

Urban Education: Exploring the Relationship Between School Boards and Municipalities

A Western Cities Project Discussion Paper

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Introduction

Although established by provincial governments, school boards have a great deal of autonomy with respect to kindergarten to grade twelve public education in western Canada. Municipalities, also established by provincial governments, have a relationship with school boards in a number of areas. As two elected bodies that have a shared history of local responsibility, it is important to understand the ways in which school boards and municipal governments intersect.

What are the key areas where school boards and municipalities have a relationship? How is this relationship developing, and what are the areas that need improvement? *Urban Education: Exploring the Relationship Between School Boards and Municipalities* examines the relationship between school boards and municipalities in six major western Canadian cities: Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. *Urban Education* demonstrates that when municipalities and school boards work together effectively, everyone benefits.

Urban Education examines the following school board-municipal relationships:

- City of Vancouver - *Vancouver School District*;
- City of Calgary - *Calgary School District and Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District (it should be noted that Alberta and Saskatchewan have separate school boards that are publicly financed)*;
- City of Edmonton - *Edmonton School District and Edmonton Catholic Separate School District*;
- City of Regina - *Regina School Division and Regina Roman Catholic Separate School Division*;
- City of Saskatoon - *Saskatoon School Division and St. Paul's Roman Catholic Separate School Division*;
- City of Winnipeg - *Winnipeg School Division No.1 (Winnipeg is a unique case as there are six public school divisions within the city - prior to July 2002 amalgamations there were nine. This report looks exclusively at Division No.1).*

While all four provinces contain francophone school boards that have a presence in each of the six major cities, they are not explicitly discussed in this report due to their provincial/regional nature.

The following analysis is primarily based on 32 in-depth qualitative interviews with key personnel from school boards, municipal governments, provincial governments, and other relevant organizations. Interviews were conducted between May and July 2002. A review of relevant academic studies, government reports, and other literature supplemented the qualitative interviews. While the research focuses on six major western Canadian cities, the findings are relevant to other cities across the West and Canada as a whole.

Table 1: School Board and Student Enrolment 2001/2002

Winnipeg No.1 (34,200)
Regina Public (22,500) Regina Catholic (10,879)
Saskatoon Public (21,912) Saskatoon Catholic (15,131)
Edmonton Public (81,537) Edmonton Catholic (28,000)
Calgary Public (96,484) Calgary Catholic (44,062)
Vancouver (58,967)

Source: School Boards.

Why Should School Boards and Municipalities Work Together?

Both school boards and municipalities are autonomous governance bodies that share much in common. For example, both are elected by and responsible to the local community, both are established and can be dissolved by the provincial government, and both share the same property tax base for a significant amount of their revenues. There are also some examples of school boards and municipalities working together for more pragmatic purposes. School boards and municipalities frequently cooperate through joint use agreements, which cover after-hours use of school or municipal facilities. Both parties are able to get the most out of existing infrastructure under such agreements, thereby creating numerous cost efficiencies. In regards to their sharing of the property tax base, it is also crucial for school boards and municipalities to work together, especially in situations where decisions made by one body may adversely affect the other.

Urban Education focuses on two main intersections between municipalities and school boards: models of funding for school boards, and planning and joint use agreements. Some additional areas of school board-municipal intersection—recreation, policing, and community services—are also explored.

Models of School Board Funding

One major intersection between school boards and municipalities is the collection of the local property tax and the setting of mill rates. A significant amount of funding for education comes from the local property tax base in each of the western provinces, with the remainder coming from general provincial revenues or other sources such as school fees. What this means at the local level is that school boards and municipalities end up sharing the same tax base, often putting a strain on their relationship. There are essentially three different models of school board funding in western Canada, each with its advantages and disadvantages, and each with its own effect on the school board-municipal relationship.

Table 2: Municipal and Education Share of Property Taxes 2000

	Municipal	Education
Winnipeg	50.5%	49.5%
Regina	47.8%	52.2%
Saskatoon	41.1%	58.9%
Edmonton	55.2%	44.8%
Calgary	55.3%	44.7%
Vancouver	56.6%	43.4%

Source: Vander Ploeg 2001.

Direct School Board Access to Education Property Tax

In Saskatchewan, school boards have direct access to the education portion of the local property tax, including the ability to set mill rates on this portion. The remainder of school board funding comes from provincial general revenues or other sources.

