



Talking about School Boards and Communities



Overview

School boards are a long-standing North American institution. They give local communities a say in one of their most important assets: their children's futures. In Manitoba, school boards date back more than a century. In their earliest years, most school boards governed an individual school that served a small geographic area. Consolidations over the years have resulted in fewer school boards, each serving more students over a larger geographic area. Today, the largest of Manitoba's 37 public school boards serves over 30,000 students, while the smallest serves fewer than 1,000.

Each school board governs a specific segment of the public school system. Those segments are called **school divisions** or, less commonly, **school districts**. In most cases, school divisions are geographic regions with discrete physical boundaries. In the case of the Division scolaire franco manitobaine, the school board governs all schools that serve a specific linguistic segment of the population, in all regions of the province.

School trustees are the individuals elected to serve on school boards. School trustees must be Canadian citizens, aged 18 years or older, and actual residents of the division they wish to serve. Elections are held every four years, at the same time as elections for municipal office. Individual trustees have no authority to act on their own; all decisions must be made in open public meetings by way of a motion adopted by a majority of the school trustees voting on the matter. The power of individual trustees lies in their ability to engage in debate, influence opinion, and ultimately vote on the matter.

Key Points

- School trustees are members of the communities they serve.
- School board governance is responsive and accountable, with regular elections, legally required consultations (e.g. on proposed budgets), standardized, transparent and accessible financial management and reporting (e.g. FRAME reports), and regularly scheduled, open meetings.
- School boards are grassroots, democratic institutions that spring from local communities. They give those communities the ability to shape schools in ways that respond to local needs and wishes concerning their children's education.
- All schools in Manitoba offer their students a solid core education that is based on minimum requirements identified by the province. Beyond this core, programming from school to school and division to division varies widely because of decisions made by school boards (e.g. optional courses of study, enhanced early years programming, etc.).

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Q&A

Aren't school boards out of date, a throwback to the days of the one room schoolhouse?

Actually, school boards are more relevant today than ever. When our society was more homogeneous and our student population less diverse, schools across the province looked a lot alike. The curriculum was standardized, students were streamed according to ability, and special needs students were rarely found in public schools. Today, schools are places that help vulnerable students succeed, that help preserve community language and culture, and that work with business and other organizations as full partners in community development.

Schools can do this because school boards are able to customize programs and implement options that meet local needs. Through school boards, communities have the option of creating their own solutions and own successes in public education. Without school boards, our schools would be facing the challenge of making one-size-fits-all solutions work.

School boards are expensive. Wouldn't we be better off spending that money in the classroom?

In most school divisions in Manitoba, the annual compensation for all school board members combined is less than 1% of the school division's operating budget. Provincially, that number is about 0.5%. So, half a cent on every dollar spent in the public education system in Manitoba is invested in promoting local democracy and community voice through trustee and school board expenses.

In all but the largest school divisions, the compensation paid to the entire school board is less than the salary paid to one classroom teacher. Even in the largest school divisions, where increased demands on time translate to a larger indemnity (or "salary"), that indemnity is only a fraction of any employee's salary. These dollars would have virtually no impact on the educational experience of students, but they do have a huge impact when it comes to enabling communities to shape their schools to reflect local circumstances and needs.

I don't have any kids in school, so why should I vote in school board elections, or care about what the school board does?

On the most basic level, you should care because school boards spend your money. All Manitobans pay for education, both directly through property taxes, and indirectly through taxes they pay to the province, which support public schools. You owe it to yourself to know how this money is being spent.

You also owe it to yourself and to future generations to know that today's students are receiving a quality of education that will allow them to become successful and productive members of their community, of Canada, and of the world. The issue here is one of public good: a well-educated citizenry contributes to economic prosperity and quality of life for all.

Not all school trustees have kids in school. Many are simply committed community members, who want to ensure the brightest future possible for everyone's kids, and for their own community. They take an interest; you should too.

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I voted for my trustee because his kids go to the same school as mine do, and I thought I could count on him to do what's right for the school. Sometimes he does, but sometimes I think he's working for some other school.

Almost all school divisions in Manitoba are divided into wards, and trustees are elected by the voters in a specific ward. However, once elected, their responsibility is to all the students of the division, not just those of a particular area or school. Sometimes, this means supporting a decision that is in the best interest of the majority of students and schools, or which will create more equitable opportunities for a specific group of students. Not everyone will support every decision, and you can't assume that the trustee you elected will always agree with or support your point of view. You can and should expect, however, that all trustees are able and willing to explain the basis on which a decision has been made (within the bounds of legally-required confidentiality).

What can my school trustee do for me?

Let's start with what individual trustees cannot do. They cannot promise to do something that requires a decision of the entire board. What they can do, however, is bring the matter before the entire board for a decision, work to ensure the board is aware of your point of view regarding the matter in question, or help you bring the matter before the board yourself as a delegation.