Listen, Learn, Lead:

Re-Imagine Education
Executive Summary

Education is vital to the future of our province. It affects everything and everyone.

With this statement in mind, in April 2018 the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation announced its intention to launch a significant initiative: Re-Imagine Education – a bold plan to reshape public education. The initiative is intended to clarify the issues facing education today, imagine what the future might look like and plan how to make the vision a reality. One step in the first phase of the Re-Imagine Education initiative includes the development of this document.

Acknowledging that those closest to education – students, parents and teachers – have oftentimes been excluded from conversations about changes in public education, a compelling rationale is presented for teachers to lead the Re-Imagine Education conversation by engaging with parents, the public and other stakeholders in open, deliberative dialogue. Supported by sound research and the perspectives of educational and policy experts, the document highlights foundational themes for public engagement and consultative processes.

One foundational concept, active democratic professionalism, recognizes that teachers collectively, and the professional organizations to which they belong, are ideally positioned as leaders to bring various stakeholders together for a common purpose and mobilize them to effect change. Re-Imagine Education is an opportunity for people to come together to create a hopeful vision of education in the province.

Central to this hopeful vision of education is the question “What is an educated person?” The perspectives of a number of scholars are presented along with a consideration of what it means to live a flourishing life. Throughout the text, provocative questions prompt deeper contemplation and dialogue about the values and principles that underpin a strong public education system.

While educational reform movements are common throughout the history of public education, they have not always led to positive, sustainable change within education systems. Research identifies a number of barriers to successful change including: ideological drivers; lack of priority for education; shortage of dedicated resources, including time to support change; inadequate consultation with teachers, students and parents; and an overall lack of authentic, engaging processes.

Acknowledging there have been a number of past consultation processes and final reports in Saskatchewan, the document invites participants to consider the legacy of these consultations and recommendations. A critical question is posed regarding how to improve upon the processes and experiences of the past.

Fundamentally, it is not enough for a consultation process to simply ask questions and collate the responses. Rather, participants must engage in real dialogue that lets them work through and reach consensus on the issues, and arrive at the solutions together. Such a process recognizes the importance of all stakeholders and the responsibility they have to build a strong public education system. It acknowledges the need for robust deliberation about educational issues.

While there are a number of consultative processes that might be employed, this document argues for a process that is inclusive and respectful of the perspectives of everyone involved, and places participants at the centre of the engagement process.

Re-Imagine Education recognizes that before goals, strategies and actions are considered, broad public and professional engagement must occur about the purposes of education. This engagement must be one that welcomes all voices, including those whose voices have been historically absent, in creating a bold vision for Saskatchewan education.
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Introduction

In April 2018, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation announced its intention to launch a significant initiative: Re-Imagine Education – a bold plan to reshape public education. The initiative is intended to surface some of the issues facing education today, imagine what the future might look like and plan how to make the vision a reality. It was conceptualized with the desire to engage with various educational partners and stakeholders, including parents, families and the general public, in a different way, through conversations and deliberations about the importance and value of a progressive public education system. Broadly stated, the goal is to strengthen the enduring democratic values that underpin a strong and robust public education system.

“The institution of public education can be designed to be an instrument of deep social change.” (Dolmage & Clarke, 2006, p. 176)

Phase one of this initiative includes, as a first step, the development of this document. Just as teachers invite their students to question critically and think creatively, this document is organized in a similar way. Sprinkled throughout the document are comments and quotes from respected educational authorities who have also grappled with the themes that have been chosen for consideration in the text. The text and questions are deliberatively designed to be provocative, to be less about providing the answer(s) and more about informing the pathway. The questions are intended to serve as extraordinary conversation starters and stimulate conversation and dialogue about a reimagined future for public education in Saskatchewan.

While Saskatchewan schools are exceptional places where students are safe and able to learn and grow, trends indicate that the current education system is strained. Increased accountability measures with a focus on outcomes and data collection, as well as ever-changing complexities in the classroom are just two factors impacting the work of teachers and administrators. Increased expectations, coupled with education funding cuts, are leading to an unsustainable situation. As Stevenson & Guilland (2016) say, teachers feel the pressure to get “more for less” from the system generally.

Teachers collectively have a deep commitment to and belief that public education is vital to
the future of the province of Saskatchewan. On more than one occasion, public surveys (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, 2015, 2018) have also reflected the strong support that parents and members of the public have for the system generally, and more specifically, for their local schools and the teachers within them.

What has also been acknowledged is that the education system in Saskatchewan has a long history of collaboration and consensus (Newton, Burgess & Robinson, 2007). Respectful interactions and relationships have existed among the partners in the education sector which includes: teachers through the Federation, boards of education through the Saskatchewan School Boards Association; out-of-scope administrators through the League of Educational Administrators; Directors and Superintendents of Saskatchewan; the Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials; and government officials through the Ministry of Education.

“Public schools everywhere face a future of rapid change, intensifying complexity and growing uncertainty. It is time for us to connect, learn, and lead together [emphasis added].”

(Berry, Zeichner & Evans, 2016, p. 223)

The Federation has identified and initiated through this initiative the need for broad-based public engagement and the development of community-driven opportunities that will strengthen the education system and existing relationships, to ensure that the public education system in Saskatchewan is robust, responsive and inclusive. The Federation envisions that through this process, new relationships, new partnerships, new strategies and approaches for decision making may also be identified and nurtured. Ultimately, the beneficiaries will be the children and youth who are at the centre of the teaching and learning relationships, structures and processes.

