

Back to class on education reform

Calling Bill 64 ‘lightning rod,’ Cullen says focus now on consultations, repairing burned bridges

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MANITOBA’S unsuccessful sixmonth campaign to sell the benefits of Bill 64 has come to a halt, with the minister in charge of public schooling admitting defeat by putting reform plans on hold.

Education Minister Cliff Cullen provided an update on the Education Modernization Act — controversial legislation that, at its crux, aimed to replace English-language school boards with a centralized education authority — at a news conference Thursday.

“The governance model was certainly a lightning rod,” said Cullen. “We recognize that, so we’re scrapping Bill 64.”

The proposed reorganization — unveiled in March at the same time as the delayed 2019 education review — and related uncertainty raised stress levels in schools already grappling with COVID-19 disruptions and led some staff to leave in search of more stable careers.

Cullen acknowledged the legislation created anxiety, but he stopped short of apologizing for how the province handled the unpopular bill.

Calling improving education a journey rather than a sprint, he told reporters the province’s focus will be on ongoing consultation and repairing burned bridges with stakeholders while an overhaul of education is halted indefinitely.

“Our priorities are wanting to make sure our students and staff are safe over the next few months as we battle the fourth wave,” he said.

Bill 64 was slated to set up a school system run by government appointees. The legislation also proposed parent advisory councils be revamped to give volunteer guardians an opportunity to weigh in on school hiring, budgeting and student assessments.

Cullen repeatedly touted the reforms as measures that would empower parents to participate in their children’s education and save up to \$40 million in administrative expenses.

Meantime, critics were outspoken about concerns local voices would be silenced without school board trustees and the fact that the most recent round of amalgamations did not result in savings. Numerous anti-Bill 64 campaigns distributed lawn signs across the province to forward their fight.

NDP education critic Nello Altomare was quick to call out the province for its reluctance to scrap Bill 64 earlier. More than 500 people, a record in the Manitoba legislative assembly, signed up to speak about the bill at the committee stage.

“Instead of being focused on kids, they’re focused on a political agenda, and that part is concerning,” said Altomare.

Cullen previously called opponents — including the Manitoba Teachers’ Society, Manitoba School Boards Association and Manitoba Association of Parent Councils — a “vocal minority” and accused stakeholders of spreading misinformation.

The education minister’s tone changed late last month; after endorsing Heather Stefanson as a leadership candidate for the Progressive Conservatives, he smirked and clapped at his colleague’s campaign kickoff when she promised to scrap Bill 64 if elected.

Thursday marked his first media appearance since video showing him cheering at the Aug. 18 event sparked calls for his resignation. When asked about his reaction, Cullen dodged a direct answer, noting there are nuances between his roles as an elected official and minister.

Cullen said cabinet decided to seriously consider backing down from Bill 64 recently when there was an opportunity to reconvene and collectively discuss feedback on it.

Not long after freshly minted interim Premier Kelvin Goertzen was sworn in Wednesday, he announced five contentious bills — including 64 — that were delayed in the spring would be thrown out so a new leader can start with a blank legislative agenda.

Cullen could not say Thursday whether revised education reforms will

be introduced during the 2021-22 school year. He indicated the next premier and cabinet will make such decisions, although the province intends to reflect on the K-12 review and Better Education Starts Today strategy, a broad provincial action plan that draws on review commission recommendations and complements Bill 64.

The fact Bill 64 disregards the commission’s suggestion to amalgamate boards and redesign them so there are both appointed and elected trustee positions on them is among the many criticisms levelled about the legislation.

Alan Campbell, president of the school board association, said he slept well Wednesday night for the first time in a long time.

“It’s very good news,” said Campbell, a trustee in the Interlake, “but at the end of the day, we have to rebuild our relationship with the government that tried to eliminate us.”

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Education Minister Cliff Cullen could not say if reforms will still be introduced this school year.

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