

Second Session - Thirty-Ninth Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
Standing Committee
on
Social and Economic Development

Chairperson
Ms. Erna Braun
Constituency of Rossmere

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Thirty-Ninth Legislature

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA
THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Saturday, June 7, 2008

TIME – 10 a.m.

LOCATION – Winnipeg, Manitoba

CHAIRPERSON – Ms. Erna Braun (Rossmere)

VICE-CHAIRPERSON – Ms. Bonnie Korzeniowski (St. James)

ATTENDANCE – 11 QUORUM – 6

Members of the Committee present:

Hon. Mr. Bjornson, Hon. Mses. McGifford,
Oswald, Hon. Mr. Rondeau

Ms. Braun, Messrs. Cullen, Hawranik, Jha, Ms.
Korzeniowski, Mr. Schuler, Mrs. Stefanson

Substitutions:

Mr. Reid for Mr. Jha at 12:58 p.m.
Hon. Ms. Irvin-Ross for Mr. Reid at 4:34 p.m.

APPEARING:

Mr. Tom Nevakshonoff, MLA for Interlake
Mr. Larry Maguire, MLA for Arthur-Virden
Mr. Daryl Reid, MLA for Transcona
Hon. Jon Gerrard, MLA for River Heights
Mrs. Leanne Rowat, MLA for Minnedosa
Hon. Stan Struthers, MLA for Dauphin-Roblin

WITNESSES:

Bill 28–The Strengthening Local Schools Act
(Public Schools Act Amended)

Ms. Victoria Schindle, Argyle Community
Action Group

Mr. Jack Grandmont, Argyle Community Action
Group

Ms. Joan Clement, Park West School Division
Ms. Jennifer Berry, Fisher Branch Parent
Advisory Council

Ms. Teresa Johnson, Ashern-Moosehorn Parent
Advisory Council

Ms. Beth Geisel, Mountain View School
Division

Mr. Craig Whyte, Kenton Community School

Ms. Debby Lee, Private Citizen

Mr. Jim Murray, Brandon School Division

Ms. Margaret Anderson, Private Citizen

Mr. Bruce Alexander, Manitoba Association of
School Trustees;

Mr. Lawrence Lussier, Manitoba Association of
School Superintendents

Mr. Bruce Alexander, St. James-Assiniboia
School Division

Mr. Craig Stahlke, Pembina Trails School
Division

Ms. Shannon Forest, Private Citizen

Mr. Bob Fraser, River East Transcona School
Division

Ms. Anna-Marie Westervelt, Private Citizen

Ms. Cheryl Zelenitsky, Evergreen School
Division

Ms. Debbie McMechan, Pierson Advisory
Council

Mr. Tom Parker, Louis Riel School Division

Mr. Colin Craig, Canadian Taxpayers Federation

Ms. Leanne Carlson, Private Citizen

Ms. Karen Carey, Sunrise School Division

Mr. Gordon Shead, Frontier School Division

Ms. Gladys Hayward Williams, Private Citizen

Ms. Jan McIntyre, Prairie Spirit School Division

Ms. Colleen Claggett Woods, Prairie Rose
School Division

Mr. Randy Aitken, Private Citizen

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS:

Bill 2–The Public Schools Amendment Act
(Trans Fats and Nutrition)

Mr. Jim Goetz, Food and Consumer Products of
Canada

Bill 28–The Strengthening Local Schools Act
(Public Schools Act Amended)

Ms. Pat Isaak, Manitoba Teachers' Society

Mr. Murray Skeavington, Flin Flon School
Division

Mr. Kelvin Dyck, Garden Valley School
Division

Ms. Wendy Bloomfield, Seine River School
Division

Ms. Linda Buchanan, Kelsey School Division
Board of Trustees

Ms. Denise Dewar, Strathclair Community
School Advisory Council for School Leadership

MATTERS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

Bill 2—The Public Schools Amendment Act (Trans Fats and Nutrition)

Bill 10—The Legislative Library Act

Bill 15—The Climate Change and Emissions Reductions Act

Bill 24—The Public Schools Amendment Act (Cyber-Bullying and Use of Electronic Devices)

Bill 28—The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amended)

Bill 30—The Crown Lands Amendment Act

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Madam Chairperson: Good morning. Will the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development please come to order.

Your first item of business is the election of a Vice-Chairperson. Are there any nominations?

Hon. Theresa Oswald (Minister of Health): I'd like to nominate Ms. Korzeniowski.

Madam Chairperson: Ms. Korzeniowski has been nominated. Are there any other nominations? Hearing no other nominations, Ms. Korzeniowski is elected Vice-Chairperson. Thank you.

This meeting has been called to consider the following bills: Bill 2, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Trans Fats and Nutrition); Bill 10, The Legislative Library Act; Bill 15, The Climate Change and Emissions Reductions Act; Bill 24, The Public Schools Amendment Act (Cyber-Bullying and Use of Electronic Devices); Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amended); Bill 30, The Crown Lands Amendment Act.

We have a number of presenters registered to speak this morning. Please refer to your presenters' list.

Before we proceed with presentations, we do have a number of other items and points of information to consider.

First of all, if there is anyone else in the audience who would like to make a presentation today, please register with staff at the entrance of the room. Also, for the information of all presenters, while written versions of presentations are not required, if you are going to accompany your presentation with written materials, we ask that you provide 20 copies. If you

need assistance with photocopying, please speak with our staff.

As well, I would like to inform presenters that, in accordance with our rules, a time limit of 10 minutes has been allotted for presentations, with another five minutes allowed for questions from committee members. Also, in accordance with our rules, if a presenter is not in attendance when their name is called, they will be dropped to the bottom of the list. If the presenter is not in attendance when their name is called a second time, they will be removed from the presenters' list.

Written submissions from the following persons have been received and distributed to committee members: Pat Isaak, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, on Bill 28; Murray Skeavington, chair, Flin Flon School Division, on Bill 28; Kelvin Dyck, chair, Garden Valley School Division, on Bill 28; Wendy Bloomfield, Seine River School Division, on Bill 28; Linda Buchanan, chair, Kelsey School Division board of trustees, on Bill 28; Denise Dewar, Strathclair Community School Advisory Council for School Leadership, on Bill 28; Jim Goetz, vice-president, Provincial Affairs, Food and Consumer Products of Canada.

Does the committee agree to have these documents appear in the *Hansard* transcript of this meeting? *[Agreed]*

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): For clarification, the food council was not for Bill 28, though. That would have been for Bill 2.

Madam Chairperson: On the topic of determining the order of public presentations, I will note that we do have out-of-town presenters in attendance, marked with an asterisk on the list.

With these considerations in mind, in what order does the committee wish to hear presentations?

Ms. Oswald: As is most often our practice, I'd recommend that we hear the out-of-town presenters first.

Madam Chairperson: Hear out-of-town presenters first—do we agree? *[Agreed]* Thank you.

Just to confirm, is that out-of-town presenters in numerical order of the bills? *[Agreed]* Thank you.

As previously agreed to by the House, the committee will sit until midnight.

Prior to proceeding with public presentations, I would like to advise members of the public regarding the process for speaking in committee. The proceedings of our meetings are recorded in order to provide a verbatim transcript. Each time someone wishes to speak, whether it be an MLA or a presenter, I will first have to say the person's name. This is the signal for the *Hansard* recorder to turn the mikes on and off.

Thank you for your patience, and we will now proceed to public presentations.

On Bill 2, we have Michelle Wasylyshien, Sussex Strategy Group. Michelle Wasylyshien, Sussex Strategy Group? She will be moved to the bottom of the list.

**Bill 28—The Strengthening Local Schools Act
(Public Schools Act Amended)**

Madam Chairperson: On Bill 28, we have Victoria Schindle, Argyle Community Action Group. Do you have materials for distribution?

Ms. Victoria Schindle (Argyle Community Action Group): Yes, we do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Please proceed with your presentation.

Ms. Schindle: Just a quick introduction, I'm Victoria Schindle. This is Jack Grandmont, and this is Esther Havedings.

Our committee, the Argyle Community Action Group, is a group of parents and community members whose purpose is to promote our community and to ensure that our local school remains viable and continues to be the dynamic place for learning that it is today.

Brant Argyle School occupies a heritage building that is vital to our neighbourhood's character and rural community life. It provides a healthy, rural, cultural environment for our children and provides acceptable bus-ride times.

Honourable Chairperson, honourable ministers and members, we would like to thank the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development for giving us the opportunity to comment on Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act.

The act is progressive and is in the best interests of our children and their education. We believe in the intent of this bill, to support and strengthen our local community schools and to provide an opportunity to

develop alternative ideas as cost-saving measures. We strongly support Bill 28.

Bill 28 encourages a collaborative process and encourages school divisions to re-evaluate their decision-making methods. Community members and parents will be a part of the decision-making process regarding the future of their schools.

Expanding the definition of community schools is important. Neglecting socio-economic factors, studies show that children in smaller community schools are more academically successful, have higher graduation rates and are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities and advanced-level courses than children in larger schools.

* (10:10)

Brant Argyle School is an asset to our community. It is the centre of our community and the reason why many of us have chosen to live there. If the school were to close, the area would quickly die. People would move their families and businesses to a town with an education facility of their choice. Healthy communities are important for student success.

Any decisions a school board considers regarding the future of the school should be made with the full involvement of an informed local community. It should be based on a broad range of criteria including assessing the value the school has to the student, the community, the economy and the school division. A good example is modelled by the Ontario Ministry of Education, pupil accommodation review guidelines. I have included references on the back of your presentation.

Bill 28 can pave the way for real and honest collaboration between school boards, community and parents. Bill 28 has been reviewed extensively by our group as well as researchers across Canada by our invitation who specialize in small local community schools and school closure research. We've got detailed recommendations for the bill located in appendix A.

Bill 28 should be very specific and precise. Phrases such as sufficient input, lengthy consideration, adequate opportunity, reasonable efforts, appropriate community purposes, should be replaced with clear, specific quantities and conditions. There should be reference to specific regulations, policies or guidelines that define these quantities and conditions. The wording and the intent

of the bill must be clear to strengthen its interpretation and to create an objective, effective document.

The reference to busing in Bill 28 is one of the bill's strongest points. For too long, our children have been considered as not being affected by ride times as they have been pushed ever longer by divisions who consider the capital depreciation on the bus as more important than the precious time our children lose every day riding that bus. How many adults in this room spend a total of three hours driving to work every day?

Many extensively researched papers in the bibliography discuss how longer bus ride times reduce study time, make students tired because of less sleep, reduce opportunities for extra-curricular activities and reduce physical activity. As well, staying closer to home in terms of energy and environmental design makes ecological sense.

Bill 28 gives the divisions five years to bring the bus ride times down to one hour. This phase-in time should be reconsidered. In several divisions, the existing routes are being amalgamated and buses are being replaced by bigger ones. The divisions could continue this trend for four-and-a-half years. Then, when the final pressure is on to conform, they will request grandfather status because they have been operating that way for too long.

The rule must be clear. Bus-ride time should not exceed 60 minutes. Twenty months is considered an appropriate time to go through comparable rigorous process of school review and should be more than adequate for the divisions to conform to reducing bus ride times to 60 minutes. A shorter phase-in time will create more motivation for families to want to stay in their communities and increase the chance of families wanting to move into these communities.

Bill 28 should describe the types of involvement a community will engage in regarding the closure process. Their involvement should be truly joint or collaborative. This bill should integrate an appeals process. When decisions as important as school reviews are being made, the groups involved need to be confident all factors have been truly considered. The ability to bring a concern before an appeal board or arbitrator ensures that all parties involved are working for a common goal. An appeals process provides opportunities for genuine public participation.

The system would greatly benefit by having an advocate to represent all the community schools and have more direct access and communication with the Minister of Education. That person should not be a government appointee or part of the division structure such as a superintendent, a trustee or a teacher, but be elected by parent advisory councils and community groups and be directly responsible to them.

The school divisions have MAST to advise and represent them. It is only fair that an advocate is created to represent our schools' interests. An advocate could be incorporated into the community school partnership initiative. This might be an excellent opportunity now that community schools are being redefined. School divisions need fresh forward thinking trustees and administrators with the potential and ability to embrace the concept of strengthening local community schools.

The length of terms for any combination of positions held on the school board should not exceed eight years. Presently, some trustees within our local school division have held positions for 20 years. This would ensure that there are always trustees coming on the boards, receptive to the new, innovative ideas.

Reduce opportunities for conflict of interest by limiting or eliminating trustee nominees with a teaching or school administration background. How will it be possible to bring in change when a teacher who is a trustee votes on a motion that could limit their own pension or employment? With 85 percent of our division budget spent on salaries, it is inevitable that some changes would occur in staffing.

Trustees and school boards need to be more accountable and transparent with the division's finances, with a willingness to share information rather than direct the public to FIPPA. Superintendents are going to have to take a hard look within their own offices and find ways to make best use of teaching staff and school facilities.

The bill needs to be strong and clear. Our recommendations are as follows:

No. 1, collaboration. In all of this, there needs to be meaningful participation and full involvement from informed parents, community, and stakeholders. Include an appeals process.

No. 2, interpretation. Your critics know this bill is here to stay, but they're saying it all depends on the wording. The text must be carefully reviewed. The

intent must be very clear. Please review our suggestions to the bill in appendix A.

Travel times. Bus ride times particularly impact rural students. A limit of 60 minutes or less is necessary for the well-being of the child, the local school, and the community. Reduce the phase-in time to 20 months.

No. 4, community School Initiative. The definition in section 196(1)(a), (b), and (c) should be expanded to also include (d), the only school in the community. A category of schools must be created as defined in 196(1), community schools or schools of necessity or equity schools, for example, that provide special resources for schools where the funding formula will not work. The definition process and criteria for community schools must be developed together with this bill.

No. 5, sustainability. This is a culture adjustment for most school divisions. Bill 28 will result in many changes to the system. The moratorium is a temporary measure to give everyone time to rethink philosophically how to support small, local community schools for sustainability. Work collaboratively, and move away from closures as a sole cost-saving measure.

If left unsupported, school divisions and their boards, with their deep-rooted beliefs, will be unwilling participants. Clear direction and support must be provided to divisions by the Province. Regulations and guidelines may need to be developed to accompany the new legislation. Providing assistance to our school divisions will help reduce the possibility of resistance and circumventing the system, and increase the chances of success regarding our children's education and the role of this legislation.

A clear start with the legislation will create positive publicity, will bring school boards on side and will encourage a collaborative process between parents, community members, school divisions, and the Province to discover alternative cost-saving measures, other than closing schools. We applaud your courage to make positive change.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

We have questions.

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): Thank you very much, Ms. Schindle, for your presentation. I appreciate the

research and the thought that went into this presentation.

Certainly, it was a privilege to visit the school five years ago prior to my appointment as minister. There was a community celebration, and it really spoke to the fact that the school is about community and community is about the school at that particular celebration, so I thank you for your comments and your suggestions on Bill 28.

* (10:20)

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield): Thank you very much, Victoria, and to the other parents for showing up this morning. I'm sure there are one or two other things you'd rather be doing this morning than presenting to committee. It's very important to come out and let all of us know what your thoughts are, and a very well researched presentation. We appreciate that.

Your last paragraph—I'll just quote from it: Provide assistance to our school divisions will help reduce the possibility of resistance and circumventing the system.

Do you think that we as a Legislature should be looking at a new policy where we look at supporting smaller schools? If, from everything I hear, and I take it we'll be hearing a lot of school divisions coming forward saying, this ends at being a budget matter; it's tough to keep open these schools.

You talk about assistance. What kind of assistance do you think we need to keep smaller schools open? How would that, then, be not part of the equation when it comes to making a decision on whether a school closes or stays open?

Ms. Schindle: I think that's part of the purpose with this bill—to be able to get together and discuss what might happen. In all the research, we tried to come up with some recommendations, but we didn't dive into the actual details of how this can happen. This has taken probably hundreds of hours to put together.

I think what everyone would be interested in, in terms of community, parents and school divisions, would be to work together, maybe with the minister in advance, to find out what can be done or how it can be done or how it can be accommodated. I really don't have an answer to that.

Floor Comment: Can I speak?

Madam Chairperson: May we have your name, please?

Floor Comment: Jack Grandmont.

Madam Chairperson: Could you spell your last name, please.

Floor Comment: It's G-r-a-n-d-m-o-n-t. Is it appropriate—

Madam Chairperson: I'm sorry. We need leave of the committee, if the committee agrees to allow you to say a few words.

Hon. Jim Rondeau (Minister of Science, Technology, Energy and Mines): I would ask for leave that he speak and this be used as part of the question time.

Madam Chairperson: Is it leave of the committee to allow Mr. Grandmont to speak and use part of the question period? [*Agreed*]

Mr. Jack Grandmont (Argyle Community Action Group): Mr. Schuler, I was just thinking you wanted—maybe, a practical example might be with busing, where divisions now are rescheduling the size of buses to accommodate different runs. Some of the assistance could be in planning better routes or even in probably downsizing bus sizes because, to keep our smaller schools going, no doubt, instead of needing a 78-passenger bus, maybe divisions will be shifting down to 40-passenger buses, where assistance would be required.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Thank you very much for your presentation.

I would now call upon Joan Clement, Park West School Division. Do you have material for distribution?

Ms. Joan Clement (Park West School Division): Yes.

Madam Chairperson: You may begin.

Ms. Clement: Thank you very much for the opportunity to make the presentation. I make it on behalf of the board of trustees and administrators of Park West School Division. We're wishing to express our concerns about Bill 28 and the impact that the moratorium has had and that the bill will have on its implementation.

Park West is a large geographical division, located up against the Saskatchewan border under Riding Mountain National Park and has, within its boundaries, five river valleys and four First Nations communities. I mention this because it has an impact on the busing recommendations portion of Bill 28.

As you may be aware, Park West has been looking at long-range planning for our division for the past three and a half years, in light of our declining student demographics. It would appear that, over the next period of years, we will be graduating 150 grade 12 students, while we have an average of less than 100 entering kindergarten into our school system. In six to eight years, this will leave us with our current school structure of 14 schools and approximately 1,200 students; thus, we need to plan ahead.

In this process, we have involved our publics through focus groups, 10 community meetings, and a follow-up focus group meeting. While the public did not agree with any of the board's suggestions, all recognized that status quo was not an option, and it appears that Bill 28 would maintain status quo.

Three years ago, we moved to put Kenton School, K to 8 with 22 students, under review and started discussion with the community. Last June, because we were challenged that parts of the board policy were perceived not to be carried out to the exactness of that policy, we moved to extend the decision until June of this year only to be caught by the moratorium on school closure. The school review committee has requested the school remain open K to 5 with 15 students and two teachers, and they would operate a child-care centre in the other portion of the school. This decision had to be made in the midst of the Bill 28 moratorium and, on one hand, created euphoria in the public as they saw the board's hands tied, and frustration on the part of the board as we struggled to be fair to all students and communities within our division. Currently, the board has granted permission for day care and will staff the K to 5 school as per the divisional divisor with 1.25 staff.

In both of the previous mentioned issues, Bill 28 and the moratorium has caused us much consternation. The department was very aware of the work we were doing in restructuring. We have had discussions with both the minister and the deputy, as well as Public Schools Finance Board in terms of ensuring that education dollars were going into programs for students and not into bricks and mortar.

Park West followed the tax incentive grant and has not raised taxes to meet program needs. We have been reducing our surplus to 4 percent, and both of these measures have left the division with less flexibility in terms of programs and staffing. The moratorium followed the setting of our budget, thus

limiting the opportunity to look at different staffing options.

We are impacted by the busing recommendations. Park West and the former Birdtail and Pelly Trail divisions have had 7:30 a.m. pickup for almost 40 years. Why, now, does one hour become a magic number? While there are only 7 percent of our students who are on the bus for longer than one hour, 18 bus routes in our division are affected. In a division with five river valleys, areas where there are no roads and where school of choice is in place, all impact on our ability to create new bus routes.

Community use of schools is not a big issue for us as all of our schools are widely used by all groups in communities in our division. We are very supportive of day care in our school. In fact, in 1986 PSFB added day care to Major Pratt School along with a renovation that happened at that time. We also support day care and nursery schools in several other schools as well. We also house ACC Parkland Campus in Major Pratt School. While community use of schools enhances options for these children, parents and others within our community, they create no revenue for the division and, certainly, with the exception of ACC, do not increase the viability of the school or increase program offerings to students. Joint use of school facilities will provide little chance of cost recovery and will make the facility consolidation almost impossible. As well, should repairs or maintenance be required, the division will need to bear those costs.

So, as we look at Bill 28, it poses a number of questions for our board. What does consolidation of buildings mean in a rural division? Does this mean that both buildings must be in the same town, or is consolidation possible when the school facilities are located in towns that are a short distance apart and where part of the students already attend high school?

What is community? Is it the community closest to where you live or where you get your mail? Is it where parents work? Is it where kids play hockey or go to Air Cadets or 4-H?

How long will the moratorium last? Will the regulations be written prior to the moratorium ending and, if not, does this bill really prevent any division, or the minister, in fact, from closing a school? What if the majority of parents want the school closed? What then?

*(10:30)

When is it no longer feasible to keep the school open because of declining enrolment? As mentioned, Kenton this year is K to 8 with 22 students. Next year the parents requested to go to a K to 5 school with 15 students and a community day care. Can we expect a small staff to provide all that is expected of today's education system for those students, and how do we attract staff to a school of this size in the future?

Does the minister have some threshold student numbers or grade levels per teacher that would make a school's programming unsuitable? In our community meetings we have been challenged to provide a definition of a viable school. How do we measure when it is not feasible to keep a school open because of declining numbers as stated in the act?

Why is retroactivity built into the bill, and why is there a choice of January 2008? When the school review is determined to be necessary, motions must be made, appropriate discussions with parents and community must take place and motions of closure must happen in June. So why reach back to January of 2008? Are staffing divisors within the authority of the board? We have used the small-schools funding, sparsity, and low socioeconomic grants to enable us to have divisors of 15:1 PTR for small schools and ranging to 19:1 for larger schools. We have provided data to show that our board has topped that up each year to maintain high-quality programming as possible for our smallest, least viable school. If this school did not receive additional divisional dollars, it would be less well off in both human and teaching resources.

Why was 60 minutes chosen as a maximum time for a student to ride a bus? Park West has been able to maintain four low-enrolment K to 8 schools in certain communities with steadily declining numbers of school-age children due to aging of population and declining farm units, while providing greater depth and breadth of programming for grade 9 to 12 by busing these students to a larger centre. In order to do this, our bus times must allow for the transportation of K to 8 students to the smaller elementary school, while still providing time for high-school students to be bused to the larger centre for their programs. Will the requirements of Bill 28 mean that we must run separate bus routes for elementary and high school students, and how would the public view us sending two buses into one yard? As well, we currently provide inter-campus busing

between two high schools. Will that be counted as part of our one-hour transportation to the school?

Transportation paid to the parent. Currently, if we cannot provide busing to a family, we pay the grant paid by the department of \$375 per child to the family in lieu of transportation. Most parents prefer busing even though it means an earlier pick-up rather than receiving the in lieu. What will be considered as appropriate compensation for travel, and will these be fully funded? Secondly, could the board determine that it would be better to pay in lieu rather than to provide bus service?

Madam Chairperson: One minute.

Ms. Clement: Should we be concerned that we are maintaining under-utilized buildings at the expense of students? The Stantec study of Park West's school facilities jointly funded by MECY and Park West shows that 6.7 million in today's dollars are required over the next eight years to continue to meet the educational needs. Why should we spend all of these dollars on buildings that would be less than 50 percent utilized for educational programming? Do we believe that joint facility use can justify this low utilization factor?

We are concerned about the kinds of programs that we can offer to our students and that they have limited choices already. I guess, as we look at this bill, we are really concerned in terms of what we're able to offer and that would be fair to all of the students within our division. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

We have questions.

Mr. Schuler: Yes, thank you very much for taking the time. I think everybody who comes out today should be thanked for coming here. It's a beautiful Saturday. I'm sure there are lots of things people would rather be doing. I'm one of those, but this is important business. We have to be here and discuss this legislation.

I asked one of the other presenters, and I'm going to ask you as well. If funding was not an issue, if the Province were funding smaller schools, would that give you more options on what you could or couldn't do?

You mention in your last page here: stabilize funding for small declining enrollment schools. Do you have some kind of funding model that you would like to see? Is there, like, do you have a

number? Do you have, like, something that the committee could actually then think about?

Ms. Clement: Well, actually, in our case—I'm sorry,

Madam Chairperson: Ms. Clement, I'm sorry I need to call your name first.

Ms. Clement: In our case, I think that funding is not the issue so much as we're concerned about having so many buildings and trying to make sure that we have appropriate programming and that we're able to continue to get the specialized staff that we require to offer programming.

So funding is one part of the issue. Certainly, to maintain a very small school, funding is an issue, but I guess our bigger question, as we look at the whole issue, when we've got 14 schools and 1,200 students, and 500 of those students are in one school, how do we then attract staff and have appropriate course offerings to students within our division? So funding is just one issue. Trying to look at how we provide appropriate programming is a bigger issue for our division.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Clement, for your presentation.

I will now call on Jennifer Berry, Fisher Branch Parent Advisory Council. Do you have materials for distribution?

Ms. Jennifer Berry (Fisher Branch Parent Advisory Council): Yes, we do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. You may proceed.

Ms. Berry: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson, committee members, thank you for the opportunity to present our parent advisory committee views regarding Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act.

My name is Jennifer Berry, I'm from the community of Fisher Branch and I'm representing our parent advisory council. This is Janice Podaima, Lisa Mazur, and Heidi Grohelski [*phonetic*], all part of our parent advisory council, and this is Lexi Podaima, as well, in the pink.

We are here representing our parent advisory council, community members, their schoolchildren and other local taxpayers as well. We are citizens of the Lakeshore School Division. We are truly reflecting the views of the vast majority of interested citizens in our community.

In a short period of time, we were able to obtain support of almost 200 people objecting to the closure of our early years school. This bill deals with the process of closing schools in our province, and we want to add our full support to this legislation as well as make recommendations for amendments to deal with our situation. We are here to explain why the current guidelines are not adequate and what can happen when our local school board representatives do not take seriously some of what we consider to be reasonable advice about exploring options to keep our schools open.

This bill is about process and we fully support the emphasis on consensus, transparency, community school program and priority for our early years schools. We wish to indicate that Lakeshore School Division did set up a process of consultation regarding the proposed closure of our school. This process of public consultation has left a bad taste in most people's mouths who attended those meetings. We contend the process was there to convince our community that their decision was the correct one. Any suggestions made to examine alternative uses for vacant space were, to our knowledge, not followed up. Also, questions about financial wisdom of this closure were not responded to. We certainly felt that we were being railroaded. Our interpretation of this process was, trust us, we know what is good for you.

Lakeshore School Division's reasoning for Fisher Branch Early Years School being slated for closure is due to a small amount of extra vacant space being available in the Fisher Branch Collegiate. Keep in mind that this extra space is not adequate to house the early years students. Hundreds of thousands of provincial dollars will be required to complete these renovations just to save the division a very small fraction of the operating costs.

*(10:40)

We wish to point out to the committee that the current government provided nearly \$1 million in upgrades to the Fisher Branch Early Years School less than a decade ago. We believe that had local taxpayers funded these upgrades directly, our trustees would have had to hide from their neighbours because of the outrage this proposed closure would have created.

Our school is in the centre of our community. Why would anyone think that our community would not make every effort to make full use of this facility? Our community does not have a public

library. Why was that suggestion not been explored? We ask members of this committee to consider what the real estate value of a closed school building is.

To add insult to injury, the division cancelled a public meeting about our school closure without advising our parent advisory council and community members. We were advised that we would be given an opportunity to report on our views of the process.

At the same time, the division was holding a two-day retreat at Misty Lake Lodge to advise staff on their realigned responsibilities in the amalgamation process and also to discuss new physical accommodations. It has come to our attention that the costs of this retreat were substantial.

Why would our division, which has continuously stressed financial hardship, proceed with this retreat, at the same time telling us that, due to communication opposition, the meeting is being postponed?

Additionally, we want to advise this committee that statements made by our superintendent, Ms. Hildebrandt, to the Department of Education and others that our community is behind this amalgamation are inaccurate.

We have questioned the wisdom of this decision from day one and believe that there are options and opportunities that have not been explored by our division. By exploring these options, we feel that we could build our community to be stronger and attract our youth to stay in the community. Divisions should listen to their stakeholders and explore all opportunities, before closing a school and wasting provincial tax dollars.

The landscape of our rural economy is changing. With these changes, all governing bodies need to adjust their responsibility to their communities and the province. They all need to focus more on building communities and utilizing all available resources. In the past, it was not required that divisions explore other opportunities outside their mandate, in order to keep these buildings open, to help keep their expenses down.

The Province is now providing this opportunity by having all governing bodies be more accountable for and to their communities. The opportunities will allow them to be more creative and move to offset some of the operating costs generated by the added value in these buildings. It is time for the division to think outside the box.

We are recommending that there be an amendment to Bill 28, that being the Exception, 41(1.4) be removed, so that the new process, which the minister is recommending in the bill, also be made available to Fisher Branch Early Years School.

By eliminating the exception of the school board vote taken before January 1, 2008, you will include the Fisher Branch and Ashern Early Years schools in this moratorium. The schools are open; the students and staff are all in place and no money has been spent on renovations to this point.

It appears that our division's focus on autonomy has overshadowed what is most important—our children's education. An amended Bill 28 puts our children first.

Thank you for allowing our parent advisory committee to speak on Bill 28.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Berry.

Are there questions?

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much, Jennifer, and for the others who've come out. It's always nice to see children in the Legislature. Great to see your daughter here.

If I can just quote a sentence out of your presentation: Any suggestions made to examine alternative uses for vacant space were, to our knowledge, not followed up on. You gave us one example and that was the library. Could you give us some other examples that were used that weren't followed up on?

There was another presenter that talked about replacement costs, that kind of thing. You mentioned, also, thinking outside of the box. We would love to hear at committee what were some of your suggestions, out of the box, that would help to keep the school open. I think we'd really appreciate it.

Ms. Berry: Well, we had many suggestions. I mean, the entire community, any stakeholder, had suggestions. They ranged from closing down the centre location of the main division office and utilizing some additional space in one of the high schools that wasn't being utilized. It would cut down costs. You know, it would just make fiscal sense, especially if we're in such a hard position financially.

We also made many recommendations about approaching Red River College, offering vocational courses, anything to attract our youth to stay, trades

courses, mini-university programs. Our children are leaving the communities to further their education after grade 12. It would be excellent to offer something to keep these students at home so they can develop their roots in the community and offer alternatives in the community, as well.

Mr. Tom Nevakshonoff (Interlake): Thank you, Jennifer, for a very good presentation and for your tireless advocacy on this issue, among others, with the parent advisory committee.

I originally came from Fisher Branch myself and I know how important this school is to the community. I was speaking with a retired teacher just a week or so ago and he made a very relevant point to me how recess and noon hours, every day, you can go out into your yard and you can hear the children laughing and playing and so forth. He said what a void that would leave within the community if that were no longer there, if that were just silence instead.

I really took that to heart and I have to say that all the calls that I've had to my office in this regard have all been definitive in their support to keeping this facility open. Over the months, I have not had one phone call from the opposite camp, so I have to tell you, I am with you in this regard.

I'm a little disconcerted when you commented on the Lakeshore School Division and the public consultation process. I know that when our administration or our staff were in discussions with the administration, they were led to believe that there had been a reversal from the parent advisory committees, and it was on that basis, I think, that the draft was finalized. I would just like you to reiterate that, once again, your feelings on the consultative process and whether you felt you were listened to, your views were taken into consideration and acted upon. If you would, please.

Ms. Berry: Well, we found it very surprising and interesting to read in newspaper publications that the parent advisory council and the community members were on board. We were taken aback. We have not been for this from day one. As some of you may know, Fisher Branch Early Years School is in the heart of our community. There's a beautiful green space. We do not want to see this building closed. Our numbers are staying static. You know, it's not like we have 15 students in our school. We're up to, I believe, 92 and this is a K-to-4 school.

The division has not been very co-operative with us in the fact that there have been meetings slated.

There were discussions or consultations, if you may call them that, where we were talked to and not allowed to speak or ask questions at a meeting. It's been a very awkward process. We feel that these guidelines that are currently in place are not adequate, and that's why we're here for Bill 28.

