

When trustees disappear, who will notice?

NICK MARTIN

MERE weeks after being elected in 2003, Winnipeg and River East Transcona school trustees suddenly awarded themselves salary increases of more than 30 per cent. Manitobans, who probably couldn't have named a single trustee, were outraged.

Indignant trustees on the province's two largest boards argued that they hadn't had a raise in like totally forever, but nary a syllable had any of them uttered during the election about boosted pay. Today, we'd call those trustees tone-deaf.

Under the terms of its Education Modernization Act (Bill 64), the Pallister government aims to eliminate school trustees on July 1, 2022.

Most Manitobans have no idea who trustees are, nor do they have much of a clue what their school boards do. People hear about school boards and school trustees when they get in trouble, as in 2003. Otherwise, business as usual is not newsworthy, with all but one school board having long ago decided deliberately to operate virtually anonymously.

Would the Tories like to get rid of Winnipeg School Division board, which has always existed on a different planet and usually has an NDP/Liberal left majority? In a heartbeat. The other 36 boards, however, include very few radicals, but a considerable number of conservatives, and lots of Conservatives.

Their extinction has been coming for years, and only now do they beseech public support.

The Manitoba School Boards Association drills into trustees that they're not elected politicians; they're stewards, members of a board of directors — and only the chair speaks for the board, only the board chair talks to the media. Even then, most board chairs have deferred to their superintendents, letting the likes of Terry Borys, Gail Bagnall or Brian O'Leary talk for

them. Pretty darned bright, all of them, but not a one of them was elected.

Running education governance this way has been a splendid success in such places as Pembina Trails, Seven Oaks, Hanover ... but name one trustee. No Googling. Just one.

The slightest sniff of controversy is enough to send boards scurrying behind closed doors — personnel issues, property discussions, discipline, bargaining — the regulations' definitions for in-camera discussion can be stretched almost infinitely to avoid debating openly and making decisions publicly.

There are exceptional school trustees who should be household names — Sandy Nemeth, Mark Sefton and Yolande Dupuis come to mind — who have devoted decades to public education, but the system dictates that you don't know them.

Wendy Bloomfield has been board chair in Seine River for an astounding 31 straight years, but she has rejected all interview requests, because the system says it's not about her. Now that Education Minister Cliff Cullen is ending Bloomfield's run, who will rally to save her, when people don't know her?

Derek Dabee declared he'd be different if elected to Seven Oaks school board: he'd talk to the media, he'd be publicly outspoken in the interests of his constituents. Alas, the pod people got him.

School boards argue that they play a vital role in making local decisions; that's true, but rarely do you know how the area trustee voted privately, or possibly reasoned against the majority, before a decision got show-of-hands support publicly.

Ask for school boards to comment on government policy, you're likely to get a canned quote written to go out over the signature of the MSBA president.

Not everyone may want to make WSD board a shining light in the darkness, but for all the adventures

created by the late Mike Babinsky or Betty Granger, there were often spirited debates and open discourse that led to education achievements in a division that had one out of every six public school children in Manitoba.

There was the landmark human-rights achievement of an anti-homophobia education plan. This was the board that created a year of pre-kindergarten nursery, that gave the city Niji Mahkwa School and Children of the Earth High School, introduced Indigenous languages into the curriculum, fed impoverished children breakfast, and hired ethnoculturally diverse community liaisons to work with newcomer families. We knew what WSD was doing, because trustees did it publicly.

There are practical questions yet unanswered about what happens to school division assets, to headquarters buildings and bus barns, to employees. Of MSBA itself, there is a building on Provencher Boulevard, a learned staff, and decades of institutional knowledge.

Has anyone in the education system been more valuable to children's safety — school buses, field trips, lab and gym activities, fire prevention — than the MSBA's risk manager — for decades Keith Thomas, now his son Darren Thomas?

Alas, their names, and so many more names of people who have worked for Winnipeg's kids, rarely enter the public realm.

All 311 trustees will disappear in a year, replaced by a new faceless provincial bureaucracy. Will you even notice?

Nick Martin is a former Free Press education reporter.