

School bill assailed by council

Elimination of elected trustees an ‘attack’ on local democracy, says mayor

JOYANNE PURSAGA

THE province’s controversial legislation to overhaul the Manitoba public school system has found another opponent.

On Thursday, Winnipeg city council voted 11-4 to ask the province to withdraw Bill 64 in its entirety.

Couns. Kevin Klein, Janice Lukes, Shawn Nason and Devi Sharma were opposed. Coun. Jeff Browaty also spoke against the motion but opted not to vote on it.

The bill aims to make sweeping changes, and replace school boards with a centralized group of government appointees. The council motion calls upon the province to preserve the current school board system.

Mayor Brian Bowman said he’s concerned the elimination of school boards would amount to an “attack” on local democracy.

“We’re seeing concerns about Bill 64 being raised across our city, and much of the concerns are relating to a loss of local democratic input in the education system,” said Bowman, noting lawn signs opposing the bill have popped up in many neighbourhoods.

Addressing council prior to the vote, Luanne Karn said the bill threatens to strip power from impartial elected officials. Many complicated decisions would then fall on parent volunteers, who have less time and experience to devote to the job, Karn said on behalf of Parents for Public Education Manitoba.

“Bill 64 is a deeply complex governing structure that seeks to centralize power and remove democratic

control over local decision-making (and transfer it) to a very small partisan group of non-elected representatives,” she said. The Education Modernization Act would collapse Manitoba’s 37 English school boards into 15 regional entities that report to the province, and replace parent councils with school community councils in each school. Those councils would “advise” principals on student achievement, staff hires, annual budgets and other priorities.

The province has promoted it as a way to empower parents, who could volunteer to make decisions on some files currently handled by school trustees.

Karn said she fears those changes would create “an extremely undemocratic form of governance for education.”

The council motion, championed by Coun. Brian Mayes, argues school boards help ensure local voices guide education priorities and decisionmakers can be held accountable through elections.

“When you’re talking about wiping out an entire level of elected government, I’ve got to say something,” Mayes, a former Brandon School Division trustee, told the *Free Press*.

The City of Winnipeg’s decision echoes similar motions by 23 other Manitoba rural municipalities, cities and towns.

However, Browaty said, the matter does not fall under council’s jurisdiction.

“I really don’t see how this is a city council issue in the slightest.

When talking to the public, I never hear people saying: ‘We need more government, we need more politicians,’” said Browaty.

In a brief emailed statement, a Manitoba government spokesperson said the province remains confident in its plan and is listening to the feedback.

“We believe our (Better Education Starts Today) strategy will improve education for all students in Manitoba while improving local voice and parental engagement... If the City of Winnipeg has questions regarding the plan, we would be happy to answer them.”

joyanne.pursaga@freepress.mb.ca Twitter: [@joyanne_pursaga](https://twitter.com/joyanne_pursaga)



Luanne Karn, who speaks for Parents for Public Education Manitoba, says Bill 64 will transfer decision making to ‘a very small partisan group of non-elected representatives.’

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