

*Murray Mandryk*

## **Schools: government sums must add up**

Sometimes, a government's toughest choice is to simply do what it said it would do. Our Saskatchewan Party government faces several tough choices of late, given that \$109 million in potash revenues (\$1.8-billion less than predicted in the March budget) says it will have to do a lot less.

But after taking away in the March budget school boards' ability to set their own mill rates, by adopting single province-wide school mill rate, ensuring that education is properly funded is the only choice that Premier Brad Wall's administration has.

That was the loud and clear message from Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) President Sandi Urban-Hall, who insisted Monday "that the government must provide the children and youth of Saskatchewan with the funding they need and deserve to succeed in today's world."

It was a warm and fuzzy message wrapped up in a substantial bit of political lobbying, as Urban-Hall left little doubt that school boards now feel they are competing with municipalities for suddenly sparse dollars in the 2010 budget. "Regina Mayor Pat Fiacco said last week that he doesn't want to raise local property taxes to make up for any provincial funding shortfall," Urban-Hall said. "At least he has that option."

She's right. And when you think about it, the government has no option other than to meet its financial commitments to ensure education is funded properly.

Notwithstanding former Regina school trustee John Conway's tirade that last spring's budget decision to move to a province-wide mill rate was "an attack on democracy" and "an attack on taxpayers' right to control and determine the nature of K-12 education", school trustees were more than reasonable in accepting these historic changes implemented by the Wall government.

Most Saskatchewan trustees accepted the logical rationale that since school boards — much like hospital boards, both past and present — have virtually no control over the major events that affect their operations (salaries, cost of materials, cost of gas to run buses, SaskEnergy and SaskPower rates, etc.) anyway, it makes infinite sense that the province be directly responsible for paying for these major costs. Besides leveling the education playing field to ensure that rich school districts with more local taxation capacity (i.e. some rural districts with local oil wells) aren't at an unfair advantage, the introduction of a uniform mill rate should have been seen as much firmer commitment by the province to its role of properly funding education.

However, if Conway did make one legitimate point it was the fear of what might happen in the event of an economic downturn and whether a Sask. Party government would simply slash education to deal with its spending problems. These concerns — being put to the test much sooner than anticipated — were the thrust of Urban-Hall's remarks Monday that very much was a case of the school trustees exercising their democratic authority.

Urban-Hall also noted that the SSBA flagged with Education Minister Ken Krawetz last March concerns about the impact of falling potash prices and weren't given any answers. Nor did Krawetz give the SSBA a definite answer earlier this month.

In fairness to the government, though, Krawetz sounds a lot firmer on his commitment to education funding than perhaps the SSBA suggests.

In an interview Monday, Krawetz said that the SSBA's concerns about funding shortfalls would be more valid if the province was failing in other areas besides potash. However, the relative economic strength elsewhere in the resource sector including oil and — most significantly — the commitment by the government to meet the demands of teachers' negotiations to ensure education is properly funded should alleviate concerns.

Moreover, Krawetz repeated his commitment that ensuring classrooms are properly funded is a bigger commitment than the \$53-million education property tax reduction in 2010.

Of course, others might not see this as great news, but let's hope and assume that Krawetz and his government have already made this tough choice.

It's certainly the right choice.

Angela Hall

## Trustees fear spending cutbacks

School boards that last year lost the ability to set local property tax rates are warning the provincial government not to cut or freeze funding for kindergarten to Grade 12 education in the spring budget.

As the province tries to deal with a revised financial outlook due to far lower than anticipated potash royalty revenues, Saskatchewan School Boards Association president Sandi Urban-Hall said kids shouldn't be forgotten.

"Unlike municipalities, school boards no longer have a right to go to the local property tax base to support Saskatchewan students," Urban-Hall said at a news conference Monday.

"If boards receive inadequate funding for the schools in their communities, they have nowhere to turn for help."

To reduce the province's long-criticized heavy reliance on property taxpayers to fund education, the Saskatchewan Party government decided last year that it would set province-wide mill rates and shoulder more of the schooling costs through its general revenue.

That resulted in a big education property tax cut for 2009 and a corresponding increase in direct funding for school divisions, boosting the province's share of education funding to 63 per cent from 51 per cent.

The province had planned to increase its share to 66 per cent and further reduce the mill rate to save taxpayers \$53 million in 2010, a tax break that Education Minister Ken Krawetz said may not materialize in the March budget.

"If we have to make a choice as government between whether we have adequate dollars for education or whether we pass on another \$53-million worth of savings to the property owner, the choice is clear: It's education," Krawetz said.

The minister said it's still early in the budget process so no final decisions have been made.

"The circumstances are education has to be adequately funded," Krawetz said when asked what reassurance he could offer school boards fearing a cut or freeze on funds.

He also noted a new teacher contract is due to be negotiated in 2010, which could impact funding requirements.

School divisions and the provincial government are meanwhile working toward a new, long-term funding formula to replace the previous grant system, but the deadline for having that in place has been pushed from 2011 to 2012.

The concerns raised by the SSBA come just days after municipalities held a news conference to express dismay over the possibility that revenue-sharing funds from the province could be frozen at last year's amount. The government had pledged to make municipal revenue-sharing grants in 2010 equal to the amount of money the province gets from one full point of the PST, a move that may not happen until 2011.

