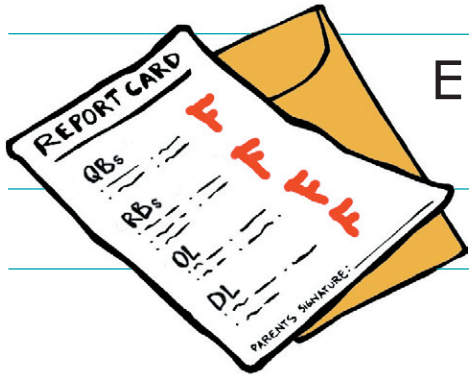


BACKGROUNDER

A Failing Report Card

EDUCATION POLICY IN MANITOBA IS HEADING THE WRONG WAY

BY DAVID SEYMOUR



Executive Summary

- Since the election of the provincial government in 1999, significant changes to educational policy in Manitoba have taken place. Contrary to the “New Directions” initiative of the previous administration, these changes have been characterized by a retreat from Canada’s decentralized education model and a rise in discretionary authority from the Minister’s office.
- These changes include a new assessment program, forced school division amalgamations, special education legislation (Bill 13), stipulation that course content be changed, intervention in school closure procedures, the ineffectual Tax Incentive Grant scheme, and a shortened school year.
- Provincial standardized tests for grades 3, 6 and 9 were abolished and replaced by subjective and time-consuming assessments. Manitoba students write fewer standardized exams than students in every other province except Prince Edward Island.
- The number of school boards was reduced from 57 to 36. The Minister of Education predicted a savings of \$10-million.
- In actuality, overall spending in post-amalgamated school divisions increased. This can be largely explained by the upward harmonization of wages.
- Special education expenditures increased by over 300 per cent over the past 20 years while overall expenditures increased by only 49 per cent over the same period. While catering for special needs students is an important prerogative for any education system, it is reasonable to question whether this exponential growth is a response to better levels of service, a genuine increase students requiring such services, or the perverse incentives offered to school boards by the Department’s funding formulae.
- The government passed Bill 13 and entrenched the controversial policy of mainstreaming in our schools. Once again this initiative overrode the autonomy of local school boards.
- Decision-making powers regarding special needs students were centralized in the Minister of Education’s office. This reduces local authority and accountability.
- The provincial government reduced the school year from 200 days, and the year fluctuates between 194 and 198 days. This was done to enable a post-Labour Day start date.
- Many organizations expressed concern about the loss of instructional time and pointed out that a post-Labour Day start date has more to do with family vacations and recreation than with education.
- The government missed an opportunity to emulate other provinces and allow school divisions to decide what changes for the school year work best for their students.



Manitoba's School Year

Yesterday: 200 days

Today: 194 +/- 198 days*

Enables a post- Labour Day start date.

*Has more to do with family vacations and recreation than educational policies.



INTRODUCTION

In 1999, a new provincial government came to power in Manitoba. As a result, the last six years have seen significant changes to educational policy in Manitoba. A new assessment regime was created, school divisions were involuntarily amalgamated, special education legislation was passed and the school year was shortened. The traditional authority of School Boards to open and close schools has been undermined by ministerial diktats. These changes are neither *minor* nor *insignificant*.

What makes these changes even more significant is that they represent an almost complete reversal from the New Directions¹ initiatives of the previous government. In fact, much of the educational policy of the current government consists of simply reversing deolutionary initiatives begun by the previous government in a series of actions the cynical might call a power grab. Thus, it is important to examine whether or not these changes have been beneficial for Manitoba students.

Assessment and Accountability

The previous Manitoba government enacted a program called Renewing Education: New Directions. A key element of the program was the establishment of standards² tests for grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 students. All students in grades 3, 6 and 9 wrote standards tests in the four core subject areas (mathematics, science, language arts and social studies), while grade 12 students wrote standards tests in mathematics and language arts. These tests also made up an increasingly large portion of a student's final mark. The final marks of grade 3 students were not affected while grades 6, 9 and 12 students had 25 per cent, 35 per cent and 50 per cent of their final marks made up of their scores on these standards tests.³

Since 1999, almost all of these standards tests were abolished. The government began by abolishing the grade 3 tests and replacing them with cumbersome individual assessments that are administered by classroom teachers. Teachers complained that a significant amount of classroom time was being consumed by these assessments.⁴ To make matters worse, several school divisions required teachers to conduct even more elaborate and time-consuming assessments because of this shift in policy.⁵

Initially, the government continued administering the grades 6 and 9 standards tests in mathematics and language arts but made them optional. Unsurprisingly, less than half of the school divisions chose to participate.⁶ In 2004, the provincial government announced it was eliminating the optional grades 6 and 9 exams and replacing them with assessments similar to those conducted at the grade 3 level.⁷ Once again, the government moved away from objective standards tests to subjective student assessments.

