

# EDUCATIONAL PRIOROTIES AND CAPACITY: A RURAL PERSPECTIVE

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This study examined the congruence between the priorities of the Manitoba government's *Kindergarten to Senior 4 (K-S4) Education Agenda for Student Success* and priorities of stakeholders in a rural Manitoba school division, and the division's capacity to achieve them. Capacity included three components for success: Legitimization of Alternatives, Diverse Networks, and Resource Mobilization. The findings suggest that the theoretical conceptualizations of how rural areas develop and/or thrive have yet to be refined. Many of the findings coincide with Howley's (1997) ideas that school reform efforts tend to essentialize schooling across contexts, for reasons that do not always reflect local purposes, interests, and/or capacities.

Key words: rural education, school policy, school improvement

Cette étude porte sur la congruence entre les priorités du Programme d'action en éducation favorisant la réussite chez les élèves de la maternelle au secondaire 4 (M-S4) du gouvernement du Manitoba et les priorités identifiées par des groupes d'intéressés au sein d'une division scolaire rurale de la province et la capacité de cette division de les réaliser. Cette capacité comprenait trois volets : la légitimation des autres options possibles, les réseaux diversifiés et la mobilisation des ressources. Les résultats semblent indiquer que les conceptualisations théoriques du mode de développement des régions rurales ont besoin d'être raffinées. Bon nombre des conclusions coïncident avec les idées de Howley (1997) selon lesquelles les efforts de réforme scolaire ont tendance à essentialiser l'éducation pour des raisons qui ne reflètent pas toujours les objectifs, les capacités et/ou les intérêts locaux.

Mots clés : éducation en milieu rural, politiques scolaires, amélioration de l'école

Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (MECY) (2002) set the groundwork for school change and school improvement with the development of the *Manitoba Kindergarten to Senior 4 (K-S4) Education Agenda for Student Success*. This document, based upon current research on school reform/school improvement, outlines six provincial priorities to provide educational direction in the province: (a) Improving outcomes especially for less successful learners; (b) Strengthening links among schools, families, and communities; (c) Strengthening school planning and reporting; (d) Improving professional learning opportunities for educators; (e) Strengthening pathways among secondary schools, post-secondary education, and work; and; (f) Linking policy and practice to research and evidence. This case study of Strongman School Division<sup>1</sup> (pseudonym), one of four case studies and a provincial survey of a standard research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), examined the congruence between the priorities of the provincial government's *K-S4 Agenda* and those priorities identified by stakeholders in a rural Manitoba school division, as well as the capacity of the division to achieve them.

School reform/school improvement literature has been criticized as universalizing schools and students, paying insufficient attention to context in terms of racial, class, and gender differences (Angus, 1993; Hatcher, 1998; Maynard, & Howley, 1997) and national jurisdiction (Levin, 2002; Levin & Young, 2000). The premise upon which this literature has been developed has generalized the differences between urban and rural schools as well. In his disparagement of educational research and school improvement, Howley (1997) states that the commitment to forms of education that sustain local communities as thoughtful cultures has deteriorated, and has been replaced by school improvement initiatives that are nationalizing or "globalizing":

If, for instance, the topic is statewide reform, again, the focus of effort is likely to be the special backwardness or challenges of rural places in acceding to the reforms, not the disjunction between local and state priorities. If the topic is student aspirations, the focus is likely to be how rural schools can best "increase" the level of students' aspirations, not the relationship between student commitment to rural life ways and cosmopolitan ways. If the topic is the dropout rate, the focus of effort is most likely to be strategies for retaining or retrieving students

rather than the disjunction between rural schools' national purposes and the nature of local rural economies. (para 20)

At the heart of the matter is the conflict over the purpose of schooling, with provincial and national reform leaders calling for schools to prepare students to contribute to national interests, while rural scholars and educational stakeholders believe rural schools should serve local community interests. Howley advocates for research on rural education that offers a "practical critique" of current trends in school improvement, because "the motive of school improvement is becoming less and less salient to real conditions in the world" (para 48).

