Policy Window or Hazy Dream?

Policy and Practice Innovations for Creating Effective

Learning Environments in Rural Schools

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**Abstract**

Rural communities that envision a bright future for themselves and their children have become innovative out of necessity—they learn, and adapt, in order to flourish and to provide opportunities for their children.  As the formal centers of learning, and often as the largest employer in the community, rural schools become the heart and symbol of learning and community identity.  Unfortunately, their policy and legislative environments often lead to tensions between rural priorities/lifestyles and urbanizing/essentializing agendas which impact upon the quality of schooling they wish, or are able, to provide.

This tension was the focus of a study on rural educational priorities and school division capacity, based on a provincial survey and four case studies of rural school divisions representing four educational regions in the province of Manitoba. Findings suggest that three educational priorities remain central to the creation of high quality learning environments in rural schools: *Improving Student Outcomes, Quality of Teachers and Administrators,* and *Educational Finance.*  This paper elaborates on the challenges facing rural school divisions for these issues, and discusses some of the ways in which four Manitoba school divisions, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), the Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST), and Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (MECY) are working to address these difficulties in what has become a policy window (Kingdon, 1995) for rural education in Manitoba.

## Introduction

Research on rural education indicates that often rural settings are plagued with educational problems that deter educational excellence:  isolation from specialized services (Cheney & Demchak, 2001); limited accessibility to quality staff development and university services (Hodges, 2002); teacher shortages especially in key areas of math and science (Lemke & Harrison, 2002) with little hope in recruiting new teachers who wish to live in larger metropolitan areas (Ralph, 2002); decreasing enrolments which leads to a decrease in funding (Ralph, 2002), a declining pool of qualified administrative candidates (Waddle & Buchanan, 2002) often due to little administrative support and an overburdening of community expectations, and educational funding formulae insensitive to the challenges of service delivery in rural areas. A most disheartening example includes the fact that the closure of small rural schools has been the single most implemented educational "change reform" in rural areas (Carlson, 2002).  Some of these issues arise from the social, economic, and political differences between urban and rural environments, but at the most fundamental of levels, they stem from the consequences of globalization on trade, labour relations, regulatory control, or governmental rules and guidelines (Lutz & Neis, in press).

In his disparagement of educational research and school improvement, Howley (1997) states that the commitment to forms of education that sustain local communities as thoughtful cultures has deteriorated, and has been replaced by school improvement initiatives that are nationalizing or "globalizing." At the heart of the matter is the conflict over the purpose of schooling, with provincial and national reform leaders typically calling for schools to prepare students to contribute to national/global interests, while rural scholars and educational stakeholders believe rural schools should serve local community interests.  In fact, contemporary visions of educational success tend to promote an individualistic, placeless vision of achievement and excellence often at odds with the more community-based educational vision of rural citizens (Gallagher, 2004; Wotherspoon, 1998) found within a specific natural environment.

Rather than viewing rural schools from the deficit model implicit in the school effectiveness rhetoric advocating for a generic, one-size-fits-all vision of schooling, this study examined how rural schools have tried to develop their capacity to work in ways that meet both systemic accountability demands and demands of local parents and communities.  The purpose of this paper will be to illustrate how rural schools have managed these tensions in three areas central to the creation of high quality learning environments:  (a) the improvement of student

outcomes; (b) the quality of teachers and administrators; and (c) educational finance. In fact, though this study clearly demonstrated that the challenges are many, small and rural schools may actually provide useful models for educational governance and service delivery that can be applied across school contexts (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Gruenenwald, 2003; Howley & Howley, 2006; Meier, 2002; Shelton, 2005; Theobald, 1997).

Finally, this paper speaks to the potential that a policy window is opening up in the province of Manitoba on rural education. Kingdon (1995) suggests that a policy window opens when three streams converge:  a problem stream, a policy stream, and a political stream.  A policy window opens "because of change in the political stream or... because a new problem captures the attention of governmental officials and those close to them" (p. 203), thereby providing the opportunity for action in the form of policy proposals and alternatives.  It is argued that, in conjunction with the research, consultations, lobbying and work being done in the province by many of the respective administrative groups (Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth, Manitoba Association of School Trustees, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents and individual school divisions) a policy window for mobilizing and highlighting rural education concerns may be opening and may therefore help to address some of the rural education needs within the province.

## Methodology

The definition of "rural area" for this study was based on Statistics Canada definitions and included all population living in the rural fringes of census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and census agglomerations (CAs), as well as population living in rural areas outside CMAs and CAs (Statistics Canada). For all statistical analysis purposes, rural schools and school divisions were separated into MECY geographical regions of Northern/Remote, Central, Parkland/Westman, and Southeast/Interlake.

