
Looking To the Future

Examining Prairie Spirit schools' infrastructure as to capacity for providing for student needs in the future.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the report was to examine the sustainability of the current configuration of Prairie Spirit non-Hutterite schools given expected changes in the next five or so years. Hutterite schools were not considered in the report as they are subject to different criteria for examination of viability. Recommendations for possible changes are included for consideration of the Board such that Prairie Spirit can continue to serve its students with a quality programming response.

The report concludes that Prairie Spirit schools are doing a most credible job in responding to the needs of its students. These efforts are supported by the Division in terms of an operational commitment to its Mission and Vision, clear articulated planning, support for an energetic and creative staff team complement and a willingness to find necessary resources. In addition, there is ample evidence of a willingness to make adjustments to operations in order to accommodate declining student numbers, a reality in most of its schools.

When considering the future impact on the current configuration of schools, the report analyzes key factors which should be considered if significant change such as student movement and or school closure is contemplated. These factors are summarized in no order of importance except that maintaining quality programming should be an overriding consideration. It is worthy of note that these factors often interrelate and can complement but may also dominate or can be somewhat neutralized by others in terms of the need to act. Factors reviewed include

A. Maintaining Quality Programming

1. Maintain initiatives in Special Education where shrinking student populations will result in further division of specialized personnel resources. Needs in this area will not reduce in proportion to student decline and in fact will likely increase.
2. Administrative time allocations presents a similar challenge as decreasing student numbers do not result in less administration time after a certain point
3. Consider the impact on programming of the likely increase in the number of triple grade classes, as they are a challenge to staff ability to meet increasingly diverse student needs. The future projects triple grade elementary classes in a number of schools and also envisages double grades in schools where they do not now exist. The French English elementary program responses in parts of the Division will be further challenged by the need for more multi-grade approaches.
4. At the high school level it will be increasingly difficult for some schools to ensure even a basic high school course offering as student numbers decline. In that regard, IITV maintenance and enhancement is a necessity but it cannot do it all.
5. The emerging importance of Technology Vocational programming opportunity is being met through the innovative CTS approach and Apprenticeship development. This added programming could increase pressure on high schools already struggling to manage the courses they offer.
6. Maintain a strong staff development presence which is the key to ensuring a quality programming response

B. Student Demographic Trends

Student demographic trends show continued student decline in most if not all schools with a more pronounced drop in the elementary areas. Division projections are unfortunately given credence by the past history of decline, Census Canada 2006 data for the Division and the absence of any identified future large economic activity infusion. The report relies on projected Division and school enrolment for 2011/12. In that year the Division is projected to have 1980 students as opposed to 2322 in 07/08.

C. Resource Capacity

Resource capacity is a significant factor and the current provincial funding formula, the largest source of revenue, does not adequately account for declining Divisional enrolment. Currently, the Division reliance on local property tax revenue is higher than most of its neighbours and due to its large number of small schools, its per pupil costs are higher than its neighbours and in fact are the sixth highest in the province with Frontier and DSFM being the highest. The community commitment to fund through property taxes is commendable but is dependent on the continuation of quality programming and cannot be expected to always be as receptive as in the past. The solution of looking for efficiencies within existing infrastructures will continue but it is not a long-term solution and can undermine program capacity.

D. Past Practices, Traditions and Policy

An analysis of past practices within the division indicates the presence of a tradition of sound planning and consultation and forward thinking in terms of anticipating and responding to the need to make student movement decisions including school closures. This tradition plus the cooperative tradition for working with others as evidenced by the recent divisional amalgamation exercise will serve the Division well in terms of a model for gaining community acceptance of possible future movement decisions. There exists a feeling of trust amongst staff that the Division will be proactive and will make decisions based on a perception of what is most appropriate for students. Within this tradition, there is a strong policy direction that should become a reference guide for actions

E. Distance and Transportation

Distance for student travel to school is a significant factor in any student movement decision. It can be an overriding issue. The Division's transportation system is developing a tradition for being proactive in ensuring efficiencies while maintaining good service. There is purposeful planning in place and any student movement decision should be accompanied by a working transportation plan.

F. Facilities

The Delaquis report indicates that all schools have adequate program space and some are underutilized to the extent that they could easily accommodate more students. In addition, most schools are functional in terms of program capacity and all are well maintained. There are few major maintenance or upgrade needs in the next five years. However, ongoing maintenance cannot be compromised. There are efficiencies to be realized in school closure possibilities and in increasing student numbers in underutilized schools.

G. External Factors and Influencers

An analysis of outside factors reveals that in the student enrolment area there is not likely to be an influx of students in or out of the Division in the next five years due to school of choice. In addition, numbers from Swan Lake First Nation are likely to remain similar. The foreign student program is a plus for the Division in terms of additional resources and cultural program enhancement but it is unlikely to impact significantly in reversing student decline. In the area of future program developments, Special Education needs will continue to grow as will increased need to respond in the Vocational Technical area and to remain current to technology and IITV equipment needs. In the resource area, the provincial contribution will likely continue to increase as in the past but it is questionable whether it will do more than meet rising fixed costs that do not decline in proportion to student enrolment decline.

The analysis of the factors outlined produced a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring that quality programming can be maintained and enhanced in the future. The recommendations are presented with the belief that careful preliminary consideration by the Board of Trustees and Senior Administration is necessary to determine what is feasible. This should be followed by a process for careful reflection and discussion with key stakeholders before final decisions are made. The Division has successfully established tradition for the process suggested.