



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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## Public funding for education in Manitoba

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

High quality public schooling is an expensive commitment. In Manitoba the operating costs for the 2015-16 school year was \$2.24 billion, which translates to an average per pupil operating cost of \$12,537 (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). In May of this year the Minister of Education and Training, Ian Wishart, announced plans to initiate a full-scale, long-term, review of education funding in the province. This short Fastfacts seeks to contribute to the review by suggesting three overarching themes to guide it: the importance of education as a public good; the importance of avoiding any drift towards a two-tiered public school system in the province; and, the importance of spending available resources wisely.<sup>2</sup>

### Education as a Public Good

An essential starting point for an informed discussion of education finance is the articulation of a set of touchstones, or core principles, of public schooling that can provide the framework for debating specific perspectives and proposals. At the heart of this in Manitoba has been the commitment to public schooling as a public good – the belief that a strong public school system is the cornerstone of a democratic society that promotes well-being and citizenship

for all – and not simply a private good, or commodity that can be differentially purchased by individual consumers. Everything flows from this. Public schooling as a public good involves the commitment to: public funding – that the full costs of public schooling are shared fairly across all sectors of society; public access and equity - that all students should have the opportunity to benefit fully from high quality schooling regardless of geographic location, local economic factors, or family circumstances; and, public participation and accountability – that decisions about public schooling are made in a democratic manner, which in Manitoba has meant a level of local autonomy, including taxing authority, for locally elected school boards. These ideals are clearly expressed in the preamble to Manitoba's Public Schools Act (<http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/p250e.php>) and provide particular answers to the question “what makes public education public”. Funding reforms will either support or undermine and redefine these ideals.

### Avoiding a Drift to a Two-Tiered Public School System

As already noted, a key aspect of a

<sup>1</sup>This *Fastfacts* draws in a number of places on a longer discussion of education finance in Manitoba that the authors prepared for the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents in 2014 entitled *Education finance and the pursuit of the goal of a high quality universally accessible public school system in Manitoba: Where are we, what challenges remain, and how can we meet them?*

<http://mass.mb.ca/publications/>

<sup>2</sup> Given the limitations of space this *Fastfacts* does not address issues of the funding of independent schooling and home-schooling in Manitoba, nor does it discuss the funding of First Nations schools. Each of which warrant attention in its own right.

public education system in Manitoba has been a commitment to schooling as a “public good” rather than a “private good”. However, currently costs to parents can run as high as a thousand dollars a year per child when you include fieldtrips, lunch supervision, purchase of a tablet, rental of band instruments and other fees. Other developments - such as an increased dependence on fundraising (Winnipeg Free Press, June 22, 2017), the emergence of a number of elite “sports academies” with very substantial fees attached to them (Winnipeg Free Press, November 16, 2015), increased attention to the recruitment of international students ([https://www.gov.mb.ca/ie/study/divisions/study\\_mb.html](https://www.gov.mb.ca/ie/study/divisions/study_mb.html)), and the government’s exploration of moving into public-private partnerships to build new schools (Winnipeg Free Press, May 2, 2017) – will raise questions for the upcoming funding review and the government’s commitment to the principles of equity and public funding. Initiatives – such as the Gordon Bell playing field or the Dakota “field of dreams” (Winnipeg Free Press, May 23, 2017) - may have compelling justifications and bring significant benefits to particular school communities but they are also contain a challenge because they slowly allow our attitudes towards public education to change and erode our commitment to public education. This point has been expressed forcefully by Annie Kidder, Executive Director of the organization *People for Education*, who when speaking about the increased reliance on fundraising in Ontario public schools commented that, “we are dangerously close to accepting the vision of public education as a charity” (Kidder, 2002, p. 43).

<sup>3</sup> For Winnipeg are school divisions the range is from a high in Pembina Trails School Division of \$555,462 per student and a low in Seven Oaks of \$297,274.

In Manitoba, where more than one-third of the operating costs of schools come from local school board taxes (see Table 1) differences in the relative wealth of school divisions provides a further equity issue that needs to be addressed.

