

• GUEST COMMENTARY

Make education an election priority

Submitted by the Garden Valley School
Division board of trustees

Are your children, grandchildren, and neighbours a priority as you consider how you will cast your vote in the upcoming provincial election?

Alongside issues like quality health care, fiscal sustainability, taxes, and new infrastructure, public education needs to be a strong consideration. Education is a provincial responsibility and so before you cast your vote, please ask candidates important questions about how they will support over 190,000 students in over 700 public schools in Manitoba.

Ask them about their vision for increasing literacy and numeracy levels and graduation rates. While GVSD exceeds the provincial average in all these areas, the impact of the pandemic has decreased levels in GVSD and across the province. What will be invested in recovery learning and increasing these vital life skills?

Ask them how they will support the increasing mental health needs in our schools. More students than ever are struggling with anxiety and multiple

mental health challenges. Like other divisions, GVSD hires clinicians (social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists) to address mental health needs. We need more clinicians and support but are limited by available, reliable funding.

Ask them about integrating newcomers. Immigration has wonderfully supplied our region with many workers and great citizens but also presents some challenges. Newcomers require extra support to learn a new language, and some need assistance to catch up with education levels in Canada. How will the government support regions like ours which lead the province in welcoming newcomers?

Ask them about poverty and meal programs. There are areas in our province with greater needs but even within GVSD we have too many students who come to school hungry. This strongly impacts their ability to focus and to learn. Community partners have assisted with breakfast programs in some of our schools, but needs are increasing. Poverty and hunger are impacting learning; how

will this concern be addressed?

Ask them about adequate education funding. Statistics can often be cleverly manipulated to deceive voters but here are some numbers provided by the Manitoba School Board Association that are worth consideration: "Between 2006/07 and 2021/22 actual growth in Manitoba's education budget was 19.2 per cent, while inflation across this same time grew by 34.6 per cent, resulting in a funding gap of over \$500 million."

If schools are asked to address mental health, integration, and poverty needs in addition to educational requirements, divisions need to receive adequate funding so the gap between funding and inflation increases doesn't continue to grow.

Ask them if they will restore school divisions' former ability to tax locally. Each school division has unique needs which require discretionary funds. In GVSD we hire literacy and numeracy coordinators to raise reading and math levels, school liaison workers to support newcomers and families in need, English as Additional Language instructors, and we partner

with four neighbouring divisions to offer exceptional technical vocational programs that prepare students for local employment. Since the government limited the ability to add a local tax component a few years ago, our region has grown significantly but we have not been allowed to fully realize the benefits of an increasing tax base locally.

Ask them about their plans for staff recruitment and retention. Like many sectors, education is experiencing a shortage in qualified staff. To date GVSD has managed to hire sufficient staff but this is not true throughout our province and the trend is concerning. What are they planning to do to address this? How will they invest in the wellbeing of current staff: professionally, personally, and financially?

Education MUST be a key priority during the 2023 election. Asking local candidates about their own, as well as their party's future plans for public education will help you to best evaluate who deserves your vote on October 3rd.