

'Us versus them' approach wrong move by Cullen

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Manitoba Education Minister Cliff Cullen.

"If you're explaining, you're losing."

— **Former U.S. president Ronald Reagan**

Whether Manitobans ultimately find fault or favour with Bill 64, the Education Modernization Act, Education Minister Cliff Cullen did himself and his government no favours Monday by lashing out at the New Democrats and groups representing the province's educators.

For more than 30 minutes, the Spruce Woods MLA tried to defend the legislation by tearing down anyone who opposes the bill or questions what it is trying to accomplish.

"Unfortunately, the purpose of their campaign is to instil fear and anxiety in parents and educators," Cullen told reporters on Monday. "These parties want to maintain the status quo. The status quo is we are spending the third-highest amount per capita in the country (on education) and are achieving some of the poorest results."

Presumably, as media such as the Sun are asking questions about the goals of Bill 64, we are included in this so-called "fear campaign." As we have already stated on this page before, the argument isn't that our system doesn't need improvements — or an overhaul, as the case may be. That Manitoba students are not doing as well as they could when comparing metrics to other provinces is a problem that cannot simply be pushed aside by opponents of the bill.

The difference of opinion, here, is in what to do about it.

Bill 64 — when passed — will completely reshape our education system by eliminating elected school boards and replacing them with a single provincial education authority. The current 37 school divisions will also be reduced to 15 regional catchment areas, and the new authority will feature a six- to 11-person cabinet-appointed board that is supposed to have a minimum of two parents from the Provincial Advisory Council on Education. Each regional catchment area will be overseen by a director of education who will be appointed by the provincial education authority board.

The government phrasing sounds good, of course — "unify 37 school boards in 15 regions and one French division;" "streamline administration and governance;" and giving "parents a stronger voice in education."

But there are some fair concerns being raised by the NDP, the Manitoba School Boards Association and the Manitoba Teachers Society that should not be merely dismissed by the minister of education. For example, regardless of whether the Pallister government and Mr. Cullen like the description, there will be a loss of local democratic representation should the legislation be approved as is.

There is a clear benefit to having school boards debate issues of governance and budgeting in the public sphere, where media and the general public have direct access to those who have been elected and tasked with making decisions for schools in a division.

The province's decision to give more weight to Parent Advisory Councils should give us all some cause for concern, especially if these volunteers, made up of already busy parents, are expected to take on the duties that normally would have fallen to a school board.

The model of education that the province is attempting to superimpose upon Manitoba's education system was copied at least in part from the Nova Scotia government's playbook in 2018, when that province, too, abolished elected school boards. Parental advisory councils were given a bigger role to play, as the CBC reported, in the hopes of maintaining local input in the education system.

The results in Nova Scotia, thus far, have been mixed. Some advisory councils have shown a high level of engagement with their communities, but as the CBC found out, many were difficult to find information on, meaning that if they were meeting, there was little public record of it.

These are the kinds of situations that could be addressed with open discussion. But that doesn't seem to be happening — no matter how many town halls the province holds.

The issue here is that the education minister seems to have taken a confrontational approach to addressing concerns brought forward by — yes — interest groups, but also ordinary parents who believe they are watching an already imperfect system becoming even more difficult to navigate.

Instead of reaching across the table to try to reach a reasonable agreement on various parts of the bill, and being open to changes or massaging its various components, Cullen ensured an "us versus them" scenario that set up teachers, union leaders and parents as the bad guys who are trying to lead us all astray.

The province has not yet come forward with a detailed plan for paying for education in our schools following the removal of education property taxes, and also, has not offered a companion piece of legislation to address student poverty — which has a direct bearing on any given student's educational outcomes.

If the education minister wants to alleviate parental fears over Bill 64, perhaps addressing these glaring omissions would be a good place to start.

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