

# Canadian Union of Public Employees

Submission to Manitoba

Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education

May 2019

***CUPE***

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## **ABOUT CUPE**

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is the largest education support worker union in Canada and in Manitoba, representing almost 6,000 members across 41 bargaining units in 25 school divisions across Manitoba. CUPE is Canada's largest education union, with over 130,000 members working in public school divisions across the country. CUPE's 680,000 members take great pride in delivering quality public services in communities across Canada through their work in municipalities, health care, social services, schools, universities, communications, transportation, and many other sectors. CUPE welcomes this opportunity to participate in the Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On behalf of nearly 6,000 K-12 members in Manitoba, the Canadian Union of Public Employees would like to raise concerns with the committee on the education review of K-12. CUPE members have a vast amount of experience in the education sector, working in all support staff classifications throughout the province. These include educational assistants, library staff, child and youth workers, other professionals and paraprofessionals, office and clerical staff, information technologists, custodial, maintenance and trades personnel.

Providing publicly funded and publicly administered education that is accessible to all is one of the most important functions of government and a necessary component of creating a prosperous and fair society. Accessible, high quality education that provides for all students' needs by accounting for local communities' interests is a unique and valuable quality that Manitoba school boards currently provide. Education is an investment that continues to demonstrate its returns each year. Students benefit directly from the knowledge and skills they acquire, and the important role public education plays in their overall development. This is especially so in Manitoba where due to local influence, policy, and programming, many school boards can provide programs beyond the curriculum.

Our communities advance because of the education system. We all benefit from an education system that produces skilled, knowledgeable citizens with critical thinking and problem-solving skills within their communities who give back. In a very real sense, public education is at the heart of a well-functioning society.

Our members' experience, as well as CUPE's experience with similar reviews across Canada informs this submission, as does the hope that all CUPE members have for a strong, sustainable, fully resourced education system.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our union has experienced one round of school division restructuring in this province – the 2001 restructuring whereby the province reduced the number of schoolboards from 54 to 37. The restructuring was widely viewed as a failure due to minimal cost savings and large amounts of time and energy spent on the amalgamation process; so much so that the process was criticized in 2005 by a right-wing think tank, Frontier Centre for Public Policy as leading to increase overall spending<sup>1</sup>.

In our submission, we will highlight the importance of democratically elected school boards that are accountable to communities, and that value parent and community input into children’s education. Our submission also raises concerns with the possibility of decreased funding and/or loss of specialized, local programming that communities have relied on and enjoyed. Manitoba’s ability to cater local programming has created stronger individualized learning environments for students and overall a more positive learning experience.

Based off previous experiences, both provincially and across Canada, CUPE raises concerns with the possibility of labour relations issues that must be taken into account during this review. At this time, when collective agreements are in effect, restructuring school divisions will create massive disruption and chaos to the system and not reap any financial savings.

CUPE supports actions and policies that sustain the current Manitoba education system and further improve strengthening community involvement and development of local programming. Community involvement and local governance in school boards has been a foundation for democracy in Manitoba. Preserving community voice and direction should be a priority in the review being undertaken by the province.

### Summary of CUPE Recommendations

CUPE submits the following recommendations for the Commission’s consideration:

**Recommendation 1:** That the province continue to allow school boards the legislative authority to tax.

**Recommendation 2:** That the province commit to ensuring school taxes increase at a reasonable rate while also ensuring that core annual funding increases at a rate that keeps up with the rising cost of education.

**Recommendation 3:** That the province commit to increasing provincial funding for education, with the goal of reaching an 80/20 split between provincial funding and local school taxes.

**Recommendation 4:** That the school boards remain as elected bodies in order to facilitate ongoing and meaningful consultation with local communities when making decisions about education and the community.

**Recommendation 5:** That individual constituencies of school trustees not be expanded, ensuring that parents and community members can continue to have access to school trustees in order to share their thoughts and concerns.

**Recommendation 6:** That the province carefully review the characteristics of rural and urban school boards and ensure that the needs, priorities, and diversity of the different communities are protected.

**Recommendation 7:** That the public-school system remain fully accessible by the public with community involvement, engagement and input.

**Recommendation 8:** That the province use school space as community hubs should a closure be determined.

**Recommendation 9:** That the province conduct a review to determine which school areas demonstrate a need for affordable child care and develop a plan whereby child care services can be administered through the school board's infrastructure.

**Recommendation 10:** That the province prioritize learning environments for students by addressing supports inside the classroom (Ex: enhanced teacher training, fundamental skills) and outside the classroom (Ex: putting in place an anti-poverty strategic plan).

**Recommendation 11:** That the province allocate more funding and resources for school boards, and support communities in determining current and/or systemic issues that need to be targeted. (Ex: Specific community issues such as adding in support services if schools have low graduation rates, require additional staff for students with disabilities, or English as a second language).