The major advantage of this approach to funding is that school boards have the ability to raise taxes themselves directly off the local property tax base, thus making it possible to fund certain programs or increase spending in certain areas. It gives local school boards real power and control over their revenues. A possible drawback to direct school board access to the property tax is that it may exacerbate discrepancies between school divisions with low and high value property assessments. Depending on what the mill rates are, school divisions with high property values may be able to better fund education than areas with low values, noticeably affecting the quality of education in different divisions.

This model of funding has led to some tension between school boards and municipalities. For example, municipal officials often resent the fact that they are the ones who send out the tax notices to residents for both the municipal and education portion of the property tax. As noted by Vander Ploeg (2001), from a municipality's point of view, this situation puts them "at a political disadvantage in that tax increases generated from the education side are blamed on the municipality (which issues the tax notice)." In both Saskatoon and Regina, the education portion accounts for more than half of the local property taxes collected (see Table 2). Municipal governments would like to see the education portion of local property taxes reduced or eliminated, resulting in an increased municipal share of the property tax base and/or an overall reduction in property tax levels.

Of all the models of school board funding, the "direct access" model puts the most strain on the school board-municipal relationship because both parties are essentially fighting over the same local property tax base. While there is some relationship regarding the setting of mill rates, respondents believe that this

Table 3: Sources of School Board Funding 2000/2001

	Local Property Tax (directly levied by school boards)	Provincial Grants (includes prov. levy on property tax in BC, AB and MB)	Other (e.g., fees, federal govt. grants)	Total
Winnipeg No. 1	\$97,266,000 (41.7%)	\$130,275,000 (55.8%)	\$5,932,000 (2.5%)	\$23,472,000 (100%)
Saskatoon Public	\$76,815,000 (64.3%)	\$38,829,000 (32.5%)	\$3,767,000 (3.2%)	\$119,411,000 (100%)
Saskatoon Catholic	\$39,038,000 (45.6%)	\$43,839,000 (51.2%)	\$2,732,000 (3.2%)	\$85,609,000 (100%)
Regina Public	\$75,316,000 (58.2%)	\$46,691,000 (36.1%)	\$7,341,000 (5.7%)	\$129,348,000 (100%)
Regina Catholic	\$33,695,000 (53.6%)	\$26,836,000 (42.7%)	\$2,300,000 (3.7%)	\$62,831,000 (100%)
Edmonton Public	\$0	\$467,048,000 (87.8%)	\$64,813,000 (12.2%)	\$531,860,000 (100%)
Edmonton Catholic	\$0	\$188,734,000 (88.8%)	\$23,722,000 (11.2%)	\$212,456,000 (100%)
Calgary Public	\$0	\$561,260,000 (91.3%)	\$53,216,000 (8.7%)	\$614,476,000 (100%)
Calgary Catholic	\$0	\$239,903,000 (93.3%)	\$17,206,000 (6.7%)	\$257,109,000 (100%)
Vancouver	\$0	\$346,409,000 (92.3%)	\$29,043,000 (7.7%)	\$375,452,000 (100%)

Source: Derived by CWF from School Board Annual Financial Statements.

Note: Separate boards in Alberta may requisition municipalities directly for funds. However, this is not shown on this table as the provincial government sets all mill rates, and the portion of funding directly levied by separate boards is subtracted from the total grant that would have been given according to the provincial government's funding formula, thereby resulting in no net difference in funding.

relationship can be improved. In Regina, for example, it was reported that school boards and municipalities could work together more effectively on taxation issues, including the establishment of mill rates.

Provincial Control of Education Property Tax

In BC and Alberta, the education portion of the local property tax is collected by municipalities and then given to the provincial government, which redistributes it to school divisions throughout the province. Mill rates for the education portion of the local property tax are set by the provincial government. As Table 3 shows, education funding in BC and Alberta is, in effect, completely controlled by the provincial government. It should be noted, however, that both public and separate boards in Alberta have the option of applying a special levy on property tax payers (under plebiscite at the time of school board elections) provided that it is no more than three percent of a school board's annual budget and does not last for a period of more than three years. To date, there are no examples of this "special school tax levy" being implemented in Alberta.

The main advantage to the BC/Alberta model of funding is that it theoretically provides equality across regions of a province. As one respondent concluded, provincial control of education funding reduces discrepancies between rich and poor areas.

