

2021 Education Review Focus Groups

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Key Findings

- Parents generally spoke quite positively about their schools, their teachers and the quality of the education their children receive. However, they admitted to being somewhat myopic in their view of the system, and often struggled to provide an assessment of the system as a whole beyond the school they know well.
- Parents had a surprisingly clear and accurate understanding of the reforms announced a day or two prior to the focus group sessions – and their view on these was somewhat negative. Parents felt some changes are required to education in Manitoba and many indicated they are taking a wait-and-see attitude (though this is often tinged with pessimism.)
- Parents were generally indifferent to – even frustrated by – school trustees and were not particularly concerned about the elimination of elected trustees. Discussions about school trustees carried a distinct flavour of “what do they really do, anyway?” In principle at least, Winnipeg dads in particular did express some concerns about the loss of local democracy and control of school divisions. If trustees are eliminated, parents wanted to have a clear “chain of command” to follow to ensure their concerns are addressed, especially if school educators and leadership are not taking an issue such as bullying or mental health seriously.
- Parents were somewhat lukewarm or even worried about the idea of parent councils having more power and responsibility. Across all groups, they were concerned parents might have too much power over what happens in schools and would prefer for educational experts to lead the way. They were also worried about cliques forming or that only parents with their own agendas will run parent councils. As well, Winnipeg parents in particular noted that a model of parent councils could disadvantage lower-income schools where parents may not have the time and resources to devote to their school’s council.

Key Findings (cont'd)



- Manitoba's performance relative to other jurisdictions was not a significant worry for parents and did not particularly resonate as a reason to implement reforms. What did resonate with parents, however, as a strong concern and a credible reason for change is the need for more in-classroom support, including mental health, teacher aides, smaller class sizes, etc. As well, access and fairness – ensuring kids have the same high-quality education no matter where they live – was also deeply valued by parents, including those in both Winnipeg and rural/northern Manitoba. The very notable outlier here were rural dads, who cared overwhelmingly about making sure schools prepare kids adequately for jobs, post-secondary education and “the real world”.
- Although parents were not overly opposed to the proposed changes and felt improvements to the system are needed, they did not have a great deal of faith in the provincial government's approach to implementing these changes. There is a strong undercurrent of skepticism bordering on cynicism among parents that the real reason for these reforms is to save money, not improve student outcomes.
- Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was not generally seen as a reason to delay change. Although some parents acknowledged the system has gone through some stress over the last year, parents – particularly dads – felt it makes sense to get on with it and make the needed improvements.

Highlights of Key Differences Among Parents

Winnipeg Moms

More likely to feel poverty is a key driver of poor educational outcomes and rankings.

More likely to be in favour of parent councils, particularly after some discussion.

Generally unimpressed with school trustees and unconcerned about eliminating them.

Somewhat less cynical about the motivations for change and slightly more hopeful that education experts have the best interests of kids at heart.

Winnipeg Dads

More aware of the elimination of education property taxes, and somewhat worried about it.

Most concerned about parent councils, largely due to the politics or dynamics they fear may come into play.

Also most concerned about the loss of local democracy with the elimination of trustees.

Tended to be quite cynical about the real motivations for reform.

Rural Moms

Most concerned with access to programs, in-class supports and courses on par with Winnipeg.

Like Rural Dads, also likely to feel school is not fully preparing kids for jobs or post-secondary.

Welcomed the idea of making educational opportunities more accessible to all students no matter where they live, but also skeptical that this could be achieved in practice.

Rural Dads

Less knowledgeable and engaged in the system.

Much more likely to feel education is somewhat lax and not teaching kids life skills and job-readiness.

Least concerned about losing a local voice in education with the elimination of trustees, but also concerned about partisan appointees or non-experts running the education system.

Methodology

Communications Services Manitoba (CSM) commissioned Probe Research to conduct a series of focus groups with Manitoba parents to understand their reactions to proposed changes to Manitoba's education system and their priorities for change. These sessions explored:

- Parental assessments of how Manitoba's education system is currently performing and how it could be improved;
- Awareness of education reform, including the key elements of Bill 64 (The Education Modernization Act) and proposed changes to the structure and governance of public education in the province;
- Views regarding these reforms, including the dissolution of school boards and elected trustees and the creation of a new provincial education authority and parent councils;
- Perceptions of the reasons driving these reforms, and which reasons resonate most strongly; and
- Trust and confidence in the government's ability to improve the system for Manitoba students.

All sessions were conducted virtually using Zoom. Participants were recruited using a customized screening instrument, with eight (8) participants recruited per session. Participants were each provided with \$100 in exchange for their time and contributions. The sessions were moderated by Mary Agnes Welch of Probe Research, with Curtis Brown of Probe Research and personnel from the Manitoba government and Argyle Public Relations and Communications also observing the sessions.

Focus group findings are qualitative in nature and cannot be extrapolated to the broader population of Manitoba parents.



Methodology

The following table provides a breakdown of the specific characteristics of each group.

| Session | Date | Time | Parent Population |
|---------|------------------------|---------|--|
| 1 | Tuesday, March 16 | 5:30 pm | Winnipeg – women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included 1 Métis woman, 1 visible minority • Children tended to be younger, 9-10 years old • 1 parent in the DSFM |
| 2 | | 7:30 pm | Winnipeg – men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included 1 Métis man, 1 visible minority • Variety of ages of children • 1 parent in the DSFM |
| 3 | Wednesday, March 17 | 5:30 pm | Rural – women <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included 1 Métis woman • Children tended to be mid-teens, 12-16 years old • 1 parent in the DSFM |
| 4 | | 7:30 pm | Rural – men <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included 1 Métis man • Variety of ages of children |



A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the backs of several students' heads are visible, showing they are seated and facing forward. In the background, a teacher stands near a whiteboard, and the overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlay.

