



Comments and recommendations regarding the Biennial Review of the 10-Year Plan

October 6, 2009

After examining the Biennial Review and revisiting the 10-Year Plan, RealRenewal urges this board to accept Option 1 and table the plan for one year or, at the very least, to accept Options 2 or 3, with the amendment that the citations for Dieppe and Jenkins schools be tabled, and that the list of schools be re-examined to ensure all schools currently above or projected to be above the confidence band of 200 students, plus or minus 30 per cent, be removed from the list of potential closures.

Our reasons for requesting the 10-Year Plan be tabled are as follows.

1. Enrolment assumptions that were central to the 10-Year Plan are no longer valid.

Enrolment is not declining at the projected rate, nor can it be expected to do so over the remaining nine years of the plan. We have all seen the headlines in recent weeks about Canada's next baby boom. Beginning in 2003, Canada's birthrate rose every year, with a 3.7 per cent increase in 2007, representing the sharpest increase since 1989. Saskatchewan registered Canada's second highest increase in 2007, at 7.8 per cent. As for Regina, health officials anticipate a birth-rate increase of 10 to 11 per cent between 2009 and 2010. This comes as no surprise to parents who arrived at public school meetings holding the baby boom in their arms, and who challenged the plans enrolment assumptions from the outset, based on valid first-hand observation that was unfortunately discounted rather than examined more closely, as one should do when reports from the field contradict baseline quantitative data.

We are still a few years away from seeing these babies enter the school system, yet already our schools are experiencing increased enrolments. We need to be mindful that this is just the very beginning of a rising shoulder, and that the 2007 spike is yet to come. We can see how the 'plus or minus 30 per cent' is a very important planning component.

Looking at the 10 most central schools – Lakeview, Connaught, Athabasca, Davin, Albert, Wascana, Kitchener, Thomson, Arcola and Douglas Park – the 10-Year Plan's forecast for 2008 was 1,988. The

actual enrolment in 2008 was 2,279, which is 14 per cent higher than predicted. By 2013, the difference rises to 28 per cent. By 2018, enrolment is expected to be 37 per cent higher than originally anticipated.

For some inner city schools, the new projections are dramatically different. Under the new forecast, Albert's projected enrolment is over 100 per cent higher, Thomson is 78 per cent higher, Connaught is 76 per cent higher, and Kitchener is 86 per cent higher. These are very large changes, much too large to be accommodated by a few adjustments to the plan and full steam ahead.

Especially troubling is that this change in the forecast occurs after only two years. If the new forecast also underestimates future population growth, demographic change in inner city neighbourhoods, increasing birthrate, and immigration by only a small percentage, the 2018 projected enrolment figures could easily be significantly higher. For example, we learned at the last board meeting that the arrival of new Canadians since June were not factored into the review's projections. Upon contacting the Saskatchewan Immigration Division, RealRenewal learned that in 2008, 354 immigrant children under the age of 14 years arrived in Regina (231 children aged nine and under and 123 aged 10 to 14 years), and that this number is about to increase markedly. The Immigration Division reports that as per nominations made through the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program (SINP) (Jan 1, 2008-Sept 30, 2009), as of September 30 it is estimated that approximately 1,000 children under the age of 12 years will arrive in Regina over the next year (366 under the age of four years and 711 aged 5 to 12 years). The Division further notes that the majority of immigration to the province is due to the SINP (60-65 per cent), however, in addition to children of immigrant families nominated through the SINP, immigrant children will also arrive in the province through the federal immigration streams (e.g. economic class, family class, refugees). Saskatchewan has seen a steady influx of immigrants over the past five years, which has contributed to the province's population growth. In summary, the 1,000-plus children expected this year represent *minimum* arrivals, potentially just 60 to 65 per cent of the full total.

2. The 2008 figures that are the basis of the Biennial Review itself have already fallen behind the curve.

The Biennial Review describes the upward enrolment trend as a "slight." At the September 15, 2009 trustees' meeting, this assessment was upped to "significant." Specifically, Mr. Ross Brown reported: "There has been a significant increase in enrolment since the 1st of September."

