

## LETTER: Separating fact from fiction

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Education Minister Cliff Cullen takes questions from media during a press conference in Winnipeg earlier this month. (Winnipeg Free Press)

There is a popular children's story in which an emperor is led to believe that wearing no clothes is the finest apparel. The emperor struts about believing he is displaying the finest fashion. Unfortunately for the emperor, the people can literally see right through this. All credibility's lost as a result.

Enter the "Fact vs Fiction" press conference hosted by Education Minister Cliff Cullen on June 14. While alleging that our association's "Local Voices, Local Choices" and "Sign Up For 64" public information campaigns are designed to bolster partisan politics in favour of the opposition NDP, Cullen concluded that only the government was spokesperson for the truth.

The minister fails to see that school boards have absolutely no interest in supporting any political party. Among the elected in our country, school boards remain unaffiliated. Trustee candidates run for office based on what's best for kids and communities, not what's best for a party.

If factual information on Bill 64 as shared by non-political school boards plays into the hands of his opposition, then the minister should really look in the mirror to see why the entire province is snickering at what, under Bill 64, he actually believes is a better strategy for education in a province that already remains among the world's best-performing systems. Instead, the mirrors are only filled with smoke— "last in the country," "third-highest spending," "poorest outcomes," etc, etc, etc. This the minister knows very well — or does he?

During the same press conference, Cullen provided further "clarifications." "There will be no disruptions to students or teachers." If introducing wholesale reforms in the midst of a pandemic is not understood as the biggest disruption in over a century, then Broadway is more isolated than COVID demands. The minister's listening tours, following the release of his strategy, called on schools to divert much-needed focus away from kids, to engage with government during the last weeks of school. And most of the "listening" was then required on the part of these teachers and principals as the minister delivered twenty minutes of scripted narrative at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars in diverted salary on the part of these staff.

The minister laid more bare facts on the table, stating that Bill 64 won't affect local business interests. "We will design a strategy for regional procurement where it makes sense to do so."

When a politician starts telling you they're going to use their own "sense" to design any strategy, that is clear enough. Particularly when driven by fiscal efficiency. If it is anything like the "sense" and "efficiency" used by the government to continue reforming healthcare during a raging pandemic, then we are greatly concerned for our communities, students, schools, employers, and local businesses.

Under healthcare, the sense used by this government is counted in lives lost. For education, it will be counted by opportunities missed. Local programs are discontinued because politicians believe their cost is inefficient. Purchasing is exercised by Broadway because this government believes central services are far more efficient than local services. In real terms, this has meant closures of agricultural offices in rural Manitoba and hospital beds province-wide, while eliminating your MPI refunds and hiking Hydro costs.

There is far too much at stake for this to happen. There is no Alberta or Ontario where we can airlift our most vulnerable students. There are no North Dakota truck stops where our schools will receive key programs when these are needed the most.

Much that can be written regarding the minister's new clothes we have done so, on [localvoices.ca](http://localvoices.ca). About how, from government's perspective, schools will not be closed under Bill 64, even as the moratorium on school closures is removed under Bill 64. How bus routes will not be extended, even as Bill 64 eliminates the current one-hour maximum on the same. How parents will be engaged "more than ever," even as the government has already removed the once

required annual meeting with their association. How communities' voices will be "heard," even as their right to elect and sit on local boards is stripped away. How an appointed advisory council will represent communities when such council already exists by law — though not convened even once during the past two decades, notwithstanding a clear legal mandate that government do so.

We could go on, but trust that Manitobans see all of this for what it truly is: a bare naked parade on the part of a minister whose chief clothier — the premier — has handed him an invisible cloak as "fact." If the apparel that our association wears is "fiction" and if it promotes the cause of the opposition in any way, then this government has lost touch with its own core values beyond repair. No stitching can close the many rips they themselves have torn in the process.

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