

K to 12 Education Funding Model Review

What We Heard
from Stakeholders

February 2023

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Overview

In November of 2021, the Manitoba government announced its intention to conduct a review of the current Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K to 12) education funding model. The funding model review is part of *Manitoba's K to 12 Education Action Plan* (see www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/action_plan/index.html) and is addressing recommendation 74 from the Commission on K to 12 Education report, to “conduct a provincial review of the provincial funding formula to ensure an equitable distribution of education funding across the province” (128). Equitable funding will help ensure all students have access to similar opportunities regardless of where they live, their background, or their individual circumstances.

In February 2022, the government established the Education Funding Model Review Team (see www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/action_plan/educationfundingmodelreview.html), comprising 16 representatives from the education sector. To date, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning has met 11 times with the review team to seek its input on the review and the development of a new funding model.

From February to April 2022, the department engaged one-on-one with 51 organizations from the education sector to hear their concerns and priorities related to the funding model review. These organizations included the following:

- Manitoba's 37 school divisions
- Manitoba School Boards Association
- Manitoba Association of School Business Officials
- Manitoba Association of School Superintendents
- Manitoba Teachers' Society
- Independent First Nations Education Partnership
- Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre
- Indigenous Inclusion Directorate Advisory Council
- Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools
- Family Advocacy Network of Manitoba
- Manitoba Association of Parent Councils
- Student Services Administrators' Association of Manitoba
- Post-Secondary Presidents' Council
- Keystone Agricultural Producers
- Association of Manitoba Municipalities

In August 2022, the department presented the draft framework for the new funding model for the sector's feedback. In December 2022, the department met again with the sector, including school board chairs, superintendents, secretary-treasurers, and representatives from education associations. The department shared an update on the review timeline, outlined the key features of the new model in relation to input from the sector, and answered some frequently asked questions about the new model.

This report provides a high-level overview of feedback received from the sector to date as part of the funding model review.

What We Heard: Overarching Themes

We heard broad agreement among stakeholders that a review of the funding model was warranted, and for some, long overdue. Stakeholders expressed that the current funding model is not meeting the needs of all school divisions and their students for various reasons, and changes to the model's structure are needed.

Equity

Equity is a goal universally supported by stakeholders. There was a strong desire for a new funding model to make deliberate and steady progress toward the goal of equity of educational experience, regardless of where a student attends school in Manitoba. Equity is the primary focus of the funding model review, and stakeholders provided a great deal of relevant input, outlined in the Specific Considerations section below.

Adequacy and Flexibility

Consistent throughout the stakeholder meetings and presentations were the themes of adequacy and flexibility.

Many stakeholders emphasized the need for the new funding model to keep pace with school divisions' operating costs. Division representatives provided significant information on their cost pressures and funding needs, and this input will continue to be carefully considered as part of the government's annual budget process that determines the total provincial funding for K to 12 education. In addition to reallocating existing funding, the new model will help allocate future funding increases equitably.

School division representatives emphasized the importance of flexibility in the new funding model. Many aspects contribute to the uniqueness of a division's student body, schools, and system. In the past, local taxation was the vehicle by which divisions were able to address local demands. There is a desire for funding to be structured to allow divisions the flexibility to address the specific desires of the communities they serve.

Simplicity, Support, and Transition

During the engagement sessions, school division representatives spoke of the desire to see the funding model simplified. Concerns over the number of categorical grants and how these increase the complexity of the current model highlighted the need for a simplified approach. Division representatives suggested that a simplified, easy-to-understand funding formula would increase the transparency of the model's workings and lead to greater year-over-year predictability.

Somewhat related to the desire for predictability of funding was the desire for funding amounts to be made known earlier than the last number of years. Division representatives expressed that this would allow for a more inclusive and thorough budgetary process at their end. Providing greater predictability and advancing the timing of divisional allocations would both be measures that would enhance division-level planning. It was noted that the ability for divisions to plan better would ultimately lead to better use of funds in the overall delivery of education.

While division representatives support adopting a new model, they expressed the need for support to be provided during the transition, to allow for an orderly adjustment of operations if required.

