



## School Boards for the 21st Century: Keeping the Public in Public Education

by Jon Young

### Introduction

School boards represent one of Canada's most enduring forms of elected representation. Over the years public education has seen many shifts in terms of the size, structures and functions of school boards in response to changing economic, social and political contexts, but for most of the twentieth century they remained vital institutions of community voice and of the localism central to public education and to the democratic process. However, over the last two decades, across a broad range of important educational matters - funding, collective bargaining, curriculum and assessment, school closures, to name only a few - there has, in most provinces, been marked centralizing of authority away from school boards to provincial governments.

To date Manitoba has generally stood apart from many of these centralizing developments and its school boards remain among the strongest in terms of local community representation in Canada. Nonetheless, the pressures remain and the future is uncertain. A significant part of the strength of Manitoba's school boards has come from the autonomy and political and moral authority that comes with the ability to raise local taxes in support of education. Currently funding issues - the adequacy of the total education budget to meet an ever-increasing set of provincial policy expectations; the balance between provincial and local revenues and the autonomy of school boards to set their own tax levels; the processes for equalizing per pupil funding levels across school divisions - are seen by many trustees as fundamentally undermining their ability to carry out their mandate. Similarly, recent unilateral changes to *The Public Schools Act* that take away from school boards the authority to close schools without Ministerial approval [*Sections 41 (1.2) and 41 (1.3)*] are seen as a further weakening of local authority.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (i) to argue for the importance of maintaining, and strengthening, a public education system in Canada that is both fundamentally public and educational, (ii) to argue that strong local school boards need to be an essential part of that system, and (iii) within the context of Manitoba discuss some ways in which school boards might be nurtured and strengthened.

## Why School Boards Matter

*“Education is the first public good that a government can give to a people.”* La Fontaine, Address to the Electors of Terrebonne, 1840.

- Cited in Saul, 2008, p. 134

### ***Education and Public Schooling: The fundamental question of purpose***

While public schools are legitimately called upon to serve many functions in today’s society, it is worth re-asserting that the core purpose of public schools is *education*. Much has been written about the educational responsibilities of schools in a liberal pluralist democracy.<sup>1</sup> Coulter and Wiens (2008) connect the notion of education to the pursuit of “a good and worthwhile life” that implies both individual fulfillment and social responsibility, and to an ongoing and inclusive conversation as to what constitutes “good and worthwhile” for particular people(s) at a particular place and time. Tom Symons (1975) similarly argued that education is inextricably bound to ideas of *self-knowledge or identity* as well as a notion of empowerment - not in the narrow sense of personal aggrandizement, but rather as living more fully in the world. Education here means *to know ourselves* - who we are; where we are in time and space; where we have come from; what our responsibilities are to ourselves, to others and to the physical world we inhabit; and where we are going/what we might become. For this process of acquiring self-knowledge to be educative and more than socialization young people must play an active and critical role in the creation of this knowledge. As Hanson (2008) puts it,

*“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.”* (p. 298)

There is an exciting and empowering dynamic in affirming this educative purpose, one that cannot be passive or imposed but rather is of necessity active and engaging of students, families and communities. It is a purpose greater than skills

development for global economic competitiveness, and it is a complex and value-laden purpose that is not always easily framed by an outcomes-based language of efficiency. It is, however, a purpose that is above all public, and well served by local school boards.

### ***The Public Nature of Public Schooling***

*“Only public schools guarantee, out of respect for the individual, that every child will have a place without precondition of any kind; and only public schools are governed by a process that is open to every member of the community, regardless of religious convictions, racial origins, economic or any other circumstances.”*  
- King, 2003, p. 5

There are three primary structural characteristics that have come to define what is “public” about public schooling in Canada. Simply put, these three characteristics can be summarized as the touchstones of:

- *Public accessibility and equality* - that all children should have access to, and the opportunity to benefit equally from, school.
- *Public funding* - that the costs of schooling should be shared fairly across all segments of society and that the quality of education received by any child should not be related to the ability of the child or their parents to pay for all or part of that schooling.
- *Public accountability and control* - that decisions about the nature of public schooling should be made through public political processes and by people elected to carry out this responsibility.

Even though there is no shortage of examples of where we have fallen short, the history of Canadian public schooling can be viewed as the struggle to establish and sustain these ideals and to define at any particular time and place who are afforded the status of constituting “the public”.

