

Rural Education in Manitoba:
**Defining Challenges,
Creating Solutions**

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Introduction

Public education everywhere in Manitoba and indeed across North America faces serious challenges. This is especially true in areas where significant economic and cultural changes have made rural communities, and the educational systems within them, particularly vulnerable. “Rural communities have become peripheral to the world economy” [Wallin], and with the decline in Canadian dependence on the rural economy has come economic instability, dwindling populations and increasing levels of poverty in rural and remote communities.

Shifting economies and increased immigration to some communities have created bulges in enrolment and a tremendous need for educational resources. The change in demographics includes a burgeoning Aboriginal population and issues for aboriginal reserves and band-operated as well as provincial schools. Amalgamation of school divisions over the past ten years together with decline in rural population has led to a reduced sense of community ownership and community voice. Society’s increasing reliance on technology as a vehicle for communication and access to information affords opportunities, but access is uneven. The decline in rural economies has resulted in greater inequities in commercial assessment and in Manitoba, therefore, increasing pressure on local property tax levies for the support of public schools.

A discernible shift in Canadian society -- to a stance of individualism over community and the perception of education increasingly as a private rather than a public good -- appears to limit the options before us. Indeed, there is a significant decline in public support for public institutions generally, including public schools. But that is in itself a challenge that must be met head-on. And while urban and rural alike share that reality as well as other issues in common, the challenges are particularly acute in rural areas with less capacity to draw on resources.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to name the particular challenges faced by rural school divisions and to identify actions which might be taken to address them. In so doing, and recognizing that these challenges are all important and in many instances inter-related, no effort has been made to suggest any order of priority among them.

Challenges

1. Social values and public attitudes.

Periods of rapid social and economic change are often characterized by significant shifts in social values and public attitudes in multiple arenas. In the realm of public education, these forces have extended the role of teachers far beyond the realm of academic instruction (Elkind, 2001) and often made public schools the scapegoat for all of the social ills within the broader communities which they serve (Manafa, 2006).

More specifically:

- school programs and service mandates continue to expand to address student learning needs with regard to social and emotional behaviours, physical and mental well-being, physical and cognitive disabilities, cultural diversity and social inclusion, human sexuality, life skills acquisition, technical, vocational and entrepreneurial skills development, etc.;
- increasing population diversity has the effect of multiplying demands and expectations and rendering consensus and agreement on shared priorities more difficult to achieve;
- schools in rural and remote regions of the province often have neither the fiscal nor the human resource capacity to respond fully and adequately and sometimes not at all to these expanding program and service mandates and expectations;
- large segments of the population are disconnected from Manitoba's public schools and have little understanding of the realities and challenges in public education and object to the increasing costs of program and service delivery to meet expanded education mandates;
- there is declining trust in and support for public institutions, including public schools, and a growing perception among citizens that "private" is more effective, efficient and less costly than "public"; and
- there is growing resistance to property taxation and local school board taxing authority in support of public schools.

2. Infrastructure needs

Dwindling population numbers in some regions and the influx of significant new immigrant populations in others have created both boom and bust scenarios in many rural school divisions. Emerging infrastructure concerns include facilities, technology and transportation systems.

- With population declines, correspondingly reduced enrolment numbers threaten the viability of many small schools. Additionally, projections of declining enrolments call into question the advisability of significant investments in facilities renewal initiatives.
- In some rural divisions experiencing population increases, there are insufficient instructional and ancillary spaces to accommodate all students.
- As school buildings become filled to capacity or closed due to enrolment declines, students must be bussed even greater distances to the next nearest school facility. Transportation costs continue to increase, as do length of routes and rider times for students.

- Lacking a coordinated provincial strategy for technology infrastructure and connectivity across the province, opportunities are limited for cross-divisional partnering around course development and delivery for students and professional development for teachers. For the most part, divisions work independently of one another in these areas and the potential for economies of scale are therefore reduced or limited.

3. Recruitment and retention of qualified staff

The most important determinant of student learning is the classroom teacher, and yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and to retain qualified teaching staff in rural school divisions.

- Many rural school divisions cannot provide the same “amenities” offered by larger, more urban divisions and teachers are therefore often hesitant to relocate to rural areas.
- Owing to lack of critical mass, school configurations and classroom groupings in rural school divisions often necessitate that teachers be assigned “out of field” or in challenging contexts which may create health and wellness issues for individuals.
- Teachers in rural divisions are often more isolated than their urban counterparts and have fewer opportunities to collaborate with other teachers in same grade levels or subject area specializations.
- Professional development opportunities for educators are often more limited in rural and remote areas and participation costs greater where travel to other locations/centres is required.
- Rural divisions are frequently unsuccessful in attracting specialist teachers in particular subject or service areas, resulting in engagement of “non-certified” individuals or position vacancies and reduced program/service options for students.

