

A Submission to the Manitoba Commission
on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education

Submitted by the

Board of Trustees
Kelsey School Division
The Pas, Manitoba



May 7, 2019

The Board of Trustees of the Kelsey School Division appreciates the opportunity to submit its comments concerning the comprehensive review of Manitoba's Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system. Kelsey School Division consists of five schools, 1535 students, 123.25 teachers and principals, and 100 support staff. All of our schools are located in The Pas, with busing bringing in students from the RM of Kelsey which includes areas in the Carrot Valley to the west, Wanless to the north, and Rahl's Island to the east of The Pas. About 59% of our students self-identify as First Nation or Métis.

As with other northern Manitoba jurisdictions, our community is semi-isolated due to the distances between the various scattered communities. As a result, our education community has to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and cooperative with local agencies and similar educational jurisdictions. Our school board must be especially responsive to the needs of the students in our community and the perspectives of their parents or guardians.

Focus Area 1: Long-term vision

Parents, teachers, students and trustees, as well as community members, want the same thing - the successful completion of a public school education for their students so that upon graduation each graduate has a good possibility of embarking on a post-secondary experience that will help them succeed as contributing, responsible and productive members of society, with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for democratic citizenship participation. We want our students to be literate (in language(s) and technology), sufficiently competent in mathematics and science understanding, and knowledgeable in required life skills.

Education has and will continue to be successful only when it is able to adapt to the many changes in society, knowledge, and curriculum, and can accommodate the diverse needs of the students it serves. The students and their families in our school division are often mobile and enter our school division into various grade levels without the solid background that a stable education experience (from their previous school or from home) would bring.

Flexibility, understanding and support are required to address these student needs. This transient nature of student enrolment results in significant challenges for them and their teachers. Frustration can lead to non-attendance so the teachers in our school division and the various levels of administration have been focused on efforts to retain students in school as a primary strategic goal. In addition, many local employers offer part-time job opportunities to high school and even middle school students that strain the regular attendance and educational achievement of some students.

To retain students, and to encourage their regular attendance, an adequate variety of courses and/or educational experiences and activities must be available to interest them and keep them engaged in school. Access to music, fine arts, band and physical education opportunities are attractive to many students as they explore their interests and talents. In a smaller community such as ours, the school is the hub of this access. Our school division does not have access to many technical vocational facilities and opportunities that are available in some school divisions. Course options desired by some students as a prerequisite for entry to post-secondary study may be low in enrolment and, as a result, could be unavailable locally due to budget and staffing constraints. To fill the gap in course availability, the broader use of technology could help but the cost of such implementation is too often a difficult financial burden on the school division. Education equity and fairness would be enhanced if the cost of technology was not a local burden but a provided basic infrastructure.

Focus Area 2: Student Learning

Student achievement is improved when courses available to students are able to engage them in learning that they find interesting, and which they see may lead to post-secondary studies or employment of interest to them. Many of our graduates have gone on to engage in successful careers, but socioeconomic circumstances can have a negative effect on student motivation to succeed. That is why we prize local collaboration in a variety of educational experiences for our students.

Too often our older students are faced with attendance issues that arise from their personal circumstances. This can be accommodated by a flexible attendance requirement that allows the students to continue in their learning over a longer period of time. Flexible instructional hours have also been a useful tool in retaining student engagement and graduation success.

Our school division has concluded that there is a need to target the students at the early years level for the provision of intense support in their literacy and numeracy learning. Our budget levels over the years are evidence of our commitment, but can result in it being done at the expense of other student/school division needs. A focus on individual student needs is enhanced by a reasonable class size, and specific learning supports for some individuals. Speech/language pathologists and psychologists are in short supply and this affects our ability to provide needed student support. Likewise the lack of available French Immersion teachers directly affects our program.

The need for student mental health services continues to grow, and the lack of trained support staff/clinicians in our region is problematic. Our response has been to improve teacher awareness through professional development, but reliance on northern regional health services is not always timely even when it is available.

While the location of preschool facilities in our schools is a very positive step for the development of articulation information about students before they enter kindergarten, there is a strong need for additional spots. Our community's shortage of preschool spots has been estimated at 100; providing these spots for eligible children would be a good help in addressing school readiness issues and have an enormous impact on student learning.

Focus Area 3: Teaching

While the instructional knowledge of teachers hired to teach in our schools has continued to increase significantly over the years, there is a shortage in some teacher specialty areas.

We struggle to obtain French Immersion teachers, and some science specialists. Once we attract such qualified teachers our goal is to retain them, and we have been fairly successful in our focus on hiring local teacher graduates of the University College of the North.