Phase One of the study was based on a survey distributed to all superintendents, trustees, principals, 12-15% of teachers, and an equal number of parents in all rural school divisions across the province of Manitoba. Spearman rank correlations, means and variances were used to determine which educational priorities were consistently ranked of highest importance (on a provided list of 22 priorities in which the six provincial educational priorities were embedded: (a) Improving outcomes especially for less successful learners; (b) Strengthening links among schools, families and communities; (c) Strengthening school planning and reporting; (d) Improving professional learning opportunities for educators; (e) Strengthening pathways among secondary schools, post-secondary education and work; and,

(f) Linking policy and practice to research and evidence).

Thirty questions related to legitimization of alternatives, diverse networks, and resource mobilization were asked to determine whether the school division had a high level of Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure (capacity) to address the affirmed educational priorities. Responses were elicited on a continuum of 1 to 4 from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. As well as determining descriptive statistics, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine differences amongst the four educational regions in the province and representative stakeholder groups (administrators, staff and community), using an associated p=level of 0.05.

Cronbach's Alpha was used as a means of determining the internal consistency of the capacity items that aligned with the Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure model.  Originally, the criterion Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of 0.70 was set to determine whether or not the scale would be considered reliable.  Fortunately, the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients were computed to be .9330, 0.9110, 0.9185 and .9000 on the four school division studies, and 0.9244 on the provincial survey, which can be interpreted to mean that the items used to measure capacity were reliable.  However, it must be cautioned that Cronbach's Alpha does not indicate the stability or consistency of the test over time.

The second phase of this research is based on studies of four school divisions that represent each of the four educational regions in the province. It should be noted that the school divisions had agreed to participate as case studies before the provincial survey was conducted, and therefore their results were not nested within the provincial survey results.  Strongman School Division represents the Central region, Resilience School Division represents the Southeast/Interlake region, Independent School Division represents the Parkland/Westman region, and Northern School Division represents the Northern/Remote region.  The anonymity of school divisions was protected through the use of pseudonyms.  In each study, all trustees, administrators, teachers, school division families and members of the business community were provided with a survey similar to that described above, but that also included community characteristics that were triangulated with Statistics Canada data to obtain a community demographic profile. Focus groups of representative stakeholder groups, individual interviews, and school visits were conducted.  Participants were asked to discuss educational priorities, their perception about the capacity of their schools to achieve these priorities, (using descriptors of the Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure as a focus for conversation) and their ideas about the role of the provincial government in educational governance and reform. A probability impact chart for the priority section and a SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis of the capacity model helped focus group members structure their thoughts. Notes were taken,

ideas were documented on flip chart, and the focus group interviews were audio-recorded. Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding, and categorizing of data into meaningful units) was used to identify themes in the data that were then used to contextualize the survey findings.  All data were charted according to the descriptors of the entrepreneurial social infrastructure model, and thematically placed into the categories of *Legitimization of Alternatives, Diverse Linkages,* and *Resource Mobilization* using constant comparison*.*

## Discussion

This paper focuses on the ways in which rural Manitoba school divisions provided quality programming in areas they considered to be an educational priority.  In the determination of what constituted an educational priority, only those priorities that were mentioned by more than half of the survey respondents were examined.  From this data, a priority was determined if it included an average ranking of less than fifth (out of ten).  Table 1 illustrates the priorities that developed out of the provincial survey and the four school division studies.  Those priorities that are highlighted are those that are similar across data groups. Three of the fifteen priorities across the data sets were direct matches with provincial educational priorities (*Improving Student Outcomes; Strengthening Links Between Schools, Families and Communities*, and; *Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence*).  Ten of the priorities were related to provincial priorities (*Quality of Teachers/Administrators; Recruiting/Retaining Teachers and Administrators; Special Education; Community Development; Discipline; Social Issues; Accessibility to Educational Services; Vocational and Technical Education, School Facilities* and; *Alternate Delivery Systems*), although their expression is unique in rural environments. One priority, *Early Childhood*, had no relationship to provincial priorities per se, since the provincial government has no mandate to provide early childhood programming in the province, even though there existed a Spearman Rho correlation (r=0.619) between it and the provincial priority, *Improving Professional Learning Opportunities for Educators.*  Two priorities, *Educational Management and Governance*, and *Educational Finance* are priorities that subsume all provincial priorities.

