

A Response to the Perrin's Report

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Public Section

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Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to respond to and provide some perspectives to the *Perrin's Report* on behalf of the members of the Public Section, a Section of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association comprised of 15 public school divisions.

The Minister of Education, the Honourable Don Morgan charged Mr. Perrins to provide options in response to the question “What system of governance and structure is needed in Saskatchewan’s K-12 education sector to achieve the outcomes established by the Saskatchewan Plan for Growth and the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP)?”

Consultation: Prior to writing the report Mr. Perrins had consulted by telephone with 32 stakeholders including 19 school boards. All of the 32 participants advised Mr. Perrins that the current governance structure enables elected school boards to perform their responsibilities very well and any change to the school divisions that were affected by the 2006 amalgamation should not be contemplated. In short, school boards have been unanimous in their opposition to amalgamation for two reasons; their belief that the current model provides students with high quality education which is supported by parents and the community and that the experience of those who went through the 2006 amalgamation informed them of the difficulties and challenges before a productive school system culture and operational model was realized. They have first hand addressed the challenges of distance inherent in their current school divisions and believe strongly that it would be counterproductive to have school divisions get any larger.

Democracy: Another important foundational consideration for school boards is the maintenance of a grass roots democratic system through elected school boards. Charles Smith, a political scientist at the University of Saskatchewan’s St. Thomas More College, was quoted in the Saskatoon Star Phoenix, November 26, that the government considering this as an option was worrisome. “Why are elected, accountable trustees seen as less valuable than government-appointed trustees? I think this is a way for the government to have more top-down control over democratic governance and important public policy, which is education.”

The report by Mr. Perrins provides an inter-jurisdictional context which indicates clearly that over the course of the past 20 years, significant consolidation of the public school divisions has occurred in Saskatchewan, to a point where there are fewer public boards of education representing a similar number of students educated in the public system compared to Manitoba and Alberta. The report acknowledges a component of 173 public trustees representing 135,000 Saskatchewan public school students, a significantly smaller number of board members than British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba. In addition the geographic area of rural public divisions in Saskatchewan is twice that of Manitoba or Alberta. Effective public voice and the ability to attract a cross section of the population to run for an elected school board requires a manageable area for active representation to occur.

Gerald Galway, an education professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland who co-authored a national report on school boards, wrote that in the past, Newfoundland and Quebec appointed or partially appointed boards, and “these systems were widely criticized as being inefficient, discriminatory and undemocratic, and were replaced — in the case of Newfoundland, by public referendum — by public systems and democratically elected school boards.” Galway said his research has found that “local democratic authority for most decisions about teaching and learning” is worth retaining. (Galway 2011)

The principles of good governance identified in the report clearly provide a message to all with interest in Public education that locally elected boards of education are the best vehicle to

ensure that these principles are enacted in the delivery of Pre-K to 12 to the communities of Saskatchewan.

A clear strategic direction would be beneficial to clarify roles and responsibilities and ensure accountability through a shared partnership between government and Public Boards of education while allowing for significant autonomy to address local circumstances and needs. Public Boards of Education are examples to our students of local democratically elected entities in a civil society. It is a privilege and a responsibility that many in this world literally die for.

This viewpoint has been publicly communicated by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association through their “Education Belongs to the Community” campaign, the Public Section through editorials and media interviews as well as communications by various public boards of education through local newspapers and media outlets.

Catholic School Divisions: One of the first questions raised by Public Section members in reviewing the report was the government position to omit any consideration for the amalgamation of Catholic school divisions. Mr. Morgan when asked that question by a reporter at the Saskatoon news conference replied that Catholic school divisions and the Saskatchewan Francophone school system would not be affected because of “legal” reasons. The report speaks to this stating “that with the establishment of Saskatchewan as a province in 1905, the 1901 School Ordinances of the North-west Territories, which set out the rights and privileges of religious minorities with respect to separate schools, were preserved. These provisions limit the authority of the province to make laws that might interfere with these rights and privileges.”

The Public Section submits there is not a constitutional bar on amalgamating existing Catholic school boards in Saskatchewan, unless such amalgamation prejudices the ability of Catholic minorities to access denominational education. **Therefore the Government of Saskatchewan can modify or alter the boundaries of Roman Catholic school divisions for reasons such as more economic delivery of educational services.**

The Public Section provides the above information to point out a lack of consistency and fairness in proposing to amalgamate public school divisions and not consider amalgamation of Catholic school divisions. At the same time the Public Section is not suggesting that Catholic school divisions be amalgamated. We are advocating that public school divisions not be amalgamated.