Perspectives on the System

This chapter outlines participants' broad perceptions of the education system, including how well they view it working now and key areas of strength and weakness.

Top of Mind Assessment of Education in Manitoba

Positives include quality of teachers and improved communication during COVID-19

Parents were first asked for a broad assessment of the education system's strengths and weaknesses. In general, parents framed their approach to this question in a very "micro" way. In other words, their view of education was not system-wide but framed only by their own experiences – largely positive – in their child's school. So, it was initially difficult for some parents to feel they had an informed opinion about the system as a whole. This was particularly true of rural dads, who were perhaps the least knowledgeable or articulate about the system's functioning as a whole.

"I don't know about as a whole, but my own experience has been absolutely amazing. It's blown me away how much they've put towards helping my daughter get over her anxiety. It's nuts, like, the resource teacher will actually buy things from Dollarama for a special period ... just to get her eased into being at school. Yeah. It's amazing."

- Rural Dad

Parents in all groups spoke particularly fondly about the quality of teachers and school support staff, saying teachers often go above and beyond, and that the quality of instruction provided is generally very good. (This may suggest that an argument for reform based on improving teacher quality may not resonate with parents, particularly those in Winnipeg.)

Parents – particularly moms – also typically framed their response to this question in light of COVID-19 and online learning, which for most had been generally satisfactory. Of note is that parents – particularly Winnipeg moms – generally spoke very highly of the quality and frequency of communication from their school during COVID-19 and hoped that kind of engagement would continue post-pandemic. Increased communication – better details about exactly what assignments are underway, how a child is performing, etc. – is highly valued by parents.

"What I find with COVID is that we have more information as parents to equip ourselves with those tools and resources so I can go online and see everything my daughter is doing in math and say, 'hey, you haven't done this assignment' ... or now I can send that information directly to her tutor and say this is what they're doing."

- Winnipeg Mom

Top of Mind Assessment of Education in Manitoba

Negatives include inconsistent quality across divisions and schools

Among the negative aspects of Manitoba's education system that parents highlighted included:

- The innate impression that programs and quality are inconsistent across divisions and across schools. This includes a perceived “luck of the draw” aspect to teachers, meaning most of the time teachers are excellent, but a poor-quality teacher or a less well-run school can be detrimental to a child’s educational experience. This sense that Manitoba’s education system is not consistent between schools and between divisions was a key theme and a key area parents wished to see improved – the reliability and the quality.
- The sense teachers are overburdened by large class sizes and there is limited access to supports for kids (e.g. mental health, learning disabilities, etc.).
- A lack of resources in rural schools – from books to high-quality teachers to course variety (e.g. advanced math, cooking). Rural moms were most likely to mention this kind of inequity.
- An approach to learning that dads and rural moms in particular felt is somewhat lax – that students lack discipline and are not allowed to fail, and that teachers teach to the lowest-aptitude students. As well, many dads in Winnipeg and rural Manitoba felt the curriculum often lacks more practical life skills or a focus on the trades, and instead mandates that students learn math or physics that won’t be very useful in life. Indeed, one Winnipeg dad favoured more aptitude testing to guide students toward their strengths and interests and less of a “cookie-cutter approach” Another Winnipeg dad felt the system tends to cater to the weakest student, providing that student more instruction time at the expense of others.

“In kindergarten, we had a fantastic teacher. Great in every aspect. And then in Grade One, it was horrible. And then Grade Two and Three has been better. But I think that the early years, the bad teacher really set my one son back.”

- Winnipeg Mom

“You know, it's a crapshoot. It depends which school, which division...I don't get the impression that we have a universal education system. We have a patchwork.”

- Winnipeg Dad

“There used to be some consequences. Even four or five years ago, there were more consequences than there are now. If something's late, they'll lose 10 per cent of their grade. But in our day, if it wasn't in on time, don't hand it at all.”

- Rural Mom

In Their Own Words: What's Working and What's Not

| | Group 1: Winnipeg Moms | Group 2: Winnipeg Dads | Group 3: Rural Moms | Group 4: Rural Dads |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| Positive aspects of the education system (mentioned in the chat function) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good communication system from the school (X2) • Mostly good teachers/consistently good teachers (X2) • Good access to technology/updated their technology (school messenger, Seesaw). Parents can see what their kids are doing by accessing online platforms • Adaptive, flexible • Positive energy • Options with language • Feel supported | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good teacher quality/staff (X3) • Good/excellent communication (X2) • Some specialization, compassion to accommodate other learning styles (X2) • Social aspect • Kids like school. ("They really like to attend their classes.") • Good availability of different programs, diversity of topics discussed, including socializing, arts, sciences, etc. ("Our rich history and ethnicity gives much for teachers to draw on in showing the important diversity in learning.") | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding teachers/really great teachers/teachers are involved with parents (X4) • Great communication from the school • Smaller classroom sizes work well for us • Lots of support for the kids (particularly during COVID) • Remote learning has been awesome in our case | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approachable teachers/communication from the teachers is very good, lots of interaction when required ("We know when things are going poorly and when they are going well.") (X4) • Steadiness of the system, very little teacher turnover • Emphasis on being a good community member, importance of being selfless. • Child loves math and her social studies. • Excellent involvement with the community |
| Negative aspects of the education system (mentioned in the chat function) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting help for kids with possible learning disabilities/psychological issues/bullying (X2) • Inconsistent across divisions • Not enough French speaking teachers, administrators and specialists, French program has become diluted • Inconsistent teaching ("Each year is a gamble when it comes to teachers. Sometimes great and sometimes awful.") • Sometimes important resources are dropped (councillors, music, art) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want a better baseline of child's progress measured objectively • Keeping up with changing technologies • Funding. Availability of immersion teachers • Too-large kindergarten class • Don't feel as involved due to COVID-19. • Children seem to be behind others on certain topics • Neglect of life skills (politics, taxes, social justice) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few elective classes/not being able to take all the courses required at Grade 11 level/no hairdressing and nursing (X3) • Inequity of resources • Remote learning has been awful for us. • Crowded classrooms with large groups typically • Not being able to see their friends since it's a split in two groups/kids not able to play with kids their age (COVID-related) • Communication, conflicting information, • Inconsistent application of policy • Inexperienced staff • Focus is overly geared towards sports achievements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea that as long as you have tried that's good enough/the lack of being able to fail (X2) • A few inexperienced teachers who've had a negative impact on my kid/teachers who tore down my kid and it's affected his self-confidence considerably (X2) • Too many admin days • There are a lot more politics discussed, mostly the opinions of the teachers |

