



LEADERSHIP, ADVOCACY AND SERVICE FOR MANITOBA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS

December 20, 2023

Honourable Adrien Sala
Minister of Finance

Dear Minister Sala:

On behalf of our Association and its membership, representing all 38 public school boards in Manitoba, we welcome you to your new role as Minister of Finance and look forward to a productive working relationship with you in the years ahead.

As we read the headlines each and every day, the fiscal challenges that our new Government must address remain significant. These same challenges are only too well understood by Manitoba's public education system. With a growing operating deficit that has not kept pace with the rate of inflation in most of the past 20 years, as well as burdensome capital infrastructure depreciation exemplified in the reality that our school buildings' average age is fifty years and older, this is anything but a jubilee.

In context of last year's grant increases in support of public education, we would note that, even with the total amount invested by Government— a significant \$103 million for 2022/23 and 2023/24, these funds only served as a stop-gap measure to ensure that our schools retained sufficient cashflow to steady state current operations, given the requirement to annualize teacher settlement expenses.

It is in this context that, in the years ahead, ambitious plans to implement anticipated changes (including universal child nutrition programs and smaller class sizes for K-3 classrooms) will present new pressures. At the same time, we believe that there is no obstacle or challenge that cannot be addressed through opportunity and innovation. MSBA looks forward to working with you, as we take hold of opportunities and potential innovations to address the ongoing fiscal challenges faced by our member school boards.

As in previous years, this brief presents the most significant cost and operational pressures that Manitoba's public education system is facing. We trust that our recommendations will receive due consideration as you identify available funding in support of Manitoba's overall priorities in 2024/25. And, as always, our Association is available to meet with yourself and your staff to discuss this brief and to begin an important conversation around the sustainability of a public good that serves as one of the greatest investments a province can make— in its children and its future.

Sincerely,

Sandy Nemeth, President

Cc: Honourable Nello Altomare, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning
Honourable Lisa Naylor, Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation



2024 PRE-BUDGET BRIEF

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: We strongly recommend that Treasury Board begin to prepare for the first provincial teacher settlement, as will likely materialize in the 2024/25 Fiscal Year, with a combination of full or partial annualized grant support and/or a one-time removal of limitations on school board levy authority, in an effort to assist school boards in implementing and sustaining this General Pay Increase.

Recommendation 2: That the Government of Manitoba consider an increase of, at minimum, a 4.4% grant increase for operating expenditures, as premised on the current projected provincial average annual rate of inflationary growth, when developing the 2024 Funding of Schools announcement and Provincial Budget.

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Manitoba extend consideration to an additional annualized catch-up increase of between 4 to 5 percent to operating expenditures over the next four years, in an effort to respond to the most recent inflationary adjustment gaps as incurred by the public education system between 2017 and 2023.

Recommendation 4: That repealment of education property taxation be maintained at a 50% total reduction effective as of 2023, with maintenance of the ability of school boards to draw upon the remaining 50% portion of locally collected revenues to address ongoing critical needs and resourcing shortages across the school system under Budget 2024.

Recommendation 5: That the Government of Manitoba continue to proceed to new school builds at the earliest possible time, even while considering significant increase for overall funding allocations to capital grants. In 2024/25, increased capital grants will remain critical for addressing identified needs of Manitoba's aging school infrastructure, while promoting renewal of its physical footprint and prioritization of accessibility. Further, that the Government consider enhancing grants in support of both school bus modernization and internet connectivity, in order to meet the needs of a 21st century school system.

Recommendation 6: That the Government continue to grow multi-year funding under the Funding of Schools Program envelope to support expanded services and supports for both learning recovery as well as mental health and wellness services in 2024/25 and future years. Further, that the Government redirect all remaining funding (approximately \$5 million over the next two Fiscal Periods) from the Teacher Idea Fund to approve a new funding envelope that will enable each division to enhance targeted intervention supports.

Recommendation 7: MSBA encourages Manitoba's new Government to resume the work of the education funding model review task force, in order to explore many of the draft features that had previously garnered "in-principle" approval from education stakeholders.



