

The Manitoba Youth Town Hall Meeting with Ministers

May 1, 2009

The Victoria Inn Winnipeg

Background

The Manitoba Youth Town Hall Meeting with Ministers was initiated in response to feedback from the “Premier’s Youth Round Table” at Rural Forum 2000. At the Round Table, Manitoba youth indicated that they would like an opportunity to speak directly with provincial and community leaders. Since 2001, ten *Manitoba Youth Town Hall Meetings with Ministers* have provided Manitoba youth with the opportunity to engage in discussions with provincial Cabinet Ministers. The longevity and history of this event reflects the importance of giving youth the opportunity to share their voices and ask questions about things that are happening in Manitoba that are both relative to their lives today and pathways to the future.

Introduction

On May 1 approximately 80 youth, from across Manitoba, attended *The Manitoba Youth Town Hall Meeting with Ministers* that took place in Winnipeg at The Victoria Inn.

The day began by receiving welcoming remarks from the Executive Director of MB4Youth, Veronica Dyck. The opening keynote address was delivered by Marilou McPhedran, Principal of the Global College at the University of Winnipeg. Professor McPhedran spoke about her work in the field of human rights and law.

After the completion of the opening address, students gathered into four groups for the first session of the day which was titled *Brainstorming Issues for Action*. The purpose of the morning session was to have the youth attendees discuss and develop questions that they wanted to ask the Cabinet Ministers in the afternoon.

Students conversed with members of their group and discussed issues and matters that they felt were important to both themselves and other citizens of the Province. Once questions were compiled, students reviewed them and selected group members to present each of the questions to the attending Cabinet Ministers.

After lunch, Nour Rashid spoke to conference delegates. Nour is a past recipient of the Manitoba Citizenship and Youth Award, as well as the Canadian Millennium Foundation Scholarship, the Loran Provincial Award, and was selected among the university entrance students as a Leaders of Tomorrow Scholarship recipient and a President's Scholar. Today, Nour is studying science at the University of Manitoba, hoping to pursue a career in medicine or international development. Nour shared her diverse experiences as a youth advocate and philanthropist. The students were able to hear a first hand view of how they could take action to affect change in both their local and global communities.

Youth Session with Ministers (The moment the students had been waiting for...)

In the afternoon the students were joined by Minister Peter Bjornson, Minister Diane McGifford, Minister Andrew Swan, Minister Jim Rondeau, and Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross. Each of the Ministers was pleased to be in attendance and it was very apparent that the youth valued their time and feedback. The Ministers

rotated throughout each of the four groups and answered some of the key questions that the students had generated during the morning session.

Education, Citizenship and Youth

Minister Peter Bjornson discussed the rationale behind making Physical Education mandatory. The students were made aware that the delivery model is meant to provide flexibility for physical activity both inside and outside of the school setting. Minister Bjornson stressed that flexibility is key to the model; it is to provide a planned and balanced program to help youth develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes for active and healthy lifestyles.

Minister Bjornson also talked about the importance of finding a variety of ways to make use of school buildings. Schools that have lower enrolment numbers can potentially explore utilizing unused space for functions such as daycares or perhaps creating areas that people can access for community clubs, events and activities. Making schools multipurpose benefits both youth and citizens of the community at large.

Many students echoed their thoughts about standardized testing and their concerns on how the tests are assessed. Minister Bjornson explained that there is a marking rubric that is used to grade the standardized exams. The students were also told that they could appeal their mark if they were unsatisfied with their final grades.

Advanced Education and Literacy

Minister McGifford responded to questions regarding tuition costs. She explained that 30% of every university's budget is directly allocated to tuition fees. The students were also advised about Manitoba's commitment to affordable tuition and they learned that Manitoba's tuition fees are reasonable by comparison to other universities throughout Canada. Minister McGifford explained the benefit of the retainment strategy that the Province has created and told students that they could receive up to 60% of their tuition costs back if they remained in Manitoba.

Competitiveness, Training and Trade

Minister Andrew Swan talked about the Manitoba Business Start Loan Program which are loans guaranteed by the Province. The students were also made aware of other grants that are available to support small businesses and entrepreneurs. Minister Swan also talked about exposing Manitoba's small businesses to the international market by organizing trade missions and trade shows.

Minister Swan addressed the issue of gambling addictions and the policies and actions they have been put in place to assist those who have a gambling problem. Minister Swan explained that alcohol and gambling are not designed to be damaging, but can be if one abuses them. AFM (Addictions Foundation of Manitoba) has received money to provide aide to those with gambling and alcohol addictions. VLTs have features to inform players about how long they have been playing.

The students had a variety of questions for Minister Swan that related to underage drinking and drinking laws. Minister Swan explained how the Province is trying to find better media outlets to reach teens. Students were also made aware that Manitoba has the toughest laws surrounding alcohol consumption and underage drinking. Lastly, Minister Swan stated that those under 18 years of age working at a restaurant establishment can not serve alcohol.

The last topic Minister Swan spoke about was the continuous labour shortage that has taken place and the demographic challenges and opportunities that exist. Despite the increasing number of high school graduates there are not enough people expressing interest in vocations. Manitoba has labour market programs to enhance the participation of individuals who are interested in entering the labour force and for those who want to advance their skills in a particular trade.

Science, Technology, Energy and Mines

Minister Jim Rondeau talked about grant incentives for environmental groups regarding geothermal energy through Manitoba Hydro and the Department of Education. The students were also told that the Province is focusing the green fund on older building structures that are not as eco-friendly.

Minister Rondeau also spoke about the effective and cost efficient use of solar energy. The students were astounded with the cost savings of having a solar wall. Minister Rondeau explained that a solar wall costs approximately \$1700 after rebates, in turn saving \$2500 in energy per year.

Many of the students were concerned about the state of Lake Winnipeg. There is a vast concern with the amount of pollution that is affecting the water quality in

Lake Winnipeg; it will take a concerted effort to change the harmful affects that have taken place.

Minister Rondeau quickly touched on the development of mines and strategies that were being implemented to reduce the environmental affects that mines can have on the environment. There has been approximately \$300 million dollars invested in the mining industry. Twenty mines have been improved and more pollution is being taken out of the air than put in the air.

The youth were curious to know what the science portion of Minister Rondeau's portfolio included. The following are the areas that are the responsibility or are overseen by Minister Rondeau: Level 4 Lab at HSC, Medical Research, HIV/AIDS Centre, Drug Companies, Functional Foods and Ethanol.

Healthy Living, Seniors and Healthy Child Manitoba

Minister Kerri Irvin-Ross explained the importance and development of *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures* Task Force and progress on the recommendations that were made, particularly the recommendations about nutrition and physical activity. The Task Force involved input from parents, students and teachers. The overall goal of the initiative is to promote healthy living activities among young children that will continue throughout life.

Minister Irvin-Ross also discussed her concern about the misuse of prescription drugs. She also informed youth that there are agencies in the Province that practice harm reduction in an attempt to decrease the spread of diseases such as hepatitis and HIV.

Lastly, Minister Irvin-Ross shared information on supports that are offered to Manitoba seniors. She mentioned that there are a lot of different housing options

for seniors which provide them with the option to live in their own home longer with or without assistance. Youth were also made aware that there is an Aboriginal personal care home for seniors being developed in Winnipeg.

Conclusion

The day concluded with a photo opportunity with all attending Ministers. The students were impressed and thankful for the time they were able to spend with each Minister. There was a consecutive request among most of the attendees to have more time with Ministers at the next *Manitoba Youth Town Hall Meeting with Ministers*.