Another positive aspect of this approach is that when the Province controls the education portion of the local property tax, there is no chance for municipal governments and school boards to get into a dispute over these tax dollars. It is simply out of their hands. Of course, these antagonisms may instead be directed toward the Province.

The main disadvantage to this approach is for some urban school boards with high property values. For example, cities like Calgary and Edmonton effectively subsidize less populated parts of Alberta. One respondent stated that under current funding arrangements, \$48 million is transferred annually from Calgary to other parts of the province. Another Calgary respondent argued that this funding arrangement is flawed because urban boards have more special needs, such as a higher proportion of ESL students or students with disabilities. This respondent stated that the City and school boards need to work together more effectively as joint advocates for Calgary, and lobby the provincial government for their mutual benefit.

Another drawback of the centralized funding model is that school boards have a great deal of autonomy stripped away from them when the Province controls all education property tax dollars. School boards are placed in a position where they have no direct powers of taxation and are thus dependent on the Province for the vast majority of their funding. The role of school boards then becomes one very similar to that of a regional health authority: lobbying the provincial government for more money and having to make tough budgeting decisions with whatever money they do receive from the Province.

Overall, this form of school board funding puts the least strain on the school board-municipal relationship, as school boards have no control over setting the mill rates on the education portion of the local property tax. Therefore, school boards and municipalities do not battle one another over who is getting more of the property tax base. Most of the tensions that may have been generated between school boards and municipalities over access to the property tax instead exist between those parties and the provincial government.

Direct School Board Access to Education Property Tax, Shared with Province

In Manitoba, the education portion of the local property tax is divided into the “special levy” and the “education support levy.” School boards set the mill rate for the special levy and directly receive these funds. The provincial government sets the mill rate for the education support levy, and the tax revenue

Winnipeg: A City of Many School Divisions

One specific issue that was reported in Winnipeg is that the assessment of property tax rates is highly complicated as each of the six public school divisions within the city sets a different mill rate for the special levy component of the education portion of the local property tax. This means that the City has to send out different tax notices for each school division. Respondents stated that it would be easier for the City to have to deal with only one school board, though whether this would in the end benefit the students and citizens of Winnipeg is a controversial question.

is turned over to the provincial government for re-distributive purposes. The municipal government is responsible to collect both education portions of the property tax.

The system of school board funding in Manitoba is in a sense a compromise position between the Saskatchewan and BC/Alberta systems, bringing together the advantages and disadvantages of each. As in the other three western provinces, municipal collection of the education property tax dollars creates some tensions. Overall, the amount of strain the Manitoba system puts on the school board-municipal relationship would fall somewhere between that of the other two systems.

Summary

Respondents' opinions on how school boards should be funded tend to be correlated with the organization to which they belong. Typically, municipal respondents want to see education funded increasingly out of provincial general revenues as opposed to through the property tax. This would give municipalities more control over the local property tax base and the ability to have increased revenue, lower taxes, or both. School board respondents, however, tend to be more supportive of the ability of school boards to levy taxes directly. This provides them with the capacity to support programs important to the local community. No matter what the model of funding, there are tensions in the school board-municipal relationship regarding finance, though as a general rule the greater the provincial role, the less tension that exists. Of course, in most cases the tension is simply redirected to the municipal-provincial and school board-provincial relationships.

Joint Use Agreements and Planning

One practical way in which school boards and municipalities cooperate to address matters of mutual concern is through joint use agreements and planning. Joint use agreements most commonly involve a school or municipal facility that is used by both parties, and perhaps by various community organizations. Planning involves questions such as where to put schools in a community and how related design features will be implemented. In both cases, school boards and municipalities come together to make the best

possible use of community resources and facilities. The joint use of school facilities also relates to the idea of the school as the centre of a community, playing a part in both the educational and social development of children and youth as well as a broader function for the community as a whole. (For more on the role of schools see Tymachuk 2001).

Joint Use Agreements

Joint use agreements constitute perhaps the most significant single component of the school board-municipal relationship. In Edmonton, for example, there is a joint use agreement whereby community groups have after-hours access to school facilities and schools have access to city parks and recreation facilities. One respondent estimated this joint use agreement forms the basis for 80-90% of the relationship between the City and school boards. Similar agreements exist in each of the six cities examined.

