



Manitoba's School-closure Moratorium One Year Later

**HOW IT HURTS STUDENTS AND
UNDERCUTS PARENTAL CHOICE**

By Michael Zwaagstra

Executive Summary

- Manitoba's student population has declined steadily over the last few decades. In 1970, there were approximately 247,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students and that number decreased to about 180,000 by 2008 - a 27 per cent decline.¹
- Out of the 684 public schools in Manitoba, 249 had fewer than 150 students in September 2007.
- In 2008, the Manitoba NDP government enacted a moratorium on school closures in the province, but there are a number of significant problems with this moratorium:
 - It fails to take into account the variety of circumstances faced by school divisions across the province.
 - The quality of education received by many students will continue to suffer.
 - The moratorium scuttles sensible school-closure plans that would be of great benefit to students.
- Surveys indicate that Manitobans are prepared to accept school closures when declining student numbers make them necessary.
- Instead of attempting to micromanage schools by implementing a misguided school-closure moratorium, the provincial government should make it easier for parents to send their children to the schools of their choice.
- Schools that focus on student achievement will see enrolment increases, as more parents will send their children to these schools while underperforming schools will have to change their focus or face closure.
- By letting student numbers and parental choice determine which schools expand and which close, the government will encourage educational excellence in Manitoba.

Introduction

Given the slow but steady decline in Manitoba's student population, one would expect to see a decrease in the number of teachers and schools as well as gradually decreasing education expenditures after inflation is taken into account. However, Manitobans actually see something quite different. The number of teachers has increased and education expenditures have risen steadily over the years.

The provincial government seems to have no difficulty accepting that education expenditures continue to rise while the number of students continues to decrease. This might help to explain last year's announcement regarding school closures. (In April 2008, the Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth, Peter Bjornson, stated that the provincial government was enacting a moratorium on all school closures.)

Despite the fact that many school divisions find it difficult to operate schools with minuscule student populations, the Minister has decreed that they must remain open. As school division officials have already pointed out,² this will inevitably lead to even higher education costs, as it is expensive to keep ageing facilities open. So, one can expect school taxes to increase even further over the coming years.

By taking this action and refusing to reverse it during the time the law has been in effect, the provincial government moved in exactly the wrong direction. Instead of further centralizing decision-making authority in the hands of provincial civil servants, the Minister should empower local officials and communities so they can manage their own affairs. The province should make it easier for parents to enrol their children in whichever schools they wish. Successful schools would grow and unsuccessful schools would change their ways or close. This would be a much more effective way to deal with the changing student population.

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The Current Situation: A 27 per cent decrease in the number of students since 1970

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Manitoba's student population has declined steadily over the last few decades. In 1970, there were approximately 247,000 kindergarten to grade 12 students and that number decreased to about 180,000 by 2008 — a 27 per cent decline.

Since 1999, 38 schools were closed and 10 new schools were opened or newly funded. Out of the 684 public schools in Manitoba, 249 had fewer than 150 students in September 2007.

School divisions were planning additional closures for 2009.

Thirteen schools were seriously considered for closure or consolidation with a nearby school.³ Most of these schools are located in the City of Winnipeg where the majority of schools are continuing to see significant drops in enrolment.⁴

The Moratorium

On April 28, 2008, the Manitoba NDP government introduced Bill 28 in the Manitoba Legislature; it was signed into law on June 12, 2008. This bill enacts a moratorium on school closures in the province. Any school division planning to close a school now needs to receive special approval from the Minister of Education before proceeding.⁵ School divisions are encouraged to diversify the use of their facilities by finding community partners (i.e., daycares, recreation centres, etc.) to make use of their schools.

Shortly after the introduction of Bill 28, several school divisions announced they were still planning to move ahead with their closure reviews. School board administrators noted they had not received any official communication from the province and that they would proceed with the plans that had been in place for some time. The Minister was quick to respond, and he stated that Bill 28 would trump any hurried attempts to close schools.⁶

While it is understandable that the government would seek to appease those who wish to see their schools kept open regardless of the cost, there are a number of significant problems with the school-closure moratorium. School trustees,⁷ the Manitoba Teachers' Society⁸ and various journalists⁹ have all raised serious concerns with the implementation of Bill 28. Several of those concerns are as follows:

1) The moratorium fails to take into account the variety of circumstances faced by school divisions across the province.