Comparative Assessment of Manitoba's System

General feeling is Manitoba's system is worse than other provinces, and eroding

Parents were asked how they feel Manitoba's education system stacks up against those of other provinces, and whether the system is getting better or worse.

- The notion that Manitoba's education system ranks near the bottom or has failed to improve significantly was somewhat common, but several parents felt this has much to do with the realities of poverty and remote communities. Winnipeg parents were particularly quick to note that Manitoba's comparative ranking has a lot to do with socio-economic factors – that poverty and the challenges of inner-city schools artificially deflate the overall rankings. Similarly, parents were not particularly swayed by the suggestion that improving the ranking of Manitoba's system ought to be a goal of reform.
- Although a minority of parents felt Manitoba's system is roughly on par with that of other provinces, most parents in all groups generally had a vague sense that Manitoba's system is somewhat worse. This impression was formed in part by speaking with friends and family in other provinces (e.g. Alberta, Ontario). This impression had less to do with funding or in-classroom support and more to do with the curriculum and the approach to or philosophy that underpins teaching.
- Parents in nearly all four groups had, to some degree, the impression the system has progressed in some ways but is also burdened by many new additions to the curriculum. They tended to favour a "back to basics" approach that moves away from rewarding kids for simply trying. Rural moms, for example, felt the system is getting worse, in part because students face fewer consequences, and the system accepts too many accommodations for students that an employer never would.

"Even from last year to this year since COVID, I think there's just a lot of stress, obviously, on the teachers and the school system itself. I don't think they're getting enough support. And I think a lot of support has been taken away from them to properly support the kids."
- Winnipeg Mom

"No, they're not really getting prepared for the job market, even at Grade 11, Grade 12. Part of it is the accommodations, because you don't have accommodations with your employer, but you do have accommodations with the school."
- Rural Mom