4. Jurisdictional and policy issues

Creative and innovative approaches to the challenges experienced by many rural school divisions necessitate local freedom and flexibility to explore options, pursue partnerships and institute changes geared to addressing the uniqueness and particularities of any given situation.

- Mandates and policies of community agencies and government departments sometimes prohibit resource sharing and collaboration between school divisions and other entities.
- Research about effective policy in other jurisdictions is not always readily available or easily accessible to inform decision-making at local school division and community levels.
- Monitoring and tracking processes are not sufficiently well developed in many instances to assess the effectiveness of new policy directions and/or program innovations in rural school division settings.
- New provincial policy directions and legislative changes may necessitate increased workload and expenditures in school divisions, but provincial financial support is often absent or inadequate.
- Gaps in inter-departmental communication and coordination at the provincial level sometimes result in confusing and/or contradictory direction to school divisions.

Toward solutions

The complex challenges facing rural school divisions in Manitoba, in many instances, surpass both the authority and/or the capacity of individual school divisions to respond fully and adequately. Collaboration among school divisions, the provincial Government and community agencies is essential to the articulation and implementation of effective strategies and actions which will ensure a high quality of educational opportunity for all students in rural and remote areas of our province. While not an exhaustive list, the following ideas provide a beginning point for discussion of possibilities and alternatives for consideration.

For local school divisions:

- develop a comprehensive program to educate constituents about the value of public education, the current realities in Manitoba schools, the importance of local control in education matters, and the necessity of local property tax revenues to support programs and services delivery;
- explore partnership models and the creation of cooperatives to address services and programming needs;
- engage in action research, data collection and on-going tracking to assess the impacts of provincial education policy and initiatives in rural and remote schools in the province.

For the provincial government:

- develop a revised equalization formula which captures more effectively the geographic and financial disparities among school divisions;
- articulate and implement a provincial strategy to provide broad-band width access in all school divisions and communities
- increase consultant capacity within Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth to service rural and remote divisions which lack consultants and specialist teachers
- review and revise provincial policies and ministry department mandates which impede inter-organizational collaboration and joint initiatives
- provide adequate financial resources to school divisions to support full implementation of provincial education policy directions (i.e. appropriate education, community schools, additional required physical education/health credits at grades 11 and 12)
- revise certification requirements which prevent employment of qualified education professionals from jurisdictions outside of Manitoba
- increase flexibility for local school divisions in the management and delivery of education programs (i.e. school day, school week, vacation schedules)

For school divisions, government and post-secondary sector:

- work collaboratively to address issues of teacher preparation and recruitment and retention of qualified education professionals at all levels
- provide increased professional development opportunities and supports for aspiring school and divisional administrators (i.e. mentorship programs)
- consider incentive programs to develop candidates and retain professional staff in “hard-to-fill” positions
- utilize research expertise in universities and government department to collect and analyse data and to inform discussions about potential solutions to identified challenges
- develop and provide appropriate professional development opportunities to address emerging social and demographic trends/changes (i.e. aboriginal issues, immigrant and war-affected students, aggressive and bullying behaviour)

For education stakeholder organizations:

- work to ensure internal organizational cohesion on requests of the recommendations to the provincial Government
- share information, data and perspectives to develop consensus and ensure coordinated lobby on education issues of common concern
- create and implement a public relations campaign to increase understanding of and support for local education governance and retention of meaningful taxing authority for school boards.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of education systems and the diversity of school divisions and communities across Manitoba, there is no single answer or solution to the various dilemmas and challenges confronting public education in rural and remote regions of our province. Rather, effective responses to the challenges outlined in this discussion paper must be tailored to the particular realities of individual circumstances. While provincial policy direction and resource supports to school divisions may be generic in nature and apply broadly to all jurisdictions, it is more importantly the creativity and collaboration among local school authorities and community organizations and agencies which will shape the strategies and actions to ensure robust and high quality public school education in all rural Manitoba school divisions. School boards and divisional administrators must assume a critical leadership role in marshalling community support and facilitating meaningful community engagement in the quest for solutions to the pressing needs and challenges of rural education in Manitoba.

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