

From Categorical to Formula Funding Support:

A Report on the Outcomes for Students, Schools and School Divisions

Submission to the Manitoba Government

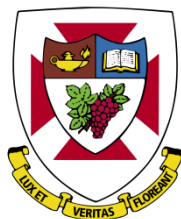
K-12 Education Review

May 2019

Lesley Eblie Trudel, PhD

Assistant Professor – Faculty of Education

University of Winnipeg



i. Executive Summary:

The following submission is taken from the findings of a qualitative research study which was completed in May 2019, documenting the shift from categorical to formula funding for students with additional needs in Manitoba schools. This study was completed in conjunction with the Student Services Administrators' Association of Manitoba (SSAAM), through an Internal Partnership Development Grant obtained from the University of Winnipeg (U of W).

SSAAM is an organization whose mandate is to advance appropriate educational programming opportunities for all students in Manitoba, through advocacy, promotion of best practices and collaboration. Membership in SSAAM is open to those educators whose primary duties or responsibilities are in the area of student services, or for those who support other staff working with special education students. Currently SSAAM has a membership of 85 individuals, actively representing school divisions in the province.

The U of W is a public university located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with a total student enrollment of 9,359. The university offers undergraduate faculties of arts, business and economics, education, science and kinesiology and applied health, as well as graduate programs. This research was undertaken by a principal investigator from the Faculty of Education. The study was also reviewed by the University Human Research Ethics Board (UHREB) and received ethics approval.

This research is of relevance to the Manitoba Government K-12 Education Review, as the findings specifically address the suggested focus areas of governance and funding, as they pertain to educating students who have additional learning needs.

ii. Background:

In January 2017, based on the unanimous recommendations of provincial educational organizations, Manitoba became one of the last provinces in Canada to shift from a categorical funding model for students with additional needs, to a formula funding system. With beliefs, attitudes and practices about inclusion evolving over time, it had become apparent that the existing categorical funding structure in Manitoba was outdated and it was necessary to explore a new model of funding. While the Minister of Education accepted the recommendation to adopt formula funding, there was an understanding that an algorithm would be developed by the province to determine how funds would be allocated to school divisions in future years. With a subsequent change in government however, this did not occur. Additionally, with staff from Manitoba Education and Training no longer providing direction about funding to students as they had done with the previous categorical model, school divisions began creating their own mechanisms to distribute funds differently.

iii. Purpose and Rationale:

The purpose of the study detailed in this submission is to determine the effect that the change of provincial funding model for students with additional needs, is currently having on:

- a. Support for students;
- b. Student performance; and
- c. Allocation of funds to schools and students;

Results from this study are also being made available to Manitoba Education and Training, Student Services Administrators, educators in other jurisdictions and educational researchers. The intention of this study is to mobilize knowledge on the implications of change in funding processes to future sustainability and equity of learning opportunities for all Manitoba children and youth, as well as, to detail the practices involved in supporting all students to obtain best possible educational outcomes.

iv. Research Design:

This submission summarizes a *qualitative, interpretive study* which involved in-depth interviews with school division administrators who are familiar with the change in funding model for students with additional needs. In Manitoba, school division staff in this regard are known as Student Services Administrators. Participants for this study were selected through a method of *purposive sampling* obtained from a provincial listing of school division staff. Student Services Administrators were subsequently contacted by email to obtain informed consent for voluntary participation. This study had a participation rate of 51 per cent, representing urban, rural, northern and southern school divisions.

Those who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed using ten, open-ended interview questions. The purpose of the questions was to elicit perspectives of Student Services Administrators pertaining to their experiences with the change in provincial funding model and process. Data collected from the interviews were collated into thematic groupings to organize the findings and construct links between events and actions described. This process is known as *analytic abduction*..

v. Research Findings:

For the purpose of this submission, the research findings are summarized and grouped according to the responses provided by Student Services Administrators for each interview question. Each interview question is listed followed by the corresponding summary of responses.

1. How long have you been a Student Services Administrator?

Student Services Administrators who participated in this research study had between one and twenty one years of experience in their positions.