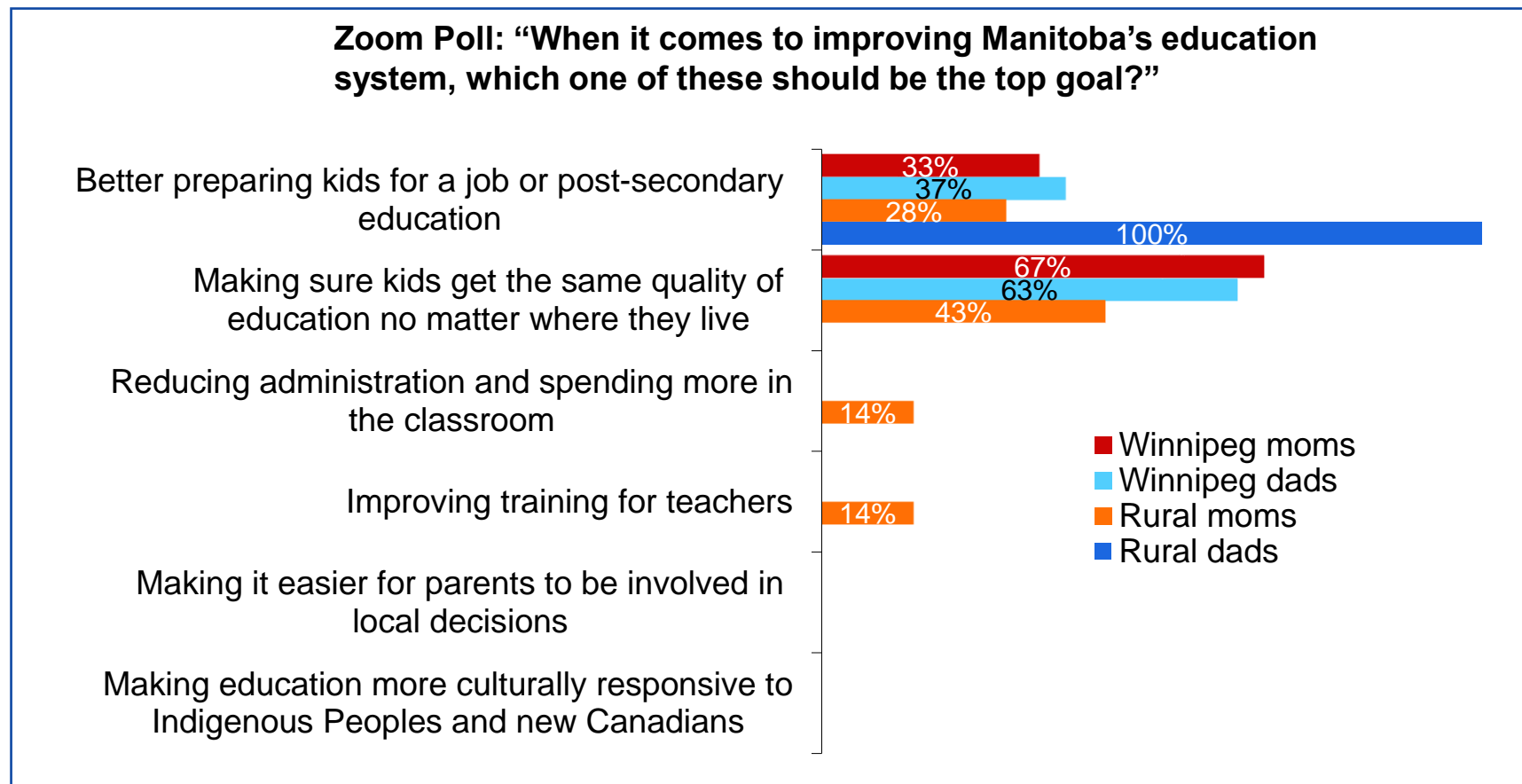
Imagining a Future System

Equality of programs, preparing kids for jobs and post-secondary are parents' top goals

Prior to a deep dive into the reforms, their potential drivers and related messaging, parents were asked for an initial assessment of potential goals of any education system improvements. Here, equality of access as well as preparing kids adequately for their next steps trump nearly all other potential goals. Rural dads were somewhat of an outlier – their wish to see kids well-prepared for the job market, post-secondary

education and even to be good citizens topped all other possible goals. Rural moms had a wider variety of top goals and were the only group where at least one parent favoured better training for teachers and more in-classroom spending.

Interestingly, Winnipeg parents were most likely to favour equality of education no matter where a child lives, in part because they felt poverty is a driver of outcomes. As well, Winnipeg moms noted access to programs for kids with disabilities varies widely.



A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the backs of several students' heads are visible, showing they are seated and facing forward. In the background, a teacher stands near a whiteboard, and the classroom environment is softly out of focus.

Awareness of Education Reform

This chapter outlines the depth and breadth of awareness of the K-12 review – what parents have heard and their initial views and expectations of reform.

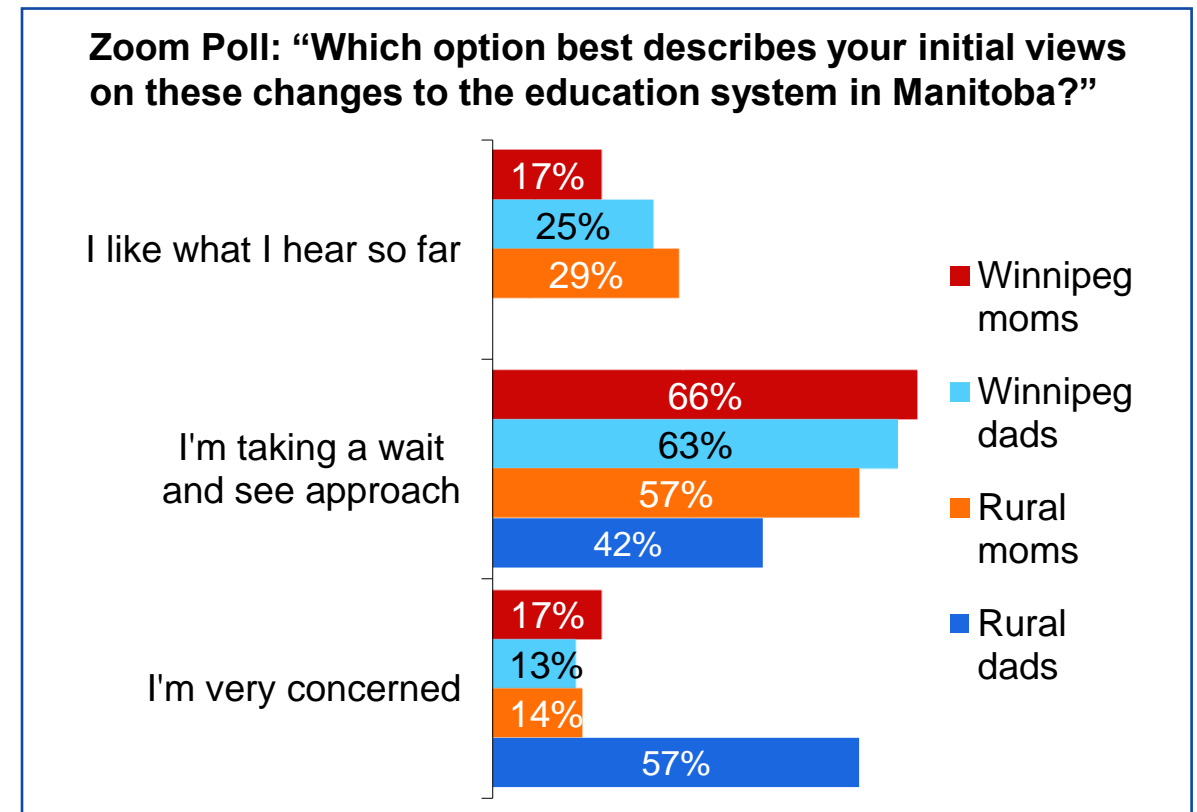
Education Reforms: Awareness and Initial Reaction

Strong awareness of the reforms, with most taking a wait-and-see attitude

Nearly all parents were broadly familiar with the reforms made public one or two days prior to the focus groups. Parents typically learned of these changes from the news (CBC Radio and the Winnipeg Free Press), on social media platforms (Twitter and Reddit) or through discussions with partners and teacher friends. Parents generally knew the province planned to amalgamate divisions and eliminate elected trustees, but had many questions about the specific details – who is really making decisions? Where will the new boundaries be? (Improvements to in-class supports, teacher training and the development of parent councils were not as top-of-mind.)

