

V. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

1. EQUALITY VERSUS EQUITY

In any discussion of education delivery systems it was inevitable that the Commission would encounter the terms equality and equity. It was essential that an attempt be made to define those terms at the outset of this review since they are so significant to both the availability of education throughout Manitoba and any attempts to enhance it in the future.

If Manitobans are to achieve understanding and solutions to problems, it is important that similar definitions of terminology be used. We frequently hear the comment that "everyone should be equal" or "everyone should have an equal opportunity for education" or "every student should have an opportunity to obtain an equal education". While the term equal is most often used in these situations equality itself is extremely difficult to achieve. Equality of opportunity is a fundamental objective but that does not mean that the same mechanisms, administrative or educational, must or can exist in all regions.

DEFINITION OF EQUALITY AND EQUITY

In this context, equality is primarily defined as balance, symmetry and evenness or "the same in all respects". Equity on the other hand, has a variety of meanings. Amongst these equity can mean impartiality or fairness. Like equality, it is sometimes used as a form of equivalence. Equality in education would mean that all students would have the same access to and receive exactly the same education in all parts of the province. Considering the incredible diversity within Manitoba, equality is an impossible goal. However, it is mandatory that we strive to achieve equity - in this case defined as "fairness under the circumstances". It is unrealistic to expect that the same number of course offerings or programs could be provided in areas of lower density student population where bussing distances prohibit the assembly of sufficient numbers of pupils to warrant the same options as can be offered in Winnipeg or other urban centres. Rural Manitobans are painfully aware of these choices and many see equality of opportunity for education as only a dream. The reality is that it is physically and fiscally impossible to attain total equality. The best we can strive for is equity - fairness under given circumstances.

DO CHOICES EQUATE TO QUALITY?

Frequently during public hearings, the Commission was told that in smaller communities multiplicity of choice does not in itself guaranty educational excellence. In many cases smaller rural schools can provide only core subjects but in spite of this limitation there are substantial numbers of very successful graduates from those schools. On the other hand, many educators would argue that a very limited exposure to curriculum and program choices is restricting. Still others would argue that only "full service" school divisions with a multiplicity of course offerings, special needs services, academic and vocational choices, and a complete range of support systems, can deliver an "excellent" education to today's student. As well, some maintain that a proliferation of available choices can sometimes work to the detriment of students if they make course selections without realizing the consequences of those choices until later in life. As can be seen from these differing opinions, one can not legitimately argue that every school and every division must, should or could provide absolute equality in terms of opportunity. Nonetheless, although there are many opinions as to the definition of what is a "basic education" today, it is generally agreed that it should be provided to all.

QUALITY OF SERVICE VERSUS EQUALITY OF SERVICE

People have the freedom to live in any area of the province that they choose. This does not mean that society must provide exactly the same services to all people in all places. It does mean, however, that society should make all reasonable efforts to provide the best quality of service possible under the prevailing circumstances. Societies tend to zone their territory according to physical and cultural characteristics for a variety of services. Society also provides some services by averaging the costs. Examples of these are primarily in publicly provided services such as health, education and utilities such as water, sewer, gas and electricity. Within the public water systems, there are numerous varieties of plants and processes utilized to produce a healthy end product. It is neither necessary nor practical for all systems to be identical in order to achieve similarity of the end product. Equity of a quality end product relative to the circumstances is the goal rather than an equality of all parts of the system. This principle is equally applicable to education.

Students who ride a school bus for one hour each way to and from school every day would certainly argue that they do not have equality with the student who lives only a block from the school. In Manitoba at the present time, there are many rural students who spend close to one hour (and sometimes more) on a bus to get to school. This is considered to be the elastic limit for bus routes. Ironically, because it is the limit, most bus routes end up being close to one hour in length, when economies in transportation are forced by fiscal restraint. The numbers of bus

routes are minimized and thus the time on the bus for each student approaches the imposed limit itself. Urban residents who live within the "no bussing" limit would not consider their situation to be equitable to those receiving bus service especially if they are just inside the present 1.6 kilometer limit.

Areas of low density in population simply do not produce the numbers of children to warrant class sizes to justify all available options within reasonable bussing times. Transportation limitations and density factors are two of the largest impediments to equality of opportunity in education. Rural residents know this all too well and are anxious to ensure that at least their elementary school children are educated close to home and they knowingly accept the fact that total equality in the form of equivalent facilities and choices may be sacrificed. In most cases this is deemed acceptable as long as a good basic education is available within reasonable bussing distance.

In the urban areas, while transportation limitations are not the same, there are still arguments about equity and equality. In Winnipeg where there are ten separate school divisions there are variations of program offerings in the divisions. Some divisions have developed specialties that non-resident students wish to access and they can not understand why boundaries within the city prevent that access. The charging of non-resident fees where access is allowed gives cause to claims of "double taxation" and inequitable treatment.

In the northern and remote districts and divisions people live with major restrictions as a fact of life. They know better than anyone the limitations that distance and isolation impose on attempts to achieve equality. They readily acknowledge that equality is impossible to achieve - but they do expect equity - fairness under the circumstances.

2. MANITOBA - PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

PHYSICAL PATTERNS

The physical environment has a critical effect on the lives of Manitobans. Natural resources, especially minerals, soils and forests shape the economy and the patterns of life. The existence of one of the most extreme climates in the world dictates behavior and accommodations to nature and each other that is not necessary in many other regions. It is important to have a good understanding of this environment as a framework for any long-term planning. It is the stage upon which life in Manitoba is acted out.