**Table 1**

**Educational Priorities**

| Priority | Province (N=268) | Strongman School Division (N=100) | Resilient School Division (N=137) | Independent School Division (N=97) | Northern School Division (N=139) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Improving Student Outcomes | X | X | X | X | X |
| *Quality of Teachers and Administrators | X | X | X | X | X |
| Educational Finance | X | X | X | X | X |
| Early Childhood | X | X | | | |
| *Social Issues | X | | | | X |
| **Strengthening Links Between Schools, Families and Communities | X | | | | X |
| *Special Education | | X | | X | |
| *Community Development | | X | | X | |
| *Discipline | | | X | | X |
| *Recruiting/Retaining Teachers/Administrators | X | | | | |
| **Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence | | X | | | |
| *Accessibility to Educational Services | | | | X | |
| Educational Management and Governance | | | | X | |
| *Vocational and Technical Education | | | | X | |
| *Alternate Delivery Systems | | | | X | |
| *School Facilities | | | | | X |

** indicates direct match with *K-S4 Agenda* priorities;

  * indicates overlap with *K-S4 Agenda* priorities

This paper reports on the challenges related to the three priorities that were common across the provincial survey and all four school divisions: (a) *Focus on Student Outcomes*; (b) *Quality of Teachers/Administrators*; and (c) *Educational Finance*.  It will also elaborate on the ways in which these four rural school divisions, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST) and Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (MECY) are attempting to address them in order to ensure all children in rural schools are provided with a high-quality education.

## Challenges

Differences in the social and economic circumstances of each rural school division in this study were very much in evidence.  The economic and industry base within the community of Strongman seemed to be thriving, that of Resilience was in crisis, and that of Independent and Northern were quite variable.  These circumstances brought unique challenges to rural schooling in each division, even though all four divisions identified three similar priorities: *Student Outcomes*; (b) *Quality of Teachers and Administrators*; and (c) *Educational Finance*.

*Student Outcomes*

Focus groups in all four school divisions turned their attention to student outcomes when they suggested that the lack of access to resources for special needs students and student services such as mental health, and the problems in recruiting professionals for specialty positions had the potential to detrimentally affect rural school divisions' abilities to serve students.  While those in Strongman School Division felt that a lack of professional development in particular areas of high growth/change (such as ESL and behavioral issues) made educating students difficult, those in Resilient School Division discussed reduced optional programming and increased workload due to declining enrolments as factors that had the potential to minimize the quality of education for rural students.  Participants from Independent School Division considered the impact *Bill 13*, (which has been incorporated as section 41.1.1 of the *Public Schools Act* legislating the right for every child to have appropriate educational programming) might have on rural school divisions, suggesting that there is a growing tendency to refer only serious student service needs due to heavy workloads, long waiting lists, and limited student service personnel.  In their estimation, special needs funding structures do not work in rural areas affected by decreasing enrolments, since class composition is increasingly

diverse (and needy), even if enrolment is decreasing. Northern School Division faced an increasing diversity of student need affected by transience, socio-economics, family dynamics, ethnicity, and health with little support and/or infrastructure available to address it. Strongman School Division was in the unique rural circumstance of facing increased enrolments, and therefore a number of programs had been developed through partnerships with community groups, businesses, and a neighbouring school division in an attempt to offer variety and meaningful opportunities for students.  Independent School Division has centralized much of its educational services, and its position as an entrepreneurial regional service provider with specializations in technology and vocational programming made it a school division of choice for students from the area and from Saskatchewan, though some of the surrounding communities were left with feelings of bitterness as their communities' services dwindled. Unfortunately, the vast geographic size of Resilient School Division which made sharing or centralization of services difficult, combined with the declining economic and social circumstances of the area made maintaining current programs and services a challenge. Finally, the downsizing of social service agencies in the community of Northern School Division made creating an Inter-Agency approach to fulfilling the increasing student service needs difficult.

*Quality of Teachers and Administrators*

When it comes to increasing the professional learning opportunities for rural educators, issues of access, time commitments away from school to travel to centers for post-secondary learning, and funding are major impediments.  Teachers in all four school divisions were happy with the professional development opportunities available to them, although participants from two of the divisions suggested that educational assistants needed more opportunities for learning.  As well, participants suggested that the increasing emphasis on social programming and behavioral issues moved staff in directions they felt ill-equipped to handle.  All focus group members spoke of the increasing difficulty in recruiting professionals, especially in student service or specialty areas. Participants spoke of the fact that rural teachers and administrators had increasing workload issues because fewer people managed and delivered educational service. Added to these challenges was a lack of a substitute pool for teachers. Many teachers found themselves working in multi-age, multi-grade classroom situations with increasing proportions of special needs students.  This, combined with less attractive collective agreement benefits and fewer social attractions, sometimes made teachers reconsider their place of employment.  Both Strongman School Division and Resilient School Division faced losing