Since the Canadian constitution assigns education, with some exceptions<sup>2</sup> as a provincial responsibility with authority residing in the provincial legislature, it is possible to argue that “the public” therefore consists of all provincial citizens eligible to vote and that public control is properly exercised through provincial elections. However, in exercising this constitutional authority in education, all provinces very early in their history created some form of elected local bodies usually called school boards with legally defined powers delegated to them by the provincial government. In doing so the provinces recognized that central to a strong civil democracy is the requirement that people have the opportunity to participate actively in the important decisions that shape their lives, not simply through federal, provincial or municipal elections, but on an ongoing basis in the public debates that shape public policy and our daily interactions. This belief was embedded in the 1871 legislation that established public education in Manitoba and, while today’s school boards and school divisions are different in a number of ways from the more than 1600 operating boards that existed across the province at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of local representation and local accountability has remained a key aspect of the governance of public schooling in the province.

While school board elections generally attract fairly limited interest and school trustees work, for the most part, out of the limelight, their existence allows the public in each school division to shape its programs (within the broad policy mandates of the province) to reflect local needs and interests. School boards provide the vehicle through which local issues such as special programming or a school closure 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 level of provincial politics.<sup>3</sup>

In doing this, elected school boards provide the democratic 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 society’s youth.

As Starratt (2004) reminds school leaders:

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).

If public schooling is to be both public and educational in the manner outlined in this article, then this point is critical. It is the school board that constitutes the local interface of professional expertise and public participation and accountability, without which public school educators would be robbed of an enduring source of support and legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the collective voice of school trustees expressed through the Manitoba School Boards Association plays an important role, along with other organizations such as the Manitoba Teachers Society and the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, in ensuring that important provincial educational decisions are accompanied by (preferably preceded by) public debate. This has generally acted to limit unilateral action by the provincial government and provided a balance that has served Manitoba schools well.

## Looking to the Future/Nurturing Strong Local School Boards

*“One of the jobs of a leader is to remind citizens of their most decent intentions.”*  
- Saul, 2008, p. 146

There is nothing that is new or radical in these principles of public schooling. They are guiding principles that have served Manitoba well and are, in fact, explicitly spelled out in the preamble to the *Manitoba Public Schools Act* (Figure 1).

The expectation that “democratic local school divisions and districts play an important role in providing public education that is responsive to local needs and conditions” sets up and acknowledges an inherent political

## FIGURE I

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

**HER MAJESTY** by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba enacts as follows.

tension between provincial goals and priorities and local needs and interests reflective of a diverse society. These tensions are generally exacerbated by the fact that school boards are a "single interest entity" - their commitment, focus and mandate being public schools - while the provincial government has a much broader mandate that requires their attention. As such, it has to be expected that, probably more often than not, there will be a level of disagreement between school boards and the provincial government, and it is a serious mistake to assume that such disagreements somehow automatically make a case that school boards are dysfunctional or outdated. Rather, at best, these tensions are productive and creative. They ensure that issues are considered carefully and through multiple voices, that decision-making is characterized by creativity, innovation and accommodation, and that decision-makers can be held to public account and to the stated ideals of public education.

What are some of the things that might support this 'best case scenario' in Manitoba?

### *1. Respectful relations between the provincial government and local school boards.*

David King, Executive Director of the Public School Boards of Alberta and former Alberta Minister of Education, has made the argument that "locally elected trustees are trustees of the local community's interest in public education; they are not trustees of the province's interests, although the provinces - without exception, I believe - think otherwise. Essentially, locally elected trustees are, or should be, the voice of the local community to the provincial government (among others); they are not the voice of the provincial government to the local community. Provincial governments should just learn to live with the discomfort this occasionally provides (2004, p. 7)."

This shared task of balancing provincial priorities with local interests requires a high level of trust and collaboration between these

two levels of government - an appreciation that there are likely to be legitimate differences between the two and a willingness to work together in the face of these differences. A recently signed “Protocol of Recognition” between the British Columbia government and the British Columbia School Boards Association provides one vehicle for signaling a commitment to such trust and collaboration, but it is the quality of ongoing working relationships, not formal written agreements, that are the true test of respectful relationships.