**Recommendation 12:** That the government ensure that they communicate and collaborate with respective unions involved.

**Recommendation 13:** That the government ensure a thoughtful and well-planned strategy should there be a transition of bargaining units to a new school division governance structure and that the government provide additional funding for the transition period, including funding for the upward adjustment of negotiated wages and benefits.

**Recommendation 14:** That the province provide complementary learning opportunities for students, child care, and adult-learning programs in order to combat poverty.

**Recommendation 15:** Should the province determine that closures be considered, they will ensure an open, transparent and democratic process of review that fully engages the community with a meaningful appeal process and clear and consistent guidelines.

**Recommendation 16:** That the province assist and encourage school divisions to further develop arrangements with non-profit and public organizations to offer services and programs so that the space is used as a Community Hub during "off" hours or if a closure is determined.

## BENEFITS OF MANITOBA’S SCHOOL BOARD SYSTEM

In Manitoba, there are currently 37 public school boards:

Beautiful Plains	Lakeshore	River East Transcona
Border Land	Lord Selkirk	Rolling River
Brandon	Louis Riel	Seine River
Division scolaire franco-manitobaine <i>*francophone</i>	Mountain View	Seven Oaks
Evergreen	Mystery Lake	Southwest Horizon
Flin Flon	Park West	St. James-Assiniboia
Frontier	Pembina Trails	Sunrise
Fort La Bosse	Pine Creek	Swan Valley
Garden Valley	Portage la Prairie	Turtle Mountain
Hanover	Prairie Rose	Turtle River
Interlake	Prairie Spirit	Western
Kelsey	Red River Valley	Whiteshell
		Winnipeg

### 1. Funding Model

In Manitoba, the school board system is funded by provincial and local divisional property tax. The schoolboard system is unique due to its legislative authority to tax with a funding for K-12 coming from provincial funding and a significant amount from property taxes that the school divisions set individually. School boards and communities have set specific mill rates in order to fund programs appropriately because annual provincial funding is not adequate. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) tracked provincial funding in recent years and listed the increases as being less than inflation. In the 2017/18 years, the province provided a 1 percent increase in 2017, 0.5 percent increase in 2018 and 0.5 percent increase for this coming year<sup>2</sup>. These provincial increases are not sustainable and force communities to increase local taxes.

Despite increasing enrollment, the province has barely increased its funding which results in fewer resources for students. In fact, the province has slowly declined its funding responsibilities. The provincial share of operating funding has gone down from 63 percent in 2016/17 to 60.3 percent in 2017/18 to 59.8 percent in 2018/19. As a result, local communities have had to make up the loss in funding. School boards keep taxes local for the benefit of children in their own community with 96 cents out of every dollar spent on education going directly to providing students with programs, supports, and services<sup>3</sup>.

Local communities have become involved with the taxation process and work with the school boards to voice their opinions and suggestions for programming which assists the school boards in setting their local taxes. Due to the school boards ability to tax, each board is able to identify local interests and tailor additional programs that suit the communities’ needs going above and beyond the curriculum.

The funding from local taxes allows for students to further expand skillsets and grants additional opportunity and learning experiences not found in other province’s school’s programming. With forty percent of K-12 funding decided through local communities<sup>4</sup>, the loss of funding should this ability be removed, would be substantial and deeply affect programs students currently have access to.

Levels of local taxation is highly dependent on provincial funding. If the province is truly concerned with the level of local education property taxes, the way to address the issue is to adequately fund school divisions so they are less reliant on property tax revenue. It is not reasonable, not practicable, for the province to simultaneously freeze funding from the province, while restricting school boards from raising taxes.

However, CUPE does recognize that the current funding split is not ideal and can create inequities between school divisions. That is why we would be supportive of a funding model which would place greater responsibility on the provincial government, and less on local taxation. The Manitoba School Board Association has also advocated for a higher provincial responsibility of 80/20<sup>5</sup>. If the province is serious about reducing how much school board tax people pay, then increased provincial funding should be a priority to remove inequities – especially in rural communities.

**Recommendation 1:** That the province continue to allow school boards the legislative authority to tax.

**Recommendation 2:** That the province commit to ensuring school taxes increase at a reasonable rate while also ensuring that core annual funding increases at a rate that keeps up with cost of rising education.

**Recommendation 3:** That the province commit to increasing provincial funding for education, with the goal of reaching an 80/20 split between provincial funding and local school taxes.

## **2. CUPE Supports Democratically Elected School Boards**

Public education is a critical part of a democratic society, and is important for the development of students' mental, physical and emotional well-being.

CUPE believes that our public-school system should have elected school boards that are small enough to ensure input from parents, and accountability to communities within their boundaries. Removal of elected boards and replacing them with appointed boards will have a negative impact on parents' ability to have input into their children's education and will reduce community engagement and accountability for education.