teachers to the attractions of working in urban environments. Although participants from Independent School Division spoke of recruitment issues, they did not feel the division had difficulties retaining staff. Because the division was isolated geographically and was a service center of its own, participants suggested that many local residents returned "home" to live and work.  In their estimation, a larger problem occurred due to the fact that professional development opportunities were being centralized in Winnipeg, and fewer presenters were willing to travel to their rural centre for local professional development.  In addition, although the division was fully equipped to use technology to facilitate learning opportunities with other centres, these centres were often less capable (or willing) to reciprocate. Interestingly, although Northern School Division stakeholders mentioned recruitment and retention could be a problem, they also stated that many people chose to come to the school division because of the beautiful natural environment and lifestyle it afforded.  However, this community was large distances from major centers, and as such, it faced similar issues as Independent School Division in terms of professional development and the barriers for stakeholders to use distance learning technologies, even though the community could likely provide access through University College of the North.

*Educational Finance*

All participants indicated that current taxation and funding structures warrant scrutiny. Certainly educational finance in relation to property taxation in rural areas has been a contentious issue for some time, and all focus groups talked about the increasing disparity between those who have the ability to pay, and those who do not. Rural poverty is a very real, and a growing, concern, and in some areas such as Resilience School Division, the local tax base is almost nonexistent.  In Strongman School Division, the issue was most often spoken of in terms of the willingness to pay education tax, although a demographic analysis of the local rural municipality indicated that rural poverty was a concern even in this high growth community. In Independent School Division, respondents indicated that the current formula does not adequately recognize that cost factors are higher in rural areas; special levies simply do not meet actual need.  In addition, grant matching opportunities with the provincial government for new programs was generally not considered to be an option when the school division faced budget shortfalls due to declining enrolments, and therefore had to put its resources into maintaining, rather than developing, programming.  In Northern School Division, there was an obvious gap developing between socio-economic levels in the community, and this was playing havoc on the school division's ability to provide equity in terms of programs,

extra-curricular activities, and student needs. The school board had already redirected extra funds to special needs students within the division, but even this was considered to be limited in terms of addressing the actual need within the division.  Other finance issues mentioned by the respondents in the school divisions related to the lack of discretionary spending capacity of small rural school divisions, the costs of transportation (including bussing costs and the travel costs associated with professional development), and the costs of provincially legislated changes that were mandated but did not include any attendant financial support.

## Responding to the Challenges

The challenges outlined above have lead many rural communities to become innovative out of necessity. Fortunately, survey respondents believed that they had a moderately high capacity to achieve their educational priorities, as illustrated by the mean scores on the capacity items (out of a total of 4) for the five data sets (provincial survey = 2.7, Strongman School Division = 2.65, Resilience School Division = 2.5, Independent School Division = 2.52, and Northern School Division = 2.49).  For the most part, rural school divisions have increased their capacity by strategizing "outside the box," and by working with others within and outside of the community to share and streamline services in order to maintain programs and opportunities for students.

Rural school divisions are not insulated service delivery providers.  In fact, across the province there were deliberate attempts made by school division personnel to build networks with the community and other organizations in order to create effective learning environments. Administrators were consistently more positive in their outlook on the capacity of their school divisions, which corresponds with Harris' (2006) view that leadership in communities that remain sustainable "embraces exploration, openness to new ideas, respect for traditions (social and of the physical and natural environment), and a desire for learning" (p. 162).  For most decisions, processes were put in place that provided opportunity for people to provide their views and input.  The importance of communication was stressed continually, as community members advocated for inclusive communication strategies that would be representative of the populations served by school divisions.

*Strongman School Division*

In Strongman School Division, networking was considered to be important within and outside the division.  The board regularly meets with parent advisory councils, initiates conversations with administrators, and a trustee sits in on administrative meetings. In fact,

administrators and trustees have gone on retreat together for purposes of planning and relationship development. The small distances between schools facilitated networking between staff, as did the use of technology, and a proposal had been initiated for a half-day of professional development that would network teachers across the division into study groups of interest.  Transition programs and school year start-up programs were developed, and had become a good way to network with parents.  Many of the programs offered by the division (Work Ed, Co-op Ed, Welding, French Immersion) helped to build networks with the community, as program developments meshed with community initiatives and needs. In order to address a growing proportion of students with special needs, the division had increased the time provided to clinicians, speech pathologists, and psychologists. In addition, staff have accessed grants to help provide quality programming for early literacy, socio-economic issues, and class size and composition.  In the competition for these grants, the school division was often the grant-writer, provider of staff and facilities, and manager of the programs. Student initiatives were supported financially by the board (i.e. a reciprocal arrangement for a vending machine), and the division provided space and some funding for a breakfast program that benefits the children in the division.