What We Heard: Specific Considerations

Student Body—Enrolment

Division representatives said the funding model must look at the student body it is supporting. Representatives from about a third of the divisions expressly said a starting point for the funding model must be to reflect and adjust enrolment numbers in the division. A number of division representatives suggested starting with a base per-pupil funding calculation and then adjusting from there depending on other criteria. Division representatives noted that the base per-pupil amount should reflect population shifts within each division.

Socio-economic Conditions

Virtually all presentations from divisions and other stakeholders raised the need for a funding formula that considered the socio-economic conditions within divisions when allocating funding. There are a number of socio-economic factors that contribute to learning pressures and increase the need for resources and support. Based on the presentations we heard, the department should ensure the new model uses the best possible data to identify the divisional incidence of the following conditions:

- household and childhood poverty
- numbers of children in care
- recent immigrant populations
- use of English as an additional language

Special Needs Funding

Consideration for funding special needs/accessible education was raised by almost all division and stakeholder groups. Many division representatives spoke about the increasing cost pressures they face in meeting the needs of students who require additional supports.

The other common discussion point related to special needs was the way funding was provided to divisions. There was less unanimity regarding the shift several years ago to a block funding model for special needs. Those in support of block funding cited factors including greater flexibility for management of resources and assistance with staff retention. Divisions that were less supportive posed concerns relating to the rigidity of the block funding approach including being unable to adjust to address students requiring additional supports who are transferring into their division late or mid-year. These divisions added that the budgetary problem was compounded by the logistical challenges of trying to find resources required to support the student.

Despite the challenges voiced about block funding, there was not a strong desire to go back to the student application process. While this was in part due to the time-intensive nature of the application process, division representatives also recognized that the application process is an unpleasant experience for parents and caregivers to go through with their children.

It was also noted that beyond the dedicated block funding for special needs, there could be other supplementary funding sources dedicated for students with special needs. These could be allocated based on certain socio-economic indicators in the division that are known to correlate with children requiring additional educational support. Children in care is one such indicator that exists in the current model, and there was support for this indicator to be part of the new model.

Population and Geographic Considerations

Entwined throughout many presentations was the varying degree of impact a division's population sparsity and geographic size has on the cost of providing K to 12 education. Some of the geographically smaller divisions have the highest student populations and highest density. At the opposite end of the spectrum, many of the province's geographically larger divisions have comparatively lower student populations and therefore lower density.

These factors can significantly affect the cost of providing K to 12 education. The case was made strongly and repeatedly that geographical size and student population sparsity should be considered in the model. The operational areas affected are discussed on the next page.

Population and Geography—Transportation Requirements

Large geographic size and/or low student population density create a heavy reliance on busing, and influence transportation-related costs and requirements. Environmental factors, including the state of the road network, can influence the wear and tear of a bus per kilometre and create varying needs as it relates to bus replacement schedules between divisions.

Additionally, sparsely populated divisions with widely distributed student populations created unique transportation challenges, including the need for additional busing beyond the “to school and back to home” requirements. Due to smaller schools experiencing barriers to offering the range of courses expected in high school, divisions look to bus students from their home school on certain days or times to another school to join other students.

Population and Geography—Supporting Students with Additional Needs

Providing for students requiring additional educational supports is a significant budgetary challenge. This is the case for all schools in the province. However, the costs for providing these services, we heard, can be greater in sparsely populated, remote areas of the province. Remote areas can experience difficulties when trying to attract, hire, and retain specialized classroom support staff.

Population and Geography—Remoteness

Participants noted that remoteness amplifies challenges that other less remote divisions face in providing K to 12 education services. The distance between where services are and where they are needed is a major challenge, as it adds time and expense to divisional budgets. These challenges apply to all areas related to operations, including but not limited to maintenance, repairs, student assessments, and professional development activities for staff. We heard from stakeholders that the funding model needs to consider the additional costs for operations in remote regions of the province.