* (10:50)

They made a motion last June to close the school even after all the community members were against the amalgamation or closure. We were told, you know, you have no other choice; this is what we're going to do. The parent advisory council became part of a planning committee for the restructuring of the new school or the existing high school, and we were there for the best interests of our children. We were not there because we embraced the concept with open arms, we were there to keep them in check and make sure that all the i's were dotted, t's were crossed and that our children were taken care of.

Madam Chairperson: One last question.

Mr. Bjornson: Actually, a comment, to just thank you for your presentation and your recommendation. Thank you for your time.

Ms. Berry: Thank you, we hope you've—

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Ms. Berry: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I would now like to call on Teresa Johnson, Ashern-Moosehorn Parent Advisory Council.

Good morning. Do you have materials to distribute?

Ms. Teresa Johnson (Ashern-Moosehorn Parent Advisory Council): Yes, we do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. You may proceed.

Ms. Johnson: Thank you.

Good morning, honourable members. I'd like to begin by thanking you for allowing me to speak with you today. My name is Teresa Johnson. I'm the mother of five children, two attending middle years, one in high school, and I have two pre-schoolers at home.

I've been asked to be the spokesperson on behalf of a group of concerned parents and community members from Ashern, Moosehorn and surrounding

areas. We are part of a coalition that includes Fisher Branch, and we have joined together in an effort to save our early years schools in both our communities.

Honourable members, Bill 28 came like a breath of fresh air into our communities and gave us hope that our schools would be saved. We see Bill 28 as an opportunity to stop the forced closures of two wonderful and very necessary early years schools. We commend this government for bringing forward such a bill. There is no parental and community support to close the Ashern Early Years School. To date, we have no confidence in the school division's proposed renovation plan of the high school which minimizes parental concerns about education.

The safety and well-being of the elementary children is not a top priority in the proposed renovation plan and neither is the negative impact on the education of the children on all levels due to overcrowding. The high school was not designed with this type of renovation in mind. We believe the Lakeshore School Division has acted in haste. The school board decided on June 2007 that the Ashern Early Years would close based on projected declining enrolment. At this point in time, I would like to stress that the school enrolment at the Ashern Early Years has not declined as the school board predicted. Yet, the school is still slated for closure. Current enrolment sits at approximately 85 students. The school division refuses to enter into further discussion, and as parents, we have lost confidence in their ability to make decisions that are in the best interests of our children.

In Ashern, a forced closure of the early years school would mean that in 2009 the kindergarten to grade 4 students would be moved to the Ashern High School. When this happens, the elementary-aged children lose their library. The middle and high school aged children would be forced to share gymnasium space with the little children. We would have to put a curtain down the centre of an already small gym to allow two phys ed classes to run simultaneously, surely leading to intolerable distractions and serious safety concerns, keeping in mind the new mandate for grades 11 and 12 physical education.

The playground will be shared, but there is no space to do this safely. The noise of the high school where older children would be studying will increase substantially. We would be reduced from two fully functional science labs to one. Again, we would be

reduced from two fully functional computer labs to one. There won't be enough age-appropriate washroom space. There is an increased chance of bullying amongst the older and younger children, the early years children being exposed to inappropriate behaviours. There simply isn't enough physical space to prevent the commingling of students in kindergarten to grade 12—is both inappropriate and unacceptable.

The decision to close down the school was made despite the fact it has been well maintained and, in recent years, received upgrading, including air conditioning, new flooring, recently painted, new playground equipment. Our town has a brand-new day-care system that is currently full and has a waiting list, youngsters who will be entering the school system in the very near future.

Ashern Early Years School is a community school that plays an important role for our community. It brings our children together for learning, but also is a family-based building where numerous community events take place. We have an important breakfast program that feeds children from low-income homes, as well as the F.I.T.S. pre-school program.

Ashern Early Years School has movie night where we bring the new release movies and play them in the gymnasium for kids who don't have the opportunity to travel to a theatre. The school is also used for highland dance, taekwondo, soccer, yoga and for the community health events. There is potential to expand in these activities even further.

If you moved to Ashern and enrolled your children in this school, you would be immediately impressed by the warmth and welcoming feeling that greets you when you walk through the door. The school's mission statement is a healthy, safe and friendly community school. Students, parents and staff are committed to working co-operatively to instil respect and the joy of lifelong learning. Ashern Early Years School supports individual growth, as well as group achievement, because we believe our children are our present and our future. The school slogan: Small School—Big Learning. That's a fact.

Bill 28 is a wonderful bill that protects the educational future of our children in our community. It is positive, proactive and shows foresight on the part of the minister and is essential to enhance rural communities. However, the January 1, 2008 exception date mentioned in the bill means that it will condemn the students in Ashern and Fisher

Branch to exactly what your bill is supposed to protect them from.

We respectfully request that you consider amending Bill 28 so that the two schools not included—Ashern and Fisher Branch Early Years schools—be protected under the bill.

This coalition would like to express, once again, that we want to see our schools continue to operate as they have in the past—ensuring that all our children will continue to receive a high-quality education in a safe and secure, wholesome, age-appropriate environment.

In conclusion, we believe an amended Bill 28 will give our schools a second chance. We welcome the opportunity to show Minister Bjornson and your government what a wonderful, viable, community based school we have. We thank you for Bill 28; our community thanks you; our children thank you. Please include us in Bill 28. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Are there questions?

Mr. Schuler: Yes, thank you very much, Teresa, and thank you to the other parents who came out today. We appreciate your comments.

Teresa, I have one question for you. In any of your discussions with the board, did you talk about any kind of possible alternative uses if you keep the school open, what other things you could be doing in the school to keep the school viable? Did you, as parents, come forward with different suggestions? We would love to hear what those are.

Ms. Johnson: When the school board came to our communities about two years ago to start discussion on this, their approach was one school would be closed. Will it be Moosehorn, or will it be Ashern? It made the two communities at odds. It was not an open dialogue in terms of what can we do. Let's do everything we can to keep our little school open.

* (11:00)

Some of the suggestions were, let's make a four-day week for the children. Can we consolidate having another community-based school coming into our school? But the school board had in their mandate that they were going to close a school. Would it be Moosehorn? Would it be Ashern? It brought the entire dialogue into an odds, two communities against each other. It wasn't until—even

though we all stayed on board with the school board to make sure that the children renovating plan would continue, that was not an option for the school division. The school division had decided, we were going to close this school. You tell us which one it's going to be.

Mr. Nevakshonoff: Thank you, Teresa, once again, for your efforts and the efforts of your parent advisory committee in this regard.

As I said to the previous presenter, when you're in a political position, often you're a weather vane in the sense that you get feedback from the community, and as is the case in Fisher Branch, it is, too, in Ashern that my office has received many, many calls from concerned citizens in the Ashern area, calling on us to try and prevent the closure of this school. I have received no calls in favour of that, I have to say, so, in that regard, I would say that the community, from my perception anyway, seems united in keeping this facility open.

Again, when it came to consultations between the department and the division administration regarding consultation with the community and the fact that the parent advisory committees and community members had done a reversal and were now in favour of the closure, would you reiterate your feelings in that regard because that was rather fundamental in the final drafting of this legislation, please.

Ms. Johnson: I just want to stress that our communities were never in agreement with closures of any type. We were led to believe that also the provincial government was on board with the school division to close our schools. We were told that there was a time line that the provincial government wanted our school closed, and that if we didn't participate in the communication with the school division, we felt that our children would have no voice. So we did stay on board to do what was best for our kids, but we were led to believe that the Province was on board with the school division in wanting one of those schools closed.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Seeing no further questions, thank you very much for your presentation.

I would now like to call on Bill Clark, reeve of Rural Municipality of Miniota. Bill Clark, reeve, R.M. of Miniota? Bill Clark will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I would now like to call on Bev Martens who—Beth Martens, who will be speaking on behalf of Mountain View School Division for Floyd Martens, chairperson.

Ms. Beth Geisel (Mountain View School Division): First of all, I'm Beth Geisel, Erna, as you probably know.

I have 20 copies, but the 20th copy is the one I'm reading from.

Madam Chairperson: You may begin, Beth.

Ms. Geisel: Thank you, Madam Chair, Mr. Minister, committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today to share our concerns with respect to Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act.

Mountain View School Division is concerned that this bill restricts our ability and the ability of school divisions across this province to move forward with systematic changes required as a result of changing demographics and needs within our division.

Since the amalgamation of school divisions in July of 2002, our school division—consisting of seven communities where we have schools, Ochre River, Dauphin, Winnipegosis, Ethelbert, Gilbert Plains, Grandview and Roblin—has been involved in an extensive, long-term planning process that has been thorough, consultative and exhaustive. We have and are continuing to engage our communities as we take steps toward improving our educational system. Our investment of time and resources to the process has been significant. However, with the introduction of this bill, these efforts are potentially being undermined.

The review process that we are currently involved in began with an extensive facility study prepared by our administration in 2003. This report provided detailed information related to the age, condition, size and capacity of all buildings, as well as information related to student population and the corresponding staff complement. The report identified surplus space and any anticipated current or future capital requirements to existing facilities. This initial step was important as it established baseline information for our newly amalgamated board of trustees and provide an inventory of resources for us to plan for the future.

The next step in our planning process was the development of a long-term planning document. The

purpose of this document was to establish measurable parameters that could be reviewed regularly to assess when the board may need to review more closely the effectiveness of a particular school. Nine parameters were identified that the board would need to consider prior to placing a school on review. A school would not automatically be placed on review if it did not meet the established benchmark for a particular parameter, rather, it would require the division to investigate more closely the remaining parameters to assess the future viability of that particular school.

In the spring of 2006, Mountain View School Division released its *Pathways to Success* document outlining many significant issues and possible reconfiguration scenarios inviting in-depth consultation with our Mountain View community. Beginning in October of 2006 and continuing through the fall of 2007, the board conducted two rounds of community consultations and a divisional round table to discuss this document prior to identifying and addressing any necessary recommendations.

A report was released in December of 2007 identifying the board's response to issues raised during the consultation process focussing on some of the common issues raised. Our communities wanted the division to investigate the expanded use of technology to provide necessary programming in our smaller high schools. Our board directed administration to pursue this recommendation, and the result would be harmonized timetables for our high schools by September of 2008 and the development of six new video conference centres in our high schools over the next two years to facilitate the sharing of programming.

The second issue dealt with transportation of students and how our system of transportation could be improved to reduce ride times to less than 60 minutes and to efficiently transport students within the division for programs not offered at their catchment area school. In response to these concerns, the board of trustees has directed administration to initiate an extensive review of our transportation system. A review committee has been established with representation from administrators, bus drivers and the general public with a report coming to the board in October.

Our consultation process continues in the Roblin and Dauphin communities as we attempt to address issues specific to those communities. A report

intended to frame future consultation with the Dauphin community is being prepared for circulation next week. However, the introduction of this legislation has caused us to qualify our report as we see it raising some uncertainty of what will or will not be possible should it pass in its current form.

More than anything, this legislation has raised a number of questions for us about our role as school boards. We want to address for you the areas we seek clarity in and the areas we are concerned about as we read this legislation.

* (11:10)

To begin with, the moratorium on school closure outlines scenarios where schools could still be closed providing certain conditions are met. While we are not sure if the two first conditions—41(1.3) (a) and (b)—both need to be met, or if each one could separately trigger the minister allowing a school to close, the legislation does not give any time lines or clarity on what would satisfy the minister that the right conditions have been met. This concerns us, considering part of our building community consensus may require some consolidation of facilities in order to better serve our students.

This also raises the issue of consensus. What constitutes consensus? The legislation identifies the consensus of both parents and residents. What if there is a noticeable difference between parents of children within the school and the community at large? The minister seems to be the one who would have to mediate to determine if consensus has been achieved. Could this be done in a timely manner or would it require extensive work, work that perhaps the school board has already undertaken, in order to satisfy the minister.

Our second concern is in regard to the ministerial regulating of transportation for students. While we are very supportive of reasonable transportation times to and from school for students, the legislation speaks of the minister stepping in to establish compensation rates if they are not met. This proposal seems to be usurping the authority of school boards to meet the transportation needs of students. Further, while reduced transportation times for students is optimal, there are situations where students reside in locations that are a long way from the nearest school, and without significant changes to routes and additional resources to add to bus fleets, the optimal time would be difficult to achieve. Given where people reside, it could mean that divisions could choose not to transport students and give

compensation instead because of the impact that picking them up would have on bus ride times for the other students on a given route. However, this potentially raises additional concerns if people were unable to transport their own children.

Our third and last concern has to do with the designation of community schools provided for in the proposed legislation. While we support the establishment of community schools, we have concerns and questions regarding the proposed legislation. What would be the criteria or definition of a community school? How would the resources be allocated for community schools that require extra support to ensure they remain open? Would these resources go directly to the school board to administer, or would they go to the school or community to address these additional expenditures similar to some schools in other provinces? How would those funds be tracked, and would we be establishing a system where some school communities would be funded under FRAME and others under separate designations? We see the potential for communities to opt for the system that best meets their funding needs and not necessarily the educational needs of students.

While we agree that schools make up a vital part of community, legislation which creates a greater link between communities and the minister's department, as opposed to a system requiring dialogue between the local elected school board and the communities it serves, undermines and diminishes the role of school boards. If that is the intent of the legislation, then we see it has the potential to serve that purpose.

Our board and division have undertaken significant involvement of our communities to discuss and address the future of our schools. Together we have taken steps to address difficult issues as a result of years of declining populations with little change to the facilities that serve our students.

As elected school boards, we have an obligation to our communities, our ratepayers and our parents, but, first and foremost, our obligation is to our students. It is a responsibility we take seriously. However, doing what is right for students may not always be seen as being in the best interests of communities, ratepayers or even the parents we serve.

We are hopeful that the Law Amendments review committee will recognize the impact that this

legislation will have on an already strained public education system. School boards need to have the ability to make the necessary changes to maintain or improve the overall effectiveness of our division and to adapt our systems to create more successful learners. The current stresses on education funding demands that we address inefficiency so that resources can be located where required.

It is with these concerns in mind that we would ask the government to reconsider the passage of Bill 28 in its current form.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Geisel.

We have questions.

Mr. Bjornson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Geisel.

I appreciate in the presentation the recognition of the efforts of the board to reduce the travel times to 60 minutes. Certainly, we recognize that the legislation is asking boards to make their best efforts to do so. We also recognize that, in some cases, regardless of what you do, there are students that will live more than an hour away from the school. That's part of the realities of living in some of the more isolated areas and communities that people choose to live in. In fact, I was at Peonan Point School yesterday for a graduation where the students travelled in the fall and spring by boat and in the winter by snowmobile to get to school. We recognize that in some of these areas there are different transportation realities.

I just had a question. When you talked about the transportation rates for students, does your division currently compensate parents on a per pupil grant or a kilometre grant or is there another formula that your division might currently use for compensation for parents who transport their students?

Ms. Geisel: We currently transport all our students, so, to be honest with you, if we have an established rate, we're not using it and I'm not aware of it.

Madam Chairperson: Further, Mr. Bjornson?

Mr. Bjornson: Would that rate be, that is established but currently not used, is that per pupil or per kilometre?

Ms. Geisel: I'm sorry, Mr. Bjornson. I'm not aware of what it is.

Mr. Schuler: Beth, sorry, I wasn't here for the beginning of your presentation.

I did, however, want to quote something out of your presentation: ". . . first and foremost our obligation is to the students." Could you kind of give us, very briefly, your feelings on—we've heard it now from other presenters—there seems to be this difficulty with programs and staffing, that it's not just the funding issue which is—one of the things I've been asking, if you had more money, would that make it easier to keep the school open? There seems to be a theme here about programs and staffing. How do you deal with those two issues to get appropriate staffing and provide the kind of program that you'd like for the children?

Ms. Geisel: Thank you for your question.

Money doesn't always answer all the questions, as one of the previous presenters indicated from Park West, Ms. Clement, that just as big an issue for us is finding the appropriate staffing and the appropriate people to fill those positions because staffing is becoming more and more of an issue in our small schools.

One of the ways that we tried to address the staffing issue to create quality and viable programming to our high school students, as I indicated in our presentation, was to set up video conferencing. We have yet to see how well that will work for high school students because video conferencing may only work for a certain type of student. It is not a viable option for a kindergarten child. It's not viable for a grade 5 child to set up video conferencing. It's important to have children in school with children. Does money fix all of the problem? Not all of it. There are other issues besides just money.

Madam Chairperson: Further, Mr. Schuler.

Mr. Schuler: I just want to say thank you for coming out on a beautiful Saturday and presenting and giving us your view and your board's thoughts.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Geisel.

Ms. Geisel: Thank you. Do you want the 20th copy? Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: The next person I have is Ed Lelond, private citizen. I will call on Ed Lelond, private citizen. Ed Lelond will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Shonda Ashcroft, Birtle and District Community Development Corporation. I will

call on Shonda Ashcroft. Shonda Ashcroft will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Craig Whyte, Kenton Community School. Do you have materials for distribution? Thank you. You may begin your presentation.

* (11:20)

Mr. Craig Whyte (Kenton Community School): Just as soon as my knees stop knocking.

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to Bill 28.

First, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Craig Whyte from Kenton, naturally. I've been actively involved in the Kenton community for over 35 years. My wife and I have three children, all of whom attended Kenton School. During those years, I was involved with the Kenton School Parent Advisory Council and served as chair for several of those years.

I would like to begin our presentation by stating that our community supports Bill 28. Manitoba is the last province to introduce this type of legislation, and we realize the implications of the bill are vastly different as you move from a large urban setting, down the line until you get to the real small schools like Kenton.

We do not pretend to know how it affects these larger centres, but we know that it's very helpful for our community. We are not naive enough to think that it is a saviour for communities like Kenton. It is, at best, a lifeline and a step in the right direction.

In our presentation we talk about the implications for our school. As you move through the province, the name may change but the situation remains the same. So, in a way, when we say Kenton, we speak for many small schools. The name may be different, but the numbers and the problems are similar.

For example, rural depopulation, we live it. I've operated a business in Kenton for over 35 years and I've seen a constantly expanding trading area as farms have gotten large and competition has dwindled due to lack of customers. My eldest child was the first baby on our street in 30 years, so we know what rural depopulation is.

You have a choice, shrivel up and blow away like dust in the constant prairie winds or fight. We choose to fight. In the last 10 years there's been well

over \$1.25 million in commercial investment in a community with no government jobs other than a post office. We have three housing starts and a housing subdivision starting this year. It's not much for some places, but big time stuff in Kenton. This doesn't sound like another dying farm community to me.

With the introduction of Bill 28, many school boards feel this is another government intrusion into their territory. Thus, we beg to ask the question. Do we still need school boards? Are they relevant? In most cases we would have to say yes, but they must listen to the ratepayers and the parents of their division.

Park West is the result of an amalgamation of Bird Tail River and Pelly Trail, which took place in 2002, and has struggled ever since to move past old division boundaries. Since the amalgamation, because of our size, we've been treated like the ugly stepsister. New textbooks, we don't get them. New school software, not for Kenton. The front of our school still says Bird Tail River even though it ceased to exist six years ago.

Bill 28 would hopefully eliminate or alter the review process. Ah, yes, the review process. We certainly have first-hand experience with that beast. When our school was placed under review in June of 2006, one of our parents asked, is there any hope for our school? The Park West CAO replied, no, your school will close in June of 2008 and, hopefully, in June of 2007. When asked about an appeal process, he replied, you appeal to us. So much for that process. Our review process has looked, at times, more like a Monty Python skit than a process to determine whether this school still functions properly.

Back to Bill 28. When presented on April 28, the bill talks of keeping little kids at home and cutting bus times. It speaks of alternative uses for buildings, such as day cares and libraries to make better use of facilities. We may have to file for copyright infringement, because on March 19 our presentation to the Park West board proposed, K to 5 with the introduction of a day care to make better use of the space. In a way, a school for little people.

Another area of concern in our presentation was time spent by little children on buses. If our school were to close, some of our children may spend the same amount of time on a bus during their school day as it took us to drive to Winnipeg, three hours.

This is not exactly conducive to a good learning environment.

There would seem to be an area in Bill 28 that may be problematic for small schools. This would be staffing. We can have all the legislation in the world in place, but it does not stop school divisions from doing an end run to close schools. Staffing them to formula and starve them to death. The board doesn't have to close the school. The parents vote with their feet, mission accomplished. Another one bites the dust.

Oh, yes, the dreaded staff divisor. In our school for 2008-2009, we're budgeted for 1.25 teachers for 16 children. This allotment includes admin, resource and teaching time. Where is the quality of education in this scenario, and what about the human rights of our children? But there's your end run.

There has to be a realization that, if there is a will to keep small schools alive, this needs to be addressed. I recently had a lengthy discussion with a gentleman who chaired a neighbouring school division for 11 years and was also vice-chair of the Public Schools Finance Board. This is someone who knows of what he speaks. His feeling was that when schools fall below the 30 to 40 benchmark the divisor needs to disappear and they should be staffed to a level that is workable for quality education. In a school like ours this top-up of half to three-quarters of a teacher, and with a \$17-million Park West budget, amounts to a measly 0.2 percent.

Back to Kenton, we have a facility that's in very good shape physically and is not expensive to operate. It would be quite easy to introduce learning through technology. We have an urgent need for a day care. We have a need for a library. We have a desire to keep our small children at home in their early years rather than shipping them off on a bus to another community.

Is it a crime to fight to save small schools by providing things for our children that other communities enjoy simply based on numbers and a few dollars? There has to be a realization that bigger is not necessarily better. The one point I will guarantee is that bigger will simply accelerate rural depopulation.

Once again, I need to reiterate when I say Kenton. You can substitute one of many small schools in its place. These schools are all special and need to be treated as such. There needs to be a mechanism either through consultation with the

school divisions or direct funding whereby these schools get the needed staffing. As I stated previously, they usually don't need much. Usually one-half to one teacher and this is not a huge investment in our rural lifestyle.

In the final analysis, it's about the kids. The money saved in closing a school like Kenton is insignificant, but what is the cost of putting a five-year-old kindergarten student on a bus for two to three hours per day? What is the cost to the parents and community? We propose the time has come to think outside the box. Small schools and small communities can survive and thrive. They are capable of doing many things to make the community successful, but we need you to step up to make this bill work properly.

As we stated previously, it may be direction for the board or direct funding earmarked for these schools. We are not asking for handouts. We're asking you to say yes to small communities, small schools and our most precious resource, our small children.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

We have questions.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Arthur-Virden): Thanks very much, Craig, for coming and making your presentation today.

As well, I appreciate the outcomes that have taken place since I saw you last, I believe. Can you outline for us—I know you've outlined the teachers' situation that you're looking at for the coming year. Is there anything else in that area that would enhance the school in Kenton in regard to the K to 5? I understand it will be there, plus I understand the day care will be allowed to use the space in the school.

Mr. Whyte: The only thing we really need—

Madam Chairperson: Excuse me, I need to call your name first.

Mr. Whyte: Sorry. I'm new at this. The only thing we really need is to be funded properly because the day care—there are already people lining up to get in. We've got a stable student body that want to have a small school. We think it's a very interesting—call it a pilot, for lack of a better term. Rural population isn't going to go away and what we've seen, if anything, we're hoping it's bottomed out and stabilized. It may slightly increase. We've noticed the activity in our community and—there are cornerstones to your

school, or to your community. One of them is the school, one is the business, the church, et cetera, and you need them all and they all function together but we need the funding.

* (11:30)

I realize what the boards are saying, too. This is where somewhere there has to be some type of mechanism put in place. It was Dick Heppie that I talked to about this. He has a lot of school board experience. He said, once you get into that 30 to 40 range, divisors have to disappear. You have to fund it for what works. I'm not saying you put four—in our case, half teachers. Not a huge amount. That's what'll make it work.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Whyte, for your presentation.

Mr. Whyte: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Larry Oakden, private citizen. Larry Oakden. Larry Oakden will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I would like to call on Debby Lee, private citizen. Do you have materials for distribution?

Ms. Debby Lee (Private Citizen): No. I was in Winnipeg yesterday when I found out about this and they're back in Strathclair. That's why I'm dressed like this as well.

Madam Chairperson: Ms. Lee, you may commence.

Ms. Lee: Good day, members of the panel, Honourable Minister.

The communities of Strathclair and Newdale applaud you. We have read in the papers and have heard on the radio some of the negative feedback you have taken over this bill and the moratorium on school closures. We support Bill 28. The school boards need to listen to the public's concern and then steer administration in the appropriate directions. The public is fully aware of the financial demands by the division.

My name is Debby Lee. I'm here as a parent, concerned community citizen and a recently resigned trustee of Park West School Division. As I said, my copies for the panel are, unfortunately, back in Strathclair. I can e-mail them, if you wish, on Monday.

My understanding is that this is a temporary moratorium. It will, at least, allow the communities

that attend the Strathclair Community School, a K-12 facility with 187 students, where no space is left unused, with time to decide on a course of action.

Currently, in our division, some early years learning assistant resources have been limited to us because of low enrolment. The course that I am most concerned about is Reading Recovery, that we have a qualified teacher on our staff. The program has been stopped.

Question one: Is it allowable for school-parent advisory groups to raise money to pay for the program privately? It seems criminal to stop a child's progress in reading when a community is willing to raise the funds to assist this problem.

Question two: The Public Schools Finance Board has limited funds to cover much-needed repair costs or new projects on improving school use. If a community is willing to assist in the cost of repairing a building—I'll give an example: A gym wall that, for 15 years, has moved every time the big high school boys run into it—are they allowed to do so?

Question three: If a school, because of declining enrolment, or if the division has chosen to raise the divisor of teacher-student ratio, half of their teaching staff numbers reduced, can school communities raise funds to pay privately for an additional teaching staff to assist in the curriculum?

Question four: Currently, some children attending the Strathclair Community School are riding the bus for 70 minutes one way. Since there are no closer facilities, how will this time limit of 60 minutes affect them? Will the time spent riding in a school bus become a written-in-stone rule after the moratorium is over?

All these situations affect whether a parent may continue to send their child to a particular school. These situations can be greatly influenced by a school board who is either willing to keep a school open, or trying to enhance its demise.

Park West has already done this with their proposal of going down from two high schools to six high schools. Some see it as a done deal.

School boards can cause uncertainty in a school's survival. Much like the *Survivor* TV program, whose torch will next be extinguished? Thank you for your time.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

We have questions.

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much for coming today, and I'm glad you happened to be in the city when you found out about the committee. I can assure you, we don't look at what you wear. We actually listen to what you say and appreciate that very much.

We would be very interested in knowing from you—and you gave completely new ideas and some things for us to think about—about what community involvement should be or could be. Any other ideas of what could possibly be placed into school to make it viable? Have you, as a community, sort of talked about that? We certainly would love to hear any ideas. Thanks for coming.

Ms. Lee: One of the things that actually a member of our R.M.—and we have three R.M.s that affect our community school plus the First Nations—had said, there's an intercampus busing program right now that occurs between Strathclair and Shoal Lake schools so they in effect sort of share a joint campus. Some courses are taught in one, some the other—just you have greater class numbers.

There has been a concern that the intercampus should be stopped because of costs. Our R.M. has offered to put money toward that cost. I don't know whether that will affect their decision or not.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation, Ms. Lee.

Ms. Lee: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Jim Murray, Brandon School Division. Do you have materials to distribute?

You may start at your convenience.

Mr. Jim Murray (Brandon School Division): Thank you. Good morning, honourable members of this committee and Mr. Minister.

On behalf of the board of trustees of the Brandon School Division, I thank the committee for the opportunity to make our presentation on Bill 28. The Public Schools Act sets forth the powers and responsibilities of school boards. Our board approaches its decision making with a clear view of its primary obligations and responsibilities, namely, to provide our students with the best possible education; to prepare our students to be contributing members of society; to be as fair as reasonably possible to our employees and to afford them the best possible security and working conditions in their employment within our financial resources; and to

ensure local taxpayers and the community receive the best possible value for their investment in the education system.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, the division is guided by an overriding theme of support to students and fairness to all.

The division provides educational and supportive services to approximately 7,000 students in 22 schools, three of which are in the rural area surrounding the city of Brandon. The division's current budget totals \$59.3 million. There are over 1,000 employees, with a total payroll and employee benefit cost of \$49.8 million. It is the division's primary responsibility to allocate human resources throughout its facilities in the most effective and efficient manner to meet the varied needs of the young people in our schools as best possible within its financial resources.

It is within the context of the foregoing that our board makes this presentation. There are aspects of Bill 28 that are of concern to our board. Our board believes that the legislative changes proposed by The Strengthening Local Schools Act will not benefit school divisions or students in small schools nor would we consider it as The Strengthening Local Schools Act. We hope the committee will recognize the validity of our concerns.

School closings. Our board is aware of the vital role schools play in any community and are aware of the effect a school closure has on a community. Our division fully involves the school and local community in any review of continuation of a school's operation. There are several factors that ultimately determine the viability of continuing a school's operation: declining public enrolment across Manitoba; the ability to provide resources to meet the educational needs of compulsory, optional and extracurricular programs made available to students; the ongoing operating and capital costs of maintaining school buildings.

* (11:40)

Our board fully supports after-school usage and the use of surplus space in our school buildings by community groups. However, it is necessary these groups such as day cares, senior groups or other non-profit organizations contribute the appropriate share of the building operation and maintenance costs as school divisions require that all funds received from the provincial government and local taxpayers be allocated for educational purposes.

An item not referenced in Bill 28 is the provision of additional funding from the Public Schools Finance Board to maintain school buildings in operation as a result of a moratorium on school closures. This is of particular note by our division, as our latest school closure was, to a large extent, a result of the Public Schools Finance Board's refusal to fund required upgrades and renovations to the building. How is this matter being financially supported by the provincial government under Bill 28?

From past experience in our school division, an enrolment of 200-plus students is required as a critical number to adequately provide the necessary programming. For in-city schools, the ability to consolidate classes to provide a critical mass is required and is interpreted as to what consolidation, stated in Bill 28, is intended to allow. This is more difficult to address in rural communities where there is only one school. Presently, our division provides approximately 4.4 teaching positions over the eligible ratio calculation at a cost of \$309,000 to address enrolment issues. If the moratorium on school closures is enacted, additional provincial funding must be provided to fully support this initiative in order that school boards can continue to provide their current resources for programs and services for all students in the division.

It is the position of our board that the local board of trustees should retain the ability and authority to determine school closures, being the elected body most closely affected by the decision. Boards take these school reviews very seriously and fully involve the parents and communities in the decision-making process. Currently there are guidelines in place to fully involve the community in school closure review, and there is a 20-month requirement giving notice of a school closure. Our board feels this to be reasonable and acceptable in consideration of this matter.

In conclusion at this point, our board is disappointed that the consultation process requested by the Manitoba Association of School Trustees at their annual convention regarding the school closures review process was not undertaken prior to introduction of Bill 28. This is a very important matter to school divisions and local communities requiring local consultation and discussions. It was our understanding that the provincial government and/or Manitoba Education were going to provide public consultation in consideration of school-closure guidelines and legislation before it was

submitted to the provincial Legislature. As a result, it is uncertain as to the basis the provincial government is considering related to Bill 28.

As to transportation times, our division supports Bill 28 in relation to having a school board use its best efforts to ensure a pupil's one-way travel time to his or her designated school is not longer than one hour and giving boards a five-year period to comply with this directive. Our board presently has a policy requiring our best attempts to having one-way travel time be a maximum of one hour. Again, to meet the proposed timelines, as legislated, may require school divisions to increase the number of routes and acquire more school buses. If divisions are required to incur these costs, additional provincial support is also required so the division will not need to diminish spending on educational programs and services.

The Brandon School Division has a major issue regarding transportation of students and its relationship to school closures. Currently, there are divisions entering neighbouring divisions to transport students under school-of-choice legislation when, in fact, they are not eligible for transportation under this legislation. This action is further endangering the viability of small rural schools and must be stopped. With the introduction of Bill 28 and the Province's concern with the closure of small schools, this matter needs to be addressed by the provincial government.

Our recommendations, then: That Bill 28 not be enacted and school divisions continue to maintain the autonomy regarding school closures after formal review involving parents and the local community.

If Bill 28 does receive government approval: That the regulations referenced in section 41(1.5) be expedited and the school closure moratorium be discontinued; that the provincial government and/or Manitoba Education provide full additional financial support for small school operations and capital maintenance improvements for community, non-divisional use of school facilities, for additional school bus purchases and operations; that divisions not be allowed to enter a neighbouring division to provide school-of-choice bus transportation unless mutually agreed to by each board of trustees; that schools be allowed to close within 12 months' notice if there is consensus among the parents and residents of the area served by the school.

