

**Presentation to the Legislative Committee on Bill 28
The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amended)**

My name is Pat Isaak and I am president of The Manitoba Teachers' Society. We represent 15,000 public school teachers in the Province of Manitoba. Thank you for the opportunity to make this presentation to the Legislative Committee considering this Bill.

Bill 28 of 2008 proposes to amend The Public Schools Act by imposing a moratorium on school closures.

The Manitoba Teachers' Society has several concerns with this Bill.

Firstly, as I've already stated, MTS represents 15,000 teachers who work in communities throughout Manitoba. Yet, the decision to impose a moratorium was made with no consultation with the Society and apparently without consultation with any of the partner organizations in education.

The Minister has many advisory bodies comprised of members of the educational community that can have developed long-term solutions to the issue of changing demographics and school closures that work for students, parents and teachers.

Secondly, the Society agrees that something must be done to address the changing demographics in the province and its effect on public schools. We are hopeful that the intent of this Bill is to merely pause pending decisions on school closures in order to evaluate what is the best interest of Manitoba students through a consultation process with all of the partners in our public schools.

However, a one-size-fits-all approach to this complex issue will not serve our students well. For many years, our members have told us that class size and composition are a top concern. Class size is not only about over-crowding. While 36 students in a class is a problem, 36 students in a school is also a challenge.

MTS sponsored a random telephone survey of 809 Manitobans conducted in May 2008 to gauge Manitobans views on the issues surrounding changing school demographics. Nine out of ten Manitobans believe that students in high school who live in small communities should be bused to schools that can offer them a full range of programs and courses.

When it comes to elementary school, 76 per cent of Manitobans believe students in small communities should be prepared to take a bus to school for a full range of programs. However, nine out of ten people don't think that ride should be longer than an hour. There was no difference in the views of rural and urban Manitobans. Obviously, Manitobans feel that students should have access to a full range of programs and services.

Teachers in rural communities are working incredibly hard to provide quality programming and the widest possible range of opportunities for their students. Every Manitoba student deserves a full range of programs and services. Costs rise when student populations of schools fall below levels where maintaining some services and courses is reasonable. Alternatives shrink and students are reduced to a bare bones program where anything beyond the basics is a frill and options are scarce or available only by distance education.

At the same time, across the province teachers are faced with a host of issues that result from declining enrolment, issues such as multi-grade classrooms, limited access to specialist services for students and dwindling financial resources.

For teachers, the issue of closing an elementary school in a small town an hour away from anywhere else is different from closing one half-empty school in the city of Winnipeg and asking those students to travel an additional ten minutes to fill another half-empty school nearby.

Addressing the effect of changing demographics on Manitoba's schools demands a made-in-Manitoba solution. That solution must be found in consultation with those who are on the frontlines serving public schools students.

The Society believes the guidelines for public school closures do need revamping. The genuine differences between rural and urban public school issues must be considered

In January 2008, the provincial government announced \$36 million more in operating funds for Manitoba schools. The result of the announcement is a 4.2 per cent increase for schools—the largest injection of money for schools in 25 years. This signals a continuing commitment by this government to keep public schools funding stable. Adjustments have been made to the public school funding model so more money is going to smaller schools and more money is flowing in the form of equalization payments for smaller school divisions.

Recent government announcements have suggested that public school buildings should be utilized to provide more community-centred services and activities for more hours of the day. For example, the plan to include more day cares in schools to help ensure schools remain the hubs in their communities is a good one. We hope that all educational partners will be consulted as these plans are further developed

We look forward to working with the government on a sustainable, made-in-Manitoba solution to this issue.

Thank you for this opportunity to register the views of Manitoba teachers.

Respectfully submitted,
Pat Isaak
President