Manitoba’s Financial Reporting and Accounting in Manitoba Education (FRAME) reports document significant, and growing, differences between school divisions in terms of per pupil expenditures tied in large part to differences in divisional property tax bases. Expressed as assessment per pupil (the total value of taxable property in the division divided by the number of students) this varies from a high of \$670,922 in Fort La Bosse School Division down to \$138,610 in Kelsey School Division, a factor of more than 4:1 (Manitoba Education & Training, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Currently targeted provincial funding in the form of equalization grants ameliorates some, but not all, of this inequality. Differences in per pupil expenditure translate into different services – wealthy school divisions can provide full day, every day kindergarten classes, poor divisions can’t.

Moving away from this shared funding model to full provincial funding would address this issue, and is something that Minister Wishart has said the education finance review will examine. All other provinces have moved in this direction in recent years. However, in terms of the touchstones outlined above such a move carries with it the undesirable likelihood of significantly weakening the authority of local school boards.<sup>4</sup> Currently it is

**Table 1. Provincial Contribution to Public Education (2015-16)**

	<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>Provincial Contribution</b>	<b>Provincial Contribution (%)</b>
<b>Operating Costs of Public Education</b>	\$2,235.0	\$1,421.0	63.6%
<b>Total Cost of Public Education</b>	\$2,690.5	\$1,997.5	74.2%

the school board that serves as the local interface between professional expertise and public participation and accountability, without which public school educators would lose an enduring source of support and legitimacy.

Without moving to full provincial funding a reduction in the size of the local funding contribution would reduce the impact of local tax base differences. In line with this the Manitoba School Boards Association has advocated for moving to a model that would see the province funding 80% of the operating costs of public schooling (Manitoba Association of School Trustees, 2005). While establishing an effective, politically palatable, mechanism for readjusting the provincial-school division funding balance has proven difficult, this shift coupled with a more robust provincial equalization formula could provide for increased funding equity between divisions without undermining the importance of school boards as the site of local participation in education decision-making.

### Spending Wisely

What constitutes the best use of available resources for public schooling is always a critical question, both in terms of the quality of children's schooling and in terms of the public's confidence in their schools. Attention to available research coupled with specific local attention to actually measuring the effects of current practices and innovations have an important contribution to make to the wise use of resources.

In one of the most influential recent studies advocating a more systematic, evidence-based educational decision-making entitled *Visible Learning* New Zealand academic John Hattie, after synthesizing more than 800 meta-analyses of research on student learning world-wide, asserts two main arguments: (i) that we currently devote too much attention and resources to innovations that research shows are likely to have only small effects on student learning;

and, (ii) that the most effective use of resources are those directed to the improvement of teaching. This is echoed by the highly influential Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that concluded:

*The quality of a school cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and principals.... PISA results show that among countries and economics whose per capita GDP is more than USD 20,000 high performing school systems tend to pay more to teachers relative to their national income per capita (OECD, 2013, p. 26)*

Any discussion of money and funding need to be broadly cast as about resources and making resources matter – with teachers as our most valuable resource. Across the province, are schools developing the talents of their staff and are those staff utilizing practices that are supported by research? Are we building a strong educational culture in our schools and communities? Are we ensuring that our strongest teachers and best administrators are serving the students who need them the most? Are schools making use of an array of evidence and data to monitor progress and guide ongoing improvements? Are we continuing to attract highly talented young people to the profession?

Finally, an effective review of education finance needs to recognize that school success is rarely achieved unconnected to broader social conditions beyond school, and policies that support investment in early childhood programs, accessible housing, income support, quality health care, family supports and neighbourhood development are crucial supports that schools and teachers need. In this regard Manitoba governments – both the last NDP government and the preceding Progressive Conservative government – have been pioneers in inter-sectoral policy development through the *Healthy Child Manitoba* policy strategy and its predecessor the *Manitoba Children and Youth Secretariat*. With the *Healthy Child Manitoba Office* now housed within the Department of Education

<sup>4</sup>It is important to note that while all Canadian provinces except Manitoba have moved to a full provincial funding model they have not, for the most part, moved away from using property taxes, now provincially set and collected, in support of public schooling.

and Training there is the potential for education funding and resources to be viewed in a more comprehensive and integrated manner.

### Conclusion

A review of education finance is timely and will need to focus on the issue of spending wisely or “value-for-money”, but its success should be first and foremost measured by its contribution to nurturing a high quality, single-tiered, education system that serves equally all Manitobans and contributes to our public wellbeing. Will the public school system of the future provide real opportunity for all or only for some?

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