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Creating a High Performance Public School System in Manitoba

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About the Education Frontiers Project

The Frontier Centre for Public Policy has established a program of research and commentaries that focuses on education policy, called the **Education Frontiers Project**. Its objective is to examine and communicate policy changes within our education system that will make it more sensitive to the needs of its clients and more effective in its performance. A main theme of the Centre's work is creating greater transparency and neutrality within all public services. In the field of public education, this means measuring results, building the case for the efficacy of standards testing in our schools, and improving curricula by returning to the cultivation of basic literacy and numeracy skills. The project would also examine the arguments and evidence for increasing the range of school options by considering the different education methods and models and comparing educational achievement across provinces and between countries.

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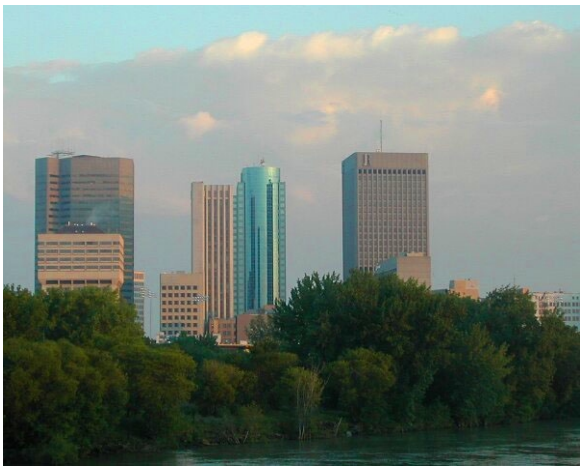
The Frontier Centre's Vision For Manitoba's Public Schools



FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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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Creating a High Performance Public School System in Manitoba

Executive Summary

- While Manitoba spends a larger amount of its GDP on public school education than any other province, educational achievement remains average or below average.
- Enhancing parental choice by enabling them to send their children to any public or private school in the province would require schools to ensure a higher quality of provision.
- Charter school legislation has been successful in Alberta and could be implemented here.
- Manitoba should re-introduce standards testing in every grade level from 1-12.
- Data from the standards tests as well as graduation rates, attrition, and attendance would enable the province to publish an annual student achievement report that allows parents to compare schools.
- The province should fund education out of general revenue rather than property taxes.
- Allowing schools to stream students at an earlier age based on ability will result in more relevant programming for all students.
- A significant teaching shortage in high-demand subject areas could be addressed through reforms in certification programs and by merit pay for teachers.
- Recruiting more international students to fill schools with declining enrolments would bring in extra money to schools and their communities.
- With these reforms, the Frontier Centre believes that it is possible for Manitoba to have the best public school system in the country.

Introduction

A well-educated citizenry, sufficiently literate to make informed judgments on social and political matters, is a necessary condition for the success of a democratic society. Because public education exists for the very purpose of ensuring the achievement of that set of values, it is important to make certain that our province has the highest quality educational system possible, and that our school system remain open to ways in which it can improve itself.

Making comparisons with other jurisdictions is a good place to start. While it might be unwise to tear down everything Manitobans have built up over more than a century in order to test unproven theories, it would be equally unwise to ignore forms of organization, practices and procedures which have proved their worth elsewhere.

Manitoba's school system is far from perfect. It would benefit from significant policy changes, reforms that the Frontier Centre for Public Policy has promoted for some time. This report summarizes the most fundamental systemic flaws and the most essential corresponding reforms.

The Current State of Education in Manitoba

Manitoba has approximately 185,000 students and 14,000 teachers in its 38 public school divisions. The province spends just under $1.5 billion on education each year.[1] This represents a larger proportion of GDP than that of any other province. Only energy-rich Alberta invests more dollars per pupil.[2] Given that commitment of resources, one might expect Manitoba to achieve among the best national results.

But our money has not bought us the outcomes we desire. Information gathered by the Council of Ministers of Education and Statistics Canada (CESC) shows that mediocrity in literacy, problem-solving, mathematics and science is a constant.[3] [4] Manitoba's relatively poor performance on these national assessments clearly demonstrates that leading the country in expenditures on public education does not necessarily translate into having above average educational achievement among students.

Standards tests are a primary means of objectively measuring student achievement. Before the previous provincial government lost the 1999 election, it had begun edging hesitantly towards mandating them in the core-subject areas of mathematics, science, language arts and social studies for grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. The present administration, resolutely opposed to testing, has abolished all except the grade 12 exams.[5] Subjective, laborious, time-consuming assessments by teachers of each student have replaced them.

