

Op-Ed: Manitobans have concerns about Bill 64

Rural Voices United

In the months since the Manitoba government released Bill 64, much has been said about the bill's removal of many protections for students, schools and communities.

The protections granted by the current legislation are especially important to small rural communities that survive largely due to the fact that they have a public school. Small towns rely on offering high quality local education to attract new families and retain existing ones.

Minister Cullen has responded to criticism of the bill by stating that Bill 64 is only a small part of the government's Better Education Starts Today (BEST) strategy, and that the entirety of the BEST strategy will prevent issues such as school closures from happening.

Minister Cullen comes from a small town, raised his children in a small town, and seems to want what is best for small towns. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, and say that the Minister will endeavour to not allow any harm to come to small towns through the implementation of Bill 64

and, further, that the true intent of the bill is to allow individual schools more autonomy over how they offer educational services in their communities.

While it may be true that Mr. Cullen will not allow harm to come to small towns or their schools while he is the Minister, it is also true that he will not be overseeing Manitoba's education system forever. Mr. Cullen is already the Premier's third Minister of Education in his term in office. How can Minister Cullen make guarantees when he doesn't even know what his portfolio will be next July when the bill is set to be implemented? While the next PC Minister may continue to follow the government's BEST strategy, one day a different political party will be in power and government strategies will change accordingly. Minister Cullen cannot honestly say that protections and intentions not enshrined in legislation will continue to be honoured under a different government.

The measurement of success in a public education system is open to interpretation, the most commonly cited indicators being graduation rate, standardized test scores (the current government's measure), stu-

dent wellbeing, or the fiscal efficiency and cost of the education system. At some point, a future government will use the economics of education as their indicator, and Bill 64 will provide them with the perfect opportunity to gut the system. This future government will be able to use the freedoms provided in Bill 64 to:

- close small, relatively costly rural schools, rather than abide by Minister Cullen's statement that it is not "our intent" (he has never actually said there will be no school closures);
- purchase supplies from the lowest bidder, leading to the loss of tens of thousands of dollars in local purchasing from small businesses, rather than abiding by Minister Cullen's promised local procurement "where it makes sense" (although it is not stated if this means where it makes sense financially from a provincial or local perspective);
- bus children over an hour to larger regional schools after closing the local one, rather than... well, actually Minister Cullen has completely ignored the question of why Bill 64 eliminates the 1-hour maximum bus ride.

Minister Cullen's primary defense of Bill 64 – that it is not the entirety of the government's plan – is short-sighted. If he truly expects protections to be granted, they need to be written in the legislation. One might suggest that, despite 17 years as an MLA, the Minister is either naive or ignorant of the way provincial politics works; but when announcing the legislation, he clearly stated that future governments can change things as they see fit as "that is the nature of provincial politics."

We are left to conclude that the minister is being disingenuous when he uses the BEST strategy to defend the bill. He knows that, if enacted, the impacts of Bill 64 will live on long after the BEST strategy has been discarded.

Minister Cullen has consistently ignored legitimate questions asked to him by his constituents by redirecting concerns about the Bill 64 legislation to promises in the BEST strategy. Every citizen understands that political promises will eventually be broken. Our children and small towns are worth more than broken promises can deliver. Local authority over our schools is crucial to the long term viability of rural Manitoba.