

When it comes to kids, let's play fair

by Robert Rivard, President, Manitoba School Boards Association

In the mid-1980s, Manitoba school boards asked the provincial government of the day for an ongoing commitment to fund 80% of public school operating costs. The remaining 20% of needed revenue would be raised locally, through the education property tax. Although we have made progress over the past decade, the goal of 80% provincial funding for education has remained elusive.

Over the years, school boards have not been alone in looking for this increase in provincial funding for K-12 education. Two major studies—the Association of Manitoba Municipalities task force report “Rethinking Education Funding: Challenges and Opportunities 2001,” and the Report of the Minister’s Working Group on Education Finance (2004)—both included, as a fundamental principle, an 80/20 split in provincial and local contributions to education funding.

The recently launched Let’s Pay Fair campaign seeks to eliminate all property taxes in support of education. As a school board member, I am unwilling to head down that path. Here’s why.

There is a widely held belief that Manitoba is the only province which uses property tax revenues to support public education. In fact, seven out of ten Canadian provinces currently derive a portion of public school revenues from property taxes. In Manitoba, these property taxes are levied primarily by the local school board; elsewhere, they are levied entirely by the province. The Let’s Pay Fair campaign assumes that the provincial government is both able and willing to ante up all funds needed to maintain the level of educational services currently offered by Manitoba’s public schools (and that it can do so without relying on any form of property tax).

However, if we look to other jurisdictions where an initial commitment to 100% provincial funding of education has been made, the story is not a positive one. Major commissions in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario have identified significant and chronic funding shortfalls for the operation of public schools in those provinces. In British Columbia, massive school closures and teacher layoffs have been the norm for the past decade. In this current year, school boards across the country have experienced sudden and often dramatic provincial funding cuts which have translated into program and service losses for students.

In Manitoba, \$750 million support for public education comes from property taxes. Can we simply assume that if we eliminate that source of revenue, some other source will be found that will enable school boards to maintain the level and quality of educational programming that our citizens have come to expect from public schools? The Let’s Pay Fair campaign would have us believe so. School boards have to “stand up and be counted,” “draw a line in the sand,” or “play hardball.” Pick your favourite cliché, they all amount to the same thing: school boards cutting services and programming in order to reduce costs and eliminate the need for increased property taxes. The government, the theory goes, will “see the error of its ways,” “come around to our way of thinking,” and “cough up the cash.” The theory may sound good, but can we afford to test it? I don’t think so.

I don’t think we can afford to play what amounts to a game of chicken with our children’s futures. Until and unless we have a commitment from the provincial government that the funds needed to maintain current educational standards are and will continue to be forthcoming, I will not be supporting calls for the elimination of property taxes in support of public education. Put another way, I am not prepared to abdicate my responsibility as a trustee of my community’s public schools, or my responsibility to the children they serve.

We can all agree that the long-standing pattern of adding more responsibilities to schools—social services, health care, mental health supports—without matching grants to support these new initiatives is unfair, that public education is everyone’s responsibility, and perhaps most importantly of all, that public education is priceless. School boards part company with Let’s Pay Fair supporters, however, when the discussion turns to what needs to be done to preserve the good and remedy the ills of our public school system. School trustees refuse to remove students from a discussion that all too often focuses on dollars before people, on costs before value. That doesn’t always make us popular, but trusteeship isn’t a popularity contest; it’s about doing the right thing for the right reason. That reason is the students and the communities whose interests we are elected to represent.