In conclusion, the division's board of trustees has the responsibility to use its resources to provide the best possible education to all of its students. Small

schools and school closures are a serious consideration in this regard, specifically in meeting the expectations of the provincial government and Manitoba Education in reference to the limitation of the accumulated surplus a division can maintain and divisions being strongly encouraged to hold the line on local school division property taxes.

Mr. Minister, I would like to say that its been a pleasure to be here today, but it hasn't. Our appearance here was unnecessary, as this piece of legislation should never have been brought forward. Bill 28 will not strengthen local schools. It will do the opposite. It will cost students educational opportunities. It will prove costly to taxpayers in the province of Manitoba and it will weaken the ability of school divisions to provide adequate services and programs.

This bill disrespects trustees in this province and disregards the trust placed in us by our local electorate, and there is very little that we see in this bill that could be confused for democracy or the democratic process. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Murray, for your presentation.

We have questions.

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much, Jim, for coming in this morning. I appreciate your presentation to committee, and, on page 3, I mean, this is the kind of thing that I think the committee has some concern with.

I'll quote out of your presentation: "a result of the Public Schools Finance Board's refusal to fund required upgrades and renovations to the building." We've had other presenters come forward and say, well, actually it's not just a funding issue, it's also staff and programming, and I think what we are starting to see is a pattern develop that, yes, staffing is an issue, you know, proper programming is an issue but there's also the other component and that is funding for small schools because, if there is a need for a substantial repair and the Public Schools Finance Board is not funding it, then you actually have two arms of the government. One arm of the government is saying must stay open and the other arm of the government then is saying we are not going to fund small schools because they don't believe they're viable. So, actually, what we're starting to see is there's a contradiction that, you know, out of the minister's mouth, one message, Public Schools Finance Board, a second message.

Madam Vice-Chairperson in the Chair

I would actually put forward I believe this is all about funding and we would like to hear—and, you know, we've sort of been getting individuals to put that on the record whether its staffing, programming, funding of small schools.

Do you not believe that there should be some kind of a small schools policy that would then properly fund the government's policy of keeping them open?

Mr. Murray: Yes, sir, that would certainly be a preference to closing small schools if the funding was available to provide adequate programming to the students that are there. The problem you have when you have schools with 40 or less pupils in it, regardless of what grades those are extended over, you don't have the resources to provide proper services and programming to those students. They're receiving a basic education but they're doing without a lot of the things that students in larger schools receive.

You reference the closure of the school in Brandon and the Public Schools Finance money. We had retained an outside firm to do a facility audit on that building and the building was found to be unsafe. For over five years we had that on our list to receive money from the Public Schools Finance Board and we received none for upgrades that that building was in desperate need of. At that time the school was placed under review. The people in that neighbourhood fought desperately to save that school and I understand exactly what they were saying. It was a very heartfelt time for our division but, at the end of the day, without those repairs being made in that building we had no choice but to move forward with school closure.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Thank you. Seeing there're not further questions, thank you for your presentation.

Mr. Murray: Thank you so much.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Denise Dewar. Denise Dewar has submitted a written presentation this morning.

Debbie McMechan. Debbie McMechan. Debbie McMechan's name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Ed Lelond. Ed Lelond's name will be dropped—

Mr. Maguire: Madam Vice-Chair, maybe this has been dealt with. Is it the same Ed Lelond that was on No. 13 earlier?

Madam Vice-Chairperson: I'm sorry?

Mr. Maguire: Is there a duplicate name on the list? No. 13 and No. 29.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Oh, yes.

Mr. Maguire: I'm assuming it's the same person. Sometimes it is not, though.

* (11:50)

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Good pick-up.

Jason Koscielny. Jason Koscielny. His name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Garry Dalgarno. Garry Dalgarno. His name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Margaret Anderson. You have a presentation. Please begin.

Ms. Margaret Anderson (Private Citizen): I'm Margaret Anderson from the Lakeshore School Division. Good morning, Madam Vice-Chairperson, Mr. Minister and committee members.

I'll give you a little idea of what we think public schools are all about. We believe that the purpose of public schools is to best serve the educational interests of the students. School boards play an important role in providing public education that is responsive to the needs and unique conditions of the communities that they democratically represent. School boards and the Province share the responsibility of being fiscally accountable in the providing of this education. School boards know their communities. School boards know the financial situation of the community members and the taxpayers. School boards are aware of the impact of declining enrolments. School boards hear the outcry while taxes increase.

School boards must continue to have the responsibility of making the decisions that will affect the students that they serve and the communities that expect quality education along with fiscal responsibility. Lessening or removing this role will not serve the best interests of what people expect in a democratic society.

When boards requested the honourable Minister of Education (Mr. Bjornson) to review the current guidelines for school closures, the intent was to speed up the process or to clarify it. In September of

'07 comments were made by the minister and the deputy minister Farthing that the department intended to engage in a consultation process on the guidelines. The target date for implementation of the new guidelines was the start of the '09 school year. A time frame of shorter than the current 20 months for school closures was preferred by most parties. That was my understanding anyway.

Now, at regional meetings in 2008—that's school board regional meetings—feedback from school boards was being gathered in anticipation of sharing this information during the consultation process. The proposed legislation was introduced two weeks later with no consultation process.

Our school division, Lakeshore School Division, is situated in the north Interlake with a geographical area of 7,000 square kilometres and was faced with the challenge of providing sound, educational programming to 1,300 students as costs increased and school enrolments decreased.

I will briefly outline the democratic process of consultation, communication and collaboration that the division undertook over the past four years to ensure that they were meeting the needs of the communities and the students and also continuing to be fiscally responsible. Beginning in 2004, the board began the dialogue on the process that they would take in dealing with the challenge of declining enrolments in the division. With the \$4,000 seed money from Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, a consultant was contracted to support the board in identifying strengths of the division and to gather data and to provide initial support for the first round of community consultations.

A work-tank, which had representatives from each community, would meet with the board on a regular basis to facilitate communication with the communities. A think-tank, with representation from the schools, the PACs, the R.M.s and the communities was also formed to provide a wider range of input to the board.

2004 to 2007: Numerous meetings with the board and senior admin, a total of 12 community consultations, eight meetings with the tanks, culminating in community consensus—my understanding was there was community consensus—that action should be taken. Motions were made in June '07, at a board meeting, that Fisher Branch and Ashern early-year schools would be consolidated with the collegiates.

In addition to the above meetings, senior admin was in consultation on a continual basis with Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, the Public Schools Finance Board, the architects and other provincial and community peoples. The goal of the board was to ensure transparency in the flow of communication. The process from 2004 to the present has made every effort to have that openness evident.

The recent proposed provincial moratorium on school closures took the Lakeshore School Board by surprise. With the huge number of requests for capital support and the limited budget available, it was definitely unexpected. It also threw the four years of consultation, collaboration and communication into confusion. Despite subsequent confirmation that Lakeshore followed process and met the '07 guideline and could proceed as planned, the vocal minorities of Fisher Branch and Ashern are now questioning the board's decision. Unfortunately, their perspective is coloured by emotion and not the grim realities of what impact declining enrolments will have on the quality of education.

As a board member, I would ask that the Province of Manitoba honour the local autonomy of boards. As a Province, be assured that we have heard and we have adhered to your messages of the past that we enter into democratic society dialogue with our communities. The public school system in our province of Manitoba safeguards the democratic society in which we are very privileged to live.

The proposed moratorium on school consolidations would be a real detriment to rural communities that are struggling to provide quality education at a cost that is bearable to taxpayers. There is a very real difference between consolidation of rural schools and those in the urban settings. Consolidation in rural areas, especially in small communities, does not mean loss of flow of traffic into the community. However, costs associated with maintaining two separate buildings can have a very real effect on the budget, which could impact on staffing and programming. Costs will continue to rise: teachers' salaries are rising, utilities are rising, fuel costs for transportation budget are going to take a big jump. Pharmacare rates are rising. I could go on. Manitoba's income tax rate is also the highest among the provinces of Ontario, Alberta, B.C. and Saskatchewan. Taxpayers' pockets are only so deep. We need to recognize these factors. The honourable minister saw the need to control the special requirements of school boards by offering tax

incentive grants to boards, and he also placed limits on the dollars by which school boards could increase their special requirement. Boards recognized these as positive moves.

Boards value community input and consultation in trying to maximize the opportunities for rural students. Rural students need all the help that they can get to prepare them for the global marketplace. Please reconsider the proposed moratorium and instead refine the guidelines to better address the situations. Let school boards and their communities decide their needs. Thank you.

Mr. Bjornson: Yes, thank you for your presentation. I just had a couple of questions.

First of all, given the presentations that we've heard from the parent groups and the suggestion that the consolidation would result in the consolidated schools being at or near capacity, would closing the other schools—do you think that that could possibly present a limit to the potential growth for the communities?

Ms. Anderson: In Fisher Branch there is adequate room in the schools to accommodate, you know, future enrolments. In Ashern, when the Public Schools Finance Board did a review of the possible schools—

Oh, sorry. You didn't call my name. It's okay to go ahead and speak?

Madam Vice-Chairperson: I did it quietly.

Ms. Anderson: In Ashern, when the Public Schools Finance Board came out and reviewed the space that was required for the early years to come into the collegiate, we were told there wasn't adequate space, but that they would provide a portable. We have gotten confirmation that the portable is on order from the Public Schools Finance Board. We're not quite sure that that's the way we want to proceed, but I don't think it would hamper future growth.

* (12:00)

As far as the questions the community groups had about consolidating the two science labs, we only run one science program a cycle. There is no need. One science lab is being used as a math class or a different type of a study group, and the computer labs—we have two labs, but the one is being converted into a portable COW. So we have laptops that go from space to space. So there is adequate provision for anything that has been, you know, consolidated, and there is a lot of space in the school.

The gym space has been a concern, but we were assured by school staff that it was doable.

Mr. Bjornson: A second question, and I'll preface the question with a comment. In the last 20 years, 80 schools have closed in Manitoba. When you go through this process of closing these assets, there's a time where, obviously, in some communities there's a value to that asset and it can be sold for a considerable amount of money depending on the economic realities of that particular community. In some cases, those assets sit empty and become liabilities.

So my question would be: Was there any plan or any potential use for these schools that you had tentatively slated for closure? Do you know if there was anybody interested in purchasing these schools, or if there's anything that the community might have benefited from, from the sale of these schools for private individuals or other interested parties?

Ms. Anderson: As far as Ashern is concerned, there are at least three groups that were very interested in possibly taking over the use of the building. The R.M. was interested in it. We have an adult learning centre in our community, Fieldstone Ventures, which is very active and they were looking for more space. The library was also considering—the regional library that is on a rotating basis or limited basis was also thinking of possibly using this space. So, as far as Ashern Early was concerned, there was adequate—it would have been used. It would have been put to good community use.

I don't know if there was anybody in Fisher Branch that had expressed an interest in the use of the building, but they've mentioned that they don't have a library and they don't have a few other facilities. In Eriksdale, we are incorporating a day care into one of our schools because of the low enrolment there. So rather than see the space go to waste, Eriksdale is going to be allowed to incorporate a day care if all the provisions are met.

Mr. Cliff Cullen (Turtle Mountain): If the minister has some buyers for some schools, I'd certainly like to be made aware of it. We have several schools that have been vacant for a number of years. So if he has some buyers, I'd certainly appreciate that.

Just so I'm familiar with your process and so I have a clear understanding, you've been going through a four-year review process here which was partially funded by the government, the Province of Manitoba. You felt you had kind of an open dialogue

with the minister and his department. I'm wondering if they led you to believe or at any time prior to the announcement on Bill 28, if they'd said to you that they were thinking of bringing in a bill such as this.

Ms. Anderson: I've only been on the board for a year and a half, so I was a little green to the process.

My understanding is that throughout the dialogue, especially when news of Bill 28 was surfacing, that we were given assurance that any resolutions or motions that were passed prior to January 1, '08 would not be affected by Bill 28. We have a letter from the department actually stating that very fact.

Since Bill 28 has been in the paper quite a bit, the local parent advisory councils have thought this was possibly a last hope to save the school. They haven't approached us per se as a board, but we've seen it in the paper. We know what their thinking and we're hearing them. If a local vote is what would be required to make sure—we think we have consensus. We feel that there are a lot of people out there who concur with the idea that to maintain two buildings is too expensive, that to better use our resources, to better use our teaching staffs, to be able to supply the needs that our students need—we have five Indian reserves near our area. We had to hire a social worker because of the special needs that we have. The money has to come from somewhere. If we can use those resources in a general setting that was our purpose. Our board is a visioning board and that was the goal of the exercise.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Your time has expired. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Marvin Anderson. Marvin Anderson. Marvin's name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Valerie Weiss. Valerie Weiss, Interlake School Division. Valerie's name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Dr. David McAndrew, Western School Division. Dr. David McAndrew. His name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Colleen Claggett Woods, Prairie Rose School Division. Colleen Claggett Woods. The name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Thomasina Charney. Thomasina Charney, Miniota Archie Community Development Corporation and Rosburn Community Development Corporation. Her name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Cheryl Zelenitsky, Evergreen School Division. Cheryl Zelenitsky, Evergreen School Division. Her name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Karen Carey, Sunrise School Division. Karen Carey, Sunrise School Division. Her name will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

We'll move back now to the in-town people. We have one name on Bill 2. Does the committee wish to proceed on 28, or go back to 2? All right, we'll move back to Bill 2.

Judy Eastman, private citizen. Judy Eastman.

All right then. We're back on Bill 28?

An Honourable Member: Bill 15, Madam Vice-Chair.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Okay.

Mr. Stefan Paszlack, private citizen. Stefan Paszlack will be dropped to the bottom of the list.

Now we're back to Bill 28.

Bruce Alexander, the St. James-Assiniboia School Division, on behalf of Yolande Dupuis.

Yes, this is a substitution. Mr. Alexander is substituting for Yolande Dupuis of the Manitoba Association of School Trustees.

Good afternoon, Mr. Alexander. Do you have a written presentation?

Mr. Bruce Alexander (Manitoba Association of School Trustees): It's being distributed.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Please proceed.

Mr. Alexander: Good morning to the standing committee, to the ministers and to the honourable members. It's a pleasure to represent the Manitoba Association of School Trustees this morning. I apologize for the absence of our president, Yolande Dupuis, but the notice received at our office was less than 24 hours, our president was travelling away from Winnipeg and, unfortunately, could not make the presentation, so I'm going to do my best to substitute for her.

In the way of introduction, the Manitoba Association of School Trustees is a voluntary association of public school boards in Manitoba. Our mission is to ensure quality public school education for Manitoba students through effective locally elected boards of trustees.

* (12:10)

As it is written, Bill 28, The Strengthening of Local Schools Act, has the potential to impact negatively on the quality of education we provide for students in our communities and the effectiveness of local school boards in representing their communities. For that reason, I am standing before you today to ask for changes in Bill 28.

First, the legislation. Bill 28 addresses three main topics: school closings; extended travel times; and community schools. We will be restricting our comments to the first two matters.

School closing moratorium is a feature of Bill 28 and I'd like to speak first on the time lines. Bill 28 provides that no school operating in the '07-08 school year may be closed unless the school board voted to do so prior to January 1, 2008. We have been advised that this moratorium is being proposed as a result of concerns raised with the minister responsible by the parents of some students at schools currently under review. In responding to these individual voices, we believe that Bill 28 undermines the democratic process whereby school boards were actively engaging with their broader communities and working to develop understanding and build consensus about the future of these schools.

When the current school closure guidelines were introduced by the Howard Pawley administration in 1982, they enabled school divisions to continue any review process that was then under way. In light of the commitment of time and resources made by many communities and their school boards to the review process in the '07-08 school year, we recommend that this legislation be amended to allow reviews under way at the time of the first reading of Bill 28 to proceed to their conclusion, whatever that conclusion may be.

We further recommend that development of school closing regulations identified in Bill 28 be expedited and that they be developed through a truly consultative process that includes school boards, divisional administrators, teachers and parents. With the development of these regulations, it's our understanding that school closing moratorium contained in Bill 28 would then be repealed.

I'd like to speak next about programs and services for students.

School boards have a dual responsibility of providing the best educational opportunities to all students within a division and of managing prudently

the resources provided by communities and the Province for that purpose. When considering school closures, the tendency is often to focus on the second of these responsibilities: the prudent management of resources. To be sure, there can be sound financial reasons for closing a school. It is more efficient to operate and maintain one school at full capacity than two at half capacity. However, what is often overlooked in discussions about school closings is an examination of the impact of school size on students' education, the quality of that education with respect to access to programs, to quality of that program and choice that meets individual abilities and interests. There is no such thing as an optimal school size. There are many variables at play: population density; geography; distance; the ages and grades of the children attending a given school.

Having said that, however, there is such a thing as too small, and too small is something that is best judged by the local community. Communities understand the importance of maintaining local schools, the roles schools play as community hubs, the sense of belonging and security that children feel in their school, the relationships that develop over the years between students, parents and staff. However, communities also want the best for their children. Communities need to be able to decide when the benefits of maintaining a community school are outweighed by the benefits that could be realized by their children should those children move to a school where simple economies of scale and sheer student numbers would mean that they have access to increased resources and more programming options.

Some definitions: Bill 28 does not allow for the possibility—excuse me, Bill 28 does allow for the possibility of ministerial approval of a school closure under specific circumstances. However, without defining terms, this allowance is meaningless.

A school closing may be allowed if the results from the consolidation of schools within an area or a community. Dictionary definitions of consolidation include: a merge or a union; a stabilization or strengthening; or a solidification.

When Bill 28 was reduced, some school divisions in the midst of school reviews interpreted the word "consolidation" in like terms and made the logical, but apparently incorrect, assumption that they would be able to continue with these reviews and ultimately determine whether or not a school would remain open or closed.

Clearly, some definition other than that contained in the standard English dictionary applies to the word "consolidation" in the context of Bill 28, and we recommend that that definition, whatever it may be, be included by way of an amendment to this legislation.

The other term that concerns us is consensus. In the absence of a definition in the legislation itself, we once again turn to a dictionary to find that consensus is an opinion held by all or most. As used in Bill 28, our question is: Does consensus mean that everyone in a school community must agree that a school should be closed, or that most of the people share that opinion? If everyone must agree, the legislation is opening the door to a situation whereby the very few can stymie the will of the majority—a tyranny of the minority, in fact.

If, by consensus, the authors of Bill 28 intend that most must agree—not, by the way, the most common use of the word—that begs the question of how we must define most. In either case, without a viable school-review process, such as the one that has been suspended by Bill 28, there is no process for determining what the will of the community is, whichever definition of consensus we accept.

Next, I refer to alternative uses. Bill 28 also provides that the minister may allow a school to close, if he or she is satisfied that a school board has made reasonable, albeit unsuccessful, efforts to expand the use of the building for appropriate community purposes. While, on the surface, this clause seems perfectly reasonable, it has implications and makes assumptions that must be examined, if not challenged.

The major implication is that school boards are not already making efforts to make available the use of surplus space to community groups. That is simply untrue. The clearest demonstration of this lies in an examination of the relationship between schools and day cares, as it has been developed over the past 20 years. Today, fully 40 percent of Manitoba's licensed day-care spaces are found in school buildings. Well over half of Manitoba's school divisions have schools that include day-care spaces. Through MAST's annual convention, Manitoba's school trustees have adopted policy positions aimed at ensuring that day cares already in place in schools are not easily dislocated.

A secondary implication is that extending the use of schools for other community uses will make schools with declining enrolments financially viable.

In many cases, this assumption is questionable. Most community groups, such as day cares and senior centres, are functioning on tight budgets and are not necessarily able to enter into market-value lease agreements for any space provided in schools.

In the case of day cares, some school divisions provide the space at no charge. Where lease payments do generate a profit for school divisions, section 174 of The Public Schools Act provides that provincial operating grants may be reduced to compensate for any such increased revenue. If one also refers to the guidelines for the disposition of surplus schools' property from 1992, they would find similar direction with greater detail.

If we're renting to some groups, a school division may find it necessary to make leasehold improvements that are required by law, but not funded by the Province. For instance, day-care centres may have minimum requirements for natural light that not all public school buildings meet. In all cases, there are ongoing maintenance costs for which a school division, as landlord—

Madam Vice-Chairperson: You have one minute left.

Mr. Alexander: —resumes responsibility. This section of Bill 28 also makes assumptions about the pent-up demand from community groups. Communities with aging demographics don't generate a lot of school population but neither do they generate significant day-care populations.

There is also a technical consideration that, when you make, adapt or re-uses of schools, you can infringe in urban areas on zoning requirements that require public hearings which may bring the school division into conflict with the local community, as it supports a zoning application. These things can also change the tax liabilities for school division buildings and affect our expenditures.

In summary, the following recommendations: That the legislation be amended to allow for school reviews that were under way, at the time of first reading of Bill 28, to proceed to their conclusion, as determined by vote of the school board in an open meeting; second, that legislation be further amended to allow school boards to initiate school reviews in accordance with the 1982 school closure guidelines, until such time as the regulations are identified;—

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Excuse me, Mr. Alexander, you have used the time but, if you wish to take the time out of the question—

An Honourable Member: He can have leave to go and—

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Mr. Rondeau?

Hon. Jim Rondeau (Minister of Science, Technology, Energy and Mines): I would propose that we ask leave that he goes to finish his presentation, and then we go into his question time.

* (12:20)

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Is that the will of the committee? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Alexander, please proceed.

Mr. Alexander: —that the regulations identified in the proposed PSA section 41(1.5) be developed through an expedited, truly consultative process; that the section of Bill 28 dealing with the extended travel time be amended so as to require school boards to establish policies aimed at minimizing student travel time, with the content of these policies to be determined by communities and their school boards in accordance with local demographic and geographic realities; and, finally, that Bill 28 be amended to ensure that school boards, rather than the minister, remain the final appeal body regarding decisions on school transportation matters.

Our association expresses sincere thanks for this hearing. We're ready for questions.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

Questions?

For clarification, Mr. Alexander, I'm asking if you are intending on presenting for the St. James-Assiniboia School Division, in addition to this.

Mr. Alexander: Yes.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: If so, with the agreement of the committee, would you like him to continue and present—

Some Honourable Members: No.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: No? Okay.

Thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr. Alexander: Okay.

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): Just, actually, in response to one of the points that you raised in your presentation with respect to lease-hold improvements required by law not funded by the Province that

you're speaking to with respect to the day-care centres, I just wanted to point out that recently the announcement with the Family Services and Housing Minister for the choices for families initiative, that we have allocated \$22.5 million in addition to the Public Schools Finance Board capital project for schools, \$22.5 million over the next five years for the purpose of funding the renovation of spaces in schools for day cares.

So that should address that particular concern that you've raised in your presentation, and I thank you for your presentation.

Mr. Alexander: I wasn't sure if that was a comment or a question. That's the reason I didn't respond, Madam Vice-Chair.

The experience of school divisions has been quite varied over time in that occasionally day-care capital works have been funded totally by the school division. Sometimes there's been participation by the Province, and all school divisions in Manitoba look forward to housing day cares. We look forward to forming partnerships with them so that the capital support can be accessed.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Alexander.

Lawrence Lussier, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents. Please proceed, Mr. Lussier.

Mr. Lawrence Lussier (Manitoba Association of School Superintendents): Thank you.

In addressing the proposed legislation, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents recognizes that school divisions have obligations to abide by the provisions of provincial legislation regulations, ministerial guidelines, policies and directives.

MASS is expressing its desire to see in place a decision-making structure with respect to school closures which exercises and promotes good public policy, good management practice and where the important decisions are made closest to the users of the services.

MASS desires to foster good educational leadership and sound organization of schools to provide the best possible education for all Manitoba students and the use of tax dollars entrusted to the school divisions in a prudent and responsible manner. Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act, and the accompanying moratorium on closure of

schools imposes material changes to decision making regarding school closure.

Under the current minister's policy statement regarding guidelines for school closure implemented in October 1982, school divisions must adhere to the framework which requires them to study the educational, financial and community impact of a school closure. The minister's policy statement provides a precise time frame for study and consultation which effectively disallows unduly speedy or ill-considered school closures and requires consultation with the affected communities. Bill 28 would remove the decision from the locally elected authority, which is in the best position to judge the educational benefit or impact on students, by closing or keeping open a school; measure the financial consequences of closing or keeping a small school open; and gauge the social impact on affected communities.

As a matter of general principle, MASS believes that the school divisions take their responsibilities regarding school closure decisions very seriously, having faithfully followed the minister's policy statement on school closure and exercised good judgment with respect to decisions.

No one wants to close schools, but MASS believes that closing schools is a necessity at times. Such times become evident when one considers together factors such as the current level of funding for schools, the recent constraints on school boards to levy taxes, the crumbling schools infrastructure combined with years of underfunded capital costs, declining enrolments, and the difficulties sustaining programming in schools that have become non-viable.

Our discussions with the Province, since the moratorium was announced, lead us to believe that the Province has not begun to calculate the financial effect of Bill 28, nor has it offered funding to alleviate these costs. The authority to determine when it is necessary to close schools has thus far resided with school boards—as it still does in other provinces.

Let's reconsider this bill, go back to the drawing board and find a better solution, one that does not weaken the important democratic voice and authority of the local school board and the community it represents.

Failing that, MASS has three recommendations with respect to Bill 28. MASS recommends that if

the proposed moratorium on school closures becomes statutory, it be declared from April 28 forward, not retroactively. We also recommend that if school closures are to be governed under The Public Schools Act, the regulations for school closures should be expedited. Finally, MASS recommends that the proposed amendments to The Public Schools Act include specific criteria against which a proposed school closure be tested: the impact on educational services to students and the quality of those services; the impact on the financial operations of the division; and the impact on the community.

A moratorium on school closure could have been declared with notice, especially for those school divisions in the process of school review for the possibility of closure, allowing the current processes to reach their own conclusions. The proposed retroactive moratorium violates the process that school divisions have embarked upon in good faith with school communities. In disallowing the result of school closure for a school review process that is in mid-course, the government has created a situation where school divisions will never be able to right their relationships with these communities. In school communities where it is known that the school division would have closed the school without the declaration of a moratorium, it is impossible to rebuild trust, the foundation of all relationships, between the school division and the school community.

If the government is determined to proceed, MASS recommends the following:

Our first recommendation: As written, the proposed Public Schools Act, section 41(1.4) indicates that the moratorium on school closings does not apply to those instances where a school board voted before January 1, 2008, to close a school. It is recommended that this section be amended to indicate that the moratorium does not apply to those instances where a school board initiated a school review, in accordance with the current school closure guidelines, prior to April 28, the date of the first reading of the bill. This amendment would mean that the significant amount of work already done to explore options and build community consensus about the future of schools under review would not be nullified.

Recommendation No. 2: It's recommended that the Manitoba government expedite the development of the regulations identified in the proposed Public

Schools Act, section 41(1.5), which would end the moratorium on school closure and provide clarity for school division operations pertaining to school reviews. Such clarity would be preferred to the uncertainty contained in the proposed PSA, section 41(1.3), where the minister's approval is required for school closure.

* (12:30)

MASS observes that there is a significant financial burden for school divisions associated with keeping schools open that might otherwise have been closed. This financial burden is amplified by the bill's requirement to restrict student ride times to and from school where additional routes will be added to meet this expectation. We note that the magnitude of the current grant for the schools with declining enrolment declared to be community schools is quite small in comparison to the actual cost of keeping these schools open.

If the budgets of school boards are burdened in this way, the unintended result may be the cutting of jobs, programs and services. Such action would further diminish the viability and quality of education in schools that remain open under the moratorium. MASS observes that there are negative educational consequences resulting from keeping schools open when they have been determined non-viable by school boards.

In such schools it becomes impossible to provide an appropriate level of specialist teacher time to support student needs. The workloads of individual teachers increases and can become unmanageable. Because there are far fewer families in such a school, a shortage of parent volunteers is experienced. Schools with non-viable enrolments have little flexibility in dealing with student placement within classes of the school in order to appropriately deal with regular class composition issues such as conflict.

Such schools often experience increased concentrations of students with special needs, further taxing the already overtaxed student support services in the school. It is recommended that the proposed Public Schools Act section 41(1.3) be amended to reflect the criteria against which each circumstance for school closure can be tested. These criteria are recommended to be as follows: first, the impact of school closure on educational services to students and the quality of those services; second, the impact of closure on the financial operations of the division; and third, the impact of closure on the community.

Further, we recommend that any of the terms used in the legislation should be clear. Terms used in the Bill 28 as written, such as consolidation and consensus, among others, need to be defined so that there is a common understanding on the part of all the stakeholders as to what precisely the legislation intends. We hold that the decision to close or amalgamate schools should remain under the authority of the local community. If the government sees otherwise, we hope that the government will amend the bill to accommodate a more reasonable approach, one that respects the process that has already transpired in some 13 Manitoba communities and keeps at the forefront the educational needs of our students, the financial situation of our local boards and the impact on the local community.

I thank you.

Mr. Cliff Cullen (Turtle Mountain): Thank you very much for your presentation.

Clearly, if Bill 28 goes forward as existing there will be substantial extra costs to local school boards. The section on community schools and the grants is quite vague. In fact it says the Minister of Finance (Mr. Selinger) may make grants. I'm just wondering if you've had any indication from the minister and his department what level those grants may be in terms of the actual extra costs that school divisions will incur.

Mr. Lussier: We have been informed that the current level of funding for a community school is \$65,000 annually. That's all the information we have at this time. We don't anticipate that it would be much more than that. For a lot of school divisions, that is less than the average teacher's salary.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Any more questions?

Seeing there are no more questions, thank you very much for your—Mr. Rondeau?

Mr. Rondeau: This is not a question.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Thank you very much, Mr. Lussier.

Mr. Rondeau: Madam Vice-Chair, I would like to ask for leave without precedent that we have Bruce Alexander present as chair of the St. James school division. I know he presented earlier, but—*[interjection]* He's next in line, but I know he stepped in for the Manitoba Association for School Trustees. I'm just hoping that he will be given consideration to present also in this case.

Madam Vice-Chairperson: Is there leave of the committee for Mr. Alexander to present? Is there leave of the committee? Does the committee agree? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Alexander.

Madam Chairperson in the Chair

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Alexander. You may start.

Mr. Bruce Alexander (St. James-Assiniboia School Division): Thanks, Madam Chair, and, again, ministers, honourable members. The St. James-Assiniboia School Division appreciates the opportunity to be heard. Particularly, we appreciate your graciousness in granting leave this morning.

The St. James-Assiniboia School Division is a community in the western part of Winnipeg; we have 8,700 students currently. We have a broad range of programming in 25 schools and we have declined from our maximum enrolment of 22,000 students approximately 20 years ago. We come this morning to present the view of locally elected school trustees in St. James-Assiniboia, giving our perspective on Bill 28.

The duties of school boards are set out in The Public Schools Act in section 41(1)(p). What it says is one of the duties of school boards is to determine the number, kind, grade, and description, of schools to be established and maintained;

This responsibility, we believe, can only be effectively carried out when it is accompanied by appropriate authority. However, we recognize that this authority is limited in scope and must be in balance with the overall provincial directions that provide quality education to all.

For the purpose of this submission, we will address only those issues which impact our school division. These issues include the announced moratorium on school closure, the subsequent regulations to be enacted to move forward and closure through community consensus and community use of schools.

First, the moratorium on school closures. Moratoriums are often the result when events in our world overtake government policy and really encourage us to stop and require some further study and thought. We recommend that this moratorium be short and be imposed only to create the regulations in consultation with school boards. It is important that the needs of our young people will not be suspended

during this time because they will continue to grow and these needs must be met without delay.

Our enrolment decline in St. James-Assiniboia has extended over 25 years. We've responded to this decline with a process that has resulted in scarce resources being allocated in an effective and efficient manner. We have been able to maintain a variety of programming at all schools. This programming has recognized a broad range of abilities and interests in our student population.

Unfortunately, enrolment decline will continue in St. James-Assiniboia. We project, within the next five years, we will reduce by a further 794 students.

Issues of enrolment decline are very unique to local communities in their character and causes and are best dealt with by local school boards with appropriate authority. Bill 28 in its current form will reduce local school board authority and render school boards less effective in dealing with demographic changes beyond their control, demographic changes which are really forces of nature.

Governments should properly be concerned about good process in these matters, unless with the judgment of local school boards who are held accountable by the communities that elect them. We encourage the minister to replace the current moratorium on school closures as soon as possible with a process that acknowledges the need for local decision-making.

Community consensus is certainly of interest. Most appropriately, government is concerned that, if school closure or consolidation is the desired action, there will be a consensus of parents and residents who are not parents in the area that the school serves.