Calls for different forms of public engagement in consultations about the public education system have arisen from time to time provincially, nationally and or globally, often in response to a narrow and sometimes controversial educational issue. Yet, as Canadian researcher and educator Stephen Hurley (2018) implores, when was the last time there was broad participation in an open and honest dialogue about the complex array of issues that have emerged in education systems over the last few decades? Even more importantly, how might the public be engaged in wide and deep conversations about what the public education system should be? And in doing so, how might the processes of engagement build a sense of public trust? What stories and aspirations need to be told and heard, and by whom and with whom, before seeking support for an aspirational educational agenda or set of recommendations?

The re-imagining of education not only invites an analysis and review of the current education system to identify what is working well, but also considers the fundamental changes that will contribute to even more successful experiences for children and youth. Over a decade ago, Saskatchewan researchers Dolmage and Clarke (2006) wrote, “We now face a world in which national and international political, military, and economic events have created a different, difficult and unstable reality. We must equip our students with the values, knowledge and skills to address the imperative of finding peaceful and creative solutions to the challenges represented by conflict … and do so in a climate of continuous change” (p. 198).

This future and these educational experiences cannot be fully realized by changes that are introduced only in one school or in one school division at a time. What is being called for in this Re-Imagine Education process is an expansive provincial initiative that can lead to the development of a compelling vision and comprehensive public policy base that acknowledges education as a public good.

“One of the issues, Jonasson (2018) asserts, not unlike the basis for the Re-Imagine Education initiative, is that teachers, administrators, board members, educational leaders, researchers, parents and citizens have not always been engaged in dialogue about their shared understandings of education, including the purposes of education or how it should be structured and conducted. “In education we go right ahead to talking about standards, quality, good schools, excellent education, best practices, good teaching and so on and so on – as if we had reached an agreement on what is the essence of education” (p. 40). Biesta (2016) says...”
it well: “The question of ‘what works’ is a meaningless question if we do not add the question of for what something is supposed to work” (p. 88).

Educational leaders and scholars David Coulter and John Wiens (2008) concur. “Discussions about learning and teaching, curriculum and assessment, governance and leadership, suggest profound confusion about what it means to educate” (p. 4). They also express their puzzlement over the certainty embedded within the educational discourse that “presumes that we have agreed about what counts as education and focus on its attainment” (p. 15).

A critical first step, long before goals, strategies and actions are considered, and certainly before they are finalized, should be broad public and professional engagement about the purposes of education. This “is a central challenge in a democracy, while preparing citizens to participate in democratic living is a central challenge for education. What is fundamentally important is that the conversation continues through productive conflict, informed debates, and provisional consensus” (Harten, Koziol & Leighton, 2010/11, p. 59).

“Problems come from research that try to tell teachers what they should do, what is meaningful and useful and what ‘works’, and what doesn’t work, what is effective and what is not .... Something never ‘works’ in the abstract but always works in relation to a particular purpose or set of purposes.”

(Biesta, 2016, p. 84)

The dilemma, or at least one part of it, is the difficulty of finding democratically respectful and safe forums in which participants can speak openly and perhaps disagree. One only needs to read media headlines to note the diverse perspectives that are held about what is or should be happening in classrooms.

Interestingly, the arguments and opinions seldom challenge the value and virtues of education itself. More often, the participants in these dialogues, debates and conversations acknowledge support for the construct of education and an educated society, but disagree over the nature, form and process of education (Nelson et al., 2004). This begs consideration of the extent to which a consensus is needed within the sector or, more broadly, within society.

Frequently, contributions to conversations about education, learning and schooling are made from the perspective of designated roles or individuals trying to advance organizational positions. The importance of clarifying values first enables participants to establish common ground, develop common language and understandings, and most importantly, forge relationships that focus on the common purposes of connecting people, regardless of role or organization, in this endeavor called education. As Dolmage and Clarke (2006) assert, “current educational policy chaos in some provinces can be attributed to the failure to determine and articulate the values and beliefs that should underscore every decision relating to education” (p. 176).

“Education and democracy are symbiotic concepts: deciding what might count as educational is a democratic problem; preparing people to resolve important concerns is an educational problem. The central educational responsibility becomes preparing people to engage with their equals in deciding how they will live together. Democracy and education both depend on cycles of provoking, understanding, nurturing and sometimes temporarily resolving differences among people who often have very different perspectives. The first step in such an effort is to recognize that the conversation is needed [emphasis added]” (Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p. 17)
Q. As we contemplate the process and results of Re-Imagine Education, what is the value proposition for students, for schools, for teachers, for the system, for parents and for the public?

What will add value to this process and propel it forward successfully?

Who needs to be involved, perhaps differently than in the past?

How can this process model a different kind of engagement and ultimately, ownership for a different future?

What does authentic public engagement look like?
A Different Direction:  
Active Democratic Professionalism

A concern that has been identified is that rarely do public consultations about education surface truly transformational ideas. Some might say that the consultations are too few, while others would say they occur frequently yet are narrow or superficial, and dominated by the strident voices of special interests. Often in education, these discussions take place in venues, including board rooms, legislative chambers and occasionally courtrooms, far removed from teachers and other educational leaders, parents and students (Wiens & Coulter, 2008). More importantly, rarely have discussions about the future of education been inclusive of all perspectives, worldviews and ways of knowing. This is important to acknowledge as classrooms, schools and communities in Saskatchewan are becoming increasingly diverse.

Teacher organizations, as independent and democratic organizations themselves, are at the heart of strong democratic professionalism (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2016). They have an important role in both making the case for necessary systemic changes and mobilizing teachers, their colleagues and fellow members to adopt; and then maximize the results of sound, well-researched and purposeful changes that are introduced.

