

Speaking Notes for
The Honourable Andrew Thomson
Minister of Learning

Announcement and Acceptance of
The Education Equity Task Force
Map of New School Division Boundaries

10:15 a.m.

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Radio Room, Room 2

Legislative Building

Regina, Saskatchewan

Introduction

Good morning. I would like to thank you all for attending this announcement that will help shape and sustain Saskatchewan's education system into coming years.

As well, I want to welcome the media from around the province that have joined us via conference call.

Six months ago our government announced a three-phase approach for undertaking education reform in order to restore sustainability and equity to our education system.

The three phases of the initiative are designed to address many of the key demographic and financial issues facing Saskatchewan's system of education.

The education reform outlined a three-phased approach to:

- renew and restructure school divisions,**
- develop a fairer system of funding from the provincial treasury**
- and address education property tax relief.**

The single most important principle we are following in developing the reforms is our government's belief that all students in the province should have access to the same quality of education programs and services no matter where they live.

Rationale

We have many challenges to overcome, including changes to our province's demographics and the extreme differences between rich and poor school divisions.

Demographically, we know that families are delaying having children and choosing to raise fewer children.

This results in us needing to maintain and support an infrastructure that serves significantly fewer students.

To put this in perspective, this past week I received the 2004 enrollment statistics for our province.

It showed that 85% of our school divisions experienced enrollment decreases and that there were 3,400 fewer students in our schools today, than one year ago. This is a sizable number of students.

In magnitude it represents an enrollment roughly equal to that of the total enrollment of the Eastend, Maple Creek, Shaunavon, Gull Lake and Prairie West school divisions, or virtually the entire rural south west.

This decrease is in line with the annual declines we have seen over the past decade.

In addition to the demographic issues, we see pressures for offering new educational resources and technologies in communities where class numbers are shrinking.

That is why today we are moving forward in reforming our school system to the benefit of both students and ratepayers in this province.

I am pleased to have received the report of the Education Equity Task Force. I want to thank the members of the Task Force including Chairman Fred Herron, Shirley Batters and Al Klassen.

These three well-respected and experienced representatives of the education community have held 81 meetings consulting with boards of education and educational stakeholders.

From these meetings, and based on the principles and criteria laid out for them by Government, the Task Force developed its recommendations for new school division boundaries.

Announcement

I am pleased to advise you that the Government of Saskatchewan has accepted the Education Equity Task Force's recommendation of new school boundaries and will enact these boundaries effective January 1, 2006.

As a result of these changes, the total number of school divisions in our province will be reduced to 34 new divisions from the 81 existing divisions.

As a result of these changes, all school divisions will now qualify for a provincial grant.

Each new school division will have at least 5,000 students, with enrolments ranging from 5,100 to 9,500 students in the restructured divisions.

Previous voluntary amalgamations have been respected in all cases.

These new divisions will continue to be governed by democratically elected boards, exercising the same duties that they have today.

These new boards will have the responsibility to ensure that tax revenues are collected on a more equitable basis, using uniform mill rates within their divisions, and ensuring that money collected and pooled within the region is spent fairly within the region.

The restructured school divisions will now all have the capacity and opportunity to offer a full range of programs and services to the students in their new divisions, today and well into the future.

Past experiences with school division restructuring have resulted in concrete benefits for students.

For example, restructured school divisions have shown an increased ability to:

- **offer more programs for students,**
- **increased purchasing power due to economies of scale,**
- **additional supports for students with special needs,**
- **curriculum implementation and teacher professional development.**

Conclusion

I have regularly made the point, in meetings with school boards and others that I understand this is a dramatic set of changes.

I also appreciate that these changes are disruptive, however, they are necessary as the quality of our education programs and infrastructure cannot be sustained on the current system.

This is evident by the fact we continue to see significant declines in enrollment while at the same time seeing escalating costs in the system.

This is not workable, not sustainable, and not equitable.

This is why we need to make changes.

I have heard many things as I have traveled the province meeting with boards, students, teachers, parents, and community leaders about these changes.

I agree fully that with those who argue that these changes need to be sweeping and need to ensure that the changes will hold for years to come.

I also agree with those who argue that we need to develop new accountability mechanisms at the

local and school level to ensure that community and parent input is heard and helps shape the direction of our education system.

To this end we will in the coming year develop a new mechanism to ensure local input is enhanced.

Finally, let me say that I believe that by returning long-term sustainability and fairness to our education system, we will be able to offer the highest quality education to Saskatchewan's children and youth regardless of where they live.

That is why I am please today, on behalf of the Government of Saskatchewan, to accept and approve the Task Force's recommendations for new school division boundaries.

My colleagues and I are confident that our objectives of sustainability and equity for students and education ratepayers will be achieved.

Now, I would like to request that the Chair of the Education Equity Task Force Fred Herron take you through a synopsis of the final map of new school division boundaries.

Thank you.