

To: The Manitoba Education Finance Review Committee:

From: Board of Trustees, Pembina Trails School Division

Date: Feb 16, 2022

Education funding and its attendant issues has been debated in Manitoba for decades. Generations have come and gone, each one committed to bringing about changes to reflect concerns of their era. In recent years, the matters of equity and opportunity for all have become increasingly apparent and important to all Manitobans.

This brief submission to the Province's Education Funding Review Committee will be a high-level commentary from the perspective of Pembina Trails School Division. We will focus on three primary areas, namely, the need for a funding formula that is responsive to rapid student enrolment growth, the need for modernizing the supporting infrastructures and systems with strategic investments, and finally an equity lens so that all students, no matter their circumstances, will become successful learners and contributors to a stronger Manitoba.

Pembina Trails is the fourth largest school division in Manitoba serving the communities of South-West Winnipeg. At 15,400 students and counting, we are the fastest growing school division in Manitoba. With current enrolment patterns it is likely that Pembina Trails will become the second largest school division in a few years. In the early stages of our rapid growth, new students filled available seats in the south half of the division. We have exhausted our inventory of space. In 2017 we opened Ecole South Pointe School. We currently have Bison Run School (K-8) and Pembina Trails Collegiate (9-12) under construction, with anticipated opening dates in 2023. Additionally, two schools have been promised by the provincial government to round out our new schools in Waverley West.

It has been our experience that the current funding formula does not work well for rapidly growing school divisions. A funding formula needs to be nimble and flexible enough to quickly adapt to the significant costs of adding new schools to accommodate rapid increases in enrolment. These costs include capital and operational including buildings, furniture and equipment, staffing, transportation, information technology and utilities.

Adding South Pointe put significant pressure on our financial situation, in the areas of pupil transportation, facilities and operations, and of course the entire human resources component. As we plan for the imminent addition of two new schools, we have great concerns that the existing formula will cause significant stress on the Division, to the point of compromising the quality of education across Pembina Trails. Class size will inevitably increase, learning technologies will fall behind, and the literacy and English as an Additional Language specialists who have played significant roles in our exemplary graduation rate will prove to be too costly for our fiscal capabilities. Our students' success is certain to exhibit a noticeable decline. Inequity is a likely outcome. When trustees had the authority to raise revenue from local taxation, we could at least in part, be responsive to growing enrolment and maintain the high quality of education that our communities expect. As our ability to raise local revenue erodes, our students will fall further behind.

The matter of local taxation also calls for clarity. The government's policy on this matter has been confusing. Lack of clarity impacts our ability to plan strategically, thereby creating a drag

on progress and our Board's Three Expectations for Student Learning. Will education be removed entirely from property taxes or just the ability for locally elected trustees to set the level of taxation?

Within the cloud of uncertainty, the province appears to be taking on a greater share of the cost of providing a high-quality education for our students. We are left wondering how the central government decision-makers will address matters such as school fees that cover field trips, student supplies, and extraordinary events in the life of students. There is considerable variation in practice across the province in this regard. Also, our current division budget process accommodates the variable school need factors. Schools with the greatest needs receive additional supports. How will the province incorporate this important element in its funding?

As we contemplate the next phase of the 21st Century where current costs appear to be unsustainable, we will need a funding formula that emphasizes the important role of strategic investments. We need to seek and implement strategies that create a more efficient and effective supporting infrastructure for what is happening in the classroom. Our financial services, facilities and operations, learning and information technologies, and our human resources systems, are all grounded in practices that served us well in the previous century. The time is ripe for re-imagining how we provide those services. The time is right for shared services, streamlined and more cost-effective ways of doing things. We currently have numerous different Student Information Systems in Manitoba. We are encouraged by the signals from the province that a unified system is being explored. We need more of that kind of thinking. We believe that the funding could be adjusted to create incentives for school divisions to work together in partnership so that more funds can be directed to the classroom. Some provinces have a funding formula that creates incentives that lead to more efficient use of school spaces. It might be time to examine the services that something like the Ontario Education Service Corporation provides for school boards in that province. OESC reduces redundancy and expenses through shared services.

The matter of provincial bargaining for teachers appears to be on track. As we proceed down this path, we strongly advocate for a sustainable funding model that fully supports the wage pressures as a result of the provincial collective bargaining. There remains uncertainty in the non-teaching collective bargaining domain as well. We believe that there would be merit in exploring an approach that is more streamlined and efficient than is currently in place.

Finally, we encourage the Education Funding Review committee to engage in meaningful dialogue on the matter of equity. We acknowledge that this is a matter of urgent concern for all Manitobans. We applaud current efforts and call on the Province to increase its focus in this arena. Pembina Trails trustees believe that all Manitoba students should attend schools with opportunities that are equitable to what our students and families have come to accept as a minimum standard. A lens on equity should be to raise the funding levels to the current front-runners, it should not be a race to the middle.

This report is not intended to be comprehensive. It is a summary from the Board of Trustees. We look forward to the opportunity to meet directly with the committee to deepen your understanding of our perspective.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees,
Kathleen McMillan, Chair