

## **The devilish details surrounding Bill 28**

**by Yolande Dupuis, President, Manitoba Association of School Trustees**

Nobody likes to see a school close. Kids moving to a new school may be anxious about unfamiliar people and places. Parents share their children's anxiety, and harbour their own worries about shifting before and after school childcare requirements, or adapting to different transportation arrangements and schedules. Former students may feel nostalgic for a soon-to-disappear piece of their own childhood, while communities already struggling with other effects of a shrinking population often see the closing of a school as a blow from which there can be no recovery.

So, if nobody likes to see a school close, why aren't school boards welcoming the moratorium on school closures that came with the April 28 introduction of Bill 28, *The Strengthening Local Schools Act*?

Under the proposed legislation, school boards would be required to make "reasonable efforts" to "expand the use of the school building for appropriate community purposes" before they might be granted Ministerial approval to close a school. The implication is that school boards have not, to date, made such "reasonable efforts," and therefore must be compelled to do so. In the case of incorporating daycare centres into schools, nothing could be further from the truth.

Daycare centres in schools can be a natural fit that brings widespread benefits. They can simplify the lives of busy families by enabling them to make one stop morning and afternoon to drop off and pick up both a toddler and a second-grader. Pre-schoolers may find the transition from daycare to kindergarten easier when both programs are housed in the same building, while before- and after-school programs can make for a seamless day for elementary students. Because childcare workers, like teachers and others working in the public school system, have undergone criminal records and child abuse registry checks, the presence of daycare centres in a school building does not create the security concerns that might come with other ancillary uses.

The complementary nature of schools and daycares was recognized formally more than two decades ago, when Manitoba's government of the day enabled the establishment of daycares in public schools. That recognition continues today, with 40% of the province's licensed daycare spaces school-based. As of 2007, 171 Manitoba schools had on-site childcare centres. Seventy percent of these centres can be found in Winnipeg and Brandon, but schools in 19 divisions outside these major urban centres also incorporate childcare facilities.

However, daycare centres in schools are not a panacea that will make every school viable anymore than committing surplus school capacity to daycare will resolve the shortage of childcare spaces that Manitoba currently faces.

Daycare centres need more than physical space. They need qualified childcare workers, and the funds to cover salaries and other expenses. Existing daycares are already struggling to recruit and retain a full staffing complement; creating additional facilities will do nothing to alleviate this challenge.

It goes without saying that daycare centres also need children, but that seems to have been overlooked to some extent in the discussions around Bill 28. There may be communities that have both empty classrooms *and* a significant number of pre-school children who will be filling those classrooms in the near future. However, such communities are an exception rather than the rule. Where the numbers of school-aged children are declining, that trend is also evident in the numbers of pre-school children who might access a local daycare centre. Where that is not the case and demographic forecasts project a

pending increase in student numbers, school boards are unlikely to have earmarked a school for review and possible closure in the first place.

It would also be naive to think that daycare centres in schools come at no cost to the education system. In some instances, space in schools is provided to daycare centres at no charge; in most cases, a reasonable rent is levied. However, that rent may not cover fully the costs of maintaining and servicing the space occupied. Operating costs such as heat, electricity and water, coupled with the costs of ongoing repairs and upgrades to school buildings, are significant. To the extent that these exceed rental revenues, they are paid from dollars nominally earmarked for the K-12 public school system.

In at least one instance, the moratorium on school closings contained in Bill 28 may have had a negative impact on both school programs and services *and* the availability of daycare spaces. Archwood School in Winnipeg's Louis Riel School Division was one of the schools under review when the moratorium was announced. Subsequently, we learned that the recommendation to the school board would have been for the conversion of Archwood School to a dedicated daycare centre. Had the school board accepted this recommendation, the centre could have served the childcare needs of the burgeoning population of southeast Winnipeg, conveniently located as it is for parents traveling to jobs in Winnipeg's downtown. Archwood's students would have joined those at another school, where increased student numbers would have meant a wider range of programs and services.

The proposal was one that was embraced by a wide segment of the community that saw the merits of a solution that was uniquely tailored to meet local needs and circumstances. To be sure, there were opponents who wanted to see Archwood remain a neighbourhood school at any cost. However, by its very nature, a democracy is a system where all views and opinions are heard, where minorities are protected, and where in the end, the majority prevails. Until now, the process used to determine the future of individual schools in local communities has been a microcosm of grassroots democracy. By undermining the voice of communities and seeking to impose a one-size fits all solution, Bill 28 in fact threatens the very democratic principles it claims to uphold.

School trustees understand that difficult and even unpopular decisions are part of board service. These decisions are necessary because school boards have the dual responsibility of providing the best possible educational opportunities to all students, and of managing prudently the resources provided by communities and the province for that purpose. On the surface, Bill 28 may be good politics, but dig a little deeper, and it's bad policy that will limit the ability of communities to shape their own schools. Manitoba's children deserve better.