Community Schooling and First Nations and Métis Education:
Community Perspectives

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Submitted by RealRenewal to the
Joint Task Force on First Nations and Métis Education and Employment
November 27, 2012

Introduction

The community school concept has been around since the 1920s, however it was not until the late 1970s that Saskatchewan school parents began to seriously discuss how to implement concepts emanating out of Flint, Michigan in their home communities (Bendig, 2012). In the United States, community schooling had been adopted and shaped by racialized and marginalized communities seeking a greater level of self-determination over their children's education. In the Saskatchewan context, a founding member of one of the province's first School Community Councils relates how community-level explorations were similarly informed by efforts of First Nations and Métis people to regain control of their destinies:

> Our band was the first in Canada to get rid of the Indian Agent, in 1965. Then I became a member of our band school committee in 1973. People wanted input, not just to be in charge of school supplies and busing. We transferred these ideas to the constitution of the [School] Community Council, the ideas of autonomy that I learned in the struggle for band autonomy. (Asikinack, *interview,* 2011)

In Regina, the connection to First Nations and Métis self-determination was evident in the types of community organizations that came together to negotiate the establishment of community schooling in the public system. They were:

- Regina Native Community Awareness Society
- North Central Community Society
- Regina Native Women's Association
- Connaught Parent's Group
- Regina Native Race Relations Association
- Regina Native Concerns Committee
- Kitchener Curriculum Committee   (Community Organizations of the
                                    Community Schools Working Group, 1980, p. 1)

While parents were looking toward Flint for inspiration, the provincial Department of Education looked toward Winnipeg, where a community schooling initiative was underway that was more top-down and narrowly focused (Greenburg 2012, *personal conversation*). It was this approach that the province brought to the table, with a proposed primary focus on Aboriginal student attendance and nutrition, rather than democratization of the system. Thus the principles of autonomy and self-determination became a key sticking point in the establishment of pilot community schools. A position paper submitted jointly by Regina-based community organizations stated, "A community school must have the participation, support and involvement of the community. Otherwise, the program will do nothing but provide lunches" (Community Organizations of the Community Schools Working Committee, 1980, p. 4).

After a months-long stalemate over the question of community empowerment and Aboriginal involvement, the aforementioned organizations wrested an agreement from the province that promised "to provide opportunities for the equal involvement of Native community residents in the community school" and to "actively involve parents and other community residents in the community school decision-making process, through the School Community Council, regarding community school policy, curriculum, finance, facilities and staffing procedures" (Province of Saskatchewan Order-in-Council, 1980). Accordingly, parents participated in hiring panels and reviewed classroom instruction and resources for racist content, among many other activities (Nicholls, *interview*, 2011). The newly formed councils also developed their own autonomous constitutions, which in some cases included measures such as a guaranteed number of seats First Nations and Métis parents, and designated seats for community representatives (Asikinack, *interview*, 2011).

Under the program, community schools received augmented funding and specialized staffing, including Community Coordinators, Nutritionists and Native Teacher Associates (later called Teacher Associates). These resources arrived under the umbrella of the province's focus on attendance and nutrition, which may have contributed to a continuing top-down view of how community schools should be established and run. Nonetheless, active parents and community took their expanded

role seriously and began working with their school community coordinators to establish after-school and evening community programs. At the aforementioned Connaught Community School, which was among the first four Regina community schools, this included adult education upgrading, AA meetings, and evening classes in car repair, beadwork, traditional dance, Cree language and guitar (Fahery n.d., A12; Bendig 2012). A review of SCC minutes reveals that a lively mix of school-community programs continued into the 2000s, including a pow wow dance group, tipi raisings, community feasts, Families and Schools Together (FAST) meetings and craft nights. By 2011, however, these activities had disappeared from the SCC minutes, along with discussion of First Nations and Métis issues. This change coincides with what can best be described as a simultaneous expansion and dissolution of the community school model.

Recent context

On the surface, the development of community schooling in Saskatchewan appeared to be on a forward trajectory since its inception. In 1983 the Department of Education declared community schooling a success in its 16 pilot locations, and began steadily expanding the program throughout the province to over 100 schools (Marshall 1983, n.p.; SCSA 2012, pp. 62-66). An action plan for 2000-2005 developed by the Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee stated parental involvement in decision-making is part of the equity equation, adding, "Equity implies collaboration, communication and decision-making" (Saskatchewan Education, n.d., p.5).