In a recent CBC analysis article, John Wiens, dean emeritus and senior scholar at the University of Manitoba's faculty of education and Alan Campbell, the president of the Manitoba School Boards Association were interviewed about the current review commissioned by the province's education minister. Wiens stated, "We have fewer places where people have a say in governing," and that a reduction in school boards amounts to diminishing democracy<sup>6</sup>. Campbell stated:

Obviously, if you want to centralize decision making and you want to take decision making away from the local level and centralize it, say on Broadway and [in] Winnipeg, well then of course, in the name of efficiency of decision making then doing way with school boards would make things more streamlined<sup>7</sup>.

Campbell further explained that the only reason to reduce the number of school boards is to reduce the power of those boards. The Manitoba School Boards Association shares this concern and held a two-day conference recently to discuss possible amalgamations during this review. John Watt, Executive Director of the association voiced his concern about community voice being taken away and major centres

controlling the province's school board decisions<sup>8</sup>. He called on allies to ensure that the association's concerns are taken seriously.

With the current model, school trustees can choose to run for the position with minimal cost. Access to running for an elected trustee position allows for a multitude of applicants from diverse backgrounds. Smaller boards ensure that communities can have their voice heard and that the trustee reflects the demographics and needs of the area. Grassroots advocates often begin as trustees with many moving on to city council or other elected positions (such as Hon. Colleen Mayer, MLA for St. Vital and Minister of Crown Services, or Sherri Rollins, Winnipeg City Councillor).

Larger wards and boards would impact minorities in the community because they perpetuate privilege by denying accessibility. Costs for campaigns would increase and specific neighbourhoods would "take over". Gender balance and representation would also be affected. Historically, women have been strong advocates for community power and voice in school governance. Recognition of women's voice and contribution was valued so much that they were able to serve as trustees in Manitoba from 1890 – before they were given the right to vote in 1916<sup>9</sup>. Today, over 50% of the current trustee demographic are women<sup>10</sup> – compared to the Manitoba legislature – 25% women, Winnipeg City Council – 31% women, Brandon City Council – 10% women, or Steinbach City Council – 13% women.

The current school board model has many voices, yet allows constituents the opportunity to communicate with their trustee when voicing concerns, setting priorities, and being involved with their children's education. This right is one that Manitobans value – a recent survey put out by the Manitoba School Board Association released results stating that 81% agree that it is an important democratic right for Manitobans to directly elect their school board trustees, and 56% opted for keeping the current number of school boards<sup>11</sup>. CUPE stresses that community engagement and interest are the pillars of public education and should be preserved, not weakened.

The province should recognize that local decision-making bodies such as school boards and municipal councils are incredibly important in preserving democracy within communities. CUPE urges the province in its review to ensure the local community remains engaged and active in the decision-making process.

**Recommendation 4:** That the school boards remain as elected bodies in order to facilitate ongoing and meaningful consultation with local communities when making decisions about education and the community.

**Recommendation 5:** That individual constituencies of school trustees not be expanded, ensuring that parents and community members can continue to have access to school trustees in order to share their thoughts and concerns.

### **3. Governance**

In other provinces and jurisdictions across Canada, school boards make important decisions about their governance model. Governance models for rural and urban school boards vary drastically in order to adapt to local interests<sup>12</sup>. CUPE raises this issue as a potential area of concern should the province decide to move towards appointed or larger, centralized school boards. Restructurings such as those just listed would impact local governance.

Geographically, Manitoba spans over 647,797 squared kilometres. The Winnipeg School Division is the largest and most concentrated school division with 78 schools and over 33,000 students. Beautiful Plains School Division is a rural school division in southwest Manitoba with 14 schools and 1830 students. The priorities for governance models between these two districts should be tailored to the specific communities served.

Pat Bradshaw, Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Schulich School of Business, and Rachel Osborne, M.A., Former Senior Policy Advisor in Education Governance write that school board governance models can develop and shift, but due to the significant differences between rural and urban school boards, there is no ideal model of governance or one way that a board can effectively fulfill its key governance functions<sup>13</sup>.

Bradshaw and Osborne listed the following factors that should be taken into consideration when examining school board characteristics:

- size, wealth, age, and location of the school district
- culture, history, and traditions of decision-making, including differences in inclinations for advocacy and political debate and involvement of parents and other stakeholders
- cultural and ethnic make-up of the student body and communities

In addition, they also published the following chart listing the differences between rural and urban school board governance models:

School Board Characteristics	Rural School Board	Large Urban School Board
External Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable funding</li> <li>• Homogeneous community</li> <li>• Shared interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insecure funding</li> <li>• Highly diverse community</li> <li>• Multiple stakeholders with different interests</li> <li>• Politically charged</li> </ul>
Size and Membership of the School Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 to 12</li> <li>• Similar interests and backgrounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 to 22</li> <li>• Representative of diverse stakeholder interests</li> </ul>
Trustee Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best interests of all the students and ensuring their achievement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interests of their constituency and those who elected them</li> </ul>
Governance Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carver Policy Governance<sup>a</sup></li> <li>• Clarity of roles and responsibilities between trustees and staff</li> <li>• Strategic not operational in focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constituency Governance</li> <li>• Less clarity of roles with tensions between interests of trustees and staff</li> <li>• More operational in focus</li> </ul>
Board Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus decision making</li> <li>• Agreement to speak with one voice</li> <li>• Shared vision and mission</li> <li>• Short meetings with clear agendas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Majority votes to make decisions</li> <li>• No commitment to speak with one voice</li> <li>• Mission more politicized</li> <li>• Long meetings and large agendas</li> </ul>

Manitoba’s sheer geographical size poses an issue that the government should consider during this review. The population density in Manitoba is concentrated in Winnipeg which prioritizes different issues and programs when compared to some of the smaller school boards in rural communities. Smaller rural boards would not fair well if amalgamated into larger, more bureaucratic boards as decision-making

processes would be far more operational in nature. This move would almost certainly squeeze out voices from rural areas and disproportionately affect smaller boards and communities.

There is no compelling reason for Manitoba to deviate from its current long-established and widely practiced governance model. The current local governance model enjoyed by individual communities increases democracy because local communities make decisions about their schools<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, parents are encouraged to be active in their communities and given an opportunity to engage in school programming and decision-making which has resulted in Manitoba's ability to preserve its diverse culture.

**Recommendation 6:** That the province carefully review the characteristics of rural and urban school boards and ensure that the needs and priorities of the different communities are protected.

#### **4. Community Connection Through Local Influence**

Public schools are a community asset, and as such communities should decide what their schools and school boards look like. In a diverse country such as Canada, it is important to preserve community influence within school board systems because it helps ensure that our schools and school programming reflects the diversity and ever-changing make-up of our communities.

The Manitoba School Board Association shares CUPE's position. The association believes that schools belong to the communities and that local voice and choice is central to education. Diverse groups such as the Ukrainian community have been able to connect through the school system and advocate for programs such as Ukrainian Bilingual programming which is currently offered in 12 schools across Manitoba. The program provides language, culture, tradition and heritage studies.

Other schools such as the Pembina Trails Schools have become newcomer hubs for refugees; offering immigrant resource and emotional supports. The province also entered into an agreement with the Opaskwayak Education Authority (OEA)<sup>15</sup> to provide an Indigenous, land-based, education program. These are just a few examples of how local input advanced program development and community connection.

The Manitoba School Board Association is advocating for the province to continue allowing local communities to connect through the school system and develop unique programs. They have highlighted the results of their poll in response to the review and emphasize that school boards, organizations, and the community work well together<sup>16</sup>. The association has stated, "School boards are grassroots, democratic institutions. Alone, either of these changes [either the grassroots or democratic nature of the school board] would severely undermine the ability of communities to shape local schools because local voice would be lost and programs would move towards a centralized curriculum. Together, they could silence the community's voice in education completely<sup>17</sup>". School centres are being highlighted as the "hubs of small communities" and preservers of prairie life – a characteristic that would very likely wither away if decision-makers from larger centres end up making decisions<sup>18</sup>.

Groups that work closely with schools such as individual Parent Advisory Council's (PAC) would also become ineffective if wards were bigger. The boundaries work incredibly well right now because the areas are small enough to allow PAC's and individual parents approach their trustee with concerns. PAC's have tight relationships with the school, families and community. Due to their relationship, PAC's can collaborate with the school and plan together to meet goals on improving education for students. They

have first-hand knowledge and experiences when navigating the school system within their community. Larger boards mean that PAC's would lose voice because areas would become larger and trustees or representatives may not be familiar with certain communities.

CUPE has long advocated for schools to also be used as community hubs or safe spaces. During the 2015 school board review in Nova Scotia, CUPE advocated for underutilized space to be used for early learning and childcare – investments that would provide strong economic boosts to jobs and economic growth<sup>19</sup>. In Ontario, CUPE voiced concerns over closures after the government announced it would be consulted on the use of schools as community hubs<sup>20</sup>. In Ontario, multiple stakeholders<sup>21</sup> met with the Premier's Community Hubs Framework Advisory Group and government ministries for consultations where it was determined that the formation of community hubs were good for policymakers and communities<sup>22</sup>.

Local communities access their schools to play sports, be involved in recreational activities, clubs, or services aimed at newcomer/refugees or indigenous youth. These safe spaces should be protected – consolidations or closures would prevent local communities from easily accessing these spaces. The province should commit to including childcare and before/after school programs in all elementary schools, and other schools where demand exists. CUPE suggests that school divisions become directly responsible for these programs. Currently, where they exist, the childcare or before/after school programs are run by non-profits with volunteer boards. The ad-hoc nature of these initiatives is administratively burdensome for staff and volunteer boards. School divisions have all the administrative functions in place to take on the role of running these programs, allowing childcare workers to concentrate on educating kids, and removing a great burden from volunteer parents. The province would be able to take steps as per their poverty reduction strategy where parents spoke about the difficulty in finding quality, affordable child care spaces that aligned with their needs, including services offered beyond traditional hours<sup>23</sup>.

