



## Board Office

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March 25, 2021

*emailed March 25, 2021*

Honourable Cliff Cullen  
Minister of Education  
Room 168 Legislative Bldg.  
450 Broadway  
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

Dear Mr. Cullen:

I write on behalf of our Seven Oaks School Division Board of Trustees to offer advice and suggestions related to the sweeping changes to education you've announced. We're writing to offer constructive suggestions to benefit the students, staff and community of Seven Oaks for which we care deeply.

### **1. Equity in funding.**

We support your goal for all Manitoba students to "succeed, no matter where they live, their background or their individual circumstances." Seven Oaks and other school divisions with modest assessment have long been disadvantaged. We consistently spend less than other school divisions yet our taxpayers face higher bills. In 2019-2020 we spent \$802 per pupil or 6% less than the provincial average. Yet our homeowners paid taxes 2.9 mills over the provincial average. That's 21% more and that is \$391.50 on a house valued at \$300,000.

**We urge you to adopt a uniform provincial mill rate for 2022-2023 school year budgets. That would immediately bring greater fairness to taxation levels throughout the province and ease the burden on those ratepayers who've been overtaxed for years.**

### **2. Don't abandon what's working.**

Our Seven Oaks schools are good now and are working hard to get even better. We attach a summary of our results as a system - "Seven Oaks by the Numbers". We are a community of newcomers and of families with modest means. We have a significant population of Indigenous students, many affected by poverty. We have one of the highest numbers of children in care of any school division. Many of our students start out at a disadvantage. They lag behind provincial averages at entry and in the early grades. They catch up by middle years and are outperforming their peers across the province by graduation.

In the most recent provincial data our on-time graduation rate was over three percent above the provincial average and fifteen percent above our neighbouring school division. Our attendance is consistently above the provincial average.

**As you move forward please view our Seven Oaks schools, staff, programs and divisional leadership as part of the solution to the challenges of Manitoba education not as part of the problems you seek to fix.**

### **3. We are a community.**

We've worked hard over many years to build the strength and capacity of our community through our schools. Some examples.

We've worked to ensure that our staff reflects and connects with our diverse community. Twelve percent of our staff identify as Indigenous and thirty percent as racial minority. We offer instruction in twelve heritage languages and bilingual programming in Ukrainian, Ojibwe and Filipino.

We attract two thousand people each year to our graduation Pow Wow celebrating the achievement of our Indigenous students. We were the first school division in Manitoba to add Elders to our staff. We've established a land-based Learning Centre and teach Indigenous content throughout our schools. Our Wayfinders tutoring and mentoring program has raised achievement for Indigenous students in poverty. Eighty five percent of our Wayfinders graduates enter post-secondary schools.

We've developed a comprehensive settlement service funded entirely by the Government of Canada providing help to our newcomer families with language classes, job search and adjustment to life in Canada. It connects to every newcomer family registering in our schools.

We offer comprehensive pre-school programming to support language development, literacy and parenting. We have expanded this to an innovative home visiting program "First Teacher" that was one of three finalists in your government's Literacy Innovation Challenge.

We converted a surplus gym to a 526-seat theatre, the Seven Oaks Performing Arts Centre, which attracted over a hundred thousand people to school and community events in its first year of operation.

We support a volunteer run Seven Oaks Education Foundation that has accumulated a capital fund of \$1,400,000 whose investment interest supports scholarships.

We've developed an innovative land-based learning centre that teaches our students about prairie history, Indigenous culture, agriculture and environmental stewardship.

And the list goes on.

**Our community values all of these programs and services. They all contribute to the successful outcomes your government is seeking to realize.**

#### **4. Directing more resources to the classroom.**

We applaud this goal. But we would suggest that you shift the focus from simply reducing administrative costs to increasing direct support to classrooms, an indicator currently measured by your FRAME data.

We've always prided ourselves on having a lean division administration. According to provincial FRAME data we direct 82.2% of our budget to the classroom better than all but one other school division. The provincial average is 78.8%. That's the equivalent of an additional \$5.3 million to Seven Oaks classrooms. This enables us to have smaller class sizes, eliminate cost barriers to participation and provide additional support and programming to our students.

We've also analyzed our administrative costs and compared them to other jurisdictions west of Quebec. We compare very favourably. We've appended a comparison chart.

**Because the classroom is our priority we are able to get students the help they need when they need it. Our teachers know their students well and can ensure their success. Please learn from us and build our success.**

#### **5. We've eased the financial burden for parents.**

We've found ways to ease the financial burden that parents face. Seven Oaks parents don't pay for lunch supervision, field trips, lockers, textbooks or musical instruments. Our participation in band went up by 50% when we began providing instruments. We use our purchasing power to lower the cost of school supplies to \$35 a year. These initiatives save our parents over \$700 per year per child.

We also provide rich programming that our parents appreciate. All of our grade one's learn to skate, our grade fours learn to swim and our middle years students learn to cycle safely.

These are things that are worth preserving and expanding.

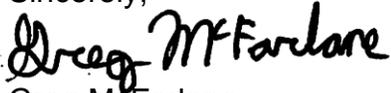
#### **6. Work Integrated Learning**

Seven Oaks has developed award winning Cooperative Vocational Education (CVE) programs and unique project based innovative high school programming (MET Schools). Eighty five percent of our CVE graduates complete their program successfully and gain employment, apprenticeships or enroll in Red River College for further education. The Education Review Report cited the Maples MET School devoting a page to it and concluding "where these opportunities existed students told us they would not want to miss a day of school". Again these successful programs can be grown and make a positive difference for even more students.

Simply put, our plea to you is to not throw out the baby with the bath water. However you choose to structure the governance and administration of our schools please be mindful that one size doesn't fit all and what's working needs to be valued and maintained. The portion of the province outside of Winnipeg is structured into 14 regions. Those regions will be sensitive to local needs and in touch with local priorities. The structuring of the Winnipeg region needs to be sensitive to local needs and in touch with schools and their communities.

We are proud of the work we have done as trustees. We've made a difference. We have looked at our community through the lenses of child poverty, of children in care, of Indigenous students and of newcomer students. We have looked at their needs and instituted programs to bring about better outcomes for all of our students. We've done this with the help and support of our community through school property taxes. We have spent our taxpayer's money wisely and responsibly and we've tailored our programs to the needs of community and our children. You are taking on a responsibility that we've exercised faithfully and responsibly. Please exercise that responsibility with the best interests of our students, staff and community.

Sincerely,



Greg McFarlane  
Chair  
Board of Trustees

#### Attachments

cc: All Seven Oaks Parents & Staff

Honourable Brian Pallister  
Honourable Cathy Cox, Minister of Sport & Heritage  
Wab Kinew, Leader - NDP  
Dougald Lamont, Leader - Independent Liberal  
Diljeet Brar, MLA Burrows  
Nahanni Fontaine, MLA St. Johns  
Shannon Martin, MLA McPhillips  
Mintu Sandhu, MLA The Maples  
Nello Altomare, Education Critic  
Dana Rudy, Deputy Minister  
Christina Moody, Assistant Deputy Minister  
Sarah Whiteford, Assistant Deputy Minister  
Colleen Kachulak, Assistant Deputy Minister  
Rhonda Shaw, Manitoba Education  
Maggie McIntosh, Free Press  
Sydney Hildebrandt, Times  
Nelly Gonzalez, CBC  
Lauren McNabb, CJOB/Global  
Josh Crabb, CTV  
Trustees