

## The ‘vocal minority’ is getting louder

### EDITORIAL

SO, maybe it isn’t just “a vocal minority,” after all.

Back in May, as an initial wave began to grow in opposition to the province’s Bill 64 — the Education Modernization Act — Minister of Education Cliff Cullen dismissed the negative public reaction as the over-amplified voices of a partisan few.

“It’s a vocal minority that we’re hearing from, quite frankly,” Mr. Cullen stated, suggesting groups with an axe to grind over proposed changes to education — including the Manitoba Teachers’ Society and the Manitoba School Boards Association — were peddling misinformation, stoking fears and “preying on the anxiety that many Manitobans are feeling during COVID.”

The minister called for an open and honest discussion based on the facts of Bill 64, and vowed to address “misconceptions” about the proposed legislation in the days and weeks that followed.

Time has passed. Unease about the bill has only grown more widespread and vociferous.

As the number of lawn signs trumpeting opposition to Bill 64 continues to grow in various residential areas and new pockets of opposition emerge, it might be time for Mr. Cullen and the Pallister government to reconsider their assessment of the broader public view of their legislation.

Here’s one way to look at it: if you’re a Progressive Conservative government in Manitoba, and you lose the support of Winkler on a given issue, it might be time to revisit the ol’ drawing board.

Winkler, which sits smack-dab in the middle of the bluest

of Tory-blue regions of the province (Manitoba’s sixth-largest community voted 87.5 per cent PC in 2019), last Wednesday sent a letter to the education minister outlining a resolution adopted by its city council in opposition to Bill 64’s planned elimination of elected local school boards in favour of a centrally managed and government-appointed education authority that will set policy throughout the province.

“School boards reflect the values of local community through essential programming, services and supports offered to the populations they serve,” the letter says. “Their operations are transparent, and through community involvement and open dialogue can build the trust that is necessary for good governance.”

The letter calls on the province to amend Bill 64 to preserve the right for communities to elect school boards and maintain local accountability in public education.

The Pallister government has couched the board-elimination measure as a cost-saving initiative, but some observers have argued it is equally concerned with seizing central control of collective bargaining with teachers.

Winkler is one of several communities and municipalities in Tory-supporting rural Manitoba to join the anti-Bill-64 chorus in recent days. Mr. Cullen’s assertion that opposition to the bill is limited to special interests and a negligible big-city constituency that has fallen victim to the vocal groups’ fear-mongering is beginning to look like a rather sizable political miscalculation.

With the Progressive Conservative Party currently staring at polling numbers that would land them in

the opposition benches if an election were held today, much of the blame for the flagging fortunes of Premier Brian Pallister and his government is being assigned to the uneven and twice-catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But make no mistake — Bill 64’s proposal to aggressively centralize education authority at the expense of local representation has become a flashpoint that could prove to be as much of a tipping-point issue as is the pandemic response.

Mr. Cullen and the government he serves will ignore the ever-larger, ever-louder “vocal minority” at their peril.



**Minister of Education Cliff Cullen**

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