

# School Boards for the Twenty-First Century:

## Keeping the Public in Public Education

This article argues that strong, locally elected school boards are essential to the well being of a healthy public school system and that they need to be nurtured and supported.

By Jon Young

School boards are one of Canada's most enduring forms of elected representation, and they have long served as the institutions of local community voice in education and for keeping the public actively involved in public school governance. However, over the last two decades, across a broad range of important educational matters—funding, collective bargaining, curriculum and assessment, school closures, to name only a few—there has, in most provinces, been marked centralizing of authority away from school boards to provincial governments. To date Manitoba has generally stood apart from many of these developments and its school boards remain among the strongest in Canada. Nonetheless, the pressures remain and the future is uncertain.

A significant part of the strength of Manitoba's school boards lies in the autonomy and the political and moral authority that comes with the ability to raise local education taxes. Currently

funding issues—the adequacy of the total education budget to meet an ever increasing set of provincial policy expectations; the balance between provincial and local revenues and the autonomy of school boards to set their own tax levels; the processes for equalizing per pupil funding levels across school divisions—are seen by many trustees as fundamentally undermining their ability to carry out their mandate.

Similarly, recent changes to the *Public Schools Act* that take away from school boards the authority to close schools without Ministerial approval are seen as a further weakening of local authority. This article argues that strong, locally elected school boards are essential to the wellbeing of a healthy public school system and that as such they need to be nurtured and supported.

### Why school boards matter—the public nature of public schooling

There are three primary characteristics that have come to define what is “public” about public schooling in

Canada. Simply put these can be summarized as the touchstones of: *public accessibility and equality*—that all children should have access to, and the opportunity to benefit equally from school; *public funding*—that the costs of schooling should be shared fairly across all segments of society and that the quality of education received by any child should not be related to the ability of the child or their parents to pay for all or part of that schooling; and *public accountability and control*—that decisions about the nature of public schooling should be made through public political processes and by people elected to carry out this responsibility. Even though there is no shortage of examples of where we have fallen far short, the history of Canadian public schooling can be viewed as the struggle to establish and sustain these ideals.

This belief was embedded in the 1871 legislation that established public education in Manitoba and, while today's school boards and school divisions are different in a number of ways from the more than 1,600 operating

boards that existed across the province at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of local representation and local accountability has remained a fundamental aspect of the governance of public schooling in the province.

While school board elections generally attract fairly limited interest and school trustees work, for the most part, out of the limelight, their existence allows the public in each school division to shape its programs, within the broad policy mandates of the province, to reflect local needs and interests. School boards provide the vehicle through which local issues such as special programming or a school closure, as well as serious individual grievances that cannot be resolved professionally, can be addressed locally by people who are likely to have both an awareness of the details of the context and a stake in the outcome, in a way difficult to imagine at the level of provincial politics.

In performing this role, elected school boards also provide the democratic framework that is essential to allowing professional teachers, principals and superintendents to do their work and to bring their expertise to the task of educating society's youth. As Starratt (2004) reminds school leaders:

*The biggest issue for public administrators is legitimacy. Their legitimacy comes from the people they serve. They are instruments of self-government by the people, with obligations to the people's well-being (Starratt, 2004, p. 27).*

If public schooling is to remain public in the manner outlined in this article, then this point is critical. It is the school board that constitutes not only the interface between the provincial government and the local community but also the local interface of professional expertise and public accountability. Without this public school educators would be robbed of an enduring source of support and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the collective voice of

school trustees expressed through the Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA) plays an important role, along with other organizations such as the Manitoba Teachers Society (MTS) and the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), in ensuring that important provincial educational decisions are accompanied by public debate, providing a degree of balance that has served Manitoba well.

### **Looking to the future/nurturing strong local school boards**

There is nothing that is new or radical in these touchstones of public schooling. They are guiding principles that are, in fact, explicitly spelled out in the preamble to the Manitoba *Public Schools Act* (Figure 1). The expectation that “democratic local school divisions and districts play an important role in providing public education that is responsive to local needs and conditions” sets up and acknowledges an inherent political tension between provincial goals and priorities and local needs and interests reflective of a diverse society.

These tensions are exacerbated by the fact that school boards are a “single interest entity”—their commitment, focus and mandate being public schools—while the provincial government has a much broader mandate that requires their attention. As such, it has to be expected that, probably more often than not, there will be a level of disagreement between school boards and the provincial government, but it is a serious mistake to assume that such disagreements somehow make a case that school boards are dysfunctional or out-dated. Rather, at best, these tensions are productive and creative. They ensure: that issues are considered carefully and their consideration include multiple voices; that decision-making is characterized by innovation and accommodation; and, that decision-makers can be held to public account and to the stated ideals of public education.