This study addressed the degree to which the assumptions behind school improvement that underpin the *K-S4 Agenda* adequately ground the six priorities within the context of rural schooling. The need for such research in Manitoba is illustrated by Henley's and Young's (2002) comment that "the concerns [in school reform] of urban Winnipeg have often overshadowed those of the rural areas of the province," even if, as they suggest, "the city has never achieved hegemonic domination over them" (p. 322). As well, MECY (2002) asserts that the Manitoba education system is serving Manitoba children and families well, citing as evidence increasing educational levels, heightening school completion rates, larger enrolments in post-secondary education, the development of a strong adult education system, highly qualified teachers, special needs inclusion, and family outreach programs. However, research on rural education indicates that often rural settings are plagued with educational problems that run contrary to the *K-S4 Agenda's* claim of educational excellence: (a) isolation from specialized services (Cheney & Demchak, 2001); (b) limited accessibility to quality staff development and university services (Hodges, 2002); (c) teacher shortages especially in key areas of mathematics and science (Lemke & Harrison, 2002) with little hope in recruiting teachers, who wish to live in larger metropolitan areas (Ralph, 2002); (d) decreasing enrolments that lead to a decrease in funding (Ralph, 2002), and (e) a declining pool of qualified administrative candidates (Waddle & Buchanan, 2002) often due to little administrative support and overburdening community expectations. In fact, "rural circumstances are often overlooked as researchers attempt to apply school

improvement procedures across all school systems" (Howley & Harmon, 1996, as cited in Carlson, 2002, p. 31), treating schools as if they were generic institutions whose ideal forms are common across school contexts. A most disheartening example of this generalization includes the fact that the closure of small rural schools has been the single most implemented educational "change reform" in rural areas (Carlson, 2002).

In any event, the six provincial priorities provide the basis for the examination of the unique challenges of communities in rural Manitoba. Three possible conclusions were anticipated: (a) consensus about the priorities exists, and rural priorities are the same as those of the *K-S4 Agenda*; (b) consensus exists only at a high level of abstraction, and an examination of the expressions of these priorities might cause differences between rural and urban (and among different rural) schools to emerge; or (c) consensus does not exist, and what the *K-S4 Agenda* claims are common priorities do not reflect the priorities of rural educators and/or populations.

#### RURAL EDUCATION AND CAPACITY

Capacity was defined utilizing a model that has been applied to rural community development, which was adapted for use in a rural education context. Entrepreneurial social infrastructure (Flora & Flora, 1993) reflects the notion of capacity because it includes three components communities (or in this case school divisions) must have to be successful in their endeavours: (a) Legitimization of Alternatives; (b) Diverse Networks; and (c) Resource Mobilization.

*Legitimization of Alternatives* focuses on the value of constructive controversy so that communities can engage in discussions around inclusive processes, without the political nature of those discussions becoming personal. As a consequence, superficial harmony and destructive conflict are replaced with processes that encourage dialogue and thoughtful decision making. Alternatives are legitimated and valued, and continuous improvement occurs as goals are monitored and assessed. Public input is respected, encouraged, and often brings about change at the local level. As Flora (1997) suggests, "there is less concern about 'Whose crummy idea was that?' or 'Why didn't you listen to me? I had a better

idea,' and more consideration of 'What did we learn from this last effort?' and 'What will we try now?'" (p. 1).

*Diverse Networks* involves establishing networks, both horizontal and vertical, to access potential sources of experience and knowledge (Flora & Flora, 1993). Such networks, which are diverse and inclusive, are created both through broad-based and personal invitations. In a school sense, horizontal networks include those within the school division – between teachers and administrators, staff and trustees, schools and the community. Vertical networks include those linkages made by individuals to regional, provincial, and national organizations (Manitoba Teachers Society; Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth). Participation in these horizontal and vertical networks varies as the needs of groups change over time. Groups are flexible and boundaries expand or contract as new partnerships form, change, grow, or narrow depending on the issue at hand.

*Resource Mobilization* speaks to the need to develop surplus in the community through local investment, both private and collective. Resources are distributed equitably and individuals or groups are encouraged to take risks to better the community. Resources are available to everyone, and the criteria for accessing those resources are clear. Individuals contribute their time, money, and effort to good causes. In relation to schooling, a community with strong resource mobilization invests in ensuring its schools are of high quality.