CUPE urges the province to carefully consider the impact of their recommendations on local communities during the review. Should closures be recommended, the province should facilitate the formation of schools into community hubs.

**Recommendation 7:** That the public school system remain fully accessible by the public with community involvement, engagement and input.

**Recommendation 8:** That the province use school space as community hubs should a closure be determined.

**Recommendation 9:** That the province conduct a review to determine which school areas demonstrate a need for affordable child care and develop a plan whereby child care services can be administered through the school board's infrastructure.

## **5. Better Learning Environments**

One of the review's main concerns is the academic performance which Manitoban students have demonstrated over the past 15 years in comparison to other jurisdictions. The review has highlighted concern particularly with reading, math and science on pan-Canadian and International assessments as being low and resulting in inadequate preparation for Manitoba's students life beyond grade 12<sup>24</sup>. Poverty reduction is the best tool for improving education outcomes. A strong education system and

comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that encompasses social housing, early childhood education/childcare, decent jobs, health and mental health supports and community recreation programs are needed to produce improvements for students who are being left behind<sup>25</sup>.

CUPE’s position is that better funding levels and supports from the province should be allocated in order for school boards to determine particular needs in the community and work towards providing support on a more individualized scale. The Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) confirms that there are “marked differences in school achievement among Manitoba students and these differences tend to be related to factors beyond education — such as poverty and family dysfunction, which affect the environment in which children are raised.”<sup>26</sup>

Currently, school boards must make up a large amount of funding through local property tax. However, due to the combination of Manitoba’s ability to tax, and locally influenced school boards, schools are able to offer programs that go above and beyond curriculum. Smaller boards allow for rural and specific local interests to be integrated into the system while the community decides appropriate local tax rates. As a result, individualized programming that caters towards current issues in the communities can rollout. The Winnipeg School Division offers swimming lessons for students, ensuring that low-income and refugee youth have access to water safety – a need that arose following an unfortunate accident where a newcomer youth drowned while on vacation. The board’s ability to tailor programming creates a more positive learning environment for students, and in some cases may save lives.

Currently, a wide variety of languages are offered and many of the school boards have well developed Indigenous education programs. These types of programs demonstrate diversity within the community and pass along valuable history within our society.

Programs to target students with learning disabilities have been developed in order to support all learning styles. Communities experiencing low graduation rates have also been able to tackle the issue through additional support programming. The additional programs and supports are possible due to funding from local taxation and community involvement. These types of programs and choices should continue to be left to local communities.

Some examples of locally influenced programs are<sup>27</sup>:

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION
Ukrainian Bilingual Programming	12 schools in Manitoba offer this program. Programs runs from K-8 and teaches language, culture, tradition, and heritage.
Safe School Committees	A committee in the St. James-Assiniboia School Division aiming to create safe, inclusive, and diverse spaces within their schools and broader environment.
Teacher Mediated Option (TMO)	Offered in the Pine Creek School Division, program is geared towards high school graduation.
Park West School Division Kindergarten	All schools provide 0.75 full-time equivalent staffing – 50% greater then regular provincial funding.
Kids at Play (KAP)	Siene River School Division offers this extended-day kindergarten play-based program.
PROMISE Years	This program is made up of a partnership of several school divisions and other organizations to provide speech/language,

	occupational, and physiotherapy support to pre-school aged children.
Vocational Programs	Border Land School Division provides programs such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automotive Technology</li> <li>• Carpentry</li> <li>• Culinary Arts</li> <li>• Manufacturing</li> <li>• Highschool apprenticeship programs</li> </ul>
myBlueprint	Resource assists students through job-specific compatibility surveys. Results assist students with short-term and long-term school/career planning.
Indigenous Education	The Kelsey School Division and the Opaskwayak Education Authority (OEA) agreed to roll out at land-based education program to deepen youth understanding of indigenous history, traditions and cultures.
Wellness Facilitator	Program offered in the Southwest Horizon School Division where the Facilitator assists the division with developing a positive mental health strategy and supports classrooms.
Winnipeg School Lunch Program	Inner city program

In addition to offering more diverse programming, community-based school programs play an important role in poverty reduction and give opportunity to students by working as an intervention alongside community-based organizations<sup>28</sup>. Proper supports outside the classroom to improve living conditions for students from low-income communities provide an avenue to rise above poverty<sup>29</sup>. In comparison to other provinces, Manitoba has one of the highest rates of child poverty. Marni Brownell and Nathan Nickel found in 2014 that 86 percent of Manitoba’s students perform at the expected level while the remaining 14 percent do not due to poverty and family disfunction<sup>30</sup>. While the province has made some improvement, moving from the worst province (10<sup>th</sup> place) to the fifth province – there is still significant improvement to be made<sup>31</sup>.