In 2001 the Role of the School Task Force recommended that a community school philosophy be adopted by all schools in Saskatchewan (Tymchak 2001). In 2004 Saskatchewan Learning updated its 1996 community schools framework document "Building Communities of Hope." Significantly, the subtitle was changed from "Best Practices for Meeting the Needs of At-Risk and Indian and Métis Students" to "Effective Practices for Meeting the Diverse Learning Needs of Children and Youth," signaling a move from the origins of community schooling as an explicit response to First Nations and Métis concerns. What followed was a rapid dilution of community

schooling as a vehicle to address long-standing issues of racism and exclusion that have marred the relationship between schools and First Nations and Métis communities. This was accompanied by an equally rapid expansion of the model.

In 2005 a province-wide data collection project provided a largely positive review of community schooling, while pointing out areas for concern and improvement (Wotherspoon, et. al. 2005). For example, the study revealed community members appreciated the work of community school coordinators, citing statements such as: "Community school coordinators fill a void – they work as a team" (p. 37). Community coordinators were reported to make a significant contribution to dialogue and leadership on community education practices, but it was noted their role was poorly understood by administrators (p. 40). The report's authors also pointed out that policies encouraging continual staff turnover were a frequently reported barrier to community engagement, and recommended that staff with an affinity to the community school model and close ties to specific communities be allowed to remain in those community schools for their working lives (p. 35). The report further acknowledged the importance of all staff and administrators placed in community schools to be well educated on the goals of community schooling, supporting a point raised more or less continually by parents since the 1980s.

In its concluding chapter, the study noted students in economically and socially challenged school communities lagged in math assessments. The data was placed in the report with a strongly worded caution that it should not be interpreted as formative data from which conclusions could or should be drawn, but was rather included as a baseline for a future longitudinal study (p. 85).

As for community involvement, the study found the vast majority of SCCs were willing to participate in or were actively engaged in the life of the school (p. 32). However, parents identified that their willingness to be involved was related to their sense of the school's sincerity about genuine involvement (p. 37). The report emphasized the role democratic decision-making must play in the model (p. 40).

The question of community involvement came to the fore in November 2005, when the province ordered all Saskatchewan schools to adopt the community school model and establish School Community Councils by 2007-2008. In so doing, the

Ministry of Learning drew existing SCCs and parent groups into boilerplate constitutions with more narrowly defined mandates aimed first and foremost at supporting initiatives defined and directed by the province (SSBA 2006). While the rhetoric signaled an expansion of community schooling, the reality gradually set in, offering a different picture at the grassroots level:

> The new rules have resulted in less autonomy for SCCs. Parents aren't interested in being involved under the new structure – it's not fun for them. (Anon. 2010)

This sentiment was drawn to the province's attention at a 2009 meeting between Ministry of Learning officials and the Saskatchewan Community Schools Association:

> We had a successful Parent Council, but since the transition to the new 'School Community Councils,' people are not as confident to get involved. (SCSA 2009, p. 3)

These sentiments merely revealed an existing crack in the system that had long been papered over by education decision-makers eager to show they had community buy-in for their plans, and suppressed among parents who felt their participation often amounted to tokenism. A later review of the 2005 data discovered community and family input into substantive matters such as school budgets, policy-making and hiring was rare to the point of almost never occurring and concluded that "despite increased resources, citizen-centred governance does not exist in many Saskatchewan community schools" (Evitts 2007, pp. 54-56, 71). More disturbing, the study found:

> ...while all stakeholders have the ability to communicate, and are formally recognized as important contributors to the dialogue surrounding community schooling, there exists a level of coercion (whether implicit or explicit, real or imagined) in many schools that prohibits any fulfillment of communicative action. (Evitt 2007, p. 81)

This existing situation, combined with new restraints on SCC activity, contributed to the ability of education administrators and technocrats to rapidly unravel the

community schooling model to suit their own policy objectives, 'evolving' the model, in their parlance, outside the arena of community input and control.

This unravelling process was doubtless influenced by upward pressure from school administrators grappling with inadequate resources to deliver on new demands from the Ministry. In particular, "high expectations placed on achievement indicators [left] little room to be concerned with community development issues" (Thompson 2008, p. 29). Beginning in 2009, the Ministry began allowing funds previously earmarked for specific community supports, such as the hiring of school community coordinators, to be used for other purposes. At the divisional level, staffing decisions were "decentralized" to principals, who were "given flexibility around staffing in accordance with their Learning Improvement Plan goals" (Cottrell et. al., 2010, p. 43). From a community perspective, the introduction of 'principal's discretion' in fact amounted to a centralizing – rather than de-centralizing – move, in that SCCs lost considerable policy leverage over the disposition of community school funds and access to specialized, culturally-affirming support staff and programs.

