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# Why Strong Manitoba School Boards Matter

By Jon Young and Dick Henley

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## About the Authors

Jon Young and Dick Henley are retired Education Faculty members at the University of Manitoba and Brandon University respectively. Jon Young's work focused on educational administration and public school governance and Dick Henley is an education historian. For the last two decades they have written collaboratively on education in Manitoba with a focus on school boards and education finance. This short article summarizes several of the issues that were raised in these publications and reiterates the arguments that they have made, and continue to hold for the importance of strong, local school boards in Manitoba.

# Introduction

The Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education is a nine-person commission charged with conducting a comprehensive and independent review of the province's K-12 education system(s). In April 2019 the Commission released a Consultation Discussion Paper that outlined six areas of focus: (i) the long-term vision; (ii) student learning; (iii) teaching; (iv) accountability for student learning; (v) governance; and, (vi) funding. In laying out the rationale for the review the document asserts that:

It has been decades since the last comprehensive review of K to 12 education in Manitoba. In that time, Manitoba has seen an unprecedented number of demographic, technological, environmental, economic and societal transformations. However, at the same time these immense changes have been occurring, the structures underpinning K to 12 education have remained basically unchanged.

During the past 15 years, Manitoba's K to 12 students have not kept pace with students in other jurisdictions in reading, math and science on pan-Canadian and international assessments. These results, among other educational indicators, suggest that many students are not adequately prepared to compete and succeed after Grade 12 as they transition to work or post-secondary education and training. This trend is concerning and the time has come for an in-depth, system-wide examination of what is working, and what is needed to change the trajectory for Manitoba's K to 12 system (p. 2).

At the time of the Minister of Education's announcement of this Commission, and in some of the early discussions related to the Commission, the value of the role played by the province's 37 school boards has been called into question (Education review to look at reducing, eliminating elected school boards in Manitoba, *Global News*, January 23rd 2019). This article addresses this issue.

# The Argument: Why School Boards Matter

Notwithstanding discussions and concerns about recent provincial *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and *Pan-Canadian Assessment Program* (PCAP) test scores, or the importance of always looking for improvement, Manitoba has a high quality public school system that is the envy of most other jurisdictions around the world. Two touchstones of this system, we argue, are: (i) a vision of the purpose of schooling as fundamentally educational and inclusive; and (ii) a structure that values and nurtures professional expertise within a framework of public responsibility and accountability. These

Manitoba touchstones are laid out with impressive clarity in the preamble to the *Manitoba Public Schools Act*, and it is these touchstones that provide the basis for asserting the continuing importance of school boards.

This argument for school boards has the essential caveats that they are small enough to legitimately claim to understand and represent local values and interests, and that they have sufficient autonomy within a provincial framework to actually make local decisions. For us, the ability to raise local taxes for education is perhaps the most important marker of local authority.

FIGURE 1 The Preamble to the Manitoba Public Schools Act

**WHEREAS** a strong public school system is a fundamental element of a democratic society;

**AND WHEREAS** the purpose of the public school system is to serve the best educational interests of students;

**AND WHEREAS** the public school system should contribute to the development of students' talents and abilities;

**AND WHEREAS** the public schools should contribute to the development of a fair, compassionate, healthy and prosperous society;

**AND WHEREAS** the public schools must take into account the diverse needs and interests of the people of Manitoba;

**AND WHEREAS** democratic local school divisions and districts play an important role in providing public education that is responsive to local needs and conditions;

**AND WHEREAS** parents have a right and responsibility to be knowledgeable about and participate in the education of their children;

**AND WHEREAS** public schools require skilled and committed staff in order to be effective;

**AND WHEREAS** it is in the public interest to further harmonious relations between teachers and their employers through the process of collective bargaining consistent with the principle that resources must be managed efficiently and effectively; and,

**AND WHEREAS** the Province of Manitoba and school divisions and districts share the responsibility for the financing of education;

*(Manitoba Public Schools Act)*

# Vision: The Educative Purpose of Public Schooling

In education a person responds to questions, pursues interests, and acts upon curiosity in ways that are always unscripted rather than predestined or preordained. Education constitutes an unsettling and unrehearsed adventure ... to places nobody has been before (*Hanson, 2008, p. 298*).

The only hope for curing the ills of the world is that young people may picture a better one and strive to realize it. To frame this picture and to cultivate this ambition is the greatest ambition of the school

(*William A. McIntyre, Manitoba Normal School Principal, 1932. Cited in Osborne, 2008, p. 29*).

