

24 January 2017

Dear Panel Members:

On behalf of the Board of Education, the staff and students at Prairie South Schools, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our thoughts about school division governance with you. Please find enclosed a written submission for your review and consideration; we look forward to seeing elements of our Prairie South story in your report to the Minister of Education in February.

Prairie South Schools continues to be willing to work with the Government of Saskatchewan as we move forward together and build communities, schools, and classrooms that embrace the strengths and needs of our students and prepare them to be citizens of Saskatchewan and the world.

Respectfully,



Dr. Shawn Davidson
Chair, Board of Education

Enclosure: Panel Submission



Thoughts on School Division Governance

Prairie South Schools

January 24th, 2017

1. Introduction

Prairie South School Division has 41 schools located within 24 rural, urban, and Hutterian communities and on the World Wide Web. The Division encompasses 32,747 square kilometres of southern Saskatchewan. It spans a geographic area from Coronach and Mankota in the South; Kincaid, Chaplin, and Central Butte in the West; Bengough and Rouleau in the East; and Craik in the North. Currently, Prairie South is divided into six subdivisions for purposes of board representation, with 10 elected Trustees. Prairie South School Division has a highly diverse range of communities and schools, encompassing rural and urban communities surrounding the City of Moose Jaw, where the school division office, learning department, facilities and transportation offices are located. Five Hutterite colonies and two associate schools are supported in partnership with Prairie South.

The students and families in Prairie South School Division are also diverse. They vary in age, personal circumstances, learning styles, interests, and individual strengths and needs. In order to provide the best education possible for all students, Prairie South School Division offers a wide range of programs and supports in all 41 schools across the Division. Central to the program in every school is the provincially mandated core curricula, broad areas of learning and cross-curricular competencies. Classroom instruction is designed to incorporate differentiated instruction including First Nations and Métis (FNM) content, perspectives and ways of knowing. In addition, each school in the Division offers specialized programming that responds to the needs of its students.

Shared understandings related to growth targets described in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) guide ongoing improvement initiatives throughout Prairie South. The Board of Education is proud of the collaborative, forward-looking relationships that have been built in our school division and that help align governance, administration, teaching, community, and partnership opportunities for the betterment of our students, schools and communities. The opportunity to be engaged is important to the Board of Education as we make informed decisions related to school division governance.

2. Context

In December, 2016, the Government of Saskatchewan shared the *Educational Governance Review Report* with Saskatchewan residents. Presented in this report are a series of



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educational governance options for Saskatchewan, each that “will require substantial change” (p. 21). Each of the options presented includes an overview of possible benefits and challenges. School divisions and other interested groups have been invited to share feedback related to the *Educational Governance Review Report* with a panel who will summarize this feedback and provide a synopsis to the Minister of Education.

3. Options

In the view of Prairie South Schools, none of the options presented in the *Educational Governance Review Report* represent an opportunity for positive change in student outcomes, sector efficiency, or targets associated with the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth*. While we agree that there are always improvements that can be made to any system, we would submit that the disruption to student learning and current improvement initiatives caused by any of the options provided by Mr. Perrins would be significant. Financial savings connected to these options are nebulous. With the current system of governance, we are nimble enough to be able to resource needs at a granular level because we have an understanding of both our communities and the schools and classrooms found within them. Our staff, our School Community Councils, and the public at large in the Prairie South region are unwilling to risk the loss of focus on improvement initiatives that any of these options would bring, particularly in light of the challenges only recently solved related to previous school division amalgamation and governance changes.

4. Benefits of a Local, Elected Board of Education in Prairie South

The foundation of the ESSP is the notion that there is promising local innovation in place in Saskatchewan school divisions that, if properly scaled, would lead to change at the provincial level in student outcomes in reading, writing, math, early learning, graduation rates, First Nations and Métis outcomes, and efficiency. Examples of scalable work connected with the ESSP and developed at the local level include *Saskatchewan Reads*, *Following Their Voices*, and the Student First classroom, currently being developed based on a model from a Saskatchewan school division.

