

Education bill sparks new school closure concerns

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter By: Maggie Macintosh

Posted: 4:00 AM CDT Thursday, Apr. 8, 2021

Rural educators and residents are worried about school closures and student commute times under proposed reforms to public schools in Manitoba.

There has been a moratorium on school closures since 2008, with few exceptions, which require elected trustees to undertake extensive consultation with a school community and make their case to the education minister. Existing legislation also requires school boards to make their "best efforts" to ensure each student's one-way trip to school is no more than an hour.

The Education Modernization Act (Bill 64) includes neither a ban on closures nor a time cap on school bus trips.

"It just points to potential disaster for small schools in the province — be they in an urban setting or in, more predominantly, rural settings," said Alan Campbell, president of the Manitoba School Boards Association and a trustee in the Interlake School Division.

"In every rural division there are small schools that operate effectively and efficiently that also double as the heart and soul and foundation and lifeblood... of those small communities."

Under Bill 64, a centralized education authority, made up of government appointees slated to replace elected boards, would be in charge of decisions to close schools. The authority would be able to close a school on the grounds it is either part of consolidation, there is consensus for the closure among parents and residents, or because declining enrolment means operations are no longer feasible — or a combination of the above criteria.

The same considerations have to be made at present, but a new central board will create a policy on possible closure notification and undertake public consultation.

Jan McIntyre, chairwoman of the Prairie Spirit School Division, said "virtually 100 per cent" of a school community has to support a closure before it's approved at present, but Bill 64 paves the way for the government to ignore meaningful consultation.

McIntyre questions why a centralized board would be able to close rural schools — a decision that hurts a community's social and economic future — as opposed to local trustees who experience the effects of a closure first-hand.

"Despite the fears and the fearmongering that's out there being created by school boards, the government has no intent whatsoever in closing rural schools or any other school for that matter," Education Minister Cliff Cullen told the *Free Press* Wednesday.

When asked about Bill 64 not including guidance on one-way school trips, Cullen said the province has no plans to expand busing distances. The minister reiterated the intent behind the proposed reforms is to shift an estimated \$40 million in education administrative costs to front-line services.

The superintendent of Frontier School Division said there's no doubt cost savings could be found by shutting down schools with fewer than 20 students and busing them to larger centres, but doing so would be to the detriment of student well-being and safety on rough northern roads. Reg Klassen said such a move would "rip apart" a community rather than improve education.

Klassen added, "Community voice needs to be heard. It's the job of policy-makers to protect the rights of citizens, it's not their job to protect cost savings. Those two don't often play nice in the sandbox. That's the difficult part about democracy."

maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca

Twitter: @macintoshmaggie

Maggie Macintosh

Reporter

Maggie Macintosh reports on education for the Winnipeg Free Press. Funding for the Free Press education reporter comes from the Government of Canada through the Local Journalism Initiative.

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