### **What are some of the things that might support this “best case scenario” in Manitoba?**

*Respectful relations between the provincial government and local school boards.*

The task of balancing provincial priorities with local interests requires a high level of trust and collaboration between these two levels of government—an appreciation that there are likely to be legitimate differences between the two and a willingness to work together in the face of these differences. Recently the British Columbia government and the British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) signed a “Protocol of Recognition” that laid out their commitment to work together in the interests of public education in the province, and a similar Manitoba document along with more frequent joint forums on education might be a useful vehicle for strengthening mutual trust and collaboration.

*Provincial legislation, policies and practices that provide school boards adequate levels of autonomy on important local issues.* For school boards to be effective—for committed people to be prepared to seek election and to serve on them, and for their constituents to look to them as community leaders—they must be seen to exert influence in important aspects of local schooling. What, specifically, those aspects will be are likely to vary over time as provincial governments come to see particular educational issues, such as school closures, as sufficiently important to their education agenda as to warrant a reclamation of provincial authority. However, where such developments represent not an isolated event but an ongoing erosion of local decision-making, they clearly undermine the vitality and purpose of boards.

*Funding arrangements that provide adequate resources for local initiatives.* An important corollary to previous requirement is that school boards have access to the resources necessary

to develop and implement local educational strategies. In Manitoba this goes to issues of the appropriate balance between provincial and local taxation, as well as the role of the provincial government on defining that balance (directly through legislation as was done by Manitoba's Progressive Conservative government in the 1990s or indirectly through Tax Incentive Grants as is currently the case) and in addressing unequal tax bases between school boards (Henley & Young, 2008). Such issues are inevitably contentious, but

when school boards consistently feel powerless to implement the programs that their communities are demanding, their viability is again brought into question.

**Community engagement as a core function of School Trustees.** The ongoing public participation in educational decision-making critical to a healthy public school system makes important demands of school board trustees in terms of community engagement. Trustee credibility as the representatives of local interests has to

rest on more than a once-in-three-years election (or acclamation). Rallis, Shibles & Swanson (2002) remind us that the role of school boards is to connect the public to its schools, and as such they are "stewards of the community conversation about schools"

**Figure 1**

**The Preamble to the Manitoba Public Schools Act**

**HER MAJESTY** by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba enacts as follows:

**WHEREAS** a strong public school system is a fundamental element of a democratic society;

**AND WHEREAS** the purpose of the public school system is to serve the best educational interests of students;

**AND WHEREAS** the public school system should contribute to the development of students' talents and abilities;

**AND WHEREAS** the public schools should contribute to the development of a fair, compassionate, healthy and prosperous society;

**AND WHEREAS** the public schools must take into account the diverse needs and interests of the people of Manitoba;

**AND WHEREAS** democratic local school divisions and districts play an important role in providing public education that is responsive to local needs and conditions;

**AND WHEREAS** parents have a right and a responsibility to be knowledgeable about and participate in the education of their children;

**AND WHEREAS** public schools require skilled and committed staff in order to be effective;

**AND WHEREAS** it is in the public interest to further harmonious relations between teachers and their employers through the process of collective bargaining consistent with the principle that resources must be managed efficiently and effectively;

**AND WHEREAS** the Province of Manitoba and school divisions and districts share the responsibility for the financing of education.

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(p. 251). To fulfill this task, they suggest, school boards and school trustees have to provide a range of invitational forums—formal school board meetings being only one—for such conversations characterized by *inclusion, dialogue and deliberation*.

This requires a proactive stance from school boards that: seeks out multiple voices and ensures that they are listened to; fosters a process whereby different perspectives are properly explained and understood; and, when choices are to be made between different courses of action, ensures that they are well reasoned and carefully articulated. It is through these processes that trustees demonstrate their integrity and their commitment to the educational well-being of the community's children and cultivate the support needed to make the difficult decisions that invariably go with the role.

### Conclusion

Canada's public education system was recently reported by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce as being second

only to Finland in a survey of seven-teen industrialized countries—a survey that placed the United Kingdom eleventh and the United States sixteenth (Chamber of Commerce, 2008). Yet often we turn to those very countries for direction in “re-forming” our schools.

In similar vein, while Manitoba has among the strongest school boards in Canada we are less likely to celebrate that commitment to keeping the public in public education than to look to provinces such as Ontario—where school boards have no local taxing authority

and where the single Toronto District School Board attempts to reflect the “local” interests of more students than are in school in all of Manitoba—and think that *we* are somehow out-of-step or backward.

The argument here is the opposite: Manitoba needs to hold onto and nurture its school boards and to celebrate the strength of their school trustees. ■

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