

Local Voices, Local Choices – Education Matters

There has been quite a bit of discussion and lots of questions about the Manitoba government's plan for education. An education review was implemented in 2018. This review cost approximately one million dollars and although the government has accepted the 75 recommendations from the report, most of the recommendations by the review board do not appear in the changes proposed in legislation. In fact the review authors find the new government legislation a "bit of a mystery". Instead an Education Modernization Act is being presented in the Legislature. Both the Premier and the Minister of Education stated that education dollars need to be spent in the classroom and not on administration. This is puzzling for Beautiful Plains School Division as that has always been a practice in this division. Beautiful Plains has consistently prioritized resources for students and classrooms in yearly budgets. Smaller class sizes, adequate staffing, safe physical environments in the form of portable classrooms and new renovations are foremost to Beautiful Plains' strategic plan. The statement that local school boards do not put their dollars into the classroom or have the students and staff wellbeing at the core of decision making is simply untrue. Every decision the Beautiful Plains School Board makes has the core question – What is the best for our students and staff.

The government's new plan – Better Education Starts Today - eliminates the 37 local school boards and replaces it with an appointed Provincial Educational Authority, a provincial advisory council, and individual school community councils for each school in the province. The idea is that this will save 40 million dollars. Our local school board costs less than 42,000 dollars annually to operate. Clearly there will be substantial costs associated with a Provincial Education Authority, a Provincial Advisory Council and local School Community Councils. When the dust settles, this initiative could end up costing tax payers far more, while our local voice will have been lost and replaced by a provincial entity. Not only will our local voice in education be lost but the local businesses will suffer as well. The procurement of supplies will predominantly be made from Winnipeg instead of locally sourced trades and suppliers. Staff members employed at a local level may not be part of our communities anymore and the impacts of that will be felt by all businesses. The government's idea is that dealing with one provincial entity for supplies will be more of a bargaining tool but it usually ends up not only costing more to have nonlocal trades and services due to travel and a lack of understanding about local needs and concerns, the level of service and quality of work is often substantially reduced.

In this new plan, our division loses its ability to make plans and decisions based on our community's unique needs. Beautiful Plains has consistently made decisions about expenditures based on what our community has needed. There are several examples of this every single year such as support staff, student services, and early literacy support. When newcomers started coming to our communities for jobs, we worked closely with local industry to gauge the number of new students and their specific needs. Extra staff and programming was added to address the unique language and learning needs of our new students.

In 2011 to help students reach their full potential and address some of the local community needs we created an Apprenticeship program. Some students were interested in trades as careers and high school courses were not reflecting those needs. The Beautiful Plains school board allocated funds to hire an

apprenticeship coordinator. In this way students were able to go to school part time and apprentice at a trade part time. The coordinator was the liaison between industry and the school. This program has been very successful with 170 students being part of the Apprenticeship program accumulating 1210 credits. Not only have these students' needs been served but likewise the growing demand in our communities has benefited.

Another way Beautiful Plains has responded to the unique needs of the community was hiring a divisional psychologist. The student advisory committee as well as staff spoke to the board about students struggling with stress, addictions, and mental health issues. An Addictions worker (AFM) was brought in to counsel and support the high school students. Programs such as Roots of Empathy, Mental Health First Aid and student groups such as the Social Justice Committee and the Student Advisory Committee were started for a positive and proactive approach.

As well, the board hired an additional Speech and Language Pathologists as a result of an increased need identified during preschool screening and in discussion with our staff who are working directly with our students. The preschool screening program is locally implemented for children in need of additional support before they start Kindergarten and resources are put in place to meet those needs.

Another area that the Beautiful Plains division has prioritized funds to ensure success for our students is providing quality WIFI and investing in fibre optics and quality connectivity for all our schools. Recently with the pressure to provide quality remote learning opportunities for our students as a result of the pandemic, wireless upgrades occurred at RJ Waugh, Carberry Collegiate, Hazel M. Kellington and Neepawa Collegiate. Wi-Fi systems are also accessed by families who need home internet in temporary learning settings. Monies were allotted for computer replacement plans, I pads and Chrome books for middle year's students, mobile computer stations, robotics and coding tools as well as professional development for teachers. This was done well ahead of the government's remote learning centre or guidelines for remote learning as we recognized the need long before the government was able to formulate a plan.

These initiatives were all made possible by the Beautiful Plains division listening to the needs of the local community, staff and students and making budget decisions accordingly. Our local board made choices based on local voices. With the new government plan, it is feared that all these programs implemented for the betterment of our students will be lost. Having the ability to make decisions at a local level allows far greater flexibility and agility than it would be if it were made in Winnipeg. The new plan Better Education Starts Today does not address the issues of connectivity, child poverty and inadequate education funding which have been completely exacerbated by this pandemic. 2/3 of Manitoba children live below the poverty line and many communities still struggle with accessible internet. This new plan does not address that in any way. The pandemic has brought into focus very clearly that our students don't need more screen time or remote learning as the new bill suggests but more social and personal interaction. We need to ensure our schools stay open and students have direct contact with humans for their social, mental and physical health.

The government has also used the PISA results to state that Manitoba students are well behind the national standards in reading, math and science. The PISA tests are given every three years (last one was 2018) to every 15 year old in selected schools. These test results can be misleading because while Manitoba did score lower than some other provinces, it was noted that 8 out of 10 students in Manitoba

were at or better than the Canadian standard. 2 out of 10 students scored lower and that is reflective of 2 out of 10 children in Manitoba who live in poverty. The PISA results show Manitoba has one of the lowest socio-economic scores in Canada. The Manitoba government has no plan to correct the social inequities in our province. Also Canada scored as one of the top countries in the world and Manitoba contributed to this assessment.

While academics are important, schools have become so much more than places where students learn to read and write. They are now critical in supporting students in their overall development, health and ability to transition into becoming successful in the world outside of school. Our division has always invested in our schools' extracurricular activities making sure that all students have access to sports, clubs, music and art classes. We have continued to understand and concentrate our efforts on attempting to ensure our students have access to a wide array of Athletics, Arts, Trades, Leadership, Social Justice and Academic options.

While there are certainly ways for us to improve in our education system, this new plan seems to be getting rid of everything that is working and replacing it with an ill thought out proposal which will affect Manitoba children for years to come. The idea that students from south of Carberry to the Saskatchewan border west of Roblin can be treated the same is illogical. The removal of school closure moratoriums as well as the removal of the guarantee that children do not spend more than an hour on a bus will negatively impact rural students. This new legislation is aimed at cutting costs but at what cost to our youth?