Collectively, teachers have long advocated for consultations and processes in which they, as leaders in the education system, contribute their own professional knowledge, skills and experiences as well as their own intellectual capacity to solve the very complex challenges associated with student learning. Teachers recognize that opportunities for meaningful engagement, shared responsibility and building upon collective knowledge will benefit education strategic planning and decision-making processes (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, 2017a). “By harnessing the collective thinking, power and knowledge of classroom teachers, principals, the community and school division administration, the overall system can be strengthened” (p. 6).

Teachers are deeply committed to student success because they have invested themselves throughout their careers in the process of teaching and learning (Nazareno, 2016). “The public trusts professional teachers because they have the qualifications, including specialized knowledge, skills and judgment, to serve students’ educational needs” (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, 2017c, p. 1).

Placing the needs of students first by nurturing their well-being and potential is foundational to the teaching and learning relationship. What teachers’ desire is to be deeply engaged in
discussions and decisions that will shape the future of the teaching and learning relationship they have with their students.

However, more broadly than within their classrooms and schools, teachers have an important role in contributing to an optimistic and hopeful vision of the public education system in Saskatchewan. They recognize that strong alliances across sectors and within communities contribute to the success of all students.

Osmond-Johnson (2018) affirms that “there is a need to position the work of teachers as extending beyond the classroom and situate teachers’ role in education within the broader context of schooling” (p. 1).

Drawing other constituencies beyond the profession into the educational process is also emphasized by Whitty (cited in Stevenson & Gilliland, 2016). “Such a democratic professionalism seeks to demystify professional work and forge alliances between teachers and excluded constituencies of students, parents and members of the wider community with a view to building a more democratic educational system and ultimately a more open society” (p. 44). Osmond-Johnson (2018) agrees that “professional teachers are seen as broadly contributing to the quality of education; they advocate for equitable policies that challenge the status quo, their purview is extended to include debates over the purposes of schooling, and their success is judged on more than students’ performance on standardized tests” (p. 2).

Finally, David Frost (cited in Berry, Zeichner & Evans, 2016) articulates clearly what many teachers inherently know. “Teachers really can lead innovation; teachers really can build professional knowledge; teachers really can develop the capacity for leadership, and teachers really can influence their colleagues and the nature of professional practice in their schools” (p. 212).

However, what is abundantly clear is that teachers can only provide this kind of leadership if they are given such opportunities or alternatively, if they create these opportunities themselves.

“Teachers are not simply at the heart of public education – they are its heart.... Teachers need to reclaim their teaching and assert a much more positive and optimistic vision of what teaching is, and what it means to be a teacher.... Teaching is intrinsically a hopeful endeavor and teachers need to be positive in their intent.... Our vision of a new democratic professionalism is not an end in itself – but a means to an end. The ultimate end, which will always be just beyond our reach, is a more inspiring and transformationary experience of education for young people in public schools.”

(Stevenson & Gilliland, 2016, p. 117-118)

Teachers engaging deeply with each other as colleagues, and together with other committed stakeholders and educational partners, is an important consideration if they wish to strengthen and perhaps, to recreate the public education system. While “forging coalitions with community interests is complex and challenging” (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2016, p. 117), teachers acknowledge the value of diverse perspectives; therefore, it is essential and desirable that everyone has an opportunity to engage in these inspiring and transformational dialogues.

Stevenson and Gilliland (2016) affirm that the search for unity cannot be confined to within the profession. If, in fact, it is to be successful as a movement for progressive change, it must extend beyond the profession. “By this we mean that an activist democratic professionalism must involve an active engagement with students, parents and the wider community and that organizing for unity must seek to develop common interests across diverse groups in the community [emphasis added]” (Stevenson & Gilliland, 2016, p. 117).
Who are the stakeholders in education in Saskatchewan?

In what ways have students, parents and the wider community been actively engaged in the past?

How might these groups be engaged differently? What is the new way of thinking?

What are the complex problems in education for which we should/could seek solutions together?

How have teachers demonstrated their commitments to democratic professionalism?

“To be clearer about the nature of education does not lead to simple, unambiguous conceptions of education .... The issues are enormously difficult and complex and [we must] approach them with due humility and respect, but they must be approached. We need people who recognize these challenges as opportunities.”

(Coulter & Wiens, 2010, p. 7)
What We Have Learned From the Past

Consultations, educational reforms and the introduction of systemic changes are recurring themes in the history of public education. During the last three decades in Saskatchewan, numerous consultations on matters of importance to the educational community have been conducted and concluded, with a similar number of final reports with hundreds of recommendations. Each of these processes, regardless of the organization or institution that initiated them, have begun with idealistic purposes and goals, and the participants in these processes have engaged wholeheartedly.

As has been the experience within the education sector in Saskatchewan, Hess (2018) wonders why the dedication and work of passionate, well-meaning people often disappoints, or why well-crafted reports with recommendations are never fully implemented. His view is that many reforms may never have been intended to work given that they are “all part of an ideological crusade to undermine democratic schooling and privatize public education” (p. 27).

While some might take issue with his analysis and view, ideology, values, beliefs and worldview are important drivers within educational planning, reviews and decision-making processes. Whether explicit or implicit, these drivers will influence participants’ individual and collective interpretations of perceived problems and the solutions developed to address those problems.

Specifically, on the role of policy, Hess (2018) suggests, “Policy turns out to be a pretty lousy tool for improving education because policy can make people do things, but it can’t make them do them well. Policy is a blunt tool, one that works best when simply making people do things is enough. Policy tends to stumble when it comes to more complex questions – when how things are done matters more than whether they’re done” (p. 28).

• Directions (1984)
• The Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School (2001)
• The Panel on Student Achievement (2010)
• Student First (2014)
• Education Sector Strategic Plan (2014)
• Seeking Their Voices (2015)
• Educational Governance Review Report (2017)
How has educational policy been developed in the past?

