



Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

Survey on the Public Schools Finance Board

Executive Summary

January 2007

Preface: *The Purpose of the Survey*

The Public Schools Finance Board plays a crucial role in the education of students in the schools of Manitoba. The Manitoba Association of School Superintendents has every appreciation for the complex considerations that accompany decisions about the allocation of resources, and the factors that drive that allocation. Concern for fiscal restraint at the provincial and local levels has driven decisions about spending since the mid-1970s, with school divisions prioritizing resources for direct classroom instruction.

However, various factors compel the maintenance, repair, renovation, and, when necessary, addition of new facilities to claim their places when school divisions and the Province of Manitoba consider the allocation of finite resources. The de-emphasis on spending related to facilities, as a result of decades of fiscal restraint at all levels, has resulted in concerns about aging infrastructures, especially as awareness emerges about the impact, on human health, of building environments and their air quality. Further, legislation to attend to the increasingly diverse needs of students compels modifications of buildings, if all students are to thrive in public schools. Finally, the nature of education has evolved to include the diversity of programming that young people require to become successful citizens of the 21st century world, and facilities must evolve to accommodate that diversity.

The functioning of the Public Schools Finance Board invites the understandable interest and concern of members of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, in the *managerial* and *political* dimensions of its members' roles. However, the *instructional* dimension, for leaders charged with supporting all aspects of the learning environment, impelled the membership to identify and advance recommendations to the provincial colleagues who will assume the responsibility for the Public Schools Finance Board under its adapted governance structure.

The Structure of the Survey

In April and May 2006, MASS conducted a secure on-line survey from which data resulted in two parts.

The questions invited members to provide their perceptions of the degree to which current structures, processes, and functions of the Public Schools Finance Board impact positively on the management of facilities in divisions throughout Manitoba.

In addition, members received an invitation to comment in anecdotal form about specific areas which included the following topics:

- PSFB Structure and Governance Model
- Funding to individual school divisions
- Access Issues
- Portable Classrooms
- New Construction
- Specific needs of new communities
- Aging Infrastructure
- Disposition Processes
- Other comments / concerns

The Respondents to the Survey

Respondents completed the survey as representatives of their school divisions, following their inclusion of colleagues of their divisional management teams to provide input, as determined by portfolios for which Public Schools Finance Board functions have significant implications.

Twenty-two of the thirty-eight school divisions represented in MASS responded to the survey as follows:

Metro Winnipeg:	5 of a possible 6
Large Urban Centres:	3 of a possible 6
Rural:	11 of a possible 21
Northern rural:	2 of a possible 4
DSFM:	1 of a possible 1

Summary of responses

Survey responses focus on ten specific areas requiring further enhancement at the Public Schools Finance Board. This section summarizes the **prominent themes** of respondents' comments about each topic, in their order of frequency.

PSFB Structure and Governance Model of PSFB

Generally, respondents welcomed the new structure, but stated that the organizational chart, including roles and responsibilities, requires further definition and clarification. Some concern merged about the practicality of the involvement of Deputy Ministers rather than administrators guiding the structure, in terms of potential political influence factors and time management. Responses referenced the current length of the decision-making process, the impact of Manitoba's aging infrastructure and funding by the Public Schools Finance Board, and the need for greater role clarity of the Executive Director and Chairperson of the PSFB.

Funding to individual school divisions

While nearly a third of the respondents believed that they had received adequate funding from the Public Schools Finance Board, the majority of the divisions indicated that local funding compensated to support urgent projects due to insufficient funds from the PSFB. Again, questions about the decision-making process appeared as a less dominant theme as to how priorities are determined for funding.

Access Issues

Eleven of the fourteen respondents to this question indicated that modifications to attend to access for students with special needs were inadequately addressed and that delays were concerning. Concern about the feasibility of meeting the demands of the Appropriate Education Programming legislation emerged as a secondary theme.

Portable Classrooms

The dominant theme was of the significant delay involved in acquiring portable classrooms. A second theme challenged the appropriateness of the use of portable classrooms on a long-term basis when they should be characterized as a short-term solution.

New Construction

All but one response indicated dissatisfaction with aspects of new construction, ranging from the delays for approval, the need for additions rather than new construction, the remoteness factor and its impact on costs for northern construction, the funding formula's inadequacy, and obsolete funding guidelines. Only one response indicated satisfaction with how new construction projects occur.

Specific needs of new communities

The ten responses focused nearly equally on two themes; these are probably a function of demographics: in that they are not applicable to some divisions or, contrastingly, they surface concern about a lack of planning when new developments occur in divisions experiencing continued housing development.

Aging Infrastructure

The sixteen responses strongly indicate **that this is the predominant concern of all of the specific issues for which commentary was invited.** Responses include concern that replacement might be preferable to, and more cost-efficient than, repair of buildings not initially constructed well.

Disposition Processes

Concerns exist with the outdated guidelines. For a few divisions, disposition of schools has not applied to their situation. Other school divisions suggested a review of current guidelines to assist with timely divisional processes.

Other comments/concerns about the Public Schools Finance Board's operation

15 responses emerged. Only one response indicated that no concerns exist for it.

The model and the funding structure elicited more commentary than the concerns about funding; however, reading them establishes that respondents perceive the two as intertwined.

A second major theme focuses on processes that respondents perceive as lengthy, unclear, inefficient, and requiring complex paperwork that taxes divisions' resources.

Observations about the PSFB staff included concern that they be recognized for attempts to be helpful, a sense that they are understaffed, reflections about the impact of the use of Deputy Ministers to head the structure, the apparent role of project leaders to slow the pace of projects, and the need for the Board's staff to have technical expertise.

Because of the prominence of the model in the comments, a summary of recommendations related to the model appears in point form, *verbatim* from the survey results:

About the model

- Two questions to reflect on: a) How does Public Schools Finance Board's current model ensure that taxpayers receive appropriate economic value? b) Is there a model for determining appropriate government funding to PSFB to meet needs?
- [Currently] too political in nature - should develop a weighted system for calculating priorities for capital.
- Effective planning (short and long-term) is important, roles of PSFB staff (adversarial mandate)
- Consider remoteness costs and modular schools.

About communication processes

- In many cases, the same information has been requested by the PSFB and was sent two or three times.
- Need for written confirmations, approvals given verbally and no follow-up.

- Amount of time for decisions and actions needs reduction.
- The process for capital construction requires unnecessary approvals.
- Planning/Communication: Although there are many pressing challenges and requests for the PSFB, development and communication of a longer range plan would assist divisions and result in better allocation and use of resources

About the use of personnel

- We recommend an Integrated Design Team involving the school division, the PSFB Project leader, and the architectural firm. Such a team needs a mandate to design cooperatively a building without the PSFB having to duplicate this work every time they receive drawings for formal approval.
- Not enough technical staff exists to complete the steps in a timely fashion. The technical staff does not have adequate liberties to make decisions within the approved allocations.

About roles and responsibilities

- The guidelines on school closure are the Administration Branch responsibility not that of the PSFB.

Concluding Summary:

- The ageing infrastructure in Manitoba is a serious concern.
- Access issues in schools are a serious concern.
- The review of the data did not elicit noticeably different themes or trends between responses from divisions based on their location in the province.
- The membership appears receptive to the impact of the new governance model.
- Respondents perceive a great need for the Public Schools Finance Board's understanding of divisions' individual demographics.