## ***2. Provincial legislation, policies and practices that provide school boards adequate levels of discretion and autonomy.***

For school boards to be effective - for committed people to be prepared to seek election and to serve on them, and for their constituents to look to them as community leaders - they must be seen to exert influence in important aspects of local schooling: to make a difference. What, specifically, those aspects will be are likely to vary from province to province, and to vary over time as provincial governments come to see particular educational issues (such as school closures) as sufficiently important to the provincial education agenda as to warrant a reclamation of provincial authority. Where such developments represent not an isolated event but an ongoing erosion of the discretion of school boards, they clearly undermine their vitality and purpose.

An important corollary to this requirement is that school boards have access to the resources required to develop and implement local educational strategies. In most provinces, where all or the vast majority of funding comes directly from the provincial government, this becomes a question of the overall levels of funding and the degrees to which provincial funding is tied categorically to provincial objectives. In Manitoba this also goes to issues of the appropriate balance between provincial and local taxation, as well as the role of the provincial government on defining that balance (directly through legislation as was done by Manitoba’s Progressive Conservative

government in the 1990s or indirectly through Tax Incentive Grants as is currently the case), and in addressing unequal tax bases between school boards (Henley & Young, 2008). Such issues are inevitably contentious; education is one of those activities where we can be fairly confident that wise and fiscally prudent people could always put more money than we have to good use.

However, when school boards consistently feel powerless to implement the programs that their communities are demanding, their viability is again brought into question.

## ***3. Community engagement as a core function of School Boards and School Trustees.***

Ongoing public participation in educational decision-making critical to a healthy public school system makes important demands, in terms of community engagement, of school board trustees. Trustee legitimacy and credibility have to rest on more than a once-in-four-year election (or acclamation). Rallis, Shibles & Swanson (2002, p. 251) remind us that the role of school boards is to connect the public to its schools, and as such they are “stewards of the community conversation about schools.” To fulfill this task, they suggest, school boards and school trustees have to provide a range of invitational forums - formal school board meetings being only one - for such conversations characterized by *inclusion*, *dialogue* and *deliberation*. This requires a proactive stance from school boards that: seeks out multiple voices and ensures that they are listened to; fosters a process whereby different perspectives are properly explained and understood; and, when choices are to be made between different courses of action, they are well reasoned and carefully articulated. It is through these processes that trustees demonstrate their integrity and their commitment to the educational well-being of the community’s children and cultivate the support needed to make difficult decisions that invariably go with the role.

## Concluding Comment

*“Not only is the public education system and its fundamental structure not old fashioned, it has found a new form of modernity. I would argue that we are more reliant on it today than we were through most of the 20th century.”*

- Saul, 2003, p. 5

Canada’s public education system was recently reported by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce as being second only to Finland in a survey of seventeen industrialized countries, a survey that placed the United Kingdom eleventh and the United States of America sixteenth (Chamber of Commerce, 2008). Yet often we turn to those very countries for direction in “re-forming” our schools. In similar vein, while Manitoba has among the strongest school boards in Canada we are less likely to celebrate that commitment to keeping the public in public education than to look to provinces such as Ontario - where school boards have no local taxing authority and where the single Toronto District School Board attempts to reflect the “local” interests of more students than are in school in all of Manitoba - and think that we are somehow out-of-step. The argument here is the opposite: Manitoba needs to hold on to and nurture its school boards and to celebrate the strength of their school trustees.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> A discussion of the concept of liberalism - and neo-liberalism - is beyond the scope of this paper. An introduction to these terms with reference to school reform in Manitoba can be found in Henley, D. & Young, J. “An argument for the progressive possibilities for public education: The Case of Manitoba,” In J. Portelli, & R.P. Soloman (eds.), *The Erosion of Democracy in Education: From Critique to Possibilities*, published in 2001 by Detselig Press.

<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal/Indian education, as a federal responsibility, constitutes the major exception. The consequences of an absence of local control and voice in the history of Aboriginal/Indian education might provide a strong cautionary note to those who would weaken provincial school boards.

<sup>3</sup> David King (2007) in a paper entitled, *When you come to a fork in the road, take it: Public school education, community, and state*, lays out an interesting comparison of the core characteristics of local and provincial politics. The former he argues are citizen politics based on trust and the latter party politics based on skepticism.

<sup>4</sup> While this point may get lost in the day-to-day routines of collective bargaining and employer-employee relations, it is nonetheless a key point to be remembered.



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