



'Advocating for Our Children, Our Schools and Our Communities' - Workshop Report
Presented to Regina Public School Trustees, April 27, 2010

On March 14, 2010, RealRenewal hosted a workshop to encourage parents and community members who want to be more involved in education as a public issue. This workshop arose out of a partnership with the Faculty of Education and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, with additional support from the Public Interest Research Group, CUPE and the RDLC action fund. We invited Jacqueline Strachan, parent inclusion coordinator for People For Education, Ontario, to lead the day.

The workshop, which included information about advocacy as well as discussion roundtables on key issues, was attended by 30 participants from throughout the province, including parents, educators, decision-makers and community programmers. Our individual backgrounds were quite varied, but whether a community council member, a small town mayor, a church minister, an urban educator, a parent of a special needs child, or a grandmother, to describe a few of the assembled, our shared concern for the humane and happy education of the next generation was clear from the beginning.

Elder Glen Anaquod opened the meeting by describing some of his own experiences as a student, and encouraged people in the room to keep working together to make things better. In addition to Ms. Strachan, presenters included Dr. Sally Cleland of the Saskatchewan Association of School Councils; Dr. Rick Sawa, teaching services consultant for Prince Albert Grand Council; Dr. Eber Hampton, past president of First Nations University of Canada; Dr. Rick Hesch, an education consultant specializing in anti-racism and Aboriginal education; and Tracy Birss and Dawn Reich of SOS Saskatchewan, an organization concerned with rural and provincial education issues.

The following evening, we co-hosted with the Faculty of Education a public discussion on standardized assessment, held at La Bodega Restaurant, which was attended by some 70 members of the public. It was a very lively event with plenty of discussion about current directions in education, locally, nationally and globally. We are in the process of compiling the notes from these presentations, and will be happy to share them with you when they've been published. We've also invited some of our presenters to be here this evening to help answer any questions you may have.

For the immediate purposes of this presentation, we would like to briefly fill you in on some of the main issues that emerged during the two sessions, and to invite you to contact us and join our public meetings for further discussion. When we host public forums, it's a very simple process. People come, they speak, we listen and we learn a lot.

As you prepare your planning priorities, we thought it would be helpful to pass on some of what we've heard and learned from the roundtable presenters and participants. Here are some of the issues that were on the top of people's minds:

1. Changes to support services

Obviously, recent news of the loss of educational assistants was on many participants' minds. There are many competing ideas about how support services should best be delivered. Fortunately, trustees have access to the best available expertise. The first and foremost experts are parents of children receiving support services. They know their children, and their children's needs, better than anyone else. As one parent of a special needs child said at our workshop, you become an advocate and an expert the minute your child enters the system. Even in cases where it seems there is family breakdown and low parental involvement, parents know their children in their hearts better than anyone.

The second most important experts are the staff members who work with our children and know them almost as well as we do. Teachers and education assistants of Regina Public are second to none. They care – an underestimated value in effective educational work – and they have years of direct experience that is grounded in reality.

By these standards, you might say that academics and officials – who don't know our children, and who have never been inside our classrooms – actually know very little. We're sure you've already discovered that a consultant's interpretation of a focus group result is no substitute for direct conversation with parents and staff. The time-honoured approaches of inviting people to your place for coffee, or chatting on the telephone, are very important methods, and we encourage you to continue doing as much of this as possible.

With this in mind, we hope you will consider attending the public meeting on support services, this Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at the Cathedral Neighbourhood Centre, 2900- 13th Ave. It's been organized by the educational assistants, and doubtless there will be several parents in attendance as well. Our members will be attending, because it's a good opportunity to meet people, and to listen and learn from on-the-ground perspectives. We hope you, too, will feel welcome to take advantages of such opportunities.

2. Racism in education

One of the major topics of discussion was the persistent, systemic problem of racism in education. Regina Public has made admirable progress on many fronts, and is to be commended for addressing Aboriginal education. We acknowledge, appreciate, and respect the fact that the Regina School Board staff includes not only staff dedicated to First Nations and Métis education, but also an Education Equity Consultant and an Elders Advisory Council. Your work here goes beyond that of many other school divisions. But workshop presenters and participants reminded us that there is much more work to be done. Many came to our workshop specifically to talk about experiences of racism in education, and to talk about how the system still isn't working for children as well as it

could be. We learned that effective anti-racism amounts to much more than adding content into the curriculum. Racism takes many forms on a daily basis inside and outside the classrooms, experienced by both students and staff members of Aboriginal ancestry. We learned that many of the issues that came up for discussion throughout the afternoon – such as support services, standardized assessment and the role of community coordinators – are deeply tied to Aboriginal/First Nations concerns. We also learned that although education policy originates from different levels of government, it cuts across all systems in the same general direction. For example, we heard that band schools now have funding tied to the implementation of standardized assessment protocols, while other community priorities go unaddressed. It was clear there are many linking issues that ultimately lead to a much needed re-examination of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within education systems and in the community. A good background resource is *Reclaiming the Learning Spirit: Learning from Our Experience* by Verna St. Denis and others, a report on a 2008 gathering of educators in Saskatoon.

