

# Cullen lashes out at opponents of Bill 64

By: Kyle Darbyson

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While Education Minister Cliff Cullen (left) said Monday that opponents of Bill 64 are distorting the legislation for their own purposes, NDP Leader Wab Kinew (right) argued Cullen's remarks do little to alleviate the public's fears. (Winnipeg Free Press)

Education Minister Cliff Cullen used a Monday afternoon press conference to "set the record straight" on Bill 64, the Education Modernization Act.

For more than 30 minutes, the Spruce Woods MLA talked about how the nuts of bolts of this legislation — which aims to totally reshape Manitoba's education system — is largely being distorted by groups like the Manitoba NDP, the Manitoba School Boards Association and the Manitoba Teachers' Society for their own political gain.

"Unfortunately, the purpose of their campaign is to instil fear and anxiety in parents and educators," Cullen told reporters on Monday. "These parties want to maintain the status quo. The

status quo is we are spending the third-highest amount per capita in the country (on education) and are achieving some of the poorest results."

The minister went on to list a bunch of "misconceptions" about Bill 64 that are perpetuated by the Manitoba NDP and its affiliates.

Ever since this legislation came to light in March, the Progressive Conservative government has maintained that the goal of Bill 64 is to get rid of the administrative bloat that is plaguing the education system and redirect those funds to support teachers and students instead.



Wab Kinew

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In order to accomplish this feat, Bill 64 will dissolve all of the province's various school boards, except the one governing the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine, and pass a lot of the major decision-making power to a single provincial education authority (made up of appointees).

On Monday, Cullen said that this transitional process will not result in any major disruptions to everyday life in the classroom, contrary to what some teachers and parents have heard from groups like the NDP.

The minister also mentioned that this new centralized authority, under Bill 64, will not be used to close down rural schools or penalize teachers for poor assessment results of their students.

In response to criticisms about how Bill 64 doesn't address systemic problems like poverty or mental health, Cullen said that those issues will be tackled through their broader Better Education Starts Today strategy, instead of being relegated to one piece of legislation.

"Poverty can't be legislated away," he said. "We are going to address the poverty issue through our poverty reduction strategy in conjunction with our poverty reduction committee of cabinet."

Cullen closed out his opening statements by encouraging concerned citizens to visit the new "Facts vs. Fiction" section of [bettereducationmb.ca](http://bettereducationmb.ca), which will outline how they've been misled by the NDP and other groups in more explicit detail.

"Do not be distracted by a campaign designed for the political gain of the opposition and their political friends," the minister said.

In response, Manitoba NDP Leader Wab Kinew told the Sun on Monday afternoon that Cullen's news conference will do very little to alleviate people's legitimate fears surrounding the potential impact of Bill 64.

"You saw nothing in the way of any acknowledgement that there are many legitimate concerns that people have," Kinew said over the phone. "And because the government refuses to acknowledge those legit concerns, I'm pretty skeptical that they're going to change course in a way that will actually help education."

Plus, Kinew added that Cullen spread some misinformation of his own on Monday, specifically when it comes to issues like the province's ability to close down rural schools under Bill 64.

"Right now the minister, somebody who is elected and is accountable to the public, has to sign off on a school closure," he said. "That will no longer be the case after Bill 64. That would happen behind closed doors."

However, Kinew remains confident that the province's most recent attempt at dismissing legitimate criticisms of Bill 64 is going to backfire in the long run.

"Because you have a lot of reasonable people who have spent a lot of time reading a very long bill, we're talking more than 300 pages here, and they've come up with their own conclusions," he said. "And for the minister and for the Pallister government to try and label those people as those who are not thinking critically ... I think it's going to turn those folks off for sure."

Moving into the summer, Kinew said the Manitoba NDP's strategy to consult with parents, educators and other concerned citizens through virtual town halls and other means is not going to change.

After all, the Fort Rouge MLA claims that the opposition party has already gained tremendous grassroots support in opposing Bill 64, having recently garnered 15,000 signatures for their "Prove Cullen Wrong" petition in a matter of days.

Plus, Kinew said that more than 400 Manitobans have already registered to take part in the committee hearings on Bill 64 that are coming this fall, which just goes to show how the public's broader unease about Bill 64 isn't going away anytime soon.

"So we're going to keep working hard to reach out to as many Manitobans as possible because what the minister's missing here is that this thing isn't about us," he said. "It's about people out there having some real serious concerns about what this bill is going to do."

The legislature is expected to vote on Bill 64 this coming fall.

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