What drivers guided its development?
What were the motivations?
What have those processes entailed?
Can the issues in education today be resolved through these same policies (ends) and/or processes (means)?

In Saskatchewan, educational policies have most often been developed by the Ministry of Education with much trust between the partners in the education system, who, because of robust and engaging policy consultation processes, shared the responsibility for implementation (Newton, Burgess & Robinson, 2006). The effect of this culture of collaboration was that “schools were left alone to ‘breathe life into policy’ [and] the life they breathe into policies is very personal and community specific” (p. 62).

While historically the educational partnerships and relationships in Saskatchewan have been strong, more recently teachers generally, and collectively, have lamented about the lack of opportunities for open and respectful dialogue about education with and among key stakeholders in the education system. This lack of dialogue has been identified as one of the barriers to fundamental change.

A second barrier of equal, or perhaps even greater, relevance may be a lack of understanding and priority for education, coupled with the lack of necessary resources, to boldly support changes that will benefit students, teachers and society the most. So, what does or will contribute to building the commitment among citizens and especially within governments, to follow through with thoughtful, well-researched directions and recommendations that have been developed through public consultation processes?}

University of Regina scholar Twyla Salm (2015), in her comprehensive analysis of Saskatchewan’s Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School (SchoolPLUS: A Vision for Children and Youth), advocates for evidence about how policies might be actualized successfully as a result of strategies that support meaningful change. Similarly, Brandl (cited in Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2016) confirms that “finding out what works is not enough. Policymaking must reside not in priority setting, information gathering, or budget allocation, but in designing arrangements such that the people assigned to carry out public responsibilities are inclined to do whatever it takes to accomplish them” (p. 18).

An equally important consideration is the length of time for meaningful change to be implemented before being evaluated. Too often, too much is expected of too many, too fast. "Policy-makers ought to make policy interventions coherent and avoid a ‘scattergun’ approach; that is, igniting a bunch of small-scale initiatives and expecting that somehow they will make a difference" (Raffo et al., cited in Salm, 2015, p. 35). Additionally, sustainable changes cannot be supported in a system that is chronically underfunded as competition for resources, between agencies and programs within the human service sector generally, becomes a distraction from the focus on the well-being of children and youth.

For more than a decade, Hargreaves (cited in Shirley, 2010) has conceptualized educational change as part of a broad, equity-driven social movement that engages participants from all sectors of the public. He and others (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Shirley, 2010) have called for a renewal of public engagement processes as a central component of any durable change strategy. This kind of renewal suggests different forms of citizen/parent/teacher engagement and involvement in the public education system, and teaching and learning processes.

Parents, and perhaps others in the community, have not necessarily been actively engaged in public policy development which, in turn, will impact and inform curricular and school program decisions. Their involvement may have been limited to volunteering at the school, supporting their child’s learning at home, or enriching the child’s learning through accessing resources and supports affiliated with, but not necessarily embedded in, the school.

Saskatchewan scholar and advocate for parental engagement Debbie Pushor (cited in Peiris, 2018) asserts,
“we have five decades of research that show students do better academically, socially and behaviorally when parents are engaged in children’s learning” (p. 1). She adds that when teachers engage with parents, they invite parents’ “knowledge to be laid alongside” that of the teachers, giving them a voice as a decision maker.

However, as Hess (2018) acknowledges, “it’s ultimately the doers – the educators – who have to do the work” (p. 29). He underscores the “crucial symbiosis” that is needed between those who are advising and advocating, including parents and other education specialists, with those who are responsible for implementation. Broad public engagement may actually impact power relationships within a school or community, and empower those who have been previously marginalized or disenfranchised (Shirley, 2010).

A key consideration in this Re-Imagine Education initiative is what meaningful engagement is, and what the appropriate roles are or should be within the province’s public education system for each of the stakeholder groups, including parents and caregivers, teachers, administrators and policy makers.

**Process is important.** "The idea of face-to-face dialogue about larger, significant human purposes that might have broad positive consequence" (Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 302) is contrasted with the experiences where attempts at dialogue have “soon degenerated into monologues, or worse, pretend dialogues where the answers and the outcomes had been predetermined and the activity became guessing how to get there” (Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 302).

Saskatchewan teachers recognize that as society changes, educational structures and situations may also need to undergo change in order to respond to needs and different contexts (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, 2017b). The Re-Imagine Education initiative is an important opportunity to reflect on previous consultations and processes, and to consider necessary changes that will ensure that the public education system in this province is both effective and sustainable.

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**Q.** To what extent have these reports and recommendations strengthened or weakened the public education system?

**How have these reports and recommendations added value to the system?**

**To what extent have the recommendations been successfully implemented?**

**Where they have been implemented, what has been the impact?**

**Where they have not been implemented, why not?**

**Are the questions/purposes which prompted those reports and processes still relevant in our current context?**

**Most importantly, what have we learned?**

As teachers propose and embark on yet another review and engagement process, it is reasonable for educational partners and citizens of the public to wonder how this process will be different and more importantly, how the outcomes of the process may be experienced differently.

Fundamentally, the public and all partners in education have a responsibility to consider all perspectives, options and views from a multitude of stakeholders before undertaking fundamental changes that will strengthen education as a public good.

**Q.** Who is responsible for education?

**What is the public good?**
The Question of “What is an Educated Person?”
The Question of “What is an Educated Person?”

The very roots of the word “education” contribute to the understandings and ongoing debate about education and schooling (Bass & Good, 2004). Derived from the Latin word “educare,” education means to draw forth what is already present as a possibility. Craft (cited in Bass & Good, 2004) notes two different Latin roots of the English word “education”; “educare” which means to train or to mold, and “educere” meaning to lead out.