Unless parents are willing and able to pay private tuition fees or to tutor their children at home, they have no alternative to local public schools, where they have little control over educational content. The much-vaunted *Schools of Choice Act* has been rendered largely ineffective by the government's refusal to allow successful schools to expand unless all others in the division are completely full. Under this policy, divisional authorities have occasionally resorted to sending children to schools outside their own neighbourhoods, but it is far from clear that travelling the extra distance means better schooling.[6] A further stricture narrows that choice and discourages divisions from attracting students even when their parents find space – only part of the public's money follows them.

The method of funding public schools has also been a chronic problem. At present, local property taxes cover approximately 40% of public education costs.[7] These taxes, levied by local school boards, have been increasing steadily and show no sign of abating.[8] The pressure they exert on homeowners, businesses and farmers has become a politically controversial burden. Among the provinces, only Saskatchewan relies more than Manitoba on this method of funding.

With the exception of a few regions, Manitoba's student population is declining. Enrolment has fallen in twenty-seven of the thirty-eight divisions over the past five years.[9] Many schools, particularly in rural areas, have cut back programs or closed down. Others face imminent closure.

Manitoba's public schools have wholeheartedly embraced the egalitarian philosophy of "mainstreaming." Instead of directing students into aptitude-relevant vocational or academic programs at an early age, this disastrous policy keeps them all in the same general academic stream until they reach high school. As a result, less than one in four people who graduate go on to attend a community college.[10] A disproportionate number go on to university, only to drop out within the first couple of years. This imbalance exacerbates an already serious shortage of skilled tradespeople.

Manitoba is also feeling the effects of a teacher shortage – particularly in high-demand areas such as French immersion, mathematics and science. Instead of addressing this problem by smoothing the path to certification for potential teachers, the province has added an extra year to the requirements for a Bachelor of Education degree. Those who do become teachers find out all too quickly that their compensation pay has little to do with results in the classroom and much to do with seniority and years spent at university.

Enhancing Parental Choice

Empowering parents to choose the schools they think best suit their children is the most essential of many needed reforms. All parents, not just the wealthy or those ready to make heroic sacrifices to send their children to private schools, should enjoy this basic right. To make this possible, the *Schools of Choice Act* must be changed.

A revamped *Act* would do more than transfer to parents the prerogative of determining which schools their children attend; it would stipulate that full funding follow every student, no matter where. Currently, only partial funding follows the student, a discouragement to school divisions that receive additional students.[11] The policy of insisting that successful schools are only permitted to expand if all neighbouring schools in the division have also reached capacity should also be rethought. Because popular schools quickly fill to capacity and are unable to expand their facilities on their own volition, that policy has acted as a severe impediment to choice.

Enhanced parental choice would also benefit special needs students, as parents would be able to select schools that best meet their unique needs. Currently, school divisions receive extra funds from the provincial government for every Level I, II, or III special needs student enrolled in their division.[12] Instead of automatically flowing to the local school division, that money would instead be placed under the control of parents. The current "one size fits all" public schools would be replaced by specialized schools that cater to individual needs.

As an additional consequence of expanded parental choice, school boards would become unnecessary, and redundant. Eliminating their bureaucracy and allowing schools to become financially autonomous would enhance local control, because that would give school principals greater flexibility to implement policies in the best interests of their local student populations. Elected governing councils of parents and teachers who serve on a volunteer basis would ensure that individual schools are accountable to the communities they serve.[13] Given record low voter turnouts in recent school board elections, neither parents nor students will miss these obsolete bureaucracies.

In addition, the *Schools of Choice Act* should permit parents to send children to private schools of their choice, whether they are religious or secular. The government can ensure that these schools are suitable by requiring that they meet the following criteria:

- They demonstrate financial solvency with a transparent record-keeping system;
- They are committed to following the provincial curriculum; and
- They are willing to administer the province's standards tests.

School Choice in Other Jurisdictions

In the United States, some localities have implemented voucher programs similar to the proposals described above.