Many networks had also been built outside of the school division. In order to address the professional learning needs of the educators in the division, Strongman School Division took the initiative, in partnership with neighbouring school divisions, to organize a Masters of Education program cohort, half of which was delivered in the local community.  As a recruiting strategy, local school division representatives partner with the Chamber of Commerce at EdExpo at the University of Manitoba to highlight the benefits of a rural teaching career in the community.  Of particular pride for local residents were the development of a welding shop in partnership with local industry and the provincial government, and the building of a shared bus garage with a neighbouring school division. Other initiatives in which the school division partnered with community groups to increase opportunities for youth and for the community included the development of the Adult Education Centre, the Parent-Child-Family Development Centre, the Regional Health Authority Baby First Program, public health initiatives, a federal program entitled, "Creating a Future," a Teen Centre in the Adult Education Centre, work with Partnership with Youth for Christ for teens who could not be in school, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and shared facilities with the Town (particularly the Recreation Complex).  Staff added to this list combined programs with a neighbouring school division (particularly vocational), the combined ordering of supplies with other school divisions, shared professional development opportunities with other divisions, and the potential use of the technology available through

Telehealth. Finally, members of the division utilized opportunities for representation on various provincial educational executives (MASS, Council of School Leaders [COSL], MAST, Manitoba Teachers Society [MTS]) in order to remain abreast of provincial developments.

*Resilient School Division*

Because of the large geographical size of Resilient School Division, board meetings were rotated across the schools in the division to provide access for community members to attend.  A number of communication mechanisms were developed in an attempt to deal with the large geographical distances between communities and/or schools: mailers were put in mailboxes; newspaper stuffers were utilized; community consultation notices were placed in rural municipality (RM) tax notices and newsletter blitzes were sent; community billboards advertised meetings; committees of stakeholders were struck to deal with important issues; and two division-wide Parental Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings were scheduled each year so that PAC members had the opportunity to meet. The school division utilized formal and informal means of gathering input for decision-making including parent councils, surveys, student focus groups, divisional planning and budget meetings, and even sharing research articles.  The greatest pride was evidenced in the attention paid to professional development within the division, as Manitoba Teachers Society had acknowledged Resilient School Division as the top division in the province in this regard.  Professional development days, and networking groups around topics like literacy, technology and guidance/resource were supported with resources and time.  For example, a half-time Web-CT project coordinator position was created to facilitate the integration of technology into the curriculum (along with PD for educators), and to facilitate some opportunities for program options due to declining enrolments. The division had also created a divisional resource centre so that educators had access to professional resources. The division utilized community resources for co-operative education and apprenticeships when (and if) they were accessible.  Enrichment days were put on by schools to increase community involvement, and one of the high schools initiated the ABBA program in order to provide a band program for students. Reciprocal arrangements for volunteerism or community service (such as yard sales, pancake breakfasts, community clean-up, turkey sales) were pursued regularly. Finally, formal and informal mentoring opportunities had begun as the division planned for future administrative openings.

Outside of the division, a collaborative, multi-leveled project in partnership with local rural municipalities was developed to establish a community-based think-tank for improving community conditions and mobilizing resources.  Other networking opportunities included

connections to the provincial educational organizations (MAST, MASS, COSL, and MTS); sending an annual letter to home-school families welcoming them to use school facilities in the hopes of encouraging relationships with the division; building links with Aboriginal communities in the area; program partnerships with adult learning centres such as Fieldstone Ventures, Red River Community College, and Campus Manitoba offering programming to local students and adults; and an open invitation to the local federal member of parliament (MP) and the provincial member of the legislative assembly (MLA) to attend school board meetings with a goal to building positive political relationships.

*Independent School Division*

In Independent School Division forums for discussion were created when important issues were under consideration so that they could be debated before final decisions were made. Schools were generally open to the community, and parent councils had good working relationships with the board, as evidenced by their efforts to work together to provide playground equipment for schools. The focus on technology as a tool to aid instruction and enhance communication across the division was prized.  For example, administrators spoke of the program EdLine that was an online resource for academic reporting, as well as the development of an online blog as a means of supporting teacher professional development. In addition, an Interactive Television lab provided the division with access and opportunity to work with others and to provide programming from outside the division.  There was an active Professional Development Committee working to bring in professional speakers, and to facilitate local professional development, including summer institutes. Educational assistants and other employees were provided professional development opportunities, particularly in areas where liability may be a concern.  Transition programming for special needs students who move from school to school within the division was applauded as being highly effective. As well, some hot lunch/breakfast programs had been developed to ensure student needs for nutrition were being met.  Some attempts had been made at the school division and/or school levels to open channels between the school division and Aboriginal communities and/or parents. At the school level, there was a focus on monitoring transitions and academic progress of Aboriginal students, the inclusion of Aboriginal methods and content, and providing remedial education to those students who had difficulty. The division was also involved in a research project at the Regional High School funded by the Millenium Foundation that examined the academic success of Aboriginal students whose programs of study included Aboriginal content and methods. The position of Aboriginal Home School Liaison worker was created within the division as a step

towards building linkages with Aboriginal parents and the billet homes of federally funded Aboriginal students.