These differing terms suggest different purposes or ends. Some would use “education” to mean the preservation and passing down of knowledge to shape children and youth, while others “see education as preparing a new generation for changes that are yet to come – readying them to create solutions to problems yet unknown” (Bass & Good, 2004, p. 162).

Interestingly, “we don’t craft our schools around that question [what is the educated person?],” says Deborah Delisle, one of five panelists at the 2012 forum Defining the Educated Person, co-sponsored by the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard. “To be educated,” said the panelists, “students should leave school with a deep understanding of themselves and how they fit into the world, and have learned what some call soft skills, complex problem-solving, creativity, entrepreneurship, the ability to manage themselves and the ability to be lifelong learners” (Anderson, 2012). Delisle added that too often educational decision makers and leaders tend to identify short-term solutions and best practices as a means to addressing the multiple and perhaps conflicting roles of schooling, and perceived problems within the education system.

To the question “what do we want an educated person to be?” the panel offered, “we want them to be wise, creative, empathetic, engaged. There are many processes by which we can bring that to a state of being and there is a role for family, a role for teachers, and a role for contemplation and reflection to get there.” While the panelists’ views contributed to this important dialogue, they acknowledged that while there may be many things in education that could be changed, it is equally important to talk about what doesn’t need to, or shouldn’t, be changed (Anderson, 2012).

Teachers and others who are involved in the education system would acknowledge that it is rare to explicitly consider or talk about the question “what is an educated person?” When they do, the answer may not be what they expect, nor would it be clearly articulated or identified within the system generally, or specifically, within schools, communities or role groupings (i.e., teacher, principals, out-of-scope administrators, Ministry or government leaders).
Unfortunately, the education system is rife with its own jargon, which isn’t always helpful. As a result, “discussion of learning can be trite. Quite simply, human beings are distinguished by the capacity to learn. Deciding what counts as educational learning, that is, learning that contributes to leading a good life, involves addressing questions such as ‘what kind of learning?’ ‘for whom?’ ‘who decides?’ and ‘on what basis?’” (Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p. 15).

The current situation as described by teachers, these panelists and reiterated by others (Biesta, 2016; Coulter & Wiens, 2008, 2010), represents both challenges and opportunities. Although the public is not the sole arbiter, there is a need for greater public discussion to clarify what is meant by “education” and identify the elements within the current system that contribute to the development of the “educated” person. This is becoming both evident and increasingly urgent.

Complicating matters throughout history is that schools, and the prescribed curriculum used in those schools, are expected to fulfil multiple functions and purposes without consensus, even among educators, about what those functions and purposes are. Therefore, the perpetual and lingering question about the role of the school must and should also be considered as part of current dialogues about public education.

This question was, in fact, the basis for the Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School, chaired by Michael Tymchak, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina (2001). That inquiry and extensive consultation process, which contributed to the final report, SchoolPLUS: A Vision for Children and Youth, occurred in the context of growing awareness and concern about the role that schools play in society. The report acknowledged that the role that schools are expected to play has altered dramatically over time. “Usually this change is captured in the claim that the role has expanded” (p. 5).

“Education in pluralist, democratic societies inevitably involves contention about what constitutes educational learning. The absence of disagreement about education usually signals one of three possibilities: everyone agrees about what is a good and worthwhile life and how it is fostered; not everyone agrees, but some people get to decide, and others agree to follow; or what counts as education is taken-for-granted by all involved they set about getting on with, whatever ‘it’ is.”

(Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p. 19)

Interrogating the relationship between the values of “schooling” and those of “educating,” Osborne (2008) refers to schooling as the processes by which children are socialized into existing socio-political arrangements and institutions. On the other hand, educating describes more liberal pursuits – the widening of children’s knowledge bases, their emerging abilities to locate themselves by connecting past to future, and their reflections on what constitutes the “good life.”

The dilemma within the education system, and even more broadly within society, is that not everyone necessarily shares understandings of what the “good life” is. Indigenous peoples’ understandings of the good life vary across nations but as LaBoucane-Benson (2012) outlines, “the good life, broadly defined (pimatisiwin) [is created when policies] seek to repair the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society” (p.2).

Furthermore, “learning occurs in the context of relationship. Before learning can be commenced, we must first ensure that we begin to renew the relationship between the learner and the teacher in a good way” (LaBoucane-Benson, 2012, p. 2). Wolbert et al., (2015) suggests that “children should be equipped, at home and in schools, to lead flourishing lives, instead of, or in addition to, merely living a happy life ... children should be broadly educated to be able to live flourishing lives, independent of their contribution to economy” (p.118). In a similar vein, MacIntyre (cited in Wolbert et al., 2015) describes “a flourishing life, a good
life - an optimal life, as a combination of ‘faring well, behaving well, and doing well” (p. 120).

However, these authors emphasize that flourishing is a matter of degree and propose two criteria: one, that flourishing should be perceived as being intrinsically worthwhile; and two, that a broad definition of human flourishing refers to the idea of “actualizing one’s potential.”

Teachers have known this for a long time and are inherently committed to this ideal, acknowledging as well the differing and unique needs of the students in their care. They would also confirm that these dialogues, like those about the educated person, may not be occurring often enough, nor are these easy questions to answer.

As a re-imagination of education is contemplated, how might participants become deeply engaged around these contested notions? In doing so, how can assumptions and understandings of education, learning and, of course, schooling be strengthened? And the purposes of each of these? What is it that students should be learning? For what reason?

“Educational reform efforts must take seriously questions concerning the purposes of education in a democracy, the relationship between education and schooling, and the purposes of education.”