The first to bring in a full voucher system was Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1990, 1% of students were selected, on the basis of low family income, to receive vouchers that enable them to attend any school their parents choose – with the exception of private religious institutions. The trial run succeeded. Five years later, the scheme was expanded to include up to 15% of Milwaukee public school students, and the proviso excluding independent religious schools was dropped.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin determined that parents whose children participated in the voucher program were more satisfied than those whose children were required to attend neighbourhood schools. Studies conducted by Harvard and Princeton Universities reported statistically significant improvement in mathematics and reading scores among the same students.[14]

In 1995, Cleveland, Ohio, initiated an even more ambitious voucher scheme. It covers up to 90% of tuition at any secular or religious independent school. In its first year of operation, approximately 2,000 students were eligible to participate. Here, too, research found markedly higher satisfaction among parents.[15] Cleveland's program was subjected to the inevitable legal challenge, but the United States Supreme Court ruled in the city's favour.[16]

The Edgewood School District in San Antonio, Texas, offers each student a voucher redeemable at a public or private school of choice. Edgewood's students performed better on academic tests than their counterparts in 85% of the other districts in Texas—even when family income and race were factored in.[17] These are not isolated findings: in many jurisdictions, low-income voucher students who attend private schools have demonstrated above-average achievement.[18]

Charter Schools

Along with permitting parents to send their children to any existing school of choice, parents should also have the option of creating their own schools. The best means to create this opportunity would be charter school legislation similar to what's already in place in Alberta. Charter schools are best described as independent public schools, but they require legislation permitting their formation and setting conditions for the granting of charters. Charter laws specify the circumstances under which groups can apply for a charter, which group(s) can sponsor a charter school and any avenues of appeal if an initial charter application is rejected.[19]

In 1994, Alberta became the first (and only) province to enact charter-school legislation.[20] Since then, fifteen charters have been granted, of which thirteen remain operational.[21] Like their fully public counterparts, charter schools were required to be non-sectarian, to be accessible to all students who fit within their educational parameters, to hire only certified (although not necessarily unionized) teachers, to follow the Alberta curriculum, to administer the province's standardized exams[22] to all students and not to charge tuition fees.

The charter scheme has proven enormously popular because it bypasses the maddening political and administrative obstacles which, in other jurisdictions, slow down or completely prevent the creation of schools that meet special needs. These specialties include instruction for gifted or at-risk youth, aboriginal studies, traditional academics, English as a Second Language, adapted learning styles and concentrated music-centred, math-centred or science-centred curricula.[23] Allowing the creation of charter schools in Manitoba would enhance our cultural diversity and ensure that schools meet the goal of individual learning.

Increasing Accountability

Standards tests play an important role in holding schools accountable since they are the primary means of measuring objective student achievement.[24] Regular standards tests are a means of ensuring that the same curriculum outcomes are covered in every school. Yet Manitoba's students write fewer standards tests than those in any other province except Prince Edward Island.[25] It is worth noting that Alberta, where every student in every school has to write the most standards tests, consistently outperforms other provinces in literacy, mathematics, science and problem-solving.[26]

Manitoba can do better. Until 1999, the province was edging gingerly towards written standards tests in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12 in four core subject areas, but this initiative was squelched when that year's election brought in a new government with a diametrically opposed point of view. The policy should be re-implemented and expanded to include all grade levels from 1 to 12.

One of the Manitoba Teachers Society's key arguments against standards testing is that it does not "provide timely assessment of student achievement in a way that could inform instructional modification for the individual student or for a group of students."[27] This critique falls wide of the mark; it's more an argument against the manner in which tests have been administered than against standards testing as such. If these tests were written annually, why would it not be possible to use the previous year's results to "inform instructional modification" for the following year? They

would also be of great assistance in dealing with the difficulties that arise from the transience of student populations, because teachers would know they had been written province-wide.

Every year, the government issues "Financial Reporting and Accounting in Manitoba Education" (FRAME), which details each school division's spending habits line by line. FRAME's award-winning usefulness as a tool for financial accountability leads to an obvious question: Why not report student achievement the same way? Once standards testing is fully operational, a new publication similar to FRAME would report each school's results, its graduation and attrition rates, attendance and teacher assessment of students and make this information accessible to the general public.[28] Parents would then be able to compare schools.

If the transparency and accountability made possible through this innovation were combined with real parental choice, schools would have much stronger incentives to provide the best education possible. Those which met this goal would thrive, while underperforming ones would have to change their practices or lose students, perhaps even close their doors.

