

GENERAL POPULATION FOCUS GROUPS – EDUCATION REFORMS

GOVERNMENT OF MANITOBA, COMMUNICATION SERVICES MANITOBA



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Methodological Overview

Leger was contracted by Communication Services Manitoba (CSM) to conduct two evenings of focus groups with individuals recruited at random from Manitoba's general population. The four groups were segmented by gender as well as residence – a female group and a male group of Non-Winnipeg residents; a female group and a male group of Winnipeg residents. Twenty-nine people in total participated in the research, representing a range of ages, household incomes and occupations.

The objective of the research was to understand Manitobans' perceptions toward the K to 12 elementary and secondary school system. Among other questions, the groups were asked to identify how they feel the system is performing, what the system's strengths are and areas the system could improve. In addition, the discussions examined Manitobans' impressions toward K to 12 system changes under consideration by the government.

Leger was responsible for the recruitment of participants who were selected at random from the general population of Manitoba. Senior researchers at Leger designed the discussion guide with input and approvals from CSM staff. The groups were conducted the evenings of March 10 and 11, 2021—two groups each evening.

Andrew Enns and Lliisa Morrow with Leger were the moderators. Andrew Enns was the principle author of this report.

Context of Qualitative Research

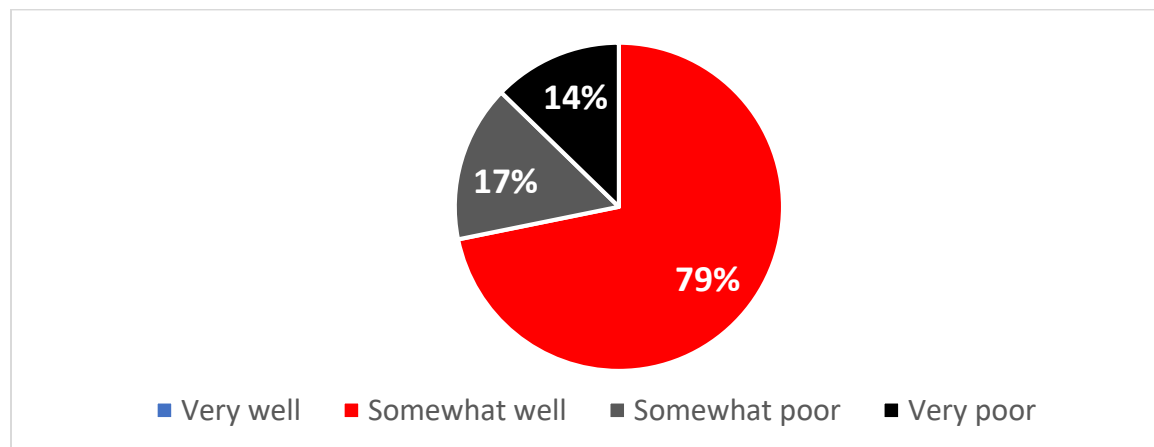
The primary benefit of focus group discussions is that they allow for in-depth probing with qualifying participants on behaviour, habits, usage patterns, perceptions and attitudes related to the subject matter. The group discussions allow for flexibility in exploring other areas that may be pertinent to the investigation.

The focus group technique is used in marketing research as a means of gaining insight and direction, rather than collecting quantitatively precise data or absolute measures. Although occasionally numbers are discussed in this report, they should be interpreted as illustrations of the range of participant opinions to enhance the qualitative insights and should not be considered statistically reliable reflections of the general population.

Perceptions of the K to 12 System

The discussion in all groups was prefaced by a poll question capturing participant perceptions of the performance of Manitoba's K to 12 system. After answering the question (results below) a discussion followed to understand what aspects of the system were influencing their overall impressions.

Chart 1: Impressions of the K to 12 System



Non-Winnipeg participants were somewhat more likely to be critical of the K to 12 system compared to Winnipeg participants. There was not a noteworthy difference in views of those with children in the system and those who did not have children in the system. Individuals with children in the K to 12 system were somewhat more likely to be able to identify a positive aspect of the school system, but these individuals were also able to offer a strong critique.

