

School trustee, principal worry Manitoba's education overhaul could spell the end of cultural programs

Seven Oaks School Division leaders worry proposed Bill 64's approach won't prioritize diverse initiatives

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Greg McFarlane is a trustee in the Seven Oaks School Division. He said people in the area are proud of the cultural programming they've developed over the years, but he's worried about what Manitoba's proposed education overhaul will mean for those initiatives. (John Einarson/CBC)

Educators in part of Winnipeg with flourishing newcomer populations say they're worried Manitoba's proposed education overhaul will put their school division's cultural programming at risk.

Those initiatives range from classes in Ojibwe and Ukrainian to a bhangra dance program to division-wide powwows — and Seven Oaks School Division trustee Greg McFarlane said he's concerned Bill 64 will mean they could fall by the wayside.

That's because the proposed public school reform would dissolve English-language school boards and centralize decision-making with the government, leaving Winnipeg with one parent to advise the province on the needs of every student in the city.

"They may not make these sorts of programs a priority for this area of the city," said McFarlane, who's also the school board's chair.

"So all that work and progress that we've done is now at the mercy of, say, one individual."

According to the 2016 census, northwest Winnipeg has seen a significant increase in newcomers since 2006.

That's true in particular for people from the Philippines and South Asia, populations that more than doubled in that time period. Filipino people now make up roughly 30 per cent of the area's population, while South Asian residents make up about 19 per cent.

McFarlane said people in the school division are proud of how their programs celebrate the different cultures of the people who go to their schools.

Learning family languages

That includes Ron Escala's Filipino bilingual class at Arthur E. Wright Community School, where students learn a language that helps them in the classroom and outside of it.

In their virtual class one day at the end of May, Escala and his students talked about why rain is important.

He reminded them of the tomatoes they planted in the school's community garden:
"Tayo ay nagtanim ng mga kamatis para makatulong sa pamayanan."

They did that on Tuesday, one of Escala's students reminded him.

"And what is Tuesday in Filipino?" he asked his class.

"Martes!"

Eight-year-old twins Isabel and Anabel Sarmiento said the class helps them communicate with their family, most of whom still live in the Philippines.

"That's why I like to go to the Filipino bilingual program, so I could help them have not a hard time speaking in English," Isabel said.

This year, there are 32 students registered from Grade 1 to Grade 3. Next year, there will be 40.

Funding decisions unclear

Over at École Templeton, principal Michelle Jean-Paul said she has some say over how much money goes to cultural programs in her school.

But under the proposed overhaul, she's not sure how much say the new parent councils will soon have over those decisions — and she's worried her school division could lose what makes it special, like its celebrations for Diwali and Philippines Independence Day and groups where students learn drumming and jigging.

"I don't know that parents recognize that these are choices. I think it's just become part of our identity as a school and I think they definitely would respond to those things, should they go missing from our school identity," she said.



Michelle Jean-Paul is the principal of Templeton School. She says cultural programs in her school division are hugely important — and she's worried about how Manitoba's proposed education overhaul could affect them. (Sam Samson/CBC)

Jean-Paul said it's crucial for voices of Black and Indigenous people and people of colour to be included in the rollout of the bill, but she's worried they might be hesitant to raise their hands because they haven't historically been represented by the system.

She's also concerned about the effect that could ultimately have on students.

"My fear is that we'll kind of go back to creating a school system that is less welcoming to children that come from very different walks of life than what the school system traditionally has been intended for," Jean-Paul said.

"How do we engage students who don't see themselves reflected in their schools, who don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum, in the activities, in the learning that happens on a day-to-day basis?"

And with teacher burnout already increasing during the pandemic, Jean-Paul said she's worried the new bill will come with curriculum changes.

That could mean teachers will have to spend more time retraining and less time running cultural programming that often only happens because staff volunteer their time during lunch or after school, she said.

Bill delayed until fall

Education Minister Cliff Cullen said the province is engaging with communities through forums, task forces and advisory councils to make sure local school priorities are addressed in the education overhaul. School divisions are also being included in planning, he said.

"Attention will be given to ensure that students see themselves reflected and respected in all educational spaces and that learning environments infuse culturally safe and evidence-informed strategies," Cullen said through a spokesperson in an email.

In March, the Opposition NDP announced it would delay Bill 64, also known as the Education Modernization Act. It won't get a second reading until the fall.