2024 PRE-BUDGET BRIEF

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPENDING TEACHER WAGE SETTLEMENT

Recommendation 1:

We strongly recommend that Treasury Board begin to prepare for the first provincial teacher settlement, as will likely materialize in the 2024/25 Fiscal Year, with a combination of full or partial annualized grant support and/or a one-time removal of limitations on school board levy authority, in an effort to assist school boards in implementing and sustaining this General Pay Increase.

As you prepare Budget 2024, we cannot underscore the importance of the upcoming teacher settlement— being the very first occasion that such a settlement will have been achieved at a single provincial bargaining table.

While formal negotiations with the Manitoba Teachers' Society are now underway, the timeframe for conclusion of this process, as well as the duration of agreement that will be addressed under the new provincial collective agreement itself, remain subject to many factors. There is every indication however, that a settlement is very likely to come into view during the current 2023/24 Fiscal Year, with the latest projected timeframe being the 2024/25 Fiscal Year.

Incremental harmonization of teacher collective agreements, as is equally anticipated to occur commencing with this first round of provincial teacher bargaining, is equally deserving of the Government's full consideration. We will therefore need to work in partnership with Treasury Board, following the annual provincial budget announcement, to identify what additional funding will appropriately compensate those who deliver instructional programs, supports and services to Manitoba's students.

Based on the current realities of available revenues and resources across all school divisions, it is critical that the Government of Manitoba understand that there is no means possible for our members to address any such related costs "from within" during this same Fiscal Period. This said, that school boards do retain their authority to utilize remaining educational levy authorities in order to address these pressures, remains a constructive way forward.

In prior years, school boards have been instructed to maintain levy increases at or below two per cent per annum. In order to ensure that no impacts occur to the system itself in terms of programming,

supports and services, we therefore strongly recommend that the Province of Manitoba extend consideration for annualization of GPI and harmonization through a combination of full or partial annualization grant increases, and, in the event of a partial increase, a one-time, and therefore limited allowance, for school boards to exceed the standing cap on use of available levy authorities.

If one-time use of levy authority is not drawn upon as a solution under the present circumstances, or unless the Province itself provides full funding in support, this will directly jeopardize our ability to deliver sustainable programming, supports and services across schools provincially. This is especially applicable given the precarious operating context faced by several rural and northern school divisions who have experienced gradual funding loss over the several previous budget cycles.

As just one example in point, in northern Manitoba, which faces an extra-ordinary challenge in the attraction and recruitment of both instructional and non-instructional staff, added dimensions of what must be included in this next teacher collective agreement have achieved a state of critical need: unless new and expanded resources are made available as we head into the next school year, the estimated gap of 35 teachers in Frontier School Division alone will only continue to become exacerbated in the next and subsequent budget years (by 2024/25, it is estimated that up to 50 new teachers will be required to respond to workforce needs in that particular school division).

In such northern and remote communities, pay and compensation is but one side of a multi-dimensional challenge involving many specific considerations including need for hiring incentivization, housing and accommodations provisions and absorption of relocation expenses. We signal these important considerations under the heading of teacher settlement as an urgent reminder that additional resources, inclusive of the GPI, are desperately needed if this province is to honour its commitment to equitable and quality public education for every Manitoban.

We therefore include this current update in the present brief by way of signalling in advance what will emerge as a significant funding pressure for all school boards, and also for the Government of Manitoba, in 2024/25. As this is the very first round of provincial teacher bargaining, collaborating with the Government to align our respective funding processes will serve to promote the success of provincial teacher bargaining now and into the longer term.

The very real relationship between our students and school staff is the most significant connection that underpins everything that we can do and achieve in public education. Resourcing the forthcoming General Pay Increase (GPI) for our teaching staff is therefore critical. The reality is that Manitoba's public education system will need to absorb all related costs, once known.

The need for funded teacher salaries is well understood by Manitobans in context of improving outcomes for our students: according to an open-ended question, "what is the most important thing that should be done to improve our public schools in Manitoba?"—asked by Probe Research on behalf of our association to a representative sample of those living in our province in December, 2021—a clear majority (51%) responded that "teacher salaries and benefits", "providing more funding for schools", and "added resources and supports for children and families" were their top priority.

