



The Challenge to Maintain a Strong Public Education System in Saskatchewan

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About the Author

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Educational Innovation in Saskatchewan

Writing for the influential international magazine *Phi Delta Kappan*, Heather-jane Robertson described Saskatchewan's public schools as "An overlooked success in an under-appreciated province." Since the article first appeared in 2002, many of the innovative reforms that helped elevate the province's schools to a position envied throughout North America have remained either relatively hidden or have become the focus of considerable skepticism. The undervaluation of school success may be distressing, but it is not unusual. Public education has rode various waves and crests as it charted a pathway to occupy a strategic place in the development of advanced contemporary societies. The prominence accorded by knowledge, information and credentials in a globalized economy have burdened school systems with even higher expectations neither always matched by the kinds of changes desired by certain groups nor at a pace and in a manner conducive to these desires.

Saskatchewan's public PreK-12 education system (including schools that offer preschool, elementary and secondary programs) faces significant challenges in its efforts to keep abreast of social and economic transformations occurring both within and beyond the

province. For most of its history as a province, Saskatchewan has struggled to develop an education system receptive to the needs of its communities. With a predominantly rural-based population employed in agriculture and other primary industries, the province also had to address the growing challenge of ensuring that youth who left their home communities were equipped to function in other contexts. Three realities — the desire to strengthen and

maintain existing community linkages; pressures to provide a full range of educational services to students; and a relatively narrow tax base – have presented special challenges that appear unique to Saskatchewan schools. However, tensions over these issues have been

the focus of numerous reports and commissions over the past several decades, not only in Saskatchewan, but in many other provinces and OECD nations as well.¹

Today's schools face the added consideration that the range of social and economic concerns is far more diverse than has historically been the case. Schooling and education have tremendous economic significance, but they are also crucial as social gathering places and inclusive spaces in which people nurture a broad range of skills and understandings related to citizenship, critical thinking,

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problem-solving, and social responsibilities. Saskatchewan Learning's broadly-framed mandate "To advance the social, economic, and personal well-being of Saskatchewan people"² highlights the core dimensions that the province's residents have deemed over time to be essential features of its school system.

Saskatchewan's schools have often taken a leading role in advancing educational reform, which is reflected in comparative measures and public opinion polls that point to high levels of outcomes and satisfaction with the province's education system.³ The province's schools are an essential public investment that many other jurisdictions and public service providers seek to emulate. The province's education system is especially strong in its ability to combine innovative arrangements drawing

together schools, communities, and key public services; proactive stances towards equity and social justice; and a strong corps of well-trained educators and educational leaders who are genuinely committed to the fulfillment of broad-based education objectives.

Despite these successes, numerous challenges arise as we make choices about what role schooling will play and how it should be organized and delivered in a rapidly changing environment. We must be cautious in the process of making these decisions not to abandon fundamental underpinnings of a system that has historically served the province and many of its residents well. Sustained investment is necessary in order to ensure that this success continues and that the benefits of a strong education system can be extended and shared by all segments of the population over the next few decades.

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Setting the Stage — The Complex Educational Landscape in Saskatchewan

It is not an easy task to balance local, provincial and external needs while ensuring equity of educational services and opportunities across the province. Many serious issues require attention.⁴ The teaching force is aging. Teachers must contend with complex workload demands, accommodating diverse student needs and changes in school organization, curricula, and partnerships. Student numbers continue to decline in much of the province, despite desires by communities for full-service schools, often within both public and separate school systems, as well as desires for a variety of many other educational options. Although schools are making special efforts to ensure that students either stay in school or return later, one in five students who reach grade ten do not graduate from high school by the time they are 20 years old. School system personnel are trying to improve postsecondary participation rates and student skill levels in areas like math and problem-solving which have fallen below national averages. There is growing concern about the adequacy of school services and completion rates for groups within the school age population which are increasing, including Aboriginal students and students with particular social, economic or physical needs. Action to address

these concerns often requires more resources at the same time that many people are posing questions about school taxes and the extent to which educational services can be sustained in some communities. A considerable degree of turnover in educational leadership in many key stakeholder organizations, which may not be surprising in these circumstances, places further limits on the ability to ensure the degree of informed educational decision-making required to plan and operate a complex education system.