* (12:40)

Bill 28 does not provide any definition of consensus or how consensus might be measured. It is important that this matter is defined in the act or, at best, in the pursuant regulations. I think we could agree that there are three possible ways to determine consensus—a plebiscite, a petition or a comprehensive joint-committee process involving the community. A plebiscite is a very expensive way to determine consensus; it requires an election and it's a process that, due to its very nature, will focus on interests, rather than on better results in the system. It does not well provide comprehensive community consideration and critical dialogue.

Petitions have been suggested as a means to determine consensus. However, we believe that petitions provide the least opportunity for comprehensive review and critical dialogue. They tend to be interest-based, narrow in scope, a quick conversation on the doorstep, with little help to a resident to understand the complex nature of the need for a particular change within the public school system that is being recommended by a joint committee. It really reinforces an us versus them attitude and brings forward emotional responses rather than reasoned responses based on a review of evidence and focussed on positive results.

The noted educational assessment authority, Rick DuFour, suggests, We have arrived at consensus when all points of view have been heard and the will of the group is evident – even to those who most oppose it.

In St. James-Assiniboia we developed a school review process that we feel determines best the will of the group. This is described and given authority by Board Policy KC and Regulation KC-R, and it's attached to your document.

The schools review committees provide membership from the school division, administration and governors as well as school site administrators and teaching staff. These members are useful in providing professional expertise and answering accurately the many questions that occur in the process. Membership is also provided to community members elected at an initial public information meeting. Parents and non-parent residents hold the majority of voting power. They bring a community perspective to the process. The schools review committee meets over six months beginning in the fall. They delve into all aspects of school operations in curriculum, in extracurricular activities and school community partnerships. Many questions are asked and much is learned which later forms the recommendations for action. Interim and final reports are made at a minimum of two more public meetings. Public meetings provide the community with an opportunity to ask questions, receive feedback and give input on what may be determined in final recommendations. This is truly a process of local involvement.

The review committee expresses its dream for the future in a list of expected performances in a school consolidation. They are shared with the community, reported to the board and the expectations are highly useful in guiding the board to

a decision and guiding, subsequent to the decision, administrators and staff in preparing for the change.

Community discussions and questions consume hundreds of hours, but they bring a focus away from interests towards better results in the system as previously described. Historically, the recommendations focus primarily on programs and services with a view to improvements in effectiveness of program accessibility, quality and choice.

Fiscal efficiency is an important concern that is viewed as secondary following consideration of how students are best served. Historically, we found that attention to quality and effectiveness brings efficiencies. These savings can be used to augment programs that may not otherwise be possible because of their costs. In the question time, I'd be happy to give examples.

We submit that the only way that consensus can be reached and measured is through a joint committee process that involves elected community members with a majority of votes on the review committee. Only in this way can a community gain in-depth knowledge about the negative effects of enrolment decline and what options are available to best provide program access, quality and choice with reasonably available resources. Granted, it does require commitment from a citizen to attend meetings and hear measured and reasoned arguments over a period of time. However, it is a democratic process that reinforces community involvement in decision-making and we believe it is the only way to reach reason and form consensus based on results that are best for our students.

Ultimately, the work of a joint committee must be considered for action by a school board. School boards are completely accountable for their judgment and government should consider good process as the emphasis in statute, regulation and guideline. They should consider any appeal based on inadequate process alone. The judgment of school boards should be accepted following an appropriate process involving the community. We would request a focus of statute and regulation in determining consensus to follow the same principles of commitment and understanding as the example of our process shows.

Community use of schools is an important focus of Bill 28. In the St. James-Assiniboia community, we welcome community use of our schools and have a long-standing practice of accommodating community needs where feasible.

Madam Chairperson: One minute.

Mr. Alexander: We have involved use by other levels of government, arts groups, 20 child day-care centres, community groups, independent schools, private trade schools, sheltered workshops, adult learning and literacy centres on lease agreements and many other community uses on occasional permits.

We feel that secondary development is important in a maturing community. We know the government is concerned about infrastructure, but sometimes if you can change that infrastructure into a liquid form and allow it to flow to a new location to meet the new needs of students, that is important, and it's one that we have had an excellent partnership with government on in our last school closure.

In summary, Bill 28 restricts the ability of school boards to respond to local conditions. They impact the local ratepayer. Mill rates can only be flattened by expenditure reduction or an increase in the tax base. Redevelopment of obsolete school sites to taxable uses will help reduce our expenditures and enhance programming to students.

We believe that we have a close connection to our community and we're elected to represent a diverse view at our board table. We invite you to examine the process that we have used and developed over 20 years to reach those kinds of consensus. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Alexander.

Are there any questions?

Thank you very much.

I would now like to call on Craig Stahlke, Pembina Trails School Division. Do you have materials to distribute?

Mr. Craig Stahlke (Pembina Trails School Division): Yes, we do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Please start when you're ready.

Mr. Stahlke: Attending with me this afternoon is the vice-chair of our board, Karen Velthuys.

You've heard some of the same sorts of views expressed by the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents. The Pembina Trails School Division recognizes its obligation to abide by the legislation, the ministerial guidelines, the policy statement directives that come from the government.

We believe that these directives, these guidelines, the legislation should reflect good public practice, good management decisions and provide for the decisions being made closest to the users of the services.

The division also believes that the use and organization of the schools should provide the best possible education for all of our students and that the tax dollars entrusted to the division by the taxpayers be used in a prudent and responsible manner.

We find that the minister's policy statement, the existing one that was implemented in 1982, recognizes three fundamental components that are important when considering school closure and that these be discussed in consultation with affected school communities. These are the educational impacts, the financial consequences and the community impact of the decision with respect to closing a school.

Bill 28 removes from the locally elected authority the decision with respect to the closure of the school, when we believe that it is the locally elected authority that is in the best position to judge the educational benefit or impact on the students, to measure the financial consequences and to gauge the social impact on the communities.

Many school divisions, including Pembina Trails, have been conducting the required studies and consultations for schools placed under review to determine whether they should remain open or be closed. It's our view that Bill 28's core and fundamental change to this process, including transferring the closure decision from the public school divisions directly to the minister, should not be made with a retroactive effect. Good public policy practice changes should be made on a prospective, not a retroactive basis. School divisions which have been going through the process under the former rules in good faith ought to be allowed to complete the process and make the decisions pursuant to the current minister's policy statement.

*(12:50)

Consequently, our recommendation No. 1 is that the legislation should be amended to apply only to schools designated as candidates for review for closure on or after April 28, 2008. Schools designated as candidates for review for closure prior to April 28, 2008, should continue to be subjected to the former minister's policy until a determination has been made by the school division as to whether or not to close the school.

Moving on to our second recommendation, the most important fiduciary responsibility of boards of trustees and school divisions, and for that matter of any decision maker with respect to education—who has power over education in Manitoba—is the educational services to the students and the quality of those services. All other considerations must be subordinate to the educational impact on students.

When schools are being considered for closure, school divisions assess the educational viability of the school under review. Questions such as those listed in our submission but not limited to the following are raised and answered by the school divisions. Our superintendent of education then and senior educators turn their minds to the class structure and flexibility that's available to students in schools with seriously declining enrolments. Whether there are adequate specialist teachers available; whether they are resource teachers, counsellors, librarians, language specialists. Is there an increased—an inordinate concentration of special needs students? Is there an adequate supply of parent volunteers and what is the prospect for future enrolment changes? Will that exacerbate the problem or will it relieve the problem?

Subordinate to the educational considerations but important in their own right are the financial and community considerations. Should the closure of a school and the consolidation of the student body into another school improve the educational services—let's say we can determine that to be the case—and also result in lower costs—let's say we can determine that to be the case—the decision to close the school would appear to be in the best interests of both the students and the taxpayers who fund the school division through their local property taxes. It seems reasonable to conclude that if the closure of a small school will improve the educational services to students and reduce the financial burden to the local taxpayer, that small school should be closed.

In the case of Pembina Trails, these aren't some concocted hypotheticals; those are the reality of our own ongoing examination in the review that we've been undertaking.

The second subordinated consideration is the impact that a school closure may have on the community. In considering the impact on a community, there may need to be a distinction drawn between closing a school in a large metropolitan area as opposed to a small or more isolated rural community. The closing in an urban area and

consolidating a school with a nearby school that may be one kilometre away—and that is again the reality in Pembina Trails, not a hypothetical—does not in our view disrupt nor cause the disintegration of a community.

In such a case as described, there are no marked negative commercial consequences. Businesses are not being adversely affected by the change. Parents are not geographically removed from the school that the students would attend. Parents would have access to volunteer. Parents would have easy access to the school staff and, in fact, these students may continue to play in the same community club they played in before, which would be the same one.

Consequently, our recommendation No. 2 is that the legislation ought to be amended to reflect all three of these criteria: the impact on the closure on educational services, which has to be the primary criterion; the financial impact; and the impact on the community.

Further, we would suggest that the terms used in the legislation should be clear. Terms such as consolidation and consensus need to be clarified so that all the stakeholders can clearly understand what the legislation intends and that we aren't engaged in debate and discussion over what we really mean.

Our third recommendation deals with this connection between the use of schools for day-care centres and other community activities and the school closure decision. In the Pembina Trails School Division, we do not see this link and, in fact, we think it's wrongly constructed. It is clearly important for any board to consider the merits of keeping a school that has been closed available as a community asset. We do support that. It would be more important in our view to establish any requirement for school divisions to make closed schools available to community groups through the minister's policy governing the disposition of surplus public school property rather than tying it to the school closure decision.

Pembina Trails supports the use of surplus school space by community groups. The policy statement referenced previously requires that community or non-profit organizations leasing space in surplus school property must assume all costs associated with the operation of the property, including the maintenance and repair, insurance, taxes, and so forth.

Further, day-care leasing spaces under the school divisions under the standard agreement, pursuant to The Community Child Day Care Standards Act, restricts rent that we can charge, based upon the terms of that standard agreement. It's done in the same way or in a similar way as for what we would charge to day-care centres, if a school is closed.

There is absolutely no funding contemplated by the Province, the school division or the day cares, which would allow funding to flow, from the day-care centres to school divisions, to subsidize the instructional operations of a school division operating that instructional service in that school. There's nothing. If there is the belief that there is, that is not true. Even if it were permitted, we've undertaken our own examinations. Day-care centres do not have the money available to provide that subsidy.

Consequently, our third recommendation is that the legislation should disassociate the use of schools by community groups from the school-closure consideration. Should the minister wish to place a greater onus on school divisions to make space available for community users, that goal can be achieved whether a school remains open or has been closed.

In cases where a closed school is retained by a school division for use by day-care centres and non-profit community groups, the legislation should be amended to provide that the Province will continue to provide the appropriate capital grants and occupancy grants to that school division in respect of that closed school and, further, exempt school divisions from the municipal taxes that are immediately imposed and levied on a school the day it's closed.

The recommendations, being proposed by the board of trustees of the Pembina Trails School Division, places a much greater emphasis on what is best for the students in terms of the educational services which they receive and on the financial impact to the local taxpayers than does Bill 28 in its current form.

We respectfully urge the Manitoba Legislature to adopt the changes to Bill 28 that are being recommended by the division.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Stahlke.

Committee Substitution

Madam Chairperson: I just got an announcement. I would like to make the following membership substitutions, effective immediately, for the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development: Mr. Reid for Mr. Jha.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: Are there questions?

Mrs. Heather Stefanson (Tuxedo): Thanks for being here and presenting to the committee on this beautiful Saturday afternoon. We appreciate you taking the time out of your schedules and being here today. Obviously, a very important issue to people within our community, within communities all across Manitoba.

My question for you: Are you aware—well, certainly, I know there's been legislation in the past. We have spoken about it, where often the government will come forward with legislation which will affect the local budgets. Oftentimes, it affects your budget, but the funding doesn't flow with the announcement and can put the school divisions in a difficult position with respect to coming up with the funds to be able to fulfil the obligations of the school division under the legislation.

Is this something that you've seen before, with respect to other legislation that has come forward and affected the school divisions?

Mr. Stahlke: Obviously, that's true. It happens every year, if there are new requirements placed on school divisions to provide educational services. It's unusual that the government is able to provide more than simply a contribution to school divisions in order to fund that, and we have to look to the local taxpayers.

In the case of Pembina Trails, this is particularly true, given our economic circumstances.

* (13:00)

Madam Chairperson: Thank you very much for your—*[interjection]*

Any other questions? Seeing none, thank you, Mr. Stahlke.

I would now like to call on Shannon Forest, private citizen. Do you have materials to distribute?

Ms. Shannon Forest (Private Citizen): Yes, I do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. You may begin.

Ms. Forest: Madam Chair, Honourable Minister, committee members, I'm here today to voice my support of Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act. I'm a member of the Westview School Parent Council, and I was also a parent representative on the Westview School Review Committee.

As you know, the proposed legislation imposes a moratorium on school closures and encourages the use of school buildings for appropriate community purposes. I'm sure most or all of you are familiar with the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*. The centre of the community was the one-room schoolhouse that all of the children attended regardless of age or grade. But the building was more than just a school. It also served as the church. It was a place for town meetings, weddings, funerals, local celebrations. Virtually all of the community gatherings were held at the school.

A nostalgic portrayal of a bygone era? Perhaps, but there's a lesson in this little bit of nostalgia. Back then, the school was the centre, the heart and the soul of the community and there's no reason why that should be different today. The local schools, especially the elementary schools, are still the heart of our communities. It makes good sense to use the schools to benefit the communities in which they're located. Each of us, through our taxes, contributes to the cost of building and maintaining these schools. But why do we essentially limit their use from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, September to June? The facilities are there. The buildings, the playgrounds, the schoolyards. Other uses can and should be made of these facilities in order to maximize the benefit to the community.

Day care or nursery school programs within the schools where space is available. The pre-school age children who attend at these day cares located within the schools are likely to be less intimidated at the idea of starting school in kindergarten. The children are already familiar with the school surroundings and they look forward to making the move from the day-care setting to the classroom setting, just a short walk down the hall.

Community clubs, youth programs, drop-in centres, after-school hours, evenings and weekends. In communities where there are no community clubs, the school facilities could be used to offer programming that would normally be offered through a community club. It provides a safe environment for our children and young people to go

to give them something to do to keep them off the streets, to keep them out of trouble.

Seniors programming, exercise, offering basic computer skills. The schools have the computer labs available. Why not make them available to the seniors both during and after school hours?

Drop-in centres for parents with pre-school aged children providing them with an opportunity to socialize, to expand their community horizons, to provide information programming on parenting, health, et cetera.

Summer programming for children to give them places to go, things to do and to keep them off the streets and out of trouble.

School divisions are to be commended for their tireless efforts to ensure that our children receive a quality education. Part of those efforts includes fiscal responsibility. Closing schools, however, is not an answer to, or a solution for, fiscal responsibility. Closing schools and forcing children to move to another school results in larger class sizes. Teachers are not able to spend as much time with each child, individually assessing their strengths and weaknesses to ensure that they get the help and education that they need and deserve.

Children with difficulties or mild learning disabilities are more likely to fall through the cracks. The whole school environment becomes less personal as it is difficult for all of the staff to get to know each child regardless of grade. There is a greater likelihood for bullying. Studies have shown, and most educators would agree, that smaller classroom sizes are preferable for teaching children. This is particularly true in the early years or elementary level. The safety of our children becomes an issue as children are required to travel longer distances to get to and from school. In urban settings, this includes children, in many cases, very young children having to cross major thoroughfares to get to and from school each day. In rural settings, it includes the length of time that our children are required to spend on a school bus travelling to and from school.

The greatest consideration to be made regarding school closures is the benefit to our children that will flow from such an action. School divisions have said that the benefit is cost savings. I agree that educating our children comes at a price. The children that we educate today are the business men and women and

leaders of tomorrow. I say that their education and the strength of our community are priceless.

Mr. Alexander stated earlier that a large number of the day cares that operate in the province are already located within schools, and I believe that this is a most appropriate place for these schools to be. In the school that my children attend, Westview, we have a day care within the school, and it is willing to expand to meet the demonstrated need for day care within our community. There is space within the school for the day care to expand.

During the review process, however, it was made absolutely clear that even if the day care expanded, it would have no impact on the enrolment of Westview School and, therefore, the existence, continued operation and expansion of the day care would be given little or no consideration in a decision to close Westview School. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

I do have questions.

Mr. Daryl Reid (Transcona): Thank you, Shannon, for your presentation here this afternoon, for taking the time to appear before this committee, and for your work on behalf of the families of Westview Community School.

I do note that you say in your presentation here, there's a place for town meetings, local celebrations, and I know Westview School has had many community groups using the school facilities in the after-school hours. I know that even my own children had the opportunity to make use of this school in the after hours through various programs.

But I want to ask you a question with respect to some of the comments that were made by some of the previous presenters, and one of the comments that was made is that this legislation should not be made retroactive, in other words, to the beginning of this year, which I think, if I understand that correctly, would indicate that Westview School would remain up for closure. Your thoughts on that.

The second question is with respect to closing of urban schools and consolidating them with a nearby school perhaps as much as a kilometre away. It says it would not cause a disintegration of a community or disrupt the school life or the families that are involved with that particular community school. I'd like to know your thoughts on those two matters.

Ms. Forest: Okay. Well, if the retroactivity of the legislation was removed, yes, Westview School would continue to be a school under review. As it turned out, the date that this legislation was announced was the date that the review committee was meeting after the last public meeting to begin our deliberations to make recommendations on the future of Westview School.

When my children started attending the school, we celebrated our 50th anniversary of Westview School. The school was established in 1953. It continues to grow strong. Our enrolment may not be what it is or what it used to be. Part of that, I believe, is in response to the shifting of grade 6 from early years designation to middle years designation. We are a strong and vibrant community. We have many volunteers within our community. We have many parents who come in daily to help at the school, and I'd hate to see it close.

We are very strong in our opposition to having the school close, and I would hate to see the retroactivity in this legislation change, that we would continue to be under that pressure.

Mr. Reid: The second point that I raised was with respect to the comments that were made that closure of a school, such as Westview, would not disrupt or cause any disintegration of the community, and I must conclude by that comment that it would have no impact on the families. What's your view with regard to that type of thought?

Ms. Forest: I believe that there would be a large impact. We have a number of families who are at what are currently the outside borders of our catchment and who would continue to be at the outside borders of the catchment if Westview were to close and the children to be moved to Radisson.

Many of them are at the outside edge of the border, but do not qualify for busing, which means that parents with young children, in some cases infant children, walking their children to and from school every day are forced to walk an additional five to 10 blocks to get their children to school, crossing two major thoroughfares, one of which does not—although it has a lighted crosswalk, the division's been attempting to hire someone to man the crosswalk and it's been unable to. You're spreading out the community, you're pushing it further and further away, and it would definitely have an impact on the families who have farther to go to get to and from school—the closeness, the tight-knit feeling, that

you have of the community by closing one school and forcing the children to attend another.

* (13:10)

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

We have time for one more question.

Mr. Bjornson: Thank you very much, Ms. Forest, for your presentation.

I was just wondering, in the meetings that were held to discuss the possible closure in the review process, had there been any mention of the anticipated subsequent use for the school once it was no longer a school building, if it did indeed become a surplus building? Was there any discussion of what it might then be in the event that it was indeed closed?

Ms. Forest: There were definitely concerns raised, issues raised, regarding the future of the school building, if the school were to close. But as far as any future use of the school, that was left at an if-and-when scenario. There was no direct or specific contemplation made of what would happen to the school. It was if and when, and the division could not and would not answer that question because the decision had not yet been made to close the school.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation.

Ms. Forest: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on George Marshall, private citizen. George Marshall? George Marshall will be moved to the bottom.

I will now call on Jill Kosowan, private citizen. Jill Kosowan? Jill Kosowan will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Glenn Hollyoake, private citizen. Glenn Hollyoake? Glenn Hollyoake will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Bob Fraser, River East Transcona School Division. Mr. Fraser, you may begin.

Mr. Bob Fraser (River East Transcona School Division): Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to present to you this afternoon, and not this evening.

On behalf of the board of trustees of the River East Transcona School Division, I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present our concerns and issues to the proposed legislation, Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act.

Approximately one year ago, the River East Transcona School Division began the difficult process of reviewing school catchment areas with a critical focus on assessing the appropriate utilization of our 42 school facilities. We forecast that by September 2012 enrolment will be at 15,651, which is a reduction of approximately 2,625 students since the amalgamation of the previous River East School Division No. 9 and the urban section of the previous Transcona Springfield School Division No. 12. Not unlike school division, school boards across the province, and indeed, across North America, we felt a responsibility to students, parents, taxpayers to deal with the excess capacity within the divisional infrastructure.

As mentioned, our process began over one year ago. Comprehensive analysis of the catchment areas of all 42 schools were conducted. The analysis consisted of enrolment history, school capacity and enrolment projection, including the impact of new developments. The outcome of the analysis identified several schools that were utilized at or below 50 percent of capacity and projected to remain at the identified levels.

As a result of our review, a follow-up study was initiated to consider schools for review that met the following key triggers: enrolment below 50 percent capacity, either current or projected over the next five years; and/or a projected enrolment of less than 125 students. Additionally, it was agreed and understood that there had to be an ability to accommodate the students in neighbouring schools, and, where possible and practical, school bus transportation was to remain neutral. Although several schools met one or the other of the triggering factors, challenges existed to fully accommodate students adequately in neighbouring schools. Consequently only two schools emerged as viable candidates for continued review. The two schools in question were Sherwood School and Westview School. The following table summarizes the enrolment projections to 2018. I'm not going to read those out, but you can see them on your sheets.

The division re-examined the catchment areas and felt that any realignment could be achieved in a fair and reasonable manner while at the same time maintaining a sense of community. Studies have also shown overwhelmingly that larger schools offer enhanced educational opportunities to students by providing greater access to programs and services not readily available in small school settings.

At a special meeting of the board of trustees on September 11, 2007, trustees at River East Transcona School Division concluded that the evidence provided by the senior administration was compelling and passed the following motion: that Sherwood School and Westview School be identified as candidates for review in accordance with the Province of Manitoba's policy statement regarding guidelines for school closure, and, further, that administration prepare a communication plan to notify parents and residents served by the above-named schools, and, further, that administration convene meetings of all interested parents and residents of the affected school to present an informational report outlining educational, community and financial implications with respect to the continued operation or possible closure of the schools under review. Said meetings to be scheduled in the school gymnasiums.

The consultation process began with presentations. Attendees at the community meetings were informed as to the purpose of the review along with data showing enrolment projections, projected cost savings, proposed catchment realignments and processes to be followed. Lastly, each of the communities was asked to select representatives to the committees.

The school community committees were constituted and several meetings were convened in addition to community forums where the broader community had opportunity for input. A comprehensive communication plan was developed and utilized to ensure all stakeholders were kept informed of the continuous process and information developed by the committees. This included extensive and ongoing question-and-answer information on the division Web site, as well as distribution of the committee minutes and information packets as they became available. All of this was done in keeping with not only the intent, but the spirit of the government's policy statement regarding guidelines for school closure.

The foregoing is provided as context to highlight for the Law Amendments Review Committee, Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, and, more specifically, the government of Manitoba, that the trustees of the River East Transcona School Division did not enter into this process lightly. Trustees considered very seriously their roles and responsibilities in dealing with the quality of education provided to the students of the division, as well as their financial responsibility to the taxpayers

of the division, the ultimate goal being the long-term financial sustainability of the school division.

We wish to express our profound concern and sadness that the government chose to circumvent the inherent duties of school boards as references in The Public Schools Act by preventing them from exercising their fundamental obligation to the communities they serve.

*(13:20)

To further exacerbate the current dilemma, in March 2008, the government introduced a new source of funding to school divisions, the tax incentive grant, in a direct effort to encourage trustees to maintain the 2008 special tax levy at the 2007 levels.

These two actions, Bill 28 and TIG, are clearly incongruent. Bill 28 contradicts the purpose of the TIG and creates confusion for school boards and taxpayers. With one initiative, TIG, the government is focussing on tax relief while with the other, Bill 28, is preventing school boards from doing just that.

As a school board we stand at a crossroads. How do we face our taxpayers and explain to them that our efforts to find efficiency and consequently cost savings—in our particular case it is estimated at approximately \$1 million per year—cannot be achieved by closing underutilized facilities? More specifically, that we have been directed to maintain these facilities and the extra cost burden. How do we explain to the parents of the students in these small settings that we are unable to provide them with the same level of programming opportunities and services available at other neighbouring schools? How do we explain to the rest of the parents in our school division that the only significant options that the government will allow the school division to pursue in the face of a declining student population, and hence declining financial resources, is the reduction of student program offerings or the reduction of teaching staff with the associated increase in class sizes? As you can see, these are very difficult questions to answer. As a school division we are already operating at a cost-per-student ratio that is less than all of the other metro school divisions but one.

We do not wish to suggest that the Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth (Mr. Bjornson) does not have the right to direct school boards. This power is vested in section 41(1)(y) of The Public Schools Act, which states that every school board

shall comply with directives of the minister. However, we do wish to state that Bill 28 usurps the powers of school boards and undermines the roles that the community has elected them to perform.

In conclusion, on behalf of the River East Transcona School Division, we request that Bill 28 be defeated. At the very least, we ask that Bill 28 be amended to allow school divisions who have already initiated review processes to complete the process as outlined in the government's Policy Statement Regarding Guidelines for School Closure.

Again, we wish to thank the committee for the opportunity to make our presentation on Bill 28, strengthening local schools, and see the hardship that it represents for our school division.

Thank you very much.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Fraser.

Are there any questions?

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Fraser, to you and Mr. Pottage, for coming before this committee here this afternoon, for giving up a beautiful Saturday to make a presentation.

I do know that this school division has held consultation meetings at Westview School and I believe at Sherwood School, and we thank you for following that process and for giving the parent advisory councils the opportunity to add some comment and to be involved in the process. But I have to ask a further question with respect to the use of the facilities because there are some folks say that perhaps it might not be possible to expand further community use. In our community you may not be aware that there are a number of folks that are asking for additional day-care spaces to be made available.

Is our school division, River East Transcona School Division, of the mind that we could utilize particular schools like Westview and other schools in our community to allow for further day-care expansion opportunities for the young families of our community that are calling on our government to have such spaces available?

Mr. Fraser: Mr. Reid, we have not decided on whether or not these schools will close or not. These schools are under review. Until that happens, until we were—if we were allowed to continue with the process after the decisions were made, one way or the other, then, at that point, absolutely, we would

look at everything that was recommended to the board.

I know, because I sat on the Sherwood School review, that there were recommendations coming on whether or not the school closes or stays open. There was a list on both sides of the ledger. Would it have been? Well, I can tell you that one of the recommendations was to put in a day care in that school long before this bill came—long before the bill was made public, let's put it that way. We were not aware this bill was coming.

We're prepared to work with government. We're prepared to work with our community. This has not been something that we cherished. This is not a pleasant situation for school boards, but we felt it was necessary to put these schools under review. The final decision had not been made, what to do with them prior to this bill coming.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there other questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation.

Mr. Fraser: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Anna-Marie Westervelt. Do you have materials for distribution?

Ms. Anna-Marie Westervelt (Private Citizen): I do.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Please begin your presentation.

Ms. Westervelt: Thank you.

Thank you for the invitation to voice my opinion about Bill 28. I have two children attending Westview elementary school, a wonderful, small school where I've had the privilege of serving on the parent council and that has survived two prior closure reviews and continues to thrive.

I'm pleased to see the Province of Manitoba taking a greater interest in education. Bill 28, strengthening local schools, is a promising move to protect and nurture the diverse ways that children are being educated in this province. School boards do well with the tasks assigned to them, but they are unable to fully comprehend the inner workings of a single-school community. Unless one is immersed in the community, knowing the value it holds for its community members is difficult to ascertain. Giving

weight to the opinions of the parents and residents of a school is imperative in deciding the value of a school. For this reason, I am in complete approval of the government's requirement that a consensus among the affected parents and residents be present before the school's closed. Parents and residents of the community in question are in the best position to understand the consequences of closing a school.

It costs money to have a small local school. It costs money to teach using fast-growing technology. It costs money to offer language immersion schools. It costs money to furnish supports for children with special needs and requirements. It costs money to provide a wide array of services and opportunities in gymnasiums and enrichment opportunities. But these monetary expenses pale in comparison to the costs if we don't provide them. We cannot be preoccupied by dollars and cents when equipping our students to walk steadily and productively into the future. Our children will be enriched for the time, effort and money that we spend on them today.

Canada is built from diverse elements. We are stronger for it. Providing a varied menu of schooling options leads to the greatest number of students reached. It nurtures the greatest imaginative possibilities. Each person here today is the product of yesterday's efforts. Think of what you have received, what opportunities were given to you and what heights you have reached. Think now of what legacy we can create for our children so they can achieve what we can't even imagine in the years ahead.

* (13:30)

Small schools are easy targets. What's the harm in transferring children from one small school to another larger, better equipped school just outside the neighbourhood? Plenty. The community loses a support. Children are uprooted and have further to travel. I don't think I need to remind the committee that Winnipeg winters do not facilitate long walks. Traffic increases, schools grow bigger and more preoccupied with internal needs. Students are more likely to become a number than a name. Newcomers have more difficulty becoming part of a larger group. When was the last time you made a friend in a crowd?

Westview and all small schools can provide what larger schools cannot, a small school environment. There are children who thrive in large schools, that's good. It fits in well with streamlined budgets. But children do exist who need smaller communities in order to thrive. It's unfortunate that

their needs cannot fit neatly into a small cost-effective budget, but that should not be our driving concern. Instead, our concern should be how to best fulfil the goal of education for all. Education is not a business where profits and costs are measured against the production of a product. A school's product is at least 12 years in the making.

Manitoba should pride itself on providing for the diverse needs of its students. Closing smaller schools based only on cost-saving factors would be contrary to that laudable goal. Bill 28 is beginning a beneficial chain reaction with the intention to establish a program to strengthen the links between families, the community and local schools. Schools are an anchor of a community, and strengthening the ties between schools and communities, students and residents, and generations, can only lead to enhanced respect, communication and co-operation within a community.

Westview is an example of this. It's a vibrant, thriving family that impacts the community around it. We hold activities like movie nights and a family fun dance for our school families, but we also look outside of ourselves. At Christmastime, our small school of Westview filled hampers for three families. Westview's leadership students are connecting with a senior's group by serving them lunch and exercising with them, and will be chronicling the seniors' memories as a class project. Money was raised for both the Terry Fox Run and during Wear Green for a Dream. The grade 1 class participates in Pennies from Heaven on a yearly basis. A drop-in walking program is available to the community every Tuesday and Thursday morning during the winter. Our parent room hosts drop-in programs for parents of preschoolers in the community. Many of these children experience a smoother transition into kindergarten since they know Westview is their school already.

We are in the process of revitalizing our playground with community use in mind. We have welcomed international students into our school family. We have a school clean-up day once a year. We are actively looking at ways that we can facilitate situations that grow our students into productive, socially conscious citizens of the future. How is it possible to reduce all of this into a dollar amount? Do these accomplishments fall short just because we have fewer students than other schools?

I have a first-hand knowledge of the importance of a small school. My son has been diagnosed with

autism. He struggles with many social tasks and needs understanding individuals in order to fully participate in the world around him until he has learned coping mechanisms. Westview's size is ideal for this. Not only is my son known by every student in his grade, but every staff member knows him by name and most students know him by sight. My husband and I credit his incredible gains in both academic and social skills to the supportive and nurturing small-school environment of Westview.

My daughter also has special needs. She can be labelled as an elective mute, which means that she is unable to verbalize her needs or wants in large social settings. She didn't speak one word out loud her entire kindergarten year, but this year in grade 2 she has achieved the ability to read short stories to her entire class in a whisper. I dread to think of how both my children will regress if their unique needs are disregarded in the interests of costs and they are sent to a school with twice the amount of students and staff. I am certain that they will take years to recover from that blow.

Bill 28 is the sign that the Province of Manitoba is willing to ensure that the well-being of children is one of our highest priorities. Bill 28 shows that our students are worth the time and effort to ensure all our schools are as well supported as possible, because their worth to meet needs is important. It's a wonderful way to ensure that Manitoba children will continue to benefit from the option to attend a small local school. What we do for our children today will impact what our children do tomorrow.

To conclude, Bill 28 looks promising. I was cautiously thrilled to hear about the moratorium placed on school closures, and my children slept better that night than they had in a very long time. I believe that this bill shows that the Province of Manitoba is fully capable of finding innovative, creative solutions to modern problems. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Westervelt.

We have questions.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Anna-Marie, for taking the time on this beautiful Saturday afternoon to come to the Manitoba Legislature and make a presentation to this committee.

