

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural Education: A Review of Provincial and Territorial Initiatives 2009

Manitoba Education,
Citizenship and Youth

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The world of rural education is ever in flux; rural schools are innovative out of necessity because of their immediate reliance on local economies, demographics and social circumstances. However, in Canada, public education remains within the purview of provincial/territorial Ministries of Education, and in this respect, a symbiotic relationship exists between ministerial authorities and local jurisdictions. There always exists tension between provincial/territorial planning and priorities and the challenges in providing educational services at the local level based on contextual differences. However, as the findings of this study suggest, the tensions are negotiated and managed at the local level in ways that attempt to commit to provincial/territorial priorities while facilitating community interests. Because of the vast diversity across local contexts, and across provincial/territorial contexts, this study could not possibly capture all the innovations that either directly or indirectly affect rural schools. However, the respondents who participated in this study, whether they were local Manitoban principals and teachers, or provincial/territorial officials responsible for a number of different portfolios, have provided a wealth of information that suggests that commitment to the sustainability of rural schools remains. This Executive Summary briefly offers a collation of the ideas that are elaborated upon fully in the remainder of this report.

Based on the responses of the professionals involved in this study, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the innovations being undertaken in Manitoba schools:

- (a) visions of schooling attempt to address formal educational goals within the local community context;
- (b) organizing, managing, and staffing inclusive special education have become a priority for rural schools;
- (c) school divisions have focused their energy and resources on providing relevant and instructional-based opportunities for local professional growth as opposed to external development due to time, distance, and cost factors;
- (d) programming options have focused on literacy in the early years; social, at-risk and student engagement activities in the middle years; career development in the senior years; and skills training and PLAR in adult education;
- (e) the use of ICT is growing, but is vastly uneven across the province;
- (f) transportation costs continue to be an issue, to the extent that they have become instrumental in the decline of extra-curricular programs in schools;
- (g) schools have become incredibly creative in how they use funds to build capacity in their schools and have appreciated the opportunities to access extra resources for innovative programs; however the increasing reliance on a competitive grant structure is becoming onerous, time-consuming and costly as more administrative time is necessary for writing, reporting upon, and

- (h) managing the grants; and,
- (h) collaboration within, between and across schools, communities, school divisions, external agencies, and institutions of higher education has become normative and is necessary to provide program opportunities, professional growth opportunities, information sharing, and access to services, personnel, and resources.

The provinces/territories that have been most innovative in the support of rural education have a number of factors in common. These ministries have:

- (a) clearly articulated a strategic vision that focuses specifically on rural issues;
- (b) supported with commitment and resources the extensive development of an ICT infrastructure capable of providing access, equity and choice for coursework, professional development, and service provision;
- (c) focused on developing incentives and initiatives that will recruit, retain and develop teachers and administrators in rural communities;
- (d) provincial/territorial funding structures deliberately designed to recognize differential economic, demographic and educational needs in rural areas;
- (e) encouraged innovation to solve challenges faced by rural school divisions by resource provision, networking opportunities, and partnerships;
- (f) promoted and protected flexibility for local options, programs and cultural innovations; and,
- (g) developed partnerships across ministries, between ministries and local jurisdictions, and with post-secondary and work for service provision, career development, and recruitment and retention.

Rural schools have become more sophisticated and more adept at doing what they have always done best—they rely on the local expertise and the concept of community to work together with partners in order to find ways to innovate, to offer as many opportunities as they can for the students they serve, and to support the local people who work hard to make sure their children receive the best education they have to offer. Local rural schools in Manitoba have aligned their innovations and practices with the direction set by the province, partly as a consequence of the resources, directions and mandates of the ministry, but also because in doing so, they have found ways to support the economies, education and social environments of their local communities. Such a symbiotic relationship works best when it is based on mutually beneficial, equitable and authentic partnerships; strategic direction and planning at both the grass roots and provincial/territorial levels; the deliberate focus on creating flexible options that can work in multiple contexts; and pressure and support for growth in response to local and provincial/territorial need. There is no doubt that there remains much

work to be done to facilitate quality education in Manitoba rural and remote schools. However, as evidenced in this study, there are three elements that will greatly support this work: (a) the energy and commitment to leading renewal and quality education already exists within the rural and remote schools in Manitoba; (b) Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth has established rural education a priority; and, (c) there exists a wealth of policy and practice innovations already undertaken in other jurisdictions in areas that face Manitoba schools, such as distance education, recruitment and retention, culturally sensitive programming, and career and vocational programming. Rather than having to begin anew, Manitoba can learn from these jurisdictions to create models of service that support the Manitoba context. In doing so, it will increase the access, quality and choices of rural and remote students, educators, and communities for educational services respectful of both provincial mandates and community need.