2. What was working well in your school division, under the previous system of categorical funding?

Under the previous system of categorical funding, Student Services administrators described the system as familiar and understood, not only by those in the education system, but also by non-educators, parents and collaborating agencies. Manitoba Education and Training set out annotated categorical descriptors, as well as, existing structures and processes for understanding student needs and obtaining funding based on established criteria in each category. Many student services staff became quite effective over time at writing funding applications. They felt that they knew the students well and could predict the application approvals that they would receive. When students arrived new to a school division, there was a process to either transfer funding from a previously attended division, or apply for new or additional funding at various check points during the school year. If a school division applied for funding and the application was denied, feedback was provided by the funding review team and there was a possibility of re-submission of the application with the suggested additional information included. Schools also had opportunities to re-apply for funding if new or significant information about a student was obtained. When funding was received, it was often for multiple years, with the potential for re-evaluation to occur during transitions to middle years, and high school. Student services staff were able to plan effectively for students knowing that categorical funding was in place for a number of years. It was noted that educational assistants (EA's) perceived an improved sense of job security when multi-year funding was in place. Overall, there was a sense of agency and control with the categorical funding system. With decisions for individual students being made external to the school division, collegiality in regard to funding outcomes was maintained at the school division level.

3. What was challenging in your school division, under the previous system of categorical funding?

Student Services Administrators explained that there was a lot of time taken by resource teachers writing funding applications on behalf of students. The applications were arduous for divisional student services staff to review, revise and appeal. It was felt that the time spent collectively gathering data, writing and reviewing the applications, could be better spent collaborating, planning and supporting students in classrooms. Student Services Administrators observed, that funding could be obtained based on writing a good application rather than on actual student needs. In fact, there were some students who were denied funding, but were perceived to have had greater needs than those whose applications were approved. School division staff often felt powerless to shift supports from students who had received categorical funding, even though another student who was not funded might have been experiencing more challenging academic or social emotional learning components. Student Services Administrators mentioned that staff were often discouraged by having funding applications denied when they believed that students fit the criteria outlined by Manitoba Education and Training. The categorical application process was steeped with frustration and stress in having to create worst case scenarios in order to obtain funding. Documentation for applications needed to be very negative and was based on a deficit model. There was stigma attached to students being funded and the process pushed staff to assign labels and pathologize for the purpose of obtaining needed resources. The applications were devastating for parents to read and made for difficult conversations when schools were collaborating with families. Once the funding applications were submitted to Manitoba Education and Training, the process for schools seemed removed, faceless and anonymous. If funding was approved, it was often equated with the provision of EA support. There was a sense of entitlement that if a student was funded, that meant the student would have an EA.

EA's were often overused and misused, sometimes absolving classroom teachers of the responsibility to instruct all learners. Funded students became the responsibility of student services staff. Social inclusion occurred in schools, but academic inclusion was not a reality. Over time, the funding categories simply became outdated or did not fit the changing demographics and contexts in Manitoba. As a result, categorical funding seemed disconnected with the day to day needs in schools.

4. What is working well in your school division, under the new system of formula funding?

Student Services Administrators noted that enhanced flexibility, creativity and customization of supports have become the keys to success with formula funding. Students are identified by their strengths and student services staff are asking, "How can we help this student to succeed?" There are coordinated team efforts at the school level to create both school and classroom profiles to document and understand student needs. There appears to be greater follow through on elements of planning, responsive instructional practices and the specific roles of staff working with students. Schools are using varying frameworks to resource and support identified needs (e.g., Response to Intervention - RTI; Universal Design for Learning - UDL; Collaborative Academic and Social Emotional Learning - CASEL). The formula funding model centers not only on building the capacity of teachers, but on making the best use of EA's for classroom support, supervision and redirection. As a general observation, there appears to be less reliance on EA's and more creative uses of formula funds to place itinerant professional staff such as learning support teachers and clinicians in classrooms and schools. Essentially this matches the most qualified personnel with the students who often have the greatest challenges. Divisional student services staff are also in schools alongside classroom teachers and supports are viewed as more visible and valued. There is greater involvement of school leaders (principals and vice-principals) at the center of planning for inclusive practices and leadership is seen as an essential element to the success of inclusion in the school environment. School staff are more inclined to include all students in

conversations about classroom composition as funding is provided to schools and ultimately to classrooms on the basis of collective needs, rather than on entitlement from the success of individual, categorical applications. The stigma of funding for individuals has been removed and the focus has shifted toward programming for all students. The conversations are now about student learning rather than on students not meeting funding criteria. This makes for much richer pedagogical dialogue that is not restricted to certain students. There is no longer “dread” that a funded student is coming into the classroom. Students are identified through teachers getting to know them and developing positive relationships in that process. Supports can be open and lengthy, or established for short “sprints” depending on identified needs. Resources may come in the form of co-teachers, clinicians, EA’s, technology options, or the use of supportive peers to encourage independence. In general, as schools work to build capacity with the formula funding, there appears to be less separation between the traditional dichotomy of student services and curriculum/instruction.