Local innovation can only be achieved when an environment exists where risk-taking is encouraged and supported, and this environment exists today in Prairie South because of the time invested and relationships built by the Board of Education. Further complexity is introduced when private and out-of-sector partners engage with school divisions with the goal of aligning their work with the needs of students. Our experience is that these partners are not



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interested in provincial initiatives. Instead, they are willing to pilot small projects with school divisions that are nimble and responsive and where the proximity of targeted budget decisions is close to the community where the pilot exists. The benefits of these partnerships are twofold. First, the diverse needs of students can be met by local partners who align their work in a supportive way. Secondly, promising projects can be identified at the local level and scaled to meet provincial needs.

A Prairie South example of scaled innovation is our work in Power Engineering programming. Four years ago, the Board of Education agreed to a partnership with SaskPower to provide Power Engineering 20 and 30 courses to students in Coronach. The foundation of the SaskPower partnership was the close relationship of a local, elected Trustee and the management of the Poplar River Power Station. Today, the Prairie South Virtual School provides Power Engineering programming to students in several Saskatchewan school divisions, SaskPower introduces steam training using a mobile lab built specifically for this partnership, and through collaboration with the Saskatoon Industry Education Council, private industry and SaskPower host students as they complete their steam training on site. We are meeting a need identified by industry, we are transforming the experience of Saskatchewan students, and we would have never gotten off of the ground without the initial targeted governance work provided by local, elected Trustees.

There are additional benefits that a local, elected model of governance can provide. Public confidence in the educational system is maintained when local people have access to a representative Board of Education which can be the final adjudicator of decisions about their schools. Additional expense related to the establishment of new entities like an Education Quality Council can be avoided when key challenges are identified to Boards of Education and they are empowered to respond. Citizens, particularly those in rural communities, will continue to have the opportunity to ask questions, offer support, and exert influence on the system in order to ensure that the needs of their children are met.

5. A Note About SCCs

Since the establishment of School Community Councils in 2006, Prairie South has worked to support their development in order to enhance collaboration between school and community and support meaningful, specific parent and community input into local school decisions. In many schools we have been successful, however in others we continue to nurture the role of the SCC.



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Locally elected Trustees provide an important link to school division governance for SCCs, and local communities encourage and expect participation by Trustees in regular meetings of School Community Councils. This connectedness between parent volunteers on SCCs and local governance results in engaged SCCs whose work is aligned with division and provincial priorities. There is a fine balance between this alignment and the differentiation necessary to respond to the significant local diversity of needs in our schools, and the relationships established between SCCs and local, elected Trustees are essential to maintaining this balance. Prairie South has developed purposeful points of connection including focus groups, networking sessions, and learning opportunities to support this relationship between Trustees and SCC volunteers. In Prairie South, our communities expect the Government of Saskatchewan to ensure the continued focus on the needs of students and families at the local level.

We are uncertain of the role that SCCs might play in an environment with a provincial or regional Board of Education. Generally speaking, the volunteers who serve on SCCs in Prairie South are interested in making a contribution to the well-being of students and staff in local schools; they are not interested in providing policy direction or oversight for budgets or bus routes. Mr. Perrins identifies a benefit related to a more direct link between SCCs and decision makers in a provincial or regional governance option (pp. 23-24); our SCCs report that this link already exists, and would be significantly weakened with the implementation of either of these options.

6. Conclusion

10 years after the last provincial governance change, Prairie South Schools has emerged as a full-service school division where the needs and strengths of our children, families, and communities are taken into account as decisions related to school division governance are made. In Prairie South, the system is aligned with local voice, local decision-making, and local accountability; each of these elements is a necessary component of the successes that our children celebrate and, most importantly, of the solutions to the challenges our children face.

As local, elected Trustees, we are enthusiastic about facing the challenges related to education in the 21st Century. We are prepared to make adjustments as new challenges emerge, and we are committed to the diversity of needs in our schools and communities. The Board of Education at Prairie South Schools stands ready to continue to partner with the Government of Saskatchewan as we pursue the ideals presented in the Educational Sector Strategic Plan and the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth* together.