(Harten, Koziol & Leighton, 2010/11, p. 61)

Notwithstanding these commitments and aspirations, “deciding what counts as education is a political problem, in that such a decision depends on determining how people live with one another both now and in the future. The challenges are myriad, but important educational questions include: What are the forms of a good and worthwhile life that a society wishes to promote collectively? What scope do people have to determine the direction of their own lives? Which aspects are best left to individuals, families, groups, communities, and governments?” (Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p. 16).

So, who should decide and through what processes? In a society that generally aims and claims to be democratic, in this endeavour that has far-reaching and long-term consequences, what educational opportunities should be pursued and prioritized? What are the individual and collective responsibilities of teachers, politicians, bureaucrats, administrators and citizens?

“We go to school – or we send our children to school – because we want to receive an education, and here we would expect that teachers will move students beyond what they already know that they want; that is, that teachers open up new vistas, new opportunities, and that they will help children and young people to interrogate whether what they say they want or desire, is actually what they should desire.”

(Biesta, 2016, p. 87)
Q. Do people decide directly or elect/appoint representatives who decide?

Who is eligible to participate and who is not?

What limitations are placed on subject matters to be decided?

What happens when people cannot agree?

What constitutes agreement?

If majority rule is a fundamental and deciding principle in a democracy, what safeguards are available for minority views?
Cornerstones of Democracy

It is important not only for teachers, but also education stakeholders and the public, to recognize the critical role they collectively have to play in creating and sustaining a robust public education system. It is also in their best interest to accept this responsibility.

In order for any process to be successful, all stakeholders and participants must engage, or at least be invited to engage, in a real dialogue that lets them work through the issues and arrive at solutions together. “Public engagement is a new way of thinking about how governments, stakeholders, communities and ordinary citizens can work together to find solutions to complex problems” (Lenihan, 2009, p. 7).

Democracies depend on dialogue. “The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. Addressing this essential need is an educational problem” (Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p.16). These authors suggest there is urgency to facilitate “democratic dialogue about education rooted in, and marked by, thoughtfulness and judgment” (Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 312).

As broad and diverse groups of participants envision what education, schooling and learning could look like in the future, it is imperative that the processes be designed to encourage, promote and respect thoughtful dialogue in both public and private spaces. Opportunities for sharing hopes, dreams and experiences in meaningful and safe private spaces will prepare participants for public conversations by engaging them in better problem solving and decision making, giving them a renewed sense of purpose.

“In this quest for whole-hearted and full engagement, no one is being encouraged to disregard or abandon their responsibilities as trustees, administrators, teachers, secretaries or bus drivers. However, we may need to “separate our private and public civic discussions concerned with education from our conversations about how to fulfill our institutional responsibilities.” (Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 309).

“Education is conversation about the meaning of life as each sees some part of it, on behalf of everyone.”
(Coulter & Wiens, 2008, p. 17)

“A well designed and facilitated dialogue is a powerful countervailing force.”
(Lenihan, 2009, p. 27)
Although the path towards open, engaging and hopeful conversations about a re-imagined education system may not always be clear and, admittedly, the ends may at times seem elusive; dialogues and conversations are critically important because they do more than just identify the strategic priorities for the future. “Education is created among people as they reveal their anxieties and their aspirations, and their understandings about historical events, current happenings, and imagined future possibilities” (Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 312).

As Behtke Elstain says (cited in Wiens & Coulter, 2004), education, and perhaps just the conversations about education, as proposed through the Re-Imagine Education initiative, can be “the means whereby some, or all citizens of a particular society get their bearings and learn to live with one another. Education always reflects a society’s view of what is excellent, worthy, and necessary. The reflections are not cast in concrete, like so many foundation stances; rather they are ongoing refracted and reshaped as definitions, meanings and purposes change through democratic contestations” (p. 22).

Proponents of active processes designed for democratic engagement acknowledge that disagreement is a key element of communal deliberations. “Good arguments can be thoughtful and reasoned, a dialogue between two different points of view – or dialectic reasoning with opposing views .... Dialectic reasoning, the examination of opposing ideas to develop a creative and superior idea, is a level beyond dialogue” (Nelson et al., 2004, p. 6).

The purpose of dialectic reasoning between competing ideas is not to defeat one and accept the other, but to search for an improved or higher level of idea. In short, an open and deliberative dialogue process invites a broad range of participants to contribute to the development of a vision for the future of public education.

“In a democracy, public debate and consultation are supposed to inform citizens and give them a meaningful voice on issues they care about.”

(Lenihan, 2017a, p. 32)

Q. What does robust deliberation and consultation with and about the education system look like?

What does meaningful voice mean?

What are the issues in education that the public cares about?

Are these issues the same for teachers? For administrators? For Ministry officials?

What are the problems for which we are seeking solutions?

What will build trust and confidence in public education?

What do the public and professional engagement processes need to entail to make them different than consultation processes utilized in the past?

“Our responsibility as educational leaders involves creating safe places for people to talk about education, where they can develop their understandings together – and then support them as they go into the public so those understandings are shared and tested in dialogue with other people who may have different perspectives, different ways of seeing the world, different notions of a good and worthwhile life and how it might be fostered ... our strategy is not an ‘answer’ in any conventional sense. Fostering democratic dialogue about education means starting over and over again: individual people with unique ideas in particular contexts at various times will generate diverse understandings (or not). That’s the curse – and joy – of education in a democratic society.”

(Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 311)
“The best way of educating people is to give them an experience that embodies what you are trying to teach. When you believe in a democratic society, you provide a setting for education that is democratic.”

