



LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND SERVICE FOR MANITOBA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

June 20, 2016

To: all Members of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly

From: the Provincial Executive, Manitoba School Boards Association

Dear Member of the Legislative Assembly:

On June 15th, Bill 8, titled *The Protecting Children (Information Sharing) Act*, was read for a first time in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly by the Minister of Families, the Honourable Scott Fielding.

On behalf of all public school boards in Manitoba, our association would like to affirm our full support for this proposed legislation.

For many years, staff and students within the public school sector in Manitoba have encountered challenges in the sharing of information between relevant authorities and public schools in instances where vulnerable students may be subject to health-related treatments or to Crown investigations and custody, owing to real instances of child abuse or neglect.

Our sector's ability to provide relevant supports and services to such students has been challenged by statutory or regulated privacy restrictions, often defended by external authorities on the basis that these existing provisions seek to promote student well-being and safety as a primary objective.

Regrettably, these same restrictions tend to result in preventing school staff from accessing much needed information in a timely manner, to ensure that our schools are able to provide necessary supports in the lives of affected students. The restrictions upon sharing of information consequence a limitation upon much needed supports and services that would otherwise be available to our most vulnerable children in their time of need.

With the introduction of Bill 8, the Government has responded to longstanding calls for action for a meaningful intervention in the above circumstances. Most recently, our association was represented alongside of many other organizations with an interest in the promotion of the well-being and education of students, on the Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes for Children in Care. One of the key recommendations arising from a consensus of the task force was to emphasize the need for greater information sharing and liaison, as would be achieved through Bill 8.

Alongside of other provincial school board associations, we were also pleased to tour the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre in Calgary during the most recent meeting of the Canadian School

Boards Association this past May, which took place in that community. Staff employed at the Centre were clear that the establishment of a legislative framework to promote information sharing was a necessary foundation for the creation of such a centre in Calgary. Each month, hundreds of cases of suspected and alleged child abuse and neglect are responded to through the Centre, using a multi-disciplinary approach by members of relevant authorities in that jurisdiction. Federal and local police services, health and child welfare agencies, and ministry of education staff work together, side by side, under the enabling authority provided by Alberta's comparable *Children First* law, to ensure that all affected children receive streamlined services and supports.

The Manitoba Government's commitment to move forward with a made in Manitoba strategy for achieving the same outcomes and benefits as are currently being provided to children in the Calgary community, will provide significant advantages in our province for the sake of all affected children.

We therefore call upon all Members of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba to move forward with their consideration and study of Bill 8 with a view to achieving non-partisanship in the best interests of every child, family and community in Manitoba. It is our perspective that greater openness of information between relevant authorities and the authority to share information represent compelling intentions for supporting this Bill. Once enacted, its provisions will serve to better advance the cause of child protection, thereby ensuring the well-being and safety of our most vulnerable students.

On behalf of the Provincial Executive of the Manitoba School Boards Association,



Ken Cameron
President

Cc: Deputy Minister Joy Cramer, Manitoba Ministry of Families
Deputy Minister Bramwell Strain, Manitoba Ministry of Education and Training
Darlene MacDonald, Children's Advocate for Manitoba