I want to first commend you, your husband and other members of the Westview School Parent Advisory Council for your impassioned work to try and save Westview School from closure. I was very

impressed at the meetings which were held at the school by the work that you and your husband had done in that regard. I commend you for that effort and for the work of so many other families in trying to save Westview from closure.

I want to ask you a question—and it's similar to the one that I asked of Shannon Forest—with respect to presentations that have been made here this morning. One of the presentations indicated that this legislation should not be made retroactive, in other words, not back to January 1 of this year.

Your thoughts regarding this legislation only taking effect after it passes the Manitoba Legislature, which could ultimately lead to the closure or further review of Westview School for possible closure—your thoughts on that, and then I'll ask you a follow-up question.

Ms. Westervelt: Thanks for keeping them separate.

If the retroactivity of the bill is taken away from this bill, I think I would be inclined to say that Westview will not exist in future years. This is the third time it has been brought up for closure for less than adequate reasons.

I think the most telling thing is that, in a school of 160 students, give or take, we were able to find 300 signatures in just a few weeks on a petition. We, obviously, have the support of our community to stay open. If we don't have the retroactivity protection, then our community has lost its voice to protect their community, so keep it.

Mr. Reid: The second question—part of one of the presentations here this morning was with respect to closing of urban schools, schools that may be very close by. We know in our community there are a number of schools, but it's suggested or proposed that, where there are nearby schools, one school—Westview, for example—could be closed as has been proposed, and it would not disrupt or cause a disintegration of the community surrounding it.

I'd like to know your thoughts with respect to that proposal.

Ms. Westervelt: It's difficult to imagine why people would think that a community was not going to be disintegrated when it was being sent to another one. Our school, if sent to Radisson, would be integrated into a school of a larger size.

We would lose autonomy as Westview School. I'm sure we would be fine. Our children would meet friends. We would be able to forge a new

community, but we would lose who we are now—absolutely.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation.

It's been brought to my attention that two rural presenters are now in our Chamber. I'm wondering if we have the leave of the committee to hear Cheryl Zelenitsky, followed by Debbie McMechan?

An Honourable Member: Leave.

Madam Chairperson: Leave? Leave has been granted.

I now call on Cheryl Zelenitsky.

Ms. Cheryl Zelenitsky (Evergreen School Division): Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Do you have materials to present?

Ms. Zelenitsky: Actually, I had a really last-minute notice about coming because I was caught up with my son's—he was in provincial track and field—so I just have a small letter. I was told that, if I had a verbal, I didn't need it. Is that fine?

Madam Chairperson: One moment.

Mr. Cullen?

Ms. Zelenitsky: I'm the chair of the board for Evergreen School Division—

Madam Chairperson: Just a moment please. I have—sorry—a list here.

Mr. Cullen: Madam Chair, I know there are a number of presenters that aren't here who probably have written submissions they would like to supply to the committee. I would hope that the committee might entertain the suggestion and the offer that any presentations which are received would be recorded in *Hansard*, as long as they are received in time for the printing of *Hansard*.

* (13:40)

Madam Chairperson: In answer to your question, Mr. Cullen, if the submissions aren't received before *Hansard* goes to print, then they can't be included, but they can be sent to committee members.

Mr. Rondeau: Would that be with the provision that they're sent in within say, 48 hours, or we'll say by Monday at 5 o'clock or something like that?

Madam Chairperson: If they're in by Monday by 5 o'clock, they should be able to be included.

Ms. Zelenitsky: So you're saying that this letter I'm reading to you, as long as it's faxed—

An Honourable Member: Anything.

Madam Chairperson: The presentation that you're making will automatically go into *Hansard*. The oral presentation is going to be recorded into *Hansard*. So the words that you speak today will be recorded in the document, and if you wish to send something subsequent to this, as long as we have it by 5 o'clock on Monday, it will also be included in the *Hansard*.

Ms. Zelenitsky: The Evergreen Board of Trustees has reviewed and discussed the proposed amendments—

Madam Chairperson: Sorry, I need to call your name first so that the recorder can turn it on, okay? I'm sorry. We've got all these rules.

Ms. Zelenitsky: I'm chair of the Evergreen School Division. Thank you for hearing from me, Minister Bjornson, and members of the committee.

The Evergreen Board of Trustees has reviewed and discussed the proposed amendments to The Public Schools Act as contained in Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act, as outlined in your letter of April 30, 2008. Our board is concerned regarding this proposed legislation for the following reasons.

Consultation: School divisions were not consulted prior to this important decision being taken by government. We have always encouraged open and honest consultation and collaboration with all stakeholders prior to important decisions that affect these stakeholders. We would request that school divisions become part of the consultation prior to development of associated regulations for this legislation.

Funding: We support the maintenance of schools in our communities. However, the funding support from government to maintain extremely small schools to achieve service standards, curriculum standards and overall quality programming is impossible under the current funding model. In addition, current funding support is inadequate for the costs of extra bus routes in geographically dispersed areas to achieve the one-hour maximum bus-ride time. These additional costs must be considered by government prior to implementation.

Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Zelenitsky.

Are there questions?

Mr. Bjornson: Thanks for being here, and I hope your son does well at the track and field today.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation.

I will now call on Debbie McMechan, Pierson Advisory Council.

Ms. Debbie McMechan (Pierson Advisory Council): Good afternoon. Sorry, I'm just thirsty.

Madam Chairperson: You may begin.

Ms. McMechan: Good afternoon, Honourable Minister Bjornson, and distinguished members of this committee. My name is Debbie McMechan and I am very proud to be representing the Pierson School Advisory Council from Pierson, Manitoba.

Sorry, it's a long way to the basement; I went to the cafeteria.

With this committee's indulgence, I would like to begin with a little story from my kitchen table. The announcement of Bill 28 has caused quite a stir in our home. It has replaced what would be our lazy, weekend conversation with a lot of enthusiastic speculation. On one such recent morning, my 10-year-old daughter, who is in grade 5, looked up from her pancakes and asked, what is a moratorium? Her dad gave her a simple definition explaining that our school was now protected from closure and told her who Mr. Bjornson was. Suddenly, she was now the most enthusiastic member of the conversation. Wow, she said, I'd like to give him a medal. And then thinking out loud as only children can do, she said, but I don't have a medal. Well, I have my science fair medal, but I'm so happy, I would give it to him.

So what is a moratorium? A space where things can stop. A time when communities like ours can have relief from the idea that school closure is a solution to declining enrolment in rural areas. At a very well-attended community school meeting recently, an overwhelming majority of people from Pierson asked us to thank Mr. Bjornson and his department for his bold commitment to fundamental change in Manitoba's public education system. I have personally never been so happy to deliver a message.

What are we so happy about out in Pierson? This moratorium provides an opportunity to creatively

address the issues that our school and community have long struggled with, a chance at last to work in a much more co-operative way with governments, boards and elements of neighbouring communities to enrich our lives as rural Manitobans.

Pierson is a small agricultural community in the very southwest corner of the province, still richly informed by strong pioneer values. We are independent by nature, but instinctively co-operative. We are a bustling little place that has, among other things, a co-op grocery and hardware, an elevator, an implement dealer, some industrial business and tradespersons, a developing oil industry and, of course, our K-12 school.

As is, unfortunately, the case with many prairie communities, we have been suffering the effects of rural depopulation for many years. The effects of rural depopulation, as I am sure this committee is well aware, cut a miserable swath through a community. Nowhere has this been as heart-wrenching and more evident than in our school. Anxiety rises with each school division budget, while funding dries up a little. Half a teacher here, a quarter of a teacher there, until our teachers are demoralized and weary. Parents are fraught with worry about the future of their children's education. Community leaders are rendered powerless to ward off what seems to be the inevitable. Even children, it seems, are not immune to the stresses that confront a community whose future is in question.

Although many of these problems continue to press our resources, we have begun to witness a change in our community. We hardly noticed it at first. One young person returns home with a spouse and a little family, and then there are two new families and then five. The business environment takes confidence from this rejuvenation and suddenly the signs of renewal are everywhere. Incredibly, in our little town, the R.M. is developing another street because the demand for housing is so strong. A tiny little rural revival has begun.

But this re-growth is a delicate and fragile thing. This moratorium provides an invaluable opportunity to actually experience community recovery. Another reason why Bill 28 is so vitally important is that because it dovetails so perfectly with this government's document *Building Strong Communities: A Vision for Rural Manitoba*, this moratorium provides the mechanism required for re-growth. It gives us the gift of time and the opportunity to look at things in a different light.

Time, for example, to explore this concept of community schools.

Pierson School is a perfect fit for the community school, and we have been instinctively growing in that direction for some time. With the guidance of our division administration and our pre-school advisory group, a day care is on its way to our school. We have had a very successful pre-school program for many years and this is a natural and timely extension of that program. Opportunities abound to use our resources to enrich and define our school. Our school, together with a local artist, was one of the original four pilot projects in Manitoba for the popular arts in the school program, a clear indication that smallness is often the seedbed of creativity.

Pierson School has established an impressive foundation in technology, the application of which to provide education for the entire community is limitless in potential. Partnerships such as the proposed mobile unit from Assiniboine Community College in Brandon with our school division promises a wide range of educational benefits to our students and community members in many areas, such as wind energy and water conservation. The possibilities for community schools are dizzying.

We can foresee the creation of a school advisory council subcommittee to co-ordinate many programs in many areas: health and wellness, fitness, mental health, conflict resolution, the art of storytelling, environmental awareness and so much more.

We are in the process of forming a joint school advisory council and municipal government group that can provide open communication, leadership and creative problem-solving in areas vital to school and community well-being, a group whose very creation is an embodiment of the belief that school viability and community survival are concepts in your perfect symmetry. In the words of our Premier (Mr. Doer), you cannot have good economic policies without good education policies. We wholeheartedly agree with Mr. Doer, and this moratorium gives us the time and the hope to ensure the survival of both.

* (13:50)

What is troubling to our school and our community is school board policy that could intentionally or unintentionally threaten viability. With respect to Bill 28's new policy on school closure, there could be a difficulty with respect to

41(1.3)(b), namely, a consensus among parents and residents that the school should be closed.

There are at least two ways to reach a community consensus. First, there is the natural realization that the communities simply cannot support the school. This is opposed to the kind of consensus of demoralization and defeat fostered by a distant school board's misreading and misinterpretation of local needs and circumstances. We know only too well that school boards with the best of intentions can sometimes create policy that amounts to a crisis for very small schools and their communities. More control at the local level, more autonomy for very small schools may well be the beginning of an answer. A distinct definition or status for very small schools that is directly relevant to community school grants and funding would provide these schools with the tools to ensure that a consensus of demoralization could not be fostered from the outside.

A different way of looking at schools whose communities are vulnerable because of size is needed. In our division, for example, every school is a relatively small school. Souris School, the largest in our division, has over 500 students, while Pierson, less than 100. At our level of very small, our priorities are not so much a wide range of course options as sufficient, highly qualified teachers to deliver core subject guarantees. We need resources for the essentials, and we believe differences of size warrants flexibility and administrative practices. A floor built into staffing formulas for very small schools would provide the students with a high-quality education and our wonderful teachers with an environment of security and challenge in which they could relax and creatively enjoy their teaching experience. For very small schools to survive, we must move away from administrative uniformity to appropriate action that suits the specifics on a local context.

Bill 28 has made it safe to throw open the doors of the storm cellar. We've lived in fear for so long. Emerging and looking around we're so relieved to see that there are possibilities for renewal. We just need the resources to get to work.

We wish to thank Mr. Bjornson and the members of this committee for your time and for this wonderful opportunity, and we welcome your questions and comments.

Mr. Bjornson, I have sworn to deliver something to you at your convenience.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. McMechan.

Are there questions?

Mr. Bjornson: Well, thank you very much for your presentation.

I appreciate the offer of the science fair medal. I, for one, didn't win a science fair medal in my time in school. I was a history buff myself, but I thank your daughter for that offer.

Certainly, you talked about the renewal in the community. Is there a community resource officer or a community development organization that's working to attract more businesses and more people to the community at this time, and what are some of the things that they might be undertaking to do?

Ms. McMechan: Well, as a matter of fact, one of the projects that our advisory council has done was to, together with the municipal government, create an economic development council which did not exist formerly in our little town. It's a brand new thing. At a much larger town—well, at a larger town next to us, they have an economic development officer that kind of administers to the whole area, but we were interested in something specific for our town, as well, that would answer the immediate needs that we had, such as housing, so that we could attract people.

Madam Chairperson: Further, Mr. Bjornson?

Mr. Bjornson: Yes. Has this new organization been part of the conversation around the potential of the impact of the school closure, or have they voiced an opinion on what that would mean to the community and their vision for a growing community if the school were to close?

Ms. McMechan: Our own little economic development council has certainly been vocal, but, as far as the larger one, no. We haven't heard from them. It's a relatively new issue, and they seem to be preoccupied with bananas out our way. Just to clarify, there's a large banana statue going up and it's got everybody in a tizzy.

Mr. Cullen: Thank you for making the long trip from Pierson in today and taking your Saturday up with this. It's good to hear some people with some passion in the community, and it's certainly good to hear of some economic development in Pierson. That's very encouraging.

Your concern here is in terms of the word "consensus." I guess that's maybe where the door is slightly open here. Would you suggest that either the

word "consensus" be defined or we should be using another term in that particular part of the bill?

Ms. McMechan: I don't have a problem with the word "consensus" at all. I think that that sounds extremely democratic. My problem with the concept behind it is that unintentionally things can happen that could foster a consensus.

If I have your indulgence, I could just go into a little example. In our little community, we're pretty fragile, as I think I might have laid out there, but we're experiencing regrowth. Recently, a well-intended decision by our local school board supporting school of choice, which we all do, was to bring a bus into the centre of our catchment area to pick up four children to take the bus to the larger centre, and we saw that as a threat to stabilizing our enrolment and keeping kids in our school, because we have a terrific school. But our problem with it was that when the school board okayed the bus, it's like they were giving their seal of approval for people to go.

It was an unprecedented act. It hadn't happened in our school division before. So I can see how that could foster a consensus because if children start to leave the school because there is a vehicle available for them to do so, people who never thought of going might go. So, in that way, consensus, I think, can be fostered, and little schools should be protected from that if possible.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation.

Ms. McMechan: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Pat Isaak, Manitoba Teachers' Society.

An Honourable Member: Her presentation's in.

Madam Chairperson: Okay, thank you.

I will now call on Tara Mulholland, private citizen. Tara Mulholland? Tara Mulholland will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Tom Parker, Louis Riel School Division. Do you have materials to distribute? Thank you.

You may begin.

Mr. Tom Parker (Louis Riel School Division): Madam Chair, ministers, honourable members, thank you for giving me this opportunity to meet with you.

I must apologize, first of all, that appendix A is not on the sheet, so I will make sure that that is sent to you first thing on Monday. It is a list of day cares that currently exist in our school.

As I've heard the past few speakers, I have to start my presentation with a personal addition, and it is that I was at a community meeting the other day for one of the schools that was under review for closure, Archwood. The members who were at the meeting were angry, disheartened and very sad that Bill 28 had come in and put a stop to the amalgamation with another school. They were looking forward to it. They saw all kinds of opportunities for their children. So I just thought I'd start with that personal story to let you know there are other views other than it's wonderful not to close a school.

As the representatives of the board of trustees, and I have Dave Richardson with me of Louis Riel School Division, we begin our presentation by expressing our appreciation for the opportunity to talk to you. Because of the necessary time limit to offer feedback about the bill, we must clarify at the outset of our presentation our belief that Bill 28 in its present form would counter its stated aim of strengthening local schools.

* (14:00)

Our fundamental concern is the bill focuses on keeping school buildings open while it remains silent on the paramount concern, the quality of the learning and teaching environments within those school buildings. Legislation that would prevent the closure or rededication of school buildings except under the most limited conditions effectively means that some students would experience even narrower opportunities than they currently experience in a public education system whose foundational principle is equity of opportunity.

The current bill focusses on facilities and space uses, effectively, bricks and mortar. It ultimately limits choice and freedom for students by limiting school divisions' ability to safeguard the quality of their learning, because it allows the school populations of which they are part to remain or become too small.

To amplify this point, many students already experience marginalized opportunities because of

steadily declining student populations in specific school buildings. They are forced to remain in the same classroom groupings, year after year, even when negative social dynamics make regrouping highly desirable, if not necessary. They experience fewer extra-curricular activities, because a small staff can only support so many opportunities. They share specialist teachers, music, phys ed, resource teachers and counsellors. So there's not somebody there for them all the time, with the corresponding limitations on extra-curricular activity or added help with learning outside of school hours.

Teachers who work in small schools also express their concerns about limited professional networking opportunities. That, we have found, is very important for teacher growth and teacher satisfaction.

We will outline later in our presentation why the suggestion that community programs could offset declining enrolment lacks validity in legislation that assumes the narrowest interpretation of the purpose of school. The actual challenge that this legislation needs to address is that of too many school buildings, for too few students, at a too great an expense for the public purse.

Further, in its most literal level, the concept of strengthening local schools is invalid when the bill omits all mention of the need to sustain the safety of school buildings' infrastructure. Nowhere, in the narrow criteria under which closure might be entertained, does the bill mention prohibitive costs of repair and maintenance that must ensure a school building's continued safety.

In effect, the taxpayers who, in recent media reports, are cited as deserving the schools for which they have paid, also deserve to keep paying for half-empty schools for which no one, including the Public Schools Finance Board, can afford the necessary measures to remove antiquated insulation, install elevators for students with special needs, upgrade traffic and parking facilities, et cetera.

The current bill focuses on transportation. Essentially, it assumes the premise that schools are situated far from each other in all parts of our province and, thereby, totally ignores the urban context in which four school buildings, each operating at half its capacity and requiring upgrades and maintenance, may exist within walking distance of each other.

Our board acknowledges that the rural context may merit careful review to ensure that students do

not experience lengthy bus rides because of local school closure; however, the current bill contains no provision for the differing circumstances of various populations or reference to geographic factors.

With these general observations offered regarding the bill's overall intent, we have sequenced further comments with respect to the order of the bill's essential elements.

With respect to proposed addition 41(1.2), Moratorium on closing schools, we have the gravest concerns with an amendment that effectively nullifies the comprehensive and respective processes, that have already occurred, to result in school communities' acceptance of the need to respond to the impact of declining enrolments on the quality of students' learning environments.

We cannot emphasize strongly enough our belief that school divisions who can demonstrate the ability to fulfil the three conditions, outlined in the proposed section 41(1.3), must be able to bring the appropriate closure to existing community consultation.

To re-emphasize our point, we offer the learning that has occurred in our local context. Even the school review committee, whose process has received some media attention through the insistence of a vocal group of parents and a very active group of parents, acknowledges the limitations of delaying a decision.

Dr. D.W. Penner School cannot remain as is, due to low and declining enrolment. Something will have to change, I can add, in the near future.

Communities that experienced the most soul-searching conversations to move beyond narrow interests in favour of enhanced learning environments for a larger population of their children cannot be asked to recycle those conversations at some vaguely defined later date, when and if guidelines finally restore the school review process. They must be able to honour their consultation process if they're to avoid treading over old ground some years in the future after their children's learning environments have experienced further erosion of the quality of education.

Stipulation 41(1.3): The minister may approve a school closure if the school board demonstrates to the minister's satisfaction three conditions have been met is further concerning because it suggests that even results obtained with wide community agreement are subject to veto. With no disrespect intended for individuals, our board must observe that

this level of latitude removes the ability for school communities' meaningful involvement in the democratic process to a very concerning degree.

This point observed, our board must ask why any community would willingly participate in a process that might be futile at its outset if an individual minister is free to express a bias and disregard a community's need for revitalized learning environments.

With respect to three conditions proposed in 41(1.3), we look at consolidation of schools, which compels by definition the closure of some facilities. Consensus among parents and residents of the area, even if the nature of that consensus were adequately defined, ignores the very real tensions that may occur between residents driven by competing self-interests. The role of the elected trustee is to define decisions that must place student learning above self-interest. Undue emphasis on the popular will risks decisions to maintain short-term comfort over long-term concern for students' best interests and needs.

Further, whether consensus is defined as majority rule through a plebiscite or the reasoned decision to accept what serves the greatest good is a significant unanswered question. We believe the scope of consultation about any educational matter depends on the latitude that the board can responsibly extend to have a final decision defined by community preference rather than by research and evidence. The entire board of trustees believes that the legislated roles and responsibilities must affect that latitude.

Accordingly, we ask for the most serious consideration as to the degree to which consultation can or should influence the decision about any specific educational matter. We have accepted that our role compels some decisions that do not satisfy individual preferences or biases. We are concerned that the bill seeks to invest responsibility in the minister for definitive decisions about matters that will have received careful exploration in unique local context. Ministerial freedom—

Madam Chairperson: There's a minute left.

Mr. Parker: Thank you. I'll move then to expanding the use of school building for appropriate community purposes will only alter the occupancy of the space. It offers no guarantee of improvement to the quality of the learning opportunities for a declining population of students. At our local level, four school review committees concluded that adding more day-

care spaces will not help children currently in school and may actually present added challenges if the buildings experience increased traffic through the school building and on grounds that cannot accommodate that traffic. Many schools operating at reduced capacity already house an abundance of day cares and partners with other community agencies, and I will get you that appendix.

The definition of reasonable efforts to expand the use of a school building will have to consider the fundamental responsibility of schools, and a tentative solution within the bill to address potentially unused buildings confuses community needs with school needs. We already have in our division a lot of use of our buildings, as we will try to show you later.

As I'm coming to the end, I'll go one final commentary, then. The timing of the introduction of the bill and media reports on which we have had to rely for information suggests the bill is reactionary in nature to responses of small but vocal numbers of community members who do not have the responsibilities of elected trustees to consider the needs of the greater community and the students. If concerns exist about the current provincial guidelines for review of school buildings, we suggest the moratorium is more appropriately directed to prohibit new motions to review schools for possible closure since the bill's introduction, rather than impeding the existing ones.

* (14:10)

Media reports are further concerning and we must register our gravest misgivings at this hearing about the stated belief that eliminating educational leaders from small schools forms an appropriate cost-saving measure. The statement effectively prioritizes bricks and mortar over leadership in a school to guide the staff and students and work with the parents, and calls into further question the essential nature of the bill's focus.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to meet with you today.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Parker.

We have questions.

The Honourable Mr. Bjornson?

Mr. Bjornson: No, that's fine.

Ms. Oswald: Thank you, Mr. Parker, for making this presentation. I thank your colleagues who have

attended with you today and endured a long sit. I know how that feels. It's good to get up and stretch, just so you know.

I just—really, it's more of a comment than a question. I would say to you, Mr. Parker, that I would concur with what you were saying at the beginning of your speech about the range of voices to be heard on this subject and that there are a variety of opinions, absolutely to be sure, but one thing I have grown more and more confident about is that any voice that has come to bear in this dialogue wakes up in the morning and says I want to do the very best for the children in my school. I believe that to be true for your school division as well.

I know, in the coming days, we'll have the chance to have tea together at graduations and so forth where we will watch the students of the Louis Riel School Division cross that stage, brilliant musicians, great mathematicians, extraordinary athletes and others, others who have come to us from war-torn countries, who have seen atrocities that none of us can imagine, their own parents murdered before their very eyes, and have found the Louis Riel School Division to be home and to be a parent.

While we may not, as government and school division, have a completely agreeable point of view on this issue, I believe in my heart we will work it out and we will do what we always get up in the morning to do and that's the best for the students in our school division. I want to put on the record today how much I congratulate you, Mr. Richardson, Ms. Burgoyne, who's here today, for the extraordinary efforts that you make for students in that division and for the successes that we are going to celebrate in those days ahead. You are to be congratulated and honoured for that incredible achievement.

Mr. Parker: I appreciate those very much. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Mr. Parker?

Mr. Parker: That's it. Thanks.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

I will now call on Colin Craig, Canadian Taxpayers Federation. Do you have materials to distribute?

Mr. Colin Craig (Canadian Taxpayers Federation): No, I don't. I have an oral presentation.

Madam Chairperson: Then please begin your presentation.

Mr. Craig: Okay.

Well, good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. My name is Colin Craig and I'm the provincial director for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. As you've probably heard by now the Canadian Taxpayers Federation is a not-for-profit organization. It is non-partisan and advocates lower taxes, less waste and more accountability in government.

I'd like to begin by saying that the legislation before us today is not friendly to taxpayers. I'd like you to consider the following that has been happening in Manitoba over the past while. Enrolment is down about 15,000 students over the past 10 years. Costs are up hundreds of millions of dollars above inflation and this would be a little bit more acceptable if we were seeing a drastic increase in student improvement through their grades but we're not seeing that.

What this bill does is support high taxes. If a school division decides to consolidate schools, the government should respect that decision. Now, generally speaking, no one wants to see a school close. In fact, many would like to see a school on every block, but, just as having a Porsche in every driveway, that's not feasible.

Consolidation could be a very positive thing. For example, if you consolidate four schools to three you end up paying less money to maintain school—one of them. You pay three hydro bills instead of four. The list goes on and on. It's not right for one person, in this case, the Minister of Education (Mr. Bjornson), to hold all the power. Communities should be able to decide but most importantly communities should be consulted. Everyone should be consulted with before such legislation like this comes forward. We've seen this similar approach with other bills, Bill 17, 31, 37 and this one. There has been no public consultation on the matter.

At this point I'd like all members to indulge a poem that was forwarded to me from a supporter of our organization. It begins with this:

"Tax his land, tax his bed, tax the table at which he's fed. / Tax his tractor, tax his mule, teach him taxes are the rule. / Tax his cow, tax his goat, tax his pants, tax his coat, / Tax his ties, tax his shirt, tax his work, tax his dirt, / Tax his tobacco, tax his drink, tax him if he tries to think, / Tax his cigars, tax his beers,

if he cries, then tax his tears, / Tax his car, tax his gas, find other ways to tax his ass. / Tax all he has, then let him know / that you won't be done till he has no dough. / When he screams and hollers, tax him some more. / Tax him till he's good and sore. / Tax his coffin, tax his grave, tax the sod in which he's laid. / Put these words upon his tomb: / Taxes drove me to my doom. / When he's done do not relax. / It's time to apply the inheritance tax."

Accounts receivable tax, building permit tax, CDL licence tax, cigarette tax, corporate income tax, dog license tax, excise taxes, federal income tax, federal unemployment tax, fishing license tax, food licence tax, fuel permit tax, gasoline tax, gross receipts tax, hunting license tax, inheritance tax, interest expense, inventory tax, liquor tax, luxury taxes, marriage licence tax, medicare tax, personal property tax, property tax, real estate tax, service charges taxes, social security tax, road usage taxes, sales tax, recreational vehicle tax, school tax, personal income tax, provincial unemployment tax, telephone federal excise tax, telephone federal universal service fee tax, utility taxes, vehicle licence registration tax, vehicle sales taxes, watercraft registration tax, well permit tax, workers compensation tax.

Certainly, the list goes on and on. But at the bottom of the e-mail there's a note. Not one of these taxes existed a hundred years ago, and our nation was the most prosperous in the world. We had absolutely no national debt, had the largest middle class in the world, and mom stayed home to raise the kids. What happened? Can you spell p-o-l-i-t-i-c-i-a-n-s?

Of course, the e-mail that I just read did not include the new tax, the vote tax. Now no one will argue that we need zero taxes in Canada, not even myself. But the poem has a pretty powerful message. We have tried the big government experiment and it has failed. If we look around the city of Winnipeg we will see potholes, roads that need repair everywhere. Certainly, you see that around the province. Hallway medicine is alive and well. We have poor student results in our schools, and our crime is out of control. What we need is flexibility at the community level to address local needs. We don't need more big government telling local communities what they need to do. And this bill removes local community control. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Craig.

We have questions.

Mr. Bjornson: Well, thank you for your presentation. I just had a couple of questions.

I'm not sure if you were in the room when I mentioned the fact that in the past 20 years 80 schools have closed in the province of Manitoba. Now the intent of this bill is to keep schools open, to keep them viable and to look at alternative uses of the buildings that could be consistent with the educational design of the institution, but also with community uses. So the intent is to look at providing more day-care spaces, to provide opportunities for senior resource centres, to provide opportunities for a number of other organizations, perhaps libraries and things of that nature. So would you suggest that it would be more prudent to close small schools and, at the public purse, fund the stand-alone structures to meet these needs in the community?

Mr. Craig: I think it's more important to let communities determine what they would like to do. For individuals on Broadway to force their opinions and views on a local community is not appropriate. The community decides that they would like to build something. If they had more money, disposable income, then they could band together as a community and take a school that perhaps may close down and retrofit it to put in a day care, or whatever they decide as a community there. I think that's the approach that we need, is we need more community control over what's happening versus the government.

* (14:20)

Speaking about community types of buildings and that, if you look at Centennial Pool on Portage Avenue, the provincial government, the City of Winnipeg, the federal government, I assume, all contributed to expanding that facility and it looks quite nice, but what happened at the same time was the YMCA down the street also expanded. So here you have the government expanding a non-for-profit organization at the same time that another non-for-profit organization is coming in and expanding and building something.

So I think what you need to do is to give the people back their money, give them more disposable income and they can then, in turn, decide how they would like to build up their community, what facilities they need.

Mr. Bjornson: My second and final question, obviously it's pretty clear, the mandate of the

Canadian Taxpayers Federation, but I've often wondered about organizations such as yours when you speak to issues around public education.

Does your organization have a policy statement or a philosophy of education that might shape some of the positions that you might take with respect to education funding?

Mr. Craig: What our organization generally supports is more individual and community control, letting communities decide what they would like versus the government simply coming in and imposing rules. You've just heard my comments, and that's the angle that I've taken.

Our approach on this issue is let the community decide what they would like to do. I think that that's the most appropriate way to move forward on this, let communities decide what they need, how they would like their schools set up, et cetera.

Mr. Cullen: Thank you, Mr. Craig, for your presentation.

It's certainly a good reminder for us and for government, I think, how many taxes we do have to pay here. I know we don't have a presentation tax in place yet. Hopefully, the government doesn't do that.

I know you've had a chance to review a lot of the legislation that's before our committee, and I just want to get your comments. We certainly have, down the hallway, Bill 17 hearings going on. We've got Bill 35, Bill 37 and this one, Bill 28, which, certainly, in my view, really impact the democratic process.

I just want to kind of get your comment as you kind of look at that whole series of legislation before us now, kind of your views on where we're headed democratically.

Mr. Craig: Well, thank you for that question.

There are two aspects to this legislation. The first one is that we have locally elected school boards who have had their powers taken away from them. They directly are accountable to the people at the local level for the decisions that they're making, and that's been taken away, and it's been put in the power of one individual. It should be communities which are deciding.

So there's that element to the democratic changes here. The other aspect, as I mentioned, with this bill and a number of other bills, they were kind of introduced in the middle of the night, right? There

wasn't a thorough process to allow citizens to be consulted, to give their input. With Bill 17, it's a billion-dollar industry and it was given a pretty good shake-up when the government announced that they were going to impose the moratorium. What should happen is there should be an opportunity for legislation to be tabled to allow vested parties to discuss it, debate it with members of the Legislature, et cetera, instead of simply being, like I said, tabled in the middle of the night.

Mr. Chomiak mentioned in one of the committee hearings, I think it was for 37, that he has four years of legislation that he would like to table. If he has four years of legislation, why not post it on the Web and let Manitobans start commenting on it now? Is that so wrong for us to know what's coming up the pipe, what types of things are going to be coming forward? I think that would be positive for everyone involved, and in many cases the opposition may agree with changes that the government's proposing.

So I think that the more you give the public an opportunity to take control of government as well as their own tax dollars, then that's a positive thing.

Madam Chairperson: We have time for one question.

Ms. Oswald: Just very briefly, I had the privilege of hearing your presentation the other night, Mr. Craig, and I believe I understood the Canadian Taxpayers Federation does not believe we have a problem with climate change.

I was wondering if you could just clarify from today if it's also the belief of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation that women should stay at home.

Mr. Craig: I think the minister heard that I was quoting an e-mail. I would disagree with the statement that women should stay at home. Nonetheless—

An Honourable Member: Just to clarify.

Mr. Craig: No, 100 percent, I disagree with that—

An Honourable Member: I just wanted to clarify. It's a bit muddy.

Mr. Craig: Yes. I wanted to read the e-mail in its proper form.

I did disagree with that, but I also censored one of the words that was inappropriate for this venue. So, yes—

An Honourable Member: You spelled it right, though. Thank the teacher.

Mr. Craig: My parents are teachers.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. Craig.

