

Let teachers get back to teaching, says Tymchak

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In May 1999, the Saskatchewan government appointed Michael Tymchak, founding director of NORTEP and later dean of Education at the University of Regina, to head a 12-member task force to analyze "The Role of the School".

As Tymchak sat down to write his report two years later, the words of a teacher from Prince Albert echoed in his mind:

"It's like I'm given a bag of broken china at the beginning of the day, and I'm expected to turn it into a beautiful teacup by the end of the day."

While Saskatchewan's schools have yet to crumble, the system is under pressure from all sides, and nearly ready to crack, the task force found. Saskatchewan's teachers are labouring under an enormous burden. Not only are they expected to give children a solid education, they also serve as social workers, counsellors, child psychologists and even parents. Schools are attempting to care for the whole child, without the financial or human resources to do so. In the end, the child suffers.

The task force travelled across the province, listening to the concerns of students, parents, principals, school trustees and inter-agency groups, and getting a feel for what these same groups of people — in diverse regions — were saying. Once they'd written a first draft, the task force went back to those same people and asked, "Is this what you're saying?"

"That process was very engaging, and it created a strong sense of ownership.... It's not just the 'expert' model," Tymchak said. "If you want to bring about social change... you have to bring people along, find out what they think."

Out of that dialogue emerged a model called "SchoolPLUS". Drawing on the community school concept — which Tymchak calls "one of the most successful things Saskatchewan has done" — SchoolPLUS calls for the school to become the hub of an inter-agency network aimed at meeting the needs of children and youth.

Rather than just adding on to school as we know it, SchoolPLUS would be a new "matrix organization" that draws all of its resources from existing agencies (including health, social services, justice and education), but co-ordinates and integrates these resources to meet children's mental, physical and emotional needs. These "school-

evaluations of school policy. As well, the task force advises giving extra-curricular activities "curricular" status, so that the educational role played by activities such as music, drama and sports receives the recognition — and funding — it deserves.

"Until you spend two years of your life listening to people, encountering the concerns, you don't feel the urgency or try to ponder possible solutions," Tymchak said. "We can't fix everything, but we can make improvements."

Tymchak is eager to see what happens in the North, with its booming school-age population, and northerners' openness to change.

"They're used to thinking developmentally and opportunistically," he said. "The North is leading a lot of things."

Even so, Tymchak expects change will start happening soon, not only in the North, but province-wide. The government has already done a special needs review, increased the number of pre-kindergarten seats, and — in the March budget — announced funding to double the number of community schools, including introducing the concept into rural and high schools. "It was wonderful to see such early affirmation," Tymchak said.

Still, he's not expecting the province's schools to be transformed overnight. "It (the SchoolPLUS model) really is quite radical, especially when you take into account all the human service agencies. In that respect, it's a long term project," he said. "We haven't gotten the government to say that's a priority for them."

Tymchak, however, believes in the task force's vision of schools as the hub of growth for a child, and a community.

"Society is ready to hear this message today in a way that they weren't 20 years ago," he said. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to realize that we need to do school a little differently."

A task force headed by former NORTEP director Michael Tymchak says schools should be supported by an umbrella of community agencies that let the teachers focus on their strength: teaching.



linked" programs would be governed by a broad-based interagency group called the Saskatchewan Education and Human Services Network.

The idea, Tymchak said, is to "nest the school in the context of a larger umbrella organization committed to children and youth," so that teachers can get back to their central role: teaching.

Thanks to the public dialogue process, the task force also made recommendations on issues that hadn't even occurred to it beforehand.

For example, it heard concerns about being "loonied and tooned to death" by school fees. For this, the task force recommended that an "equity fund" be added to school divisions' operating grants, to subsidize these costs for families experiencing financial hardship.

The task force also felt that teachers should not be required to pay for classroom supplies out of their own pockets. So, they advised that boards get extra money to create individual accounts, each worth \$300, for these supplies.

Student voices were also heard, and out of these dialogues came the idea of regular student "focus groups" and annual staff and student