That our constituents continue to support provincial budget investment in their local schools is more than evident from these responses. The people of Manitoba recognize that if any improvement is to take place, then our province must remain competitive while providing the inputs necessary for enhanced educational outcomes. Amidst national and international teacher shortages and this year's

repeat cycle of growing requirements for substitution capacity, it is important to protect Manitoba's ability to develop, attract and retain our present and future teacher workforce. Anticipating and appropriately resourcing the next GPI could therefore not be more compelling as we enter 2024 budget cycle.

We want to ensure the Government of Manitoba that MSBA and its members remain committed to restraining the tax burden for all Manitobans. Over the previous mandate, we actively worked with key partners in the agricultural, real estate, municipal, and educational sectors to identify meaningful solutions towards the exercise of tax restraint. We are only too aware that passing our operating expenses onto hard-working Manitobans, is not an option. It must be exercised with restraint and only as required to support the ongoing delivery of essential services to the advantage of Manitoba and Manitobans— apart from which, such delivery would not prove feasible. The current set of circumstances, from our perspective, do necessitate increases beyond the standing two percent cap. Were this not so, there would be absolutely no recommendation from our association and its members to consider doing so. We trust that the Government will take this into consideration when announcing the Funding of Schools Program, early in the New Year.

GENERAL OPERATING INCREASE— OTHER EXPENDITURES

Recommendation 2:

That the Government of Manitoba consider an increase of, at minimum, a 4.4% grant increase for operating expenditures as premised on the current projected provincial annual average rate of inflationary growth, when developing the 2024 Funding of Schools announcement and Provincial Budget.

In the past, MSBA has highlighted that new teacher settlements are but only one factor of divisional operating investments. School boards have equally been confronted with the reality that for all remaining operating expenses, the 3.3% average provincial annual inflationary increase witnessed in 2021 was followed by a 7.8% average annual inflationary expansion in 2022 and a likely 4.4% average annual increase by the end of 2023. This growing inflationary pressure provides a significant challenge to protecting status quo operating expenditures relative to our programming, supports and services.

These inflationary impacts already translated into the need for, at minimum, \$40 million in 2021 and \$94 million in 2022 for additional external funding support, through a combination of provincial grant funding and ongoing local property taxation revenues. We were therefore very grateful for the important one-time funding grant of \$77 million that was provided in 2022 and the \$103 million provided on an annualized basis in 2023, to help address our general operating cost pressures. This combination of funding helped to promote a necessary response to many ongoing cost pressures.

However, once again this year, sustained additional funding support is once again needed to respond to the elevated 4.4% annual average inflationary increase that has been experienced over 2023. In 2024/25, approximately \$49 million in minimum added funding support is therefore required, to

respond to these real inflationary impacts. The reality is that far more is required, as will be addressed under recommendation #3 below.

How might it be possible to resource an additional \$49 million in support of public education as we enter 2024? There are several funding levers that remain available. We therefore trust and so recommend that the Government shall engage in efforts to achieve balance through the combination of operating, capital, special requirement, equalization (the Formula Guarantee General Support), Tax Incentive Grant, and other one-time adjustments to base and categorical grants, that remain under its discretionary authority. Through careful adjustments drawing upon all six mechanisms, it is possible to respond to the most urgent pressures.

To recommend precise increases to and for each of these levers is no small feat and, as an association we feel that determining which combination of increases and which lever will be used to do so, would best be entrusted to the Schools Finance Branch, Schools Capital Branch and Treasury Board to calculate.

A FURTHER RECOMMENDATION FOR OPERATING

Recommendation 3:

That the Government of Manitoba extend consideration to an additional annualized catch-up increase of between 4 to 5 percent to operating expenditures over the next four years, in an effort to respond to the most recent inflationary adjustment gaps as incurred by the public education system between 2017 and 2023.