Mr. Craig: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Leanne Carlson, private citizen. I see you're passing out materials.

Ms. Carlson, you may begin your presentation.

Ms. Leanne Carlson (Private Citizen): Good afternoon, Honourable Mr. Bjornson, Madam Chairperson, and distinguished members of the committee. I apologize if I have left out some things in my presentation. I was away in Toronto all week and heard at 11 o'clock this morning that I'd be presenting.

I'd just like to start today by reading to you an e-mail that my husband and I sent to Premier Doer, Mr. Bjornson, and Mr. Farthing on April 28 of this year, concerning the St. James-Assiniboia School Division:

Dear Sirs:

We are writing to you out of deep concern for what is happening in our school division. As you are hopefully aware, Ness and Hedges middle schools are under review for possible closure and amalgamation. The school review committee, chaired by a school trustee, has finished its review process and is recommending that Ness Middle School and Hedges Middle School be amalgamated at the Hedges site. In other words, they would like to see Ness Middle School close.

We believe that this would be the 16th school that the St. James-Assiniboia School Division has closed in just 25 years. This has to stop and, although we are well aware that school boards are separate entities, we are respectfully requesting that the provincial government step in now and put an end to closing schools.

When we purchased our home in St. James, a big part of our decision was that our three children could walk to all levels of schools from our house. That will no longer be the case, if Ness Middle School were to close. It is a concern that I have heard again and again at review committee meetings that I have attended, yet, it is one that never seems to have been addressed.

The board of trustees keeps saying that St. James is an aging community, but how do we attract young families if we don't have schools to offer them? At a time when the people of this province are screaming for more day-care centres, why are we closing the very places that could accommodate them?

We are searching for more facilities to improve the quality of life in our communities. Again, why would we close the places that could accommodate them?

It is time that both the Province of Manitoba and the school boards step up to the plate and start coming up with some creative ways to utilize the facilities we have. There are school board meetings on the 26 and 27 of May when, very likely, the fate of yet another school in St. James will be decided. Please don't let it get to that point. Do something now. We thank you sincerely for your consideration of this matter.

I can only assume that ours was one of many letters, e-mails, phone calls or personal feedback that the Province of Manitoba has received. I assume this because of the introduction of Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act. I personally would like to applaud Mr. Bjornson and the NDP government for stepping in and standing up for our children and our communities.

Both my husband and I firmly believe that children benefit much more from learning in an environment where class sizes are smaller, teachers are really able to get to know their students, and students get to know their classmates. We also believe that they can benefit greatly by sharing their school with the community around them.

When you give kids a sense of pride in their community, it can do wonders for them. We have the opportunity to do just that by utilizing the community schools to their fullest. Right now, that isn't being done and, before Bill 28, there was no indication that it would be.

* (14:30)

Our only concern with Bill 28 is the possible loopholes that we believe the school boards may try to use, if they're really set on closing a school. For example, if a school board really wanted to close a certain school, what is to stop them from simply putting two schools under review and calling it a consolidation? And what is meant by having community support to close a school?

The St. James-Assiniboia School Division claimed that the community had accepted a possible amalgamation of Ness and Hedges middle schools, and yet, so far, in just a very short time, we have collected signatures from 623 members of the community that say they are opposed to it. I think there are many more people out there who would also sign, given the opportunity.

I believe that this should be an indication to both the school boards and the Province of Manitoba that members of the community are tired of seeing their schools taken away from them and that they are very supportive of Bill 28 and the ideas behind it. I only hope that the bill is made strong enough to effectively produce the results that it was meant to.

I should also mention that it was not just parents whose children were directly affected by a possible school closure that signed the petition. We believe that our petition represents all demographics in the community, single people, married people, people with children, people without children, young people and senior citizens. They're all behind you on this bill.

The St. James school division when presented with our petition, I realize had some concerns with it, and in their report today, I believe they mentioned that a quick conversation on the doorstep does little to help a resident understand the complex nature of the need for a particular change. I would suggest that perhaps if the school trustees themselves took the time to go door to door in the community as we did, they would have a better understanding of what the people are saying. They're saying that they're tired. They're tired of seeing their community schools close, and they want it to stop and they wish us well with our petition.

The St. James-Assiniboia School Board also mentions that a petition reinforces us versus them mentality and brings forward an interest-based emotional response rather than a reasoned response. To this I would say, if we're not emotional about what is best for our children and students, then there is something very, very wrong.

In closing, I would once again like to express my gratitude to Mr. Bjornson and the provincial government for standing up for our schools, for our children, and for our communities. I see a very bright future for all the communities of Manitoba as a result of Bill 28. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Ms. Carlson.

We have questions.

Mr. Rondeau: Thank you very much, Leanne.

Just wondering if you could review the steps that you as a person, as a resident, took in order to try to convince the St. James school division of your point of view and the response from the school division.

Ms. Carlson: Well, I guess it started out with the review committee meetings themselves. There were three committee meetings that either my husband or myself attended. Several points we brought up there we just felt weren't addressed. At some points, we actually had to just state our question in a yes or no answer and demand an answer.

None of the things that we brought up we felt were ever circulated in any of the written material that the review committee put out, so that was very frustrating. We have attended school board meetings where—well before one of the meetings the chairman of the board asked us to actually maybe just go home and look on their Web site to read the reports that they had written. We phoned several trustees. Some of them, it was a very positive experience and they listened to our concerns. Others we felt—well, we just felt a great deal of resentment from them as I think they knew that we were not sitting by quietly and letting them close yet another of our schools.

Overall, I believe that—and I know that these school boards will deny this to their grave but we do believe that they had an agenda going into the review process, and we just don't feel that our thoughts were heard from them and that is why we turned to you, the provincial government, to help us.

Mr. Rondeau: Just a quick question. I'd like to thank you for all your efforts, but just one quick question. When you're going door to door, how many people refused to sign your petition?

Ms. Carlson: When we went door to door, we spent—well, we went to the local schools in our area, and I don't think more than one or two people refused at the school levels. When we went door to door, we spent about five hours one Saturday going around the neighbourhood and, honestly, I think I could count on one hand the number of people who did not sign our petition. The majority of them—you know, it wasn't a case of just, you know, they didn't really care so they thought they'd sign so we'd go away. The majority of them were generally happy that we were there and that we were doing something

and thanked us for our efforts and were just really behind it.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation, Ms. Carlson.

I will now call on Robert Dyck, private citizen. Robert Dyck? Robert Dyck will be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on David Grant, private citizen. David Grant? David Grant will now be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Randy Aitken, private citizen. Randy Aitken? Randy Aitken will now be moved to the bottom of the list.

I will now call on Jaime Glenat. Jaime Glenat? Jamie Glenat will be moved to the bottom of the list.

Mr. Gerald Hawranik (Lac du Bonnet): Madam Chair, at this point, of course, in the proceedings we'd likely be calling people a second time, but, rather than call on them a second time and then delete them from the list, I wonder if there'd be leave for you to canvass the audience to determine whether or not there are others in attendance who we'd previously called, and then hear them if they're here and allow them to present, and, if none, then we'd be prepared to go line by line on a few bills: 10, 15, and 30.

Madam Chairperson: We will entertain your request.

I have two more lists of individuals who've arrived to present for the first time.

Mr. Hawranik: Okay, that's acceptable.

Madam Chairperson: We have three names yet to call.

So I would like to call Karen Carey, Sunrise School Division. Do you have materials to distribute?

Ms. Karen Carey (Sunrise School Division): I do, yes.

Madam Chairperson: Ms. Carey, you can start your presentation.

Ms. Carey: Okay, all right. Well, first of all, I would like to say, before I get into my presentation, thank you for having us here to speak. Thank you for the opportunity.

I want to also thank my fellow trustees that have spoken before me, and I want to thank our provincial organization, Manitoba Association of School Trustees, for their representation of us and their speaking to the bill as well, and we do support Manitoba Association of School Trustees' position on this.

* (14:40)

Before I get into my presentation, the presentation is on behalf of the whole school board, and I think you'll find the entire presentation very respectful and very appropriate and well thought out.

I guess, as an individual trustee I did want to say that I'm a little disappointed. I feel that this is a process that could have been consultative in nature, and it isn't. It's been dictatorial in nature, and it certainly isn't the way that we approach things with our community. It certainly isn't the way that you folks expect us to approach things when we deal with our community and those that we go to for advice. So we would expect, when we are in a relationship with you folks, that we would be treated with the same respect and collaboration that you expect back from us.

So, from the Sunrise School Division presentation to the standing committee, June 7, regarding Bill 28. The Sunrise School Division board of trustees supports and reiterates the request of the Manitoba Association of School Trustees to withdraw Bill 28. Failing withdrawal, Sunrise School Division supports the recommendations that MAST has provided to the standing committee to mitigate the negative impacts of this bill on the students and ratepayers of Sunrise School Division. In addition, we would like to share with you the following concerns.

Financial implications: Implementing this bill will come at a considerable cost. This cost should not be borne by the ratepayer of the school division through their property taxes. Additional costs for adhering to new busing guidelines, providing spaces to community organizations such as day cares and keeping schools with low enrolments open if mandated by this bill should be fully funded by the provincial government.

Recent history has seen the provincial government set several precedents in terms of underfunding initiatives. For example, Bill 13, the inclusive education legislation and, more recently, grade 11, 12 phys ed. This lack of funding has

translated directly into property tax increases to ratepayers as school divisions scramble to put in place programming without sufficient funds to support the new initiatives mandated by the provincial government.

Under program implications: Rural school divisions already face many challenges transporting students in a timely manner to their designated schools. At Sunrise School Division we're proud of the fact that we already ensure that students going to their catchment area schools are not on our buses longer than one hour. We firmly believe that travel time should be limited to less than one hour. The reality, however, in Sunrise exists that not all students can access all programming options at their catchment area school. We must, out of necessity, transport students long distances to take advantage of programming not offered—oh, I lost my page. Hold on, folks. It was going so good there, too—available in their catchment area school.

These programs are offered in our own centres of excellence or in neighbouring school divisions. Programs such as vocational, high school French immersion and heritage language would not be accessible to considerable numbers of our students under the travel time restrictions of this bill. So, while we appreciate the intent and support the idea of one hour, it's not always possible when you're in a rural school division. You can't offer Ukrainian in every centre. You can't offer French immersion in every centre. You cannot offer vocational programming in every centre. We don't have the money or the resources to provide those things.

Governing implications: In Sunrise School Division we firmly believe that the closer the decision maker is to the student in the classroom the more reflective the decision is of the needs of the student. As trustees, we live in our school communities. We share our lives with our fellow community members. We are parents and grandparents of children in our own schools. We recognize, we react to and we plan for the unique and ever-changing needs of our school communities. Within Sunrise our learning communities are diverse. Programs implemented at schools reflect the needs of that learning community. In one community we have strong Ukrainian language support while another community thrives with a dual track French immersion school.

Our colony and small schools have unique multi-age environments. An increase in immigration has

seen English as an additional language support become a priority in one centre while AAA dollars support growing Aboriginal populations in another. The homogenous one-size-fits-all approach of recent education legislation is eroding the autonomy of school boards and creating challenges for school divisions in meeting the needs of our diverse learning communities.

Under the heading Lack of Consultation: As school divisions, we are expected and mandated by the government to collaborate and consult with our community. We believe in this consultative process in Sunrise School Division and are surprised and concerned that a government, which values and expects collaboration and consultation, would introduce Bill 28 without the appropriate consultation with MAST.

Our expectation and that of our school communities is that the local input we receive is advanced to the provincial level through collaboration between MAST and the provincial government. Without this collaboration, any provincial education legislation will inevitably fall short of successfully meeting the needs of our school communities.

In closing, we urge the provincial government to reconsider Bill 28 and recommend withdrawal of the bill. Failing this, we support the mitigating recommendations of our provincial organization, Manitoba Association of School Trustees. Thank you for your time.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Ms. Carey.

Are there questions?

Mr. Schuler: Karen, thank you for coming to this committee. I'm sorry I was a little late getting to your presentation.

Ms. Carey: Nice to see your face, Mr. Schuler.

Mr. Schuler: I had some duties that I had to take care of and I appreciate the committee's indulgence.

I reference your lack of consultation. I guess that would just be piled on the lack of consultation with school board amalgamation with lack of consultation. We could just spend all afternoon, but we won't. That's been the mantra of this government.

On your first page, you talk about—if mandated by this bill, should be fully funded by the provincial government. We've had presenters come to this

committee, both parents and board, management and all the different sides; they've all basically indicated a concern they have, and that had to do with proper staffing and program access. Some indicated they didn't think this was a big funding issue to keep schools open but, in the end, everybody's speaking the same language—that to keep a small school open, to have a smaller enrolled school, you need proper staffing; you need access to programs, which all cost money.

We had one example from Brandon. The school's basically falling apart. The minister says, no, we support small enrolment schools staying open; the Public Schools Finance Board says, no, we don't support it because we're not going to put money into schools that are no longer considered viable. So the mixed messages coming out of the government are amazing.

Back to the staffing program access and funding—how do you staff and how do you provide programming for schools where the enrolment is fairly small?

Ms. Carey: It depends on the community that we're serving, first of all, so that may vary from one centre to another. If I can pick a school, like Hazelridge School, for example—that's where my kids go—it's a small school, capacity of 72, and it's a little three-room school house.

What we do there in terms of staffing is we have multi-age classrooms, and we have a K to 2 classroom. We had a K to 2, a 3-4, and a 5-6; we've reduced the 6 and moved that to another school. So we have three classes: a K-1, 2-3, and a 4-5.

Utilizing the multi-age environment, we're able to provide the kids with an appropriate education and still do so in a cost-effective manner. Because of the small numbers, we feel the kids are receiving an exemplary education, and they do. My own kids have benefited tremendously from being in that small school environment.

Mr. Schuler: So, with proper funding, it can be done. She has to note it.

Ms. Carey: Yes, with proper funding, it can be done. Things, like our Ukrainian programming, that we offer in Oak Bank—some of the kids that choose to take that program, they can live as far away as—I don't know if you're familiar with our area—past Anola, out near St. Rita, I believe, and so on.

To get those kids to those programs that we can't offer everywhere, it's just not cost-effective. We wouldn't receive funding to do that everywhere. We have to have those kids on a bus, sometimes for longer than an hour. The parents who choose that program because that's what they want for their kids, they don't mind those kids being on the bus for longer than an hour, because they decided that that's the educational priority for that family.

*(14:50)

So I think that decision—while the one hour is a great guideline and we adhere to it as much as we possibly can and we meet it with all of our catchment area schools—we can't meet it when we're doing things, like vocational programming. We don't have a vocational school in our school division. That was taken away from us with their split in 2002. The vocational school that we access, one of them is in Transcona, one is in Louis Riel School Division, and one is in Lord Selkirk School Division, three different vocational facilities depending what our kids are closest to. But our high school kids are on the bus for a long time to get to that programming. We have no other choice. So, if you're telling us we can only have them on the bus for an hour, then they can't access that programming any longer.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any other questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation.

Ms. Carey: Thanks for your time.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Gordon Shead, Frontier School Division. Do you have materials to distribute?

You may start your presentation, Mr. Shead.

Mr. Gordon Shead (Frontier School Division): Good afternoon, distinguished members of the committee. Our board of trustees send their regrets. They were unable to attend because of the late notice, and many of our trustees are living far and wide across the province.

I'm going to speak to the presentation, and it has several appendices items attached for you, so that's information for you, and you may have questions on some of that.

Frontier School Division is a unique school division, including several small and remote schools, and a map and enrolment sheets are enclosed. We

also operate schools on First Nations communities or in proximity to First Nation or federal land. In several cases, small communities contain both Frontier provincial and First Nation federal schools.

Recently, the board of trustees placed two schools on review. These were Disbrowe in Red Sucker Lake and Pine Dock. A third school in Pelican Rapids was discussed several times for possible review; however, that was not done at the time. The review reports that were provided in each community are also enclosed.

In addition, the board did approve a refinement to the 1982 provincial policy on school review, and this process is specific to our communities. Pine Dock was approved for closure at the end of June 2008, and the closure is proceeding. The board did put on hold the review process for Disbrowe School, while Pelican Rapids never formally reached the review process. Likely this school would have been placed on review this spring or early in the fall of 2008.

With all due respect, the division believes the legislation fails to address several significant issues and these are noted in the following section, and I'll touch on them right now.

The first is for pupil cost. Small schools are expensive to operate. Generally, in the city it costs just under \$10,000 to educate a student. Smaller remote schools may cost four to six times that. A per pupil cost sheet for selected Frontier schools is enclosed. There are no provincial guidelines for these costs when they reach a high level. For example, Disbrowe School exceeded \$40,000 per pupil when placed on review, and the recommendation from the division is that policy or guidelines be developed with input regarding mandatory placement on review when per pupil costs exceed \$50,000 annually.

Student enrolment: We operate some schools with 10 students or fewer. One of these schools will close soon. That's Pine Dock. There are no provincial guidelines for mandatory placement on review when student enrolment drops to a very low level. Pine Dock and Disbrowe schools had fewer than 10 students each when placed on review. The recommendation again is that policy or guidelines be developed, including input, regarding mandatory review when enrolment drops below a critical level. And, as we did in the division, a combination of cost

and enrolment could be used to identify that threshold.

Thirdly, we have several schools located in small communities with a population of approximately a thousand people or less. Disbrowe and Pelican Rapids schools are part of or adjacent to a First Nation community with its own school. In both cases, the First Nation schools are larger, more modern and have some economies of scale lacking in the small Frontier schools.

The recommendation, again, is that a policy or guidelines be developed to address the existence of more than one school in small communities and this reality be part of the review process.

Fourthly, Frontier has several communities with a mayor and council and chief and council reflective of both provincial and federal government jurisdictions. In addition, school committees identified in The Public Schools Act and as part of the Frontier governance model are in place in these communities. Further, ownership of facilities may be vested in both the provincial and federal governments with delegation on the federal side to the local First Nation. These complexities of ownership and use of facilities were not considered in the legislation.

The recommendation, therefore, is that the guidelines be further developed to ensure provincial and federal jurisdictions work together on behalf of schools, students and parents in these types of communities.

Fifthly, clarification of the legislation. Apparently, it would still be possible to close a school under Bill 28. However, the language and terminology in the bill lacks clarity. Two points serve as examples: consensus among the affected parents. Does this mean 100 percent, a simple majority, a set threshold, or some other consideration? Does it mean a single parent or family has power of veto?

Consolidation of schools. Does this include a provincial school closing and students attending an adjacent First Nations school, funded and operated under federal government and First Nations jurisdiction and guidelines? The recommendation there is either clarify the points or withdraw the bill and replace it with something more appropriate.

Sixth, travel time in buses. Currently, many students in Frontier School Division travel from one to two hours daily, each way, to attend high schools

where these grades are unavailable locally. The only other option is to have students leave home for extended periods of time to attend high school and live with someone other than immediate family. Parents and staff members in these communities would like to see provincial support for grade extension, including appropriate and prompt capital-facility funding, development, and expansion to offer more grades in the home community.

Frontier, with board approval, has added grades 9 and 10 in a few schools. Parents and staff in some communities would like to see more of this happen. In some cases, however, parents and communities at large have no desire to see grades 11 and 12 offered locally. Further, they're willing to support the extended bus transportation travel time to the adjacent community for access to high school, with a corresponding lengthy travel times.

The Province needs to fund these scenarios, regardless of the time spent by the students on the bus. The recommendations therein are two: (a) support further grade extension, and (b) address the student travel time with revisions to provide that opportunity of access.

Lastly, increasing community use of schools, as noted in the legislation. In Frontier School Division communities, the school is usually the major and most-used facility resource available to the whole community. There's likely no way to increase the level of current use. These communities are typically very small, lack any significant economic base and are often comprised of community groups, businesses, and organizations with very limited economic and human resources.

Declining enrolment or school closure would likely result in less use by these community groups. Therefore, it's almost a given that, in Frontier School Division communities, increasing use of the school by the community is not a reality; therefore, that piece of the legislation is seen to be irrelevant.

In summary, the division simply sees that these issues are not reflected in Bill 28. Our concern is really that it's a matter of some things being omitted or not being attended to, errors of omission that need to be attended to. That, thank you very much, is the end of the presentation. All of the appendices materials are there for your information.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

We have questions.

Mr. Bjornson: Thank you very much, Mr. Shead, for your presentation. I'm sorry I missed the first part. I did need to step out for a moment for a health break.

I just want to say, as I intended to say yesterday in Peonan Point School at the graduation, that Frontier School Division should be commended for the leadership that you demonstrate, particularly with respect to the small schools, keeping small schools viable and believing in the value of the small schools and community schools.

That was clearly demonstrated at Peonan Point yesterday with the wonderful celebration of the success of those two young women graduating from that facility.

I appreciate the presentation that you've given us for consideration today, and having missed the first part, I'll be sure to review the notes and the suggestions that you have proposed.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): You used, I think, it was Disbrowe School which had per-student costs of something like \$40,000 per year. Can you give us a little bit more understanding of the breakdown of the expenses related to that \$40,000?

Mr. Shead: A very small school with student enrolment of under 10, still within our guidelines for Frontier School Division, we still staff it at the same ratio we would a larger school in a more southern setting.

We don't cut on the resources. The costs are higher. We've got a teacher, maybe an educational assistant. We've got housing costs. Travel costs for consultants to go and work in that school are higher because of the remoteness factor. Utilities are higher. A small school in Brochet, it costs \$8 to do a load of laundry. That's a cost factor that we deal with on a daily basis, and we have to budget for that.

*(15:00)

So the remoteness brings with it a huge percentage increase in costs. If we were to build a brand-new school in many of the sites in Frontier School Division and the north, the cost to build the same facility in the south would be double to do the same in the north. So it impacts everything from maintenance to utilities to supplies to travel, and that's the reality to operate a small school.

We have 16 schools with four teachers or less, and we don't go cheaply on those schools. They get the same level of service that a larger school would get within our division in a southern, larger, more accessible setting. So those are the realities of Frontier School Division.

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much, Gordon, for coming in and making your presentation; appreciate it very much.

Your first sentence says: Frontier School Division is a unique school division, including several small and remote schools. I had the opportunity to look at your map, and it's about the size of an average European country. That's a substantial school division.

Because of the size of it and the uniqueness of your school division, were you consulted at all about this legislation?

Mr. Shead: No.

Madam Chairperson: Any further questions?

Mr. Gerrard: Just to probe a little bit further in terms of—you have at least two schools which are in communities where they're part of the same community. There is a First Nation community and a larger school, and, in those circumstances, can you give us a little bit better understanding of what would be the differences in terms of the quality of the educational environment and the school environment if you tried to maintain the small school versus amalgamating or having the students go to the First Nation school.

Mr. Shead: I'll use the example of Pelican Rapids. Sapotaweyak First Nation has a school in that community, a fairly large school, several hundred students, brand new, opened September of 2007, nursery to grade 12. We have a little school with 25 to 30 students in it that goes from nursery to grade 8. It's an older building, and the economies of scale are such that we can't compete.

We would love to be able to put our school in Pelican under review with the potential for having all of the students attend a new school with a formalized reverse education agreement, which we've done in other communities in the division. Some of the students are already going there. Some of the parents are working there from the provincial land. The principal of that school used to work for us, so we have a very high confidence level that the quality of education at that school is solid, very solid. We were

meeting with the chief and council, staff of the First Nations, the director of education, prior to the legislation with the aim of moving toward review.

So there was a scenario where the two schools, if you were a good baseball player, you could probably throw a ball from one schoolyard to the other in the community. It's one school-one community that is usually the notion that we see in Frontier communities. It's not two separate entities. The reserve and provincial boundary lines are invisible. Many of the people living on provincial land are status First Nation, but they're not living on the reserve land, so they're funded provincially. It's where you sleep at night that counts as to who funds you. It's not your status; it's where your bed is.

So that's the best example I can give you. The legislation really is problematic because it brought to a screeching halt a process that was already under way, and the attachments are in the appendix materials here. So we were hopeful that we would move to a review, and we think closure with a better quality of education—or not better, as good, in a bigger facility being offered in the same school where the kids would not have to make the transition to leave one school and then they go away from home to another site after they've left our place, that's probably the best example I can give you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you. Our time for questions has expired. Thank you for your presentation.

Mr. Shead: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: I will now call on Gladys Hayward Williams, private citizen. Do you have materials to distribute?

Ms. Gladys Hayward Williams (Private Citizen): I have no materials to distribute. It's an oral presentation.

Madam Chairperson: Then please commence with your presentation.

Ms. Williams: Thank you.

Minister of Education (Mr. Bjornson) and MLAs, thank you for allowing me to present at the standing committee for Bill 28.

My name is Gladys Hayward Williams and I am a resident of Springfield. I live just about five minutes from École Dugald school, which is a French immersion school for our area, and, in the

other direction, I live about 15 minutes from Pierre Elliott Trudeau school, which is a French immersion high school and used to be the catchment school for our students to continue their French immersion education, as is provided for them under the Charter of Rights.

This was so until 2002, when there were a series of amalgamations of school divisions across this province under Premier Gary Doer, done under the previous Public Schools Act, although it was in violation of it. The Springfield students were cut off from the programs established for them in Transcona, but by the taxpayers of the former Transcona Springfield School Division, and were paid for, in part, by the taxpayers of Springfield. In other words, the parents of these students, their grandparents and their great-grandparents.

I mention this because, by limiting bus transportation to one hour for our students, you, once again, attempt to cut them off from their programs and services that are there for them, outside of their school division, because it is now the Sunrise School Division that the École Dugald school is in. It is the River East Transcona School Division that the French immersion high school is in.

You either attempt to cut them off from these programs, or you ask the Springfield taxpayers to, once again, pay again to maintain access for their students. Right beside the Pierre Elliott Trudeau school in Transcona, the taxpayers also pay to have programs established in the Murdoch Mackay high school which is a vocational high school and now is outside the school division for our Springfield students.

The concern there is about being able to access these programs. Our students also now access in the Louis Riel School Division the ATC centre there, which is a great thing for our students but, if we're going to limit it to one hour, our students either will not be allowed or not be able to attend these programs and gain the education or, again, it will be our taxpayers that have to pay.

This again, as was presented previously, is for other school divisions, outside of Springfield, but within the Sunrise School Division. It's particularly about the Springfield students that I'm asking you to not—please—once again disadvantage them regarding their education.

I agree that the closer to the classroom the decision-making process happens, the more likely it is to be of benefit to the students in the classroom.

I have a question: When we pay dollars, as parents, to create the organization MAPC, Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, and when school boards pay dollars in order to support the Manitoba Association of School Trustees, why is this consultation not happening before bills are created that affect our students?

I will say to you one more time, the closer to the classroom the decision-making process happens, the more likely it is to be of benefit for the students in that classroom. Thank you for your time.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

There are questions.

Mr. Bjornson: Thank you for your presentation.

I would like to assure you that the intent of the legislation around the distance travelled is, specifically, to look at trends that we've seen in the past where, as enrolments declined, the size of the bus would get bigger and the bus routes would get longer.

Certainly, when you talk about specific programs where you have transportation of students from one division to another, we would hope there's a reasonable effort to address the one-hour transportation time. Obviously, in those cases, it's not the intent of the legislation to usurp those programs because of that requirement to travel an hour. The time is geared towards keeping kids on the shortest possible bus routes.

I know, as a father of three children under the age of 10, I can't imagine any of my children on a bus for an hour and a half on either side of the school day. That is what that particular part of the legislation is designed to do—to ask school boards to work towards one-hour travel times.

Ms. Williams: May I respond?

Madam Chairperson: Yes.

* (15:10)

Ms. Williams: Thank you.

I would say to you, perhaps, that's what you were pointing at and, being a father of children under the age of 10, perhaps, that's what you were thinking.

I am talking to you specifically about high school programs and high school students, and I would say to you again that had there been consultation with parents and with school boards appropriately, then these things would have been shared with you in order to craft the legislation and perhaps maybe not even have found it necessary to have it.

Mr. Hawranik: I would like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule, especially on short notice, to make presentation to committee, a very interesting presentation, and, certainly, one which, I hope, we'll be taking into account, and perhaps looking at modifying legislation to allay your concerns. But, again, thank you very much for coming this afternoon.

Ms. Williams: May I respond to that as well, please?

Madam Chairperson: Yes, Ms. Hayward Williams.

Ms. Williams: I also, then, would like to say that I support MAST in their recommendations, and I believe it was Karen Carey, board chair of the Sunrise School Division, that the first thing would be to actually remove the legislation. I understand that you're talking about modifying it; I'm not sure that it is needed.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation.

I will now call on Jan McIntyre, Prairie Spirit School Division, who is presenting for Marvin Anderson.

Ms. McIntyre, you may commence your presentation.

Ms. Jan McIntyre (Prairie Spirit School Division): Thank you.

I would like to begin by apologizing. At the beginning of our presentation it says, submission to the Law Amendment review committee, rather than the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development which, obviously, you are. But, nonetheless, it is regarding Bill 28.

I am here with our chairperson of our board, Marvin Anderson, who's sitting back in the audience section. I'm speaking on behalf of the board of trustees of the Prairie Spirit School Division to voice concerns regarding Bill 28. Prairie Spirit School Division is located in south-central Manitoba. We

are a school division of approximately 2,300 students spread out over almost 6,000 square kilometres. Our division is comprised of 29 schools—16 public schools and 13 Hutterian colony schools. High school programming is offered in 9 of our 16 public schools. The largest school in our division is a K to 12 school in St. Claude with 231 students. Our smallest public school is located in Bruxelles, with a K to 8 enrolment of 36 students.

Over the last 25 years, our enrolment has declined, on average, by approximately 3 percent per year. This rate of decline is projected to continue so that by the school year 2011 or 2012, which is only three years from now, our enrolment will be down to 1,980 students.

Prairie Spirit has a history of working to provide quality programming for our students. It is, without a doubt, the overriding consideration in the decisions we make. Through purposeful planning, we have done our utmost to achieve that goal. At a divisional level, we have had two voluntary amalgamations, eventually joining the former Pembina Valley, Tiger Hills and Mountain school divisions to form the current Prairie Spirit School Division in 2002.

We have restructured our administrative staff to better serve our students in a cost-efficient manner and are working on an ongoing area-by-area review of bus catchment areas to provide more efficient and timely service to our students. At divisional cost, we have put in place an interactive television system to provide course availability for high school students, and as well at divisional cost, we have put in place high-speed Internet to allow for the utilization of Web-based courses to further enhance program availability. Our teaching staff have a history of making instructional changes and adaptations designed to provide for quality programming despite declining student numbers.

We have a history of community consultation, seeking the public's input in programming priorities. Trustees regularly attend each parent advisory council meeting in the division and live in the areas they represent. When sustained low enrolment numbers are encountered, trustees work with communities to determine how best to proceed.

Two recent school reviews have chosen to leave schools as is for the moment, but since 2001 three small communities have voluntarily closed their schools. Each of those buildings has either been sold to community or private interests for development or

has been utilized by the school division for other purposes.

In consultation with the board, the community of Cypress River has opted to close its school in June of 2009. In light of Bill 28, the community currently awaits word as to whether or not that closure can proceed, and the school division must deal with staffing commitments made on the understanding that the school would indeed close in June of 2009.

The Public Schools Act delegates to school boards the responsibility of determining the number, kind, grade and description of schools to be established. The moratorium on school closures legislated in Bill 28 directly conflicts with the autonomy of school boards to make appropriate decisions for the communities and students they represent and to act upon those decisions. Trustees are elected to represent all of our constituents and to make decisions at the local level. As enrolments continue to decline, difficult decisions will have to be made. School closure is a decision of last resort, but there are, unfortunately, times when this is the best option. We cannot compromise the quality of education offered to our students. To do so would compromise their future as well as that of our communities.

As enrolments decline, future Prairie Spirit projections indicate triple grading of elementary classes in many of our schools. Even with the use of technology, IITV and the simultaneous teaching of multiple courses at the high-school level, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure even a basic high-school course offering. Teachers find it difficult to teach outside of their field of expertise and/or in the challenging context mentioned above, leading to greater difficulty for the school division to recruit and retain qualified teaching personnel.

Aware of these realities, the board of trustees of Prairie Spirit School Division commissioned two reports that were received in January of 2008. One examined the public school facilities in our division and the other addressed our programming needs now and over the next five years. Recommendations involving potential school closures and reconfiguration of schools were presented to the trustees. As per Prairie Spirit practice, we consulted with our administrators, including all school principals, made both documents public and developed a plan to consult with all school division communities over the course of the 2008-09 school year regarding the report's recommendations.

