

Speaking Notes

for

Peter Bjornson

Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth

On the occasion of the

Manitoba Chambers of Commerce Breakfast Series

on

Tuesday, February 10, 2009

7:30 a.m.

at

The Marlborough Hotel

Marlborough Room

331 Smith Street

Winnipeg, Manitoba

- Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.
- On behalf of Premier Gary Doer, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the state of education in Manitoba.
- I've seen on your website that the Chambers' mission is "to foster a dynamic economy and vibrant communities, making Manitoba the best place to live, work, invest and raise a family".
- This government shares that vision: that's exactly why we've been working to build one of the best education systems in Canada.
- Neither an innovative economy, nor vibrant communities, would be possible without the teachers, administrators and parents who dedicate so much of their lives to shaping our children and preparing them for a lifetime of learning.
- Organizations such as Manitoba's Chambers of Commerce play a pivotal role in that process.

- In today's challenging economic times, we can not lose sight of the long-term benefits of investing in the education of our children.
- Continually improving our education system is one of our government's main priorities – and it is without doubt my number one priority as Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth.
- I am very encouraged by the results of our efforts to date.
- Assessments are one of the most obvious ways we have of measuring success in our education system.
- Besides assessment by teachers, which is on-going, Manitoba coordinates a number of provincial assessment programs to give teachers and parents yet another tool in ensuring that students' needs are being met.
- The main goal of assessment is to support and improve student learning.
- And because we know that being engaged with learning is critical to both achievement and to building life skills, student engagement with school is also assessed.

- Manitoba also participates in National and international assessments that provide insights into our education system.
- At the national level, Manitoba participates in the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), a relatively new program which targets the reading, math and science skills of 13 years old students.
- Internationally, Manitoba participates with the other Canadian provinces in the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, an initiative of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- According to the 2007 PISA results, when compared to other provinces in Canada, Manitoba ranked 4th in science, 5th in math and 5th in reading. Meanwhile, Canada ranks within the top four countries in the world, compared to the United States who on average ranks outside the top 30
- The PCAP and PISA results indicate Manitoba's school system is on the right track, but there's always room for improvement.
- I am also gratified to note that high school graduation rates are increasing in Manitoba.

- Manitoba's high school graduation rates have been trending upward in recent years. They are now approximately 10 per cent higher than they were in 2002.
- By increasing our graduation numbers, we are helping students set the foundation for higher education, successful entry into the labour force, and brighter futures.
- Getting back to the Chambers' vision of an innovative economy and vibrant communities, I should mention that the quality of our education system is about far more than just assessments and completion.
- In particular, I'd like to mention some specific areas where we have targeted resources to areas which I believe are absolutely vital to our shared goals – Education for Sustainable Development, support for special needs students, rural education, and Aboriginal and northern education.

- Encouraging good citizenship and environmental stewardship cut straight to the heart of preparing young people today for the challenges they will face tomorrow.
- Teachers across the province are helping our students understand what it means to live in a more sustainable way. Students are increasingly realizing that social, economic and environmental factors are inter-connected.
- We firmly believe that sustainable development should be a major guidepost for both our economy as well as our education system.
- From preparing students to be responsible global citizens to engaging them in poverty-awareness projects, to organizing school green teams, our province's commitment to education for sustainable development is alive and thriving.
- In November 2008, Manitoba hosted an international conference called Choose the Future, which attracted more than 450 delegates.

- Choose the Future appealed to a broad array of teachers, business leaders, non-government organizations and government representatives who have a common interest in sustainable development.
- More than 80 presenters shared their experiences and expertise on 16 different sustainability-related themes, such as corporate leadership and aboriginal principles.
- The conference reinforced our province's reputation as a leader in this field.
- At the same time, a new working group of the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) met to begin developing a national Framework for Collaboration and Action.
- A provincial plan is also in the works, based on delegate feedback from the conference.
- Providing additional supports for special needs students is also vitally important.

- I believe that each student should have the opportunity to meet their full potential in our classrooms.
- Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, FASD, disabilities, or mental health issues may have special needs, but they share a common desire to fully benefit from our education system.
- For that reason, we have increased funding for special needs students by over \$60 million since 1999. We have also worked very closely with school divisions to ensure that every student have appropriate supports.
- We believe that a quality educational system is one which helps each and every student reach their full potential.
- Moving on, I'm happy to tell you that education in rural Manitoba will be a priority area for my department in the coming year.
- As you may know, declining enrollment is a major factor affecting the delivery of education in rural communities.

- Declining enrollment makes it more difficult for schools and school divisions to provide the array of educational services and programs that students need.
- That's why we have been working very closely with school divisions to find ways to enhance distance learning opportunities for students, as well as addressing some of the transportation-related needs of rural schools.
- In order to recognize the central role schools play in our communities, we have also been promoting community uses of surplus school space.
- I believe that by opening up our schools to our communities, we are helping to keep smaller schools viable, and keep smaller communities vibrant.
- Schools and school divisions in northern Manitoba similarly face challenges related to remoteness and distance.
- In addition, northern communities face many economic and fiscal funding challenges.

- Improving education for northern and Aboriginal Manitobans is absolutely an economic and moral imperative – and one which our government is absolutely committed to.
- That’s why we’re investing in the University College of the North; that’s why we’re supporting and promoting technical-vocational education; that’s why teachers must complete mandatory courses on Aboriginal perspectives and why new curricula must include Aboriginal perspectives; and that’s why we support post-secondary Aboriginal learners with tools like our ACCESS programs and the Bright Futures Fund.
- But we can’t do it all alone.
- Unfortunately, the federal government has not always lived up to its duty to Aboriginal learners.
- The federal government is constitutionally obligated to provide k-12 education on First Nations.

- However, this education has traditionally been underfunded by Ottawa – especially in comparison to students and schools funded under the provincial education system. For example, the average per-student funding for the Frontier School Division was almost \$17,000 in 2008/09, while the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada average per-student funding was under \$14,000. That’s a \$3000 gap.
- To seriously address this gap, the federal government absolutely must live up to its obligations to First Nations learners.
- In closing, I’d like to say that none of this would be possible without the record levels of financial support this government has committed to education.
- Every year in late February or early March, Manitoba’s Education Minister announces the level of funding for the coming school year.

- I have made six of those announcements. But this year's decisions were made in an environment far different from announcements in previous years.
- Governments across Canada, at every level, are faced with difficult decisions due to growing economic uncertainty.
- Manitoba is not immune to the economic challenges posed by the global economic slowdown.
- Despite this uncertainty, two weeks ago I announced a 5.25% increase to the level of funding for public education in Manitoba. This represents an additional \$50 million investment.
- Our government made this announcement because we believe that now is the time to build on the strengths of our public education system... to invest in our schools... and to invest in our future.
- The success of our students, and the education system as a whole, affects the entire province.

- The decisions we make today will be felt for years to come.
- I believe the result will be a stronger, more prosperous Manitoba for all of us.
- I wish each of you continued success.
- Thank you.