In Winnipeg, females were more positive about the education system and saw things from the proverbial 'glass half full' perspective. The school system is doing reasonably well in terms of preparing youth for post-secondary education opportunities, covering the basics of reading and math, and providing a variety of different opportunities for future education and career opportunities (vocational programs etc.). Also, there were complimentary views shared about how schools and teachers adjusted quickly to operate in the pandemic.

Negative elements of the K to 12 system that were identified included lack of support for teachers in the classroom, and thus teachers becoming overworked. Additionally, a need for more EAs was widely mentioned among the groups. It was also noted that the K to 12 system was not designed for new Canadian students who have limited English and literacy skills. The groups indicated more support and better allocation of funds and resources is necessary to improve the system.

Males in Winnipeg, while still all somewhat satisfied with the system, emphasized more shortcomings with the system and its performance:

- The curriculum is too narrowly focused on university and not focused enough in supporting trades and other post-secondary education choices
- Missing some fundamentals such as basic math necessary for household accounting

- Inequity in the system between schools and school divisions (the pandemic shone a light on when this when it came to remote learning and technical capabilities)

Outside the city, both the female group and the male group were quicker to identify (compared to Winnipeg participants) inequalities among schools in terms of programs offered, quality of teaching and the standards students were held to. Smaller, more rural schools offered less to their students in the way of targeted programming and demanded less of their students in the way of work ethic and integrity.

There was considerable discussion in both non-Winnipeg groups of the ‘no one gets left behind’ policy. There was a sentiment among these groups that every student gets to advance to the next grade regardless of if they are qualified to do so. Different opinions were expressed as to why this is the case: student self-esteem; school esteem; convenience for the system when everybody passes to the next grade. Overall, however, this was viewed in the Non-Winnipeg groups as a disservice to the student. Several older individuals (age 50+) recounted their own experiences receiving extra attention and additional assignments to bring up their level of learning in school. These participants felt this sort of approach is not occurring anymore.

Like in Winnipeg, females outside the city were more sympathetic to the plight of the teachers. Participants viewed teachers as over-worked, lacking resources and generally trying to do too much. Several individuals noted the need for more teacher’s aides in classes.

Male participants were of a similar view: there are many excellent, hard-working teachers, but there are also some teachers in the system who are not very good. A few males spoke of the need to hold teachers to a consistent standard to ensure overall quality. This point brought back the discussion of the inequality between school divisions and the schools within them.

In each non-Winnipeg group, a few participants spontaneously identified the excessive number of school divisions. This excessive number was viewed as something that could be reduced to lower the administrative costs. Participants would want to see those saved costs then funneled back into the classroom. A concern expressed a few times throughout the groups is the lack of life skills taught in the curriculum, like financial management.

Later in the discussions, participants were given the following statistic: *Manitoba spends among the most nationally per student, however in performance testing, Manitoba’s students score at or near the bottom.* Participants were only somewhat aware of this statistic. Many were not aware at all. Even though awareness was low, the statistic was not challenged strongly or doubted by participants.

Some participants noted that students are being taught at varying levels depending on which school they attend. This was particularly evident in the Non-Winnipeg groups where individuals felt the standards/expectations were lower in smaller, rural schools compared to schools in larger urban centers. This is not an acceptable circumstance in their view.

The groups could not explain why Manitoban students receive such poor results despite the large amount of education funding. A few individuals in the Winnipeg male group (and both groups outside

Winnipeg) thought Manitoba's high child poverty rate and a significant indigenous population could be a factor. There was some agreement with this reason.

A few individuals in Winnipeg also raised some questions/concerns about relying too heavily on the results to standardized testing scores— *"They don't tell the whole story."*

Almost all participants across the four groups did not think the solution would be spending even *more* money to help improve provincial results. They felt that since Manitoba already spends the third most per student in Canada, that those funds should be allocated more appropriately. Participants were not very aware of how the education system works in Manitoba, so they had limited input on how best to restructure and allocate funds. They did believe that with such a high amount spent per student, outcomes should be better.

This section of the discussion was concluded by asking participants if they felt students were the focus and the system served them, or conversely, whether the system was the focus and students had to fit the system. Most participants were of the view that students were not the focus of attention and activity. Female participants were unable to clarify if they believe students were the focus of the K to 12 system. Men were more likely to say the system was too rigid, inflexible and failed to adapt teaching to specific students' various needs.

