

# THE OPINION PAGE

## Speaking Up Against Bill 64

By Dougald Lamont

In the last year, the pandemic has been tough, but if there is one sector that has worked better than almost any other in this crisis, it's been the public education system.

As a parent with three kids in public schools (and a fourth at university), I can say we owe our educators a debt of thanks. School boards, trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers, EAs and bus drivers have all done an amazing job, under tough circumstances, keeping our children safe and making sure they keep learning.

They deserve our gratitude, our respect, recognition – and above all, our support.

Most school divisions in Manitoba are facing cuts and shortfalls because the

PCs will not cover emergency costs from COVID-19. They have not even spent all of the \$85 million safe “back-to-school” money from last year.

Now the PCs have brought forward a new law, Bill 64, that will completely scrap the public school system as we know it – ignoring months of consultations with parents, educators and others, and their own K-12 review.

The K-12 review recommends keeping school boards with some elected trustees. The PCs are completely getting rid of them.

Instead of locally elected trustees, and local superintendents, the PCs will appoint everyone who runs the school system – including school principals.

Locally elected school boards know their com-

munities best. School boards are innovators that Manitobans have benefited from. They have initiated programs for specialized vocational training to ensure that students are provided with the skills they need to succeed. These programs are at risk of disappearing if Bill 64 goes ahead.

The PCs have argued that these proposed changes are to address Manitoba's test scores. We need to be honest about test scores, because it is not that all Manitoba students are doing badly. At least 80 per cent of students match or do better than those in other provinces. About 15 per cent of Manitoba students really struggle because they live in deep poverty.

They are in poverty because their parents may not speak English or

because they have trouble reading. They may be working full-time at minimum wage. Children are often struggling because the education system failed their parents, too.

Bill 64 is also bad for local economies. Many small to medium-sized communities are supported with good, local jobs through their school division. By removing all school boards, jobs will be lost across Manitoba, hitting rural and Northern Manitoba the hardest.

Further to the closure of school division offices, maintenance buildings, and bus garages, school closures could also be on the horizon. Bill 64 lifts

the moratorium on the closure of schools and it also removes the extended travel time clause in the act which limits bus rides to no longer than one hour.

We believe a change of this magnitude to one of the core functions of Manitoba's government requires a clear indication of popular support. This is why we are requesting all-party cooperation to have a referendum on whether Bill 64 should be adopted or not.

Don't let the PCs get away with this. Let your MLAs know you oppose it. We urge you to sign up to speak against Bill 64 by calling 204-945-3636.

*– Dougald Lamont is the MLA for St. Boniface and the Leader of the Manitoba Liberal Party*

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