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**Letter to the Editor – December 9, 2013**

On October 22, 2013, Premier Brad Wall and Minister of Education Don Morgan announced that the Government of Saskatchewan will build 9 joint-use schools. These schools are designated for the communities of Saskatoon, Regina, Martensville and Warman.

The announcement has been generally perceived as a positive response to the pressures felt by school divisions with growing enrolments due to urban expansion. The government, it is important to acknowledge, has had a strong track record on funding for new school construction (20) and major renovations (23) since 2007. However, as welcome as any investment in school infrastructure is at this time, the decision to fund joint-use schools, particularly in Warman and Martensville gives rise to questions about the issue of equity in the rationale used to make this decision.

The question of equity arises with the perception that some school divisions are “jumping the queue” to receive funding ahead of other school divisions with school needs that fit the criteria for funding. From the perspective of Public Section, the designation of separate schools seems to be a significant way, but not necessarily equitable way, in which some projects are moved ahead on the list. It can be argued that other projects, which may be more critical, have been overlooked or delayed as a result.

The Martensville and Warman scenarios give cause to question the designation of joint schools in those communities. Martensville only recently (2010) established a separate school division which quickly amalgamated with St. Paul’s Roman Catholic Separate School Division (Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools). Only 148 Roman Catholic electors out of a potential of 1700 expressed a desire for Roman Catholic education at the time of formation. Currently approximately 150 Roman Catholic students from Martensville and Warman access separate schools and have been busing to Saskatoon - a practice that is not uncommon for children of many school divisions.

The Warman Roman Catholic community has only recently explored the possibility of establishing a separate school division and at present there is no Roman Catholic school division in Warman. Roman Catholic Committee Secretary for the establishment of a separate school division in Warman, Josie Hodgkinson, was quoted recently in the Star Phoenix “that their best-case scenario was to get student busing to Saskatoon”. She said the group didn't expect to see a Catholic school in the rapidly growing city for many years to come.

This begs the question of government priorities and decision making when considering the capital needs of other school divisions across the province.

In fact the current condition of many schools, urban and rural, creates and sustains a significant inequity of educational opportunities. Unfortunately many school boards are left without funding for renovations or adequate preventative maintenance funding to address deficiencies in the short to medium term. This situation is exacerbated by decisions such as the Warman and Martensville designations. The question then becomes what about all these other schools? What will happen to the infrastructure needs of all these schools and communities? School boards will be anxiously awaiting the March 2014 Pre K to 12 Major Capital Request List.

A further concern relates to the practice of the government to build two schools, public and separate, in all urban subdivisions. When one examines Statistics Canada data it is clear that the ratio between members of the Roman Catholic faith in Saskatchewan compared to non-Catholics is one third to two thirds. The Public Section believes that it would be fair and reasonable that this ratio be reflected in the number and size of separate schools compared to public schools. That would mean that you may not have a separate school in every community unless the size of the subdivision would warrant such an arrangement. A more prudent approach to this sometimes politically charged situation would be to utilize bussing at least for a period of time to accommodate infrastructure needs.

In closing, the Public Section is not opposed to the establishment of Roman Catholic school divisions. We have always valued our educational partners and respect their constitutional right to minority faith education for the education of children of the minority faith that established the school division. In due course it may be appropriate to have facilities in the communities discussed; however, it is also paramount that school divisions are on a level playing field with equitable funding for education in all areas, for all school divisions. Operating funds and capital are basic necessities for the children of Saskatchewan.

**Bert de Gooijer, Chair, Public Section, a Section of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association** (Public Section is comprised of 15 public school divisions**)**