Reaction to the reforms was not overly negative. Most parents said they are taking a wait-and-see approach to the reforms and that some change makes sense. Some parents felt the changes may involve “privatization” or at least more “government control” of education (though one Winnipeg mom felt differently – that more robust parent councils could improve oversight, while Winnipeg dads were somewhat more positive in their comments, but also worried about removal of trustees. Their “wait and see” approach was somewhat more cynical or pessimistic.

Interestingly, rural dads were most concerned about the changes even though they spoke most pointedly about the need for improvements to student outcomes. As well, Winnipeg men were the only group to mention the elimination of the education property tax and were somewhat worried this would result in cuts to education.



Initial Reaction: In Their Own Words

"If there's an opportunity for parents to have more of a part or role in schools and the progression and changes, that's always positive. Usually, it's just parents with ideas forming, but you have nowhere to take that. So, I like that. If I could be involved in a school community council to help the school divisions be better instead of having to run for political trustee..."

- Winnipeg Mom

"I haven't read enough about it to fully understand the impact, but it sounds like it's not a good thing. It sounds like it's going to be more government controlled and less input from people who are working right within the school divisions and understanding what their communities need. And it's going to be ultimately the government just kind of calling the shots."

- Winnipeg Mom

"My initial reactions are somewhat pro. I like the idea of testing. I like the idea of adapting the education curriculum with the times. But I do generally fear the elimination of property school taxes. I never think it's a good idea to take money out of the education system. And I also very, very much dislike the government picking who is on the school board. I find that politicizes education too much, or at least risks moving in that direction."

- Winnipeg Dad

"I feel badly for some of these administrators that are probably going to lose jobs, but that is progress. Hopefully, we can move some of that money close to where the kids use it."

- Winnipeg Dad

"I don't know what we're going to amalgamate with, but we have a 400-mile radius, so the school division could be spread so geographically wide it becomes almost impossible to be effective."

- Rural Mom

"They're making a business decision really. There's no emotion attached to it. I think, as parents, we're all emotional people. I think long-term they might figure it out, but short-term, they're certainly going to be some pain."

- Rural Dad

"They're creating an appointed board, so a board that isn't accountable to the people or accountable to the parents."

- Rural Dad

A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the backs of several children's heads are visible as they sit at desks. In the background, a teacher stands near a whiteboard, facing the class. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlay.

Reaction to Key Reforms

This chapter outlines parents' reaction to key elements of planned reforms – and tests some additional rationales that support these reforms.

Views on Elimination of School Divisions

Some amalgamation made sense, particularly in Winnipeg, but rural parents more concerned

There was general acceptance that there are too many school divisions now, and that some degree of amalgamation – particularly in Winnipeg – makes sense. Parents felt this move may create more consistency and save some administrative costs.

Winnipeg parents generally felt the city has too many school divisions that are arbitrarily created, and amalgamation makes good sense. In general, Winnipeg parents had little attachment to their specific division. One parent felt that some of the “ridiculous” differences in programs and approaches throughout Winnipeg could be eliminated, even though a large division might be somewhat unwieldy. Though Winnipeg parents had some initial reservations, they also felt the move could lead to more consistency in learning. They also knew that most other large Canadian cities have only one or two school divisions.

Among rural residents, there was surprisingly little concern about potential local job losses that may result from amalgamation. For some, this was seen as the price of change. Rural moms suggested they would prefer to see two in-class support staff replace one higher-paying administrator.

Rural parents were concerned, however, that larger divisions would result in fewer programs in their child’s school or that they may be dictated to by administrators in Winnipeg or Brandon. In other words, they saw amalgamation as a threat to what they already have and not an opportunity to offer them more. Indeed, one rural dad noted that the amalgamation of the health regions damaged the ability to react locally and standardized care down to the lower standards of the new region.

However, despite the fact some parents felt eliminating divisions might save some administrative dollars, most felt the move will not affect or improve what happens in the classroom. In other words, parents saw little connection between amalgamation and better education.

“Is there going to be someone from Winnipeg making decisions for communities that they haven’t been in or seen and know the issues and problems that people deal with in those areas?”

- Rural Dad

“I’d love to see more funding go directly into the classroom. Whether or not it actually will, though, that’s where I’m a bit concerned and nervous, just because our government isn’t always trustworthy.”

- Rural Mom

Views on Elimination of Elected School Trustees

Little attachment to trustees, but rural parents more concerned about the loss of a local voice

Although some parents were concerned that eliminating school trustees would limit a local voice in education and replace elected trustees with “politicized” appointees, parents were surprisingly disenchanted with their existing school trustees. Many did not know who their trustee is, had little contact with trustees outside election campaigns and could not say what role trustees play. Several noted trustees are invisible and rarely connect with parents. Moms, and Winnipeg moms in particular, were the least perturbed by the idea of eliminating elected school trustees and were almost angry about what they felt were unresponsive and ineffective representatives who offer little expertise. What seemed to matter most to them is having a clear “chain of command” to follow when advocating for their child, and typically this process rarely involved trustees.

Winnipeg dads were perhaps slightly more likely to consider the ramifications on local democracy. They were more likely to feel that less democracy is a downside, especially when the new authority’s board will be appointed by the government.

Generally, though, the reaction to this move in all groups was not negative. Put another way, there is very little strong understanding of, or innate support for the current system of elected school trustees. The very modest degree of opposition to eliminating them was based on principle and not on any degree of attachment to the system itself.

“What do they even do? Like, you have to look up who they are and what they do because you have to vote for them and you don’t want to be ignorant. But what are they actually doing? If no one knows what they’re doing, then their job can’t be that important, right?”

- Winnipeg Mom

“I think any time you take away democracy in any way is a bad thing and you centralize it like that ... I have engaged with my school trustee, and I do vote for school trustees and I’ve always had positive interactions with them.”

