

Community and its counterfeit in education by Lloyd Robertson

It wasn't all that long ago that the administrative offices of Northern Lights School Division were moved from Prince Albert to the North. This made the Division more "northern" but did nothing to make local communities healthier or more viable.

My last column dealt with community development and its counterfeit, bureaucracy. In a bureaucratic society communities become dependent on those in control of funding, resources, planning and knowledge. Two classes of people evolve in such communities: the independent service provider and dependant service recipient. The recipients become increasingly dependent and the providers become increasingly bureaucratic.

It was observed during the 1970s that many parents, especially in urban inner city areas had a "dependent recipient" relationship with their schools. They avoided school functions and did not take part in their children's learning. Learning was seen as disagreeable work. A parent being called on by a teacher meant the student was "in trouble". The language of the students reflected a "school as jail" attitude.

Question: "When are you getting out?"

Answer: "On my sixteenth birthday."

"Community development" meant changing the relationship between schools and their public with elected parent councils having real authority over certain kinds of programming. I was a trustee on the Regina Public School Board when the province's community schools program was introduced to our division in 1982. According Department of Education literature:

"A community school is concerned with the involvement of all residents of its community. It seeks to improve the total environment and quality of living for children, families, older people, all who live in the neighbourhood. It develops programs related to the needs of the neighbourhood. It brings the services of health, welfare, recreational and educational agencies so close to the people that they are readily available."

The Board chairman proudly told reporters that the Regina Public School Division had pioneered "community schools" before the Department of Education had "jumped on the bandwagon". He missed the point. True, a nutrition program and a pre-kindergarten enrichment program was

started in the mid-1970s; however, the involvement of the communities was missing. This was an example; therefore, of bureaucratic development, not community development.

The Board Chairman said later that the reason why program enrichment was needed in inner city schools was because "Native people are culturally deprived". He explained that the school board was refusing to recognize a Regina Native Advisory Committee because "if we recognized them then we would be bound, politically, to take their advise". Both comments show the reasoning of a person committed to bureaucratic, as opposed to community development.

Imagine my surprise, some 16 years later, to learn that the Pre-Cam Community School Council did not have control of the community school budget. Later I presented a proposal to be sent to funding agencies that would see the development of parenting self-help groups. I was told that the proposal would have to be endorsed, not by the community school council, but by the school administration. The proposal was rejected because these parenting classes were said to be within the mandate of the Department of Social Services, not education. The bureaucratic mind set is hard to shake.

Community development involves bringing together community members and facilitating them to define their problems, assess their needs, determine their solutions and take whatever resources they have at their disposal to implement those solutions. For the community schools program to work the councils need to fully involve the school as part of the community. Components in the original program included community use of facilities, community involvement in the regular school and classroom programs, community-based adult education, additional programs for children and youth, coordination of social services and meaningful control over community school budgets. Anything less is not community development.