As Levin and Riffel (1998) state:

in an important sense identification or understanding of issues and changes is always local. The literature on schools and change may talk in terms of macro trends . . . but what people actually see in their daily lives are local and concrete manifestations of larger trends . . . the meaning . . . will be quite different in a large urban centre and in a small rural community. (p. 120)

Therefore, it was necessary to determine whether the meanings about priorities made by those in Strongman School Division (pseudonym) were in fact a manifestation of the "larger trend" of the K-S4 Agenda, or whether they are more locally constituted – but no less important.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized surveys and focus group research methods to address its objectives. A survey was used to gather information on demographics, educational priorities, and capacity. The survey was first distributed to 10 rural educational stakeholders for reactions on items to increase face validity. Items were clarified, discarded, and/or added, based on the feedback and discussion. A presentation to the school board was made to procure consent to conduct the study. Fifteen surveys were then sent to management groups (trustees, central office, and in-school administration), all staff (135 surveys), all families with children in the school division (600), and 50 randomly chosen businesses from within the community. In total, 100 surveys were returned: management (N = 7), staff (N = 49), and parents/community groups (N = 44).

The first part of the survey instrument, which collected contextual school information, was distributed to administrators only. Questions related to school division demographics were asked: school grade levels, enrolment, graduation rates, special needs enrolment, post-secondary entrance, student teacher ratio, class size, student transportation, technology, and teacher/administrator levels of education, and turnover rates.

All stakeholders received parts two to four of the survey. Part two of the survey instrument collected community demographic data which were cross-referenced with 2001 Census Canada data. The third part of the survey provided respondents with a list of 22 potential educational priorities, including the six priorities found in the *K-S4 Agenda*. Respondents were asked to rank the list of priorities from 1-10 and to offer others that were of importance. Spearman rank correlations, means, and variances were used to determine which priorities were consistently ranked of highest importance, and to determine relationships between priorities.

The final portion of the survey asked participants to rate the capacity of their schools. Thirty questions related to legitimization of alternatives, diverse networks, and resource mobilization were asked to determine whether the school division had a high level of entrepreneurial social infrastructure (capacity). Responses were elicited on a continuum of 1 to 4 from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Sample questions included such phrases as, "*the school division is oriented towards including rather than*

*excluding members of the community," "resources (money, space, communication, equipment) are controlled by a few key individuals," and "school division leaders accept criticism well."* As well as determining descriptive statistics, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine differences among stakeholder groups, using an associated  $p =$  level of 0.05.

Because the instrument was in its first iteration, a reliability analysis (Cronbach Alpha) was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the 30 capacity items. A Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of .9330 was computed, which can be interpreted to mean that the items used to measure capacity were 93.3 per cent reliable. However, Cronbach Alpha does not indicate the stability or consistency of the test over time. In fact, reliability is not a characteristic inherent in the test itself, but rather is an estimate of the consistency of a set of items when they are administered to a particular group at a specific time under particular conditions for a specific purpose. Extrapolating from reliability results to other situations must be done with great care.

Those who indicated an interest on the returned survey forms in focus group sessions were contacted to participate in a focus group to discuss and reflect on educational priorities, school division capacity, and the role of the provincial government in educational governance. Five focus groups were conducted that lasted approximately two hours each, with participants representing all the trustees, all but two administrators, staff (representing both support staff and teaching staff), and parents/community members (representing French Immersion and regular program supporters, parents of special needs children, single parents, country and town people, and businesspeople, social service providers, and farmers). A probability impact chart for the priority section and a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) of the capacity model helped group members focus their ideas. Notes were taken, ideas were documented on flip charts, and the focus group interviews were audio-recorded. Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding, and categorizing of data into meaningful units) was used to identify themes in the data that were then used to contextualize the survey findings. All data were charted according to the descriptors of the entrepreneurial social infrastructure model, and placed thematically into the categories of

Legitimization of Alternatives, Diverse Linkages, and Resource Mobilization.

#### NATURE OF THE COMMUNITY

The population (town = 6142; Rural Municipality [RM] = 5139) and infrastructure of Strongman are increasing at a healthy rate (8% over five years), which does not reflect the typical rural stereotype of decreasing population. In fact, the majority of respondents labeled their community to be either stable (52.5%) or booming (47.5%). The majority of adult community members in Strongman are married (62.5%), and the community has a high representation of young people (one-third of the population in town and one-half in the Rural Municipality). Family structure is more diverse (with children, without children, single households, lone parent households) in the town of Strongman, and dominated in the RM by families with young children. Census 2001 data suggest that the community is relatively homogenous, even more so in the RM. Christian faiths, mostly Protestant, predominate, which promote a community culture dominated by religious or traditional rural values. Given this lack of diversity, respondents indicated in survey results that social ties remain strong within the community and within the surrounding rural area, and reported little to no social or class conflict. Whether this is in fact the case, or whether respondents may have been reluctant to admit to internal conflict, is difficult to determine.

