

## Education Matters — Local Voices, Local Choices

The year 2019 will be a landmark in the approach to Education Financing. The newly appointed Minister of Education, Kelvin Goertzen, who oversaw the reform of the Health Financing, is undertaking a study of Education Finance all the way from the property tax invoice to the School Divisions' year-end audits. He describes the assessment he plans as the sort of thing only done every 20 or 30 years. It is a very ambitious task, and he admits it may take more than a year.

He has to figure out how to be fair to all stakeholders who are taxed to fund the system, and then how to ensure that the money collected is effectively used to secure the best outcomes for all students. There is a lot to consider.

At the moment, roughly 40% of the cost of Education is collected as property tax by local School Divisions. Each division prepares a budget once they know what they will be receiving from the province, and calculates what they will need from local taxes to run their schools. The budget is prepared by locally elected Trustees with the help of the division's administration. It is a classic example of democracy in action; an ineffective or wasteful board can be brought to account and replaced.

Among the things that Goertzen is considering is whether the grassroots system of 37 locally elected Boards of Trustees with taxing privileges is the best way to control and direct Education spending. He could remove the taxation privileges, or adjust the number of local boards, or take over the whole enterprise and run it from a central office. One thing he can't do is stop taking property tax to fund the system; the cost of educating each pupil in the system stands at an average of \$13,284 — a total of \$2.4 Billion, and it can't all come from income and sales tax revenue without a horrible upheaval. Property tax will remain, but will local control?

At a quick glance, you might think that fewer, larger boards would be more efficient and command some economies of scale, but the forced amalgamations of the nineties produced no real economies. The fact is that the most efficient and cost effective boards are not the largest ones, and the climate of locally driven innovation has produced some wonderful new programs for Manitoba's far-flung and widely differing communities.

Here in Beautiful Plains, we have developed programs and policies that make our graduates welcome whether they go for post-secondary education, or into the trades with apprenticeship hours already in their resumes. Our graduation rates are high, and our marks in standardized exams are generally above provincial averages. This is because we can allocate resources to support our students and give them what they need to succeed. We have successfully faced some radical changes in our demographics brought about by local industry, and have undertaken the building of a new middle school to ease the pressures of student population. To do this in the short response time we have needed is a tribute to a very effective administration, and a flexible and enthusiastic staff. What's more, it was done keeping our costs per pupil well below average, and with an administration budget below 3%.

Local control is vital to the success of our local schools. In the upcoming discussions of Education funding and control, don't let it slip away.