In the months to come, RealRenewal will be continuing this important discussion, with a view to developing a proposal for action that will focus on promoting greater community involvement and voice in addressing racism. We are happy to invite further conversations with trustees on this pressing matter, and to attempt to answer any preliminary questions you may have this evening.

3. School mergers

We heard from rural parents about small children being put on buses with pillows and blankets, for long rides to schools that are overcrowded as a result of mergers. Promised merger rebuilds have amounted at best to a portable classroom or two, if they're lucky. We don't want this situation in the city, although it's already happening. At the start of the renewal plan, we were told the program model was elementary schools of no more than 400, high schools of no more than 1,200. Keep in mind these numbers were already pushing the ceiling of optimal enrolment levels. In your review of the renewal plan, we would like to see a renewed commitment to keeping schools below the promised upper limits. To accomplish this in a time of increasing enrolment – especially when the province has announced an expected 10,000 more newcomers under the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program in 2010 – we need to use everything we have. If some schools are faltering, we should re-energize them with attractive programming and positive attendance boundary changes. Concentrating and then breaking overly large populations into pods doesn't maintain the enrolment limits committed to in the 10-Year Plan – limits that were drawn for good reason. We need to maintain a good variety of facility and program options spread around the city, or face the rural option: a few schools bursting at the seams, and some very tired little tykes travelling far from home.

We understand that when you pull on the string of a merger decision, it leads back to the Ministry, which encourages large-scale capital spending on large-scale mergers, and discourages the practice of caring for and working with the things we have. But as elected trustees, you have the freedom to think creatively, and to suggest new approaches. I'm

sure nobody enjoys the role of rubber stamp, so this is an opportunity to say, “Wait a minute, what if we did things differently? What if we centred our planning on schools of human, sustainable scale? What would the system look like? How would we accomplish it?”

4. Standardized assessment and the literacy-numeracy focus

Reading the work of Dr. Doug Willms, whom you met with recently, we learn that value-added assessment was a cornerstone of George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind initiative. It is helpful to review this history. Diane Ravitch was President Bush’s assistant education secretary, and the architect of the assessment program; she was one of the people who helped promote transferring the phrase ‘continuous improvement’ from the factory floors of Japan to the North American classroom. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, she feels No Child Left Behind was a mistake, particularly for its over-emphasis on literacy, numeracy and value-added assessment. In her book *Death and Life of the Great American School System*, she writes: “States and districts are now gearing everything up to getting the right [test] numbers and nobody is learning anything. They may even be learning less overall, because there is no incentive to teach anything except reading and math.”

Thankfully, there is recognition of past mistakes, and people such as Dr. Willms understand that the system of value-added assessment needs to be realigned, to make it a more holistic, stress-free enterprise. There is a lot of talk, which is good, but for our kids the important thing is the walk. Is it possible to significantly reform assessment models? Despite the best intentions for a well-rounded, quality education, when schools and students don’t meet benchmarks, what are the results on the ground? We worry that unless significant resources follow, it becomes a shell game of shuffling resources and staffing around to meet new demands for intensive learning and for increased hours devoted to math and reading, often at the expense of other subjects, programs and school-community activities. We know some schools are doing innovative, exciting things, and we are hopeful structural innovation will provide more opportunities in this regard. However, as more of the calendar gets locked down by literacy, numeracy and assessment-based priorities, requiring more teachers on staff with specialization in these areas, we must be careful that we don’t undermine the available space for other areas of learning and teaching, an outcome that has been well documented in other provinces. We also worry that if anyone on staff questions the direction, they might be identified as resistant to change, deadwood, or good candidates for retirement, rather than seriously hearing them out and making adjustments.

For parents, it’s already a frustrating exercise trying to get their kids out the door in the morning against protests that school is boring, that it’s all about math. It’s frustrating for students who miss having variety in their week, who get tired of testing and re-testing. We think this is why our Monday evening public discussion on standardized evaluation was standing room only. Many attendees were concerned about the creeping influence of assessment-heavy priorities that are loved by government officials and hated by kids.

