

**AN ACTION PLAN FOR INFLUENCING AND INFORMING
EDUCATION POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
IN SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA**

April 2007

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.



RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

For more information, please visit www.brandonu.ca/rdi.

**AN ACTION PLAN FOR INFLUENCING AND INFORMING
EDUCATION POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
IN SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA**

Presented to:

Westman Superintendents' Group

Prepared by:

Karen Rempel, Research Affiliate
Robert Annis, Director
Rural Development Institute
Brandon University
Brandon, MB R7A 6A9

Document summary

This document sets out an action plan for influencing and informing education policy, research and practice in rural southwestern Manitoba. The audience for this action plan is the Westman Superintendents' Group and its representative school boards. In addition to a rationale for action, the plan also sets out a planning model for decision- making and various options for research or applied research activities for the Group. It also identifies some, but not all, of the factors that the Group need to take into consideration when planning research or applied research activities.

The purpose of this action plan is to set out a framework for research planning and activities aimed at influencing and informing education policy, programs and practice in rural southwestern Manitoba. The primary features of the framework are:

- a planned approach for identifying relevant and timely research information;
- consideration for the role of the Westman Superintendents' Group; and,
- the development of research capacity at the community or local level.

The action plan research agenda derives primarily from discussions and consultations held in late 2006 and early 2007 between individuals from the Rural Development Institute (RDI), Brandon University and the Westman Superintendents' Group. From time to time, RDI also sought and received some input from representatives from Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, and the Manitoba Education Research Network.

Background

Over the course of a few years, the Westman Superintendents' Group expressed a strong desire to provide meaningful and timely ways of informing their boards, communities and policy and decision-makers about the numerous challenges and opportunities in rural education. One potential strategy was to undertake action research.

It is noteworthy that the thinking of the Westman Superintendents' Group was very much in line with the November 2006 brief, *Rural Education in Manitoba: Defining the issues, drafting the solutions* prepared by the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) and the Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST). After stating that “significant economic and cultural changes, however, have made rural communities and the educational systems within them particularly vulnerable” (p.2), the MASS/MAST brief also calls on local school divisions to “engage in action research, data collection and on-going tracking to assess the impacts of provincial education policy and initiatives in rural and remote schools in the province” (p. 4).

In the fall of 2006 and early winter of 2007, individuals from the Rural Development Institute, Brandon University, the Westman Superintendents' Group and the Manitoba Education Research Network undertook discussions aimed at exploring the form and function of action research for the purpose of informing policy and programs in school divisions in Southwest Manitoba. The final consultation session was held in early February 2007.

Major areas of interest for education policy, research and practice in Southwest Manitoba

Over the course of several months, the Westman Superintendents' Group and the Rural Development Institute undertook an iterative and consultative process that identified several major areas of interest and specific topics for education policy, research and practice (Table 1).

Table 1: Areas of Interest

Area of Interest	Specific topics
Governance of rural school divisions	Sharing resources Adaptive governance models Inter-linking agencies Pros and cons, cost/benefit analysis of school closures, amalgamations and models
Technology-based learning	
Demographic shift in rural population	Range and trends of rural population shifts, ethnicity, special needs Demographic information – how to use and gather information, indicators and implications
Increased demands on school division	Increased demands on system by external agencies
Infrastructure	Issues around funding formula Buildings and effectiveness of building space Alternative uses community schools
Special needs of students	Meeting student needs - what, why and how can needs be met Time on the bus and impact on learning

The consultation process also revealed that each school division faces its own unique characteristics based on the nature of its member communities and circumstances within the division. Ultimately, these major areas of interest and the unique characteristics of each Westman school division formed the foundation for specific actions set out on pages 8 and 9 of this document.

Actions and role of the Westman Superintendents' Group

In addition to identifying areas of interest in the consultative process, RDI also described to the Westman Superintendents' Group various options for action and the role that the Group may wish to play. These actions include:

1. develop a plan to undertake a particular action research project at the local school division or school level;
2. commission others to undertake research on behalf of the Group;
3. advocate for others to take on research on particular issues;
4. seek opportunities such as forums to meet with other school divisions and researchers with the aim of using research to influence policy;
5. become organized as a Group in order to respond to policy consultations; or
6. participate in broader collaborative research activities and partnerships.

