

Parent councils join school reform pushback

MAGGIE MACINTOSH

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE
REPORTER

PARENT councils are the latest to critique the public school overhaul.

Their campaign calls into question the Pallister government’s promise that looming changes will empower caregivers.

The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils launched the Education Vision Coalition on Tuesday, joining various anti-Bill 64 movements critical of intentions to replace elected trustees with a centralized authority of government appointees.

The province has touted changes, including new caregiver-run school councils, as ways to empower parents — but a coalition spokesperson said Bill 64 is, in some ways, “empowering them too much.”

“Fundraising used to be the No. 1 issue for (councils). That’s no longer the case. We have to think beyond the bake sale. Parents are dealing with issues such as bullying, drugs, gangs, and suicide,” said executive director Brenda Brazeau, a mother in River East Transcona.

Brazeau said the legislation asks busy parents to volunteer to take on roles similar to those done by paid trustees. It is difficult enough as it is to engage parents on councils, she said, adding some schools do not have active parent

groups.
The Education Modernization Act could come into force as early as October. It would collapse 37 divisions into 15 regions and replace parent councils with school community councils.

Located in every school, new councils will “advise” principals on matters related to student achievement, staff hires and performance, and annual budgets, among other things. Under the new model, parent engagement officers connected to every school will take on similar roles to the parent council association, such as answering parent calls and training councils on fundraising.

Brazeau said her association will no longer be the official voice of schoolbased parent groups — which was solidified in legislation in 2013 — and it remains unclear whether the province will continue to fund it.

The association has an annual budget of \$100,000 in provincial funding and about \$20,000 in school registration fees.

In a statement, Education Minister Cliff Cullen countered the argument parents will be expected to do the work of trustees or educators.

“Our government believes there’s a role for parents and caregivers in the decisions and operations of their children’s schools,” Cullen said. “Through school community councils all parents can use their

knowledge to advise principals about school planning and priorities, new programming, and staffing needs, for example wanting teachers with cultural knowledge reflective of the school community, or certain subject area expertise.”

The Education Vision Coalition — composed not only of parents, but also both current and former educators and school leaders, and trustees — calls for the bill to be scrapped; it has created toolkits for families on Bill 64 and how it differs from Manitoba’s fiveyear education strategy.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca
Twitter: @macintoshmaggie



Brenda Brazeau, executive director of the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, says Bill 64 asks busy parents to take on trustee-like roles.

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