

'Better education' started many years ago

RICK HALEY

WE have many problems in public education and changes need to happen — fast. Teachers are skipping parts of the curriculum. Children are struggling emotionally and academically. There are great inconsistencies amongst schools. Parents need to be more involved. We need the government to step in.

But wait — don't we have one of the greatest education systems in the world? We do. Canada is a great country, and there is a direct correlation between a productive school system and quality of life. And in Manitoba, we are also doing well, despite what the Progressive Conservatives will have you believe.

The majority of students in Manitoba graduate high school and go on to be contributing members of society. We accept, on average, 15,000 newcomers each year, and our school system is one the main reasons people choose Manitoba. We hosted more than 18,000 international students in educational facilities in 2018. This is a good place to be.

But we need to make changes, and here are the issues: A super-sized curriculum: We think schools can fix everything. Kids are fat? Add more physical education. A cashier couldn't make change? More math. Businesses can't find enough staff? Let's teach employability skills. A student didn't know what the Holocaust was? Ramp up the social studies. Throw in arts education, sustainable development and land-based learning, just to name a few, and we quickly see there aren't enough hours in the day to teach it all.

We keep adding more and more, so curriculum needs restructuring. Perhaps we need to decide if

we are educating well-rounded students with a general skill and knowledge base or we are a factory pumping out future employees.

Support for struggling learners: Most energy and resources in a school go to less than 20 per cent of the students. This is reality. We continue to see an increase in the number of students with exceptional needs. Learning differences, mental and physical health issues and behaviour issues are just a few of the concerns educators struggle to deal with. We need help.

As the provincial government trims what it calls top-heavy administration, what also gets cut are the supports schools need in the way of co-ordinators and clinicians. These people help the teachers and educational assistants who work with students. And larger class sizes don't make their work any easier.

Inequities amongst schools: The purveyors of Bill 64 say this will be solved — a child will get the exact same educational experience in Dauphin, Steinbach, Charleswood and downtown Winnipeg. But it will not happen. Publishing test scores will not provide accountability. Schools in lower socioeconomic areas of Winnipeg deal with many issues that do not arise in more affluent neighbourhoods and rural areas. Poverty is real in Winnipeg, and it greatly affects learning.

Along with poverty come hunger, transiency, lack of proper clothing, supplies and resources. Many families living in poverty deal with trauma. Moms and dads work two and three jobs just to put food on the table. Many parents do not trust the education system, as generations of their families have dealt with residential schools.

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well as those in the suburbs? Is it a surprise their parents are not involved as much as they would like to be in their child's school? What is needed are community resources, run in conjunction with high-needs schools to help families. In other words, wrap-around support. If we are truly an inclusive community and we care about our neighbours, we need to remedy this — now.

Teachers, educational assistants, secretaries, custodians and bus drivers have been involved in student-centred education for a long time now in Manitoba. Better education doesn't start today; it started many years ago.

Yes, we need to change education in Manitoba. But Bill 64 is not the fix we need. It is not a "modernization" act; its scope is archaic. I can guarantee that in 10 years, this legislation will not have saved any money, but it will have impacted learning. And unfortunately, that impact will be to the negative.

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