Saskatoon Public Schools

RESPONSE TO
Education Governance Review Report:
Kindergarten to Grade 12
by Dan Perrins

Delivered Jan. 19, 2017
to the Governance Advisory Review Panel
Thank you for this opportunity to respond to *Education Governance Review Report: Kindergarten to Grade 12* by Dan Perrins.

First, allow us to provide some details about our division. With a current enrolment of 24,000 students, Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS) is the largest and arguably the most diverse school division in the province. We employ about 2,500 people and have an annual operating budget of about $250 million.

We would like to emphasize that all of our comments today are prefaced on three core values, beliefs we as a board hold dear.

1. **The best interests of students must take precedence, always.** Public education is a public good delivered through a partnership between school communities, boards of education and the government and although education is a long-term investment by society in its own future, our students get only one crack at it. That makes our education system too important to allow any structural or governance changes to happen without the involvement of all partners and without very thorough consideration of both the intended and unintended consequences on students. The process we’re in right now points to political expediency in the face of a fiscal crisis rather than any measured and careful consideration of what is best for the students of Saskatchewan.

One of the responsibilities of a public institution is to continually improve in all aspects of its operation but any change must have a demonstrable benefit for those we serve, our students.

2. **Our communities—the taxpayers of this province—deserve and benefit from locally elected trustees who represent their interests in education.** We believe the democratic election of school board trustees is a system that has served, and continues to serve, the students of this province well. We believe that, given the demographic and geographic diversity in this province, locally elected trustees are in the best position to manage and advocate for the needs of their communities.
We believe elected trustees bring an important level of credibility to the delivery of education that would not be there under any alternative structure.

3. We also believe education is a proactive investment. There is significant research to indicate that every dollar invested in education is a dollar that can be saved in the future in services like health, social services and corrections.

Teddy Roosevelt once said, “Complaining about a problem without posing a solution is called whining” so as a board, we want to be proactive in our response to this report and in partnering with the minister, the government and our education colleagues to address any and all issues faced by the education sector.

The report itself is very wide ranging, covering myriad aspects of education. Its purpose, as outlined on Page 3, includes:

- achieving the outcomes set out in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth* and the Education Sector Strategic Plan;
- improving the quality of instruction for all students;
- finding cost containment;
- developing consistent, effective and efficient business processes;
- improving accountability and transparency through clear lines of authority and responsibility; and
- preserving and strengthening parent and community voice.

That is a lot of ground to cover in the abbreviated timeframe for this process. Given the breadth of the report, we will only be touching on some key points we feel need particular attention but would welcome further discussion about any of the report’s content.

One of the challenges we faced when reviewing the report was trying to identify the problem with the education system as it now exists. In other words, what’s broken? With no clearly identified problem, we are left to speculate.

1. Is the problem that the costs associated with 28 school divisions, including governance, are just too high?

The costs associated with the 10 SPS trustees—remuneration, professional development and other allowances—in 2014-15 was $334,437 and our consolidated operating expenses were $241.6 million. Governance then represents .138 per cent of total operating costs. We believe the benefit of having elected
trustees to establish policies and priorities, provide oversight, develop partnerships and build the culture of our organization outweigh the cost. Without a doubt, it is a lot of work; trustees are not in this for the money.

As mentioned above, the responsibilities of trustees are varied, but there are some aspects of the job that are very hard to put a price on.

One is the trust relationships that take years to establish but bring tremendous benefit to our division and the students we serve. One example is our agreement with Whitecap Dakota First Nation that saw the incorporation of their school—Charles Red Hawk Elementary—into our division. We do not believe we could have reached this groundbreaking agreement were it not for the fact elected officials were talking with elected officials.

And how do you put a price on the grief elected trustees save the minister and his staff? Do not underestimate our ability to diffuse situations and find solutions for individual students and their families, situations that would be on track to blow up in the media or during question period in the legislature were it not for our ability to intervene.

We urge the minister to consider these advantages when thinking about the “cost” of trustee governance in education.

In terms of overall expenditures, SPS prides itself in continually seeking efficiencies to ensure maximum resources are directed to our classrooms, to our support programs for students, to professional development for our staff and to maintaining healthy and safe learning environments.

That search for efficiencies continues internally, with other boards and across the sector. One example is bussing in Saskatoon—we are currently in talks with Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools to further rationalize transportation of students around the city with an eye to saving an additional $900,000 annually.

