



Submission to the Advisory Panel on Education Governance

RealRenewal Education Advocacy Association

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Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to have input into decision-making on the democratic structure of our education system. RealRenewal's some 200 members include parents, teachers, school staff, students, education experts and community members province-wide who share common cause in defending and supporting public education in Saskatchewan. Together our members offer a voice for one of the most important ingredients of education governance, the electors.

Through nearly a decade of outreach to our members and beyond – via public forums, surveys, research, and workshops – we can confidently state that, no matter the issue, there exists consistently strong elector support for transparent, accessible governance that invites local involvement, and that upholds the role of electors and their elected representatives, as described by the Education Act. As your panel lacks a member who expressly represents electors, we feel it is important to bring these perspectives to the table.

Local governance

The research report provided to your panel contains a well-considered section on the concept of governance. However, it is worth looking more specifically to local governance and its importance to the efficient, effective delivery of social goods.

The term 'local governance' emerged in the mid-1980s over concerns that increasingly centralized economic and political structures had created a democratic deficit, leading to citizen disengagement and, consequently, reduced support for public projects (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1994; Institute on Governance, 2005). Local governance has been defined as "meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible and accountable to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberties" (Blair, 2000, p. 21). In 1999, the United Nations Development Program recommended strengthening local governance as a means to "implicitly and explicitly address issues of the relative distribution of powers, balancing of functions, services, activities and such between the center and local levels, and/or between the public sector and civil society/private sectors" (UNDP, 1999, pp. 26-27).

Over the years, this concept has gradually become more institutionalized through the establishment of institutes such as the Vancouver-based Centre for Civic Governance (see www.civicgovernance.ca), and the acceptance of local governance discourse as part of the toolkit for urban planners and developers (Moulaert, Swyngedouw, & Rodriguez, 2001). In a study of local governance initiatives in six countries, Blair (2000) argued that democracy, not just decentralization, is the key component to its success. This involves ensuring citizens hold a genuine seat at the table, and have the ability to hold their local representatives to account:

The central idea of participation is to give citizens a meaningful role in local government decisions that affect them, while accountability means that people will be able to hold local government responsible for how it is affecting them. Together these two processes are what constitute the heart of the 'democratic' component of democratic local governance. (p. 22)

If we apply these central principles to public participation in education decision-making, it implies at minimum there exists:

1. A right to vote for local representatives.
2. An expectation that public service planning and delivery is informed by locally-chosen, locally-accountable boards.
3. An ability to ensure large bureaucratic structures and funding models remain flexible to local needs and aspirations.

Far from detracting from system efficiencies, such measures open the door to more nimble, nuanced responses to the challenges in our schools and classrooms.

The role of electors

We are fortunate in Saskatchewan to already have the basic structures of local governance built into public education. Under the Education Act we, the public, hold a recognized role in governing the education of our children. Through the Act and its regulations, we hold annual electors' meetings, participate in School Community Councils and, most importantly, elect trustees to represent our interests as parents, community members and ratepayers. Hastening the abolition or contraction of school boards effectively disenfranchises a whole population of its legislated right to participate in education governance, which is contained in the Education Act's words, intent and spirit.

The provincial government, beset by a resource revenue setback, has indicated a wish to dramatically alter these provisions in a hunt for cost-savings. However, short-term budget crises do not give license to so easily contravene the spirit of the current system, which indisputably recognizes we electors have a voice and a public responsibility to participate in education decision-making. The government has a duty to consider the existing voter-rights of citizens of this province, and to seriously engage directly with electors around any measures that would substantially weaken or disenfranchise them of their voting power. Weakening democratic foundations should never be a go-to solution for short-term budgetary problems, particularly as there is no compelling research evidence to support the theory that eliminating local governance provides either long-term cost savings or improved student achievement scores.

The role of school boards

Over the years, we have worked with many parents who are in conflict with their local school boards. Nonetheless, there is general support for the concept that we should have local trustees that we elect and hold accountable at the ballot box, and local school board offices that we can approach for immediate information and assistance on daily matters.

Recently, RealRenewal requested submissions on ideas for educational transformation, in preparation for the SaskForward Summit, which invites a much broader discussion of potential education reforms than what is afforded in the scope of the provincial government's review. Out of 22 detailed submissions received, one suggested 12 school boards, one suggested no less than six, while the remainder of governance-related comments spoke strongly for no further amalgamations. Of note, none supported the entire elimination of school boards; this upholds the similarly unanimous response Mr. Perrins encountered in his conversations with the public.

