



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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## Poverty and Education in a Winnipeg Suburb

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**T**he Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores were released this week, and once again Manitoba ranked poorly relative to other provinces and the Canadian average. Some will say, “What is wrong with our educational system?” However, the better question is, “why do we allow such very high levels of poverty to persist,” when the statistical evidence is so absolutely clear that there is a causal relationship between poverty and low educational outcomes.

Although poverty is particularly concentrated in Winnipeg’s inner city, large pockets of severe poverty exist in various suburban neighbourhoods as well. An example is three elementary schools in south St. Vital. Poverty levels in the neighbourhoods surrounding these three schools in the Louis Riel School Division (LRSD) are on par with those in the inner city.

Not surprisingly, outcomes at these three schools are well below the average for the LRSD. This is despite evidence that the three schools themselves are excellent. Even before they start, these children’s readiness for school is far behind the Divisional averages. The poverty—complex, multi-faceted poverty that includes various forms of oppression and causes multiple types of damage—is the problem.

To improve educational outcomes

for children experiencing poverty we need a coherent and long-term anti-poverty strategy led by all three levels of government that includes reparations to Indigenous citizens and measures to support the success of all families. That is not happening, and low-income children suffer as a result.

In the absence of an effective anti-poverty strategy driven by the three levels of government, the Louis Riel School Division is working with neighbourhood organizations and parents to implement an innovative community development (CD) strategy, what we have called a “whole community” strategy, aimed at strengthening families and building community. The theory is that stronger and healthier families and communities will produce improved school outcomes.

The approach taken by the School Division has been to meet with and listen to parents and others who live in the community to try to determine what they believe is needed to strengthen families and build community. This is a CD approach.

Building on what community members have said, much has been accomplished in the past 18 months since an initial report was delivered to the LRSD. These are some examples:

- The co-location at the previously almost-empty Rene Deleorme Centre

there is an alternative.

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(RDC) of the EDGE Skills Centre, offering academic upgrading and EAL programming to almost 400 adults; the Morrow Avenue Childcare Program, which will soon have 100 childcare spaces and will use the highly effective Abecedarian approach; and the Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program, which last year worked to meet the needs of 800 newcomers. These programs and their co-location at the RDC are strengthening families and the community.

- The establishment at Lavallee School of Winnipeg's first new Boys and Girls Club in 15 years. The community recommended this after-school program for children. Research shows that Boys and Girls Clubs improve children's likelihood of success at school.
- The implementation of new Indigenous programs aimed at cultural reclamation to strengthen families and build community. An example is the Red Road to Healing program, which responds to the trauma so closely associated with complex poverty.
- The creation of a parent-mentor program modeled on a highly successful program in Chicago, which brings a select number of parents into each of the three schools to work alongside teachers and to undergo life skills training. This program, now working on its third cohort, is proving to be highly successful.

These new initiatives have been added to what is already a strong array of programs offered by the LRSD and by community organizations in the area, all of which serve to support what community members consider the outstanding work done by teachers in the classrooms of the three schools.

The engagement of community members in prescribing and creating new supports and shifts in approaches is driving community renewal, cultural resurgence and vitality. It is building healthier families and communities. Children growing up in healthier families and communities are far more likely to

succeed in school.

This study has made clear two important things:

First, poverty has a dramatic and adverse effect on children's education. Any serious effort to improve educational outcomes in Manitoba must address the issue of poverty. This is not being done at all satisfactorily by governments.

Second, local school boards can play a significant role in reducing the negative impacts that poverty has on educational outcomes. The LRSD is being innovative in using a community development approach and working in partnership with community organizations and parents to strengthen families and build healthier communities. This is not a quick fix approach. However, in time, healthier families and communities will create the context in which children will thrive in school. The three schools included in this study are excellent; the problem is the poverty. The School Division deserves credit for understanding this, and taking action.

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References available upon request.

