

Testing the candidates

by ALAN CAMPBELL

Education drives social well-being. We may spend more time talking about the economy, healthcare or infrastructure, but education gives our social fabric its strength. Educated populations are healthier. They have higher employment rates in more highly skilled and better paying occupations. They are also less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. So, education matters to everyone.

The year 2019 is a watershed year. In January, the government launched a review of Kindergarten to Grade 12 education in the province. Thousands of Manitobans shared their thoughts through public consultations, written submissions, and online surveys. The commission at the centre of this review will prepare a report and recommendations for release in March 2020. Between then and now, Manitobans will elect the government that will receive that report, and decide how to respond. We have a responsibility to make sure that those we elect are up to that challenge, with the knowledge required to make sound decisions.

As a parent, a community member, and a school trustee, there are specific education-related issues that matter to me, and conversations I want to have with candidates before I decide how to cast my vote.

The student population in our public school system is diverse, which is one of its strengths. However, diversity also means that some students need additional supports to succeed in school. Whether it's specialized language instruction for newcomers, occupational or physical therapy for children with special needs, or clinical supports for children in crisis, all students must be supported. So before I cast my vote, I will ask candidates: Are you aware of the diversity that exists in Manitoba's public school population? What would you do to ensure that schools have the resources they need to support every student so each can thrive and achieve at a high level?

Health and education have a symbiotic relationship: a better education leads to better health, and better health leads to better educational outcomes. Schools work to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on students' learning and health through initiatives like meal programs, pre-school outreach, and summer enrichment, but schools can't tackle the challenge of poverty alone. So, before I cast my vote, I will ask candidates: Do you support the efforts of schools in your community to help students overcome the negative effects of poverty on their health and education? What is your understanding of the relative responsibility of schools, municipalities, and the provincial government in supporting students and families in poverty? Are there specific provincial initiatives you support that would help in this regard?

All Manitoba public schools provide a solid core education based on the provincially mandated curriculum, but not all schools are the same. They may offer programming that helps preserve community heritage for future generations, pre-school programming that helps ensure students enter kindergarten ready to learn, or technical and vocational programming in partnership with local businesses that both helps youth transition to the workforce and communities to grow and prosper. Programs such as these rely on funds raised through property taxes set by school boards. So, before I cast my vote, I will ask candidates: Are you familiar with the types of locally-supported programming that exists in schools in your community? How would you work to ensure that local community voices retain their power to shape schools in ways that meet their specific needs and wishes?

Manitoba has 37 elected school boards, comprised of 297 school trustees. School trustees are community representatives serving for minimal compensation. Provincially, the cost of school boards account for about half a cent of every dollar of the education operating budget. An additional three cents of every dollar pays for the highly qualified administrators needed to manage and lead in the complex organizations that are school divisions. More than 95 percent of education dollars are spent in classrooms or on operations, maintenance, and bus transportation. Reducing the number of school divisions will not change these realities, as evidenced by previous school division amalgamations. What such a reduction would do is increase costs, create a great deal of disruption and uncertainty, and dilute or eliminate community voice. If we are going to reduce the number of school divisions in Manitoba, we need to have a better reason than "because everyone else is doing it"—and objectively, that reason does not exist. So, before I cast my vote, I will ask candidates: Do you know what school boards actually do in Manitoba? Do you believe that they add value to our public school system? Are you willing to work cooperatively with school boards in your community to the benefit of local schools? Do you support the current configuration of school divisions in Manitoba, and if not, how and why do you think it should be changed?

These are my education-related issues and questions this election year; you may have others. Whatever the case, please think about the issues, ask the questions, and keep the conversation going. Supporting education is an investment in our future that benefits everyone. This election is our opportunity to let candidates know that we value education, and to support those that share this value.

To find out more and for further election resources, please visit www.localchoices.ca.

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