Once again this year, we offer a further recommendation in terms of operating, when it comes to containing and minimizing prior year impacts upon those boards that have realized gradual and cumulative revenue losses under the previous Funding of School Program announcements.

This remains an important objective of our association on behalf of its members. We therefore recommend that special emphasis be placed on general catch-up increases to revenues to address the reductions that have been experienced by impacted boards, who are consequently finding it more and more difficult to maintain the same equity and accessibility in programming, services and supports.

It is no secret that progressive years of funding for school operating below the rate of inflation— when added further to the existing half billion dollar inflationary funding gap between total revenues received in public education and actual operating costs (evident from mandated financial reporting and accounting under the longstanding FRAME report)— have represented a fiscal noose around effective maintenance of the educational opportunities that all Manitobans should expect from their public schools. If steps are not undertaken to meaningfully address this growing funding divide in 2024/25, the gap will only continue to outpace available resources, to the detriment of our students and our communities.

Even with last year's overall increase, recent funding trends have witnessed budget decreases for nearly half of all school divisions, with fewer and fewer school divisions able to fund costs at the rate of inflation while nearly two thirds experience increases below the rate of inflation. To successfully address our call to quality education for all of our children, this funding pattern should not persist.

Based on this precarious context, divisions province-wide have engaged in cost containment measures that are based on the least impact to those programs that are critical to student success, even while we are experiencing more and more impacts to these same core services and programming. Going into 2024, appropriate steps must therefore be taken by Government to reverse this alarming trend. We therefore strongly recommend that Government extend consideration for between a 4 to 5 percent increase to operating expenditures over the next four year mandate, in an effort to address the most recent inflationary adjustment gaps as incurred by the public education system between 2017 and 2023.

In the above respect, successive Governments have often observed that select divisions maintain "surplus" and so have no requirement for additional operating increases. The reality is that these reserves are mandated to address emergency requirements across the public education system and are therefore not tied to operating expenditures. As witnessed during the pandemic period, that such monies were available at select divisions in order to respond to critical needs and requirements was very firmly demonstrated. We therefore trust that no mistaken assumption be drawn between system need and maintenance of reserve allowances when reviewing the actual needs that exist in Manitoba's public education system.

PAY FOR NON-INSTRUCTIONAL ESSENTIAL SUPPORT

In respect of our schools' "other operating" costs, it is important to remain aware that just under half of these "other operating expenditures" (approximately \$500 million) are vested in non-instructional compensation for our support staff.

School boards make every attempt to "hold the line" when it comes to achieving settlements that provide a fair and honest wage for our staff, while also promoting fiscal sustainability. We are well aware that funding and human resources are finite and must be balanced with operational needs as well as, most importantly, attendant impacts upon our local ratepayer. In the 2024/25 context, what is fair reflects the cumulative context of fiscal and wage restraint measures beginning in 2017, combined with the specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, one which was followed by significant economic volatility.

Into the 2024/25 Fiscal Year, public school divisions have continued to bargain with those support staff units who have completed the four year mandate established under *The Public Sector Sustainability Act*. The experience to date with those units that have settled, is noteworthy:

- 1) Last year, approximately 10% of non-teacher units settled. The average settlement across these units is currently 2.63% for 2023. Previously, the average settlement across non-teaching units tended to reflect the previous teacher wage settlement pattern, at a combined increase of 6.7% over a four year period. Moving forward, school boards are experiencing increased pressure for higher settlements due to the provincially mandated minimum wage under Bill 44 *The Employment Standards Code Amendment Act (Minimum Wage)*, introduction of Bill 4 (*The Minimum Wage Adjustment Act, 2022*), recent public sector settlements for staff at crown corporations, strikes in our own sector as well as other sectors, and the extremely high

Manitoba annual average CPI rate in 2022 of 7.9%. These emerging developments do contribute to elevated expectations across all bargaining units. The 4.8% increase that became effective April 1, 2023, on minimum wage, with the further 6% increase that occurred on October 1, 2023, signifies that an 11.1% increase will establish a baseline for our upcoming discussions.