School systems face a more general challenge as they seek to balance equity and diversity. Equity, even in the narrow sense of ensuring comparable levels across the province of access to schools, quality of education, school funding, and tax levels, is difficult to achieve. There are tremendous variations in the organization and composition of the province's schools and school divisions. These concerns were the focus of initiatives announced in 2004 and formally implemented in 2006 to realign the province's 81 school divisions into 34 (and eventually 28) larger ones. In the early phases of this reorganization, a handful of the province's school divisions each had fewer than ten schools and a thousand students,

whereas the largest divisions in Saskatoon and Regina were composed of several dozen schools and more than twenty thousand students. Similarly, school sizes ranged from fewer than ten pupils to well over 2000, although smaller schools were predominate.

Saskatchewan has proportionately fewer larger and more smaller schools than any other province. Nearly half of all schools in Canada — compared to about one in four in Saskatchewan — have 300 or more pupils. The median school size in the province is 200 students, while about one in four of the province's schools have fewer than 100 pupils.⁵ Although schools exist side by side in some communities, the average distance to either the nearest elementary or secondary school was five kilometres in Saskatchewan in 2006 (before the latest round of school closures), compared to a national average of about three km.⁶

Major changes taking place in the province's demographic and economic circumstances are complicating these matters further. Trends such as urbanization and an overall decline in school-age populations affect communities in different ways. While some schools (mostly rural) with seriously low student numbers, others (mostly in higher grades and growing city neighbourhoods) find it difficult to keep pace with sharp enrollment increases. As a result of these changes, many difficult decisions lie ahead concerning thresholds at which schools can be funded and sustained while providing essential programs and services in close proximity to students who need them.

Social and economic transformations are also requiring Saskatchewan communities to look carefully at wider questions about equity and

diversity. Increasing social, cultural, and economic diversity throughout the province are accompanied by new opportunities as well as new challenges. Fundamental changes are occurring with respect to who is going to school (more people from a greater variety of backgrounds and living circumstances are going to school and staying longer) and what people either need or expect from schools.

We need, in this context, to pay attention to how schools can be best equipped to build upon and learn from the numerous capacities represented in such diverse communities. The expansion of early childhood education initiatives, measures to include and provide services for various categories of special needs students in public schools, and the expansion of school mandates to promote a model of integrated service delivery designated by the province as School^{PLUS} in tune with community needs have all had an impact on the composition and dynamics of schools and what they are expected to oversee.

One of the core strengths of public school systems, in comparison to other institutions, is their potential to accept and accommodate diversity. All partners have a stake and must play a part in ensuring that this potential is realized. Schools and the communities they represent need to be continually receptive to the specific needs, desires and circumstances of those who enter them. The overall challenge, then, is to determine how Saskatchewan can maintain a strong education system that addresses its current fiscal, social and cultural circumstances while building upon and expanding the diverse capacities of its communities and people.

The Issues

Social and Cultural Diversity

Among the key forms of diversity reshaping Saskatchewan schools are the growing numbers of students of Aboriginal heritage, a small but increasing immigrant population, increased demands for special education services (for students with exceptional learning and behavioural needs), and students from homes encountering either economic or social difficulties. Education systems, in acknowledging their responsibility to ensure that students from all backgrounds have equitable access to schooling, must also ensure that they can deliver specific programs, services and arrangements that take into account the tremendous range of experiences, capabilities, and challenges represented within the population. Initiatives to improve educational success and engagement among Aboriginal students are starting to be taken more seriously as the proportion of Aboriginal students rises above one-quarter of the school-age population. Demands for programs to foster immigrant integration and English (and sometimes French) language training are growing as Saskatchewan looks to other nations to meet its labour force needs and replenish a declining population. Desires to improve the ways in which schools address the specific learning needs of students with either physical or behavioural difficulties, as well as those encountering domestic problems, are often frustrated by limitations imposed by larger class sizes,

limited resources, or the lack of community services. In many of these cases, either funding arrangements or agreements with other agencies — including federal government programs, First Nations, or outside organizations — create a complex network of regulations and guidelines that make it even more difficult for school boards to balance diversity and equity.

