

Punt premier’s school plan: NDP

Opponents of education reform make case for Bill 64 to follow Pallister out the door

MAGGIE MACINTOSH

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE
REPORTER

NOTICE of the Manitoba premier’s early exit mid-mandate has renewed calls to scrap his government’s overhaul of public schooling — a controversial plan that has sparked protest in all corners of the province since it was unveiled.

Following Premier Brian Pallister’s Tuesday announcement he would be stepping down as leader of the Progressive Conservative party, speculation began about whether a new boss will usher in Bill 64 (Education Modernization Act) as the Tories grapple with polling numbers.

The second reading of Bill 64, which aims to replace Manitoba’s English- language school boards with a centralized authority composed of government appointees, is expected in October.

More than 500 presenters are signed up to speak to the bill at the subsequent committee stage, a record in Manitoba legislative assembly history. Meantime, there are numerous anti-reform campaigns and thousands of lawn signs in opposition to the sweeping changes across the province.

When pressed about the status and future of Bill 64, a government spokesperson said they did not have a comment on the matter Wednesday afternoon.

Earlier in the day, the official Opposition held a news conference to call on PC MLAs to “kill the (five) bills” — Bill 16, 35, 40, 57 and 64 — the NDP stalled during the spring session.

“Now that we have a lame-duck premier, it doesn’t make any sense for Manitoba to continue to pursue his legislative agenda,” said Wab Kinew, leader of the NDP, who was flanked by colleagues during a midday media availability on the legislature grounds.

NDP house leader Nahanni Fontaine suggested three options for the governing party to withdraw its bills. The PC caucus could:

prorogue the house so remaining bills die; vote down the legislation when second readings occur; or, seek a unanimous leave of the house to withdraw the documents.

She added Wednesday she has sent a letter to government house leader Kelvin Goertzen outlining the NDP call to immediately withdraw the bills.

(Goertzen said in a statement he is happy to meet with the Opposition house leader on such issues.) Critics of Bill 64 claim it will silence local voices when trustees are eliminated and allow for the possibility of partisanship in education decision-making. The province, however, has backed reforms as a way to empower parents and find savings by streamlining repetitive administrative division expenses.

The Manitoba Teachers’ Society and Manitoba School Boards Association, both of which have been running anti-Bill 64 campaigns for months, echoed the NDP’s calls Wednesday.

“If prospective leadership candidates want to be taken seriously by Manitobans, they should seriously consider coming out publicly with a plan to withdraw Bill 64 immediately,” said Alan Campbell, president of the school boards association.

“The conversation about improving our public education system in Manitoba needs to continue and the K-12 review is a logical starting point, but the conversation needs to come from a place of mutual respect and recognition of the incredible work that has taken place on the front lines by division leadership since the start of the (COVID-19) pandemic and, of course, in the decades prior.”

The president of the teachers union said in a statement the legislation locks in serious challenges to representing the most vulnerable students in public schools. It does “absolutely nothing” to address child poverty, which teachers know has a profound effect on student success, added James Bedford.

Citing widespread backlash to Bill 64, Kinew said his party would immediately repeal the legislation

if the NDP comes to power in the next election.

He also indicated his party would disregard the K-12 education review, because it took place pre-pandemic.

He would not say Wednesday whether his party would fully reinstate the education property tax. In addition to the reform bill, the NDP wants the province to scrap: Bill 16, which would allow an employer to fire a staffer for “strike-related misconduct;” Bill 35, which would allow cabinet to set electricity rates; Bill 40, which would enable provincially-owned liquor sales by third parties; and Bill 57, which would restrict the rights of protesters by allowing owners of critical infrastructure to apply for court orders to halt or limit protests.

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca Twitter: [@macintoshmaggie](https://twitter.com/macintoshmaggie)

• DAN LETT: KILL SCHOOL BILL / A4

‘Now that we have a lame-duck premier, it doesn’t make any sense for

Manitoba to continue to pursue his legislative agenda’

— NDP Leader Wab Kinew



NDP Leader Wab Kinew is joined by MLAs Nello Altomare (left), Uzoma Asagwara, Nahanni Fontaine, and Jamie Moses as the official Opposition called on government to withdraw legislation in light of Premier Brian Pallister’s decision to step down — including the government’s controversial education overhaul proposal.

MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS