

## Manitoba's Public School System – Economic Powerhouse?

### Executive Summary

- Over the past 30 years, the number of students in Manitoba's public schools has declined substantially and the downward trend is continuing in most school divisions.
- At the present time, only 15 school divisions accept international students.
- While there are currently less than 500 international students in Manitoba, many more can be accommodated.
- Between 1999 and 2003, 27 school divisions experienced a total decline in student population of 8,619.
- Since most of these divisions have the same infrastructure available as they did four years ago, this enrolment decline has created many extra spaces.
- If Manitoba divisions accepted just 8,500 international students to compensate for enrolment declines, and each of these students paid tuition in the amount of \$10,000, an extra \$85 million in funding would be pumped into the public school system and could improve instructional programs for all students.
- In terms of living expenses, international students would also contribute to the local economies of the communities where they attend school.
- Some rural communities, notably Leaf Rapids and Lynn Lake, have been devastated by the loss of major industries. International education could provide these and other communities with an additional source of stable, long-term growth.
- The government of Manitoba can capitalize on this opportunity by exploring ways to increase the number of international students in the province.

### Introduction

Over the past 30 years, most Manitoba school divisions have seen their enrolments slowly decline. In the early 1970s, they educated approximately 245,000 public school students, but now handle only 186,000 students. Manitoba's public school population is almost 60,000 less than it was 30 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Since birth rates across Canada are continuing to decline, this downward trend is expected to continue.

This decrease in enrolment has hit some school divisions particularly hard. Some have seen their enrolment dip to record low numbers and have had to downsize and close schools. In some rural communities, insufficient enrolment has meant the loss of their only school. The continuing trend of rural depopulation makes it probable that even more schools will close in the future. These school closures are having devastating effects on the communities they once served.

<sup>1</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *FRAME Report 2003-2004 Budget*

One solution for this discouraging trend might be the importation of foreign students. Some school divisions have begun developing international education programs and recruiting students from other countries. These students pay tuition fees and while they attend school, they also live in the community and contribute to the local economy. Although only a small number of divisions have been actively recruiting international students, other divisions, particularly those with declining enrolments, could participate as well. In light of the high number of empty classroom spaces available in Manitoba's public schools, the importation of international students could prove to be a major growth industry. Rather than dealing with issues of school closures and staff layoffs, school divisions could instead anticipate growth and expansion.

### **Current Status of International Education in Manitoba**

In the 2000/2001 school year, 361 international students were enrolled in Manitoba's schools and the total tuition collected from these students was \$2.4 million.<sup>2</sup> Currently 15 school divisions out of 38 have international student programs. Participating divisions include Evergreen, Flin Flon, Interlake, Lakeshore, Lord Selkirk, Pembina Trails, Portage La Prairie, River East Transcona, St. James-Assiniboia, Southwest Horizon, Sunrise, Turtle Mountain, Western and Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> International students are required to pay a tuition fee of approximately \$10,000 to cover the cost of their schooling and are also expected to pay for room and board on top of that.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these divisions have reported considerable success with their international student programs and are actively recruiting more. Louis Riel School Division has recruited international students for more than 20 years and reports that these students achieve a 95% university acceptance rate. River East Transcona places a significant emphasis on English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and actively recruits top ESL teachers for its schools.<sup>5</sup> These divisions are already capturing benefits from the recruitment of international students. Manitoba Education, Training and Youth publishes a booklet geared to international students that explains why they should consider pursuing their education in this province.<sup>6</sup>

Given this positive record, the question becomes why only a relatively small number of international students – less than 500 – are attending public schools in Manitoba. Do we have enough space to accommodate a larger number?

### **Enrolment in Manitoba School Divisions**

School divisions in Manitoba choose not to publicize the amount of extra space available for students in each school. While an exact figure for the number of extra spaces is therefore impossible to calculate, it is possible to examine enrolment trends over the past few years and determine which school divisions have experienced declines. Since they generally have the same number of schools open as they did before and those schools

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<sup>2</sup> International Education Branch, *The Report on International Students in Manitoba 2000/01*

<sup>3</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *Study in Manitoba* <http://www.gov.mb.ca/educate/sim/english/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *Manitoba's Public High School Costs*, [http://www.gov.mb.ca/educate/sim/english/pages/costs\\_hs.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/educate/sim/english/pages/costs_hs.html)

<sup>5</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *Elementary to High School*, <http://www.gov.mb.ca/educate/sim/english/study/pdf/elementaryhigh.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *A Handbook for International Students: An Overview of Education in Manitoba*, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/docs/support/intstudents/IntStudentsEngHandbook.pdf>

have the same capacity, most of this decline in student population represents extra space that has become available.

In the four years between 1999 and 2003, only fifteen public schools – mostly in rural Manitoba – have closed due to declining enrolments.<sup>7</sup> Even with a conservative estimate that each school had a maximum capacity of only 200 students, these schools alone could have housed almost ten times the number of international students currently in Manitoba, up to 3,000 people.

In addition, 27 out of Manitoba's 38 school divisions have experienced declines in enrolment over the past four years. Many of these declines are substantial.

### School Divisions with Declining Enrolment<sup>8 9</sup>

School Divisions with Declining Enrolment	Sept. 1999	Sept. 2003	Decrease
Beautiful Plains	1,767	1,617	150
Brandon	7,873	7,364	509
Evergreen	1,824	1,720	104
Flin Flon	1,645	1,437	208
Fort la Bosse	1,788	1,615	173
Frontier	7,252	6,455	797
Interlake	3,634	3,427	207
Kelsey	1,936	1,764	172
Lakeshore	1,479	1,363	116
Lord Selkirk	4,937	4,805	132
Mountain View	3,512	3,432	80
Mystery Lake	3,551	3,380	171
Park West	2,375	2,147	228
Pembina Trails	14,333	14,307	26
Pine Creek	1,426	1,325	101
Portage La Prairie	3,884	3,539	345
Prairie Rose	2,737	2,421	316
Prairie Spirit	2,976	2,620	356
Rolling River	2,346	2,159	187
Seine River	3,750	3,500	250
Southwest Horizon	2,107	1,885	222
St. James Assiniboia	9,594	9,326	268
Sunrise	7,960	4,977	2,983
Swan Valley	2,075	1,933	142
Turtle Mountain	1,466	1,240	226
Turtle River	903	805	98
Western	1,572	1,520	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>100,702</b>	<b>92,083</b>	<b>8,619</b>

<sup>7</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *Enrolment Reports 2000-2003*, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/finance/facts/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> Manitoba Education, Training and Youth, *Enrolment Reports 2000-2003*, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/finance/facts/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> In 2002, the number of school divisions was reduced from 54 to 38. In order to derive 1999 enrolment levels for recently amalgamated school divisions, figures from school divisions in their pre-amalgamated state are combined.

Some of these decreases in enrolment have been significant and striking. These 27 divisions now have 8,619 fewer students than they had four years ago. Since they obviously had room for the student load in 1999, most of these divisions have extra classroom space available. They have room for a great more international students than the current number of 500.

## **Benefits of International Students**

An increase in the number of international students would confer many benefits on Manitoba's school divisions and communities. If divisions took in just 8,500 international students (to compensate for enrolment declines over the past four years) and each of these students paid \$10,000 in tuition, divisions would receive an extra \$85 million in funding every year. This money could pay for much needed educational programs, infrastructure repairs and teaching staff increases that would benefit all students. Instead of being faced with population declines and forced cutbacks, school divisions would be growing and expanding.

Since international students would live in the communities where the schools they attend are located, these communities would realize significant economic benefits. These students would participate in the local economy by paying for room and board, buying clothing and purchasing school supplies, among other things. Many communities would receive a much-needed boost to their local economies.

Some rural communities in Manitoba are on the verge of shutting down because of the collapse of industries they predominantly depended upon. In particular, the communities of Lynn Lake and Leaf Rapids were hit hard by the closure of mines that provided most of their employment. More than half their populations have left, their schools are more than half empty, and many important services such as banking are contracting. They no longer have the critical population mass necessary to make these services profitable.<sup>10 11</sup> Even larger communities such as the city of Thompson, have expressed concerns about their dependence on a single industry.<sup>12</sup>

These communities hold infrastructure designed for many more people than they currently boast, public school spaces included. An influx of international students could provide the economic boost necessary to revive them. Schools could once again be expanding and the increased population would lead to more services and jobs. International education could prove to be the stable, long-term industry that these rural communities so desperately need.

## **Conclusion**

International education has the potential to become an economic powerhouse for the Province of Manitoba. While there are currently only a small number of international students in Manitoba, school divisions that accept these students have reported significant successes. Manitoba can accommodate many more international students, since 27 school divisions have seen their total enrolment decline by 8,619 over the past four years alone.

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<sup>10</sup> CBC Manitoba, *Leaf Rapids Mine Closes*, June 28, 2002, [http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb\\_mine020628](http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb_mine020628)

<sup>11</sup> CBC Manitoba, *Lynn Lake Going Broke*, May 10, 2004, [http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb\\_lynnlake20040510](http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb_lynnlake20040510)

<sup>12</sup> CBC Manitoba, *INCO Examines Future of Thompson Operations*, April 29, 2002, [http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb\\_inco020429](http://winnipeg.cbc.ca/regional/servlet/View?filename=mb_inco020429)

Along with the increased funding for school divisions, international students would also contribute to the local economy since they would reside in the communities where they attend school. Many rural communities are experiencing substantial population declines and have the infrastructure in place to accommodate a much larger number of people. International students could help provide the critical mass of people these communities need in order to maintain important services.

The Province of Manitoba should immediately initiate a process to seek more international students for our public schools. The substantial educational and economic benefits would justify the effort.



**About the Author:**

**Dennis Owens** is the Senior Policy Analyst at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy. A native of Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, and a descendant of homesteaders, Dennis Owens moved to Winnipeg to attend United College in 1965. He graduated from the University of Winnipeg in 1970 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Science. Over a 20-year career in the transportation business, he rose to the position of operations manager of a Winnipeg-based firm. Since then he has researched and written about Canadian public policy issues for a variety of organizations including the Manitoba Taxpayers Association and the Prairie Centre.

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