5. What is challenging in your school division, under the new system of formula funding?

When asked this question, Student Services Administrators overwhelmingly responded that the greatest challenge under the system of formula funding, involved the fact that there is no actual formula set out by the province since implementation of this practice. Student Services Administrators essentially described a freeze in funding for students with additional needs, from 2017 until the present time. Furthermore, the amounts previously allocated for students who were categorically funded level 2 and 3, are being stretched to cover increasing numbers of students throughout the system. With inclusion viewed more broadly under the formula funding model, the system casts a wider net, ultimately increasing the numbers of students who could potentially be supported and expanding the nature of supports they might receive. One school division administrator provided data from the division’s Early Years Evaluation (EYE), citing that the number of students with additional needs at the

kindergarten level has almost doubled, increasing from 18 to 33 per cent during the period from 2011 to 2017. Another Student Services Administrator identified that in the 2018-19 school year, 75 per cent of students coming into kindergarten were assessed to be in Tiers 2 and 3 on the EYE. This information was echoed by the majority of study participants referring to contextual data obtained from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) or L'Instrument de mesure du développement de la petite enfance (IMDPE). Student Services Administrators added that with students remaining in the education system until age 21, there are rising costs for appropriate educational programming in the community for students when preparing to transition from youth to adult services. Furthermore, when students require targeted or intensive interventions at any point during kindergarten to grade 12, other systems may not necessarily be responsive to student referrals or requests for supports. Several study participants noted that the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) has been cutting back services to school divisions. All study participants shared that Health Authorities have demonstrated differing capacities to respond to school divisions. As a result, school divisions, where necessary, have used formula funds to hire mental health and addictions staff to respond to identified student needs and priorities at tier 2 or tier 3 levels. Student Services Administrators indicate that unlike the previous system of categorical funding, formula funds no longer follow when students move from one school division to another. As a result, school divisions are finding it increasingly difficult to support transiency, especially when students in care are placed for short stays in resident homes. Overall, the increase in the number and nature of student needs, the required expenditures in school divisions to meet those needs, along with the freeze in funding from the province, has resulted in what is described as "chronic underfunding" in the area of student services. Therefore, the question asked by many in this study, is whether the Task Force on Special Needs Funding will reconvene as originally planned, to recognize concerns arising from school divisions and develop a responsive funding formula.

6. How has the change in funding model and process impacted the practice of supporting students in schools?

Student Services Administrators believe that there is considerable capacity building that is occurring in schools and classrooms with the change to formula funding. There is no longer an external mechanism to manage the funds, and a system of internal frameworks is being developed individually by school divisions to provide structure and process for the system. Along with that growth comes concerns and challenges as school divisions work through their unique models. The following question arose in that journey: What if one school is a better advocate for students than another? Does that mean that some students won't receive the services and supports they require? At the current time, there is care and caution taken on the part of Student Services Administrators to ensure that schools do not enter a competition for scarce resources. Time is being taken to develop transparency, trust and a climate of deepening understanding of responsive practices to meet student needs. There appears to be a greater focus at the school and classroom level on planning, problem solving and determining the roles that various staff can take in supporting identified needs. Funds are allocated to schools and site-based teams are expected to be responsible for, monitor and shift supports throughout the year, as required by students at the school level. This is a much more continuous, precise and strategic model as schools engage in learning sprints to make positive differences in student learning expectations and outcomes. School divisions are also defining needs in the context of student independence and mastery. Questions are being asked by school division personnel, about the nature of student needs and who can best support what is required. The learning curve is steep for classroom teachers as they enhance instructional practices for all students. Teachers are becoming increasingly comfortable in requesting additional supports in their classrooms (e.g., resource teacher, co-teacher, or clinician time). This process can be a challenge for any staff without a student services background. The face of funding

and decision making has changed, and it has become apparent that school divisions and schools do not have a common means of collecting information on student needs nor allocating supports. Formula funding has challenged Student Services Administrators to devise divisional frameworks, or assist with school-based systems of data collection in order to allocate resources. While there is no universal or standard formula based practice developed or required by Manitoba Education, schools in the province are using a wide variety of school and classroom profiles. In some school divisions profile documentation is invitational, whereas in others, it is required for discussion about supports.