- 2) To date, 44 support staff agreements have expired as of the end of the 2023 calendar year, with 19 more expiring as of the end of 2023, resulting in a total of 63 support staff agreements fully expired by the end of this calendar year. Based on progress to date, support units are insisting that divisions settle with Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) applied not just to the current but also applied to future budget years. As outlined above, school boards have experienced a few settlements to date for the 2023 calendar year— however, recent settlements outside of the education sector are increasing expectations among our non-teaching bargaining units. The bottom line is that when bargaining is scheduled over the course of the next year, employers will not be in position to absorb any compensation increase if, under the 2024/25 Funding announcements, extra-ordinary additional support for other operating expenditures is not forthcoming.
- 3) Where impasse occurs, strike action and, alternatively (as outlined in *The Labour Relations Act*), resort to binding arbitration is authorized and almost certainly “on the table.” Recently, school boards have seen hesitation among parties to use binding arbitration. MSBA believes this is due to the legislated limitation, which specifies that a collective agreement will expire no later than six (6) months from the date of the award. The experience with the recent bus drivers strike in the Winnipeg School Division in 2020/21, the custodial staff strike in the Rolling River School Division in 2021/22, support staff in the School District of Mystery Lake in 2021/22, Educational Assistants in Hanover School Division in 2022/23, and other units with strike mandates, demonstrates that support units are not averse to settling in that manner. The ultimate outcome where such developments occur is that strike mandates are being given where these result in maximum disruption to divisional operations. In consequence, our students’ learning is in turn often disrupted, in terms of the services that these students and their schools rely upon to deliver, as well as to access and provide, educational opportunities.

In respect of divisional “other operating” investments— as already demonstrated in 2023/24 and now as we enter 2024/25, our revenue requirements shall remain much more elevated than the annual average rate of inflation in Manitoba alone.

The overall conclusion that we offer for how to address these other operating expenditures in terms of non-instructional support staff settlements aligns with our very first recommendation, in terms of providing a grant increase sufficient to cover and address such costs, or a combination of measures including a one-time lifting of restrictions on levy authority and allowance for use of the special requirement in order to ensure minimal disruption to our students and schools.

EDUCATION PROPERTY TAX REPEALMENT/PROPERTY TAX OFFSET GRANT

Recommendation 4:

That repealment of education property taxation be maintained at a 50% total reduction effective as of 2023, with maintenance of the ability of school boards to draw upon the remaining 50% portion of locally collected revenues, in order to address ongoing critical needs and resourcing shortages across the school system under Budget 2024.

For fear of sounding as though we are on “repeat play”, there is a subtle difference between our request under Recommendation #1 and this present Recommendation #4. Whereas the first speaks to a one-time allowance to exceed the heretofore established two per cent cap on levy authority, this present recommendation speaks to promoting and protecting the overall 20 percent share of operating revenues that remain available to school boards based upon the provincial average distribution of operating revenues by source. In this respect, we recognize and acknowledge the election commitments that were made by the new Government in this last respect. However, we feel it important to underscore that any potential loss of the existing levy authority would represent a critical mistake now and into the future, for all of the reasons we have addressed in this brief.

That Manitobans support the continuation of shared responsibility between Government and school boards for governing and investing in their local school divisions is clear. According to a Probe Research survey conducted on our behalf in December, 2021, it bears emphasis that eighty percent of Manitobans believe that directly electing their own representatives to oversee their local public schools is an important democratic right. A clear majority also favour keeping local school divisions to oversee and govern public schools on behalf of their neighbourhoods and communities. Such support is even stronger among those living in rural and northern Manitoba. It therefore closely follows that Manitobans’ support for “local voices and local choices” in education includes adequate and sustainable investment. Doing so will ensure that these voices and choices remain viable and can flourish well into the future.

Last December, a Probe Research poll indicated that 58% of Manitobans would favour discontinuation of Bill 71 rebates, in order to invest those revenues in social priorities, with a further nine per cent being unsure of whether or not to continue repealment of education property tax. The question of “who pays and for how much” was a priority long advocated by our association. As was repeatedly stated by your predecessors, “putting more money on the kitchen table” certainly remains a compelling objective but, as we noted throughout the last mandate, should not signify that any of that money comes from the classroom table. The December, 2022 Probe survey clearly demonstrated that Manitobans understand this key fact.