Economic opportunity was suggested to be high, with manufacturing and construction dominating the economic activity, followed by health and education, and agriculture (in the RM). Survey results, suggesting that the average income of community residents was about the same or higher than that of the province, were not reflected in 2001 census data. In fact, the average earnings in town (\$24,747) and the RM (\$19,655) were lower than the provincial average (\$27,178). Participation (P) rates (the labour force, employed and unemployed, expressed as a percentage of the population) and employment (E) rates (the number of employed persons expressed as a percentage of the population) were also significantly higher in the RM (P=72.5%; E=71.2%) than they were in the town (P=67.1%; E=64%) and the province (P=67.3%; E=63.3%). In addition, although education rates in general were low to moderate, half



(50.2%) of the population in the RM aged 20-34 had less than a grade-12 diploma. All these data suggest that families in the RM need dual incomes; they are working at higher rates, with less income, lower education levels, with more mouths to feed. Therefore, these data substantiate an alarming trend regarding the growth of rural poverty, especially given a report from the division that one-quarter of the students live in poverty. Overall, the discrepancy in findings between survey reports and 2001 census data suggest that either the 2001 statistics no longer report the accurate economic circumstances of residents in Strongman, or those who filled out the survey misjudged the general pattern of economic circumstance within the community, perhaps because the general climate of the community is celebrated as being one of prosperity (especially by prominent leaders and entrepreneurs within the community), without an attendant focus on the poorer circumstances of labour workers and farm families. It may also be that those who filled out the survey represented a wealthier group of community voices, who are more likely to provide input into community matters (including education). Although there is no way to determine whether this is the case, the implication is that the respondents of this study may not necessarily represent those whose voices are traditionally marginalized.

#### SCHOOL DIVISION CHARACTERISTICS

At the time of the study, Strongman School Division enrolled 1,560 students, and enrolment has been increasing over the past three years. The school division maintains two elementary schools (K-4), one middle school (5-8) and one senior high school (S1-S4). The student-teacher ratio was 16.7:1, with an average class size of 23.6. Half the students, who were from the surrounding rural area, were bussed to school. The division services special needs children designated for funding at Level I (10%), Level II (2%), and Level III (0.5%). Respondents indicated that the level of technological infrastructure ranged between adequate and extensive.

In addition, central office personnel reported that over the past three years, 30 per cent of the students from the school division have moved into university programs, 7 per cent have gone to college, 2 per cent have enrolled in vocational programs, and 50 per cent have moved into the labour force without pursuing post-secondary education. The overall grad-

uation rate from the school division was reported to be 90 per cent. Fifty percent of the teaching force held Bachelor's degrees, 35 per cent held Post-Graduate diplomas, and 10 per cent held Masters degrees. Teacher/Administrator turn-over rates during the last three years remained around 10 per cent. All staff within the division were Caucasian, as were the majority of students (91.2%). One-quarter of the students within the division were reported to live in poverty.

## FINDINGS

This section provides the findings related to educational priorities and capacity.

### *Educational Priorities*

In the determination of what constituted an educational priority, those priorities that more than 40 respondents mentioned (basically half) were examined. From these data, seven priorities were determined with average rankings less than fifth (out of ten): (a) *Improving Student Outcomes* (mean = 3.02; variance 8.18); (b) *Quality of Teachers and Administrators* (mean = 3.59; variance 6.91); (c) *Early Childhood* (mean = 4.28; variance 7.59); (d) *Educational Finance* (mean = 4.35; variance 9.55); (e) *Special Education* (mean = 4.44; variance 4.55); (f) *Community Development* (mean = 4.79; variance 10.17); and (g) *Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence* (mean = 4.93; variance 7.44).