It has been stated by members of this board that biennial reviews will catch these changes, and therefore the plan is working and need not be re-drawn. This is a problematic assumption. Davin is one example of a school that, with a September enrolment of 169 K-8 students and 7 SLC students, sits well above the confidence band of more than 140 students (200-400 students plus or minus 30 per cent) and is projected to remain so through to 2018. Yet in this biennial review, Davin remains on the closure list. We know about this situation only because the parents have been proactive in contacting their principal, getting the latest numbers, and presenting this information to the public. How many other schools are in the same circumstances? Although another review is promised down the road, unless the plan is tabled or significantly altered tonight, such schools will remain under a cloud of uncertainty.

This is no small thing: a closure threat negatively affects neighbourhood development, property values, the amount of volunteer hours and donations that can be raised in the community, and the sense of security our children feel in their surroundings.

As well, the first biennial review comes too late for Dieppe and Jenkins. As you will hear from the Dieppe community, their school now sits within the confidence band and enrolment appears set to grow rather than decline over the next few years. At 140 students, it has exactly the same enrolment as Glen Elm, which has been recommended to be removed from the closure list. New high-density housing projects are underway and young families are moving into the area. While Jenkins remains a lower enrolment school, the demographic changes moving through Regina's core neighbourhoods will doubtless soon arrive on this school's doorstep as well. Mr. Brown has described the enrolment situation as "fluid." We urge you to wait at least one year to consider the future of these schools, so that we do not run the considerable risk of losing schools precisely where we need them.

3. Proposed mergers are likely to push receiving schools over the 400-student enrolment mark, which is unacceptable.

We need to look closely at how big our elementary schools may become as a result of this plan. A merger of Coronation Park and McDonald is one example or a merger that would lead to a school of more than 400 students within eight years. Next year, Jenkins students will have the choice of joining Buck, population 409, or Mironuck, population 549, and the Jenkins attendance area will combine with Mironuck for future students. Keep in mind that Wascana's French students have already been moved to Mironuck to accommodate the Herchmer closure. This school now has a projected combined French and English enrolment of 845 students by 2018, far beyond the 480 students anticipated in the 10-Year Plan, a number that was already too high. A plan that includes such numbers cannot in good conscience be accepted by this board or by parents. You may argue that you will fix this problem down the road, but it would be much better to fix it now. The first step is to hold off the next round of closures, so as not to add the pressure of closure accommodations to already overburdened schools.

4. The closures are too closely integrated to view in isolation.

The review proposes that schools now above the confidence band simply be switched over from closure schools to receiving schools. While we greatly welcome this news, the implications are not so simple.

For example, if the plan continues under Option 2 or 3, Connaught will become a receiving school, presumably for Davin students, and potentially for Athabasca students as well. Based on the numbers reported by principals on September 30, 2009, never mind looking ahead to 2018, a merger of Connaught and Davin would result in an elementary school starting at 516 students, well above the 400-student maximum premised by the plan, even with 'plus or minus 30 per cent.' This does not take into account the potential impact of an Athabasca closure. Likewise, Connaught's 174 French students cannot be transferred to Massey without moving Massey above acceptable enrolment levels, as last year Massey French was already at 306 students and rising.

From this dilemma you can see that it is not enough to simply say, ‘We’ll take Connaught out of the mix and make it a receiving school.’ The wisdom of closing surrounding schools and carrying out program mergers also necessarily falls into question. In short, the whole plan needs to be re-configured, a task that can only be accomplished by placing a moratorium on intended closures.

5. The plan’s budgetary assumptions no longer hold.

The 10-Year plan’s investment strategy assumed annual mill rate increases. Those increases are no longer available, and it remains uncertain what will emerge in their place. We learned at the last meeting that the board will not be able to put aside a capital reserve in the way the plan anticipated. We know that some new ideas are being explored at the provincial level. For example, officials in the Heritage Branch and the Education Ministry met in June to look at how to implement a Fix-it-First capital funding policy designed to encourage renovation over new construction, and these talks are continuing. An additional factor is the possibility of Saskatchewan entering a budget deficit. The one thing your officials have said we *do* know is that the provincial facility pot is frozen, and the development of the new provincial funding model is still 18 months away.

In summary, the budgetary foundations of the 10-Year Plan have shifted. No clear alternative plan has been presented to the public, nor can it be under the circumstances. Until the new funding model is unveiled, the responsible thing to do is table this plan.