The changes that surround schools are occurring at a time when school systems, along with other government services, are being asked to be more transparent, accountable, and performance-oriented. Such objectives, while highly important, can be interpreted and implemented in a number of different ways, with significant consequences for people who work in and with these public services. Measurement of student test scores, for instance, can be a powerful tool to help educators and parents assess how effective schools are at improving student performance. They can also be highly misleading when they are interpreted narrowly without taking into account the broad range of factors that influence and represent student outcomes. Similarly, expectations that teachers will implement new curriculum requirements, consult more widely with parents, or provide specific services for students are not likely to be successful if the resources and mechanisms to support these changes are not clearly in place.

Economic Changes and School Finance

The burgeoning provincial economy is having an uneven impact on schools and the students and communities they serve. Many individuals and sectors are experiencing unprecedented employment prospects and fiscal opportunities. Others face hardships as they deal with the effects of being displaced, unable to participate in core activities, or confronted with rapidly rising costs of living. Schools are affected by these changes both directly (for example, through rising operational and construction costs) and indirectly (such as family and personal difficulties). These changes will affect individuals in different ways. At a time in which most of us seek further education to improve employment prospects, those youth who either interrupt or discontinue their schooling to pursue what they see as lucrative (even if potentially short-term) job options and economic opportunities may find it difficult to return later, especially if their schools have closed in the meantime.

Amidst more promising economic forecasts, the province's system of educational finance remains an area of continuing controversy. Concern over inequities in the distribution of education operating grants and property assessment rates have prompted several groups (most vocally the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, the Saskatchewan Urban Municipality Association, and core business lobbies) to call for the province

to fund education exclusively through general revenues. The provincial government's initial response, to provide modest budgetary increases for elementary and secondary education accompanied by various school property tax credit measures, cannot be regarded as a long-term solution to this issue. It is also risky to rely too much on insecure promises of a more favourable equalization formula from the federal government as the potential solution to provincial education funding problems.

Education funding has long been a contentious (and occasionally unstable) activity in Saskatchewan and other provinces. Education

(as recognized constitutionally since Confederation and replicated in subsequent provincial legislative acts) is an area of provincial jurisdiction, augmented by the ability of local boards to make specific decisions about levels of educational programming and priorities.

The rising importance of education as a public activity has contributed to central governments, including the federal government, taking on a more prominent role. This was largely to ensure that school systems would have the fiscal capacity, standards, and ability to sustain an increasingly more demanding range of programs and services within a common overall framework. Nonetheless, the principles and practical aspects of maintaining both central and local responsibilities for education finance and operations are crucial for preserving school system integrity and vitality.

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Ironically, conditions and arrangements that potentially threaten local autonomy, including the terms of reference and implications of international and interprovincial trade agreements, are likely to undermine educational equity in the name of "fairness." Again, the difficult question of how communities can sustain the kind of education system required today while remaining sensitive to local capacities and needs emerges as a core issue. Current social and demographic trends in Saskatchewan suggest that more aggressive educational spending will be required in conjunction with wider public investment in order to sustain an education system that will be sufficient to meet ongoing demands.

Educational Investment for the Province's People and Communities

The investment required to operate and maintain any large education system, particularly one as complex as that of Saskatchewan, is considerable. It is not, though, out of line with other types of public services. The costs associated with running the province's school system have increased substantially — typically more than those of other provinces over the past decade — but the relative cost (measured, for instance as expenditures per student relative to total economic productivity, or Gross Domestic Productivity) actually began to decline after 2003.⁷

Teachers, parents and students are paying more out of their own pockets to help subsidize education, both directly and through community fundraising activities. In addition to costs for supplies, fees and other school

activities, some families are paying for tutoring services, extra-curricular activities, and a variety of other materials and programs to support their children's learning. These trends are not problems in themselves as they sometimes offer many benefits for learners. However, they do point to a wider concern that the more public schools are unable to provide all students with the programs and resources they need, the bigger the gap is likely to become between advantaged and disadvantaged learners and families. Not everyone can afford the time and resource demands imposed when outside support is required to subsidize schooling. There is a further danger in privatization by stealth. Without adequate public funding, schools become increasingly reliant on revenues and programs from corporations and other private agencies. In the meantime, outside educational providers can further diminish the ability of public school systems to maintain themselves by seeking to induce students who become disaffected with a system that is unable to meet their needs.