The opportunities Independent School Division had seized to link to outside agencies, businesses, and government had to be applauded. Shared programs between the High School, universities and community colleges existed.  For example, first year university courses were offered in partnership with the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, and Brandon University.  As well, the Precision Land Management/Environmental Management program was a dual credit program in partnership with Lakeland College, and University College of the North. The Informational Technology program developed out of a school/business partnership with Monsanto and Agricore United. In fact, the Regional High School has been so successful in its school/business partnerships for programs and/or technology that businesses now seek out the high school for potential partnerships.  There existed a Heavy Duty Mechanics program run out of the bus garage, which was a partnership with Assiniboine Community College and University College of the North.  Many individual courses were made available to students and/or members of the community as long as enrolments were viable, including for example, those related to becoming a nurse's aid, early childhood development, and knitting.

In order to increase professional development opportunities for educators, links between MECY and staff from the division had been developed for provincial curriculum writing, pilot testing, and implementation.  In addition, staff were able to access grant monies from the Manitoba School Improvement Program to review Grade 9 transition and academic success. In order to provide better programming for students who do not necessarily succeed in the regular program, the school division (more particularly the Regional High School) had become part of a community Inter-Agency service with mental health, corrections and probations, RCMP, and the Manitoba Metis Friendship Centre.  This SUCCEED program offered an alternative school environment with a focus on helping students transition back to the regular system.  The school division also partnered with the Manitoba Metis Federation to help provide adult education services.  Two schools had onsite daycare services, which were part of divisional programming in Human Ecology, and the HeadStart program run by Public Health used school division facilities to run its program on days when the Kindergarten program was not running.  A student exchange program with the Ukraine existed. Finally, a cross-border agreement with Saskatchewan had been created in conjunction with numerous school divisions and the two provincial governments so that students on both sides of the border could access educational services in the schools of their choice.

*Northern School Division*

Trustees developed working relationships with a number of groups, including the local First Nations community, Northern Teachers Association, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Parent Advisory Councils, and students. The school division provided information to the community in a variety of ways, including radio broadcasts, email, provision of a trade show, newsletters, newspaper clips, and web postings.  In addition, each school had a board representative who regularly attended school functions in order to maintain connections between the school board and individual schools. Since transience issues were common across the division, central office, resource teachers and classroom teachers focused their attention on placement and program needs, and transition programs were developed for all students as they moved between schools in the division.  The many opportunities for PD across the division were planned between the local teachers association and the division.  Early dismissals were provided to create opportunities for staff discussion, and administration time was allocated to work on behavior issues within the division as well as to provide opportunities to mentor new teachers. The school division had become aggressive in going after grants, and the division instituted an Innovation Committee whose primary mandate was to generate new ideas for resource and program management. As a result, the division was granted a Community Schools grant from the provincial government to help it develop programs to meet student need and diversity issues, and the division also developed an Aboriginal Education Committee whose mandate was to serve the needs of the large proportion of Aboriginal students in the division, with an attendant focus on creating PD opportunities for staff on diversity, Aboriginal world views, and inclusion of Aboriginal content.

In terms of building linkages outside of the division, the school division deliberately ensured that it had representatives on provincial committees (MTS, MAST, MASBO, MASS, etcetera) in order to remain "in the loop" on public education issues across the province. Linkages were also made with community representatives such as mental health, social work, the Public Schools Finance Board and community organizations to offer preschool programs, daycare, playground equipment, breakfast programs and shared facility usage agreements for the community pool.  A working relationship was being cultivated with Child and Family Services, and staff were hopeful that a stronger Inter-Agency approach to student services might develop with other organizations in the future. School personnel worked with the Primary Health Care Centre on planning and projects that were offered to the public, and with University College of the North to educate students on various health issues.  Finally, links between Northern School Division and University College of the North (UCN) were being developed for

program, personnel, technology and facilities sharing, including the vocational program already in operation.