Two of these seven priorities (*Improving Student Outcomes* and *Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence*) are *K-S4 Agenda* priorities. All focus groups turned their attention to student outcomes when they suggested that access to professional development (especially for specialty areas, English as Additional Language [EAL], and behavioral problems) was a growing concern. As well, the lack of local access to student services such as mental health and the problems in recruiting professionals for specialty positions detrimentally affected the school division's ability to serve students. It was also perceived that the changing nature of the family structure and the fact that families are busier has led to a decrease in the parental support for learning provided at home. Interestingly, the parent focus group suggested that boys are no longer as engaged in the learning process, and there is a danger of their

dropping out of school to move into work positions available in the growing industrial economy. Trustees added that changing graduation and curriculum requirements had an impact on the number, types, and quality of the programs the school division provided. On a more positive note, however, all focus groups spoke of the number of programs that have been developed through partnerships with community groups to offer variety and meaningful opportunities for students: work education, adult education, businesses (welding program), and the neighbouring school division (shared bus garage, shared programming and PD).

Focus groups did not speak directly to the priority of linking policy and practice to research, except by alluding to it in their suggestion that the provincial government often adopts the latest educational trend which may have little relevance to the rural setting. In this way, policy and practice become linked less to research and more to “what everyone else is doing” across the nation.

The third priority found in the survey results, *Special Education*, has a direct relationship with the *K-S4* priority of *Improving Outcomes Especially for Less Successful Learners*. However, this priority is actualized differently for rural residents, who have little to no access to professional health, medical, and psychological services for special needs students, and limited access to professional development for those teachers and educational assistants who work with the growing number of special needs children. On the other hand, the small and intimate community environment provides opportunity for businesses to partner with the school division to offer a Life Skills program that focus group member prized highly.

It may be argued that *Quality of Teachers and Administrators* could fall under the *K-S4* priority of *Improving Professional Learning Opportunities for Educators* because it relates to improving quality through professional development. The caution here, of course, relates to access, time commitments, and travel to centres for post-secondary learning, and their attendant funding issues. The division has initiated an onsite Master’s degree cohort for graduate course work delivered by University of Manitoba faculty. Teachers were happy with the PD opportunities available to them within the division, but it was suggested that educational assist-

ants need more opportunities for learning. As well, groups suggested that staff remain ill-equipped to handle the increasing emphasis on social programming and behavioral issues. All focus group members spoke of the difficulty in recruiting professionals, especially in specialty areas. Participants spoke of the fact that rural teachers and administrators have wider skill sets because there are fewer people managing and delivering educational service. This ability was viewed positively by some, while others suggested that having teachers teach multiple curriculum levels or teach outside their area of expertise had negative ramifications for students. Administrators spoke of rural teachers and administrators as risk-takers who were "creative and smart" in their ability to balance resources with programming opportunities.

*Community Development* as a priority may be argued to fall within the confines of the K-S4 priority, *Strengthening Links Among Schools, Families, and Communities*. However, the *Agenda* items found within that K-S4 priority relate mostly to a dichotomous separation between school and community. As such, *Agenda* items focus on increasing the information flow from schools to parents and encouraging parental and community involvement within the school itself. The relationships between school and community in Strongman are more complex than this. The *Agenda* items do not deliberately blur the lines between school and community such that the school becomes an instrument for community development or vice versa, which is often an underlying factor in the development of programs in Strongman. Strongman is developing as a major service centre in the area, which provides opportunities for partnerships and programming that other communities do not have. Often links to the community are created out of a practical desire to share services, facilities, and resources while offering opportunities for students to learn and to become involved in the life of the community. On the other hand, the school division is well aware that the competition for tax dollars between the school division and the rural municipality, as well as the instability of the local rural economy, which relies on the export of manufactured goods to the United States, has serious repercussions for community development and the quality of relationships between the school division and community. There is also recognition that issues facing the school also face the community, and vice versa. This aware-

ness was exemplified in the understandings that increasing numbers of EAL students not only had an impact on the programming of schools, but also on the nature of communication between the school and non English-speaking parents, and the community's ability (and infrastructural needs) to deal with the influx of immigrants. Another example was the recognition of the increasing number of social and behavioral programs developing in the division (often shared with community agencies and/or organizations), created out of a response to community need.

Part of the community development priority may also be reflected in the *K-S4 Agenda* priority, *Strengthening Pathways Among Secondary Schools, Post-secondary Schools, and Work*, whereby career development, employability skills, technical vocational enhancements, and community service student-initiated projects for credit are being developed. Strongman School Division is already ahead of the government in its commitment to utilizing partnerships with local industry and the neighbouring school division for these purposes. The one qualifier to this, however, was the caution from parents who suggested that more students (especially boys) were dropping out of school to move into work opportunities that the growing industrial economy provided.