In partnership with other significant community stakeholders, including municipalities and chambers of commerce, the ability of school boards to retain a twenty percent share of operating investment remains unchanged to this day. A resolution to fully repeal all education property taxes as debated by the members of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities in 2017 was soundly defeated by its membership. What has therefore never been advocated was a full repealment of education levies, thereby resulting in 100% of operating revenues for public education coming from the provincial

government. Neither has any stakeholder ever argued that such redistribution ought to be achieved through any form of provincial debt-finance measures. Notwithstanding, we well recognize that repealment commenced well before the provincial deficit had been addressed. Ideal conditions were not sequenced to promote long-term sustainability of the education property tax repealment.

We therefore remain very concerned regarding the overall sustainability of Bill 71 taxation repealment and how this can be successfully managed over time. In keeping with our members' interests, we can only issue a reminder that it is possible to promote lesser burden upon local ratepayers through means other than repealment, while also protecting school boards' ability to retain the degree of fiscal autonomy necessary to equally promote local responsibilities for implementing programs, supports and services that remain aligned and responsive to the needs of our students and communities.

In view of the significant fiscal pressures we have already outlined, our association can only stress that any further consideration for incremental and ongoing implementation of taxation repealment would gravely constrain our respective responsibility to respond to the panoply of pressures described in this brief. It is for that reason that Recommendation #4 speaks to a need to maintain the current portion of taxation repealment at its 2023 level. This successfully achieves the "80/20 split" in operating revenue by source, as long sought by major stakeholders. We are aware that our new Government is well aware of these concerns but we would be remiss not to repeat our advocacy on this important issue.

CAPITAL INCREASE

Recommendation 5:

That the Government of Manitoba continue to proceed to new school builds at the earliest possible time, even while considering significant increase for overall funding allocations to capital grants. In 2024/25, increased capital grants will remain critical for addressing identified needs of Manitoba's aging school infrastructure, while promoting renewal of its physical footprint and prioritization of accessibility. Further, that the Government consider enhancing grants in support of both school bus modernization and connectivity, in order to meet the needs of a 21st century school system.

According to our most recent survey of members, the vast majority of Manitoba's school capital footprint has now exceeded a fifty year anniversary. In an effort to respond to new school capital requirements, the former Government pledged a 20+ "new schools guarantee." The intended opening of these schools was designed to respond to ongoing growth and demand in many high need communities across Manitoba.

With the current decision to suspend all new school capital projects, our membership is concerned about when plans will be announced to move forward to meet these community and student pressures. While we appreciate the need for the new Government to review all projects and move forward on a sound basis to promote sustainability for longer-term financial security, we wish to note that these existing needs and pressures are not able to be "placed on hold" as expediently. We therefore signal our desire for this important work to resume as soon as the new Government may be in position to do so.

In respect of our older infrastructure, maintenance and retrofit requirements continue to accentuate. The \$8 million in capital grants received in each of 2022 and 2023, when situated in context of 700 public schools, rising inflation, and availability of a shrinking pool of qualified contractors (who are then able to charge “more for less” to undertake completion of these priorities), deserves special attention.

Recent media focus has been placed both on ventilation upgrades in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as soaring temperatures within schools this past spring, leading to concern and worry for the health of our staff and students. The Federal Government through Health Canada continues its review of potential new guidelines regarding air quality in schools, even as Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning was poised to publicly release results of lead testing of potable water sources in our schools. Both air and water quality cannot be underscored enough when it comes to health and wellbeing of Manitoba’s children. Every investment helps to address these needs given the age and state of our mechanical and physical systems, including those relating to plumbing, heating, cooling and ventilation. Responding to climate action initiatives designed to lessen the overall environmental impact of our footprint further runs into what can only be restated as hundreds of millions of dollars in needed funds.