### The Provincial Response

When asked what role the provincial government should play in educational governance and change, most of the respondents from these four rural school divisions focused on curriculum and budgetary issues.  At the time of the study, perhaps most critical was the view that the provincial government needed to recognize how intricately connected curriculum changes, legislative changes, and social programming developments were to governance and delivery issues in rural areas. There was a sense that if the provincial government was going to initiate and institute changes, it also had to provide the resources necessary to ensure these changes could be effectively and properly instituted. They suggested that the provincial government should build stronger networks with rural stakeholders, and facilitate partnerships between universities and rural areas that could help with recruitment problems.  Focus group members also suggested that the provincial government needed to recognize that rural school divisions need differential levels of support depending on their unique circumstances, and therefore current funding formulae needed to be re-examined.  Finally, it was mentioned that the provincial government, in conjunction with industry and education, must create partnerships to provide support for the development of a healthy rural economy, which may include provincial incentives for business development and educational service provision.

Partly in response to the findings of this study and largely due to the discussions that developed between rural superintendents across the province, MASS created a Rural Education Subcommittee whose mandate was to discuss, strategize, and plan for ways to address the challenges facing rural school divisions in Manitoba.  In effect, this group, working with MAST as a partner, became a lobby presence and a political voice for rural education.  According to Kingdon (1995), these actions represent both the introduction of the problem stream (issues facing rural education) and a political stream (lobby presence by powerful administrative groups).  One of its first priorities was to write a position paper on rural education from the perspective of these educational leaders (MASS & MAST, 2006), and to circulate the results of this rural research study.  Since provincial education groups in the province of Manitoba (MECY, MASS, MAST, MTS, universities, etcetera) have a tradition of collegial work relationships, when particular groups begin working on topics of interest, it is not long before all provincial organizations learn of the agenda underway.  At the annual MASS Summer Institute held in Clear Lake, Manitoba in August, 2006, rural education was very clearly an agenda item, to

which MECY responded positively by publicly announcing some plans that focused specifically on rural education (a political response to the pressure building across the province).

In November, 2006, MECY organized a research forum on rural education under the auspices of the Manitoba Education Research Network.  At this forum, MECY representatives were in attendance, participated in debates, responded openly to challenges, and indicated a desire to work towards a new vision for rural education.  In January, 2007, an invitational meeting of educational policy-makers and decision-makers was held to begin visioning for rural provincial policy directions. On January 29, 2007, the province announced a 3.3% funding increase to education, and targeted additional fund increases for areas in which many rural school divisions struggle: (a) $8 million for Level 2 and 3 special needs; (b) $8.3 million in equalization; (c) $4 million for declining enrolment support; (d) $700,000 for curricular materials; (e) $1.3 million for counselling and guidance support; (e) $1.1 million for building operational and minor capital costs; (f) $1.3 million in professional development; (g) $800,000 in transportation funding; (h) $200,000 for English as an additional language; (i) $100,000 for Aboriginal academic achievement; (j) $127,000 for early childhood development; and (k) $2.3 million in support to targeted school division projects.

In the same announcement, MECY also reminded the public that the provincial government funds approximately 70% of the total educational costs in the province.  In addition, since 1999, the province has increased the education property tax credit to $400, increased the seniors' tax credit to $800, reduced the education property tax on farmland by 60 per cent and completely eliminated the residential education support levy a year earlier than promised, for what it suggests leads to a $100 million benefit to residential taxpayers.  It appears that education finance has been on the agenda, but it is very difficult given other provincial priorities, health care being the primary one, to alleviate the financial issues for education.  Rural areas in particular are hit hardest with this reality, as they face increasing levels of poverty without large student enrolments, which still remains the primary granting mechanism for education dollars. Unfortunately, the provincial addition to education spending covers only about half of the annual increase in approved educational spending.  The end result is that school property taxes will go up for the upcoming year, and/or school divisions will have to use any reserve funds they may have, which are often reserved for retroactive contracts settlements, large purchases (such as buses), or long-term planning projects (such as technology systems).  The first option will take priority for rural school divisions, particularly since it is illegal for school boards in Manitoba to run deficit budgets.

MECY also announced that it plans to move forward in the areas of research, policy

development, and the creation of opportunities that help to offset the challenges facing rural school divisions. A response paper related to the position papers and research work on rural education is currently being written.  Representatives from MECY's Research and Planning Branch are working with rural superintendents and rural researchers from Manitoba universities to find ways to write grants and/or create research opportunities specifically tailored to the needs of rural areas.  All of this work will find itself incorporated into a policy response, which in Kingdon's (1995) view, constitutes the final stream necessary for opening of a policy window.

In April 2007, the annual Rural Forum held under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture included sessions focused on rural educational issues.  The exciting aspect of this forum includes the fact that this was one of the first times that cross-ministry, and cross-rural leadership groups came together to discuss how their particular agendas intersect and interact with each other to create the social, demographic, and economic realities found in rural communities.