Parents are getting educated about pitfalls to be avoided, and alternatives. We note that Dr. Sawa has been invited to speak at the Saskatchewan Association of School Councils conference in Saskatoon this weekend. He is the editor of *Assessing Students' Ways of Knowing*, a book that explores different perspectives on what is important, what should be measured, and how it should be measured, particularly from aboriginal perspectives. Other resources are the Council on Canadian Learning's reports *Redefining How Success is Measured* and *The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: A Holistic Measure to Measuring Success*. You will find links to these and other resources on our website, www.realrenewal.org. But, again, we encourage trustees to talk to teachers, talk to your kids, and find out firsthand how the current focus on literacy and numeracy, and the measurement methods, are playing out in daily classroom life. Are people happy, or unhappy? It's a simple but important question.

5. The future of community schools and community school coordinators

The 2005 Community Schools Data Collection Project found that community coordinators are vital to the functioning of a community school yet "the role is not always understood, valued and supported" (p 109). We think this may be what has happened as school administrators look for ways to shift staff around under the aforementioned pressures. In response to our questions about staffing levels, correspondence from the director states that at the outset of the 10-Year Plan there were 16 schools with community coordinators. Now there are eight. With the closure of Jenkins School, we can expect there will be seven or perhaps even fewer next year. We make special note that these were designated equity positions. We have been informed that the community school concept is now considered an idea of the past. We wonder if most trustees are aware of this major shift in policy and staffing direction.

As an SCC member at a community school, I can say that none of this big picture thinking has been broached with community members, the people who are most affected. In the case of my school, we were simply informed that our coordinator position was gone and wouldn't be replaced. What I can tell you is that our community coordinator was the heart and soul of our school, and it hasn't been the same for the students, parents and neighbourhood since she left. We don't have the same level of family-friendly activities, and we don't feel the presence of the school at our community gatherings. A lot of this activity took place outside school hours and outside classrooms. It's a huge loss that will never be measured, because that's not what we're measuring these days.

We hope you agree with us that the community school concept and community school coordinators should not slip quietly into oblivion. The model has a 30-year history, and is highly regarded among students, staff and community members, according to the data collection project. The idea of community schools has historically had the support of this school board, to the point of providing designated funding beyond what the province provides, a very wise and much appreciated policy. The model is not, as has been argued, easily replaced by external supports and the Elders in Residence program. Yet clearly something has shifted quite dramatically, in a very short time, under the radar of public

discussion. This is a subject that deserves far more transparent, detailed, open-ended discussion with the affected communities. We urge you to immediately enact appropriate mechanisms to promote this discussion at the board level, and we invite you to participate in community-organized meetings on the future of our community schools.

6. Decision-making processes

It's true by the time the big decisions trickle down to parents, the options are very narrow and the key processes are already underway. I'm sure you've noticed the same trend, as we move to new models of governance and consultation. Some of our rural participants, who are with us tonight, have been studying consultative models. They worry that current trends empower officials while disempowering citizens and their elected representatives.

Our fate in this regard is shared. As autonomous parent councils become a thing of the past so, too, will elected school boards, leaving a system where everything is determined by Ministry bureaucrats and well paid consultants. That doesn't mean we should just tick off the minutes until we are dismissed. One possible option is division-wide committees or task forces made up of citizens and trustees, mandated with tackling specific issues by gathering information and ideas over extended periods, as opposed to one-off meetings. There is precedent; for example, in the past a values committee was struck to consider core values in education, which included both board and community representatives. This, we are told, is the origin of our four values.

Such an approach is not quite the same as an inclusion model, which encourages involvement in and support for programs that are more or less already set. It also differs from a consultative model, in which citizens respond to options set before them, and have their guided responses become raw data for someone else's interpretation. Our suggestion is closer to a participatory citizenship model, where specialized task forces with targeted community representation would be mandated to develop, draft and advocate policy recommendations from the ground up. For example, a committee that included parents of children receiving support services could delve into core policies around support services. With this approach, some serious action and debate on important issues would be generated – and committee members would be cheaper than consultants! We hope you will agree that there is a need to re-engage a strong public voice in education, on a more equal decision-making footing, while there is still opportunity to do so.

Conclusion

In our experience, parents and community members are an invaluable source of information. They know population trends before the trends hit the charts, they observe how policies and educational approaches affect our children, and they understand the connection between schools and communities because they *are* the connection. We hope the information provided will be helpful in adding to the picture of what issues are being discussed in the community, and we encourage you to join in direct conversation with your neighbours and school parents, as well as with staff and teachers. Please call on us any time for information and assistance with community connections. Thank you.