

2/5/11 Winnipeg Free Press (Pg. Unavail. Online)
2011 WLNR 2317863

Winnipeg Free Press (Manitoba, CA)
Copyright 2011 Winnipeg Free Press, a Division of FP Canadian Newspapers Limited Partnership

February 5, 2011

School system that teaches but can't learn

Manitoba's chronic reliance on transfer payments, its ever-inflating public sector and its increasing concentration of sectoral decision-making power in the hands of a few on Broadway is having an enervating effect on the province, Law Professor **Bryan Schwartz** argues in *The Supplicant Society*. It doesn't have to be that way, Manitoba can change for the better, Schwartz demonstrates in this series published by the Winnipeg Free Press and the Frontier Centre for Public Policy. The series started Jan. 22 and continues weekly on Saturdays, ending on March 5. Footnoted versions of this article can be found at winnipegfreepress.com and at www.fcpp.org

Local school boards in Manitoba can be a means of gathering the insight and wisdom of parents, students and local community members. The government of Manitoba is determined, however, to reduce them to one more level of the provincial bureaucracy.

We are headed towards the same overly centralized model as in health care, where the independent boards of hospitals and seniors homes have been steadily pushed aside or relegated to an ever-diminished role by government-controlled regional health authorities.

The province has taken many decisions out of the hands of local school boards in recent years.

The government assumed a veto over local school closures, attempted to cap tax increases supported by local school boards in the interests of meeting student needs, forced the amalgamation of divisions and asked to review and approve local budgets (1).

There actually is a real need for greater centralization of funding for school boards. Province after province has reviewed and eliminated systems where schools are financed largely through local property taxation (2). That system is harsh on parents and students in economically disadvantaged communities or areas that do not have valuable commercial properties. This province is moving gradually in that direction, but the property-tax system is being used as an excuse to further squeeze out local input and replace it with centralized control.

Former premier Gary Doer indicated that once the province reached a point of funding 80 per cent of school board revenue, it would take over union negotiations and standardize them province-wide (3). Then, even more

Manitoba voters will be on the provincial payroll, and the ruling party can try to buy the political support of more public employees with taxpayer money.

Local control will be diminished even further, and with that, the opportunity for innovation, experimentation and diversity.

Centralized fiscal support need not be accompanied by micromanagement. The provinces used to complain bitterly about strings attached to federal transfer payments, as did band governments. Ottawa has responded by increasingly relying on bloc funding, rather than using its spending power to dictate or supplant the choices of other governments. Provinces that have centralized funding have found ways to maintain some real local power and choice -- e.g., leaving local school boards a meaningful portion of their budget that is free of provincial direction.

We should be looking for ways to increase, rather than impair, choice and diversity within the public school system. Greater freedom should not be confined to those who can afford to send their children to private schools. Alberta led the way in Canada in introducing charter schools in its system. These schools, although publicly funded, have a significant measure of autonomy with respect to curriculum, staffing, educational focus and approach.

Instead of being forced into cookie-cutter schools run by a provincial bureaucracy, parents and children are freer to find an educational home that suits their own needs and aspirations.

A recent study by the Canada West Foundation found that Alberta's charter schools have achieved considerable success. Educational outcomes, tested by objective measurements, have improved in both reading and math, while students and parents report a high level of satisfaction 4).

The study suggests that these schools can be models for innovation and excellence. Alberta charter schools bring real pluralism to the system. The focus of some is gifted children, others on math and science, and others have an aboriginal dimension.

To be sure, rules governing the development of charter schools must be carefully designed and implemented or serious problems can emerge. For example, a province cannot simply allow charter schools to cherry-pick the easiest-to-teach students and ignore those with special needs. Legislation and regulations can easily ensure that charter schools are widely accessible and not confined to students with superior financial means or academic gifts. In fact, charter schools can be established -- with special financial support -- to find innovative and effective ways to serve special needs children.

We can add primary and secondary education to the sectors of Manitoba society that have been placed under the central control of government and add their administrators and staff to the effective roster of provincial employees.

Or we can do something far better. We can increase equity in funding across the system and at the same time enhance the ability of parents, students, teachers and administrators to come together and create distinctive educational communities. With diversity will come innovation, lessons to be learned and shared across the system and ultimately better educational outcomes. Thoughtful and imaginative reforms to the governance of our schools can be an integral part of moving from a supplicant society to a revitalized Manitoba.

Next Saturday: Money Talks

Footnotes:

1.) List from Nick Martin, "Rural divisions sort through school closings," Winnipeg Free Press, April 30, 2008, A5. Available online at <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/historic/32828454.html>.

2.) Government of Saskatchewan News Release, "Provincial Government Delivers Largest Education Property Tax Cut In History." Available at <http://www.gov.sk.ca/news?newsId=64a1895d-097e-4ea4-b643-d0097ccca514>.

3.) Dan Lett, "Who's running Manitoba schools?" Winnipeg Free Press, May 17, 2008, A7. Available online at <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/historic/32860054.html>.

4.) Shawna Ritchie, "Innovation in Action: An Examination of Charter Schools in Alberta," Canada West Foundation, <http://blog.cwf.ca/CustomContentRetrieve.aspx?ID=1086723>, released January 18, 2010.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

COMPANY: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

NEWS SUBJECT: (Education (1ED85); Government (1GO80); Regulatory Affairs (1RE51))

REGION: (Canada (1CA33); North America (1NO39); Americas (1AM92))

Language: EN

OTHER INDEXING: (FRONTIER CENTRE; NICK MARTIN; SASKATCHEWAN NEWS RELEASE; SUPPLICANT SOCIETY; WEST FOUNDATION; WINNIPEG FREE PRESS) (Alberta; Bryan Schwartz; Dan Lett; Footnoted; Gary Doer; Legislation; List; Manitoba; Province; Schwartz; Shawna Ritchie; Thoughtful)

Word Count: 976

2/5/11 WINFREPR (No Page)

END OF DOCUMENT