

Bill 64: the numbers don't add up

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MUCH has been said about the impact of the proposed Education Modernization Act (Bill 64) on educational services for all children enrolled in Manitoba public schools. A large part of the impact is related to the funds available to maintain all existing programs and services.

The provincial government currently only provides between 35 and 60 per cent of the funds for programs and services, depending on which programs and/or services the students require in order to have a successful learning experience.

In the most recent provincial report on actual expenditures for all public school divisions/districts, in the 2019-20 school year, the expenditures totalled \$2.5 billion, of which the provincial government provided only \$1.5 billion (approximately 60 per cent of the total costs). The remaining \$1 billion was raised by local school boards through local property taxes (\$900 million) as well as funds from the federal government and First Nations communities.

Without school boards and local property taxes, where will the rest of the money come from?

In 2019-20, the actual expenditures for supports and services for high-risk students totalled \$457 million. Provincial government funding support was less than 35 per cent, particularly in the urban areas. Based on locally identified student needs and parental demands, these support services include specialized programs, educational assistants, specialized teaching staff and supports for teachers to address the needs of individual students, as well as specialized supports for new immigrant families. Sixty-five per cent of these expenditures were paid for by local property taxpayers.

The Better Education Starts Today document states that where you live changes how well you learn, because school funding is based on the ability to raise money through property taxes — somehow equating the ability to learn with funding mechanisms. Since the province provides less than 60 per cent of funding support, local school boards have been left with no choice but to use the only option they have — property taxation — to obtain sufficient resources for important programming to support student and local community needs.

Parents, and even some employees of government agencies, have moved their children/ clients into other school divisions to obtain programs and services not available in their home school division.

How will these highly effective and extremely necessary programs and services continue to be provided, particularly in highrisk vulnerable communities?

Manitoba Education's "Facts and Fiction" document states that "unique local programming will still be allowed" and "changes ensure more resources for our classrooms." How will that happen without the government providing more funds?

Both the premier and the minister of education consistently tout that the implementation of Bill 64 will result in a "saving" of \$40 million, which is the entire allocation for trustees, senior administration and secretary-treasurers. One would assume that at least some of these funds would have to be used for the salaries of the 15 regional directors, at least 15 secretary-treasurers and the support staff required. What happens to all the other support staff currently in school board offices?

Even if you assume that all of the \$40 million "saving" would be put back into the classroom (the equivalent of about

three-quarters of a teacher per school across the province), the funding currently provided by the province would still be at least \$900 million short, as the \$40 million has only been reallocated, not deleted.

The provincial government has made it very clear that school boards and their use of local property taxation to raise funds for specific programs and supports will disappear. In the 2021 budget, the province indicated education property taxes would be phased out by 50 per cent (25 per cent per year) for residential and farm properties, and 10 per cent for other types of property, with rebates returning nearly \$250 million to property owners this year.

The Facts and Fiction document states: "Education funding is being increased by over \$1.6 billion over the next four years" — obviously acknowledging that the current funding support from the province will not be sufficient. This is an interesting commitment, since this government has provided almost no funding increase to school divisions since it came into power in 2016. Taking four years to make up the difference will definitely necessitate cutting a lot more than just trustees and superintendents.

If the goal of this government is to maintain a strong educational system for all students across the province, what other method of taxation will be used to maintain and supposedly expand programs and services?

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