Table 2 outlines the major area of interest and the role of the Westman Superintendents' Group based on the outcomes of the consultative discussions.

Table 2: Area of interest and action

Area of interest	Action for Westman Superintendents' Group
On-line technology based learning	Group to develop a plan to undertake research.
Demographics	Advocate someone else
Special needs of rural students (health, learning needs, etc.)	Advocate others to do (subset of SSHRC-CURA)
Infrastructure	Seek opportunities for forums.
Increased demands on the system	Agenda item for the future
Governance	Participate in broader research activities and collaboration

As well, the role of the Westman Superintendents' Group could be one of the following:

1. Principal investigator: Principal investigators have primary responsibility and leadership for the intellectual direction and administration of the research.
2. Co-investigator: Co-investigators work as a part of a larger research team. He/She also plays a significant role in the conduct of the research and may also have some responsibility for financial aspects of the research.
3. Researcher: Researchers help develop and then carry out the activities outlined in the research plan. These activities include data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings. Researchers have academic qualifications for research. Research assistants or community-based researchers (as in action research) carry out research activities under the direction or guidance of researchers.

4. Collaborator: Collaborators are stakeholders with vested or specific interests in the subject of the research. Collaborators can be involved in a number of ways during any or all phases of the research. For example, collaborators may proactively seek out principal investigators and researchers to carry out research activities. Collaborators may also contribute relevant and/or particular information.
5. Partner: Partners in research activities might be financial, human or in-kind resources. They are frequently interested stakeholders and might serve as a sounding board either in the design or results interpretation stages. Most often, they are seen as the audience or recipients of the research information. For example, policy-makers, decision-makers.

Teams of individuals carry out the activities and typically assign various roles such as principal investigator, co-investigators and researchers. Collaborators can also be involved during particular phases of research activities. Partners receive updates and/or final reports.

Plan of Action

The iterative and consultative process between the Westman Superintendents' Group and the RDI concluded with an outline for a plan of action for influencing and informing education policy, research and practice (Table 3). It is assumed that time lines will be determined at a later date.

Table 3: Action plan for Westman Superintendents' Group

Area of interest	Goal	Specific topics	Role / team	Implementation
Technology-based learning	Develop plan to explore the potential and effectiveness of technology-based learning approaches to sustain / enhance the quality of rural education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact and evaluation as it moves ahead • Considerations for implementation • Local implementation, divisions sharing inter and intra (external divisions) • Impact of various models – WEB ct Evergreen, Calgary (ROz) • Who are the students/learners • Understand staffing considerations <p>Also encourage others (BU, other faculties of education) for research and or research findings</p>	Westman Group to undertake Tim D. Ray D. Roy P.	Immediate
Demographics			Advocate for others to do.	Not set

Area of interest	Goal	Specific topics	Role / team	Implementation
Special needs of rural students (health, learning needs, etc.)			Collaborate with others. Ex. SSHRC-CURA research project Dale P.	Immediate
Infrastructure				Not set
Increasing demands on the system				Future agenda item
Governance			Include with special needs of rural students and collaboration with SSHRC-CURA research project. Dale P.	Immediate

Appendix A

Two fundamental understandings underpin the selection of research focus as well as the type and form of action research approaches. These are:

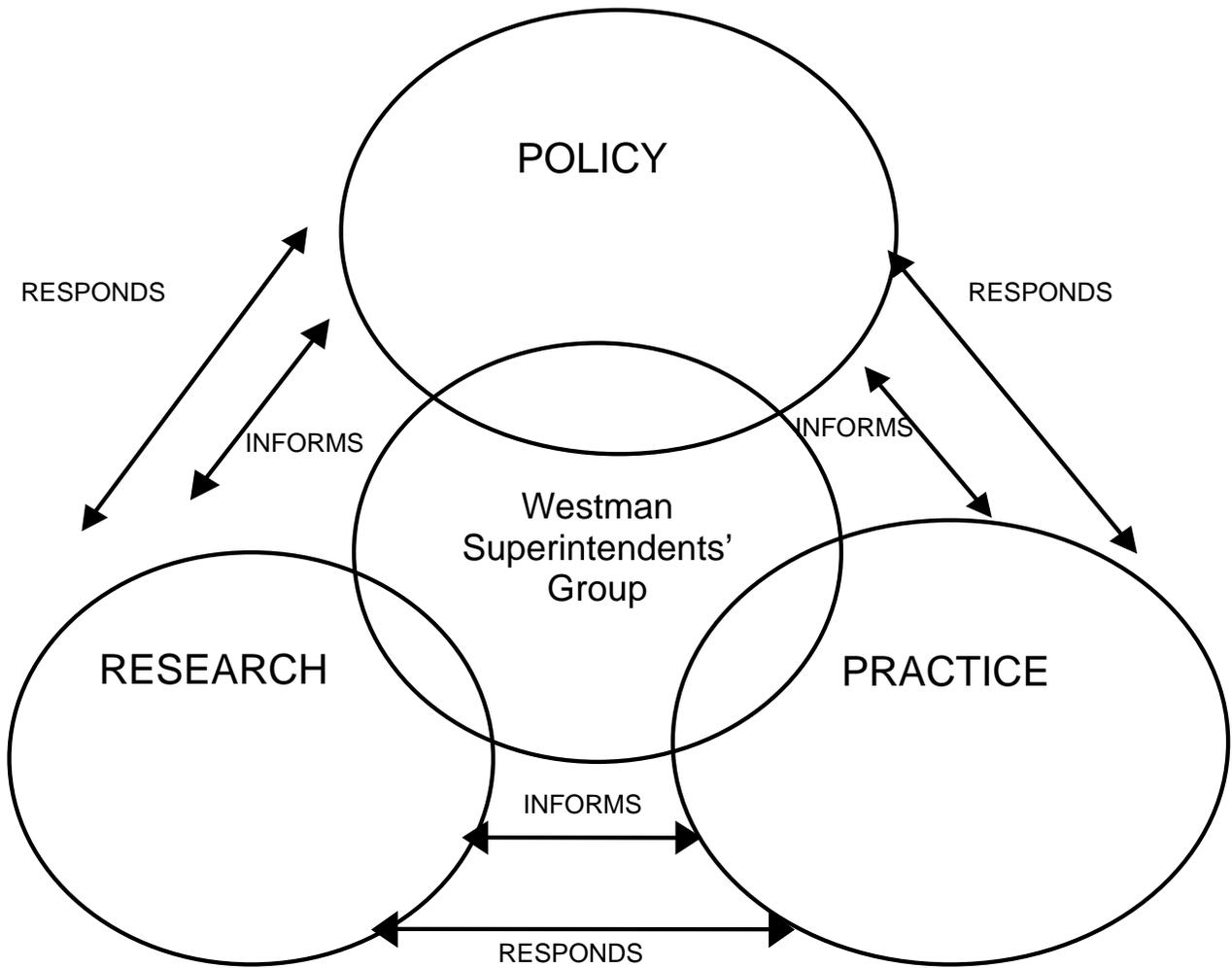
1. the interface between research, policy and practice; and
2. the research-planning model.

1. The Interface between Research, Policy and Practice

Research, policy and practice are inter-related elements as illustrated in Figure 1. This inter-relationship is fluid and informs or responds to one or more elements over time and based on circumstances.

Interpretations of this inter-relationship should be coupled with the fact that rural problems are complex and not usually resolved by simple or short-term action. Instead, they require actions such as undertaking or encouraging research and applied research activities. However, it should be understood at the onset that these efforts or outcomes are only brought about by time and with the commitment of human or financial resources.

