

Informed and engaged public remains key to strong public schools

In the lead-up to the October 24 elections, candidates for school trustee will be working to earn voters' trust and earn a position on the local school board. They will also be working to educate many in their communities about educational issues, and the important role school boards play in shaping students' futures and building strong communities.

Online commentary posted in response to public school-related articles often reveal strong opinions about both schools and school boards. Many of those opinions arise from a foundation of misunderstanding or misinformation. Some of this results from simple generalizations. All school boards work to maximize levels of student achievement and minimize increases in education property taxes. But throughout the province, some boards are dealing with overcrowded schools, while others face declining enrollment. Some have higher-than-average numbers of newcomer students, or students living in poverty, or difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff. All of these situations pose very real challenges for communities, and all require very different school board responses.

But the problem isn't only generalizations. Every school trustee in Manitoba can identify issues that have generated high levels of community engagement. However, few would say that this is the norm when it comes to routine school board matters—the regular meetings, the budget meetings, and the public consultations that collectively reflect the work of school boards. School boards and individual trustees have always had a responsibility to generate opportunities for meaningful community engagement, but now, perhaps more than ever, communities need to take advantage of those opportunities as we approach a watershed moment for our public school system.

In January, the provincial government will launch a review that is expected to lead to some significant changes in the K-12 education system. The number of school divisions in the province, the way in which teacher wages and benefits are bargained and our schools are funded, and curricular changes to “improve” student numeracy and literacy are just some of the topics expected to fall within the scope of the review.

Based on previous reviews initiated by the current government, this one will likely include a public consultation process. This will give all Manitobans a chance to shape their public schools for years to come, but this opportunity comes with responsibilities—to understand the schools we currently have, to envision how schools could even better serve students, and to think critically about how and if any proposed systemic changes will move us from where we are to where we want to be.

But beyond their individual voices, expressed through online surveys or other mechanisms, Manitobans also have a collective voice: their elected school boards. The democratic process allows communities to choose the representatives they feel will most accurately and capably advocate for local needs and wants.

In 2018, the democratic process will also enable communities to elect the representatives who will best reflect the community views on the major, systemic issues soon to be under review. However, this goal will only be achieved if Manitobans accept additional responsibilities: to engage with all school trustee candidates, to find out where they stand on the very real issues facing public education, and to cast informed votes on October 24.

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