Although the government kept the grade 12 exams, they have been significantly reduced in value. Instead of counting for 50 per cent of a student's final grade, they are now worth only 30⁸ per cent. Thus, Manitoba joined P.E.I. and become a province with few objective standards tests.⁹ This lack of objective assessment means that it is virtually impossible to hold schools accountable for the level of student achievement since there is now no way to objectively evaluate this achievement.

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The increased expenditures can largely be explained by the fact that employee wages had to be harmonized.

School Board Amalgamation

In 2002, the Manitoba government passed Bill 14, the Public Schools Modernization Act, and reduced the number of school divisions in Manitoba from 54 to 38.¹⁰ While this decision faced significant opposition (particularly from school board trustees), the government argued that amalgamation would result in savings of approximately \$10-million. In addition, Drew Caldwell, then the Minister of Education, asserted that amalgamation was necessary to prevent school divisions from becoming too small and ineffective.¹¹

Unfortunately, these projected savings were not realized. A Frontier Backgrounder shows that far from spending going down in amalgamated school divisions, overall expenditures increased by 7 per cent in one year alone.¹² This increase can largely be explained by the fact that employee wages had to be harmonized — and they were always harmonized upward. While the government acknowledged that wage harmonization would take place, it made the argument that administration costs in amalgamated school divisions would be reduced since there would be fewer superintendents and trustees. To the government's surprise, the total savings in this area turned out to be a paltry 2.6 per cent — less than \$500,000.¹³ Considering the fact that the government spends over \$1.4 billion on education every year, this level of savings is minuscule indeed.¹⁴

Dr. Benjamin Levin, Deputy Minister of Education from 1999-2002, has repeatedly made the argument that school board amalgamations were unnecessary and a distraction from more important and pressing educational matters.¹⁵ The government would have done well to listen to advice from its deputy minister on this point.

Special Education

Special education can be described as *the* growth industry in Manitoba education. Expenditures on Function 200 (Previously named 'Exceptional' and now 'Student Support Services') equated to 8.7% of total education expenditure in 1984.¹⁶ Today the figure has more than doubled as a proportion of total education expenditure to 17.7%.¹⁷ The proportion of students classified as needing special assistance has increased by 39% in the decade 1998-2007 from 1.15% to 1.6%. Nobody would begrudge students with special needs the extra assistance they require to reach their potential. However in view of such rapid growth in both the number of students classified as special needs and the amount of funding directed toward them, the question of how effectively genuine need is being targeted arises.

It may be the case that expenditure has increased because the proportion of students requiring special resources has increased by 39% in a decade. It may be that educators have become more adept at identifying students with special needs, or some combination of this and the previous possibility.¹⁸ However it is also possible that the funding formula, which funds schools to hire extra staff for disabled children, combined with the policy of mainstreaming that means these staff operate contiguously with the rest of the class, has given schools the incentive to artificially inflate

the number of students requiring assistance in order to acquire greater resources for the school in general. Were this to be the case it would be a terrible example of a system that creates perverse incentives for schools to take advantage of their most vulnerable beneficiaries.

With the passing of Bill 13, an amendment to the Public Schools Act titled Appropriate Educational Programming, the situation will almost certainly become worse. Not only does Bill 13 entrench into law those elements of the current system that are working poorly, it ensures that school divisions will become burdened with even more onerous regulations than currently exist. Bill 13 entrenches the controversial policy of mainstreaming into law and gives the Minister of Education the authority to make regulations that ensure individual schools provide necessary programming for each student.

Thus, school divisions and individual schools will lose a substantial amount of their decision-making power regarding educational programming for special needs students. Instead, even more power will be concentrated in the Minister of Education's office. To make matters worse, Bill 13 provides a dispute resolution clause that will enable parents to challenge programming decisions made by school boards. If a parent is inclined to be litigious, this will be encouraged by the formal process of appeal that enables the parent to bypass the local school officials and make an appeal directly to the Minister of Education.


While the intentions of the current government are undoubtedly noble, the result of Bill 13 will almost certainly be negative. As decision-making becomes more centralized and local school boards lose their authority, expenditures can be expected to increase accordingly.

Length of the School Year


From 1995 until the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year, schools were required to be open 200 days a year. Ten of these days were set aside as administration/in-service time for teachers while schools were required to be open to students for the remaining 190 days. Schools were closed for four statutory holidays, two weeks at Christmas and one week in the spring. To complete the necessary 200 days, the school year in all school divisions commenced several days before the Labour Day weekend.¹⁹

Amid much controversy, the current Manitoba government changed the school year to its pre-1995 status. Rather than having a fixed number of school days, the length of the school year changes annually. Depending upon when Labour Day falls in September, the school year varies in length from a minimum of 194 days to a maximum of 198 days. None of the holidays was reduced, and teachers are still guaranteed a minimum of five in-service days.²⁰ School divisions have the option of eliminating some of the five administration days to make up lost instructional time.

It is important to note that support for the shortened school year was far from unanimous. A number of organizations expressed concern over the loss of teaching time, and several school divisions announced that they plan to review the amount of class time spent on non-instructional activities (sports rallies, field trips, assemblies, etc.) and reduce the number of administration days to compensate for lost instructional time.^{21/22}



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**Forced
amalgamation
of school
divisions
equals
divisiveness
and expense.**

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of this change to the school year is the missed opportunity to give local schools more flexibility with their calendars. While the government expended a great deal of political capital to reduce the school year by a few days, it could have followed the lead of other provinces and allowed changes to the nature of the school year. Other provinces allowed school boards to experiment with year-round schooling, staggered entry dates for students and four-day school weeks. Instead, the debate in Manitoba focused on the advantages and disadvantages of starting school after a long weekend. It is questionable whether this was a worthwhile use of time.

Micro Managing School Boards

If reduced Standards tests, school board amalgamation, a top down approach to special education and school year reduction are some of the general results of the centralization of power in the Minister's office, some recent interventions in the education sector show how specific the effects of the new centralized power can be. In the past year, the Minister's office has used its powers to undermine in the Boards' traditional jurisdictions over school closures, curriculum content, and mill rates.

The traditional Manitoban model of education administration puts school board in charge of school closures. However, the Minister of Education has recently overridden this tradition with a moratorium on school closures regardless of processes followed and decisions arrived at by the school boards. The St. James school board, for example, has had to suspend its closure review as a result while it waits for direction from the Minister as to how the moratorium will affect their ability to act.²³ It may well be that they are wasting their time under this administration however, if the Winnipeg Free Press has reported the extent of the Minister's stubbornness on closure decisions accurately "That's academic, said Bjornson — whatever the trustees do, he will not allow Ness or Hedges to close."²⁴ A former school principal summarizes the dynamics of the situation as "politically popular in some segments of greater Winnipeg."²⁵ The broader picture is of a Minister who has centralized control over school closures for political reasons and in the process usurped the school boards from their traditional roles in the process.

The education sector has also had to change its practices in response to demands from the Ministry for specific educational content. The recent stipulation of mandatory grade eleven and twelve phys-ed credits imposed an additional cost of around \$1 million per year for teaching staff alone on school boards, forcing them to either raise additional revenue through property taxes or draw resources away from other areas.²⁶



The school boards have also had their traditional sovereignty as an entity that is able to raise revenue through local taxes. The Tax Incentive Grant scheme has given school boards an opportunity cost for raising property taxes, being receipt of Provincial money if they do not raise their mill rates. The underlying assumption of the TIG is that it provides an amount that adequately compensates school boards for the revenue they lose by not raising mill rates in any given year. At a theoretical level this assumption is clearly at odds with the devolved model of education administration that has evolved in Manitoba. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of school divisions rejected the TIG, preferring to continue their traditional practice of raising

their own revenues to suit their varying needs. This rejection brings into focus the tension between top-down stipulation of educational administration practices and school boards with devolved authority serving the needs of their local communities.

Conclusion

It is clear that the provincial government made substantial changes in education policy in Manitoba since 1999. Unfortunately, these changes, rather than improving education in Manitoba, have caused Manitoba's educational system to deteriorate. By abolishing almost all standards testing, it is now virtually impossible to hold schools accountable for student achievement. The forced amalgamation of school divisions has been incredibly divisive and has not led to any significant cost savings. Bill 13 entrenches mainstreaming, and it will almost certainly make special education even more expensive than it is today. Finally, the government forced all school divisions to shorten their instructional year when it could have emulated other provinces and given them some much-needed flexibility. These changes, in combination with a series of recent ministerial edicts concerning how school boards should be run have heralded a centralization of administrative power in the minister's office that is a grave threat to the Canadian model of devolved authority designed to allow school board to serve the specific needs of their local communities.

In short, Manitoba's K-12 educational system has deteriorated steadily since the current government took office in 1999. Continuing along the same path will lead to even greater erosion in quality.

 ***By abolishing almost all standards testing, it is now virtually impossible to hold schools accountable for student achievement.*** 

Footnotes

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In his first year working for the Frontier centre David has carried out extensive media work, presenting policy analysis through local and national television, Newspapers, and Radio. His policy columns have been published in the Winnipeg Free Press, Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Calgary Herald, Regina Leader Post, and the National Post. David has produced policy research papers in the areas of Telecommunications Privatization, Education, Environmental Science and Fiscal Policy. However his major project with the Frontier Centre is the Local Government Performance Index (LGPI). The inaugural LGPI was released in November 2007 and comes at a time when Municipal accounting standards in Canada must improve if the Municipal government sector is to reach its potential as an economic growth engine for Canada. David also volunteers as a rugby coach in the Regina community and has built a sports car entirely from scratch.

The Frontier Centre for Public Policy is an independent, non-profit organization that under-takes research and education in support of economic growth and social outcomes that will enhance the quality of life in our communities. Through a variety of publications and public forums, the Centre explores policy innovations required to make the eastern prairies region a winner in the open economy. It also provides new insights into solving important issues facing our cities, towns and provinces. These include improving the performance of public expenditures in important areas like local government, education, health and social policy.

The author of this study has worked independently and the opinions expressed are therefore his own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Board of the Frontier Centre for Public Policy.

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