6. The primary rationale for the plan has changed significantly.

This 10-Year Plan was presented to the public, through meetings and the media, as a necessary response to the challenge of declining enrolment. The school board’s presenters arrived at meetings armed with graphs to illustrate the problem. To be sure, they also spoke of Quality Learning and the need for larger schools to provide an increased staffing and resource base, but all of this discussion was framed around the assumption of declining enrolment as the driving factor. Over the past few months, this message track has been switched off, and a new one has been switched on. We are now told that the primary purpose of the plan is to finance an organizational re-vamp known as Structural Innovation. Indeed, the board chair stated we cannot separate the 10-Year Plan from Structural Innovation.

Overlooking the fact that the term Structural Innovation does not appear in the 10-Year Renewal Plan, we think there is much the public can support regarding this strategy. There is also much to be explored and discussed, including how Structural Innovation can adapt to a variety of school settings and sizes. And there is much that is unknown. If, for example, Structural Innovation includes the phase-out of ‘para-professionals’ such as teaching assistants and community coordinators, and if these staff members are to be replaced by more highly paid professionals, and if the Structured Learning Classrooms and Developmental Classrooms are in the process of being shut down as part of Structural Innovation, with the goal of special needs programming being integrated into the work of mainstream classroom teachers, then these are things that are new to the public. Although those few citizens who attended the last board meeting heard that the 10-Year Plan must go forward in order to pay for the new

staffing strategy, nowhere is this rationale expressly laid out with numbers, timelines, budgetary information and other information the public would expect to see, particularly as this is now presented as the primary rationale behind the 10-Year Plan. The plan should therefore be tabled so that it can be re-presented for public consideration as a way to pay for increased administrative costs under Structural Innovation, with the relevant information provided within a meaningful public consultation process.

7. The biennial review process is not sufficiently public or transparent

We are concerned about the pattern set for future reviews, in terms of transparency and opportunities for public input. Parents only heard through the grapevine that some sort of review was being conducted behind the scenes. When we asked to see basic information such as the results of teacher satisfaction surveys, correspondence with the Education Ministry regarding funding commitments, and accounts of plan-related expenses, we received a letter stating we would be billed \$760 for these documents. This seems excessive and outside the spirit of public discussion of publicly funded schools. Indeed, the review has only become as public as it is through parents' efforts to draw public attention to its existence and to alert school communities that will be impacted by tonight's decision.

Having said that, understand that we are pleased this review has been conducted at all. The reviewers applied due diligence in adjusting to a changing enrolment landscape, and provided plausible recommendations, the first of which we can support, and the second two which we can support with the previously stated amendments – namely, to place an immediate moratorium on impending closures and to re-examine the list based on 2009 enrolment figures. This does not mean projects that already have funding commitments should not proceed, or that innovation in the classroom must grind to a halt. There remain many avenues to move forward on with creativity and flexibility.

Conclusion

On September 15, we heard in this room that we must stop worrying about bricks and mortar and stop “putting money into schools we don't need.” This statement was striking on two counts. First, while bricks and mortar may not matter in the rarefied world of education theory, rest assured that in the more corporeal world of our communities, schools are very real and tangible shared community assets, built and paid for by the local ratepayers for future generations. Second, when speaking of “schools we don't need,” one wonders who the “we” is. The “we” certainly doesn't include the children who attend our schools. Neither does it include the young families who are moving into our neighbourhoods. Whether or not school administrators and professionals need our schools is immaterial. *We* need our schools. Our kids need our schools.

Today, actual 2008 enrolment numbers clearly show that the City of Regina has been experiencing a dramatic demographic shift, which is affecting all neighbourhoods in the city, not just the new neighbourhoods on the outskirts. We have heard in this chamber that updated 2009 enrolment information will not be available until mid-October. We also heard that there has been a significant increase in new Canadians since June who are not included in the current statistics.

Finally, we heard that the new provincial funding formula will not be rolled out for another 18 months.

You must agree that it would be irresponsible for any elected public representative to press forward in the absence of such basic, foundational information. This adds up to one possible choice, and that is to table the plan for at least one year.

Sources:

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