Rural school divisions with communities in danger of losing their only school face a completely different set of challenges than do school divisions in the City of Winnipeg. A blanket moratorium prescribes the same course of action for all school divisions. The community impact of a school closing in a Winnipeg neighbourhood with students being bussed to another school a few miles away is completely different from that of closing a rural town's only school. A province-wide moratorium is a blunt instrument that makes it impossible for school divisions to decide what is best for the communities they serve.

2) The quality of education received by many students will continue to suffer.

Schools with an increasingly small enrolment have great difficulty meeting the needs of their students. Fewer extracurricular activities, combined grades and limited course offerings are all the hallmarks of schools with declining enrolment. As student population continues to decline, the quality of service provided to students will also decline.

3) The moratorium scuttles sensible school-closure plans that would be of great benefit to students.

The St. James-Assiniboia School Division in Winnipeg has experienced a substantial decline in student enrolment. Hedges Middle School and Ness Middle School are located less than two kilometres from each other and both are operating substantially below capacity. Despite the fact the school division planned to amalgamate the two schools and enhance the program options available to students, the new law will prevent this change from taking place.¹⁰ It makes little sense to force a school division to keep two under populated schools open when they could easily be combined in one building.

In another case, the Louis Riel School Division had been reviewing the closure of Archwood School, which is located in southeast Winnipeg. The recommendation that the superintendent was planning to present to the board was to bus the students to a nearby school where more programs were available and convert Archwood School into a dedicated daycare centre.¹¹ By forcing the school to remain open, students have been kept in a school with fewer programming options while the neighbourhood lost out on a much-needed daycare centre that could have served families in southeast Winnipeg.

Province-wide moratorium is a blunt instrument that makes it impossible for school divisions to decide what is best...

4) Manitobans are prepared to accept school closures when declining student numbers make them necessary.

A telephone survey conducted by the Manitoba Teachers' Society in May 2008 found some interesting results. Nine out of ten Manitobans stated they believe that students in small communities should be bussed to schools that are able to provide the programs and options that they need. More than three-quarters of Manitobans also favoured bussing elementary students to schools that have a full range of programs.¹² Clearly, most Manitobans think the quality of the programming is more important than the distance of the schools.

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A Better Approach

Instead of attempting to micromanage schools and implementing a misguided school-closure moratorium, the provincial government should look at a different possibility: The province should make it easier for parents to send their children to schools of their choice. School openings and closings would then follow parental choice.

Schools that focus on student achievement will become larger, as more parents enrol their children at these schools while underperforming schools will have to change or face closure. In contrast, a moratorium on school closures rewards underperforming schools and their staff by making it impossible for such schools to face real consequences for failing to meet student needs. There is no sensible purpose in forcing a school to remain open when there are not enough students to attend it.

By allowing parents to guide which schools will expand or close, the government will encourage educational excellence in Manitoba. This is exactly the message that the province should send to parents and students.

Conclusion

A school-closure moratorium in Manitoba makes little sense. It forces underperforming schools to remain open, costs taxpayers extra money, limits programming options available to students, fails to take the diversity of situations across the province into account, and according to at least one poll, it goes against what most Manitobans want to see happen.¹³ School divisions do not take school-closure decisions lightly, and it is surprising the provincial government thinks a centralized policy administered by bureaucrats is in the best interests of parents and students.

Considering the continued decline in the student population in Manitoba, school closures are an inevitable occurrence. It makes little sense to keep schools open if they do not have the student population needed to sustain important educational programs. It does make sense to combine some schools in order to consolidate resources and programming.

The best way to deal with the school-closure issue is to place the decisions entirely into the hands of parents. Successful schools will expand while those that fail to meet the needs of their students will eventually close. Allowing parents to decide which schools will close makes much more sense than an arbitrary policy that will only serve to undermine educational excellence.

Place the decisions entirely into the hands of parents.

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FURTHER READING



Excellence in Education by David Seymour

http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=2198

Computers in the Classroom by Michael Zwaagstra

http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=2035

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