*Educational Finance* is not a priority found in the *K-S4 Agenda*, although it is the foundation of most issues within public education. Respondents in this study believed that taxation and funding structures warrant scrutiny. Educational finance in relation to property taxation in rural areas has been a contentious issue for some time, and all focus groups talked about the increasing disparity between those who have the ability to pay, and those who do not. Other financial issues related to the lack of discretionary spending capacity of small rural school divisions, and the pressure non-amalgamated school divisions face to match the collective agreement provisions of amalgamated school divisions. Transportation costs for students and PD put increased strain on local budgets, as does the need to offer special services for students and safe and adequate facilities. In fact, often the school division took risks with resources to ensure that they could meet the needs of students, both public school students and adult education students.

Finally, the priority of *Early Childhood* is not related to any of the *K-S4 Agenda* priorities, for the obvious reason that early childhood pro-

gramming is not a responsibility of MECY. However, it is not surprising that rural parents would desire their children to have access to such programs because they have proliferated in urban environments. Although focus group members did not speak about early childhood education directly, they did speak with pride about some of the programs for early-years children that were partnerships between the school division and community organizations, such as a daycare that began to accommodate adult education students and developed into a family resource centre, as well as programs like Baby First and Healthy Child.

#### *Capacity*

The mean score of 2.45 (out of possible 4) on the capacity items suggests that, overall, survey respondents believe that Strongman School Division has a moderate capacity to achieve its educational priorities. Interestingly, of the five items that had high agreement levels, two of the items related to *Legitimization of Alternatives* and three items reflected *Diverse Networks*. Respondents agreed strongly that: (a) *the school division is oriented towards including rather than excluding members of the school community* (N = 77; Mean = 3.2727); and (b) *school division members and community members interact with each other across a wide variety of settings* (N = 71; Mean = 3.0845). They also highly agreed that, in terms of network diversity: (a) *parental input is valued* (N = 75; Mean = 3.1200); (b) *the school division maintains many formal connections to the community* (N = 62; Mean = 3.0806); and (c) *the school division often works with other educational organizations/partners* (N = 66; Mean = 3.0606). It seems fair to suggest that the school community in general is pleased with the school division's attempts to interact and work with the community, and that these groups feel that their contributions are valued. However, the ANOVA results do suggest some differences in responses between particular groups.

Overall, the educational management group (trustees and administrators) had higher levels of agreement on capacity items. This group agreed more highly than parents (a) *that the school division welcomes constructive criticism* ( $p = 0.001$ ), (b) *that it communicates* ( $p = 0.036$ ) and *connects well with the community* ( $p = 0.001$ ), and (c) *that resources are re-*

*arranged to try new/different initiatives* ( $p = 0.036$ ). As well, management groups and staff agreed more highly than parents that school division members interact with each other across a wide variety of settings ( $p = 0.002$ ). All these items seem to be related to contact, open communication, and public relations with the community. Because the management group mean was above three for all these items, this group indicates that it is trying to connect with the community openly, and encourage community input. However, the community group responses indicate that community members still feel that they are on the outside of the communication and information loop. The management group also more strongly agreed than parents and staff (a) *that leadership is broadly shared* ( $p = 0.009$ ), (b) *that the division listens to multiple perspectives* ( $p = 0.001$ ), (c) *that leaders accept criticism well* ( $p = 0.024$ ), and (d) *that leaders attempt to build relationships with all members of the community* ( $p = 0.007$ ). In addition, the educational management group had higher levels of agreement than staff for the idea that disagreements are settled reasonably without personal attacks ( $p = 0.038$ ). Obviously, there is some discrepancy between perceptions, which was borne out in focus group data provided below.

*Legitimization of Alternatives* was referred to by focus groups in a number of ways. All groups suggested that the school division focused on process, affirmed the perceptions of stakeholder groups, and attempted to depersonalize situations involving conflict. Trustees mentioned that they asked for input in budgetary, management, and program decisions in a number of forums, and administrators indicated that trustees were open to suggestion. However, the parent/community group felt that divisional forums were sometimes created more for providing the rationale for a decision already made than for gathering input, and groups whose numbers were of a minority in the community (e.g., French Immersion parents) sometimes felt that their voices were not heard. However, groups were happy with the positive influence of teachers new to the division who brought forward diverse ideas and ways of teaching. As well, all focus groups suggested that living in a small rural community where relationships were fostered helped to create an environment where alternate views could be expressed.

