

Nemeth, Sandy. "High stakes for education" *Winnipeg Free Press, August 19, 2023. Op-ed.*

THERE is much at stake for Manitoba's public education system that should compel consideration by voters in the lead-up to the Oct. 3 provincial election. School boards know that regardless of which party forms government, both long-standing and emerging issues must be properly and fully addressed to ensure success for all current and future students.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not over, with the virus still present and being transmitted. School boards and senior administrative teams will be navigating the effects of a global pandemic for some time. Indeed, stress and anxiety due to a variety of factors, including those brought on by COVID, is having an unprecedented impact on the mental health and wellness of students and staff.

The climate catastrophe is getting worse. Oppressive heat arrives earlier each year and stays for much longer. Under such conditions, schools and buildings without adequate cooling systems are not conducive to learning or working. How we build schools and keep older buildings comfortable must be looked at through a lens of immediacy, but also one of sustainability and renewability.

Infrastructure deficits are increasing. For decades, school divisions have had to delay needed repairs and upgrades due to budget constraints. The cost to address all of these, across all school divisions in Manitoba, is estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars, increasing exponentially the longer it takes to resolve.

More children across the province are coming to school hungry. When the link between poverty and educational success is so well documented, how and when does the province with the highest child poverty levels in Canada acknowledge this wrong and take steps to make it right?

How do school boards save for a rainy day when it is always pouring, and the umbrella is filled with holes?

Knowing that a safe and caring learning environment is crucial for student success, how do we provide this, supported by a framework of equity, respect for diversity, and inclusion?

The literal \$64-million question, and the dark cloud overhead, centres on funding.

How do school boards save for a rainy day when it is always pouring, and the umbrella is filled with holes?

Where does the money come from, for desperately needed clinical services staff, nutrition programs, and infrastructure repairs when school boards are capped at grants below the rate of inflation while at the same time having lost the ability to raise revenue locally to cover some of the shortfall?

It all hinges on a long-awaited and much-needed new funding model, which may in fact do little over time to assist school boards if the amount of money allocated is inadequate, its distribution unequitable, the model itself unsustainable, and the dollar amount year-over-year unpredictable for planning purposes.

It was not long ago that the potential adoption of Bill 64 shone a light on the numerous and connected facets of the public education system. The ensuing conversations only served to further highlight challenges being faced provincially and locally which, coupled with a global pandemic, decades of underfunding, staggering poverty, and mounting mental health challenges have combined to bring the perfect storm to Manitoba's public education system.

We must look for the opportunities that lie in the eye of this storm.

As the voting public we can, and should, insist on sustainable practices, safe and healthy schools and buildings, and environments that inspire generosity of thought and action, where all who work and learn have what they need to succeed.

This must be realized under a new and fully functioning umbrella, in a public education system that is adequately funded and resourced to do all of this and more, for the sake of our province and future generations. The myriad needs and challenges school boards and senior teams are working to address, both emerging and ongoing, deserves serious contemplation as voters consider how they will mark their ballot.

At the same time, we must acknowledge and celebrate the many successes found in every school thanks to the innovative approaches, expertise, and dedication of caring and committed senior and school educational leaders and staff.

When a candidate for MLA knocks on your door, and as Manitobans prepare to go to the polls, think about your kids or grandkids, the kids in your community, the opportunities you want for them, and the future of Manitoba.

Think about public education.

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