While respondents overwhelmingly described joint use agreements as an extremely positive aspect of the school board-municipal relationship, some felt that they could be improved upon. In Winnipeg, one respondent stated that schools and other buildings that are part of such agreements could be better used to provide services to the community, and that a better cost-sharing agreement is needed. Similar sentiments were expressed by respondents in Regina and Vancouver.

In addition to the fairly straightforward agreements that exist regarding the joint use of facilities, there are a couple of notable examples of much more substantial joint projects between school boards and municipalities. One such example is in Regina where the City played the role of facilitator in a project involving a site that includes a public school and Catholic school as well as city facilities such as office space, a daycare, and a walking track. This is an example of a community centre concept where schools and other community services are integrated. It was noted that there has been some resistance to joint projects on the part of the Catholic board in Regina, as that board is concerned about losing the concept of a "Catholic education" – similar concerns have been expressed in Edmonton (*Calgary Herald* 2002). Another instance of significant school board-municipal cooperation occurred recently in Calgary between the City and the Calgary Catholic School District regarding the development of the YMCA Shawnessy complex. This site features a Catholic school, a public library, twin arenas, and a gymnasium.

Planning

Schools are an important part of the city planning process. Where schools are located, what the access to these sites will look like, and what type of developments occur near to schools are all factors that need to be considered. It is necessary for school boards and city planners to work together on these considerations to balance the needs of schools with the overall needs of the community.

Specific examples of formal collaboration on planning were mentioned by respondents in Regina and Calgary. In Regina, there is one elected member from both the public and separate school boards on the City's planning commission, which advises city council on urban planning issues such as land use, school sites, and transportation. In Calgary, there is a joint use committee that is similarly made up of representatives from both school boards and the City. The mandate of this committee is to ask what is in the best interest of Calgarians, as opposed to the interests of any one party, regarding matters such as the planning of new communities and school sites. This committee meets monthly and all decisions are made by consensus.

A recent significant development in Saskatoon having to do with planning and joint use agreements is the "Integrated Community Centre Strategy," which was established in May 2002. This strategy involves joint planning in new and existing neighbourhoods, including the joint use of facilities among the City of Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Public School Division, Saskatoon Catholic Schools, and Saskatoon District Health. The purpose is to have integrated planning among these parties in order to design facilities to better suit the needs of new and existing neighbourhoods. As one respondent stated, the idea in Saskatoon is one of a holistic approach where different parties work together to "provide a good quality of life for our citizens" and avoid "chop[ping] services into pieces."

The issue of surplus school sites was cited as an important aspect of school board-municipal relationships in some cities. In Edmonton, for example, when a school is closed, the City has priority on purchasing the site, and usually wants to acquire the site in order to preserve green space (which is especially important in inner city areas). However, there is some tension over the selling price, as the City would prefer to pay nothing (and can cite the fact that the land and buildings have already been paid for publicly once) whereas the school board wants compensation for these sites. This is an area of the school board-municipal relationship that was identified as needing improvement in Edmonton.

Transportation is an additional area of planning that was commonly cited by respondents as relevant to the school board-municipal relationship. Having good transportation access and bus routes, for example, are important to help ensure that students are able to get to school. Transportation was cited as a potential predictor of students' ability to be successful at school, as lack of access to transportation results in poor attendance. One respondent in Saskatoon felt that transportation, especially for low-income students, could be more fully subsidized by the City to ensure that students are getting to school.

Summary

Each of the six cities has some form of joint use agreement whereby facilities are shared between municipalities and school boards. There are also many planning intersections in the cities around issues such as where to place schools and what to do with surplus school sites. Calgary and Regina both have

joint planning committees that include school board and municipal representation, and the recently announced Integrated Community Centre Strategy shows a positive step in this direction in Saskatoon. Working together on the planning and joint use of school facilities helps to strengthen the connection between schools and the larger community, and also provides numerous cost efficiencies. Respondents in some cities felt that more could be done to maximize the use of school and municipal facilities.

Additional Areas of School Board-Municipal Intersection

As reported by a respondent in Edmonton, there are issues related to the social and urban fabric of cities that bind school boards and municipalities together. For example, poverty—a common urban issue—is “a huge, absolutely prime factor” in influencing students’ ability in the school system, stated one respondent. According to the Canadian School Boards Association (2001, 1), over twenty percent of Canadian children live in poverty, and “poverty has an impact on readiness to learn, the ability to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the public education system, and eventual school success.”