The *diversity of networks* in Strongman School Division was commendable. All groups suggested that the school division attempted to create good working relationships within the school division, the community, neighbouring school divisions, and across the province. The school board built in time to network with school groups on planning, programming, and budgetary issues; focus groups were happy with the fact that trustees governed as a board rather than as individuals focused on "turf wars." The sheer number of shared programs, facilities, and services between the school division, community groups, and neighbouring school divisions illustrated a strong focus on offering quality programs for students while managing resources as efficiently as possible. Group members suggested that the school division generally responded to community needs and concerns, even if the response was not always favoured by all. A sense of friendly competition between Strongman School Division and a neighbouring school division was alluded to, but all focus groups suggested that their working relationship was very positive, as evidenced by a number of shared programs, services, professional development, and facilities. In fact, the most significant networking issues occurred when interpersonal relationships became strained due to formal educational role responsibilities and educational politics, whether that included the conflicts that developed over taxation between school division members and rural municipality members, or between the school board and professional staff.

Strongman School Division mobilizes resources in a number of ways. The school division has attempted to maximize its resources to meet learning needs through sharing resources, programs, services, professional development, and facilities with community organizations and neighbouring school divisions. It has taken risks with its resources to support and accommodate both student and community interests when provincial reimbursement was not guaranteed. According to focus group members, the budget process is well planned, invites input, is flexible, and is prudently responsive to the local rural economy. Administrators suggested that those within the school division are willing to put their own interests aside if they realize that another group has a stronger need for resources. Trustees spoke of the complexities involved in ensuring that resources were distributed evenly. Participants also



spoke of the fact that the school division has taken advantage of opportunities for outside funding through provincial grants or opportunities to partner with local philanthropists. The primary threats to their mobilization of resources mentioned were (a) rural economic instability, (b) potential loss of the ability to levy local taxes, (c) the increasing reliance on user fees, (d) the resource ramifications of provincial educational trends, (e) the pressure of keeping costs low, and (f) the effects of the potential move to provincial collective bargaining.

#### CONCLUSION

This analysis of Strongman School Division has shed some interesting light on the nature, educational priorities, and capacity of this particular rural community that may offer lessons for rural communities elsewhere. Fortunately, the economic and industry base within the community seems to be growing. Manufacturing and construction and health and education are the largest industry bases, with agriculture also a primary industry in the RM, factors that coincide with research on rural communities in Canada which suggests that health and education are now a primary industrial base (Hobbs, 1994; Statistics Canada, 2001). Strongman also exhibits characteristics of a "Central Place" (Stabler & Olfert, 1996) because it has been able to gain momentum in population, industry, services, and infrastructure, while communities around Strongman have lost them. However, the fact that there exists another community close by to Strongman that also exhibits characteristics of a central place makes Strongman anomalous even within the understandings of Central Place Theory. Perhaps the primary lesson to be learned here is that the theoretical conceptualizations of how rural areas develop and/or thrive have yet to be refined, and that educators still have much to learn about the dynamic nature of what it means to be rural.

Unfortunately, the reality of rural poverty is a growing concern. Currently, residents of the Rural Municipality of Strongman are managing to maintain their lifestyles as dual income families. The industrial and service base helps to offset and support those who live in the rural municipality. However, the demographic, income, education, and participation/employment data indicate that these families are relying on a continuance of economic opportunity, which, if a downturn were to

occur, would place many families in very difficult circumstances. Such an unfortunate finding, especially within a community that was reported to be stable at minimum, and at best, booming, illustrates the need to closely examine the economic circumstances of other rural communities to track the potential encroachment of rural poverty.

In terms of educational priorities, the results of this study suggest that all three of the possible conclusions hypothesized at the outset of the study have been exemplified. Two priorities identified in the study (*Improving Student Outcomes* and *Linking Policy and Practice to Research and Evidence*) are priorities found in the *K-S4 Agenda*. Another three of the priorities (*Special Education*, *Quality of Teachers and Administrators*; and *Community Development*) are closely aligned with other *K-S4 Agenda* priorities, but their expression is subtly, yet distinctly different from how they are exemplified in the *K-S4 Agenda*. One of the priorities (*Early Education*) is not covered by the *K-S4 Agenda* at all, but rural stakeholders believe it is an important educational priority, although it may not be a legal responsibility of Manitoba Education. The final priority, *Educational Finance*, in fact is an umbrella priority under which all six *K-S4 Agenda* priorities may be subsumed, and educational finance in relation to taxation and the educational funding formula is a grave concern. Further research is necessary to determine whether and/or to what extent these findings may be generalized across other rural communities, and what other priorities may develop.