- Winnipeg Dad

“Sometimes you have to blow something up in order to make it better. That’s just the way it is. Not that I don’t feel bad for them, but feeling bad for somebody and keeping them on is kind of like dead weight on the ship.”

- Rural Dad

Views on Parent Councils

Concern over how they will work and whether they're fair to low-income schools

Parents were somewhat doubtful about a larger role for parent councils and did not necessarily equate stronger parent councils with an effective local tool to keep schools and the system accountable. As they worked through this idea, it was clear parents wanted a much clearer sense of the defined roles and responsibilities of these councils.

Their concerns could be broadly summarized this way:

- **Importance.** Parents felt they have limited time to volunteer, and the work of a parent council must have value and consequence – i.e. real decision-making power and not just “downloading” fundraising, administration and other “grunt work”.
- **Expertise.** Although parents wanted a voice, they felt the best people to make decisions about education ought to be teachers, principals and other experts. Similarly, parents said councils should not be able to micromanage educators, and they were somewhat concerned about any ability councils may have to potentially hire and fire their school principal.
- **Equity.** Particularly among moms, concerns were raised that schools in lower-income neighbourhoods with struggling families would naturally have weaker parent councils, which they felt is the opposite of what those schools require. Downloading responsibilities and oversight to parents could exacerbate inequity in the system.
- **Process.** Parents were concerned that councils would get hijacked by parents with self-serving agendas and would overstep their bounds or be “cliquey”. This was somewhat informed by less-than-positive experiences parents have had serving on parent advisory councils. Parents wanted clarity on the guardrails in place to prevent councils from “causing chaos” or micromanaging school administrators.

“The biggest struggle with parent councils is volunteerism is dropping, OK, no one has time to volunteer ... For a parent council, if they're there to make decisions, absolutely, people will be signing up. But if they're there to do the work unpaid that someone else should be doing paid, they're not going to do it.”
- Winnipeg Mom

“That's putting a lot of pressure on these parents, especially in those marginalized communities, where parents don't have time to volunteer, or they're not as engaged. How is that oversight going to work?”
- Winnipeg Dad

“In a parent council, it tends to be the parent who is willing to speak the most has the most influence in the room, and that's not me. I don't necessarily agree that the one with the most volume should get the most votes. Not that those parents had bad intentions. It was just them being them.”
- Winnipeg Dad

A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, the backs of several children's heads are visible as they sit at desks. In the background, a teacher stands near a whiteboard, facing the class. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlay.

Resonance of Messaging

This chapter outlines parents' reactions to some of the underlying reasons for education reform to get a better understanding of which messages resonate most and in what way.

Message Resonance

Improving educational outcomes had strong resonance among parents

Several key reasons for reforming education were tested to understand which parents found credible or important. Some of the key findings included:

- **Better outcomes for kids** was viewed as a strong and important reason. Here, parents spoke more about how Manitoba doesn't necessarily stack up well against other provinces and that this may make Manitoba grads less competitive in the job market. As well, there was soft agreement that standardized tests are useful to the system and to them as parents, although some parents worried about teachers only "teaching to the test". As well, there was skepticism that the government's true motivation for change is to improve outcomes for kids.
- **Improved ranking** was not seen as a strong or compelling reason for reform, particularly for moms who were more likely to say rankings are dependent, to a large degree, on the socio-economic realities of inner-city and northern schools, and there's only so much schools can do when parents are not as involved or stable.
- **More classroom supports** was seen as a strong reason for change, and one mothers tended to bring up on their own – the pressing need for everything from additional reading programs to more mental health services for kids. Here again, though, many parents felt it unlikely the reforms would actually result in measurable improvements to classroom supports. As well, though many parents mentioned superintendents with high salaries and the savings that could be repurposed into classrooms, other parents noted that the administration is "the backbone" of the system and exists to support teachers.

"I'm pro-standardized testing especially in the early grade school level, because it helps with recovery. When you move into the high school level, it has few other consequences, and it doesn't usually work quite as effectively."

- Rural Mom

"I don't think that's what's going to happen. I don't think there's going to be more money in the classrooms. There's no way."

- Winnipeg Dad

Message Resonance (cont'd)

Fairness and equity of access also important, but rural parents skeptical of how this will work

"If their actual reason for amalgamating all the divisions is so that there can be better Reading Recovery - that is not in every division. Some divisions have more access to it than others. And Reading Recovery is a fantastic program. It'll bring up scores if all of a sudden northern Manitoba has access to that program."

- Winnipeg Mom

"It would be fine as it's not lowering the education for everybody else. I'm sure there's some schools that are better than others. Some might get better funding. I'm not sure how it all works exactly, but as long as we're not going down."

- Rural Mom

- **Improving teacher quality** was generally not seen as a significant need in Winnipeg, where parents felt teachers are generally excellent. Rural parents were somewhat less warm in their assessment of teachers but also noted it can be very hard to attract top-quality teachers to smaller communities. Although this was not an outcome that was explicitly tested, Winnipeg moms in particular raised the goal of reducing class sizes and lamented what they saw as backsliding on the progress made on this in recent years.
- **Fairness and equity of access** came up organically during the discussion as being very important. But, when tested here, this seemed to be less valued by parents. Rural parents were skeptical their children would ever have better access to programs and services on par with those offered in Winnipeg, for example. As well, rural parents in particular worried their local school might be brought down to a regional standard and not raised up.

Two additional notes here: Rural parents in particular were very open to programs and electives being offered online. In fact, the pandemic has made the idea of online or virtual courses more palatable and tangible for many parents, and they tended to suggest this themselves as a potential improvement.