Education Sector Strategic Plan: The Public Section Boards of Education recognize the interests of the government to improve student outcomes and to achieve cost-containment by maximizing the use of resources. These broad goals coincide with the interests and operations of school boards.

It is appropriate that the report identifies the Education Sector Strategic Plan as a methodology that has resulted in teamwork to bring about effective change across the system. The reference to the Directors involvement and the achievement improvement of grade 3 students in reading as well as the initial gains related to the *Following their Voices* initiative demonstrates that current efforts to work together have been successful and will be successful in the future. The viewpoint of public boards of education is that we need to maintain and support the success of students and the Education Sector Plan. In this regard there is concern that any further amalgamations will result in harm to the continuity of supports in place to assist students in achieving the goals of the ESSP.

The reference in the report to Michael Fullan is noted and interpreted as suggesting more control by government. “Michael Fullan, in discussing whole system reform, speaks to the need for vertical and lateral accountability where direction concerning core goals comes from the centre and there is a partnership with the sector in pursuit of the goals.” Fullan’s 6 Secrets of Change - Love Your Employees, Connect Peers with Purpose, Capacity Building Prevails, Learning is the Work, Transparency Rules and Systems Learn, is an example of his philosophy that recommends team processes more consistent with the ESSP methodology rather than a top down structure and approach by a Ministry of Education.

Parent Councils: There is also considerable promotion in the report for parent councils presented as a replacement for locally elected school boards. Thomas Fleming, a professor at the University of Victoria sees school councils, to some extent, as having become “restructurings” Trojan horse in that they reduce resistance to the loss of local representation that occurs when school boards are amalgamated.” Manitoba’s boundaries commission made the point this way: “Parents who typically take a strong interest in their local school may feel that they would be losing a level of representation if trustees had larger areas and numbers of electors to represent. However, parents are more concerned about the school their children attend, and the programs offered there, than the division in which the school is located”. He goes on to ask how parent council representation relates to the kind provided by school boards and can they, as parent-dominated bodies, fairly represent the larger local public interest in schooling? (Fleming 1997)

Potential for Change: Twenty years of change in the province, as noted in the report, to improve equity of taxation and equity of distribution of funding to allow for equitable access to education within the public system is nearing completion. The final recommendations of the funding distribution model, if implemented, will move us closer to a point where equitable funding will lead to equitable opportunities for all students to be successful in this province. The ESSP further strengthens the process; a plan with a provincial focus on results but allowing for Boards of Education to adapt delivery of services and programs to meet local concerns and circumstances.

Directives to achieve broad based efficiencies is and has been ongoing, and public boards have committed to and are positively addressing these challenges. The true test of the correct balance is in cost efficiency without being results ineffective. Movement to more centralization of services to be more cost efficient needs to be measured against the effect it will have on timely, accurate and reliable services for students, parents and staff.

Comments will now focus to the more specific options and rationale in the report, the “shift in governance topics” and the “options” contained in the report, Provincial Model, Regional Model, Division Model (Restructuring Public School Divisions) and (Realigning Boundaries).

The Shift in Governance section of the report contains a number of topics including Strategic Direction and Accountability, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Consistency/Standardization and Participation. There are a number of suggestions/recommendations among these categories that school boards are familiar with and have acted upon and continue to adapt to the needs of their divisions. Public Boards of Education will continue to work with the government and Ministry to develop policies and processes that address the shifts in governance as described by Mr Perrins. This would be done mindful of the need to realize within any direction taken, of the diversity of the province. This is especially true for factors that affect Board members and staff due to distance and geography, number of Board members per Board, ethnic and cultural diversity and that the implementation of cost efficiencies can only be anticipated after understanding the cost of delivery in particular areas and school divisions.

One such area that was highlighted in the run up to the Perrin's report was comparisons between governance cost of school boards to governance costs of health districts. A comparison was made between the Saskatoon Health District and the Saskatoon Public and Catholic school boards. The costs for the school boards was considerably higher than the health district without any explanation pertaining to the budgeting parameters of each organization. Accordingly, it was explained in a Saskatoon Star Phoenix article dated November 26, 2016 by SSBA President Davidson that school board governance budget categories included items such as scholarships, membership fees, money for elections, costs associated with School Community Councils and other expenditures. It seems that the messaging conveyed by the government to the press regarding the variance made no effort to compare "apples with apples". In fact when one conducts a fair analysis of public school divisions governance costs and examines areas such as trustee salaries, expenses, travel and professional development the picture emerges of prudent management with overall costs within a fraction of a percentage point of a board's total budget. This is a relatively small percentage of educational spending utilized carefully and moderately by elected boards of education.

