

# Education minister seeks advice of 30 teens on school issues

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MUCH to Namirembe Afatsawo’s dismay, remote learning won’t stop for high-schoolers who study French immersion in The Pas once the pandemic ends.

The 15-year-old has learned that, owing to a shortage of French educators, e-learning is not uncommon at Margaret Barbour Collegiate.

“One thing for sure I’d like to see improved is the French immersion program in rural places,” said Namirembe, who just finished Grade 9. “We have a lot of combined classes with mixed grades, so sometimes the classes can be pretty big... (and) lots of our teachers actually live in other towns, so we connect through a TV system.”

Namirembe would rather talk with teachers face-to-face so she doesn’t have to worry about asking complicated questions over email — which is among the items she wants to discuss with the education minister, as a member of Manitoba’s new student advisory council.

Thirty teenagers have been tapped to advise the minister on public school matters as the province proceeds with its agenda to dismantle divisions, implement new standardized tests, and overhaul the school funding model, among other things.

Starting next month, each student will serve a year-long volunteer

term, during which there will be meetings to discuss topics related to schooling and feedback on provincial plans.

Education Minister Cliff Cullen announced Wednesday the province had confirmed 30 members, out of 200 applicants who indicated interest in sharing insights about challenges they and their peers face at school. “These students come with diverse interests, identities, backgrounds and perspectives from across the province, including Indigenous, French language, LGBTTQ+, visible minority students and students with disabilities,” said Cullen, during his opening remarks at a press conference.

Eleven students identify as visible minorities, four are Indigenous, six said they have a disability, and two are part of the LGBTTQ+ community.

Approximately half of the students selected attend school in Winnipeg, including the daughter of Manitoba’s chief public health officer. The other participants study in Mystery Lake, Hanover and other rural and northern divisions in between. Five of the members are private school pupils.

Common themes raised in applications include mental health, diversity and inclusion, reconciliation, and regional equality in schooling, Cullen said.

As far as Namirembe is concerned, areas for improvement include creating a French tutoring program for highschoolers and addressing the immersion teacher shortage in rural

areas so upper-level courses, such as biology and chemistry, can be offered in French.

“I was really hoping that I could do (all my courses) in French, just to practise comprehending French in different subjects, but that won’t be an option. If we could get teachers to teach those subjects in French, that would be really great,” added the student, who plans to study either social sciences or politics after she gets her diploma.

Asked about assurances the province will act on the council’s insights, Cullen said it’s critical to engage students to make sure the province fully appreciates the barriers to their success.

The youth council details were announced in the wake of parent engagement town halls and the minister’s 2021 “teacher listening tour” — both of which critics suggest are merely for appearances, citing the fact Bill 64 ignores the K-12 review’s recommendation about public school governance.

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**Namirembe Afatsawo**