Are there more opportunities for efficiencies? Of course there are, and it is incumbent on boards of education to not only do the best but also be seen to do the best with the public funds they receive. The way boards across the province have coalesced around the goals of the Education Sector Strategic Plan is an indication of our willingness to work together to achieve targets and outcomes. That process, the momentum, and the expertise driving the quest for improved educational outcomes could be applied to an education sector plan that seeks operational efficiencies.
The province’s 28 directors of education sent a letter to the minister of education on Nov. 30, 2016, stating their position that transformational change is needed in the sector, but structural changes would shift the focus from students and the ESSP to managing the rebuilding of organizational structures.

The directors go on to offer the minister 19 suggestions for process and practice changes they view as feasible, practical and sustainable alternatives to structural change. These suggestions are worthy of serious consideration as they come from the people who arguably know education delivery better than anyone.

Real transformational change is about identifying the desired state, and then figuring out how to get there, not making wholesale change and hoping you end up somewhere you want to be. If the issue is money, let’s address money.

We respectfully suggest the minister review Mr. Perrins’ list of efficiency suggestions on Page 20 of his report as well as the suggestions submitted by directors of education, select priority areas, set targets and let us get to work.

As the largest division in the province with some of the most sophisticated business processes already in place, the minister might consider asking Saskatoon Public Schools to take the lead in one of the identified areas where efficiencies are being sought.

2. Is the problem student outcomes?

The need to improve student outcomes is another recurring theme in Mr. Perrins’ report. On this point, we concur; we must always strive to help our students do better. Our board is among those noted by Mr. Perrins on Page 11 of his report as having a strong commitment to the goals and outcomes of the Education Sector Strategic Plan. As a division, we have aligned our internal priorities with the plan and have committed considerable resources to the collective efforts going on across the province to achieve the stated outcomes.

On the very next page, however, the report states: “The Minister of Education has the authority to publish goals and objectives for the system but cannot directly impact the achievement of students. The Minister must rely on the efforts of teachers, principals and administrators who are employed by boards of education to effect change.”

This statement implies boards of education hold sole responsibility for the educational outcomes of students. We strongly disagree.
To say the minister cannot directly affect the achievement of students ignores the fact the minister of education and the ministry provides us with the curriculum we must deliver and the resources with which to deliver it. These two factors do affect student outcomes, and the minister and his government directly control them.

There are many other realities that affect student outcomes, some of them noted by Mr. Perrins on Page 9 of the report, and none of them within the purview of boards of education. They include the training of teachers in Saskatchewan; poverty; the lingering effects of the residential school system; disparate health-care access for certain communities; supports for children before they reach the K-12 system; integration services for refugees and immigrants; and the list goes on.

We would suggest the minister resist assigning responsibility for student outcomes only to boards of education. In addition to supporting the efforts underway to meet the targets of the ESSP, we would also encourage the minister to consider these suggestions:

1. Evaluate whether teacher training in this province is appropriate given the needs of a 21st century Saskatchewan classroom;
2. Consider curriculum review and not just its depth, but also its breadth. We need to listen to teachers when they tell us they struggle to meet the massive number of learning outcomes required in a single school year;
3. Work with cabinet colleagues to develop policies and programs to address poverty, knowing that among the significant benefits will be improved educational outcomes for students across the province;
4. Consider a review of school-year calendar development practices, including the implications of two, week-long breaks between January and April; and
5. Following up on the minister’s “everything’s on the table” statement, consider allowing Saskatoon Public School to pilot a year-round school model, knowing there is significant research showing that learning loss for students over the summer has a cumulative and negative impact on student outcomes.

Many of these suggestions have implications for the education ministry as well as the minister. We view the ministry as an active partner in supporting school divisions in the province but we also recognize the effect of budget cuts on its ability to do the work. Doing the same, or more, with less puts additional strain on the system so everyone must strive to maintain collegial and beneficial working relationships within the education sector.
Given the reductions in ministry staff, we suggest there is value in looking beyond our borders at what is working well in other jurisdictions and adopt those practices as our own. While it is always preferable to have a made-in-Saskatchewan solution to things like curriculum, we cannot afford to continually re-invent the wheel.

3. We also wonder, based on the Perrins report, if the problem is that the government does not believe that trustees “randomly” elected in a democratic process can provide good governance of the education system?

Democracy is messy but to suggest democratically elected trustees cannot do the job ignores what a group of citizens brings to the board table. Among them are:

- a diverse range of perspectives, expertise and life experience;
- the ability to challenge educational assumptions and thereby generate creative solutions; and
- the ability to connect with electors, to serve as a bridge between the communities we serve and the division but also between the division and the ministry.

Shifts in Governance

We would now like to address some of the points made in the Shifts in Governance section on Pages 20-21 of the Perrins report.

