

We need to talk

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It's been an interesting week for anyone with a stake in public education in Manitoba—and that means everyone. The provincial schools funding announcement was unveiled on Thursday. As always, it generated a good deal of discussion, and that discussion was even more intense than usual this year.

The announcement included an overall increase of \$6.6 million dollars in support to public schools, or 0.5%. This figure is below the rate of inflation, and the lowest increase in almost two decades. The announcement included additional funding to support newcomer students' English-language learning needs—\$40,000, province-wide, or about half of the cost of one teaching position. It challenged school boards to increase efficiencies by mandating a 15% decrease in their already capped administration costs. The announcement also restricted any increase to the local education property tax and, in the name of efficiency, a move to a single provincial bargaining table for teachers.

Given that this was specifically a funding announcement, it's not unexpected that money figures so prominently. But we can't make good decisions about cost without a concurrent discussion about value, and that's something that has been missing for too long when it comes to public education in Manitoba.

Most Manitobans would agree that strong schools are critical to our province's success, but how do we define "strong"? What do we expect of our schools? Are strong schools the ones that consistently produce top results in national and international assessments? Should schools support students in developing skills and habits to help them remain active and healthy throughout their lives? Should they challenge and support every student, according to individual circumstances and need? Support mental well-being? Prepare future workers? Future citizens?

Some people take a traditional view of public education and prioritize academic indicators of student success, or see education as preparation for future work. Others believe that students' physical and emotional well-being are prerequisites for their academic success, and that schools need to focus resources in those areas. Yet other people embrace an expanded role for schools as incubators of social justice, equity and democracy.

Each component of students' school experience—academic, vocational, physical, cultural, social—enhances their education. But resources are always limited, and one of the major responsibilities of school boards is to balance priorities and expectations with fiscal realities. To do that, school boards consult with community members as they set their budgets, something that is happening right now in school divisions across the province in advance of the March 15 deadline for budget submission to the province. Talk to your local school board trustees, and they will be able to tell you about school services or programs that have been added or eliminated in recent years, and how and why those decisions were made. There will be a common theme underlying their answers: community needs, expectations, and priorities.

But while conversations about public schools happen regularly at the local level, it has been years since we engaged in a comprehensive provincial discussion about education. So, we've taken to treating education as a random assortment of disconnected parts, and acted accordingly. Worried about

students' physical well-being? Add a couple of phys. ed. credits to the graduation requirements. International assessments not ranking Manitoba's students as highly as we would like? Dedicate resources to improving instructional practices. On the surface, decisions like these make sense, but sometimes they have ripple effects, or only address part of the problem they are intended to solve. More compulsory credits in high school means fewer optional credits for students to explore personal interests and career options. Changing instructional practices may improve the test scores for some students, but others will find academic success only when we provide the physical, mental, and social supports they need.

Let me bring this back to my starting point: money. Education is an investment, and a critical one. As a result of the recent education funding announcement, school boards know how much they have to invest in public education for the upcoming year. And while they are disappointed that they will not have the resources needed to do all that can be done to support kids in Manitoba's classrooms, they will work with their communities to make sure that the investments they do make are wise ones. But while that is happening, and certainly before funding is announced for the 2019-20 school year, Manitobans need to engage in a public dialogue about what we want from our schools and what it means to be educated. And after they do that, they need to hold the provincial government and their school board to account for creating and supporting public schools that can meet their expectations.