

Local Leadership needed now more than ever - Opinion

Since the suspension of classroom learning and subsequent rapid shift to remote learning took place in Manitoba schools in March, education leaders have been working relentlessly to meet all students' needs in a nimble, 21st-century blended learning environment.

To say that the superintendents and senior administrators of this province's school divisions have gone above and beyond in the last seven months is the understatement of the year. Simply put, without these teams of professionals, supported by their locally elected school boards, the government would not have been able to provide remote learning in the spring or to reopen schools this fall.

As a member of the department of education's response planning team, the Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA), along with other key education partners, has been consulted and engaged extensively on the development of the many draft, contingency, auxiliary and finalized plans that have resulted in students returning to safe learning environments.

On the question of how best to communicate these plans and shifts between various pandemic response levels, in an effort to mitigate anxiety among parents and front-line staff in education, there may be no correct answer. As the employers of all of this province's front-line education staff, (teachers, educational assistants, bus drivers, custodians, social workers, clinicians, principals, senior administrators and others), we can empathize with the government's need to be transparent while at the same time trying to ward off accusations of fear-mongering and insensitivity to stresses being felt in every school across Manitoba.

School boards have an acute awareness of the incredible stress and anxiety being experienced in our schools.

At the political and governance level, the gravity of this pandemic and its potential impact on schools was made clear to school boards when Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen announced the imminent suspension of classes — appropriately, in person at MSBA's annual general meeting in Winnipeg — on March 13.

Since that tumultuous day, I have appreciated the consistent communication the minister has engaged in with myself and other leaders in education in our province. Of course, when we reflect back on that announcement, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that on that day in March we were also anticipating the imminent release of the report of the review of K-12 education. Instead, it has been indefinitely delayed as result of the COVID-19 pandemic — or so we thought.

As part of the government messaging around the throne speech in early October, and then again this week with the introduction of new education-focused legislation, it has been publicly implied that in the interests of austerity, the report and implementation of the K-12 review's recommendations should somehow be jammed into the already-stressful world of public education in Manitoba as a means to start reducing "red-tape and administrative waste."

The only message school boards, superintendents, senior administration teams and, indeed, all Manitobans should be hearing at this time of spiking cases and community transmission of COVID-19 is one of respect and sincere appreciation for the flexibility, determination and professionalism with which

the plans of the department of education and Manitoba Public Health have been locally tailored and successfully executed in every community school across Manitoba.

At a cost of less than a nickel of every education dollar spent, school boards and superintendents are not pulling money from the classroom — they are literally allocating every available cent to ensure that all students have a safe learning environment, staff have a safe workplace and families have confidence in their locally governed public schools.

Since the announcement of the K-12 review in 2018, school boards across this province have been engaged in "full court press" advocacy for all Manitobans in each of their unique communities, because we know that our public schools are best served by democratically driven local decision-making.

The collaboration between superintendents and their school boards, especially over the last seven months, has allowed for the provision of a safe and sustainable public education system for Manitoba families in the midst of this pandemic. As we continue to navigate the coming months and years, our students will continue to be best served by that same local voice and local choice in the governance of their schools.

This is the most important reality that must inform any future considerations on the implementation of the K-12 review.

Alan Campbell is president of the Manitoba School Boards Association.