Without the same profile as high priority areas like health care, security and environment in which public spending is escalating, public education becomes increasingly more vulnerable to these kinds of problems. Any province that does make it a key priority and decisive commitment to maintain a strong public schooling system is in danger of losing one of its most valuable resources. We can learn from the lesson of schools in many other places, including New Zealand and parts of the United States and United Kingdom, where the diversion of funding and support for public schools has eroded the total quality of education and increased the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.⁸

The Need for Continuing Educational Balance

Education can be understood, in part, as a public investment that contributes to enhanced social and economic prospects and conditions for individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. Carefully-tended public education systems are also crucial for enhancing the well-being and quality of life of individuals and their communities. Several questions can guide our thinking about how best to work towards meeting the aims of the provincial education system's mandate to advance the social, economic and personal well-being of Saskatchewan people:

- What optimal school size and level of programs and services are required in order for either community or region to sustain an adequate education?
- How can we ensure that the province maintains and increases its commitment to provide adequate funding to meet these targets?
- How can provincial funding support a progressive tax system which balances fairness, responsiveness to local needs, and assurances that costs are not borne primarily by families and individuals?
- What do communities need to do to ensure that all schools are able to provide curricula and services appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal students, special education students, and other diverse learners in the province?
- How can these services complement prospects that all learners will gain an appreciation for the skills, understandings and responsibilities associated with global citizenship?
- What kinds of mechanisms are necessary to provide opportunities for meaningful participation by parents and community members in educational decision-making?
- How can we ensure, at the same time, that educators have the necessary resources, support and flexibility to deliver the numerous services and curricula they have been mandated to provide?

The answers that Saskatchewan residents pose to these questions are critical. It is essential, at a minimum, that short-term decisions do not damage the province's capability to build upon and extend its capacity to deliver the kind of education system required to address the ongoing needs of its children, youth, and adults.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Province of Saskatchewan, *Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life: Rural education: A summary* (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1957); Saskatchewan Education, *Structuring Public Education for the New Century: Ensuring Quality Education for Saskatchewan Students* (Regina: Saskatchewan Education, 1997); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *The Educational Infrastructure in Rural Areas* (Paris: OECD, 1994).
- 2 Saskatchewan Learning, "Mandate." Retrieved September 21, 2007 from <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/mandate.shtml>.
- 3 See, for example, Saskatchewan Executive Council, *Saskatchewan Omnibus Survey, January 2007* (Regina: Points West Consulting, Inc., 2007). Retrieved October 4, 2007 from <http://www.executive.gov.sk.ca/pdf.documents/polling/2007/Omnibus%20Survey%20January%202007.pdf>; Sigma Analytics and Saskatchewan School Boards Association, *Perceptions Tracking Survey Fall 2005: Final Report*. (Regina: Sigma Analytics and Saskatchewan School Boards Association).
- 4 Data and further detail on key educational trends in the province are contained in Saskatchewan Learning, *Saskatchewan Education Indicators Kindergarten to Grade 12 Fall 2005 Update* (Regina: Saskatchewan Learning, 2006).
- 5 Data from Saskatchewan Learning, "Active List of Saskatchewan Schools Provincial K-12 Enrolment (as of September 30, 2006)" (Regina: Saskatchewan Learning, June 2007). Retrieved September 28, 2007 from http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/branches/ed_finance/as_pdf/full_active_list_2006.pdf.
- 6 Calculated from data in Statistics Canada and Council of Ministers of Education Canada, *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program 2003* (Ottawa: Canadian Education Statistics Council catalogue number 81-582-XIE), p. 316.
- 7 Statistics Canada, *Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1997-1998 to 2003-2004* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2006), catalogue number 81-595-MIE2006044.
- 8 See, e.g., Hugh Lauder, David Hughes and collaborators, *Trading in Futures: Why Markets in Education Don't Work* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1999).