

Editorial by MSBA Provincial Executive – November 2018

An old French proverb says "the more things change, the more they stay the same". In re: "Goertzen receives mandate letter" (accessible at <https://www.steinbachonline.com/local/goertzen-receives-mandate-letter-from-premier>) two messages communicated were made regrettably clear to us: 1) Manitoba may be in store for more of the same and 2) it is difficult to understand how the voice of Manitobans will help to shape the government's current plans for education.

More of the same?

Minister Goertzen has now clearly indicated that "merging school divisions" is on the table under the education review that is set to happen next year. For our association, if this were to happen, it would only lead to more of the same.

Nearly twenty years ago, the Government reduced 20 school boards, down to the current total of 37. The target: millions of dollars in savings and a strategy to streamline our education system for even better results. Make it more manageable and comparable to other provinces, or so they argued. However, in 2005, an independent study written by the Frontier Centre for Public Policy found that the elimination of 20 school boards resulted in virtually no savings.

Instead, dollars were spent to save dimes. Bigger school divisions meant bigger costs. The study concluded that the time spent on the amalgamation process would have been better invested in meaningful education reform. The only real impact of this "merger of school divisions" was to remove ownership of public schools from small town communities.

Fast forward two decades later. Why Manitoba would then rely on the exact same strategy as used by a former Government is an important question that every Manitoban must ask.

Critics tend to answer this question by highlighting our students' academic achievement and performance in comparison to their Canadian peers, with the mistaken belief that our students somehow fall short and that amalgamating school divisions will "correct the course".

But is this true? The latest national and international exams in literacy, math and science, which are given to students by Ministers of Education themselves, have shown that eight out of ten Manitoba students perform at or above national and international standards, the same level of performance in every other Canadian province. The only difference: our students made the grade with marked improvements across all three subjects on the latest national exam.

As a Manitoban, you rightly deserve all of the facts to make a clear and informed decision when it comes time for you to be consulted on public education. Based on statements made in re: "Goertzen receives mandate letter" however, it is increasingly difficult to understand how the government plans to consider the voice of Manitobans when it comes to such consultations.

The 2019 Provincial Pre-Budget Survey

In regards to at least two items which have recently been included in the government's pre-budget consultation survey, it would now appear that plans are already being finalized. The first concerns yet another reduction of the total number of school divisions. The second concerns a reduction of the number of labour bargaining units in education.

As steadfast believers in democracy, our association took the current pre-budget consultations at face value. On October 19, the Manitoba School Boards Association outlined our position on why we oppose both of these options (see [Pre-Budget Consultation – An Education Perspective: Summary & Analysis](#)).

We encouraged all Manitobans to understand the facts on the issues raised. As taxpayers and stakeholders of the public education system, we believe that it is our citizens' right to have their voice heard concerning each of the education-related options that have been pitched under the current pre-budget survey.

Based on Minister Goertzen's most recent comments however, that changes will happen notwithstanding the pre-budget consultations, appears to be a foregone conclusion. When it comes to reducing the number of bargaining units, Minister Goertzen has clearly indicated that legislation is already being set in stone to make this a reality by next fall. Why then consult Manitobans on whether or not to reduce the number of bargaining units under the current survey?

In respect of public consultations concerning "mergers of school divisions", it is our sincere hope that Manitobans will be given a multiple choice test without right or wrong answers. However, it would seem that this too may only be a matter of "when" and not "if", notwithstanding anything Manitobans may have to share on this important subject.

Democracy rests on some important foundations, not least of which is the use by elected officials of evidence-based decision-making. On the flip side, decision-based evidence-making is the very opposite of what a true democracy stands for. At the end of the day, once thousands of people have completed the 2019 pre-budget survey, or the upcoming education review survey, or any other survey for that matter, we must ask: will these surveys find what Probe Research has recently found to be true with scientific precision and accuracy, during its most recent September 2018 public opinion poll?

Will the government surveys find that 56 percent of all Manitobans actually favour leaving school divisions exactly as they are in this province? Will they find that less than a quarter, or 23 percent, want bigger school boards? And will these surveys show that less than one in ten people in Manitoba want to abolish school boards in favour of complete government control over the public school system?

No matter what the public consultation surveys find and no matter how things unfold, we can promise Manitobans that some things will stay the same no matter what. Across the 37 distinct communities where democratically elected school boards currently govern on behalf of their fellow citizens, school boards will continue to promote an accountable, transparent and locally defined education system that empowers all Manitobans to exercise their voice and vote when it comes to public ownership of their schools.

School boards will continue to defend the distinct and diverse character of each community, so that they remain protected in every classroom. We will forge ahead to ensure that all students continue to make the grade in comparison to their Canadian peers. And we give you as fellow citizens our commitment that, no matter what our local means or resources, we will continue to provide our students with the very best quality of education and equality of opportunity possible.