We firmly believe that this moratorium prevents our board from addressing the serious reality of declining enrolment in Prairie Spirit School Division. Throughout the period of the moratorium, enrolments will continue to decline, and as time passes even greater difficulty will be faced in maintaining quality programming. This bill makes no provision to increase funding support to maintain programming in low-enrolment schools where the only current option is to make triple grading a reality, nor does it offer funding for professional development to better equip teachers to meet curriculum needs under such a scenario. Furthermore, it does nothing to offer increased technology support to high schools whose enrolments are insufficient to affordably offer basic core courses in the traditional one teacher in one classroom setting, nor does it offer any support for professional development of teachers who are faced with simultaneously teaching more than one course at a time, often courses outside of their field.

In addition, we voice concerns regarding safety issues in extremely small schools. We believe that there must be always at least two adults present in school at all times, but should schools continue to remain open with extremely low student populations, current staffing allocations may not always allow for such staffing. Concerns are also raised that there always be sufficient supervision, something that may prove difficult in extremely small school settings, particularly over the duty-free lunch period. As well, it must be acknowledged that a child's school experience includes extracurricular activities. As student populations shrink, so, too, do staffing allocations, and with that come diminished opportunities for extracurricular activities. If the last resort option of closing schools is removed from school boards, then additional funding support must be offered to maintain student safety and quality programming in low enrolment schools. Current funding levels will compromise both safety and programming in these low enrolment schools as student numbers further decline.

*(15:20)

We would further like to address the issue of length of bus ride for transported students. Approximately two-thirds of Prairie Spirit students are bused to school. We do our utmost to ensure that student transportation times are no greater than one hour each way. However, with geography and country roads being what they are, this is not always achievable. We believe that in order to meet this one-

hour limit proposed in the legislation we will need to add additional bus routes, and even then it will be extremely difficult to ensure that those students living in the most remote portions of our school division will be within the legislated limit. Driving too fast for road conditions and rushing to arrive at a given time will undoubtedly compromise the safety of our students.

In closing, we believe that Bill 28 threatens the quality of education of the students in the Prairie Spirit School Division and that this legislation also threatens the safety of our students. Furthermore, this legislation detrimentally affects local autonomy as it removes the right of duly elected school trustees to make the decisions they have been entrusted to make. Rather than legislate these measures, we believe it would be in the best interests of government, school divisions, ratepayers and students to work together as stakeholders in our education system to develop guidelines to address issues raised with this legislation. We feel that guidelines achieved through honest and open consultation enhance understanding and commitment while providing direction that allows for flexibility relevant to circumstance. Surely, this would be a more sensible approach to the challenges we together face.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

We have questions. I have Mr. Schuler, Mr. Cullen, then Dr. Gerrard.

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much, Jan, for coming and doing this presentation. It's beautiful outside. I'm sure there are a lot of other things you could be doing, but you're here making it.

I just want to quote one thing from your last page, and that is: If the last option of closing schools is removed from school boards, then additional funding support must be offered to maintain student safety and quality programming in low enrolment schools. Current funding levels will compromise both safety and programming in these low enrolment schools.

Have you had any discussions with the minister or with the department in regard to low enrolment schools because, as far as I know, from the time I've been at this table, this is the first time we've actually had safety raised as a concern in schools. Have you raised that issue directly with the minister and his department, and what was the response?

Ms. McIntyre: Just this week we were in Winnipeg, again, twice in one week on the same issue. We intended to meet with Mr. Bjornson, but he was called into concurrence, and so we met with Gerald Farthing. We raised some of these issues with them at the time, but prior to that, no.

Mr. Cullen: Thank you, Jan and Marvin, for coming in today and making the trip in.

You certainly have done a lot of work over the years. You've gone through two amalgamations. I think you have a pretty good understanding of the challenges that rural areas face. I know this legislation is going to have a direct impact on you because I look at Cypress River, for instance. In essence, it has gone through the process, and I understand your board voted on it. I would think, in my view, it falls outside of the scope of Bill 28, and I think the will of the school board should be looked after.

I wonder if you, first of all, have had any direct response from the minister in terms of the closing of Cypress River. And actually, the second thing, and Mr. Schuler alluded to it, was the quality of education. Bill 28 is certainly going to impact the quality of education and, you know, the department has kind of been monitoring the fact that you can't have any excess surpluses as well. So you don't have any extra money kicking around in view of that. I just want to get your comment on the quality of education and how Bill 28 is going to impact that as well.

Ms. McIntyre: I'd like to begin by answering the question about Cypress River. We discussed Cypress River with Mr. Farthing this week when we were in, and we left a letter for the minister, and so we're waiting response on that.

Now, in regard to your question of quality of education, our concern is that, as resources get spread thinner, as grades—there are fewer students per grade, and so more grades are joined, more classes are joined at the high school level. We have teachers who are teaching two or three math or more courses at one time to a group of students.

I think then the question becomes quality, and that concerns us because we feel that our students are just as deserving of being prepared for post-secondary education as students living in more populace areas.

Mr. Gerrard: You've mentioned the school at Cypress River and maybe you can help us a little bit to understand the situation better. Tell us a little bit about the number of students, the projected enrolment, where the students would go if the Cypress River School closed and what the nature of the consultations have been with the community.

Ms. McIntyre: Sure. The community of Cypress River has been in consultation through their trustee, Mr. Anderson, for the last two to three years regarding the enrolment numbers. It's been discussed over time that the projections are that the numbers will decline this year and they'll decline further next year and so on. It's a K-to-6 school. I think there're 30-odd students there, and they're basically offering programming in two classes, three grades apiece.

The parents, knowing that the future is for that enrolment to further decline, have chosen to come to the board and work with us to close the school. The agreement is that we would provide some additional staffing for the school year coming up, '08-09, and then they would close with dignity in June of 2009.

That has been the intent, and it was done in consultation with the school division through the trustee. The community had meetings, came to the board with a community letter asking that this be done, and the board met those requests and that is the plan.

Mr. Gerrard: Where would the students be going, how far away and so on?

Ms. McIntyre: They will primarily be going to Glenboro which is 10 miles down the road.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, thank you very much for your presentation. *[interjection]*

Mr. Hawranik, let me just check to confirm whether or not there are any other presenters.

I believe this concludes the list of people who are present here this afternoon. Are there any other individuals that were wishing to present today?

Madam Chairperson: Seeing none, then, Mr. Hawranik.

Mr. Hawranik: Yes, Madam Chair, seeing that there are no other presenters for bills who are registered here today, I would ask leave of the committee to proceed on a line-by-line basis on Bills

10, 15 and 30, the rationale being 10, 15 and 30 have now been called a third time in committee.

Bills 10 and 30 don't have any presenters, and Bill 15 has one who has been called once already. So we'd be prepared to proceed on a line-by-line basis, 10, 15 and 30.

* (15:30)

Madam Chairperson: Do we have leave of the committee to—

Some Honourable Members: Agreed.

Madam Chairperson: Okay, during the consideration of the bill, the table of contents, the preamble, the enacting clause and the title are postponed until all other clauses have been considered in their proper order. Also, if there is agreement from the committee, for the longer bills I will call clauses in blocks that conform to pages, with the understanding that we will stop at any particular clause or clauses where members may have comments, questions or amendments to propose. Is that agreed? [*Agreed*]

We will now proceed to clause-by-clause consideration of the bills.

Bill 10—The Legislative Library Act

Madam Chairperson: We will begin with Bill 10.

Does the minister responsible for Bill 10 have an opening statement?

Hon. Diane McGifford (Minister of Advanced Education and Literacy): No, thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mrs. Leanne Rowat (Minnedosa): Thank you, Madam Chair. I did give a fairly detailed review of Bill 10 during second debate, so I believe that this bill is fine to go. I understand that it's generally a housekeeping bill.

Again, I want to just congratulate the legislative staff for all the work that they do in support of the MLAs and the province as a whole. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: We thank the member.

Clause 1—pass; clauses 2 and 3—pass; clauses 4 through 8—pass; clauses 9 through 11—pass; clauses

12 through 14—pass; table of contents—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill be reported.

Bill 15—The Climate Change and Emissions Reductions Act

Madam Chairperson: We will now proceed with Bill 15.

Does the minister responsible for Bill 15 have an opening statement?

Hon. Jim Rondeau (Minister of Science, Technology, Energy and Mines): No, I don't, Madam Chairperson.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mr. Cliff Cullen (Turtle Mountain): Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a brief couple of comments.

Certainly, we recognize what the minister is trying to accomplish here and obviously recognize that greenhouse gas emissions is a very important issue for Manitoba and all Canadians. We just feel that there are some areas here, that we can strengthen this legislation, at least make it more accountable to Manitobans and make this government more accountable to Manitobans. That's kind of the intent of some of the amendments that we will be bringing forward. We certainly hope the minister will look favourably on these amendments.

We think we can move this legislation forward to the benefit of all Manitobans. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: We thank the member.

Shall clause 1 pass? Mrs. Stefanson?

* (15:40)

Mrs. Heather Stefanson (Tuxedo): No, it's okay, sorry, keep going.

Madam Chairperson: Clause 1—pass.

Shall clauses 2 and 3 pass?

Mrs. Stefanson: We can pass clause 2, I guess.

Madam Chairperson: Clause 2—pass.

Mrs. Stefanson: I move

THAT the following be added after Clause 3(1) of the Bill:

Initial annual targets

3(1.1) For each of the years 2008 to 2012, the annual emissions reduction target for Manitoba is to reduce emissions before the year's end by at least 20% of the total amount required to meet the initial emissions reduction target set out in subsection (1).

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by Mrs. Stefanson

THAT the following be added after Clause 3(1) of the Bill—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense. Thank you.

The amendment is in order. The floor is open for questions.

Seeing none, is the committee ready for the question?

The question before the committee is as follows:
Moved by Mrs. Stefanson

THAT the following be added—dispense?

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense.

Mrs. Stefanson: I just wanted to briefly put a few words on the record with respect to this amendment that we're bringing forward here.

Our concern with the bill, the way it reads without this amendment, is that it effectively leaves it open for the minister to not, in fact, have to reduce any greenhouse gas emissions until after the year of the next election, which is 2011 if another bill passes.

So our concern is that if this government is really serious about reaching its Kyoto targets that they have set, that we believe there should be annual reduction targets between now and 2012. We think an even way of doing that is to do 20 percent per year starting in 2008 up until 2012.

I would encourage members opposite to support this amendment if they are really serious about being able to reach their Kyoto targets by 2012.

Mr. Rondeau: I thank the member for her comments. However, I'd like to just make some quick responses. One that between 1990 and 1995, the greenhouse gases went up by about 1.1 megatonnes, it's 1.1 million tonnes. From 1995 on, it went up to 21.4 megatonnes. Now, that was an increase.

Now, what I want to show is what's happened since the year 2000. Since the year 2000, it went from 21.4 megatonnes to, in the year 2000, about 20 megatonnes. Because we also have been having a growing GDP of about 20 percent between the year 2000 and 2006 that's caused, in general, that would create the increase in the greenhouse gases. We've also had about 45,000 new people in the last little while and that should, theoretically, have an increase in greenhouse gases.

I'd like to let the member know that even though there have been decreases from the year 2000 to the year 2001, there was a slight increase in 2002. Then, every year, there's either a slight increase or decrease. But in summation, from the year 2000, where we had 21,400, this year, as reported by Environment Canada, we have 21,200. So with an increased GDP, an increased population, we've had a decrease.

The other thing, it's not a linear decrease. What happens is that with more and more programs going on-stream, more and more activities taking place, it increases the decrease—it speeds up the decreasing of the greenhouse gases emissions. So we're going to have less and less as time goes on. So as more and more programs go on-stream, the decrease will increase.

We believe that we have (a), a commitment to meet Kyoto, and (b), we're well on the way of increasing the speed at which the greenhouse gases are going down.

Mr. Cullen: I certainly want to speak in favour of this amendment as well. I think the minister has to reference back his legislation here, and look at the only target that he has referenced in this legislation, is from actually 1999 to the target year of 2012. This is the only target he's got in this entire document.

Our view is, again, that the target date of 2012 is after the next election. Our view is that Manitobans would like to see some kind of a decrease, starting fairly quickly. That's the intent of this amendment—to get the government moving and try to take some of the politics out of this particular legislation.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: No.

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is accordingly defeated.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: Shall clause 3 pass?

An Honourable Member: As amended.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mrs. Stefanson: I move

THAT Clause 3(3) of the Bill be amended

(a) by striking out "The minister may" and substituting "In accordance with the regulations, the Clean Environment Commission must annually"; and

(b) by striking out "in any given year" and substituting "in the year for which the determination is made".

Motion presented.

Mrs. Stefanson: The reason for this amendment is simply to take this out of the hands of the minister for calculating the emissions and offsets; it also makes it mandatory.

As it reads right now in the legislation, it says the minister may. We believe that this must be done and it's a bit of a conflict of interest, if the minister does this as well. I'll leave my comments at that.

Mr. Rondeau: I thank the member for the suggestions. The one thing about the calculating of the emissions and the offsets is that this is still being developed with the Western Climate Initiative. It's developed in other countries; it's still a moving target as far as whom, how, and where they're going to be calculated.

If you noticed a few days ago, Environment Canada put out a report. They put out an independent, third-party report. I think that, in the area of climate change, over time, more and more

groups are going to have reports, but what we want to do, at this point, is to work through the Western Climate Initiative, the governors' association and all the different organizations to make sure we know who's going to report. There will be different reports out there.

I think what we should do is allow these processes to take place. Then we will have established, in a very short period of time, a legitimate, third-party group and, of course, which would be open to evaluation by the public, by third parties.

As you noticed a few days ago, the government is very open to any discussion whenever a third-party group presents any information to the public. What I believe we need to do is make sure that the minister decides, not on the third-party evaluator, but the process.

We would be definitely relying on any information from the Western Climate Initiative, governors' national targets, Kyoto, any of those groups, to figure out how this process is going to be moving forward—the method of calculating emissions and the offsets. It would be definitely set up for a third-party validator.

* (15:50)

Mr. Cullen: That's encouraging news from the minister that there will be a third party involved here.

Does this existing act—will that then allow the minister to appoint third parties to calculate emissions and offset? Is that what you're trying to tell us, because we certainly view that there should be an independent, third-party agency to have an idea what's going on.

What we're doing here is we're allowing the minister to make up the play as he goes along and, subsequently, review his own test, if you will. That's why we want to get a third party involved in the process.

Mr. Rondeau: I understand that there's being developed ISO international standards if we want to be part of the Western Climate Initiative, if we want to go into having a cap and trade system. If we want to be a participant of any of these things, we actually have to be a member of and adhere to international standards, and I understand that's what we're doing here. We'll accept the international standards. We'll be part of the agreements like we are, Western

Climate Initiative, which actually will specify the standards.

So whether it's Canadian Standards Association which is verifying credits or whether it's Western Climate Initiative which says it's going to be an ISO international standard, we will adopt those. They will be recognized third parties, and it will be publicly stated which group we are working with. It will be a third-party recognized standard.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is defeated.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: Clause 3—pass.

Shall clauses 4 and 5 pass?

Mrs. Stefanson: I have an amendment for clause 5.

Madam Chairperson: Clause 4—pass.

Mrs. Stefanson: I move

THAT Clause 5(1) of the Bill be amended

(a) by replacing the part before clause (a) with "For each year after this section comes into force, the Auditor General must prepare a report that"; and

(b) in clause (b), by adding ", and evaluates the effectiveness of the policies, programs, incentives and measures" at the end.

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by Mrs. Stefanson

THAT Clause 5(1) of the Bill be amended

(a) by replacing the part before clause (a) with "For each year after this section—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense.

The amendment is in order.

Mrs. Stefanson: Just to say a few words about this amendment, effectively what we want to do is take it out of the hands of the minister reporting on himself and putting that in the hands of a third party, being the Auditor General. We believe that this is a much more transparent process and would hope and encourage that members opposite would support this amendment.

Mr. Rondeau: Not only will we have a public transparent document that will be tabled in the Legislature, but will also be able to be available for public disclosure, for public comment. As part of WCI, we've made the commitment to make our reports and our progress public, and we will do that.

I also would like the member to know that the Auditor General is free to look at (a) our programs, (b) our benefits, and (c) how we are achieving our targets because we made a public commitment toward targets. I would be happy to discuss at any time with the Auditor General how we're accountable and the progress we're making accordingly. In fact, that's the right and obligation of us working with the Auditor General to do so.

Mr. Cullen: I, again, appreciate what the minister is saying, but we still feel that there's a need for an independent agency here to provide a report and then evaluate the policies that the government has developed. I think as a basis for how effective the policies and the framework that the government is putting forward, there has to be an evaluation. We believe that should be done on an annual basis.

The way this legislation is reading is that the report would only come every fourth year after 2012. We just find that unacceptable, especially given that Environment Canada provide their reports on an annual basis. We think the Province should be providing their reports on an annual basis as well, and, again, having a third party involved is a lot more—would be more clear for Manitobans. I'm sure they would appreciate having a third party involved, as opposed to just the minister and his department.

Mr. Rondeau: Just as a quick response, we do have third-party, independent validators, like Environment Canada, which come out, and, as was done on May

16, they came out with an independent, third-party report that they don't ask us for clarification or publication. They provide that information and we have to defend it.

The other thing we have to do, very appropriately, is if we say that we have these programs and these targets, we actually have to justify those with the Auditor General, and I'd be happy to work with the Auditor General to have appropriate checks and balances to make sure we do that because I think it's essential.

However, it also says that we have to create a report in 2010 and 2012, and it goes into specific detail about what we're doing, how we're reaching them, all the plans under sectors like agriculture, transportation, the timing, how they have to be placed. That's in 2010 and 2012.

You might also know, Madam Chairperson, these reports are independent third party, and that's why we don't need this. It's already out there, and I'm sure I will be in discussions in the future with the Auditor General and others to make sure that the programs are working and we can sign deals and move forward on the appropriate programs.

Mrs. Stefanson: I guess my question for the minister would be, at this stage, that—I mean, we believe that it's very important not only to have an independent person or body preparing the report, but it would be I think very beneficial to Manitobans to have this done on an annual basis.

The minister has mentioned—and it mentions in the legislation—that the first report will come out in 2010 and then again in 2012, and then thereafter it's going to be every four years.

I believe that Manitobans would want to see reporting annually. What is the rationale behind every four years?

Mr. Rondeau: I think there're two things here. One, there are annual reports, and there will continue to be annual reports through Environment Canada and other third parties that are talking about our programs and our initiatives, et cetera.

But it's also really important to note that we're working on larger trends and programs. So, like, a geothermal heat pump installation, you start. More and more people are getting it. More and more people every year are installing it. It takes awhile. So what we're looking at here, in this report to the

Legislature, is not only our targets, which are reported on by Environment Canada and other third parties, what we're also looking at is the programs that we're initiating, the trends, the long-term trends.

So the goal of the proposal and the report that is prepared by the department and is presented in the House is meant to show how our programs are working, what our programs are doing and how we're, long term, achieving our goals. It is not meant to be the verifier of everything that's going on. The verifiers are the third-party, independent groups that provide their data without consultation, without informing the government, independent of this government, and that's the way it should be.

Our agreement with the Western Climate Initiative is we're going to keep people informed. I'm sure that we will continue to inform people about the progress in the building efficiency, transportation, the new furnace program, the geothermal, all those trends. We will do that and we'll have a reporting system to the public.

But, to the House, we're going to go long-term trends, 2010, 2012, and every four years after that. So we're talking overall trends, because occasionally there can be a spike like happened this last year.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is defeated.

*(16:00)

Madam Chairperson: Shall clause 5 pass?

Mrs. Stefanson: I move

THAT Clause 5(3) of the Bill be replaced with the following:

Additional requirements

5(3) Each report must also state the total of Manitoba's emissions for the year of the report and compare that total with the total of Manitoba's emissions for 1990.

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by Mrs. Stefanson

THAT Clause 5(3) of the Bill be replaced with the following—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense.

The amendment is in order.

Mrs. Stefanson: Just to put a few words on the record with what we want to achieve here. This essentially will tell us and tell all Manitobans how close the government is towards meeting their Kyoto target on an annual basis. We believe that this would be very important so that Manitobans are aware of whether or not the minister is, in fact, on target and not just saying that they are on target towards meeting their Kyoto commitment.

Mr. Rondeau: Madam Chair, if you look at section 5(2), it actually talks about, in section (a) exactly that. So in section (a) it goes through the emission reductions that have been achieved in other jurisdictions as a result of the actions. It's talking about future and past emissions. It's talking about the programs and encouraging supportive activities. It's talking about all the other co-operate—so, it's doing all that in section 5(2). So it's already doing that.

The other thing is this is just showing two things: (1) a carbon neutral decade or better. The other thing is that we already are talking—if the member's talking about showing that we have met Kyoto obligation, actually, that's part of the bill. It's going through it, and we will definitely show that we're going to meet or exceed our Kyoto targets.

Mr. Cullen: Just again, appreciate the minister's statement. I think it's a bit of a stretch to say that the bill already does that. You know, again, we're looking for annual reporting so that Manitobans know exactly where we're at. The whole idea is to compare it back to 1990 as we understand the Kyoto commitments. That's the intent of this particular amendment. So we think it's very valuable here, and

we don't think the bill addresses that situation in any other clause.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: No.

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is accordingly defeated.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: Shall clause—[interjection] Sorry.

Mrs. Stefanson: Madam Chair, I move

THAT the following be added after Clause 5(6) of the Bill:

Report to be posted on Internet

5(7) The minister must ensure that, without delay after the report is tabled under subsection (6),

(a) a copy is placed in the public registry maintained as required by section 17 of *The Environment Act*, which must include the electronic public registry of the Manitoba Department of Conservation website; and

(b) a copy is placed on the Clean Environment Commission website.

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by Mrs. Stefanson

THAT the following be added—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense.

The amendment is in order.

Mrs. Stefanson: The purpose of this amendment is so that all Manitobans are aware of, with the annual

reports, where the government is at with respect to meeting their Kyoto targets. It's often been sometimes reports are tabled in the Legislature. It's not easily accessible to the public. I think this just creates a more transparent and open environment with respect to reporting of this so that it's easier for people to see exactly where we're at.

So I would hope that members opposite would support this amendment.

Mr. Rondeau: I think the member for this actual—and we've had a good discussion over here about public information on this. The trouble is the Clean Environment Commission as a part of government; it is not part of government. It's an independent commission, so I wouldn't be directing them to do this.

What we would endeavour to do and what I would look at is something that I may look at on the report stage where we have to make it public on the Web site, is our intention to make it public on the Web site. It will be on the Science, Technology, Energy and Mines climate change Web site. We put everything, including our public consultations, all the workshop data, everything goes on the Web site, and we actually have it for comments. So we would be prepared to put it on the Web site and have it for public discussion.

However, I don't think I would have, in any way, shape or form, the power to tell the Clean Environment Commission to put it on their Web site. It's an independent group and I think that would be inappropriate, so, although I'll look at the suggestion, this amendment as stated wouldn't be appropriate for me to direct the Clean Environment Commission.

Mr. Cullen: Well, I certainly hope the minister will have a hard look at our amendment here, and when he's looking at it I would hope that he would reflect on our comments about making reports available on an annual basis, as well. I think that's what Manitobans would be looking for. Quite frankly, having reports available every four years, this doesn't seem very effective to me and not very transparent when we're dealing with greenhouse gas emissions in Manitoba.

Mrs. Stefanson: I think, just further to that, I'm wondering if the minister would then agree to bring forward an amendment to require that the reporting to be placed on the Web site immediately upon being tabled. If he will bring forward that or if we are to

bring forward in report stage session amendment, will he agree today to support that?

Mr. Rondeau: I would be happy to discuss the options there, whether it's in regulations, whether it's in the bill, we can talk about that between now and report stage, and I would make a commitment to talk to both the critics on this and see whether we can come to an amiable resolution.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: No.

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is accordingly defeated.

Mrs. Stefanson: I move

THAT the following be added after Clause 5 of the Bill and before the centred heading "GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES":

REDUCED SALARIES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF MISSING A TARGET

Consequence of missing a target

5.1(1) If an emissions reduction target set out in subsection 3(1) or in regulation under subsection 3(2) is not met, for the next year the salary of each minister – including any person appointed as minister in that next year – must be reduced in accordance with subsection (2).

Salary reduction

5.1(2) When a minister's salary is to be reduced for a year,

(a) it is to be reduced by the following percentage of the additional salary otherwise payable for that year to him or her under *The*

Legislative Assembly Act for his or her services as minister:

(i) 40%, if salaries were reduced under this section for the immediately preceding year, or

(ii) 20%, in any other case;

(b) the reduction may be spread out equally over the remaining pay periods in the year; and

(c) the reduction applies only while he or she is a minister.

Application after change in government

5.3(3) If the party forming the government after a general election is not the party that formed the government before the election, the salary reduction does not apply to a minister appointed after the election in respect of a missed emission reduction target in respect of

(a) the year in which the election occurred; or

(b) the immediately preceding year.

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by—

Some Honourable Members: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense. Thank you.

THAT the following be added after Clause 5 of the Bill and before the centred heading "GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES":

REDUCED SALARIES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF MISSING A TARGET

Consequence of missing a target

5.1(1) *If an emissions reduction target set out in subsection 3(1) or in a regulation under subsection 3(2) is not met, for the next year the salary of each minister – including any person appointed as minister in that next year – must be reduced in accordance with subsection (2).*

Salary reduction

5.1(2) *When a minister's salary is to be reduced for a year,*

(a) it is to be reduced by the following percentage of the additional salary otherwise payable for that year to him or her under The Legislative Assembly Act for his or her services as a minister:

(i) 40%, if salaries were reduced under this section for the immediately preceding year, or

(ii) 20%, in any other case;

(b) the reduction may be spread out equally over the remaining pay periods in the year; and

(c) the reduction applies only while he or she is a minister.

Application after change in government

5.1(3) *If the party forming the government after a general election is not the party that formed the government before the election, the salary reduction does not apply to a minister appointed after the election in respect of a missed emissions reduction target in respect of*

(a) the year in which the election occurred; or

(b) the immediately preceding year.

The amendment is in order.

* (16:10)

Mrs. Stefanson: Well, we would hope that the ministers around the table and the members opposite would support this amendment. I think if they're really serious about reaching their Kyoto targets and their commitments, they wouldn't hesitate to support this type of an amendment. So I think, if they've got nothing to hide, it's no problem.

I know members opposite sort of giggled when I mentioned section 5.1(3) which essentially states that if there's a change-over in a government, that subsequent ministers will not have to have their salary reduced as a result of this. I think it's important that future governments not be left to clean up the mess of previous governments. So, if the minister responsible for greenhouse gas emissions in the province is not prepared to meet his targets, I don't believe that future ministers of the Crown with new governments in the future should have to clean up his mess.

So, with those words, I would hope that members opposite would support this very important amendment.

Mr. Rondeau: Just a quick word back, Madam Chair, I think the Premier (Mr. Doer) is on the record, and I agree wholeheartedly, that if we're not shown as to make progress to this, the ultimate will not be the fact that we'd lose ministerial pay, but that we would lose government. I think we've shown that we've moved forward on this factor. We're taking lots of action. We're getting lots of things going, and I think that's very, very important.

I also would like to point out again to the member that since 2000 our greenhouse gases have dropped in spite of good GDP and good population growth. So, in spite of the fact that industry is doing well, population increases are going well, our greenhouse gases are going down, which is good. So that's very, very important, but, also, I'd like to say that I think the people of Manitoba think that the environment, greenhouse gases, the type of planet that we leave to future generations is important and will hold us accountable, will hold us accountable for ourselves and also judge us against other governments' actions.

Mr. Cullen: The minister is right. It's all about being accountable, but there's nothing in this proposed legislation that holds the minister or his government accountable for their actions. If you look through here, we're talking about a four-year reporting period, first of all, a four-year reporting period, if the minister reads his legislation, after 2010, 2012. Then the reporting period reverts to every four years. So there's certainly a lack of ongoing reporting there.

Really, again, it's about being transparent to Manitobans and being accountable. There's only one target in this entire legislation, and that target, interestingly enough, falls probably one year after the next election. So if the minister is really serious about having the election being the vote on what this government is doing, he would set up some targets prior to the next election, so that Manitobans could actually judge what he's done over the last number of years and if he is making any real change in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

So there's a lack of accountability in this particular legislation, and we think this particular amendment would make the minister accountable and other ministers of the Crown accountable to Manitobans, because the way this particular legislation is written, basically nothing has to be accountable until after the election.

Mr. Rondeau: I'd let all committee members know that we have agreements with WCI, the Western Climate Initiative, the Midwestern Governors Association. We've committed to meet Kyoto or exceed Kyoto, and, in the case of the Western Climate Initiative we're eight years ahead of where we need to be on that. So we'll continue to do that.

If the member would look at certain media outlets a few days ago, we do become accountable. There are third-party, independent organizations that

provide reports, and then we are accountable as a government, me as a minister.

I think the ultimate would be we're accountable to the public. I know, every year, we present a budget. Occasionally, I've heard that some ministers have had motions to remove their salary or lower their salary. I would presume that could be used in the future; it makes sense that people are held accountable.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

Some Honourable Members: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Shall the amendment pass?

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Voice Vote

Madam Chairperson: All those in favour of the amendment, please say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Madam Chairperson: All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Madam Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it. The amendment is accordingly defeated.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: Clause 5—pass; clauses 6 and 7—pass; clause 8—pass; clauses 9 through 11—pass; clauses 12 and 13—pass; clause 14—pass; clause 15—pass; clauses 16 and 17—pass.

Shall clause 18 pass?

Mr. Rondeau: I have an amendment. Basically, what's happened is that the amendment is on clause 18. It says

THAT Clause 18 of the Bill be amended by striking out "sections 17 and 18" and substituting "sections 16 and 17".

This was just a numerical error. What we had done is—we're supposed to do 16 and 17, instead of the 18. So we made the change here.

Madam Chairperson: It has been moved by the Honourable Minister Rondeau

THAT Clause 18—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Chairperson: Dispense.

The amendment is in order.

Any further questions?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Madam Chairperson: Amendment—pass.

Clause 18 as amended—pass; clauses 19 and 20—pass; clause 21—pass; clauses 22 through 24—pass; clauses 25 through 27—pass; table of contents—pass.

Mrs. Stefanson: I'm wondering if, as we're getting to the title of this, if there's leave of the committee to change the title to The Anti-Climate Change and Omissions Reductions Act.

Madam Chairperson: Preamble—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill as amended be reported.

* (16:20)

Bill 30—The Crown Lands Amendment Act

Madam Chairperson: Okay, we are now proceeding with Bill 30.

Does the minister responsible for Bill 30 have an opening statement?

Hon. Stan Struthers (Minister of Conservation): No, Madam Chairperson.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement? Thank you.

Clauses 1 through 3—pass; clauses 4 through 6—pass; clause 7—pass; clauses 8 and 9—pass; enacting clause—pass; title—pass. Bill be reported.

Mr. Gerald Hawranik (Lac du Bonnet): Provided there are no further presenters, is it the leave of the committee to call it 12 o'clock, or are there other presenters?

Madam Chairperson: I wonder if I can canvass the group at the back. Are there speakers on our bills? Please come forward.

Bill 28—The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amended)

Floor Comment: This is regarding Bill 28.

Madam Chairperson: Just give us a moment to get ourselves organized up here. Your name, please.

Ms. Colleen Claggett Woods (Prairie Rose School Division): Colleen Claggett Woods. I'm the board chair for Prairie Rose School Division. I'm Colleen Claggett Woods from the Prairie Rose School Division. I'm here to make a presentation to the standing committee.

I'd like to thank you for hearing this—

Madam Chairperson: One moment. I need to recognize you so that you're official in *Hansard*.

Ms. Woods: Okay. Do you want a handout passed out, or do I just leave it with you?

Madam Chairperson: Yes, we'll have it distributed, thank you. Please proceed.

Ms. Woods: I'm making this presentation on behalf of the board of trustees from Prairie Rose School Division.

Our presentation today reflects our concerns as an individual school board and as public school boards in general. The current provincial guidelines for school closure, albeit in need of improvement, outlines a process that a board must follow to ensure to the community and all residents of the school division that a proper study is done.

The current process ensures community involvement and input. It ensures that all information that a board uses to reach a decision is made known to the public and assures that there is ample time for the board and community to study the issues prior to making a decision to close a school or change grade configurations of a school.

A critical component of the current guidelines is that the board who is currently responsible for the final decision must identify when a school is to be placed on review, make that public and follow a clearly defined process to reach a decision. It holds the local elected school board accountable to the residents of the communities who elected these boards.

