

## Students should learn about issues, policies

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In his letter to the editor, "Re: Bill 64 provides teachable moment," Education Minister Cliff Cullen presents a compelling argument for using Bill 64 as a "teachable moment" within the school system and more broadly, among Manitobans. A "teachable moment" that touches upon all the elements of formulating good public policy — government, affected and interested individuals and organizations, the issue, the variety of perspectives and opinions.

Understanding the intent, content and impact of Bill 64 is critical to an informed discussion of government policies and legislation. Understanding requires clearly stated and understandable statements of intent, content, impact and relevance on the part of the government and critics of government policy. Where there is no clarity, there will be misunderstandings and misinterpretations and the resultant fears and anxieties. Those fears and anxieties intensify when government intimates that proposed legislation is but one element of its proposed, but not shared, comprehensive strategy to deal with a public issue.

No one has the monopoly on understanding and defining public issues or on defining appropriate public policy responses to these issues, which includes government and the party that forms government. Which means universal exposure to differing ideas, visions, perspectives, opinion in an environment where differing ideas are welcome, examined, challenged in a respectful manner without resorting to maligning those with whom one does not agree or impugning agendas harmful to public interest. That includes the opportunity to expose and question "partisan rhetoric" and rigid ideologies.

It is hard to envision a more appropriate venue than our public schools for teaching the skills of examining and understanding public issues and public policy responses to those issues, of encouraging and respecting the perspectives and opinions of others, of becoming informed and engaged citizens with respect to public issues.

Anything less engineers a public environment as characterized by Cullen. An environment of partisan politics, rigid ideologies in the discussion and formulation of public policies characterized by fear, disrespect, intolerance and missed opportunities to develop sound public policies. As a society, it is regrettable that "teachable moments" in the form of civic classes have not been and are not a mainstay of public education.

In a democratic society, one of the most important skills to learn and to practise is how to be informed of public issues. Maybe, just maybe, Bill 64 will provide the incentive to bring public issues and policies, however messy and complex, into the classroom in a forum dedicated to learning.

**ROSEMARIE and CHESTER LETKEMAN**

**Brandon**

