

## Calling for more equity on school boards

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A new report calls into question the limited oversight of school board races in Manitoba and recommends elected officials intervene in the name of equity.

“Our systems have to change. They have been so, for lack of a better word, archaic and they’re so outdated and change is so slow within them,” said Kathleen Vyrauen, chairwoman of the Newcomer Education Coalition.

The coalition’s 2022-23 report card on the state of equity in education focuses on legislative change as a way to speed up levelling of the playing field for racialized trustee candidates and ensure elected boards better represent their diverse constituencies.



MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES  
Kathleen Vyrauen, chairwoman of the Newcomer Education Coalition, is trying to ensure elected school boards better represent the diversity of their constituencies.

The 28-page document — the third of its kind — will be released publicly today.

Manitoba needs to enact election financing legislation to prevent individuals and corporate interests from influencing races and support the review of school board ward boundaries every 10 years by an independent commission, per the report.

Its authors indicate the latter would address a “real and perceived” conflict of interest involving incumbent trustees’ roles in the review and revision of ward maps.

Vyrauen, a project manager at Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, said shrinking the size of constituencies acknowledges the diversity within a division and makes campaigning for public office more accessible because it’s less costly to distribute nominee materials in a smaller area.

The Winnipeg School Division has operated with a nine-ward system — an oddity in a city where multiple trustees are typically elected in a handful of mega-wards — for the last decade.

The jump from three to nine wards came into effect in 2014 to create a more even distribution of population within each ward and promote a sense of community within the new borders.

Just over one-third of all students in WSD are members of a visible minority.

Four trustees, accounting for 44 per cent of the board’s membership, identified as racialized in a 2022 survey undertaken by the coalition following the most recent civic elections. Those figures are up from one and 11 per cent in a 2021 report.

The number of racialized principals, teachers in permanent roles and educational assistants has also increased by 12 per cent, nine per cent and 19 per cent, respectively, in recent years.

The coalition’s latest report card touts the progress made since its inaugural edition was released in 2020. Among the changes there has been an increase in trustee diversity overall and divisions have announced initiatives to track demographic data.

At the same time, Vyrauen said “there’s tons of work still to be done” to diversify teaching rosters and other teams of student role models who work in the kindergarten-to-Grade 12 system in Winnipeg.

The new report recommends the creation of a special trustee caucus to “provide a vehicle to strengthen the presence of racialized voices at the school board level.”

It also suggests the province and school boards association partner to fund a civic education initiative with the goal of increasing voter turnout among newcomers and racialized voters.

The Manitoba School Boards Association president said she and her colleagues “wholeheartedly” support the engagement and participation of newcomers in matters related to public education.

Sandy Nemeth noted the association launched a mentorship program and hosted information workshops, both of which were designed to address barriers for trustee candidates from underrepresented communities, ahead of the 2022 races.

“This initiative demonstrated significant promise for the future and the association intends to offer the program on a more frequent basis between and leading up to school board elections,” Nemeth said in a statement, adding MSBA will review the coalition’s related recommendation.

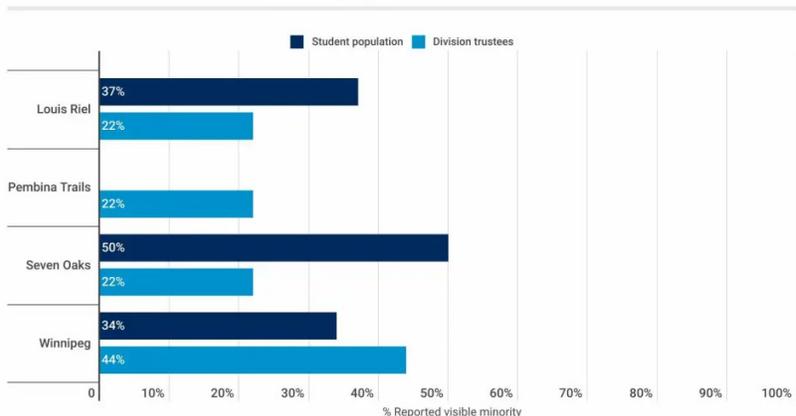
Education Minister Nello Altomare was not available for an interview Wednesday.

A spokesperson for the minister’s office said the government appreciates the new report and will review its recommendations.

The Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle is expected to publish its sister report, a similar document that is also put together with support from the Community Education Development Association, in the coming weeks.

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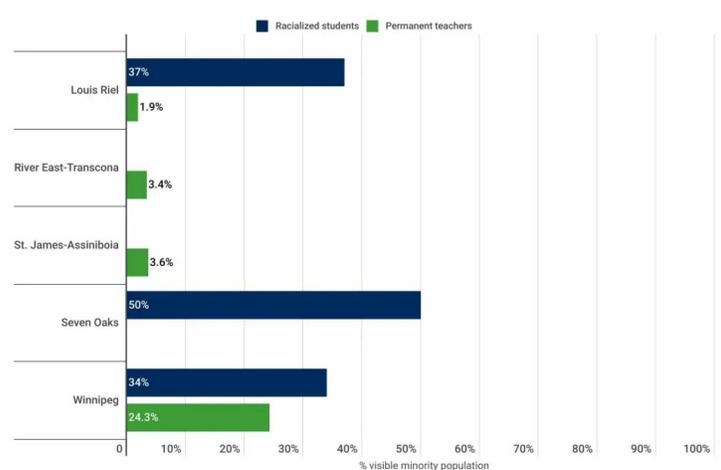
**Percentage of visible minority students and trustees in Winnipeg school divisions**



Source: State of Equity in Education Report, 2023. River-East Transcona, Pembina Trails and St. James-Assiniboia did not report data for student population. River East-Transcona and St. James-Assiniboia reported zero visible minority school trustees.

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**Percentage of visible minority students and teachers in Winnipeg school divisions**



Source: State of Equity in Education Report, 2023. Note: River-East Transcona and St. James-Assiniboia did not report data for student population. Seven Oaks did not report data for teachers. Pembina Trails did not provide either.

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## New calls to action

1. The Manitoba government should enact legislation to address education equity-based issues involving school board governance, including: election financing laws for school boards; and school board ward boundary review legislation
2. City school boards should form a racialized community school trustee caucus
3. The province and school boards association should fund a robust civic education initiative to promote voter rights and awareness to increase the participation of racialized and newcomer communities in school board elections
4. The government and philanthropic sector should support community-led research on equity-based education

- The Newcomer Education Coalition’s State of Equity in Education Report 2023