

Q&A with Education Minister Cliff Cullen

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On Monday, Education Minister Cliff Cullen dedicated an entire news conference to dispelling “misconceptions” about the Education Modernization Act. (File)

Even though the Manitoba legislature won't reconvene until the fall, the discourse surrounding Bill 64 is still heating up this summer, with Education Minister Cliff Cullen being at the centre of it.

On Monday, the Spruce Woods MLA dedicated an entire news conference to dispelling "misconceptions" about the Education Modernization Act, accusing members of the Manitoba NDP and its affiliates of perpetuating a misinformation campaign designed to "instil fear and anxiety in parents and educators."

This news conference came at a time when the province is hosting a variety of virtual meetings that are designed to gather the public's feedback on how to reshape Manitoba's education system.

In order to clear the air about Bill 64, and the province's push for education reform more broadly, Cullen decided to speak with the Sun over the phone on Thursday morning.

The following is a transcription of that conversation, which has been slightly edited for length and clarity.

The Brandon Sun: Do you believe that your government is striking the right tone by directly going after the opponents of Bill 64 in such a way, especially now that the province is hosting these virtual meetings with parents?

Cliff Cullen: We got into this because we are trying to be the most improved province in the country. And we have to have a conversation about education to achieve that. That's why we embarked on the K-12 review.

(With) 75 recommendations coming out of that review ... it's not something that we're going to leave sitting on the shelf and collect dust. We want to move forward with the recommendations in that report.

Clearly we've learned through our COVID experience that there can be a new way of doing business. And what we've done is we've combined the recommendations from the K-12 report and our COVID experience and put together a Better Education Starts Today strategy.

The message this week is we want Manitobans to be informed about what we're trying to accomplish through the strategy and that Bill 64 really speaks to one pillar of the four pillars in the strategy.

We're trying to encourage Manitobans to do their homework and get educated on what we're trying to accomplish, and that really is the best for students.

SUN: I think a lot of people feel like certain educators and parents already have done their homework and still have concerns about the legislation. Do you feel that it is a good rhetorical strategy to come out and tell these people that they're wrong, even though they have done the legwork to read through the bill itself and come to the conclusion that they have concerns with it?

CC: What I said was, not everyone is not going to agree with our approach, the governance model.

We think it's the right approach. We are listening to Manitobans. We are prepared to make amendments, and that's why we're going through the listening exercise, quite frankly. We're going out of our way to engage.

I've had 18 teacher discussions over the last month. We have a parental engagement team out in the field doing regional meetings. We're going to have our fourth town hall next week. We've heard from literally thousands of Manitobans, and a lot of those Manitobans are saying "yeah, it's time for change."

SUN: I don't think that people are objecting to the idea that change needs to happen. I think some people object to the amount of change you guys are instituting and the way you're instituting it.

CC: What we're doing is really empowering the local community to provide advice to the school. We're empowering parents to do that, we're empowering the community to do that and we're providing direct advice to the school leadership through principals and vice-principals to make those decisions, and really empowering teachers as well.

Parents know their kids the best. Educators are trained in delivering education, and we've seen more and more money diverted away from the classroom. And we think that we need more resources for the front-line classes, and we think this is the model that can do that.

I get that change can be difficult, but we think this is a change for the better.

SUN: You mentioned the K-12 education review and how that's kind of the foundation of Bill 64 and the Better Education strategy more broadly. But why should parents believe that the new round of consultations that you're doing this summer are meaningful when your government ignored major recommendations in the K-12 education when constructing Bill 64? I think immediately of the recommendation that you should keep some school boards intact.

CC: The reality is, Kyle, that of 75 recommendations, 60 we agreed with, the other 15 we agreed with in principle. If you look at that one recommendation of the 75, it talks about elected officials as well.

The only thing we did slightly different was we have the French language division and an English language division. We just thought that the time had come to do it that way.

So when you say that we're ignoring recommendations, I would strongly disagree with that.

If you look at the recommendations, a lot of those, the 15 that I talk about, are goals. They're lofty goals that can't be accomplished through legislation. That's really why we're engaging Manitobans. We're saying "OK, have a look at the legislation. That's our short-term governance piece."

The bigger picture here is obtaining outcomes for students and teachers and leadership. And that is a journey. That's a five-year journey and we want you to be part of this journey.

So it's about reaching out on two fronts: on the legislation, but also trying to engage Manitobans and educators that to achieve our goals recommended there is going to take a lot of work.

The K to 12 report did not leave a roadmap on how to achieve these goals, and we are currently putting together that roadmap on how we are going to achieve these goals and provide that to Manitobans this fall.

SUN: In the spirit of looking ahead to the future, especially if Bill 64 comes to pass, I was curious about what the fate of different school divisions will be if the legislation passes in its current form? For example, for a smaller organization like the Turtle Mountain School Division, will it cease to exist? What will happen to the staff who are employed by some of these smaller rural school divisions?

CC: So, school boards themselves will disappear. We still need the staff to provide the administration. We're not centralizing a whole bunch of staff into an office in Winnipeg. That's the misconception that's out there.

We've learned through COVID that people can work remotely and they can work from home, those that aren't in the classroom. So there's all kinds of opportunity for that to happen.

So we still need the administrative support, we still need that network of people involved in education, certainly outside of the classroom, to make sure the administration is done. We just don't need the bricks and mortar that we used to.

SUN: So am I to understand that all the administrative staff who are part of these divisions will still be employed, they will just be employed in different capacities within these new regions that are being proposed under Bill 64?

CC: We're currently having a look at what the structure of that system will look like. That's currently underway. Clearly, we do have a duplication in services across 37 school divisions, so that's something that we're looking at. We're looking at efficiencies and synergies in the system.

We have committed to taking the money that we can save on the administration side and moving that money to the front line, where we can provide additional education assistance and provide the clinical support and evaluate funding for special needs and those with mental health issues. That's one of our goals as well.

SUN: Moving back to Monday's press conference, you were repeatedly asked to identify the groups who support Bill 64 and who are in favour of the changes that you guys are proposing? Would you be willing to expand on or identify those groups with me today?

CC: Let me say that we're engaging thousands of Manitobans, parents and educators. A lot of them have indicated a willingness for change, to improve the system.

We look forward to that. We are continuing to work with the parents and teachers. We're engaging other stakeholders as well to explain what we're trying to accomplish.

So far we've just had one coalition of union leadership that appear to be opposed to it.

SUN: In that respect, you've been quoted in the past as saying that the opponents of Bill 64 are a "vocal minority." In this sense, do you believe that the NDP is fabricating or inflating the amount of support they've received through petition signatures or lawn signs that they say are being set up across the province?

CC: I'm saying they've been disingenuous in terms of providing false information to Manitobans. That's why some Manitobans are making the decisions they are. The point of the news conference on Monday was to say to Manitobans "make sure that you understand the facts."

That's why we put out our Facts versus Fiction information. We're simply asking Manitobans to make sure they appreciate the facts. Don't make decisions based on fiction.

SUN: Is there anything else you would like to add about the Bill 64 discourse and how you think it will continue to evolve over the summer as these Parent Engagement Task Force meetings move forward?

CC: We're going to continue to engage Manitobans. We're going to listen to Manitobans, get their ideas in terms of both the legislation and the (Better Education) strategy going forward. We look forward to continuing those discussions.

We're encouraging Manitobans to go to bettereducationmb.ca and make sure they fully understand the strategy and what we're trying to accomplish.

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