

Members of Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools' Board of Education had the opportunity to meet with the governance review panel on January 5, 2017. This is a brief review of our position on education in Saskatchewan and on the Perrins report.

As a Catholic (separate) board, the specific options in the report do not apply directly to us. However, we believe it is important to address the underlying philosophies and principles, and their implications to the education sector as a whole, contained in the report. We believe that they have the potential to fundamentally change the way education is supported, governed and, ultimately, delivered in our province. We appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective.

Comments and critique of the report and its options do not imply that that we see no room for improvement in our current situation. In fact, we are firm believers in pushing for continual improvement. However, important factors in defining the effectiveness of education seem to be missing: how will any change improve reading or graduation rates, for example?

Since the last amalgamations in 2006, we are just now starting to see things settle, and progress in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) is taking hold. Real, sustained change at the classroom level takes many years and much determination. Disrupting that progress with further change would be detrimental to student success.

Education is the foundation of a free and democratic society; it has been, and will continue to be, a vital strength of our country and our province. In many parts of the developing world, we see repressive regimes limit access to education for groups of marginalized peoples. No doubt, equity in education comes with a cost, and that cost is an investment in the future and prosperity of our society. Local representation—decisions made by those closest to the people affected by decisions—is a key democratic principal to ensure equity is achieved.

Education is a unique sector that requires a unique structure. It is a 13-year relationship with a child and a family. It hinges on being part of the community and building relationships centred on trust, accessibility and accountability that honour the input and unique context of the local community. This can only be achieved through locally-elected boards, not through large mega-boards or government appointments.

All of these attributes of locally-elected representation serve boards well in establishing local partnerships, whether they be with local businesses, different levels of government, non-governmental agencies, education partners or other service providers. To use just one example, our board has established valuable partnerships with the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) and the Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. (CUMFI) to improve the learning outcomes for our First Nations and Métis students.

The report indicated that elected trustees may not have all of the skills and expertise to appropriately govern; i.e. various roles and backgrounds that align with the duties of a board. While this may be true of some boards or individuals, many boards do have a strong cross-section of backgrounds and training. There are ways to address this perceived gap that do not include moving to appointments.

Pages 20-21 of the report outline shifts in governance that are recommended regardless of the direction taken. Our comments include:

*Strategic direction and accountability:* Our ultimate accountability is to our students, and by extension, their parents, who are also taxpayers and voters. The number of members per board needs to take into account factors such as geography, size, population, etc. to obtain democratic representation (similar to all other forms of government). A range with a cap might make some sense. A democracy does not place restrictions on who runs (which is the same for reeve, mayor, councillor, MLA, MP, etc.). Training is certainly a good option, as long as it is cost effective.

*Effectiveness:* In the past the ministry played the role of monitoring quality. As boards have become bigger, they have the capacity to take on this role. Clarity of this moving forward is necessary.

*Efficiency:* There is a lot of good work already underway. We don't see this as a shift—this is business as usual for our board and many across the province. The report references value. It is important to note that cost is only one part of the value equation; quality is another key component in defining value.

We would be remiss if we did not mention things we do that are not part of our core-mandate when talking about efficiency. As an example, is feeding close to 2,000 children lunch each day part of our mandate? What about services we offer that are really health services (occupational therapy, speech language pathology, nursing support, etc.)? Everything that is not caught by the other ministries ends up part of our plate with no recognition for costs. We could be more efficient (reduce costs) by providing only the services that are part of our mandate, but that would leave many students behind.

*Consistency/Standardization:* The diversity that currently exists as you look across the province (North, urban, rural, etc.) all have different contexts, stressors, strengths, weaknesses and needs. Attempts to standardize must take into account the high degree of variability of work, responsibility, etc. in the various contexts. Equality (treating everyone the same) does not necessarily bring about equity (ensuring similar outcomes).

*Participation:* Locally-elected trustees reinforce the value of and build relationships with School Community Councils. Trustees are actively engaged with councils, and council members know they have accessible and accountable representation. In addition, trustees attend and participate in hundreds of community meetings and events. This presence in the local community provides local community members with easy access and a voice in governance.

We believe our work toward co-governance with STC and CUMFI is an effective way to increase outcomes of First Nations and Métis learners and to give the people these organizations represent a true voice in education.

We are concerned that appointed boards and moving to provincial or regional models of representation would reduce participation in School Community Councils and would be a set-back in the relationships developed with First Nations and Métis partners like STC and CUMFI.

It appears that the main driver in options 1 and 2 of the report is standardization: the assumption is that all 606 schools would be doing the same things, same policies and same inputs, and, therefore, would achieve the same results. Diversity is not welcomed.

This is “industrial age” thinking that made sense on assembly lines in the early 1900s. Current high-performing companies and organizations now implement structures and mechanisms to unleash the power of the people in order to problem-solve and innovate. The people bring their diversity and learn and work together. Current research into organizational theory and improvements point to ways to break down the monolithic structure into smaller networks. A nimble, responsive, connected organization can react to changing contexts. Staff are engaged and are part of the endeavour.

These two options perpetuate the fallacy that centralization reduces costs (increases efficiency) at the board and administrative levels. Service delivery costs are the bulk of expenses (as it should be). While these options may cost less at the top levels, it is a very small proportion of the overall costs. Research and experience indicate there are no or minimal savings in large-scale amalgamations or centralization of services.

Our comments on options 3 and 4 assume the government maintains elected trustees. Minor amalgamations and/or realignment of boundaries can make some sense if, and only if, done with purpose and principles. These options avoid many of the significant issues associated with options 1 and 2. Options 3 and 4 maintain the aspects of democracy that we hold to be of foundational importance to who we are in Saskatchewan. The relatively minor costs associated with the governance and administration are the costs associated with democracy.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Signed by Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools’ Board of Education Trustees:

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