*Standardized expectations of boards in relation to required competencies of board members; require mandatory board training*

Following on the previous comments about the competencies elected trustees bring to the job, having various skills and abilities does not mean trustees do not have things to learn. Quite the opposite in fact. Trustees must model learning but boards should be allowed to assess the skills required, identify gaps and work to fill them based on the needs of their division. There is no one-size-fits-all training plan.

*Standardized governance costs*

We reiterate—we are not in this for the money. If standardization of items like remuneration rates is important, we would support working with the government to determine what is appropriate. Of some concern, though, is the suggestion that there should be a maximum annual number of board meetings. In our division,
trustees do not get paid 'by the meeting' and we must be allowed to deal with the business of governance as it arises.

**Standardized administrative costs**

While there could be some standardization of administrative costs, our board has a couple of particular concerns.

The first is with a provincial pay grid for out-of-scope positions. This would need to take into account the varying size and complexity of divisions across the province. There must also be consideration given to a potential unintended consequence: a pay grid developed today for purely fiscal reasons may limit our ability in future to attract the best to our sector from other jurisdictions.

A second concern relates to standards for central office staff in relation to school-based staff. This ignores the particular circumstances of any one division. For example, within our student population, Saskatoon Public has a very high percentage of students who require supports for learning compared to other divisions. To limit the number of support staff we can deploy for the benefit of those students and their teachers will have a negative effect on the educational outcomes for those children.

**Partnerships**

We would like to take some time to talk about partnerships. As mentioned earlier, Perrins rightly points out effective delivery of education is a partnership between school communities, boards of education and the government. We believe there are other partnerships that deserve recognition for the value they bring to our division.

We have already highlighted our relationship with Whitecap Dakota First Nation (WDFN), which goes back more than 20 years and brings benefits and advantages for students and staff across the division.

[[Murray Long, director of self-government with Whitecap Dakota First Nation addressed the panel, outlining the history of the agreement and the value of working with local officials—both elected and non-elected—to find solutions that meet the needs of WDFN students. During subsequent discussions with panel members, Mr. Long suggested it would have been improbable that such an agreement would have been reached, or that an existing agreement could be maintained, were WDFN dealing with a single provincial education board.]]
One of the most important relationships we have is with parents and guardians of our students individually and through our School Community Councils (SCC). SPS has a well-developed SCC network; the division provided support for establishing SCCs, SCCs are involved in the development of school strategic plans, and our SCC assembly meetings are opportunities for education, the exchange of ideas and a chance for the board to report directly to school communities.

Our SCCs keep trustees in touch with the people we serve, and keep parents, guardians and schools communities in touch with elected decision makers

[[Catherine Weenk and Deborah Whittingstall, co-chairs of our SCC assembly, spoke about the critical need for parent voice in education. They pointed out that 50 per cent of SPS funding comes directly from Saskatoon ratepayers and that those ratepayers deserve a say in education delivery. They emphasized the importance of the relationship between parents and elected trustees as we work together for the best outcomes for all students.]]

Options

We would now like to comment briefly on the four restructuring options presented in the Perrins report.

Option 1: Provincial Model
This option raises more questions for us than it provides answers.

☐ How will this structure benefit students?
☐ How can a provincial appointed board be responsive to the needs of communities, including communities that exist within our division like our First Nations, Métis and Inuit students?
☐ While it might appear to save money in the short term (remuneration for elected trustees would cease), what is the cost of shifting focus from educating students to restructuring education in this province? The cost to students of that disruption will not be insignificant.
☐ How does a parent with concerns navigate the bureaucracy, and how long does that person wait for a response?
Option 2: Regional Model

Please see above.

Option 3A: Restructuring Public School Divisions

No SPS trustees have direct experience with division amalgamation. To gauge its effectiveness, we must rely on our colleagues who speak of limited operational savings and the fact they are still dealing with the lingering negative effects of the 2006 amalgamation.

Option 3B: Realigning Boundaries

Please see Option 3A above.

That said, there could be potential operational efficiencies to be derived with the realignment of boundaries but caution is required. We believe there is a need to identify and preserve effective educational cultures where they exist.

Conclusion

As we said earlier, democracy can be a bit messy but a mature democracy is characterized by negotiation, participation and compromise. A mature democracy should also demonstrate its ability to tolerate differing views, and we appreciate the opportunity to share ours.

In summary, we encourage the minister and this government to allow those of us deeply committed to and involved in education to bring our expertise and local knowledge to bear on finding the outcome improvements and the efficiencies it seeks.

We also hope everyone in this province agrees that education must be viewed in the long term, well beyond the mandate of this government, or the next, or the one after that. The education of our young people is simply too important to allow it to become political capital for any government. We would suggest one of the most important roles we have as locally elected trustees is to protect the education system of this province from undue partisan political interference.

Thank you.