

EDUCATION SHOULD NOT SUFFER DUE TO REFORMS, TAXES – *The Brandon Sun*

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"If we are to protect a high quality, public school system that is truly public, then school boards matter. They matter because (i) they can represent local voices about the education of a community's children and youth; and (ii) because they have a degree of autonomy in making local decisions that reflect those local voices."

— Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba "Why Strong Manitoba School Boards Matter."

"Over the past sixty years, there has always been consensus that, in order (for) local school boards to continue to meet local needs, some portion of fiscal autonomy remains desirable. For us, achieving the 80 per cent provincial and 20 per cent local share would serve to realize this priority."

— Manitoba School Boards Association, "2020 Vision."

In the last provincial election, Brian Pallister's Progressive Conservatives promised to begin phasing out education property taxes over the course of a decade, starting in 2023, once the party had balanced the budget by its timetable of 2022.

Following Pallister's announcement earlier this month of a \$5-million surplus – on paper at least – for the 2019-20 fiscal year ending last March, the premier felt compelled to move forward on that promise this week by recommitting to that gradual phase out during the government throne speech this past week.

Pallister told media that the government plans to make up for the lost tax revenue by growing the economy, rather than "taxing

people out of their own homes, by punishing people when they make improvements in their own businesses, and by hurting families who are struggling enough to make ends meet without having to pay disproportionately higher education taxes than anyone else in Canada."

No doubt this had many landowners in rural Manitoba cheering, as there has long been a complaint that successive provincial governments have been offloading more and more education funding to local school boards, who only have one recourse to make up any shortfall – raising the local mill rates through municipal taxation.

The premier is certainly not wrong to point out that Manitobans pay disproportionately more in education taxes than any other province. Statistics Canada data published by the MSBA in its "2020 Vision" document last year showed that in 2016, 38 per cent of education funding in this province came from property taxation, while the province paid 55 per cent, and the remainder (six per cent) came through other sources.

It's not really surprising that property owners would like to see school boards lose the ability to levy taxes, but what they may not realize is that the local decisions on the ground made by locally-elected officials could be nullified if this is not done with care.

Until now, the results of the final report from the Tories' Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education have been withheld from the public, as our government switched priorities to begin battling the pandemic last March – right around the same time the report was to be

released. That independent review was widely believed by teachers' unions and the NDP as a pretext that would pave the way for the Pallister government to eliminate local school boards.

Those fears likely grew after Winnipeg media questioned Pallister on Wednesday whether the government would indeed do away with school boards. As our sister paper the Winnipeg Free Press reported, the premier did not give a direct answer but said that the province needs to look for better ways of doing things.

"Too much money's spent at the top of our education system," he said. "We need those resources moved to the front line. We're failing our kids when we're ranked 10th out of 10 (provinces) in every category of comparative analysis."

While we have had our own reservations when it comes to school board spending decisions over the years, parents must surely see the relevance that local officials can have when it comes to coordinating our

childrens' education. This is especially true of the last eight months as the division administration in Brandon have worked with local principals, teachers and provincial officials to create guidelines designed to get students back into the classrooms – virtually and otherwise – while keeping them as safe and healthy as possible.

We are not against plans to phase out education property taxes, provided it's done with an eye to preserving local voices in the continued deliverance of education in this province, and that the quality of education in Manitoba does not suffer as a result.

But our premier has not yet offered proof that economic growth in Manitoba will be able to make up the estimated \$830 million shortfall lost through such a phase-out plan. And with a massive, pandemic-induced spending deficit now in the books — one that could potentially take decades to pay off — Pallister's plan seems like so much wishful thinking.