There are a number of ways in which school boards and municipalities work together to address issues such as poverty. After-school recreation programs are common, and often involve both school boards and municipalities. In Edmonton it was mentioned that outreach and student leadership programs are examples of programs that contain some degree of municipal and school board involvement. One respondent stated that it is important to make recreational opportunities available to students with low incomes, as they will do better in school as a result.

The issue of school safety is currently of concern across western Canada; for example, a recent survey conducted by the BC Ministry of Education shows that 22 percent of grade ten students do not feel safe in their schools (McInnes 2002). Police community resource officer programs, no doubt in part a response to concerns over school safety, exist in many western Canadian cities. It was stated that one such program in Regina has been a “huge success.” Police officers, fully dressed and armed, are placed in schools to “serve as positive role models” and to engage in mostly preventive, “pro-active” work. It was reported that the officers are very popular with the students. Respondents in Saskatoon, Calgary, and Vancouver noted similar programs, and starting in fall 2002, Winnipeg will be testing a pilot program of this nature.

An alternative to the police community resource officer program was proposed by a respondent in Calgary, who stated that it may be just as effective to have un-uniformed social workers doing similar work. For example, there is a pilot program currently underway in one Calgary elementary school called “New Roads.” This program involves city social workers who work with seven to eleven year old school children at risk of becoming offenders. The program is preventive in nature and involves a relationship with students at their school and with their families.

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Respondents in Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver reported that ESL students commonly experience a more challenging school environment than do students whose first spoken language is English. The Vancouver School District is of particular note here, with 28.1% of current total enrolment and, according to one respondent, over 50% of incoming students to the district being ESL. Adequately supported ESL programs are important for cities because they help to facilitate the social integration of those whose first language is not English, thereby reducing the chances of social fragmentation between ESL individuals and the larger community.

Table 4: ESL Enrolment Figures 2001/2002

<i>School Division</i>	<i>ESL Enrolment</i>	<i>% of Total Enrolment</i>
Winnipeg No.1	100	0.3%
Regina Catholic	15	0.1%
Regina Public	280	1.2%
Saskatoon Catholic	175	1.2%
Saskatoon Public	269	1.2%
Calgary Catholic	2,717	6.2%
Calgary Public	9,560	9.9%
Edmonton Catholic	1,370	4.9%
Edmonton Public	1,772	2.2%
Vancouver	16,543	28.1%

Source: School Boards.

Overall, while areas such as justice and social services are primarily provincial responsibilities, there are a number of ways in which school boards and municipalities work together to help tackle difficult issues that exist in their communities. Although municipalities and school boards do not possess the broad sweep of provincial agencies, they can make a difference in the lives of students and in the community as a whole through specific, targeted programs.

Implications for Policy Development

While the school board-municipal relationship is continuing to develop in each of the six cities, there are some areas that need improvement.

Provincial governments need to recognize the special pressures faced by urban school boards and more adequately take these into account when establishing school board funding formulae. Urban school boards must deal with a variety of issues that tend to be concentrated in the urban environment,

such as poverty, youth crime, and large numbers of ESL students. Whether funding for urban boards is levied directly off the local property tax by school boards or comes from a provincial levy on property taxes, or from provincial general revenues, may be a secondary question. The important matter is that urban school boards have access to the funds that they need.

School boards and municipalities in some cities need a more developed relationship on planning and joint use agreements. The municipal-school board relationship on community planning and the joint use of facilities is a success story, and is a relationship that is still evolving. Each of the six cities has a joint use agreement that not only helps to make the best use of public space, but also reinforces the idea of the school as a focal point for the community—a place where not only children are educated but where community members of all ages go to take advantage of various recreational opportunities and community services. Sites where schools have been combined with recreational facilities and municipal office space are a good example of this approach.

Conclusion

School boards and municipal governments have a shared history and role as important actors at the local level. Over the course of this shared history there have been a number of ways in which school boards and municipalities have come to work together ever more closely, from the traditional relationship regarding property taxes, to joint use agreements and joint input into community planning, to involvement on broader social issues that are important to both parties. Although the school board-municipal relationship is still evolving, there are some areas that could be strengthened. School boards and municipalities need to continue to enhance the ways in which they cooperate in order to ensure a quality education system and an optimistic future for western Canadian cities. ■

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