(Myles Horton, cited in Longo, 2013, p. 1)
Public Engagement Through Deliberation and Dialogue

Don Lenihan (2009, 2017a, 2017b), a respected Canadian authority on engagement processes, has spent more than a decade analyzing traditional consultation and policy development processes. He is an advocate for authentic processes that will truly identify or create the necessary changes, as well as leverage the political will to implement or actualize these changes.

Lenihan (2009) describes traditional consultation as the most familiar model designed for input from invited or selected participants to respond to a particular question, analysis or recommendation. The processes utilized may be large or small, they may involve public hearings or surveys, but typically they have a similar goal: to give participants an opportunity to gather and/or share ideas and information; to influence planning and/or decision making by providing input or advice on an issue.

Once submissions have been made in a traditional consultation model, organizational officials typically review the material (written and/or oral submissions, surveys, etc.); deliberate on what conclusion(s) can be drawn and then make recommendations to decision makers. In short, the model has three basic stages: getting the participants’ views, drawing on those views to deliberate over the issues and developing recommendations for decision makers.

Lenihan (2009) acknowledges that over the past two decades, these traditional consultation models, especially when conducted by governments, have been under significant pressure. “Events like town halls and public hearings often fail to resolve difficult issues. Indeed, when the participants’ views are polarized or fragmented – as they often are – consultation can make matters worse” (p. 10).

Although recommendations arising out of such a consultation process theoretically reflect participants’ views, officials may be challenged to make recommendations that are universally acceptable. Therefore, when reports are finalized and made public, those who disagree often characterize the process, or even the organization responsible for initiating or conducting the consultation, as having failed them.

With this acknowledgement, it is important that those who are interested in seeking input from constituents seek ways to ensure that these processes are transparent, accountable and responsive. Doing so may change participants’ perspectives about the processes, recommendations or outcomes, but also the institutions and organizations who initiated the consultations.
Q. What are some of the examples of traditional consultation processes (and these kinds of responses to them) from the past three decades in education in Saskatchewan? How have these processes been experienced by participants? What have been the results or outcomes of these processes/reports/recommendations?

“Traditional consultation remains an important tool in government’s tool-kit but is not the right one for every job; sometimes, we need to move beyond it.”
(Lenihan, 2009, p. 13)

A second model of engagement, described as deliberative processes, asks more from participants than just the expression of their views. “They must go another step to engage one another in a dialogue where they work through the issues together, weighing evidence for competing claims, seeking compromises and trade-offs to deal with competing values and priorities, and arriving at strategies for how to proceed .... The basic idea here is that involving the public in the deliberative stage of the policy process will lead to a more transparent, accountable and responsive outcome” (Lenihan, 2009, p. 10).

Q. What are some of the examples of deliberative processes from the past three decades in education? How have these processes been experienced by participants? What have been the results or outcomes of these processes or the reports/recommendations that arose from these processes?

Public engagement processes, as a third model, “are designed to help all these parties work together more effectively to find and implement solutions to complex problems or achieve complex goals” (Lenihan, 2009, p. 11). Complexity and scale in terms of desired change are causing institutions/organizations to think differently, beyond deliberation, about how they engage with stakeholders and the public.

Successful public engagement processes require collaboration between and among all of the stakeholders, including government, communities and citizens. An important factor that sets this model apart from other consultation and deliberation models is the degree to which all participants are involved from conceptualization through to actualization or implementation.

Q. Is this what the Re-Imagine Education initiative is asking us to do?
Lenihan (2009) emphasizes that public engagement is not about size, but rather about how institutions/organizations “can use deliberative discussion to unite a group of people around a common goal and mobilize them to work together to achieve it” (p. 11).

Q. What are some of the examples of public engagement processes from the past three decades in education?

How have these processes been experienced by participants?

What have been the results or outcomes of these processes or the reports/recommendations that arose from these processes?

More recently, Lenihan (personal communication, June 8, 2018) has emphasized the emerging and increasingly important role of narrative building to take participants and organizations beyond traditional consultation, and deliberation models and processes. He has become an advocate for engaging larger groups of people in narrative building (storytelling) processes that not only build a compelling story, but also guide the analysis of and inform policy development. A model that includes narrative building has the potential to engage more people and acknowledge the value of their lived experience.

Research-based and evidence-based analysis won’t necessarily develop the strong support that is needed for change to occur; however, the analyses contextualized through a narrative created within community may contribute to a more compelling vision for the future.

Narrative building is deliberation on a larger scale. A process such as this is most powerful when values and/or priority conflicts in a policy development or strategic priority setting process exist. Evidence (data) itself doesn’t solve value conflicts. Deliberative dialogue and narrative building bring the public, and especially those who wouldn’t necessarily have been engaged, into conversation. When combined with data analysis, public engagement processes such as this can unite a group of people specifically, and citizens generally, around a common goal and mobilize them to work together to achieve it.

Ideally, a strong community narrative reflects participants’ lived experience, and is supported by analysis and facts. “The challenge and opportunity ahead … [is] to combine the techniques of narrative-building with those of evidence-based decision making to develop an engagement approach … informed participation” (Lenihan, 2017b, p. 35).

“Deliberative pedagogy in the community connects – and transforms – deliberative dialogue, community engagement, and democratic education by attempting to create space for reciprocal conversations that are grounded in real-world experiences.”

(Longo, 2013, p. 5)

A well-crafted, open, deliberative dialogue process will likely rely on different dialogue styles at different points. The process could simultaneously have different deliberative discussions underway in different “dialogue spheres.” The goal is to construct a unifying narrative that has a good “fit” with the facts, values and priorities of the community found in the various narratives. Longo (2013) also notes the significant shift that happens when participants in these processes, citizens themselves, are central to decision making.