Meanwhile, administrators whose plans may have been threatened or altered by what little power remained to SCCs seized the opportunity to declare community schools a failed experiment (Cottrell et. al., 2010, p. 43), despite the absence of longitudinal data to support their claim. Ironically, the very same 2005 data collection project that commended the community school model and warned against misinterpretation of test score data was cited in public meetings as 'proof' that community schools were ineffective (*personal observation*). At the Ministry level, the terminology of community schooling was replaced by 'community education,' serving to further de-link community schooling from its place-based community context and place it in the realm of educational technocracy. Specific mention of First Nations and Métis concerns began to melt away, along with targeted resources, until ultimately funding was absorbed under the general heading of 'supports for learning' and it was announced that there would be no more community school designations. In this manner a set framework of requirements and accountability was replaced by the individual power of division officials, with no avenue for community members to appeal said decisions.

Community perspectives and responses

        Despite the community school model's foundational promise that parents and community members would become partners in educational decision-making, parents were shut out of the major changes to community schooling described in this presentation. While the manner by which formerly designated community school resources have been realigned varies from division to division and from system to system, the experience of Regina Public offers the most prescient view of how resources can now be redeployed outside the knowledge and involvement of parents and community partners. Beginning in late 2009, RealRenewal began receiving reports from school communities that had lost their community coordinators and evening programs without explanation. In February 2010, the Regina Public School Board responded to RealRenewal's inquiries about the number of community coordinator positions since 2007 with a letter stating 8 of 16 designated Regina public schools had switched to "new staffing approaches to meet their emerging needs" (RPS, *correspondence*, 2010). In plainer words, within less than three years, community coordinator positions had been quietly eliminated in 50 per cent of Regina Public's designated community schools. Through other channels, RealRenewal was able to ascertain this amounted to 6.75 FTEs remaining among a staff position had been expressly identified in the 2005 data collection project – and by many parents over the years – as providing important leadership in support of effective community schooling (Wotherspoon, et. al. 2005, p. 40). In various statements, division administrators and school administrators have said the responsibilities of community coordinators have been transferred to other staff members and the Elders program. However, in speaking with affected communities we have seen little evidence that this is so, and we have concerns that Elders – who are not salaried employees – are being expected to pick up the slack of lost staff positions. Regina Public officials have stated the staffing changes were supported by an Elders' Advisory Council, reported to include parents and community members and to hold regular meetings (Cottrell 2010, p. 41). However, when a concerned First Nations parent asked at the board's 2012 AGM how the composition of the Council is determined and how it operates, no answers were forthcoming.

A paucity of information is complicated by the consequences of asking for information. When the member of an affected SCC raised questions about community school staffing with board administrators, the response was a veiled threat against school's future community school funding status. This response correlates with Veritt's observation that community members are subjected to coercion, and is collaborated by comments we have received while investigating this issue:

> If you say anything, you will lose your job. The [school] tour didn't show the reality – what the classes are actually like, the problems. I can't talk to my trustee because the board office will wonder where she got her information from and it will get back to me. (anon., 2011)

> If you try to even remotely involve the community, the response from the administration is like, 'How dare you?' (anon., 2011)

> I brought a copy of the community school framework to an SCC meeting to show to the other parents. The principal flipped out and demanded to know in front of everyone who gave it to me. (anon., 2012)

While shared decision-making is listed as a requirement of community school designation, in fact RealRenewal's work supporting school communities has revealed that today decision-making of any consequence remains largely in the hands of administrators, and SCCs are advised that their mandate is restricted to supporting the Learning Improvement Plan, with a heavy-handed emphasis on providing funds for classroom resources. As one example, although the Education Act's Regulations specifically invest SCCs with the power to comment on school closures and other policy matters (The Education Regulations 1986, Part II.2.3.93), SCCs are routinely advised by school principals that they are not allowed to do so because it is 'outside their mandate.' SCC members have also been informed that parents and community members have never had the right to an opinion on staffing decisions, such as the removal of community coordinators, despite the fact that SCC members originally sat on the panels that hired community coordinators, as well as other teaching positions (Nicholls, *interview*, 2011).

As first-hand accounts of the weakening community role began to emerge, RealRenewal hosted a workshop in September 2012 to discuss the uncertain future of

community schooling. After a morning of information-sharing, some 30 participants spent the afternoon developing a list of final recommendations for action, which included:

- Work on anti-racism so inclusion doesn't turn to exclusion.
- Challenge 'principal's discretion'
- Speak out about the feeling of powerlessness that has been created
- Work in partnership with other communities
- To gain involvement in SCCs, there has to be a purpose and issues that are a priority to people.
- Help the Coordinators gain the power to build the autonomy to do their jobs.
- Advocate for the resources for community activities and after school programs.

(RealRenewal, Workshop notes, Sept. 2010)

This was followed up with in-depth interviews with available participants, who identified the top three key issues for school communities: building community partnerships; resources for after-school and community activities, and; the ability for communities to identify and address their own priorities (Hesch 2011, pp. 1-2). Since this workshop, we have done our best to advocate for these important goals. It is not an easy task in an atmosphere of increasingly heavy-handed control from above over the work of SCCs.

At a Saskatchewan Community Schools Association in-service meeting in 2011, a RealRenewal representative asked a Ministry spokesperson if parents were considered stakeholders and, if so, why they had not thus far been informed or consulted about changes to community schooling. The Ministry response was that of course parents and community members were very important stakeholders and they would be consulted in future. To our knowledge, this has not happened.

Conclusion

Evitts' observes, "While community school policy can be expected to have a positive effect, it cannot happen overnight, nor can it be expected to right all wrongs…especially those that are deeply historic and systemic in nature (Evitts 2007, p. 7). Community schooling has not been perfect, but neither has it been a failure. The 2005 data collection project was very positive about the model's current practice and future potential. But from our meetings and discussions with community members, it is clear the model has been weakened and tilted toward tokenism and administrative control in recent years. The alternative presented – delinking community school resources from First Nations and Métis issues and absorbing resources into more general budget lines – would be more acceptable if it were shown to work. However, in the school division where this approach has the longest and most aggressive history of implementation, success indicators are moving in the opposite direction. For example, while SCC participation among the category 'principals, teachers and student representatives' increased by 3 per cent between 2009 and 2011, the participation of community members *declined* by a corresponding 3 per cent, while participation by parents remained the same (Regina Public Schools 2011, p. 17). Further, between 2008 and 2011, the percentage of Aboriginal students performing at adequate or above in comparative oral reading records declined from 65 per cent to 58 per cent in Grade 1 and from 60 per cent to 46 per cent in Grade 2, leading Regina Public Schools to conclude that "the gap in achievement [between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students] is widening" (RPS 2011, p. 10). Declining reading assessments indicators among Aboriginal students were also noted in Grades 4, 7 and 10 during the same time period (RPS 2011, p. 11). Clearly the absorption of community school resources into other budget envelopes has not been the magic bullet for which school principals may have hoped.

Recent history does not mean community schooling cannot or should not be restored to its original purpose – namely, to allow communities to regain control of their destinies and to reshape an education system that has stubborn roots in a long history of colonialism and racism. The Assembly of First Nations Secretariat recommends the following indicators of success for working in a community context:

- Percentage of schools that are governed by a community-based governing agency
- Percentage of schools with each type of school governing agency
- Number of work experiences opportunities provided to students
- Number of meetings held with other community agencies
- Parent and student satisfaction surveys – is the school part of your community?

(Hurton 2009, p. 15)

In short, rather than giving up on community schooling as a token segregated gesture in its current form, it makes better sense to unleash the model's heretofore constrained potential to genuinely create change. In this manner community schooling can become one important potential inroad to improved First Nations and Métis education, honouring the original intent of its founders. With this in mind, we respectfully make the following recommendations:

1. Restore and rehabilitate the community school model as a means to address longstanding First Nations and Métis concerns with the education system.
2. Support the Saskatchewan Community Schools Association and provide substantial resources to expand its outreach to disempowered communities.
3. Undertake the longitudinal study recommended at the conclusion of the 2005 Community Schools Data Collection Project.
4. Provide community-led training opportunities for education administrators and staff on local issues and the principles of shared governance.
5. Re-affirm the power of SCCs under the Education Act to speak freely on broad educational policy and program issues.
6. Include grassroots community members and community organizations in policy-making, investing in them actual powers to shape policy.

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