Awareness of the K to 12 Education Commission

There was consistently low awareness of the Education Commission work, consultations, and recommendations across the groups. There was limited awareness among the male groups and virtually none in the female groups. When the moderator mentioned that the report was presented earlier in 2020 but the pandemic postponed further action, there was some recall, but still not strong.

The following recommendations were presented and discussed as groups:

- ✓ **More emphasis on improving student learning outcomes**
 - Improving student assessment and reporting to help teachers and parents monitor performance in real-time
 - Implement provincial assessments and make school-level results available to the community
 - Strengthen curriculum with a focus on the essentials of literacy, and numeracy
- ✓ **Increasing achievement and outcomes for Indigenous students to close the gap**
- ✓ **Increase professional supports to teachers and administrators that are focused on improving the education experience and outcome for K-12 students**
 - Working with stakeholders to address absenteeism
 - Build a province-wide system for remote learning
- A greater role and opportunities for meaningful engagement for parents in their children's' education with the creation of School Community Councils**
- Expand technical and vocational training based on workforce needs**
 - Building an education system that supports student no matter what path they choose, whether it is post-secondary, training, or employment
- Enhancing supports for mental health and student well-being**

When presented with the recommendations, participants reacted positively. Females often singled out the following recommendations with positive commentary:

- Enhancing supports for mental health and student-wellbeing
- Expanding technical and vocational training based on workforce needs.
- Enhancing supports for mental health

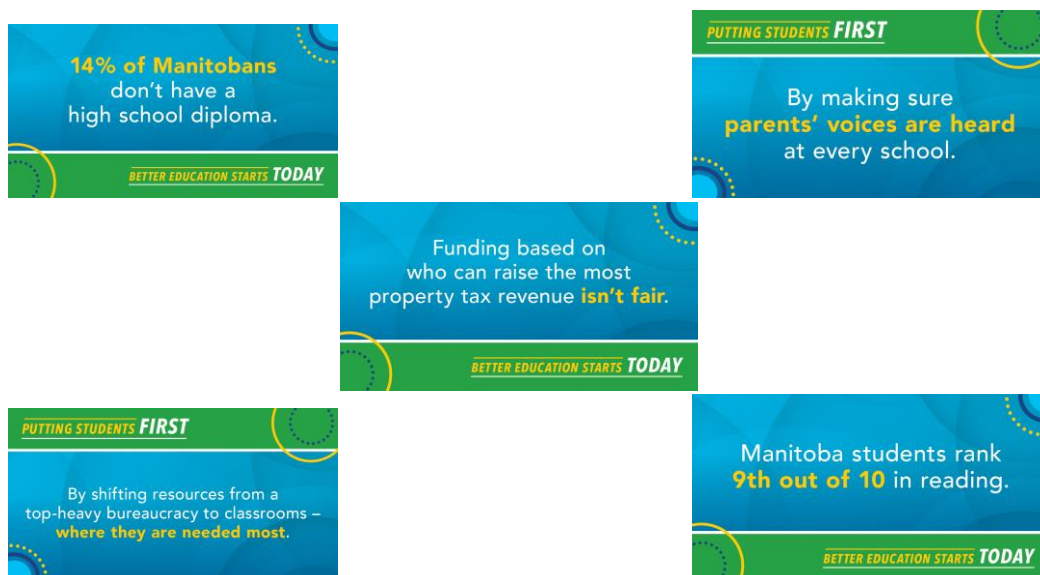
A few female participants felt that while creating a greater role for parents is a nice idea, it may not be very realistic in terms of parents' abilities or desires to be more involved.

Men singled out the following recommendations for positive commentary and discussion:

- Strengthen the curriculum to focus on essentials
- Expanding technical and vocational training based on workforce needs.
- Funding for your school shouldn't be based how much can be raised from property taxes

Both groups described the recommendations as ambitious and significant. A common concern/criticism was the lack of detail in terms of how these changes would be implemented.