Second, parents had no strong views on whether school principals ought to remain in the teachers' union. Rural parents had some sense that principals do still occasionally teach, but most parents viewed principals as being part of "management" instead of teachers.

Confidence in the Government

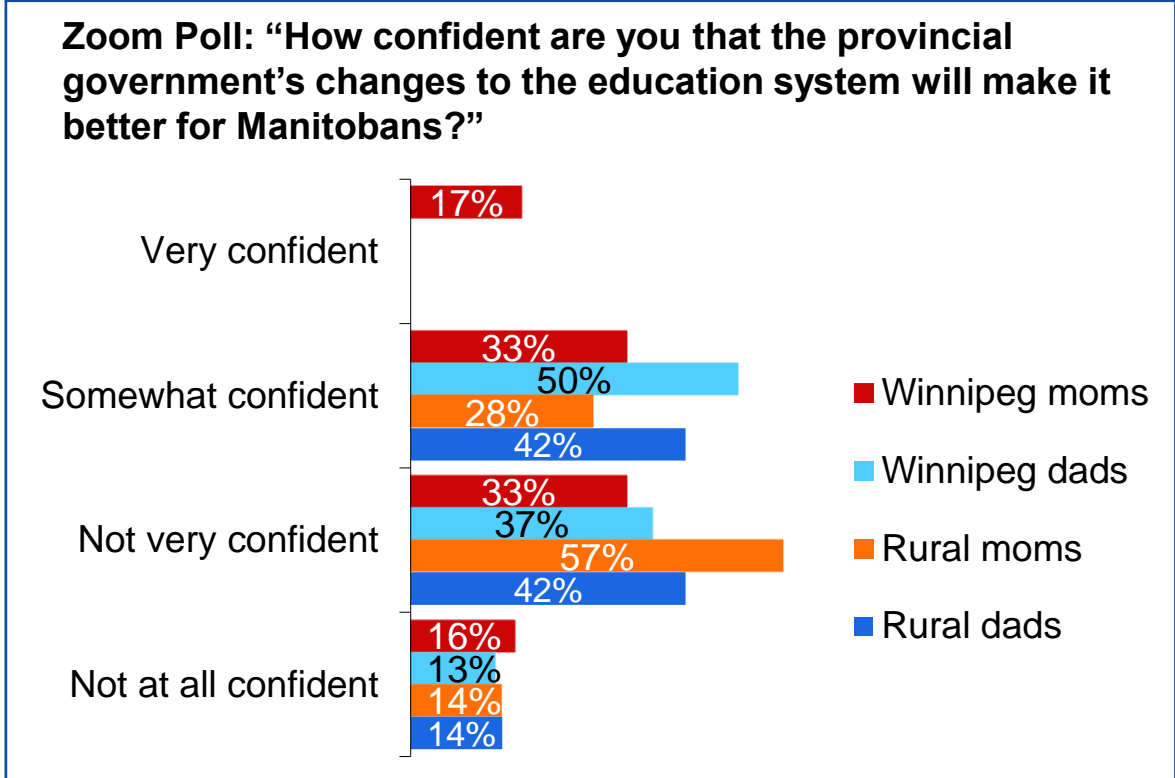
Parents expressed little confidence that the government is making changes for the right reasons

Throughout the discussion, parents repeatedly expressed skepticism about the government’s true motives for change and whether reforms would have any real effect on what happens in the classroom. To close out the session, parents were asked to rank their confidence level, and most felt not very confident. Several parents said the plan may look good, but the “devil is in the details” and felt the real goal of the reforms is cost savings. This view is somewhat coloured by parents’ views on health care and the sense that reforms there were heavy-handed and not particularly successful. As well, parents wanted to see evidence and research to support the government’s approach.

Parents did acknowledge that improvements are required and said they have some confidence in teachers, education experts and policy staff to have the best interests of children at heart. In this way, parents may have more faith in these groups as trustworthy messengers of reform.

“Like, what kind of people are they going to appoint to this board? If it's some super talented people that I believe would better the system, then yeah. And the opposite would be true if they hire some people that I would almost grimace at hearing their names listed. I would have to wonder what their intentions really are. Is it just smoke and mirrors?”
 - Rural Dad

“I just don't believe (improving quality) would happen. I think that's someone smoking something that they think that'll happen. Maybe I'm just old and cynical. I could see it lowering standards across the system, but I don't think (improving standards) will happen.”
 - Rural Mom



Impact of COVID-19

Parents were somewhat split on the idea of making reforms now, or waiting for the pandemic's end

Parents were asked whether the pandemic has affected their view of the education system, as well as whether now is the right time to make significant reforms, or if it makes better sense to wait until the pandemic subsides completely.

- Many parents noted that there's never an ideal time to make big changes and were somewhat pragmatic in their view that there will always be casualties of change. As well, parents felt that, if the changes result in better in-classroom supports and a better experience for their kids, then change now is worth pursuing. Interestingly, parents in all groups worried just as much about the threat that reforms would be rolled back after an election and a change in government.
- Other parents – a minority – felt it makes better sense to wait, in part because students are already somewhat behind after the pandemic.
- As well, the ability of schools to pivot and evolve during COVID has, for many, improved their faith in the system's management and staff.

"My opinion of the education system was lowered because of (COVID), because you're hearing about the lack of funding and the added stress put on teachers and principals and such. That's made me think more negatively. With that said, we're lucky that so far we have had a good experience with the school, with the communication, their handling of everything."