A move towards larger or centralized school models would disrupt the ability to provide high-quality and accessible education and support services. Larger schools mean larger class sizes which results in worse academic performance<sup>32</sup> as students would get less individualized attention. Research has demonstrated that larger schools are associated with reduced rates of student participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, more dangerous school environments, lower graduation rates, lower achievement levels for impoverished students, and larger achievement gaps related to poverty, race, and gender<sup>33</sup>.

If the government is seeking to consolidate schools, we highlight that closing schools does not necessarily pay off nor does it improve education. The National Education Policy Center concluded that closures are “a high-risk/low-gain strategy that fails to hold promise with respect to either student achievement or non-cognitive well-being” and do not necessarily result in students transferring to higher performing schools. In fact, the transfer itself could set students back as they adapt to new environments<sup>34</sup>. John Wiens, senior scholar at the University of Manitoba’s faculty of education stated “We don’t need school boards to be large in order to educate kids” and cited the 2001 amalgamations as an example that brought nothing for Manitoba schools<sup>35</sup>.

Consolidation or amalgamation would result in school closures and more time would be spent transporting students in buses as opposed to additional learning time that could be scheduled before or after school. Smaller school boards ensure that students can access support at their school efficiently without parents or bus drivers needing to drive students' long distances. Longer bus rides have been voiced as a concern in many other provinces where closures and consolidations have been suggested<sup>36</sup>. CUPE shares this concern for many of Manitoba's rural schools.

**Recommendation 10:** That the province prioritize learning environments for students by addressing supports inside the classroom (Ex: enhanced teacher training, fundamental skills) and outside the classroom (Ex: putting in place an anti-poverty strategic plan).

**Recommendation 11:** That the province allocate more funding and resources for school boards, and support communities in determining current and/or systemic issues that need to be targeted. (Ex: Specific community issues such as adding in support services if schools have low graduation rates, require additional staff for students with disabilities, or English as a second language)

## **The Experience of Past Amalgamations**

CUPE has gone through many amalgamations in the school board sector across the country. Our experience from past amalgamations in K-12 education is that it takes time and resources to merge numerous collective agreements and develop consistent human resources policies. A 2008 research report on school division restructuring by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association points out that “achieving equity between employees and schools in the new school divisions posed a significant challenge.”<sup>37</sup> Every school division has a number of locally negotiated employment contracts and operates in culturally specific communities - a process to understand and review those contracts is a critical part of implementation for any changes.

CUPE recommends that the government ensure a thoughtful and well-planned strategy should there be a transition of bargaining units to a new school division governance structure. We also recommend that the government provide additional funding for the transition period, including funding for the upward adjustment of negotiated wages and benefits.

These are the lessons CUPE has learned during previous amalgamations:

### **Saskatchewan:**

In 1996, there were 119 school divisions in Saskatchewan and CUPE had 60 bargaining units in the K-12 education sector. After three rounds of amalgamations in 1997, 2004 and 2006, the number of school divisions dropped to 28 and CUPE consolidated the number of its bargaining units into 26, or by more than one-half.

- Lesson 1: It took many years to consolidate due to different expiration dates of collective agreements. Some divisions had high numbers of collective agreements. Because this process took a long time, parents and staff were left with uncertainty.
- Lesson 2: Wage disparity was a major issue across the province for support staff. The new school divisions recognized that inequities among support staff were unfair and they agreed to negotiate common wages and benefits that raised lower-paid support staff to the rates in the higher paid legacy agreements. In a few instances, the wages of the higher paid staff were red-circled, creating disillusionment with amalgamations. Those red-circled viewed amalgamation as a loss of income due to being ‘the best’ in the area.

### **Nova Scotia**

In 2018, Nova Scotia dissolved six regional English-language school boards and replaced them with an appointed advisory council. CUPE is against appointed school boards and made its position known that by not having democratically elected school boards there would be less transparency and public accountability.

- Lesson 1: Public accountability was impacted. Due to appointed boards, the communication between the advisory board and parents is of a different nature because parents are no longer constituents.

Lesson 2: Communities really value local democracy and the ability to participate in their children's education. Due to the dissolve of local school boards and centralizing power, local communities had less power and less voice.

Lesson 3: Lack of communication with respective unions and silence on labour relations issues created unnecessary fear and uncertainty among support staff. At the time, several CUPE locals were in bargaining and questions were going unanswered. Productive communication and collaboration could have avoided this<sup>38</sup>.

### **Ontario**

Under the Harris regime, Toronto was forced to become a "megacity" despite 76% of voters opposing the merger. Amalgamation was supposed to promise "savings, greater equity and more clout," yet savings did not happen after thousands of jobs were cut in the first three years because more staff were needed for police and transit to deal with growth<sup>39</sup>.