In the Non-Winnipeg groups, in addition to the Commission highlights, five communication message slides were shown to participants for reaction:



In these groups, the reactions to the creative material were positive and no 'red flags' were raised. The tagline "Better Education Starts Today" seemed to be preferred among women while men were more divided between the two taglines used. One participant commented, "I think they already do put the students first, so the other tagline makes more sense." Others in the group agreed with this statement.

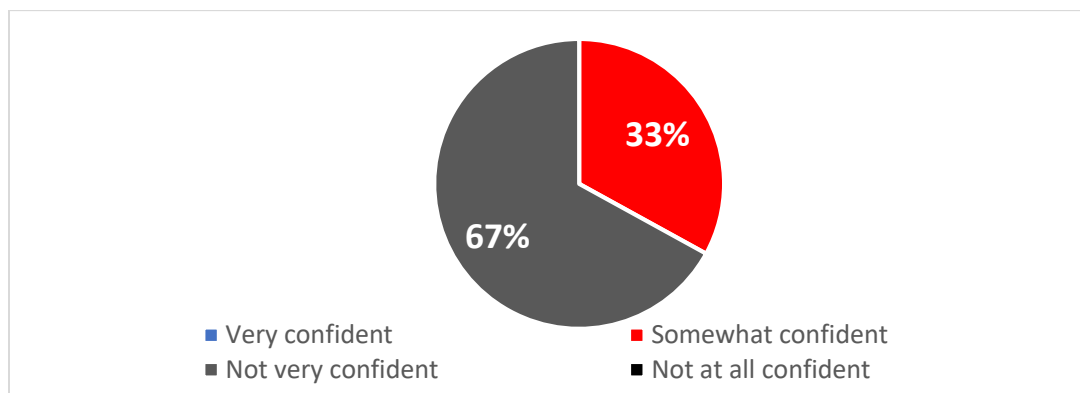
The “shifting resources from top heavy bureaucracy” statement was mentioned as a strong message by several participants (men and women). In the male group, the phrase “14% of Manitobans do not have a High School diploma” was eye-catching. The initial reaction to the ‘14%’ was that it was high and a problem in today’s modern economy. Many people noted that it is difficult to find a job without a high school diploma.

In all groups, participants were asked to respond independently to a question regarding their confidence in the provincial government successfully implementing the changes from the report.

Participants’ confidence in the government successfully implementing these changes among all groups was lukewarm. This lack of confidence stemmed from the perceived extent of the proposed changes and the slowness of government’s management of change. A few participants commented that there would likely be considerable opposition to these changes, notably from teachers, because of how ambitious the recommendations are. While several in the group agreed with that comment, when probed, this was not a reason to not proceed with the changes. Participants just simply noted that it would be a challenging process.

In the male non-Winnipeg group, there was a suggestion that there should be a transparent mechanism in place to report on the progress of the changes throughout their implementation process. This would help demonstrate change is happening. A few other participants added that perhaps an independent third party could provide some impartial updates. This comment underscored some of the typical cynicism associated with elected officials, government bodies, and their collective abilities to successfully manage large scale projects.

Chart 2: Confidence in Government’s Abilities to Execute Changes



Pandemic’s Influence on the Timing of Changes

The impact the pandemic had on the timing of proposed reforms to the K to 12 education system was discussed. Most people said they felt the system had responded well and made the necessary adjustments. In the initial conversation there no comments suggesting the pandemic exposed weaknesses or challenges to the system or that its structure created issues that hampered response times to operational changes. The challenge of managing across 37 school districts when trying to implement consistent public health measures was not obvious to participants.

That said, there was no strong sentiment expressed in any groups that the pandemic should further delay necessary reforms. Many participants said reforms to the education system are long overdue and that the pandemic has undoubtedly already delayed things, but it is time to get things moving.

A few people agreed that with so many changes already happening as a result of the pandemic, it might in fact be a good time to begin the discussion on broader systemic reforms. The view expressed in the groups was that it probably was a good time to introduce the idea that the return to a post-pandemic operation might be more of a 'new normal'.

K to 12 Governance and Administration

None of the groups had a firm grasp of the various components of the education system in Manitoba. The most knowledgeable group was the male non-Winnipeg group. They were able to generally describe the various components of the system and how they interacted with one another.

