

NDP hold up contentious education bill

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter By: Maggie Macintosh

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Nahanni Fontaine, NDP house leader, said the NDP took steps to delay Bill 64 before the spring legislative session ended Tuesday in order to allow Manitobans more time to study it and fully understand the implications of it. (Ruth Bonneville / Winnipeg Free Press files)

Manitoba MLAs will vote on sweeping education reforms in autumn, after the Tories' last-ditch attempt to expedite second reading of Bill 64 was thwarted before the spring legislative session ended Tuesday.

Last month, the Progressive Conservative government house leader asked the NDP to collaborate on moving up the timeline of committee hearings on the Education Modernization Act.

Since the NDP delayed the bill earlier in the session, second reading is expected Oct. 7, which requires committee hearings to conclude by Nov. 2.

"The government's desire is to ensure that all presenters can have their say on this bill. However, without co-operation, this timeframe will cause some difficulty," wrote Kelvin Goertzen, government house leader, in a letter dated May 28.

More than 300 presenters have signed up to speak about the legislation, which will replace elected school boards with a centralized authority.

Nahanni Fontaine, NDP house leader, responded to Goertzen Tuesday, saying the NDP took the step of delaying consideration of the bill in order to allow Manitobans more time to study it and fully understand the implications of it.



As various anti-Bill 64 signs pop up on lawns across the province, Education Minister Cliff Cullen has suggested a vocal minority opposes the reforms and is spreading misinformation about them. (Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press files)

Fontaine wrote that his proposal, which would have required second reading by Tuesday, would advance harmful changes to public education, and require presenters to start organizing themselves at the busy start of the school year in September.

"Bill 64 will... centralize power in hand-picked appointees decided by government. This, and many other harmful changes in the bill have sparked widespread opposition from thousands of Manitobans across every region in the province," she added, before calling on the government to withdraw the bill immediately.

As various anti-Bill 64 signs pop up on lawns across the province, Education Minister Cliff Cullen has suggested a vocal minority opposes the reforms and is spreading misinformation about them.

"Clearly the NDP do not want to discuss education reform, improving student outcomes, and getting the supports to teachers and front-line educators but would rather continue their campaign of misinformation for their own political gain," Cullen said in a statement Tuesday.

The abolition of elected school trustees has raised concerns about the new governance system being undemocratic.

NDP education critic Nello Altomare said in a release Tuesday there are concerns the bill could lead to the closure of rural schools, loss of culturally relevant programming, and more cuts to classrooms.

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