Talking about School Division Amalgamation

Overview

Manitoba currently has 310 elected school trustees serving on 37 school boards across the province. Fifty-four of these trustees serve on the six school boards that are wholly or largely located within the geographic boundaries of the city of Winnipeg—Winnipeg, St. James-Assiniboia, Pembina Trails, Louis Riel, River East Transcona, and Seven Oaks.

Over the past 60 years, the number of school divisions and districts has been slashed from around 2000 to fewer than 40 as improvements in transportation and communications have made larger geographic jurisdictions viable. These reductions came about largely as the result of government initiated reviews in the mid-1940s and late 1950s. By the time of the last major review of school division boundaries (the 1994 School Divisions/Districts Boundaries Review Commission, headed by William Norrie), there were 57 school divisions and districts in Manitoba, with 10 of these in Winnipeg. The government of the day never acted on the 1994 boundaries commission recommendations, which would have seen the number of school divisions in Manitoba drop to 21, with four in Winnipeg. However, the number was reduced to 55 provincially and nine in Winnipeg in 1998, with the school-board initiated amalgamations of the Norwood and St. Boniface and Tiger Hills and Pembina Valley school divisions. That number was further reduced to the current 37 in 2002, as the result of provincially mandated amalgamations.

Since 2002, the question of further amalgamations has been raised from time to time, but no action has been taken. Successive provincial administrations have voiced their support for voluntary school division amalgamations, and have encouraged school boards to consider mergers as a way of generating savings.

Key Points

- Education is a classroom-based, labour intensive endeavour. The majority of public school dollars are spent on direct (e.g. teacher and educational assistant salaries, classroom supplies) or indirect (e.g. transportation, building maintenance) services to students. The cost of providing these services is not dependent on the size of the jurisdiction, particularly when school boards are prevented by law from consolidating or closing schools in an effort to realize savings and enhance educational programming.
- Larger administrative units do not necessarily translate into lower administrative costs. Administrative costs, as a percentage of operating budget, show little variance from school division to school division across Manitoba, and are capped at a maximum of 5%. While each school division may have only one individual designated as superintendent or secretary-treasurer, the size and complexity of larger jurisdictions require the employment of additional levels of administrative staff. The argument that a reduction in the number of school divisions automatically translates to a corresponding reduction in the number of administrators is overly simplistic.
- School division amalgamation is a costly process. One-time costs relate to the integration of different technology and information systems. Ongoing costs relate to the harmonization of wages, benefits and working conditions for employees previously covered by separate collective agreements, and the standardization of student programs and services across the new division. Experience following the 2002 amalgamations has shown that the up-front costs alone for large divisions can total millions of dollars.

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Key Points

- Amalgamation is a complicated, time-consuming and disruptive process that diverts schools' focus from where it rightly belongs—students and their learning—to the logistical concerns of merging two systems and cultures.
- Students in Manitoba are not prevented from attending schools outside their home school division. Schools of choice legislation means that students are able to attend any school in the province, providing that space is available at the receiving school. The "space available" provision is no different than that which applies when a student wants to attend other than his or her designated school within a school division.
- Many of the diverse programs in Manitoba's schools exist because of the initiative of individual school boards. For example, a wide variety of languages are taught in schools across Manitoba, including Hebrew, Ukrainian, German, Spanish, and Cree. Were it not for the initiative of the boards of smaller school divisions responding to needs identified by a segment of their community, many of these opportunities might not be available.
- With fewer trustees representing larger constituencies, community voices (especially minority voices) may have to work harder to be heard.

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Q&A

Cities like Calgary and Edmonton each have a single, large school division, and they seem to work just fine. Why won't one big school division work in Winnipeg?

The question isn't really whether or not one big school division would work in Winnipeg; the question is whether the benefits of creating that division would outweigh the disruption and costs associated with the process. In some large cities, the municipal and school division boundaries have always been co-terminus; as the city has grown, so has the school division, and it has continued to function smoothly. That's not the case in Winnipeg. The six school divisions that fall primarily within the city boundaries are remnants from the days when Winnipeg as we now know it was a collection of separate cities such as St. James, St. Vital and St. Boniface. When these separate municipal jurisdictions merged—a process that had its own challenges—the school divisions were left intact. The creation of a single large school division in Winnipeg would require the merging of these six jurisdictions, with all the associated costs and disruptions. The end result would be a single school division governed by a single school board, but that doesn't automatically translate to a better education for students.

There are new residential developments in Winnipeg with no schools, and older areas of the city with schools that are sitting half empty. If Winnipeg had a single school board, couldn't we make better use of the available space?

Some school divisions are experiencing uneven population growth, with fewer students in some areas and new residential development in others creating a demand for additional classroom space. In south Winnipeg, for example, Louis Riel and Pembina Trails School Divisions have both seen large residential developments over the past several years, and new schools that have been built are quickly at or over capacity. At the same time, both Pembina Trails and Louis Riel have excess classroom capacity in other neighbourhoods in the division.

Generally, there is already sufficient capacity within Winnipeg's school divisions to accommodate all students, without needing to look across divisional boundaries for empty classrooms. The challenge is that communities want or expect that their children will be able to attend a school close to home, rather than riding a bus to a different neighbourhood. Whether Winnipeg has one school division or six, current residential growth patterns will continue to pose a challenge when it comes to making efficient use of existing school space.

Wouldn't bigger school divisions mean more choices for students?

Not necessarily. It's nice to think that every program that is currently being offered in a school in Winnipeg or another region of the province would be offered in every school in an enlarged school division, but that's unlikely. Many of the unique or specialized programs that are currently being offered are funded through the special levy—the local education property tax—rather than by funding provided by the provincial government. The nursery school program offered by The Winnipeg School Division is a good example of this. The school board has been able to offer this program because its community supports and is willing to pay for it. Expansion of such a program to other areas of the city would require expanded support and expanded funding—and the availability of that support and funding is not a given.

Also, don't overlook the role that school boards had in the first place in providing the wide range of optional programming that is currently available. Some of the most innovative programming originates in the smallest school divisions, from boards that are closely tied to their communities and who understand what is important to a community when it comes to educating its children. When we reduce the number of school boards, we increase the distance between school boards and their communities, and run the risk of losing out on some good ideas.

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Q&A

Wouldn't we eliminate a lot of unnecessary duplication if we had fewer school divisions?

School division staffing is tied to student numbers. Some things are obvious—the number of teachers, the number of custodians, and the number of buses and drivers all depend on how many students are attending classes in how many schools, and how those students get to those schools. Other things aren't as obvious. For example, the divisional superintendent has a responsibility for hiring, supervising and evaluating professional staff. In a smaller division, one individual might be able to take on that role fully, along with fulfilling all the other duties associated with the job. A large school division with many more teachers may assign that role to an assistant superintendent, while other assistants take on other "superintendent" responsibilities, such as curriculum development or student services. The same thing happens in areas such as transportation and human resources—in smaller school divisions, one person may be able to do the same job that requires a team or department in a larger division. On the surface, larger school divisions might reduce what appears to be duplication by reducing the number of individuals with similar titles, but that doesn't mean that larger school divisions create efficiencies in the area of staffing and administration costs.

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