboree camp provide a range of opportunities to build confidence, inspire creativity and foster self-expression among students and to facilitate the development of a deeper understanding of history, traditions and cultural heritage across the division. The Frontier Fiddlers, an every changing group of students drawn from across the division, are frequent performers at many local community and provincial events and typically draw rave reviews from every audience every time.

### Partnering for student success

In many Manitoba school divisions, the challenges of geography and population sparsity often translate into very real limitations in program and service options for students. Cross divisional partnerships and collaboration provide a promising avenue to overcome such limitations.

The Career and Technology Studies (CTS) program developed by the **Prairie Rose School Division** and operated in collaboration with multiple school division, post secondary and community partners enables students in small rural high schools to access technical, vocational learning experiences that would otherwise be unavailable to them. CTS provides a structural framework for aligning learning opportunities in school and community settings to create highly individualized, flexible programming which responds to students' interests, experiences and career aspirations. The program also invites direct community involvement in the public education system, fostering a better understanding of its challenges and a greater sense of

community ownership in support of the division's ideals and goals.

In today's complex and rapidly changing society, ethical leadership and service to community are very real challenges for all elected officials at any level of government. The projects and initiatives described above are but a small sampling of the many and varied efforts by public school boards across Manitoba to lead and to serve in ways that matter and make a positive difference in the lives of students, of families, and of the communities which they represent. Human imperfections and

shortcomings of public officials notwithstanding, Manitoba school boards "work" because they work for kids and for communities and make Manitoba's public education system a source of inspiration and ideas for educators and Ministry officials across the country. ■

*Carolyn Duhamel is Executive Director of the Manitoba School Boards Association. Additional examples and stories of ethical school board leadership in action may be viewed at [www.schoolboardswork.ca](http://www.schoolboardswork.ca).*

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