

IV. WHAT'S WORKING WELL? / CONCERNS HEARD BY THE COMMISSION

1. WHAT'S WORKING WELL?

The Commission was asked to review the existing system and to make recommendations which would result in furthering educational excellence. During the many visitations to all areas of the province, Commission members were consistently struck by the sincerity of the vast majority of people within the education system. While this vocation, as in others, has its share of individuals who are contributing less than positively to the desired end product, it is very evident that the large majority of participants in the system are doing the best they can under the present circumstances.

The Commission was especially encouraged to see the level of effort, ingenuity and devotion displayed by classroom teachers who, in spite of reducing resources, increasing class sizes and concern about violence in schools, continue to forge ahead with that for which they were trained - aiding in the development and education of young people. All too frequently, the spotlight of public service shines on the political and administrative levels rather than the classroom where the majority of education activities take place. It is imperative that all available future resources be channeled in such a way as to maximize and reinforce the efforts at the classroom level. Similarly the support functions to education must be organized as efficiently as possible in order to maximize resources available to students and families thereby complimenting the efforts of the classroom teachers.

Many administrators and educational leaders are succeeding in spite of the limitations they work with. This is due to a combination of professional training, ingenuity and enthusiasm complimented by generous portions of common sense. It is, however, inescapable that these professions will include some who are simply not appropriate to serve in those roles. The increased trend towards individualized accountability and accountability of the system as a whole will necessitate improved training prior to assumption of these roles. This, together with continuous accountability, will ensure that the community is receiving value for its financial investment.

The Commission was in contact with hundreds of school trustees during the process and while the roles ranged from basic volunteer to almost full-time salaried positions, the one underlying constant was the desire to provide the best possible education for the young people of Manitoba. It is unfortunate, however, that on occasion we see politics and turf protection intervening between what is actually best for the students and what local special interests appear to be dictating. It was encouraging to receive positive advice from many who approached us on an individual basis urging the Commission to do what's right for the future, rather than what is politically expedient at the present time.

The Commission viewed numerous examples of things that were working well around the province. The cooperative venture amongst three school divisions in south Winnipeg to operate the South Winnipeg Technical Centre is worthy of commendation. It is apparent to the Commission that this solution which crosses the boundaries of three separate school divisions has avoided duplication and waste by nonproliferation of smaller facilities and at the same time has provided an innovative approach to a much needed sector of the educational spectrum. The pioneering approach of a guaranteed education level shows promise of bridging an apparent credibility gap between our education system and industry.

Divisional cooperation, while sorely lacking in many areas, is very positively evident in others. Most recently, a few regional efforts were initiated to introduce and take advantage of distance education. Originating in the Wawanesa/Souris Valley area, positive manifestations have now emerged in the Evergreen/Lakeshore school divisions and a northwest consortium is making progress in the Swan River/Dauphin area. Hutterian colonies are also setting up electronic links to enhance their students access to broader educational opportunities. The integration of technology as a useful tool into our delivery structure for education is not optional; it is mandatory. Our children's capability of using modern technology exceeds substantially the mental horizons that most adults typically place on themselves.

The services provided by the Winnipeg based Child Guidance Clinic across numerous divisional boundaries appeared to the Commission to be a most appropriate response to much needed services thus avoiding duplication by each individual area attempting to create its own programs in these areas. In a service area demanding highly educated and specialized staff, it is important that overlaps be avoided as much as possible, for both professional and financial reasons.

The Commission was pleased to see initiatives, especially in rural divisions, of sharing of resources such as clinicians and specialists who are primarily concentrated in urban areas.

2. CONCERNS HEARD BY THE COMMISSION

The majority of presentations to the Commission were originated by proponents within the education system itself. As one would expect, there was a heavy emphasis on defending the positive features of the existing system coupled with a fear of what potential change could do to the existing structures. Some of this fear was generated by the unknown since the Commission was seeking and entertaining advice in the absence of specific proposals for change. Nonetheless, there were proponents for change and complaints about the existing system that need to be addressed. On many occasions, the Commission was made aware of problems in the informal sessions or on a private basis by individuals out of either exasperation or fear of condemnation in their own community.

The Commission heard complaints from parents about inflexible administrations and boards on a number of issues. On a few occasions it was apparent to members of the Commission that some decisions were being made in the interest of administrative convenience and tenacity in clinging to a previously adopted policy rather than applying individual common sense and action which would actually be in the best interest of the student and family.

Some examples of intransigency were evident in the administration of some divisions' transportation policies. There are numerous situations where bussing is the source of disputes between parents and school boards and there are several examples where parents are being forced to drive their children several kilometers to access an existing bus route - mostly to the route of a bus from a neighbouring division. In some cases, this brings the child to within a few kilometers of the destination school. There are other examples of children being bussed many kilometers to a school within their divisional boundaries as opposed to being allowed to attend a much closer school which happens to be across a school division boundary.

The apparent imperviousness of existing boundaries is the source of much anxiety for parents. In Winnipeg especially, the Commission received numerous complaints about inability to access programs across borders within the City. Newcomers to Winnipeg were especially surprised to find ten different city-based school divisions, each with its own policies, procedures, programs and methodology. The whole issue of residual fees for non-residents of individual divisions is an arena fraught with problems. There are great disparities between and amongst divisions as to whether or not fees are charged, how much they are and who pays them.

While there are numerous examples of positive parental involvement, the Commission heard on many occasions that parents want to be included on an informational basis in the operation of their schools. Generally they do not seek dictatorial powers but rather want to be a contributing partner with the teachers, principals and others involved with school management. It was evident that the present participation level ranges from hot-dog sales and fundraising to democratic advisory councils.

There was considerable anguish surrounding the reduction in assistance available from the Department in the curriculum area. Many divisions used strong terms in describing their feeling of abandonment during a period of frequent curriculum changes. Many divisions felt they were incapable of providing appropriate curriculum implementation without the necessary support staff.

The Department's decision to eliminate centrally based clinicians was the topic of many presentations - most of a critical nature. In fairness there were some who subsequently supported the move due to an increased ability to have direct influence over the activity of clinicians shared between divisions. However, all deplored the 'down-loading' by the Department to local boards generally resulting in an increased special levy to divisional taxpayers, when allowed.

It was apparent to the Commission that there is a lack of coordination between departments and agencies providing services to children. This is especially evident in the specialist/clinician field where there appears to be potential for great improvement. There is need for greater coordination amongst the departments responsible for Health, Justice, Family Services, Rural Development, Recreation and Education and Training.

One of the most common concerns that the Commission heard was that the public school system was falling heir to all of society's problems. It was argued that the education system has become the surrogate parent without the financial ability or the authority to perform that task. The classroom teacher is now expected to perform functions well beyond normal expectations. A major complaint was that teachers are not able to concentrate on the mainstream of knowledge, as their attention is diverted from their primary role.

A frustration was frequently expressed that educators are now expected to solve societal ills neglected or deliberately ignored by other segments of society. Most educators will not let children become victims of the situation and cope as best they can. In an era of substantially reduced resources, these expectations are rapidly exceeding the role and capability of educators.