Accessibility upgrades to meet the needs of all students, staff and community members who access our physical spaces also remains a compelling priority and these additional expenditures alone continue to be projected at over half a billion dollars.

Returning to the needs present in northern Manitoba, you may be aware that teacherages are important components of the capital infrastructure required to attract and retain qualified teaching and non-instructional staff in this region. Yet, over the past few decades, the state of northern teacherages is nearing a state of full depreciation. Some of these residences have been in constant use for the past four decades (and sometimes even longer) and in some cases, were originally placed in communities as only temporary structures. The time to conduct a review and assessment for their replacement and to provide capital support to help ensure that these buildings are well maintained and align with local needs, is certainly an initiative that would be strongly supported and encouraged as you develop Budget 2024.

In 2020/21, we presented to your predecessor the outcomes of a cross-Canada comparative study of school capital commissioned by the Fraser Institute under its “Education Spending in Public Schools in Canada” report. This report highlighted the fact that Manitoba demonstrated the second lowest growth in school capital spending across Canada and was among only three provinces that registered negative investment due to underfunding. To state that the health of our buildings, and those who frequent them, require special attention in 2024/25 and with longer term plans and commitments, is an understatement.

The school capital mandate of Government, which we believe now falls under Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation, must keep measured pace with the care needs of our most aged infrastructure. New schools to align with new communities is important but so too are sufficient investments in older schools, so that they continue to remain healthy and productive places for all members of our school society and for meeting the needs of their surrounding community.

In respect of this portion of the recommendation, we would also signal that, with the realignment of ministerial portfolios, while we suspect that the School Capital Branch now falls under authority of

Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation, clarifying whether this is the case and whether any key contacts have changed would be of significant benefit for our membership. We would sincerely appreciate if the Ministers copied on this brief can provide clarity to us.

Finally, to close of recommendation #5, we would advocate that special focus must also be placed on two additional priorities as well: modernization of provincial bus fleets and greater connectivity to ensure our schools are able to respond to the needs of a 21st century operating context.

In respect of school bus replacement, repair and maintenance, no effort has to date been made to begin to respond to the Federal Government's zero emission mandates by reviewing our school bus fleets within Manitoba. While all school divisions shall become mandated to meet these targets by 2050, with the urgency of doing so becoming ever clearer based on scientific warming projections, we are only too aware that Governments in such jurisdictions as BC, Quebec and Ontario have received funding to engage in pilot testing towards more efficient bus fleets, even as no leadership has been undertaken in Manitoba on the same. We would therefore invite the Government to work with us to help ensure that our divisions are not unfairly advantaged once the target deadlines come into view.

Beyond such momentous changes on the near horizon, that school bus maintenance grants have largely remained stagnant is equally deserving of review and consideration.

In respect of the need for greater connectivity, if the pandemic proved one reality regarding our education system, it is that connectivity is everything when it comes to community resilience in context of emergency and disaster response planning and the ability to rapidly adapt and shift should need ever arise again in future. Let alone the importance of internet connectivity to meet the needs of a global knowledge economy in which students must be prepared to enter a workforce across which technological skill remains among the most essential requirements. As you may be aware, the laying of fibre optic networks across southern Manitoba is proceeding at current time, but it is projected that decades will pass before every major community receives such critical infrastructure. Here again, equity for rural and northern Manitoba comes into view as well.

We would therefore recommend that at minimum, new and expanded capital investments be made to rectify Manitoba's ongoing school and teacherage capital deficit, while also extending consideration for enhanced support to achieve school bus modernization and critical, internet-related infrastructure.

INTERVENTION SUPPORTS

Recommendation 6:

That the Government continue to grow multi-year funding under the Funding of Schools Program envelope to support expanded services and supports for both learning recovery as well as mental health and wellness services in 2024/25 and future years. Further, that the Government redirect all remaining funding (approximately \$5 million over the next two Fiscal Periods) from the Teacher Idea Fund to approve a new funding envelope that will enable each division to enhance targeted intervention supports.