“Deliberative pedagogy in the community opens opportunities for public deliberation to recognize the political aspects of community engagement; for community engagement to incorporate collective action into public deliberation; and for democratic education to foster empowerment and reciprocity into teaching and learning.”

(Longo, 2013, p. 13)
“Creating and sharing stories is an integral part of the human experience. Not only do stories offer us a source of inspiration, they also contain the potential for understanding the many ways in which we value and devalue ideas, trends and actions. Stories are paradoxically unique and universal: they exist within us, they define us. Stories allow individuals to reflect on their personal trajectory, understand the complexities of life, and develop an awareness of the variety of voices involved in authentic narratives. Stories support communities in constructing identity and celebrating heritage, as they portray values that define a communal idiosyncrasy. The impact of storytelling lies on the breadth of experiences and perspectives that stories encompass; communities come together to tell a singular story with many voices. One person’s story can change the way we perceive the world, and a community’s story could inspire those listening to take action.”

(Garcia & Longo, 2015, p. 7)
A Pathway Forward:
Open, Deliberative Dialogue to Re-Imagine Education

From the outset, through its bold invitation to Re-Imagine Education, the Federation has conceptualized a robust, comprehensive and inclusive engagement process with education stakeholders, parents, caregivers, teachers and members of the public who are interested in the future of public education in the province.

As with all consultation, deliberation, public engagement or narrative-building processes, this initiative will lead to real change and truly be “imaginative” only if the public, as well as the educational partners, are also ready, willing and able to take some ownership of, and responsibility for, the process and the pathway forward.

Lenihan (2009) suggests that good planning and policy development, not to mention a visioning process about public education, should be holistic in nature. It should also take important horizontal connections between health, education, social systems and issues into account. If education is a public good, the public and all educational stakeholders have a crucial role in determining the future of the system.

There is shared responsibility for defining and implementing many of the strategies and solutions that will strengthen and/or improve the system, which will in turn, enhance the success of the students who benefit from a robust public education system.

“Allowing the public to engage in such a discussion can lead to highly productive and innovative ways of looking at issues and proposing solutions, for both the public and governments.”

(Lenihan, 2009, p. 24)

Process experts such as Garcia and Longo (2015), Longo (2013) and Lenihan (2017a, 2017b) suggest that citizens, and their organizations and institutions, need to do more talking and engaging collaboratively together within their respective communities. Not only are storytelling and narrative building essential elements in creating community, they are also essential elements in how education should be re-imagined. “Schools and communities are inextricably linked: solutions to the problems in each must be addressed by harnessing the many talents in the entire ‘ecology of education’” (Crimen, cited in Longo, 2013, p. 2).
Storytelling serves collaborative purposes as it allows participants to resist the danger of the single narrative and its potentially stereotypical representation of reality. “When marginal groups engage in a collaborative process of narrating stories, storytelling has the potential to explore new self-perceptions and strengths that fall outside previous negative constructions held either by themselves or others” (Garcia & Longo, 2015, p. 8).

“Deliberative pedagogy in the community is a collaborative approach that melds deliberative dialogue, community engagement and democratic education.”

(Longo, 2013, p. 2)

“The single narrative ... fails to represent the diversity of views that represent a community, with its complex history, its place in the world, and its uncertain future. The single narrative is constructed and told by those in power with the intention to have the dominant discourse accepted as the ultimate truth of the collective whole.”

(Garcia & Longo, 2015, p. 7)

Narrative building and sharing stories in community provides opportunities for connection, learning and leading while honouring the personal experiences of participants. “Bringing the ‘whole system’ into the room makes feasible a shared encounter with aspects of reality we normally avoid – chaos, uncertainty, complexity. The key word is ‘shared’. When we explore common ground with others, we release creative energy leading to projects none of us can do alone. People simultaneously discover mutual values, innovative ideas, commitment and support. Rarely in daily life do people encounter these key conditions for action all at once” [emphasis added] (Weisbord, 1999, n.p.).

Murphy (2018) also emphasizes the importance of engaging the profession in storytelling to reimagine what schools could be. “Stories are deeply personal, giving us a look at the students and families in the crosshairs of test-based accountability while also sharing their thoughts and feelings as they navigate various obstacles. And they offer an alternative vision of the ways in which teachers are already rethinking education [emphasis added]” (p. 32).

New forms of community, public and family engagement need to be developed to create a truly inclusive public space for deliberative, open dialogue about the future of public education. That’s what Re-Imagine Education is hoping to do.

Q. How might we ensure that this educational renewal process is different from, yet supportive of, other forms of parent and community relationships with school?

How many groups currently are engaged in education renewal and what kinds of change strategies do they typically use?

What evidence do we have that some of the traditional processes and educational change initiatives actually improve conditions in schools and communities and contribute to greater student success?

What do we want to build on? What gaps exist?

What role should the public play in a repertoire of educational change strategies in the future?

Finally, it is important for everyone engaged in the Re-Imagine Education initiative to remember that education improvement is hard work. “Doing it well is at least as much about discipline and precision as it is about passion. This means listening more deliberately and speaking more selectively. We all need to respect the limits of policy, ask more of parents, and appreciate the symbiosis of talkers and doers” (Hess, 2018, p. 29).

“We need a public space – a place where people could talk with one another about matters of import ... a place where all are welcome.”

(Wiens & Coulter, 2008, p. 203)
“The work of a team or organization needs to start with a clear sense of what they are trying to accomplish and how they want to behave together. Once this clarity is established, people will use it as their lens to interpret information, surprises and experiences. They will be able to figure out what and how to do their work. We know the best way to create ownership is to have those responsible for implementation develop the plan for themselves. It simply doesn’t work to ask people to sign on when they have not been involved in the planning process.”

(Wheatley, 2006, p. 68)
References


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