A More Equitable Funding System

The 2004/2005 FRAME Report projected approximately $1.48 billion in expenditures on K-12 public education. In 1981, the province paid 82.4% of operating costs. The provincial government's share of public school financing has declined substantially over the past 25 years.[29] At present, it directly funds 56%, while property taxes (special levies) set by local school boards cover most of the remainder (38.8%).[30] The only province that depends more heavily on property taxes to fund education than Manitoba is Saskatchewan.[31]

There are two types of property-based school taxes in Manitoba. The first, the Education Support Levy, collected by the provincial government at a uniform mill rate, raises approximately $174 million per year. The government has gradually lowered it over the last four years.[32] The second type is the special levy. This portion, $558 million a year, is collected by school boards.[33] Though these local rates vary across the province, they are all set considerably higher than the Education Support Levy and are continuing to rise.

This method of financing is unsustainable in the long term. While municipalities have often managed to freeze levels of non-educational property taxation, school-board exactions have increased every year over the past twenty-five, a trend which shows no sign of slowing down.[34] Property taxes are inequitable because they bear no relation to affordability. Many property owners, particularly seniors, live on fixed incomes and cannot continue to pay these ever-higher charges. Since an educated citizenry benefits the entire province, it follows that all taxpayers should share in the cost.

Abolishing school boards and transferring full control over school funding to parents would eliminate the *raison d'être* for special-levy property taxes — and necessitate the provincial government's paying all costs from general revenues. Since every province except Manitoba and Saskatchewan covers all or nearly all these expenditures this way, such a step could hardly be regarded as a leap into the unknown.[35]

A major objection to doing away with special-levy property taxes is that the provincial government's budget may not be able to absorb the $558 million these taxes presently bring in. But other considerations make this shortfall less daunting:

- Eliminating the Education Property Tax Credit (EPTC) would save the government $179 million a year.[36] This credit, currently $400, can be claimed by all Manitobans who pay more than $250 in educational property taxes.[37]
- Abolishing school boards would save the $50 million a year currently spent on their administration.[38]
- Reducing Manitoba's per-pupil expenditure to the Canadian average would save approximately $100 million annually.[39]
- Competition among schools would exert positive influence beyond the realm of academic quality: cost-efficiency – scarcely a consideration in today's politicized, bureaucratic near-monopoly — would have to be taken seriously.
- Finally, the provincial government has forecast it will take in $524 million more for the 2005/06 fiscal year than it did in 2004/05. Even a small part of that extra revenue could compensate for the disappearance of special-levy property taxes.

A very quick means of more efficiently allocating resources inside the public school system is to change the way schools count their students. As things stand now, divisions base their per-pupil allotment to schools on how many students they contain on "count day," September 30. A school gets the entire year's allocation even if a student shows up only on that one day and then drops out or transfers.[40] Funding schools instead according to the number of students they have in regular attendance would end that charade.

The elimination of special levy property taxes and the funding of public schools directly through general revenues would enhance both equity and efficiency. An additional incentive – performance bonuses for schools that perform well on standardized tests – would tie extra funding to the elusive goal of academic excellence.

An End to Mainstreaming

Currently, Manitoba public schools are discouraged from streaming students into different classes and programs oriented to their interests and abilities. Instead, "inclusion" is the order of the day, under which teachers must try to deal with special-needs and regular students in the same classroom.[41] While the intentions behind this policy are humane, it is unrealistic to believe academic rigour for other students is not being sacrificed.

Along with watering down the education of academically gifted students, mainstreaming has led to disproportionately high university registration and lagging enrolment in community-college vocational programs. Less than one-fourth of post-secondary students in Manitoba attend community college.[42] While having such a large number at university is impressive, the failure of almost half of full-time first-year students to complete a degree within six years illustrates a disturbingly high dropout rate.[43] It is reasonable to conclude that many of these students would probably have been more suited to vocational training at a community college.

But our system discourages students from pursuing vocational programs. Until they reach high school, students are forced to remain in a general academic program and that bias means an underemphasis on specialization in trades. Down the line, low enrolment at community colleges is the consequence and that, in turn, has contributed significantly to a shortage of tradespeople in Manitoba.[44]

The German model is different. After completing grade 4, children enter secondary school at one of three levels. One prepares students for a vocational career, another for university, the third for a balance between both.[45] Approximately two-thirds of the German workforce has received vocational training of some sort.[46] That nation suffers no shortage of skilled workers.

Forcing all students to remain in the same general academic program provides a disservice to academically gifted and vocationally suited students alike. Manitoba's policy of mainstreaming – for regular instruction as well as special needs students – needs reconsideration.

Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

Manitoba is short of teachers in high-demand areas such as French immersion, math and science.[47] Because a large number of them are approaching retirement, this shortage will only become more acute.[48] The province has recently aggravated the problem by extending the length of university training required for certification. Candidates must now complete

a three-year undergraduate degree and then a two-year B.Ed.

If the shortage is to be tackled seriously, we would do well to follow the lead of the approximately forty American states that have turned to alternative means of certification. Over 125,000 American teachers have qualified in this way since 1985.[49] These programs require candidates to earn a university or college degree in the subject(s) they wish to teach. Instead of spending one or more years in full-time attendance at a faculty of education, these neophytes take extensive course work during their first year in the classroom. During this fledgling stage they are assigned mentor-teachers.[50]

The average alternatively certified teacher is older than most education-faculty graduates, and tends to have substantial professional experience, possess a well-rounded fund of knowledge and more likely belong to a visible minority.[51] In fact, minority representation on teaching staffs has increased substantially in alternative-certification states.[52]

Research also indicates that alternatively certified teachers are more likely to remain within the profession than traditionally educated ones. In the Los Angeles Unified City School District, 40% of new traditionally-trained teachers give up by the end of their first year — compared with only 20% of alternatively certified ones.[53] Most states see alternative certification as a reliable way to build their reserves of long-term career teachers, not just as a temporary expedient.

If aspiring teachers could obtain certification without having to acquire a B.Ed. degree, education faculties at Manitoba's universities would have to streamline their programs and make them more directly relevant to the classroom setting.

In addition to removing obstacles it has placed athwart the path of qualified, well-educated professionals who want to become teachers, the province should also re-examine its methods of compensation. Currently, only two criteria determine salaries — years of university education and years on the job. Research shows, however, that classroom outcomes bear no correlation to the former, and only a very weak one to the latter.[54]

The answer is to base remuneration primarily on performance.[55] While moderate raises for years of experience should remain, merit ought to replace university-years on the salary grid, with annual tests providing the data necessary for objective measurement. Teachers whose students' scores showed the most improvement over the previous year's tests would take home the largest increases, while the ineffective would face decreases. Since merit pay would recognize achievement in a tangible way, successful teachers would be encouraged to stay in the public school system.

More Students in Manitoba's Schools

One reality over which schools have little control is declining population in many communities, most markedly in rural areas: enrolment has fallen in 27 of 38 divisions since 1999.[56] This has led to widespread program cutbacks, closures and imminent closures.

A few divisions have found a way to buck this demographic trend: attracting students from other lands. In the 2000/2001 school year, 361 international students paid $2.4 million in tuition fees to attend Manitoba's public schools.[57] Fifteen divisions are currently running international student programs.[58] These students are charged a tuition fee, in the range of $10,000 and are also expected to pay their room and board.[59]

Many divisions have reported considerable success with their international student programs and are actively recruiting. Louis Riel School Division has brought in international students for over 20 years and reports they achieve a 95% university-acceptance rate. River East-Transcona, which emphasizes English as a Second Language instruction, searches out top teachers in that specialty.[60] Manitoba Education, Training and Youth even publishes a booklet outlining the advantages this province offers.[61]

Manitoba's public schools could accommodate far more international students. Twenty-seven divisions have lost approximately 10,000 students since 1999,[62] and many have retained most of that old classroom space. Increasing that number by 10,000, under the assumption each paid $10,000 in tuition, would bring $100 million into the public school system — not to mention the positive economic spin-offs from that many more people settling here.

Conclusion

It is time for Manitoba to shake its have-not mentality. If we adopted a clear-headed, results-oriented philosophy of education — and embarked in a consequent manner on the reform of standards, finances and administration outlined above — we could create the strongest public school system in the country. Instead of being known as the province which spends the largest percentage of GDP on schools, Manitoba would become renowned as the province that achieved the best results.

The keys to that revival are clearly available. Enhanced, expanded parental choice, rigorous, transparent standards tests, a more equitable funding system that relies on general revenues rather than property taxes, an abandonment of mainstreaming and instead placing students in appropriate vocational or academic programming at an

earlier age, and allowing teachers to become certified through alternative means and to have their pay based upon performance – are all proven tools for public school improvement. These reforms will result in a superior education system that is even more attractive to international students.

Manitoba's public school system can become the best in the country, and these reforms described in this report show us the way there.

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