Population and Geography—Small Schools

Several sparsely populated rural divisions raised concerns regarding the ability of per-pupil funding formulas to cover the costs of operations. Their position was unlike more heavily populated districts. They often have classrooms and buses operating below ideal capacity. Yet, regardless of the utilization rates, some of these operating costs are the same as if they were fully utilized.

These division representatives spoke of the fixed costs associated with operating and maintaining buildings that cannot be adjusted to reflect the number of pupils enrolled—specifically, costs for heating and other utilities, fuel, and insurance.

Indigenous Student Population

Many presenters spoke of the funding model's ability to recognize some of the unique education requirements for Manitoba's Indigenous population. Discussions about Indigenous student population revealed challenges related to supporting the incorporation of culturally appropriate studies and supports, such as Knowledge Keepers and Elders, into divisions where Indigenous self-identification and representation is low.

In addition, discussions highlighted the need for resources for divisions to ensure some course work supports the Indigenous reconciliation efforts the province has made a priority, irrespective of Indigenous population levels in the division.

Many of the presenters made note of Indigenous students being overrepresented in socio-economic situations associated with learning pressures, which served to reinforce the need for divisional funding allocations to consider the socio-economic situation in each division.

French Immersion and Francophone Education

Regarding French Immersion, some division representatives expressed challenges related to the efficiency of classroom size and teacher-student ratios, additional costs for materials, additional busing for sparsely populated divisions, and obstacles to attracting French Immersion teachers in rural/remote areas.

In many ways, the points expressed by Francophone education representatives aligned with those of the individual English division representatives. They highlighted challenges related to significant busing requirements, remoteness from large urban centres, managing smaller schools or operating at less-than-ideal capacity, and supporting students who require additional classroom supports, sometimes in regions where this is difficult to do.

Notably, Francophone education's challenges are heightened by the need to provide these services in French. Accessing staff and instructional materials in a province that is overwhelmingly Anglophone is difficult, time consuming, and expensive.

Aging Infrastructure

A few division representatives took time in their presentations to highlight the state of their school infrastructure and how that has impacted their operational budgets. The aging infrastructure, while functional, was noted as not efficient to operate or maintain. Division representatives noted that aging infrastructure has created challenges relating to the cost of heating and cooling, ongoing maintenance, repairs, and upgrades. For divisions with aging infrastructure, the pandemic exposed additional challenges with their older buildings in terms of equipping classrooms for remote learning.

What We Heard: Other Funding Considerations

Capital Spending

Several division representatives raised concerns regarding the province's support of large capital projects, specifically the building of new schools. The concern revolved around what the province supports as part of the capital undertaking and what was part of the responsibility of the division to support. In previous years, when new schools were constructed, division representatives were expected to fund the final steps required before assuming occupancy. With the phasing out of local taxation abilities, division representatives expressed concern that funding the essential requirement to assume occupancy would need to come from operational budgets to the detriment of the student body. As a result, division representatives expressed a desire for there to be an adjustment made to what is funded as part of a capital project like a new school build within the new model.

The above discussion was very much focused on the construction of new schools around the province. However, there were other aspects of capital expenditures that were raised in the engagement sessions that were identified as important considerations related to K to 12 education funding in the future. These included major renovations or maintenance projects as well as Internet connectivity discrepancies across the province.

While major capital funding is not the primary focus of the funding model review, department staff are reviewing the input received.

Shared Services

During the engagement sessions and as part of understanding the divisional operational practices, we heard examples of interdivisional cooperation on the delivery of services. These activities included the following:

- vocational programming
- bus transportation and maintenance agreements
- virtual school programming
- student service programming
- administrative sharing

Examples of the cost sharing of divisional services were not raised often in the sessions, but when they did arise, they were positively viewed. Partners in these shared programs expressed a desire for the new model to enable collaborations to continue.

Next Steps

Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning thanks all school divisions and stakeholders for their continued engagement in the K to 12 education funding model review. The department is working on further improvements to the new model informed by the feedback received from consultations to date. Once these improvements are complete, the department will reengage the sector to seek detailed feedback on the new funding model.

References

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