Currently, in the context of fiscal constraint, the notion of identifying and focusing attention on a narrow set of “core functions” has gained popularity. While Manitoba’s public schools are expected to serve many functions in today’s society it is worth re-asserting the belief that their core purpose is *education*. Much has been written about the educational responsibilities of schools in a liberal democracy. David Coulter and John Wiens, in their edited book *Why do we educate? Renewing the conversation*, elaborate on

the notion of education as being connected to the pursuit of “a good and worthwhile life” that implies both individual fulfillment and social responsibility. Elaborating on this in the introduction to his 2015 review of the governance of Winnipeg School Division Wiens asserted that, as public educators:

We are helping each child and young person to ‘learn how to become and be a good person’, hoping in the process this will translate into helping them together with us ‘create a better world’. (*Wiens, 2015, p. 8*)

Certainly, this task has a substantial technical, pedagogic and curricula component — math and literacy, as well as future employability, matter — but it cannot be reduced to a narrow set of ‘deliverables’ or outcomes. It is also, fundamentally, a political and ethical human concern. Once we go beyond any very general and abstract conversation, what it means to be a ‘good person’ and how and where best to nurture such development is *inevitably and necessarily* characterized by a diversity of moral perspectives and priorities and highly contested. This is the terrain of public schooling in a democratic society and, if the resolution of this diversity of perspectives is

not to be simply achieved by an autocratic imposition of one version of 'goodness', then it has to be addressed instead through an inclusive, and ongoing public dialogue. A strong civil democracy requires that all people have an opportunity

to participate actively and in meaningful ways in the important decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their communities. In education, Manitoba school boards have played a key role in sustaining that democratic requirement.

# The Public in Public Schooling

Elected school boards represent one of the most enduring structures under-pinning Manitoba school systems. Situated between the central, constitutional authority of the provincial legislature and the on-the-ground realities of individual classrooms and schools, school boards have been charged with the dual tasks of (i) implementing provincial policy fairly and efficiently in their local school division, and, (ii) representing local community values and interests.

While school board elections generally attract limited interest and school trustees work, for the most part, out of the limelight, it is their existence that allows the public in each division to shape local programs — within the limits of provincial mandates and regulation — to reflect the local context. Boards provide the vehicle through which local issues such as special programming or school closures can be addressed locally, by people who are likely to have both an awareness of the details of the context and a stake in the outcome, in a way difficult to imagine at the provincial political or bureaucratic levels. Furthermore, crucially, this notion of local/community is one that is bigger than the individualistic/private interests on “my child” or “my school” and which instead has as its fo-

cus “our children”, “our schools” and “our community”.

In addition, by serving this role school boards provide the framework that is essential to allow professional teachers, principals and superintendents to do their work and to bring their expertise to the task of educating the province’s youth. Starratt (2004), in his book *Ethical Leadership* reminds us that,

The biggest issue for public administrators is legitimacy. Their legitimacy comes from the people they serve. They are instruments of self-government by the people, with obligations to the people’s well-being (p. 27).

Those people who dismiss school trustees for their lack of professional expertise miss this point. Yet if public schooling is to be both ‘public’ and ‘educative’ the point is critical. It is the school board that at the local level constitutes the interface between professional expertise and public participation and accountability without which professional educators would be robbed of an enduring source of support and legitimacy.

Nor does the, relatively rare, incidence of perceived school board dysfunction in Manitoba (Wien’s, 2015) or elsewhere (Government of Nova



Scotia, December 19, 2006) provide a valid justification for weakening or abolishing them. In extreme situations where school boards elections cannot correct the dysfunctionality, the *Public Schools Act* already provides an effective course of action through the appointment of an Official

Trustee. [It is perhaps worth noting here that when, in the recent past, the NDP government was impacted by a leadership revolt and struggle there was no such call for the abolition of the provincial legislature. The question was put to voters, instead, at the next provincial election.]

# Taxation

If school boards are to serve a democratic role in support of public education then they have to be more than the administrative arm of the provincial government — professional staff are better equipped to serve that function. Effective school boards have to have a level of authority and autonomy with which to carry out their work of reflecting local interests. Manitoba currently has among the strongest school boards in Canada and an important source of that authority comes from its ability to raise education funds locally through property taxation.