To summarize, electors view the elimination or further amalgamation of school boards as an invitation to deepen the inefficiencies that are already unfolding from an increasingly overly-centralized model of education governance. As one example, they have seen the inefficiency of the province's top-down decisions on P3 school builds, which did not take into account local planning priorities or even whether or not school divisions had access to land in the selected areas.

Comments of our members included:

"Eliminating elected boards is a horrible idea. Making larger school divisions will take away parental and community input...a shared services body like 3sHealth would add another level of impersonal bureaucracy, centralize and privatize services."

"School boards should be locally elected. They should not be eliminated. The more removed the funder is from the receiver, the greater the waste and misuse of funds."

"We should not try to overhaul a complex system in a month or two, during a budget crisis, without proper consultation, evidence/research, without understanding what the impact of prior amalgamations were."

"Our province is too big and schools spread out. How can one board know the needs of so many schools in such large divisions?"

"No financial savings in reducing divisions. Cutting funding to LINC [Local Implementation and Negotiation Committees] agreements will not allow divisions to maintain services to students."

“Time and effort spent consolidating school boards could be much better spent simply concentrating on delivering education services, by supporting our school boards, teachers, students and communities.”

It is not surprising that the province should seize on eliminating school boards as a response to budget shortfalls and lagging test scores. As Land (2002) points out, it’s common for central government officials to blame school boards for perceived system shortcomings and to seek their elimination. Researching the U.S. system, she comments:

By design or in effect, many of the recent educational governance reforms constrain, alter, or eliminate school boards. However, little discussion and less research has focused on how school boards can operate most effectively within these new governance structures or what the consequences of school board elimination would be. (Land, 2002, p. 247)

In short, it’s far too easy to reach into the hat and pull out school board amalgamation as a solution to chronic problems. As one of our member submissions states: *“No major change agenda should be undertaken without first clearly stating what the desired outcome of the change is. Is it to save money? Short term? Long term? Is it to ‘improve’ education? If so, how do you define this?”* These questions have not been fully addressed in this review process, nor can we expect them to be fully addressed between now and the next provincial budget.

Further, in communications with our members and the public, it is abundantly clear there is little to no appetite for yet another administrative revamp. People are far more interested in looking deeply into how we can improve our children’s learning experiences. Being on the same heavily standardized, centrally-dictated track for several years with few measurable gains suggests it is time for new listening and thinking. Ideas we have heard include more holistic, balanced curriculum, increased hiring of First Nations teachers, support for school community councils, more time and freedom for teachers to teach, increased support for community coordinators and education assistants, smaller class sizes, improved teacher-student ratios, and renewed attention to basic school maintenance, to name a few.

On the budgetary side, there is strong support for reinvesting school divisions with the power to set their own mill rates and maintain control of their own reserves, as a

means to raise funds locally to meet local aspirations. The move away from this model has been fraught with inefficiencies and budget shortfalls. As well, questions have been raised regarding increased emphasis on hiring lean consultants, and replacing made-in-Saskatchewan in-house curriculum and classroom materials with high-priced products and services from global multinationals such as Pearson Education. Our members also question the 2011 decision to increase funding of private religious schools, and to add in a whole new class of qualified independent schools. If we are to re-examine education spending, these are the types of relatively recent decisions that are much more open to revisiting, in comparison to opening up and revisiting the foundations of our governance under the Education Act.

The role of democracy

In difficult times, education invariably benefits from more democracy, not less. Allowing local communities and their elected representatives to have input into pressing problems provides effective, efficient planning. While central bureaucracies tend to view variances in the system as a deficit, the view from the ground is quite different. Local variances and voices can be very beneficial, and should be allowed to flourish. There are few known benefits to be gained from eliminating or amalgamating school boards, and many potential problems, starting with the immediate drain on attention, time and resources that could be better spent supporting the learning needs of our children.

Local school boards and their electors may at times trouble the waters of power, but that is their function. Checks and balances are required by democracies. Governments under political stress often move to centralize power, claiming it will be more efficient. We on the ground know the opposite is true. Nothing is more *inefficient* than centralized bureaucracies that distance themselves from public input.

In your discussion of education governance, we hope that upholding the democratic rights of citizens is paramount. As well, we urge you to impress upon our provincial government leaders that education – like democracy – is simply an investment that must be made through thick and thin, in good times and bad, for the sake of our future.

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