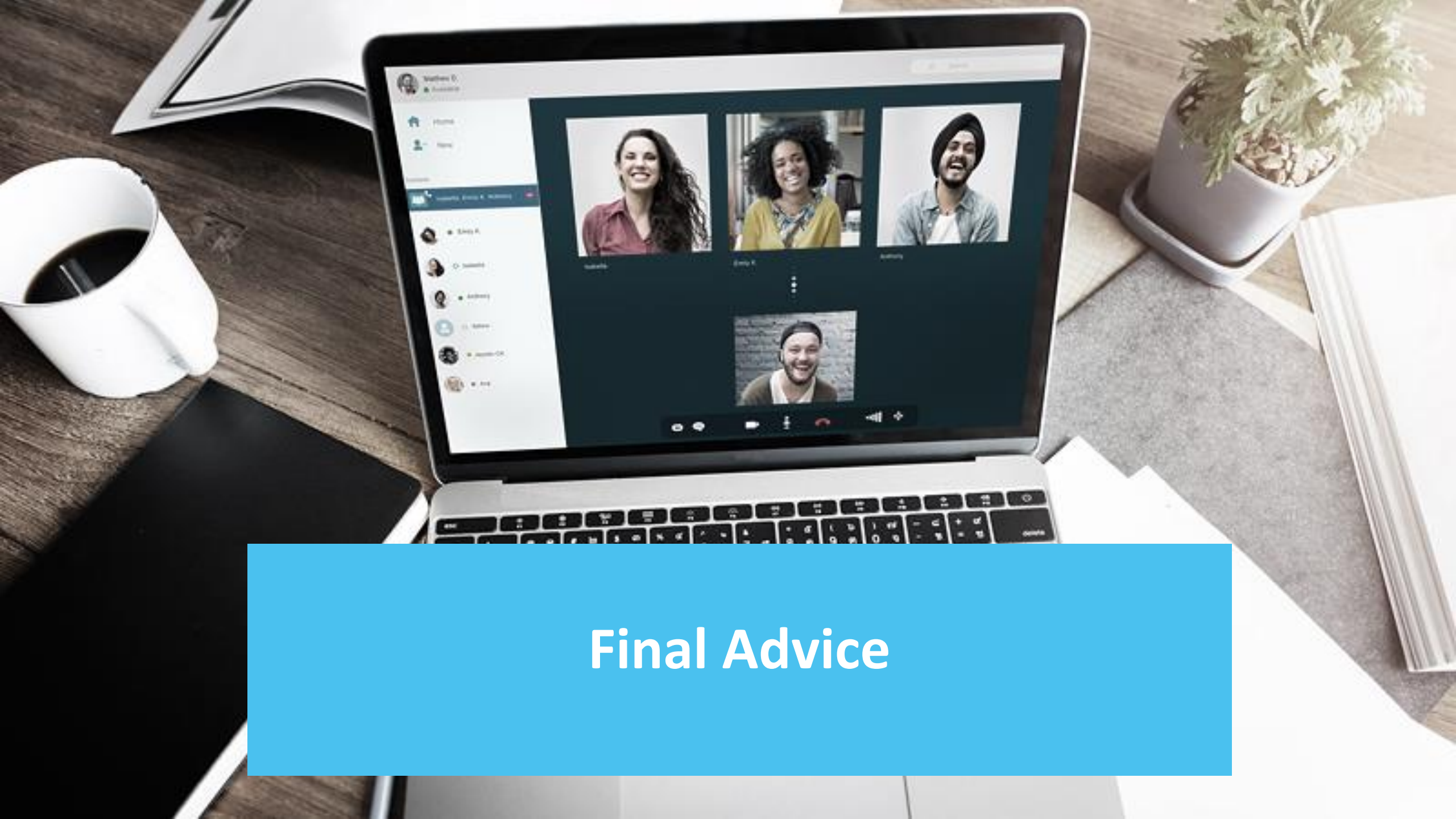
- Winnipeg Mom

"The whole COVID situation has demonstrated how adaptable the schools are and how able they are to make changes."

- Winnipeg Dad

"There's no real great time to do it, and I don't think COVID, at least in this province, is an excuse to not do something. Like, if we've got the actual research to back it up, that these changes will be good, I guess now would be just as good a time as any."

- Rural Dad



Final Advice

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- **Focus on how the changes benefit individual parents, kids and their schools.** Avoid discussing things at a “system” level. Parents aren’t connected or attached to “the system” and don’t think about education in those terms. Similarly, PISA scores and rankings don’t matter much to parents – they are somewhat outside parents’ frame of reference and were not seen as good arguments for change. However, parents are deeply attached to their child’s school and teachers. Their sense that the system is working reasonably well is driven to a significant degree by that relationship.
- Related to this, parents also felt, to some degree, that these reforms won’t trickle down to the classroom and that the governance changes don’t have a great deal to do with the day-to-day education their children will get. **This may represent an opportunity to re-balance the message** by making it more focused on improving the educational experience of children and less about governance and other aspects that are further from the classroom.
- At the same time, empowered parent councils were not seen as a hugely welcome innovation. Parents worried about the internal politics of parent councils, and the risk of overreach. **Creating and communicating clear expectations and guardrails around parent councils and their roles and responsibilities could help build support for this model.**
- **The message about equitable access to programs has strong resonance.** In Winnipeg, this tends to mean fair access and stronger programs for low-income kids as a way to combat poverty. In rural Manitoba, this means better access to programs and courses to ensure their kids have the same chance in life as a child in Winnipeg. **However, rural Manitobans had a ceiling on their expectations.** They had an innate sense that the size of their communities simply makes a full suite of programs comparable to what may be offered in Winnipeg unlikely, so it makes sense to guard against over-promising.
- **People – even rural men – distrust the current government’s intentions and feel most reforms are driven only by a need to cut costs.** There’s a need for a clear plan to build trust that is somewhat de-politicized and focuses on the real changes that will trickle down to the classroom. Put more bluntly, for parents, administrative cost savings and improving rankings are not particularly effective arguments for change. Fair access to a high-quality education and in-classroom improvements are.