Although Mr Perrins has included factors and challenges such as legislation, regulations and policies in need of change, the process has failed to address the full breath of issues, concerns and realities of publicly funded education. These include but are not limited to a clarification of mandate of minority school systems, the increasingly complex relationships and needs of First Nations and Metis students, the increased funding for independent and private schools resulting in fewer dollars for public education and the allocation and funding of infrastructure among competing systems.

It is agreed there are initiatives that could be undertaken to advance important goals and improvements throughout the province and that strategies and approaches could be developed without dismantling proven structures that have served the educational requirements of the children and youth of Saskatchewan over the years. It is an entirely reasonable proposition to put forward that the government "not throw out the baby with the bathwater" and instead put a similar level of energy toward working constructively with their provincial education partners to collaboratively establish a roadmap for improvement and cooperatively work together to achieve those plans.

Provincial Model: Consolidate 18 existing public boards of education into a single provincial public school board with responsibility for management of all 606 of the public schools in the province. The public board would report to the Minister of Education.

The Public Section believes that the identified benefits such as strategic direction and provincial standardization, efficiency, accountability to government, standardization of policies and procedures, 'one board' model, more power directly to government, paints a picture that's thoroughly laid to rest by identified challenges such as; minority faith divisions could be constituted in an attempt to maintain their local voice, participation in governance will be a challenge and parents and families in the public system would have different access to board members than in the separate and francophone system.

Regional Model: Another option is to establish four regional public boards of education, accountable to the Minister of Education. Regional boundaries would be established by the Minister following consultation and could consider health services to the extent possible.

The benefits and challenges to this model are similar to the Provincial model.

Restructuring Public School Divisions: 18 school divisions to between 8 and 14
There is nothing in this model to justify the disruption and negative effects on those school divisions that would be affected by the government edict.

Realigning Boundaries: areas surrounding Saskatoon and Regina and northern Saskatchewan could be considered.

Government purpose regarding this option as it relates to Regina and Saskatoon continues the expansion of Catholic separate school divisions in the province. The doughnut areas around Regina and Saskatoon taken from Prairie Spirit S. D. and Prairie Valley S. D. and added to Regina Public and Saskatoon Public would expand the coterminous boundaries of Regina and Saskatoon Catholic with the immediate result of expanding separate school enrolment and would further result in capital projects for Catholic schools in communities around the cities, all in areas that are perfectly happy with the educational services provided to them by their current Public boards of education.

In addition the changes would have a detrimental effect on the current rural public boards that benefit from the high population areas to enhance their economies of scale and contribute to the vibrancy, effectiveness and efficiency of their school divisions.

Conclusion: Last spring, the government and Minister of Education announced a need for transformational change in government including the education sector. The blank sheet of paper with everything on the table soon became a focus on school board governance and administrative costs. This has led to the Perrin's report and a panel to provide options and feedback to cabinet on Public education in Saskatchewan.

The Perrin's report by default has targeted public education and regrettably has put one of the most effective institutions in Saskatchewan on the defensive. The 2006 amalgamation resulted in 18 public school divisions congregated from over 70. Boards that amalgamated went through a long and difficult process to address the changes particularly the accommodation of the large size of the new divisions; taking years to build a strong culture and organizational design that works. School boards have been and continue to be committed to collaborative processes that lead to improvements for students. The cooperatively developed Education Sector Strategic Plan by the Ministry of Education, Saskatchewan School Boards Association and school divisions has resulted in real achievement benefits for students. Boundary changes need not be the focus of further transformational change and take away from more pressing priorities in the education field.

Governments typically don't like to be associated with the status quo because it conveys an image of inaction, but in the education domain we need to go beyond image and perception and stick with what is real. The status quo, leaving the current school divisions structurally intact, enabling them to get on with their work led by elected individuals dedicated to excellence, remains the option that clearly best serves the people of this large diverse province and best serves its children and youth.

To conclude, the Public Section respectfully urges the Minister of Education to take further amalgamation of public school divisions off the table and continue to enhance the student achievement and efficiency initiatives that have produced positive results. This approach, consistent with a Saskatchewan education culture of partnership is the best way to move forward.