7. How has the change in funding model and process impacted student achievement?

Student Services Administrators report that it is difficult to assess whether the funding model has impacted student achievement. There is currently no provincial mechanism to collect data in a consistent manner regarding students who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to monitor and assess goals outside the regular curriculum. Manitoba Education and Training has alluded to the possibility of a province-wide Individual Education Plan Report (IEP-R), however this document has not yet been finalized nor implemented. A number of school divisions have implemented divisionally developed IEP-R documents. While the data collected can be used within divisions, it cannot be used for more systemic analysis due to differences in document content and style. In terms of data collection from the Provincial Report Card, there are concerns about inconsistent reporting practices and misperception about grading for students with additional needs. For example there is often confusion when an IEP is in place for a student working on grade 2 outcomes in grade 5, as to whether the student can score more than a 1 or 2 on the ordinal scale of the report card. Teachers also appear to be unclear as to whether the grade that they assign is a blended mark based on progress from the IEP and grade level outcomes. Anecdotally, most believe that the formula funding model has caused a change in attitude towards inclusion. School divisions and schools are more commonly asking: How are all

students academically included in education? Student Services Administrators believe that the formula funding model is eliciting changes to instructional practice. In several school divisions there is data to demonstrate that the numbers of adaptations plans are decreasing. In discussions about this data, the observation has been made that classroom teachers are seeing that they can do more to meet the needs of students by using a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach or universal interventions in the classroom. With changes to more inclusive instruction, less individual adaptations are required. School divisions have also begun to disaggregate divisional data on literacy and numeracy, as well as consider data on reading progress or other divisional indicators when determining whether there has been an impact on student achievement. School divisions ascribe to a variety of different primary student information systems (e.g. PowerSchool, Maplewood, Tyler etc.). Although the majority of school divisions in Manitoba access Clevr for purposes of collecting Student Services related data, divisional documents available on student information systems are not universal in nature and cannot be used for purposes of provincial analysis.

8. How has the change in funding model and process impacted the school division's ability to support the mental well-being of students?

Student Services Administrators believe that the shift to formula funding has offered increased flexibility for school divisions to support staffing, programming, resources and professional learning in the area of mental health and well-being. The flexibility described did not come from an increase in formula funding, but rather from creativity on the part of school divisions to meet the needs of students. Several divisions reported increased rates of student anxiety revealed on the OurSCHOOL (formerly Tell Them From Me) Survey and locally division developed instruments, as well as, increased emotional and behavioural challenges indicated on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). School divisions also reported increased numbers of Violence Threat Risk Assessments (VTRA). Northern

school divisions and those which have schools in remote areas are forging agreements with neighbouring school division partners to support urgent and emergent needs through existing crisis response mechanisms. Anecdotally, school divisions shared that funds are being shifted to support regulation of behaviour and social emotional learning due in large part to poverty, family dysfunction and isolation. Student Services Administrators noted a change in perspective from that of students behaving badly, to an increased quest for understanding as to why behaviour may be occurring. They reported investments in the areas of mental health promotion and literacy by increasing supports universally in classrooms and increasing teacher capacity to instruct mental health programming through various subject areas at all grade levels. A number of school divisions also mentioned the positive and progressive learning that has occurred with school division action research teams from involvement in the Provincial Cohort on Well-Becoming, with U of M researcher, Dr. Thomas Falkenberg. Nonetheless, Student Services Administrators maintain that much of their work in the area of mental health and well-being remains reactive, targeted or intensive in nature. School divisions are supporting families through the engagement of attendance officers, outreach facilitators, social workers and are providing equine therapy, music and art therapy, as well as private therapy directly to students. School divisions are also funding private mental health and forensic assessments to gain support, recommendations and direction on complex challenges that they are facing with students who have profound mental health challenges. A number of school divisions are involved in “community hub” models which feature wrap-around approaches and collaboration between divisions and the services of RCMP, Probations, Mental Health and AFM. Investments are being made to increase school counselor and clinician time and school divisions are shifting roles of clinicians to focus on mental well-being, hiring mental health workers and establishing divisional well-being committees. The fact remains, however, that waitlists for mental health supports from health authorities range between 3 and 18

months. Access to psychiatry and mental health staff for consultation or collaboration after the occurrence of a significant mental health event or hospitalization, is limited at best. There is significant disparity between the services that can be provided by health authorities to students in urban or near urban school divisions and those in more rural, northern or remote areas.

