

Slow drip is eroding Manitoba education

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IN the 16th century, Hippolytus de Marsiliis described water torture as a way to drive its victim insane with the stress of water dripping on a person's forehead for a long time. In the 21st century, that describes the Pallister government's dictates to education.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Every week we get some new edict from Pallister's people to further erode education as we know it. The latest has to be the most irrational — a letter to school board trustees telling us to not lay off any teachers (but not providing any additional funding to pay their salaries).

Wait a minute. Wasn't it just a couple of months ago that this same government told trustees they can't raise property taxes? And it's the same government that has said for the past three years that trustees can't budget for more than a zero, 0.75 and one per cent salary increase while refusing to allow school divisions to plan for an exigency.

Now this government is using the money that could have helped pay for teacher salaries to send cheques to property owners throughout Manitoba — a rebate Education Minister Scott Fielding said “will be paid for entirely by government, so it will not affect funding to schools.” What? Not affect funding for schools?

Most people see this torture for what it is. Some of them, those who are able to afford it, are even donating their school property rebate cheques to their school divisions. This includes me and my colleagues on the Winnipeg School Division board of trustees. As trustee Chris Broughton said in a recent tweet, “The Pallister government is borrowing money to cut education and give property owners a tax rebate. In an effort to right this wrong, I will

be donating my Education Tax Rebate to the WSD Children's Heritage Fund.

“I do not believe our public schools should rely on charities to function, so I will continue to use my position as a trustee to fight Pallister's cuts and destruction of our education system.”

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I concur. A properly funded education system includes provision for salary increases to its staff. It is draconian to suggest anything less for the people who work so hard to provide a safe learning environment for this province's children.

Let's not forget, however, that we're dealing with a premier who says it doesn't bother him “at all” that teachers pay for school supplies out of their own pockets. He's also the premier who thought it might be a good idea to have teachers drive three or four hours from home, in the midst of a global pandemic, to get a vaccine that hadn't even been offered by the authorities in North Dakota.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Education in Manitoba is in a fight for its very life. We are facing, potentially, a complete dismantling of the system with Pallister's Education Modernization Act, Bill 64.

Education Minister Cliff Cullen has said on many occasions that he sees \$40 million in savings from “top-heavy bureaucracies” will result in more teachers and EAs in schools across the province.

It appears Cullen doesn't have any understanding of the real costs of

classroom education. While \$40 million sounds like a lot of money, when spread across the entire province, it may, at best, result in half a teaching position in schools.

While the province is sending out rebate cheques, we're left wondering how school divisions in Manitoba are going to pay for such things as French Immersion programs, which are largely funded through property taxation (in WSD, 84 per cent of the cost). How will this and other funding gaps in programming be addressed by the new model?

I have more examples to share, but urge you to see them all in the presentation posted on winnipeg.sd.ca. WSD trustees and our colleagues across the province, along with the Manitoba Teachers' Society, Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, university professors and many, many more have made presentations and raised questions — and received no answers from the premier and his cabinet — about the many faults found in Bill 64 and Manitoba Education's attempt at Better Education Starts Today.

If we can stop the drip, we may be able to save education in this province.

Betty Edel is chair of the Winnipeg School Division board of trustees.