Prior to amalgamation, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) could fund itself through real property tax, Education Development Charges (EDC) (levying money against new development proposals as a condition of subdivision and other development approvals), and through the province. Harris restricted EDC charges to only be for buying new school land and no longer allowed TDSB to collect money for new school construction or expansion. Due to declining enrolment, the TDSB was worried about school closures as this would be short-sited considering the rapid growth of Toronto<sup>40</sup>.

The amalgamation left 22 trustees to oversee 22 wards with over 600 schools. Each ward experiences its own needs and challenges – expanding ward lines did not leave local communities with greater voice. The Harris government downloaded school trustee responsibilities to unpaid, volunteer parents despite parents voicing their concern with making administrative decisions<sup>41</sup>.

Lesson 1: Imposing wide restrictions effectively removing TDSB's ability to collect taxes deeply affected the school boards ability to fund its school properly.

Lesson 2: City council reduction resulted in parents feeling more disconnected.

Lesson 3: Volunteer boards do not replace democratically-elected school trustees who have the responsibility to be in regular contact with parents. Expanding wards for school trustees meant that communities and parents had less voice and power in decision making.

### **General Concerns from Educational Worker's Perspectives**

CUPE members are very concerned that changes to existing school divisions will disrupt current labour management relations, community involvement in decision-making, and ultimately reduce democracy. The nature of school boards allows for grievances to be brought directly to the board due to the direct relationship boards have with the staff. In addition, the relationship between the trustees and unions is one built on trust. A centralized process would remove this. CUPE supports local democratically-elected school boards because public schools should be accountable and transparent in decision-making, including to staff. An appointed board with no connection to the community would harm this relationship.

In terms of CUPE staff, the uncertainty of not knowing if you will have a job and the stress from the disruption to our school divisions could drive many staff to leave the system permanently. This will

ultimately hurt the kids in our schools, who could be left without their teaching assistant, or their school secretary or the caretaker who keeps their classroom clean. CUPE has heard during previous amalgamations from its members that staff morale was impacted due to uncertainty and decisions made without proper consultation.

The province must also consider how many provisions in CUPE collective agreements, such as varying rules around job security, hours of work, benefits and wages are in effect. An amalgamated school division will have to address multiple labour agreements. Consolidating school boards does not necessarily mean finding cost- saving efficiencies<sup>42</sup>. Consolidation/restructuring is often oversimplified and thought of as an efficient model to save money due to services being run out of one/fewer bodies. Creating bigger school boards and districts that may require less top-heavy decision-makers, still require adequate mid-level staffing<sup>43</sup>. CUPE submits that simply red-circling staff is not the answer. No one should have their wages reduced or red-circled as this would be an unfair blanket action that would freeze workers' wages and not recognize inflation or rising cost of living.

CUPE recommends that the government review previous school board amalgamations and restructurings in order to facilitate as smooth of a transition as possible.

**Recommendation 12:** That the government ensure that they communicate and collaborate with respective unions involved.

**Recommendation 13:** That the government ensure a thoughtful and well-planned strategy should there be a transition of bargaining units to a new school division governance structure and that the government provide additional funding for the transition period, including funding for the upward adjustment of negotiated wages and benefits

## HOW TO SUSTAIN THE CURRENT EDUCATION MODEL

### 1. Investment into the Future

CUPE recommends that the province focus on how to sustain local schools because poverty is a multi-faceted societal issue that is comprised of inequitable access, absence of opportunities, social isolation, discrimination and stigma<sup>44</sup>. Local schools are at the centre of building sustainable rural communities in Manitoba and the public services they provide are the “best bargain available to Canadians<sup>45</sup>. The programs offered should be appreciated as an investment in good jobs for the community<sup>46</sup>.

The Province of Manitoba adopts a poverty reduction strategy under the *Poverty Reduction and Social Inclusion Act* every five years. A new plan was adopted in March 2019. The plan specifically targets six priority areas including investing in Manitoba’s future prosperity through supports to children and youth, promoting economic inclusion through employment, education and training, and facilitating partnerships and supporting community-based organizations<sup>47</sup>. The provincial strategy also acknowledges the important need for reconciliation and commits to focussing on the long-standing negative impacts of residential schools and relationship with Indigenous peoples and communities.

Improvements to society as whole start by identifying those students who are being left behind – specifically vulnerable children and families on assistance and Indigenous communities. The poverty reduction strategy revealed that those families living in poverty experienced additional difficulties and stresses when navigating support systems and trying to access government services<sup>48</sup>. During the poverty reduction strategy consultations, literacy and numeracy skills were highlighted as an important element of success in the complex and evolving economy. CUPE agrees with this position.

A strong education system and a “comprehensive anti-poverty strategy including social housing, early childhood education/child care, decent jobs for parents, health and mental health supports and neighbourhood-based recreation programming” is vital when investing in the future of the province<sup>49</sup>. The poverty reduction strategy re-commits its Budget 2018 to focusing on strengthening its programs to ensure that those in the greatest need of support have access<sup>50</sup>. Complementary learning opportunities such as summer/after school activities, supports for students with disabilities, life skills training and early intervention for those displaying difficulty are the best investment to combatting poverty and creating a successful economy<sup>51</sup>. These are programs and services that require adequate funding in order to be successful.

CUPE suggests that schools be open to additional programming as stated above. However, should the province determine that the future of a school must be considered, an open, transparent and democratic process of review that fully engages the community with a meaningful appeal process and clear and consistent guidelines must be followed. Meaningful consultation and outcomes of amalgamation and closures should be made widely available for all residents, parents, staff, and unions.

**Recommendation 14:** That the province provide complementary learning opportunities for students, child care, and adult-learning programs in order to combat poverty.

**Recommendation 15:** Should the province determine that closures be considered, they will ensure that an open, transparent and democratic process of review that fully engages the community with a meaningful appeal process and clear and consistent guidelines must be followed.

## **2. Community Hubs**

CUPE has supported using school buildings in non-traditional ways as an alternative to school closures or during school's "off" hours (evenings, weekends, Christmas/March breaks, summer breaks). CUPE and other advocacy groups have long advocated that underutilized space in school buildings be used for direly needed public early learning and childcare<sup>52</sup>.

Creating a Community Hub School by leasing excess space to appropriate community partners is another alternative to school closures and the loss of a community asset. Although community hubs can take many forms, schools and repurposed schools are frequently referenced as the ideal location. Not only is this an effective use of these publicly-owned, centrally-located assets, it also makes the school even more relevant to the community. These spaces become home to social clubs, recreation groups, health services, cultural centres and so much more.

An analysis done by economist Robert Fairholm shows that investing in early learning and childcare leads to economic boost in terms of jobs and economic growth<sup>53</sup>. These types of investments could also almost pay for itself in terms of increased revenues for governments from the additional jobs and economic activity. Using school buildings to invest in early learning and childcare would benefit children, parents and local economies.

Since 2004, for example, the Government of Ontario has recognized the important role schools play in their communities by providing school boards with funding through Community Use of Schools (CUS) and related programs. CUS assists school boards with operational funding (the costs of heating, lighting and cleaning required to keep schools open) as well as funding for youth and neighbourhood programs, including summer programs.

The evidence is clear that access to public spaces strengthens communities, but concerted effort from all levels of government is required to open-up public space for public use. Partnerships between school boards and other public sector partners are a promising area for school boards to explore in an era of declining enrolment. Manitoba's anti-poverty reduction strategy hopes to improve education outcomes but acknowledges the additional challenges faced by Manitobans living in poverty. Families living in poverty have difficulty in accessing transportation, healthcare, or nutritious food. These are issues that local school boards can assist with. Nutritious meal programs for students could be expanded, and school space could be utilized for evening or weekend clinics all while remaining local and accessible to those in the area.

CUPE advocates very strongly that partnerships involving school space exclude private, for-profit companies. The opportunity to share space in a public school should be limited to non-profit and public organizations.

**Recommendation 16:** That the province assist and encourage school divisions to further develop arrangements with non-profit and public organizations to offer services and programs so that the space is used as a Community Hub during "off" hours or if a closure is determined.

## Conclusion

CUPE supports our existing system of democratically elected, locally governed school divisions in Manitoba. There is no evidence or rationale for amalgamations or consolidations. As school divisions work together cooperatively to improve student educational outcomes across the province, any restructuring will create massive disruption to our education system. Ultimately, children and parents will lose education supports in the schools and access to their democratically-elected trustee.

If the government forges ahead and restructures school divisions, we urge the Minister to consult extensively with communities about boundaries and to maintain democratically-elected school board trustees.

Local communities and parents are engaged, involved and work with their trustees to provide local programs. The community needs to feel as if they are part of a meaningful public engagement process that involves local governments, parents, citizens, students, economic development agencies, local boards of trade, community organizations and local unions to plan for the future of their local schools.

Commission members should consider past examples of school board amalgamations. A simple move towards a centralized model does not bring cost savings nor additional benefits to the quality of education.

Public education should not solely be focused on funding and costs. Public education means that the public has input in how education is run, developed, and policies are able to be debated in order to voice community concern. Open and transparent dialogue surrounding decision-making simply does not happen in the same fashion when large decision-making bodies take over.

CUPE recommends that, if public school divisions are consolidated, the government provide school divisions adequate transition funding and additional funding for a labour adjustment strategy in order to facilitate as smooth of a transition as possible. A smooth changeover ensures that communication and consultation with the community, parents, and staff take place. If all group's positions are respected and heard, then all will be connected and involved in the process. These are the fundamental pillars of public education that must be preserved.

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