The Kelsey School Division board, senior administration and teachers work collaboratively to ensure financial resources are available to promote professional development opportunities. Most Manitoba Education and provincial sessions for teachers are held in Winnipeg, requiring extensive travel time from The Pas and associated expense. This makes it difficult to provide PD opportunities to our local teachers. The lack of local substitute teachers is another limiting factor in teacher access to professional development sessions outside the community. There has not been sufficient availability of interactive video conference PD opportunities, even if the internet utilization were better than it is. The lack of substitute teachers in our area also limits the use of teacher led collaboration on education issues and curricula to ensure teachers remain up to date.

We are fortunate to have committed school principals who work with their staffs to address the provincial and division goals and objectives. The role of a school principal has always been a challenging and demanding one, and is especially so in today's society. There are so few interested in relocating to the north or applying to fill these roles that our solution has been to provide the training for our future school leaders drawn from our teaching staff. The relationship among a school's professional leadership and staff is critical to a collegial and supportive school environment. As instructional leaders in their schools we believe the principal must be a part of the same professional association. Their removal would result in a severe disconnect. As the face of the school to the community, the principal also provides a critical communication component for the school board and teaching staff.

Focus Area 4: Accountability for student learning

By definition, not every student can be above average, but every student can achieve a

recognized level of success that encourages their continued study. Regular classroom-based assessment by teachers is very important to monitoring this progress, and regular feedback to students on their level of progress is healthy. Comparisons made as a result of international tests that use different student cohorts taking such tests lead to inaccurate conclusions. Similarly, streaming out of students in some provinces from being included in the testing can lead to inaccurate conclusions. Assessment that focuses on an individual student as part of the teaching/learning process is best initiated and encouraged at the school level. Continuous educational progress by students is to be encouraged, and instructional delivery must be flexible and targeted to achieve this.

Regular and clear communication with parents on the progress of their students is a key component of a successful and responsible school division. But communication can be difficult when there is no formal communication system in a home. Our schools make efforts to incorporate parental access to their students' information via the internet so there may be no surprises about student attendance and achievement.

Focus Area 5: Governance

Formal education in The Pas was started in 1909 when a group of parents formed a school for their children. In 1912 when the north was joined with Manitoba, the right to form The Pas School District was quickly undertaken by these parents and ratepayers and a local school board was elected to manage public education delivery in the community. In 1959, the establishment of the Kelsey School Division continued the involvement of parents and the community in their governance of local public school education via a democratically elected school board.

For 110 years this model has been important in the identification and support for education goals and programs desired by the community. While communication between senior administration and school trustees of the northern school divisions/district has been healthy and collaborative, the specific needs of each education community have been

served best by the more localized and specific goals identified and set by each school board. The community differences - cultural, educational, geographical - among the various education jurisdictions are best served by locally elected community representatives. Any amalgamation of northern jurisdictions would bring uncertainty, more strained distance communication to our operations, and a level of disconnect from the democratic process. Thus we recommend maintaining the current governance model of elected school boards, a democratic right of Canadians.

Our school board's relationships with the local teachers' association and the support staff association are positive ones due to our regular and respectful face-to-face dialogue on issues of common interest. Our joint understanding of school and community needs is enhanced because we are all members of the same community.

Support of Manitoba Education consultants in specialized areas has been very useful to our education community over the years. Likewise the support of a provincial association of school trustees has contributed to a progressive and consistent standard of trustee involvement. As committed community members who are interested in our education system, local school trustees play an important role in ensuring local policies, infrastructure, transportation and maintenance needs are identified, considered and addressed in a fair and equitable manner.

The best decision-making is that which is done as close as possible to the school and students. Oversight by school trustees ensures relevance, equity and commitment to student needs and achievement.

Focus Area 6: Funding

While the funding model is not a significant part of this review, it is a constant worry to our school division due to the very low tax base of our community. We have tried to manage this issue through dialogue of our local elected school board with the locally elected municipality councillors, but in dealing with the harsh economic realities of our northern community the inequity of basic support for education needs to be addressed.

Recommendations

1. Technological infrastructure must be a provincial provided item for school divisions so there is equity in the province.
2. Preschool placements in schools must be increased to meet the local demand.
3. Principal teachers must remain as motivators and instructional leaders in their schools, and as colleagues with their staffs.
4. Teacher-based assessment, combined with flexible instruction, should be encouraged to ensure continuous educational progress of students.
5. Cultural, educational and community variations are best served by locally elected school trustees.
6. The property tax-based revenue system must be changed to provide revenue equity for all jurisdictions of the education system.
7. The challenge to provide timely and supportive mental health support to students must be met for student learning successes to follow.