Post-pandemic, the need for targeted and intensified funding for learning recovery, mental health/wellness, and addictions supports are greater than ever before. Meaningful expansion of these services does not come in the form of “one-time” funding envelopes. This requires a shift to dedicated, permanent base funding that will address a student population that is nearly 190,000 students strong.

We are grateful for the supports that were extended in prior years to address many of these factors. That costs and demand are fast outpacing available resources must be addressed however, if we are to effect enhancements in responding to these challenges.

To render such resourcing cost neutral and within the scope of existing funding, we therefore recommend that the Government consider redirecting all remaining funding from the Teacher Idea Fund (originally scheduled for implementation at \$5 million per year over the next two fiscal periods) to better align with the above programming priorities. It is our view that learning recovery, mental health and wellness, and addictions supports remain among the largest priorities that will best address teacher needs now and into the foreseeable future. Without additional and meaningful investment, our staff will continue to balance each of these priorities against existing workload demands, and our pupils will be ill-served as a result.

CONTINUATION OF FUNDING MODEL REVIEW

Recommendation 7:

MSBA encourages Manitoba’s new Government to resume the work of the education funding model review task force, in order to explore many of the draft features that had previously garnered “in-principle” approval from education stakeholders.

Lastly, in concert with your predecessors and other partners, we want to highlight our continued support towards finalization of what had commenced in 2022, in terms of a general education funding model review. As a means through which to determine how future funding may be better distributed to serve our system’s needs, to proceed with such a review remains of highest priority for our members.

Prior to the formal suspension of this review in December, 2022 (with resumption of consultations only weeks prior to the electoral blackout period this past summer in 2023), we want to highlight that many stakeholders supported, albeit “in principle”, many of the preliminary features that had been described under the draft model. While it remained to be seen how the proposed model would adequately respond to ongoing financial pressures given that it did not take into account the sufficiency of current funding investments, that some positive and constructive work had been achieved, provided hope that the model might be reformed in the longer term.

IN CLOSING

As always, Minister Sala, our chief priority remains focused on our frontline— our students, staff and the resources that they need for educational success. This remains the enduring reality of the public school system in Manitoba, and also of the mission and mandate of the Manitoba School Boards Association in championing its cause.

We remain ever cognizant of the multiple, challenging realities faced in the realm of Government finance. MSBA certainly appreciates the larger economic context faced by our province at current time. Yet, as we hope has been showcased in this year's pre-budget brief, that we cannot shortchange our children, employees, or their future also precedes any further fiscal or economic trade-offs in responding to this context. Only increased funding will serve them well in the year and future that lies ahead.

As our province prepares to plan for the 2024/25 Fiscal Year, we cannot overstate the many mandates that will be impacted if our resources remain underfunded. We are well aware that our combined operating and capital funding requests are significant. This is especially true when the Government faces such a critical deficit challenge. However, the expectations that our communities have for quality and equitable educational access and opportunity for our children— are just as significant.

Meal, nutrition, extra-curricular and summer programs, wrap-around services, individualized education plans, remedial/tutorial support, access to community service providers, family engagement and outreach; each of these are but threads in the patchwork of a comprehensive blanket of initiatives that will address the supports required by those children most in need. These supports are needed now more than ever, due to the critical trends and patterns we are seeing at current time, not just among those “high or at risk” student populations that have historically demonstrated the highest vulnerability rates, but also within the general student population.

We therefore trust that the recommendations presented to the Government of Manitoba in this pre-budget consultation brief continue to remain pragmatic and aligned with the expressed needs of our students and their schools, towards the development of Budget 2024. As always, the Manitoba School Boards Association is available for further consultation and advisement regarding the finalization of budget development, should you wish to discuss our recommendations. We are hopeful that, in keeping with established practice, this brief will well serve to inform your deliberations in the coming weeks as you finalize review and consideration of our schools' requirements in 2024/25.

The children of this province are the greatest gift and most important resource that Manitoba has for actualizing its hopes and dreams for the future. Through the financial investments that are committed in 2024, we can continue to resource and equip them with the very best that this Province has to offer, towards that enduring and critical end.