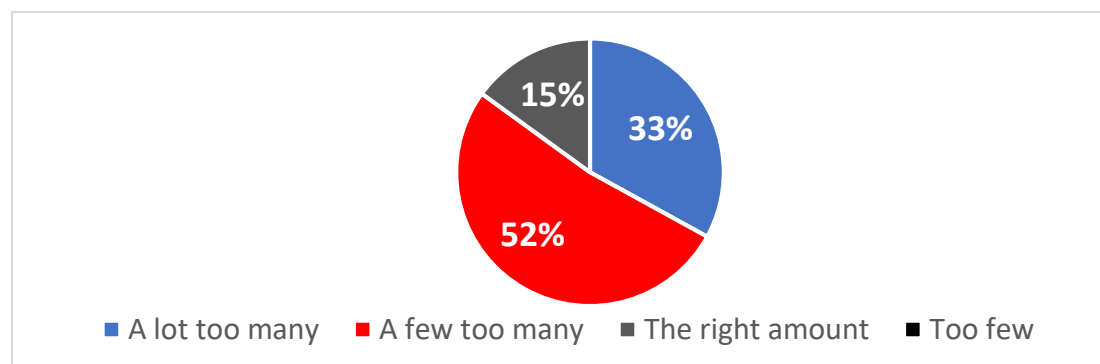
School Divisions

The different components mentioned most often were teachers and school divisions, with curriculum also coming up often as an important part of the system. School trustees were more likely to come up spontaneously in the non-Winnipeg groups, but it still required some probing for school trustees to be mentioned. As noted, only one group could provide a reasonable description of how the different components worked together.

When asked, participants were not able to provide a good approximation of the number of school boards in Manitoba. Female respondents tended to significantly underestimate the number. Female groups typically guessed between the existence of 7 and 10 divisions. In the male Winnipeg group, a few individuals said they thought there are between 25 and 30 divisions in the province, however several individuals in this group were completely unsure. In the non-Winnipeg male group, answers ranged between 10 and 20 school divisions.

After a round of guesses, participants were made aware of the actual number of school boards in Manitoba through the following question: *Do you think 37 school boards across Manitoba is a lot too many; a few too many; about the right amount or not enough?* The chart below provides the responses across the four groups.

Chart 3: Impressions Regarding the Number of School Division



The responses to the question clearly indicate a broad sentiment among all groups: the number of school divisions in Manitoba is excessive. The moderator then introduced the notion that a recommendation from the Commission was to significantly reduce the number of divisions by up-to half.

There was no discernible opposition to this idea. In the non-Winnipeg groups, it was noted, without prompt, that there is likely a lot of administration required to support the current number of divisions. This led to comments that these dollars could be re-directed toward supporting teachers in the classroom.

Men were almost universally supportive of reducing the number of divisions by half. Almost all male participants understood the administrative savings as a result of fewer boards. A few men in the non-Winnipeg men's group also suggested that fewer divisions would create more employment opportunities for teachers. This view was based on a perception that teachers are limited in their work opportunities to within their division.

One individual cautioned that it was good to reduce school divisions, but care should be taken to not replace these with an even larger centralized bureaucracy, because in that case the system would be no further ahead. Another individual in Winnipeg questioned whether Winnipeg School Division No. 1 could get any bigger than it already was.

A few male participants in the non-Winnipeg group said amalgamating boards would be hard to accomplish outside the city as schools and communities are so spread out in the rural part of the province.

Female participants raised a few more concerns than males did regarding the risk-reward possibility around school board reductions. There was some concern that there might be a negative trade off: although there would potentially be positive outcomes with a reduced number of school divisions, there is also the real risk of losing services. This was a greater concern for the rural participants in comparison to the participants from Winnipeg.

School Trustees

Female participants were very unaware of the roll of school trustee. Most males were equally unaware, but a few older men in the non-Winnipeg group did have a better understanding. One individual noted the role they play in raising property taxes, which the group agreed is a significant power. However, there was very low awareness of the Province's plan to phase out the education portion on property taxes.

Due to this low awareness, the connection was not made that school trustees will be losing one of their main functions, which is increasing the mill rate on the education tax each year.