Embedded in the current debates surrounding Manitoba school boards' taxing authority are two quite distinct, but intertwined, issues: (i) the merits of moving to a single provincial source of funds, and (ii) the merits of using property taxes — whether collected locally or provincially — to support public schooling. Two arguments made in support of a move to full provincial funding are: (i) increased equality for school divisions with less wealthy property bases and revenue generating capacity; and (ii) the shifting of the funding of public schooling off of property taxation. The argument that full provincial funding would address the current inequities that currently exist in per pupil education expenditures between

divisions based on the relative wealth of individual divisions is an important one (O'Leary and Young, 2014; O'Leary and Young, 2018). Either moving education funding off of property taxes entirely or collecting and distributing property taxes centrally with a common mill-rate would be ways of addressing this issue. However, a more robust provincial equalization formula could just as well address this issue. Likewise, a reduction in the proportion of school funding borne by local property taxation from the current level of just under 40 percent of the annual operating budget (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019) to something like an 80 percent (provincial)/ 20 percent (local) share would also serve to reduce these inequities.

For some, the desire to take away local school board taxing authority is based on the belief that public schooling should be fully funded by general revenues — the broad range of taxes raised at the provincial level — and not property taxes — the only tax available to school boards. The history of the funding of education in Canada through a tax on local property and the merits of taxes on property as opposed to other forms of taxation raise complex issues beyond the scope of this article (Henley & Young, 2008).

What is worth noting in this context is that in most cases the move to full provincial funding in other Canadian provinces has not seen the elimination of the use of property taxation to support education but rather simply the shifting of control of those revenues from the local to the province.<sup>1</sup>

As with the issue of tax base inequities across school divisions, a re-alignment of the balance between funding from provincial general revenues and revenues from local property taxation would ameliorate this issue without weakening school boards. Successive governments have tried on occasion to move in this direction by legis-

lation to freeze local tax increases in the 1990s, a Tax Incentive Grant (TAG) introduced by the previous NDP government, and more recently by Ministerial directive, but overall the balance has moved in the opposite direction. Notwithstanding the associated political and administrative complexities, moving to a funding model that would see the provincial government assuming a larger proportion of the operating budget for public schooling from general revenue while allowing school boards to retain a smaller, but still significant, taxing authority would, we believe, provide a fairer, more balanced, and more widely supported funding formula.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A 2014 article by Rene Appelmans and Brian Spurrill, *Property taxation supporting education: Fact and fiction* reported that across the western provinces education property taxes are the source of between 34–35 percent of provincial public school funding. In this regard Manitoba stands out only in that the tax is set and collected locally rather than provincially — not in the use of property taxation in support of education.

<sup>2</sup> In the early 1908s provincial funds accounted for some 80 percent of the public school operating budget with local taxes constituting the vast majority of the rest — although the provincial contribution did include revenues from provincial collected property taxes as well as general revenues. Since then the notion of an 80/20 split has been often articulated as a fairer distribution of financial responsibility both among various political parties and among other educational stakeholders (Henley and Young, 2008).

# Conclusion

The Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Discussion Document poses the question, “what is working and what is needed to change the trajectory for Manitoba’s K-12 system [to better equip Manitoba youth for life after Grade 12]” (p. 2). Improved student learning outcomes always depend on high quality teaching and a broad range of environmental supports for families and children, but system-level governance issues matter too. Our purpose here has been to attempt to lay out an argument as to why, and how, strong local school boards have served Manitoba schools well and continue to do so — that they are not some unnecessary, ill-informed, expense but rather vital stewards of the public voice in public schooling that need strengthening rather than weakening.

The argument here is simple. If we are to protect a high quality, public school system that is truly public, then school boards matter. They matter because (i) they can represent local voices

about the education of a community’s children and youth; and (ii) because they have a degree of autonomy in making local decisions that reflect those local voices.

But the argument here is not simply for the continued existence of school boards. In addition it is essential to: (i) resist the large-scale amalgamation of urban, school boards that has happened elsewhere — such as the Toronto District School Board that serves more students than are in all of Manitoba’s provincial system — and which makes a mockery of any notion of local community voice, and, (ii) avoid centralizing actions that so limit the decision-making authority of boards, particularly in the core areas of funding and budget-setting, as to make them no more than the administrative arm of the provincial government. Such developments need to be seen as what they essentially would be — step one of a two-stage path to the abolition of school boards and the commitment to schooling as a truly public endeavour.

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