Certainly, the strengths of Strongman School Division relate to the diversity of networks it has created, particularly with the community and a neighbouring school division, to provide services and programs based on student and community need. All stakeholders recognized how intricately related the local economy is to the school division's ability to resource education, and participants expressed concerns about the increasing divide over the competition for tax dollars and the ability to pay. It may be that many rural communities, because of declining economic circumstances, are likely to focus on building networks within and outside their boundaries because the creation of such linkages may facilitate the practical and prudent mobilization of resources that are less often being provided by the provincial government, and are becoming increasingly more difficult to access from local sources. The concern

here, though, is that local networking among school divisions ultimately might have finite potential, to which some of the amalgamated divisions across the province might attest. As more rural areas face poverty, increasing responsibilities and fewer resources, even shared services will ultimately become strapped without additional inputs of governmental support.

Skepticism regarding the provincial government's role in rural educational management and change was apparent in all focus groups. In general, participants were suspicious of efforts that were made ostensibly to elicit rural voice, and suggested that the provincial government does not respond to the diversity and unique needs of Manitoba's rural stakeholders. Instead, they perceived that the provincial government perpetuates negative stereotypes of rural communities and rural schooling, and policies do not reflect, nor are they considerate of, the differential needs and circumstances of rural environments. When asked what role the provincial government should play in educational governance and change, responses centred on curriculum and adequate resource support for provincially imposed changes. They also stressed the belief that the provincial government needed to consider how changes in curriculum and policy affected rural school divisions' abilities to offer programs, provide facilities, and organize staff. Such findings coincide with Howley's (1997) ideas that school reform efforts have the tendency to essentialize schooling across contexts for reasons that do not always reflect nor are respectful of local purposes, interests, and/or capacities.

Although it is dangerous to generalize from the findings of case studies, the findings of this study may have implications for rural educators in other locales. For instance, the data suggest that the relationships found between educational priorities may work themselves out differently in rural areas than they do in an urban environment because of the unique context of rural life. The correlations suggest that rural communities desire access to a holistic educational experience that responds to the needs of early childhood, public education, and adult education. Education cannot, therefore, be separated from the continuity of community life, although the artificial separation exists in provincial educational policy. What is needed is the willingness of provincial education authorities to creatively strategize with government representatives in

other ministries to cross the artificial boundaries created by bureaucracy to create policies that validate the holism and connectedness that is the rural way of life. As well, cross-community groups must work together, sharing information and services rather than duplicating them or maintaining “turf wars” – which also have implications for privacy legislation and bureaucratic mechanisms that have a tendency to insulate social service and/or business organizations from one another rather than promote shared services. Such ideas would help to strengthen both the *Legitimation of Alternatives* and the *Diversity of Networks* that could be found within and between local rural communities and the provincial government. Research must be conducted along the way to ensure that both governmental and community agencies engage in proactive processes and practices that facilitate school divisions’ abilities to meet provincial mandates while respecting local autonomy, culture, and economic realities. Research that considers how educational services may be conceptualized differently in rural contexts must also be conducted, and school improvement strategies and/or research must be tailored to the particular needs of rural communities. Such practices will help not only to provide the community with educational opportunity, but also help the community develop and keep its primary resource: its people.

In conclusion, Haas and Lambert (1995) suggest that rural school improvements that are genuinely rural (a) are grounded in a sense of place; (b) value outcomes arising from individual situations rather than predetermined, specified results; (c) invite contributions from those who are usually marginalized in community development and reform efforts; (d) are systemic, comprehensive, long-term, multifaceted; and (e) are grounded in and energized by a moral stance of rural communities and schools strengthening themselves. It appears from the results of this study that educational stakeholders in Strongman School Division also advocate for school improvement efforts that are locally responsive and that help to sustain a rural lifestyle. Because educational leaders were found to be the group most optimistic in their belief that rural communities have the capacity to achieve their priorities, it follows that they should take the lead in developing and implementing rural school improvements that are grounded in a commitment to quality rural schooling and community development.

## NOTES

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