

Province demands school division data ahead of overhaul

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SCHOOL divisions were given the last two weeks to compile detailed data about their non-school employees, facilities, and student transportation, as Manitoba Education prepares to replace elected boards with a centralized authority.

Earlier this month, Sarah Whiteford, assistant deputy minister, sent a memo to superintendents and secretary-treasurers at all of Manitoba's English-language divisions to break down a new provincial audit request.

"The data that is being gathered will be used as inputs into the development of multiple options and functional organizational models of the Provincial Education Authority and its 15 regions, including the identification of which functions should be a regional responsibility and which may be a shared service," wrote Whiteford, in the June 10 letter obtained by the *Free Press*.

She added the figures are critical to ensure "existing unique aspects of school divisions are not overlooked" during the design process.

Administrators were asked to return completed templates with up-to-date information on finances, human resources — including organizational structure figures, as well as budget and payroll data related to non-school employees — and school bus fleets by June 24 at 3 p.m.

The provincial associations that represent superintendents, boards, and school business officials penned a joint letter with an unsuccessful request that the deadline be extended for all.

Given leaders have been swamped this month as they wrap up the school year and start planning for 2021-22, the

"They continue to ask for more information from the division that has nothing to do with supporting students at a time when students need more support than ever," said Alan Campbell.

In defence of the request, Education Minister Cliff Cullen said Thursday the province would be remiss if it didn't prepare for the transition of the school system.

"We have to be prepared when Bill 64 does pass," said the minister, when pressed on the subject during an end-of-the-year news conference. "We want to make informed decisions based on data, and we don't have all the data to make those decisions."

Cullen said the province has engaged Deloitte as a consultant to discuss the transition and what the new structure may look like. He indicated he is hopeful all divisions will submit the data because the province has offered support to compile it and divisions are obligated to do so under legislation, even though some have delayed their responses.

In one letter to a board chairperson, which is dated June 24, Cullen warned that delays would affect the quality and timelines for planning the transformation, "which will result in unnecessarily prolonging the uncertainty that you have indicated is affecting school division staff." Also in the notice, the minister said the department would consider an extension until July 2, on a case-by-case basis.

Meantime, Campbell said it's unfortunate the province continues to focus on overhauling public education without an evidence-based plan when other provinces are solely focused on a strong finish to a challenging academic year.

As early as October, the Education Modernization Act (Bill 64) could

pitch to replace elected English school boards with a central authority of government appointees.

The new authority would oversee 15 regions, one of which would encompass all of Winnipeg, and all schools would be required to set up new school community councils run by parent volunteers.

The Progressive Conservative government touts the plan as one that will empower parents and redirect up to \$40 million in repetitive administrative costs to classrooms.

Critics, however, are concerned about the loss of local voice and the possibility the authority board would be politicized by the government of the day.

The official Opposition stalled the second reading of the bill, which was initially expected this spring, and related committee hearings, in order to allow for "sober second thought," said Nello Altomare, NDP education critic.

"Committee is set up in order to make amendments to bills. Clearly, they're not respecting this and they're not going to listen — again," said Altomare, a retired principal. "It's insulting."

Families thought they would be listened to during the education review, but Bill 64 does not reflect the commissioners' governance recommendation, and now the province is ploughing ahead with changes despite meaningful consultation, he added.

A total of 455 people have signed up to speak about the bill at the legislative committee, a staffer at the clerk's office confirmed Thursday.

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president of the Manitoba School Boards Association called the request an “absolutely tone-deaf” example of how out-of-touch officials are with front-line needs.

come into force and transform the kindergarten to Grade 12 system.

The legislation has sparked controversy, along with multiple anti-Bill 64 campaigns, owing to its

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