

Long-term planning needed for schools SANDY NEMETH

In their recent call to address the widening wealth gap, Oxfam Canada made two statements of note: Four of the five wealthiest Canadians have seen their wealth increase by two-thirds since 2020. Additionally, the richest 0.02 per cent of Canadians now possess more wealth than the bottom 80 per cent.

As the wealth gap and public education finance are directly related, this contrast becomes a starting point for highlighting the recommendations that the Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA) has tabled before provincial Finance Minister Adrien Sala in this year's pre-budget brief.

As we prepare budgets for the 2024-25 school year, informed by the annual funding of schools announcement in coming weeks, the overall amount of money needed to fund public education, and the ability of school boards to address local needs cannot be overstated. The increasing challenge of poverty, disparities faced by remote communities, and general economic and inflationary pressures, have combined to create worry.

Our desire is to maintain and enhance programs and services that ensure students and staff are well, successful, and remain optimistic about the future.

In our brief, we began with a strong recommendation that the Manitoba government begin to prepare for the first province-wide teacher settlement, to help sustain what is anticipated to be a significant general pay increase in this present compensation context.

Next, that the government of Manitoba consider a 4.4 per cent grant increase for operating expenditures based on current inflation, when developing the 2024 funding of schools announcement and provincial budget.

In an effort to maintain status quo funding and programs for the benefit of our schools and students, we also recommend that the government of Manitoba extend consideration to an additional annualized catch-up increase, in an effort to respond to what has become an annual 4-5 per cent inflationary adjustment gap as incurred by the public education system over the past decade alone.

Our fourth recommendation is that current education property tax rebates be maintained as government may be able to do so, with the ability of school boards to draw upon the remaining portion of locally collected revenues to meet critical needs in the public education system. We are well

aware that Manitobans support this prime objective, and we hope that Manitoba's new government will take stock of their support as well.

To address overcrowded schools, planned new school builds must proceed without delay. At the same time, elevated capital infrastructure support as needed to fix leaking roofs, classrooms that are variably "too hot" or "too cold", and to promote more accessible buildings for all Manitobans, each reflect the requirements of Manitoba's aging school infrastructure. New support for school bus modernization and internet connectivity, to fully meet the needs of a 21st century school system, is of equal consideration.

Recommendation six is that the government continue to grow multi-year funding to support expanded services and supports for both learning recovery, as well as mental health and wellness services both now and in future years. This need not be new money; we have in fact strongly suggested that these vital needs can be responded to by using existing funds, enabling each division to enhance targeted intervention supports for our students and communities.

Finally, MSBA encourages Manitoba's new government to continue review of the public education funding model, to support the creation of a new way forward for funding that is sustainable, equitable, aligned with needs, and predictable.

Standing on common ground, education stakeholders have offered many reasonable and practical ideas for how these goals can be pursued on a positive path in the right direction.

While every school division in Manitoba can point to services and programs that meet the unique needs of their communities, the need for appropriate funding remains a constant among all.

Without sufficient financial resources in the 2024-2025 budget, school boards and senior leadership teams will again be debating how to best use finite resources to ensure success for all students.

These difficult conversations could largely be avoided with a funding of school announcement that recovers what has been lost, meets the needs of today, and allows for future planning that ensures opportunities, experiences, and physical and mental health and well-being and supports for students, families, and staff.

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