Figure 1: Interface between research, policy and practice

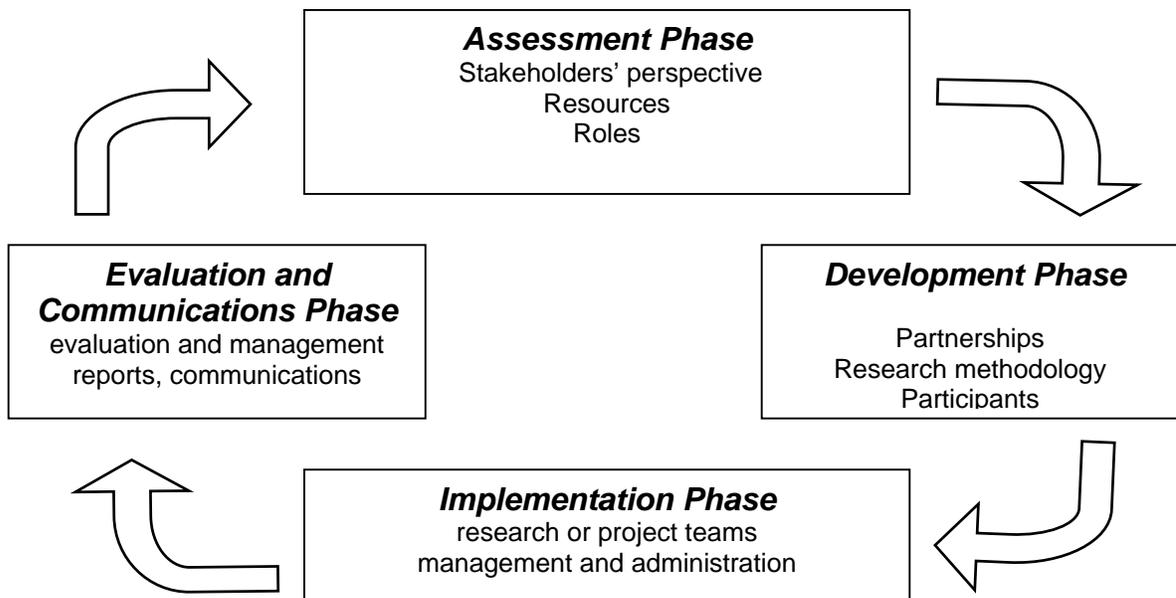


2. Planning Cycle for Research or Applied Research Activities

The planning cycle (Figure 2) for research or applied activities is used to select and monitor research or applied research activities. The phases and sequencing are typical of other planning models; however, the considerations that need to be taken into account may vary. The fundamental benefit for any planning model is that the research activity is being properly organized and managed.

Using a well-established research planning model planning process will help the Westman Superintendents' Group refine its decision-making process, help establish research and project teams, evaluate impact and processes; and, ensure that effective communication on matters of interest to rural communities.

Figure 2: Research Planning Model



Each phase of the planning cycle includes several considerations requiring reflection and/or decisions. Reflection of these and other considerations will help the Group identify the research question and approach that is the most suitable to provide timely and effective influence on educational policies and practice. Generally, these include considerations that

1. present various options for action.
2. identify the role of the Westman Superintendents' Group in the research or applied research activity.
3. identify the resources available to undertake the research. These considerations include the availability of human and financial resources and the availability of data to inform the research.

RDI ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Scott Grills, Chair
Brandon University
Brandon, MB

Mona Cornock
Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives
Brandon, MB

Larry Flynn
Public Health Agency of Canada
Winnipeg, MB

Reg Helwer
Shur-Gro Farm Services
Brandon, MB

Ben Maendel
Baker Hutterite Colony
MacGregor, MB

Jonathon Maendel
Baker Hutterite Colony
MacGregor, MB

Darell Pack
Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
Winnipeg, MB

W.J. (Bill) Pugh
Meyers Norris Penny
Brandon, MB

Fran Racher
Brandon University
Brandon, MB

Doug Ramsey
Brandon University
Brandon, MB

Peter Reimer
Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives
Winnipeg, MB

Frank Thomas
Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce
Brandon, MB

Larry Wark
MTS Communications Inc.
Brandon, MB

Jeff Williams
Brandon University
Brandon, MB

Dion Wiseman
Brandon University
Brandon, MB

Robert Annis, Director
RDI, Brandon University
Brandon, MB

The role of the RDI Advisory Committee is to provide general advice and direction to the Institute on matters of rural concern. On a semi-annual basis the Committee meets to share information about issues of mutual interest in rural Manitoba and foster linkages with the constituencies they represent.