Like municipalities, Urban-Hall said school boards don't want their funding levels to be at the whim of the rise and fall of commodities such as potash.

"We need a stable source," she said.

315664 GLOBAL TV SASKATCHEWAN DEC 14, 2009 22:30 HRS.

**SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOL BOARDS CONCERNED OVER  
GOVERNMENT FUNDING AND FEAR CUTS ARE COMING**

**NANCY CARLSON (Anchor):**

Saskatchewan School Boards Association officials say the government may break a promise made to fund schools from kindergarten through Grade 12.

As Ryan Sang tells us, trustees don't want school children to pay the price of a funding shortfall.

**SANDI URBAN-HALL (Sask School Boards Association President):**

The expectations of the education system are ever increasing and our students' needs more diverse.

**RYAN SANG (Reporter):**

Do it for the kids: That is the message the Saskatchewan School Boards Association is sending to the province. It says the Ministry of Education might not follow through on its promise to fund K to 12 schooling.

**SANDI URBAN-HALL (Sask School Boards Association President):**

Education funds speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, education psychologists.

**RYAN SANG (Reporter):**

Those are some of the programs it fears could be in jeopardy but even now in a recent media release it said the amount of funding Boards get every year is quote "a crap shoot".

Earlier this year the School Boards lost access to set the local education property tax rate. That's how they get their money. That rate is now being controlled by the government.

The SSBA also says it doesn't have a predictable source of cash flow like the PST.

In response the government says education is a major priority and the evidence is in the numbers.

**KEN KRAWETZ (Saskatchewan Education Minister):**

We've funded over \$300 million dollars into the infrastructure fund to ensure that schools can be built and renovated. And we provided that \$240-million additional dollars to ensure that education received a higher amount of money.

**RYAN SANG (Reporter):**

Krawetz adds if there isn't enough money coming from property tax there are other options.

**KEN KRAWETZ (Saskatchewan Education Minister):**

If the mill rate changes and is lowered as was the promise in this next year then additional dollars will have to come from the General Revenue Fund.

**KEN KRAWETZ (Saskatchewan Education Minister):**

The government expects to have the exact formula to distributing funds to school boards by 2011.

Ryan Sang, Global News.

315533 CKRM-RADIO, REGINA. DECEMBER 14, 2009. 16:00 HRS.

**SCHOOL BOARD ASSOCIATION SENDING MESSAGE TO THE PROVINCE – IT WANTS GOV'T TO FOLLOW THROUGH WITH ADEQUATE FUNDING**

**CRAIG WOLLEBECK (ANNOUNCER)**

Saskatchewan School Board Association sending a message to the province. The SSBA wants the provincial government to know they must follow through with a promise of adequate and sustainable funding.

SSBA president Sandi Urban-Hall.

**SANDI URBAN-HALL (SSBA)**

We can't have our funding tied to commodity prices. We know that commodities rise and fall. We need a stable source.

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315524 CJNB-RADIO, BATTLEFORDS. DECEMBER 14, 2009. 16:00 HRS.

**SASK SCHOOL BOARDS HAVE JOINED MUNICIPAL LEADERS  
EXPRESSING CONCERN THAT SASK GOV'T MAY FREEZE REVENUE  
SHARING**

**JULIE LARSON (ANNOUNCER)**

Yet more pressure on the government over funding shortfalls from falling potash prices, this time from the Saskatchewan School Boards Association.

But as reporter Sarah Mills explains, the criticism also extends to mayors and councils of municipalities.

**SARAH MILLS (REPORTER)**

SSBA wants to ensure education is adequately funded next year. It's what the mayors are also asking for, for municipalities. But president Sandi Urban-Hall contends at least councils can go back to the property taxpayer when the government can't deliver.

**SANDI URBAN-HALL (SASK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOC)**

We do acknowledge that there was an over-reliance on property tax, but what happened when general revenues fell, school boards had the option of going to the property tax base if they needed to.

**SARAH MILLS (REPORTER)**

Government took away school board taxation power in the last provincial budget, leaving Urban-Hall and her group to keep their fingers crossed there's enough money in the bank for them.

Sarah Mills, Regina

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315517 CJME-RADIO, REGINA. DECEMBER 14, 2009. 15:00 HRS.

**SASK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION IS REMINDING MUNICIPALITIES THAT THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN TOP PRIORITY**

**ALEC DOCKING (ANNOUNCER)**

The provincial government ducking criticism over potash prices perhaps, now the Saskatchewan School Boards Association has a volley aimed at municipalities. It's reminding the mayors and councils of their continued taxation power when times are tight, something school boards no longer have since the last provincial budget.

As the province deals with a drop in revenue, the school boards president Sandi Urban-Hall wants to make sure the education of kids remains a top priority.

**SANDI URBAN-HALL (SASK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOC)**

We understand that the government is in a tight spot, we just need to make sure that the needs of the children and youth remain forefront in their mind and part of that decision making process.

**ALEC DOCKING (ANNOUNCER)**

Now Urban-Hall argues a predictable, sustainable funding formula is required like a portion of PST revenues, the promise that was made to the municipalities.

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