vi. Recommendations:

- 9. Are there specific recommendations regarding the allocation and distribution of funds that might be of future consideration for school division administrators and provincial decision makers?**
- 10. Are there other comments that you have not yet included or believe are of importance to this study.**

The following recommendations summarize the collective responses to the final questions of the study:

- a. It is essential for the province to determine a formula for allocation and distribution of funds to school divisions in order to resolve the current challenge of underfunding to schools. The formula should be transparent and flexible with recognition for the unique needs of the communities rather than basing the calculation on population alone. It is important that the province ensures that the funding formula aligns and balances with current needs in school divisions.
- b. It is critical to determine the scope of responsibility for student services in school divisions and schools. Traditionally, student services provided leadership and support in the area of special education. This mandate, however, has gradually widened with

student services also providing support for students affected by complex trauma, abuse, neglect and family breakdown, students experiencing challenges and changes in regard to diversity, students who are new to Canada and require language and living supports, and students with additional needs who are experiencing gaps in their learning. With a focus on the whole child and youth, it is necessary to fund school divisions to provide integrated, purposeful supports and services based on evidence of need at the school level. This may require funds being reallocated to deliver services to students where they are legislated to attend each day.

- c. It is vital for the adoption of a strategy for students who require targeted (tier 2) or intensive (tier 3) supports in the area of mental health. Student Services Administrators in this study suggested the possibility of developing a model similar to that of the Unified Referral and Intake System (URIS), where resources would be transferred from other ministries to education, to fund key support functions for students with identified mental health needs in schools. There was also a suggestion of multi-system provincial coordination of this process, between the ministries of Health, Education and Training, Families and Justice.

- d. It is imperative for schools and school divisions to be able to appropriately assess and collect data on the progress of all students in Manitoba. In order for this to occur, Student Services Administrators in this study advocated for Manitoba Education and Training to implement the provincial Individual Education Plan Report (IEP-R) and standard related technology templates. Additionally, study participants recommended

that the Instruction, Curriculum and Assessment Branch, as well as, the Inclusion Support Branch of Manitoba Education and Training, work together with the Student Services Administrators Association of Manitoba, to make the Provincial Report Card a universally designed document. This will assist with improved clarity and communication to all parents, as well as, provide more inclusive and accurate data for purposes of provincial resource allocation.

- e. It is important for formula funding to continue. Participants in this study believe that the funding model has truly encouraged better dialogue at all levels of the system. The change has resulted in creativity and flexibility to provide the necessary programming, services, supports and resources for all students. Formula funding has resulted in the increased use of staff with skill sets to meet the needs of students. There is greater independence for students, and more peer to peer support being naturally developed. Allocations of formula funding to schools have promoted efficacy, independence and allowed school sites to take enhanced responsibility for student needs.

vii. Implications for Practice:

The purpose of the study detailed in this submission is to determine the effect that the change of provincial funding model for students with additional needs, is currently having on:

- a. Support for students;
- b. Student performance; and
- c. Allocation of funds to schools and students;

In response to the areas outlined above, I conclude the following:

- a. In regard to support for students, formula funding has been a welcome change and has allowed for flexibility, creativity and customization of supports, resources and staffing by schools, for the identified needs of students. The Student Services Administrators participating in this study advocated that formula funding continue.
- b. School divisions were not able to comment on whether formula funding impacted student achievement, as it was challenging to obtain data on the progress of all students. There is no provincial report (IEP-R) for students who are working outside the curriculum and there are concerns about inconsistent reporting practices relating to students who are challenged by the regular curriculum. It is also difficult to obtain data on all students from school division information systems as the systems are not universal in nature and therefore data from them cannot be used for the purpose of analysis.
- c. With regard to the allocation of funds to schools and students, the province has not announced a new funding formula for the distribution of resources to school divisions since the initiative was launched in January 2017. As a result, with increasing student needs and resources frozen from the province, school divisions are in a state of chronic underfunding where student services is concerned.

Respectfully submitted,
Lesley Eblie Trudel, PhD
(Retired Assistant Superintendent of Schools)
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education
University of Winnipeg