Although the steps taken to date are preliminary, what is encouraging is that rural education issues seem to have made their way onto the provincial agenda.  Ministry representatives are encouraging discussion, facilitating meetings and planning sessions, and appear to be responding to the level of distress and concern resonating from rural school division leaders.  Time will tell if the current consultations result in meaningful change for rural school divisions, but currently there is at least a willingness to discuss, to listen, and to collaborate on issues that are specifically rural issues—which is more hopeful than what was the case even two years ago.  It would appear that a policy window is opening for rural educators across the province as the problem stream, the political stream, and the policy stream begin to converge.

## Conclusion

Even though all four divisions listed *Student Outcomes, Quality of Teachers and Administrators, and Educational Finance* as common priorities, the reasons why they were priorities and the challenges the divisions had in achieving them were not always the same. Unfortunately, the challenge that did link the four school divisions was the growing reality of rural poverty, the circumstances of which are alluded to in the report written by the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry (2006). Such an unfortunate finding illustrates the need to closely examine the economic circumstances of other rural communities in order to track the encroachment of rural poverty, and to initiate programs designed to support the rural economy and those who live in poverty.  Initiatives supported by the Standing Senate

Committee on Agriculture and Forestry (2006) include those related to rural economic development, income policies, education, transportation issues, tourism, immigrant settlement, regionalizing government offices, and more rural research.

In terms of the model for capacity based on Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure, the strengths of the rural school divisions related to the diversity of networks they created to provide services and programs based on student and community need. In fact, the many ways in which these school divisions became innovative out of necessity serves as a model for all school divisions.  In Strongman School Division, this was illustrated most particularly with the development of relationships between the school division, community and neighbouring school divisions.   In Resilient School Division, the most effective networks were those that currently existed within the school division itself (especially professional development networks), as well as those created by the superintendent to access outside sources of information and/or resources, such as the community think-tank and provincial grants.  In Independent School Division, networks were established with businesses, higher education authorities, the provincial government, and Inter-Agency service groups to access vocational and technology education, university credits, research and program monies, adult education, and alternative program needs.  In Northern School Division, the most successful networks seemed to be those that were within the division as well as those that were strategic decisions to sit on provincial educational committees in order to maintain a provincial presence.  All stakeholders recognized how intricately related the local economy was to school divisions' abilities to resource education, and there were concerns about the increasing divide over the gathering of tax dollars and the ability to pay. It may be that many rural communities, because of declining economic circumstances, are likely to focus on building networks within and outside their boundaries, since the creation of such linkages may facilitate the practical and prudent mobilization of resources that are less often being provided by the provincial government, and are becoming increasingly more difficult to access from local sources.  The concern here, though, is that local networking ultimately has finite potential.  As more rural areas face poverty, increasing responsibilities and less resources, even shared services will ultimately become strapped without more governmental support in policy and/or practice.

It appears from the current climate in Manitoba that a policy window may be opening for rural education in Manitoba.  It seems that the development of the MASS/MAST Rural Education Subcommittee and this provincial research may have been both the introduction of a problem and a political impetus that caught the attention of MECY governmental officials who traditionally have a good working relationship with MASS and MAST.  The political environment

is favorable partly because of the strong lobby presence of these two educational organizations, and because of the collaborative work history of professional organizations and the provincial government.  However, when a problem is identified and the political environment is favorable, it is vital that the policy stream produce viable alternatives.  Otherwise, the item risks fading from the decision agenda.  Given this possibility, it is incumbent upon the educational policy-makers and leaders who have been part of the overtures made by MECY to ensure that the momentum on these issues continues to build, and that the planning for rural education across the province produces viable alternatives for rural school divisions. Otherwise, there is a danger that, as Henley and Young (2002) suggest, "the concerns of urban Winnipeg" will once again "[overshadow] those of the rural areas of the province even if the city has never achieved hegemonic domination over them" (p. 322).

Amidst the challenges that they face, rural school divisions remain resilient, resistant and able to adapt, even though they have had to reinvent themselves and their practices time and time again. There remains a will and a tenacity for survival that battles the forces that would signal their demise.  And the belief that children (even if there are only a handful of them) have a right to receive a quality education respectful of local circumstance continues to thrive, though tensions between local needs and urbanizing educational policies remain.  It is *because* the stakes are so high that many rural school divisions have developed ways of working that are models of effective practice for us all.  And it is because of this tenacity that rural education is once again on the provincial agenda—it is now up to all of us who retain a passion for rural education to ensure that it remains there.

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