Most females said they voted for a trustee in the last election but admitted that this decision was often made with little research or input--*"I just chose the person who was there before or picked the name I liked most."* However, there was still a feeling, specifically among the female Winnipeg group, that the elected trustee had some role to play, although this was not clearly known or defined.

The female groups felt there might be some negative public reaction if school trustees were appointed rather than elected. One participant commented that it is difficult to change those types of positions – people might see it as a suppression of their freedoms, regardless of whether they fully understand the trustee’s role.

In both groups of males, it was less common for participants to say they have voted for their school trustee in the past. There was less concern expressed regarding appointing trustees rather than electing them.

The non-Winnipeg male group was more dismissive of the school trustee role. Only a handful of men said they voted for their trustee and only one individual could identify his school trustee. One individual noted, with the agreement of several others, appointing trustees could lead to more diverse skillsets in the trustee roles. This individual said that many trustees are former teachers or school principals, and this does not offer diversity of advice or perspective.

In the male Winnipeg group, there was some discussion about changing the collective bargaining structure from one based on individual school divisions to one that was a single provincewide agreement. This idea was supported by group members. However, several said it would be difficult to accomplish given the opposition by the teacher’s union. It should be noted that this streamlining of contract negotiations did not clearly equate to better supports in the classroom.

Final Thoughts

1. From these four focus groups, there does not appear to be great urgency around changes to the K to 12 education system. That said, people do believe changes are necessary. However, it is not a top-of-mind issue at present. Concerns with the system are largely centered around support for teachers, and support for student outcomes; yet there is not a clear enough understanding of the K to 12 system to easily connect how systemic structures might be contributing to lack of teacher support and poor student outcomes. It is important to define the problem clearly along with the solutions. Make it obvious what the reform is intended to address and how it will improve the situation for teachers and students.
2. The student focused Commission recommendations resonate with Manitobans. The prevailing public perception is that graduating high school students have a lot of career and post-education options. There is the belief that the K to 12 system needs to adapt better to these realities, and that the system does not prepare students enough for life after high school. There is a desire to see a change the rigidity of the system to be more flexible to the needs of the student.
3. While there is good support for the intent of the Commission recommendations, there are questions and concerns surrounding the implementation of said reforms. It is important, early in the process, to lay out clear pathways of implementation with timelines and milestones. The establishment of a system that transparently reports the implantation process back to Manitobans would have value in assuring taxpayers that progress is being made. There is

support for modernizing the education system, but there is a healthy dose of cynicism around the government's ability to successfully get it done.

4. There is a case to be made for changing the top-heavy nature of the system, but the government must be clear that money saved from fewer administrations and administrators is going directly into classrooms. Increased resources in classrooms is important from the public's perspective.
5. The general public is somewhat of a 'blank slate' in terms of the role and importance of superintendents, school boards and trustees. There is awareness of the positions, but clarity on the roles and responsibilities within the system is lacking. It is important for the government to clearly communicate current roles in the K to 12 system to Manitobans and explain how they are being effectively replaced with better structures. In particular, it is important to communicate the shifting of the Education Levy off property and how that impacts responsibilities within the system. Finally, it will be helpful to demonstrate to the public that the structural reforms will address the various inequities within the system—either between schools within a division or between divisions.
6. The fact that Manitoba spends a lot on education and gets poor results is a good opening position for the need to modernize the K to 12 system. People see the unsustainable problem with that situation. That said, focusing on standardized test scores is not the be-all-and-end-all for a change rationale. There are other good arguments for reforms:
 - The system has not been reviewed and reformed for decades and the world/economy has changed considerably
 - Systemic socio-economic challenges are not getting better, and an improved education system may help in this regard
 - The pandemic has exposed us to the power and potential of innovation and flexibility – the system should reflect that

There is a strong underlying sentiment that change is needed in the K to 12 system. The system is not widely perceived as fundamentally broken, but it most certainly perceived as needing major renovations. The public's opinion is one that the K to 12 system will undoubtedly require more investment from government in future to ensure it successfully adapts to changing needs. However, this belief is complemented by the view that it is important future investment supports a system that is doing a better job graduating students prepared for the post-high school world ahead.