The proposed legislation places the final decision in the hands of the Minister of Education. It is unlikely, however, that any Minister of Education would initiate or conduct a school review. It is likely

that the review initiation process would remain a local board responsibility. Unfortunately, the proposed legislation does not identify what process the minister would use to make such a decision. Not only does the proposed legislation remove the ability of the locally elected board to make a final decision, the omission of any defined process for the minister to follow in making a decision is the fundamental flaw of the legislation.

The bill is titled The Strengthening Local Schools Act. How can this be stronger? Replacing a mechanism that requires a nine-member locally elected school board following a clearly defined and transparent review process, a board that makes all decisions by vote in a public meeting setting, with a new mechanism that allows one person to make a decision based on vague criteria and no process. Clearly, it sets the stage for such decisions to be politically influenced, subject to lobbying and maneuvering. Communities will not be better served; there will be no accountability for the spending of public funds and, most importantly, it will not serve the best interests of children. Thus, we respectfully recommend that the legislation be withdrawn. Failing that, it is imperative that the legislation be amended to leave the final decision on school closures matters in the hands of locally elected boards.

We see the overall effect of this proposed legislation as potentially weakening the public school system of Manitoba for years to come. If enacted without amendment, it will also create an immediate negative impact. The decision to place a moratorium on school closures retroactive to January 2008 demonstrates an apparent lack of respect by the government for the role of the elected boards and the work that they do to ensure a strong public school system throughout Manitoba.

In good faith, school divisions such as ours have responsibly addressed declining enrolment issues, ensuring that we follow the process set by the government. In 2007, due to significant declining enrolment, we placed one school on review and commenced the intensive process to address the matter. The board meticulously followed provincial guidelines to ensure that the review was comprehensive and the process was fair to all concerned.

To inject a retroactive moratorium without any consultation, consideration or understanding of the impact that it would have on a local board's efforts in carrying out its responsibilities makes no sense. It

weakens relationships and erodes confidence. While we certainly do not agree with the intent of the proposed legislation, we respect the government's authority to change legislation and, as such, we firmly believe that the government should demonstrate respect for school boards' authority and responsibility by, at the very least, amending this legislation to allow any school review process that was under way when this legislation was introduced to proceed to its conclusion, whatever that may be.

In conclusion, we remind the government that Prairie Rose School Division, a division created in 2002 by the Province of Manitoba, has been led by a board that has acted responsibly in fulfilling all expectations of the Province, including showing efficiencies in operations, in establishing a new school division under some extremely challenging circumstances.

We are a division of small communities, most of which are facing declining populations. We are elected trustees who live in these small communities. We know that our total student population could theoretically be housed in schools in two or three communities. We understand the importance of schools to our communities and the impact on a community that loses its school. We know the effect when grain elevators close, rail lines are removed, banks merge and local businesses close.

We do not want to close schools, but ultimately some communities shrink to the point where the community school is no longer viable nor able to provide adequately for the children who attend there. The school in Prairie Rose School Division designated for closure in June 2009 currently has a projected K to 6 enrolment of 18 students for next year. This suggests one teacher instructing seven grade levels and a return to the one-room school concept that was abandoned some 50 years ago. The building itself is an 80-plus-year-old multilevel facility with accessibility limitations, located less than 12 kilometres from another K to 6 school that is also under capacity. It is a painful decision to make, to close a school, but is it not better that the local people who live in our communities make that decision than one person far removed from the local circumstances?

This legislation is seriously flawed and should either be withdrawn or significantly amended to address these concerns.

We thank you for your time and consideration and for this opportunity to share our concerns.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation.

Are there questions?

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield): Thank you very much. I appreciate very much you coming, beautiful Saturday that it is. We don't seem to be having a lot of them.

* (16:30)

We've had in the last five, six hours or more, individuals coming forward and saying one of the concerns they have is staffing and programs. I was wondering if you could reflect on that. Again, where I'm going with this is should there not be proper provincial funding if the decision is that we keep small schools open. That's a policy decision of the government and, if that's their choosing, then should there not be the funding with that? Because, otherwise, foisted upon local communities is the funding of proper staffing and programs.

Could you just reflect on that for the committee? Thanks for coming out.

Ms. Woods: I think from the board's standpoint, the school that we are considering for closure will be a one-room school. Providing the programming for special needs students in that school, and issues regarding social services and all the processes that we need to provide I don't think can be met with one staff person in that room. Provided that we put extra staffing in that school, we don't have funding for that, therefore, it comes from public tax dollars, which is paid for the entire division, not just that community. There are a large number of community members who have expressed appreciation for the fact that our board has kept taxes to a same rate for the last two years in a row by deficit budgeting.

To provide for this school, and to make this school what it needs to be, is going to a PSFB matter. It is taking tax dollars from PSFB. It will take tax dollars from public funds to make the school what it needs to be. So I don't know how we're going to do that without funding from the government. If they choose to say that we have to keep all schools open, then I hope they have very deep pockets.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

Are there any further questions?

Seeing none, I would like to thank you for your presentation this afternoon.

Ms. Woods: Thank you very much.

Madam Chairperson: Seeing no other presenters—do we have a further presenter? [*interjection*] Can you please state your name for us?

Mr. Randy Aitken (Private Citizen): I'm Dr. Randy Aitken.

Madam Chairperson: One moment, please.

Committee Substitution

Madam Chairperson: I would like to make the following membership substitution, effective immediately, for the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development: the Honourable Kerri Irvin-Ross in for Daryl Reid.

* * *

Madam Chairperson: I'm sorry, your name again?

Mr. Aitken: Randy Aitken.

Madam Chairperson: Randy Aitken, No. 41. Do you have some material to pass out?

Mr. Aitken: No, I don't.

Madam Chairperson: Then please proceed with your presentation.

Mr. Aitken: Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

I've, this past winter, had the opportunity to chair a school review committee for a school my children attend, which is Chapman School in the Pembina Trails School Division. So I would like to present a very different side of this process, and one that, very much from the parent's perspective, was a flawed process.

I'm sure you people are all very good at recognizing irony, and we're part of the, I believe, the Tuxedo riding, and there's probably not been an NDP member elected there for much time, yet this bill is very popular and we're very supportive of what's happened to save our little school. So, as the chair of this review committee, I experienced a number of things.

Probably most frustrating for me was that a decision had already been made and the process was largely, in my opinion, and the opinion of the other three parents that served with me, that the decision was made and the process was more about crowd control than it was about consultation. So that was very disturbing to us.

As a committee, we negotiated, or we spoke with the board of trustees of Pembina Trails many times about the feeling of crowd control and the lack of legitimacy of the process. It was a great concern for us. We tried to communicate that very strongly. We had community meetings with just the parents and community members invited. So meetings that excluded the trustees and the administration of the division. It came back, throughout the community, that this was a done deal and it was very disheartening to see your elected officials have a decision.

I continually see in the media the school divisions are frustrated that you've pulled the carpet on them, but they've pulled the carpet on their local constituency as well. I don't think you have anything to feel bad about there because they certainly have done the same thing to their constituents.

The process was, in fact, so flawed that it led to the resignation of one parent member, and three parent members suspended participation in the process in Pembina Trail at Chapman School. Despite that very, very drastic step on our part, the division continued on to write a final report that was not reflective of community intent or community wishes, and they continue to this day to spin that, I guess, as a negotiated process. Certainly, when you lose half of your committee, I think that's a very significant message to a school board, yet they sailed on and delivered a final report without our involvement.

Really, the problem with Chapman School is a problem of uneven public policy application. Our school has a catchment population that's roughly one-third the size that other schools in the division have. That is just an uneven application of public policy. You can draw a box around any school and have it close based on how big you draw that box. We believe, obviously, that population is the biggest predictor of enrolment. If you draw a small population box around a school, you're likely to have a small enrolment. In our case, despite the fact that student density near our school is greater than some of our neighbouring schools, they've chosen to draw a box unevenly and apply division policy unfairly.

We presented a very compelling argument to show that there were other options, more strategic options, in our little neck of east Charleswood that would save more money, yet the division was not interested in doing a strategic review of schools in east Charleswood or Charleswood as a whole. So,

once again, that became very distressing. It became something where we began to feel that we had been singled out; a decision had been made, if you like.

Routinely, we hear, again, that local representation is the best way to look after the interests of children. I would put to you that perhaps the ultimate local perspective is parents. Parents in my community very much appreciate having a school for their young children to be able to walk to, so they don't have to cross Roblin Boulevard which is a very busy street. So the safety of their young children was paramount in the minds of the parents that were involved.

I think, as we go forward, it's no secret that the demographics of elementary-school-aged children in the country is a problem. I think, in some ways, smaller schools are going to be a better fit as we go forward. As much as they may not have all the efficiency of large schools, they certainly do have some community benefits that we appreciate that you've recognized.

As this thing goes forward, we'd again like to thank you for your intervention, that we as a community felt very bullied by our school division. We would very sincerely hope that you rejig the process so that it's more of a negotiation than a predetermined discussion. There needs to be some more balance of the powers in that discussion, and we certainly hope that, if boards are allowed to start this process again, they all start de novo. Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you.

* (16:40)

Mrs. Heather Stefanson (Tuxedo): Thank you very much, Mr. Aitken, for coming here today and for presenting to this committee.

I know, certainly, I was out there at the public meetings and was very impressed with how many people came out to those public meetings in support of keeping the school open and running. There were many speeches from people and questions from people who were community people as well, not necessarily people who have children at the school. It's very much a big, integral part of our community. So I just want to thank you, first off, for coming here today to present.

I'm wondering if you could indicate to me, I know there's an excellent day care in the school right now, which a lot of people talk about in the community, and it's a very important part of the

community as well. So that's one of the things, I think, that certainly came out of the public meeting that in terms of the viability to help keep it open and keep it going, were there some other things that you as parents came forward with and what were those things to help, whether they're sports activities or other arts or environment related initiatives, to use within the school?

Mr. Aitken: Thank you for your question. It's a very good question.

In fact, there were six strategies that the parents suggested that would allow the school to rebuild its enrolment. You know, sadly, none of those strategies were of interest to the division. We as a community became most enamoured with a strategy that addressed the problem that we view that our school division has.

In rough numbers, about 15 percent of the student population of Pembina Trails chooses to leave Pembina Trails, seeks education in other places. From what we can see from the educational literature, most of those choices are based on values or academic reasons. So we felt that, you know, with 2,600 kids leaving Pembina Trails, there was room for one school in that division to develop a unique program. We didn't want to prescribe what that unique program was but we very much asked and pleaded with the division to survey the constituents of Charleswood and the division as a whole to say, what is it that's missing in your child's education? Why are you contemplating or why have you, in fact, already left public education? That was turned down, so we were very distressed that they didn't want to understand why 15 percent of their population didn't want a free product.

A number of other things, of course, things, you know, such as enhanced academics. We looked at trying to recruit students from other catchments, so a promotion of the benefits of the school—all those things were very frowned upon, I guess, by the division and we can understand why they wouldn't want to see one school promoted over another, but, certainly, we had a very big difficulty understanding why they were threatened by unique programming.

Madam Chairperson: Are there any other questions?

Seeing none—[interjection] Sorry.

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): I just wanted to thank you

for your participation in this process today and appreciate your presentation.

Mr. Aitken: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Thank you, Mr. Aitken, for your presentation.

Mr. Aitken: Thank you.

Madam Chairperson: Seeing no other presentations here this afternoon, the hour being 4—

An Honourable Member: 12 o'clock.

Madam Chairperson: 12 o'clock? Okay. Is it the will of the committee to call it 12 o'clock? [Agreed]

Committee rise.

I'm sorry. Leave the bills here at the table, please, so that we have them for Monday.

COMMITTEE ROSE AT: 4:43 p.m.

WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS PRESENTED BUT NOT READ

Re: Bill 2

Food & Consumer Products of Canada (FCPC) is writing to express our general support for Bill 2, The Public School Amendment Act (Trans Fats and Nutrition). We would also like to take this opportunity to express some concerns we have with the bill.

Bill 2 is important because it prohibits the sale of foods containing certain amounts of industrial trans fats in schools. FCPC and its member companies support these measures because they are consistent with industry's own efforts to help fight childhood obesity. We are pleased that the bill is consistent with the recommendations of the Trans Fat Task Force in adopting the task force's limits of:

- 2 percent of total fat content in vegetable oil or soft spreadable margarine and
- 5 percent of the total fat content in a product.

The bill is also consistent with the Trans Fat Task Force recommendations in exempting trans fat originating from ruminant meat or dairy products.

However, FCPC is concerned that section 47.2(2)(b)(ii) will prohibit the sale of pre-packaged foods containing more than 0.2 grams of trans fat per serving and in so doing will be out of alignment with the federal Trans Fat Task Force recommendations,

and will also potentially eliminate the sale of healthy snacks to children.

Under the Food and Drugs Regulations, "trans fat free" is defined as 0.2 grams per serving or less. This level must be met in order to make an advertising or labelling claim of "trans fat free" and is not intended to be used as the recommended allowable limit of trans fats in foods.

Health Canada has instead adopted the Trans Fat Task Force's recommendations of 2 percent and 5 percent of total fat as the allowable limits. These limits were developed using dietary modelling to provide Canadians with a dietary trans fat level that:

- is below the WHO recommendation of 1 percent of the total dietary energy; and
- supports Canadian healthy eating guidelines such as Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating.

Restricting the sale in schools of pre-packaged products containing more than 0.2 g of trans fat could unnecessarily limit healthy snack options for children and be inconsistent with a healthy dietary pattern. Snacks such as pre-packaged peanut butter and crackers, cheese and crackers, trail mixes and granola bars with nuts—all good sources of protein, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals—could be prohibited from sale in Manitoba schools. These products may exceed the 0.2 g threshold because while their individual components are trans fat free (i.e., crackers alone; peanut butter alone), when combined, the trace trans in both products can push the trans fat level over this limit.

Recommendation:

Align all trans fat thresholds including those on pre-packaged foods with the federal Trans Fat Task Force recommendations of 2 percent and 5 percent of total fat limits.

Task Force Recommendations are "Living Guidance":

It is important to note that the Trans Fat Task Force recommendations are not federal regulations, rather they provide "living guidance" to industry and may change over time as the allowable limits are achieved and potentially adjusted to reflect industry's continuous improvement and to address the practical realities of specific product categories.

For example, low-fat products are by definition limited to a low total fat content. But because the task force recommendations specify that trans fat can

only be a percentage of total fat in a product, low-fat products are disproportionately impacted. The lower the fat, the lower the allowable trans fat. The allowable limit of trans in low-fat products may be adjusted in future to address this issue.

Similarly, "mixed" products such as yogurt with granola contain a mix of naturally occurring trans (originating from ruminant meat or dairy products) and industrial trans. These foods present a challenge because when you add the naturally occurring trans and industrial trans together, the total fat can exceed the 5 percent limit. This is another example where the allowable limit may be adjusted in the future to address the practical considerations of the "mixed" food category.

FCPC is concerned that in taking a prescriptive approach, Manitoba will limit its flexibility to make future threshold adjustments in synchronization with the federal program.

Recommendation:

In order to accommodate future changes in trans fat guidance from federal health authorities, consideration should be given to using guidelines rather than a prescriptive approach to limit the allowable percentage of trans fat in products to 2 percent and 5 percent as recommended by the federal Trans Fat Task Force.

Transforming the Food Supply:

FCPC members are leaders in food science and are using that expertise to advance Canadians' health. Product reformulation is changing the food supply toward healthier choices. In addition to reducing sodium, trans fat and sugar in existing products, companies are investing significantly in new product development so that Canadians will have access to a wide selection of affordable products, including those with enhanced nutritional value with the additions of omega 3, calcium, fibre and vitamins.

Limiting Trans Fat in the Food Supply:

In June 2006, industry reiterated its commitment to cut industrial trans fat in the food supply and to achieve the following thresholds by June 2009:

- Limit the trans fat content of vegetable oils and soft, spreadable margarines to 2 percent of the total fat content; and
- Limit the trans fat content for all other foods to 5 percent of the total fat content, including ingredients sold to restaurants.

These measures are in accordance with recommendations by the federal Trans Fat Task Force, co-chaired by Health Canada and the Heart and Stroke Foundation. The task force was convened in November 2004 to provide Health Canada with strategies to reduce the amount of trans fat in Canadian diets. FCPC was an active member of the task force and fully supported its recommendations to government.

Food companies submit reformulation data to Health Canada as part of the government's ongoing monitoring program. Health Canada has committed to publishing the progress updates approximately every six months over the next two years. The first set of data published in December 2007 demonstrated significant improvement across all classes of pre-packaged foods.

For example, based on an analysis of pre-packaged products sold in grocery stores in 2006, the following products met the 5 percent trans fat limit:

- 60 percent of cookies
- 85 percent of crackers
- 75 percent of frozen potato products and
- 83 percent of frozen chicken products.

The full set of data and product associated lists are available on Health Canada's Web site at http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/gras-trans-fats/index_e.html.

Given the significant improvement these results demonstrate, it is important that provinces in the process of developing trans fat policies for schools ensure they are aligned with the federal approach. Canadians' health is best achieved when consistent policies and standards are applied across the country. Manitoba can benefit from the task force's work and the reformulation progress already achieved by ensuring its policies are aligned with the federal approach of achieving the 2 percent and 5 percent of total fat limits within the next two years.

On behalf of our members, FCPC commends the government for taking steps to promote healthy eating in Manitoba's schools. FCPC would welcome an opportunity to meet with any member of the committee to discuss these issues and to provide you with additional information about the Trans Fat Task Force recommendations as well as the food and beverage industry's role in fighting childhood obesity. Please do not hesitate to contact the undersigned to further discuss these issues.

Phyllis Tanaka, MSc. RD
Vice President, Scientific & Regulatory Affairs-Food Policy
Food & Consumer Products of Canada
Toronto, Ontario

Jim Goetz
Vice President, Provincial Affairs
Food & Consumer Products of Canada
Toronto, Ontario

* * *

Re: Bill 28

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 percent 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 10 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 percent 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.

Pat Isaak, President
The Manitoba Teachers' Society

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Re: Bill 28

While Flin Flon School Division is not impacted at this time by the proposed legislation contained in Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amendment), we do have concerns over both the content of Bill 28 and the process with which we have been given an opportunity to express our opinions.

Firstly, we believe the current legislation on school closure is fair and requires no change. It allows for consultation with all stakeholders and a reasonable time line to implement such a decision. Closing a school is not a decision that is made lightly, but rather one that is made after considering all factors and determining that closure is the only viable option remaining. We also have concerns over the lack of consultation the government has provided to school boards with respect to the impending legislation. You would ask that school boards provide adequate opportunity to consult with their community around school closure, but do not afford us the same consideration.

Secondly, we have concerns about the fact that Bill 28 is yet another example of the provincial government overriding locally elected school boards and their ability to make autonomous decisions. In the last couple of years we have been handed down caps on divisional administration costs, caps on budget surplus, new curriculum mandates without the corresponding increase in funding, and freezing local boards' ability to raise taxes. These constraints, compounded by inadequate funding, are certainly testing the limits on school divisions' ability to continue to provide the best education to our students.

Thirdly, we are now being told that in addition to providing education to students, we should become landlords, as we try to find entities that will pay adequate rent to cover the expenses associated with keeping half-empty schools open. Most if not all of Manitoba's school divisions currently offer space at either no cost, or very little, to provide day care and pre-kindergarten programs to our community. Our buildings are used extensively by the community to offer recreational opportunities to both students and members of our community, again at little or no charge. Many of these entities have limited ability to raise revenue and if forced to pay rent, these programs could no longer be offered. Alternative use of school space brings with it other concerns such as security, renovation costs, and general wear and tear on buildings that are already suffering from inadequate maintenance and repairs. The true cost of keeping a school open goes beyond just covering utilities and other operating costs. In many cases, the property has considerable commercial or residential use, and if sold, could save taxpayers tax dollars.

Finally, we wish to express our concern over the fact that in order to present to the standing committee, we would be given only two days notice. When you live in the north, such as we do, the time and money associated with getting there under any circumstance is very substantial. To be given two days notice only increases the cost even more. There is no opportunity to take advantage of seat sales to fly; for trustees to take time off from work often requires most often requires more than two days notice to the employer, and to drive would require more time away from your place of employment, with no guarantee as to when you may have an opportunity to be heard before the committee. While written submissions are received, we believe they do not have the same impact as a personal presentation.

We would ask that government reconsider Bill 28 and provide school divisions with the opportunity to consult with the government on the implications of the bill.

Murray Skeavington
Chair, Flin Flon School Division

Re: Bill 28

As the Board of Trustees for Garden Valley School Division, we have several concerns regarding Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act (Public Schools Act Amendment).

First, the lack of consultation on Bill 28 is contrary to what school boards are asked to model. Garden Valley School Division certainly supports long-range planning that includes collaboration with stakeholders. As we continue to plan for increased student enrolment as a result of the provincial Nominee Program, we recognize the value in relevant data, input from the field, and long-range plans that go beyond the Public School Finance Board's mandatory five-year capital plan. We believe in making evidence informed decisions and encourage the government to engage in a consultative process that includes locally elected school trustees.

Second, inadequate funding is a growing concern. In the Minister's letter addressed to Chairs of school boards, it was stated that "in addition, school boards will be expected to use best efforts over the next five years to reduce school bus travel times to not more than one hour one-way for students for whom they have an obligation to provide transportation. Given geography and population scarcity in some areas of rural Manitoba, I recognize that this will be a challenge. Government is prepared to provide additional funding to assist school divisions in this regard." Other initiatives, like the grade eleven and twelve physical education credits, have received token funding that results in local school boards picking up the difference. Garden Valley received \$35,000 for an initiative that will cost at least \$135,000 to implement in the 2008-09 school year. We believe provincial initiatives should receive full provincial funding.

Finally, Bill 28 is another example of the provincial government overriding a locally elected school board's ability to make autonomous decisions. Divisional administration cost restrictions, budget

surplus caps, and freezing the ability to raise local taxes are hurdles that make it increasingly difficult for school boards to fulfil their mandate. Our desire is to respect and work collaboratively with all levels of government as we continually strive to improve public education for Manitoba students. We also expect the provincial government to respect our mandate as we fulfil our obligations to the students and residents of Garden Valley School Division.

We respectfully ask that government reconsider Bill 28 and immediately consult with elected school boards on the implications of the bill.

Kelvin Dyck
Chair, Garden Valley School Division

* * *

Re: Bill 28

Written Submission to the Standing Committee of The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba regarding the Law Amendments Review Hearing on Bill 28

The Board of Trustees of Seine River School Division would like to make the committee aware of the following potential concerns regarding the passing into legislation of Bill 28.

1. Seine River School Division currently is working with the Public Schools Finance Board to relocate our regional high school in Ward Three from Ste. Anne to La Broquerie. This intent has been shared at two public meetings held in Ste. Anne and La Broquerie in February of 2007. This adjustment in program delivery is part of a comprehensive reorganization plan aiming to address overcrowding issues in La Broquerie, Ste. Anne and Lorette.

Trustees are concerned that this plan may be vetoed by the Province as an outcome of the passing of Bill 28.

2. Our second concern is the issue of length of bus rides referenced in the bill. Currently, due to the physical distance from their catchment area high school, we have students on buses more than one hour. A direct drive from the student's home (approximately 83 kilometres) to the high school would exceed an hour. We would like assurances that the references to length of bus ride are not intended for situations such as these.

Respectfully submitted by the Board of Trustees,
Seine River School Division,
Mrs. Wendy Bloomfield, Chairperson of the Board

* * *

Re: Bill 28

At our meeting of May 26, 2008, the Board of Trustees for Kelsey School Division discussed Bill 28, The Strengthening Local School Boards Act (Public Schools Act Amendment).

Although our board is not immediately impacted upon by the regulations of this bill in that we do not face the closure of any of our school facilities, there are aspects of the bill that cause us concern for future planning and fiscal response to conditions of declining enrolment that our community faces each year.

Requirement of Consensus

If the intent of this requirement in 41(1.3)(b) is common agreement "among the parents and residents of the area served by the school that should be closed," this would provide for the discussion of differing opinions. If the intent of the requirement for consensus is that everyone must be in agreement, the whole process could be undermined by one person who may not be willing to look at the full planning and fiscal picture of the division.

Moratorium on closure of school students attended in 2007-08

We support those boards who have been engaged in the school review process in accordance with the former school closure regulations of meeting with the public for two years prior to the proposed closure date. Parents and the community have had ample opportunity for input, and those boards have made those applications for well-defined reasons. This board believes that the process for engaging in community dialogue on these issues has enough depth that a moratorium is unnecessary. Closing a school is always a last resort for any division.

Use of schools for community purposes

This board represents a community where the challenge of attracting new residents is of greater concern with each passing year. We have employment issues—the situation with our pulp and paper mill has meant that tax breaks were arranged to keep it as viable as possible. That enterprise is still on shaky ground and with the impact on the economy due to the dollar, the price of gas, et cetera, we don't see much change for the future.

We enjoy partnerships with several day-care facilities within our schools but even with current conditions there are financial issues. We have a preschool program in our early years community school. The operators have applied for 'rent-free' consideration under the community schools concept. Their ability to raise revenue is limited; their rates are frozen at \$5/session, yet the costs for the facility continue to increase. We have kept our rent at the same rate for the past two years but with their costs of programming increasing, the preschool program is struggling.

Other boards have raised issues that concern us greatly as well:

- Cost recovery. Those wanting to use the facility usually have limited resources and the school has to address operating and security costs.
- Renovation costs. We made provision for a day-care centre to operate out of one of our schools, only to be told by the day-care co-ordinator that the lighting wasn't appropriate, and that the bathroom provisions had to be upgraded. The day-care program is trying to address this through grant applications and the PSFB certainly does not have this on their financial radar screen when there are so many other pressing needs.
- Alternative uses for a school. We are working hard to make sure that each of our schools continues to operate as a school, but when it is no longer possible to do so, taxation and zoning issues will come into play. How will we be funded for these 'non-school' buildings?

Lack of Consultation with Divisions

Divisions, and the Manitoba Association of School Trustees, have been requesting a review of the school closure guidelines for the past couple of years. This has been a matter of concern at our trustee convention and was raised with the Minister on several occasions. It was a shock to see this matter presented in bill form with no prior discussion with trustees, or acknowledgement of the process that many boards were already engaged in with their constituents.

Under The Public Schools Act, some of the duties of school boards include:

- the responsibility for providing adequate school accommodation for students between the ages of 6 and 21.

- the responsibility of determining the number, kind, grade, and description of schools to be established.

As elected officials we have been put in a position to make these decisions at the local level. The process used to introduce this bill (as with the funding announcement and the bill on cyberbullying) can only be seen as another step toward removing local autonomy.

We ask that the government reconsider this bill and consults with elected school board officials on the implications of this bill before it goes further.

Linda Buchanan
Chair, Kelsey School Division Board of Trustees
The Pas, Manitoba

* * *

Re: Bill 28

In the spring of 2007, the Park West School Division met with community members throughout their division to discuss four proposed models for restructuring our schools. One of those models was called "status quo" and involved no changes; the other three proposed various levels of student, classroom and grade movement throughout the division. At meeting after meeting last spring, communities unanimously rejected the changes that were being offered. Everywhere, the responses were similar:

- Slow down.
- Allow us the opportunity to participate in finding solutions to the problems of scant dollars, and of declining enrolments.

The Strengthening Local Schools Act, Bill 28, does just that. It has given communities in rural Manitoba the necessary time to explore alternatives beyond those proposed by our Division; namely, that we bus our children one, two, three or more towns over in order that they are able to realize the quality of public education that Manitobans have long been told we are entitled to.

We applaud the government for taking this very important first step and giving us the time we have been seeking. We support Bill 28.

In November of last year the Strathclair School Council developed a community survey. The survey was developed by the parent council and with the support of the R.M. of Strathclair, distributed by mail

to all families served by the Strathclair Community School; a K-12 school of just under 200 students. 476 surveys were mailed out to families in seven communities, four municipalities and a First Nations reserve; 210 surveys were returned—nearly half of those returned surveys were identified as coming from parents.

I was told that members of our school board discounted the results of this survey because the survey was biased towards our school. Of course it was. I was also told that the results were not valid as only people who feel passionate about the subject would take the time to respond to a survey. This, too, is true.

Forty-five percent of our community members felt passionate enough to respond to the survey. Our parents and our communities care about our children's education.

Ninety-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they felt very strongly about maintaining a school in Strathclair and 187 respondents, or 89 percent, felt that grades K-12 must be maintained in Strathclair; 75 percent were willing to accept multi-grade classrooms as an option. Many people asked about exploring other options, like Web-supported learning, for education.

Parents also identified their concerns about increased busing times for their children. At Strathclair School we already have children, in both elementary and high school grades that are on the bus by 7:30 in the morning—to extend that journey by even a moment more is unacceptable. Bill 28 addresses this concern as well by encouraging divisions to strive to keep all bus rides under one hour.

Many people added their own comments to the survey. There was a great deal of thought in many of them:

- We recognize that rural populations are dwindling;
- We want the best education for our children that we can provide; and
- We recognize that over time this will require adaptation and change.

People did not understand though the immediate need for radical change in our school and were angered and frustrated by what they perceived as a school division that was not working for and with us; a board of trustees that was not listening to our

concerns, our wishes, and our dreams for our children nor acknowledging the social cost of school closure to our communities and the emotional cost to our families.

Currently, with inter-campus busing, the Strathclair Community School runs a successful sports program in partnership with Shoal Lake School—we are competitive neighbours when numbers allow, joining forces together when needed to make a full roster. We have a joint band program that is terrifically successful. And together we are able to offer our high school students the credits they need to proceed, and to succeed.

And yet the plan that the division was proceeding with involved the movement of Strathclair and Shoal Lake classes in September of 2009. Although our communities may be 17 kilometres apart, there are children attending Shoal Lake School from the west who are already travelling nearly 20 kilometres and families that are on the furthest edge of Strathclair's catchments who travel in excess of 25 kilometres. These distances are as the crow flies, and certainly not "as the bus drives."

Our Premier has made a commitment to realizing Kyoto emissions targets; this very committee is examining Bill 15, The Climate Change and Emissions Reduction Act whose stated purpose is "to address climate change, to encourage and assist Manitobans in reducing emissions, to set targets for reducing emissions and to promote sustainable economic development and energy security." Yet the Park West School Division plan of school closure and classroom movement would have children and parents travelling farther and longer. We can't take public transit to our child's school—if I want to participate in my child's education, I am driving my car to get there.

The school division identified maintaining elementary school in local communities as a priority. Yet Shoal Lake community was to see their youngest students, Grades K through 8, moved by bus to our community.

They indicated that the "rationalization" of high schools, or closure, would be done through the review policy. Yet Strathclair community was to see their high school students on the bus to Shoal Lake in a year's time, without ever having fallen under review by the current or even by the newly proposed, and recently defeated, review policy that would have dropped the number threshold even further.

Their actions, their plan, belied their own words: "the review policy will allow impacted communities and the Board appropriate time to implement initiatives that may increase their enrolments through economic development or other educational partnerships."

Bill 28 has changed their plan. It has forced our division, and other school divisions in the province to rethink how they will manage the real problems that face rural education today.

But merely rethinking our education delivery methods is only the first small step. We must make a long-term commitment to quality education for all Manitobans, regardless of whether they live in the city, in a small town, on a farm or on a First Nations reserve. Over 45 percent of Manitoba's youth reside outside of Winnipeg. None of them should be short-changed.

But the model of education that works best for our urban counterparts—the full-service high school—is not the answer. Nor is the current funding mechanism for urban schools, based per child, workable for our rural schools.

A plan that responds to decreasing enrolments by closing classrooms and putting children on the bus is not a viable long-term approach to the current challenges facing rural education. And yet current funding formulas encourage our school divisions to

do just this. We continue to ask our local trustees to do more with less. Without an improved funding formula that addresses the special requirements of a dispersed rural population, this bill threatens to exacerbate an existing inequity.

We maintain that a school's performance should not be judged by the number of students in its classrooms nor must a small school be an impediment to academic success or fiscal sustainability.

We need our government to pass this bill. We need incentives to encourage divisions to work with the communities they serve to foster partnerships that will truly make our schools centres and collaborators in their communities.

We need more than just the reprieve that this moratorium offers us, however. We need a long-term plan in our province that will provide quality education for years to come for all of Manitoba's children.

Bill 28, The Strengthening Local Schools Act, has given us space to dream. Now our government must give rural school divisions the funding that will enable them to make that dream our children's reality.

Denise Dewar, Chairperson
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The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/hansard/index.html>