

## Bill 64 earns a failing grade

By: Jim Silver

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### OPINION

THE proposed re-organization of K-12 education in Manitoba being contemplated by the provincial government's Bill 64 is unlikely to have any impact whatever on the educational success of children and young people.

What the government is proposing is an educational reshuffling, with elected bodies being eliminated here and appointed bodies and toothless advisory committees being created there. This administrative overhauling will preoccupy educational administrators for years to come. Meanwhile, the real educational problem will continue to go unaddressed.

The most significant impediment to the educational success of children and youth is poverty. Virtually all rigorous studies across the world over decades have reached the same conclusion: the most powerful predictor of educational outcomes is socioeconomic status. What this means is that the higher the level of poverty, the lower the level of educational attainment.

Multiple studies in Manitoba have found the same to be the case. In those areas of the city and the province where the incidence of poverty is the highest, levels of educational attainment are the lowest. This pattern begins even before children start school. Measurements of children's readiness for school show that in those areas where poverty is highest, the proportion of children at age five who are ready to start school successfully is lowest.

The evidence is overwhelming and incontestable that poverty produces poor educational outcomes.

Poverty is a major problem in Manitoba. A December 2020 report prepared by the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg based on 2018 data (the most recent available) found

87,730 children were living in poor families. This is 28.3 per cent — more than one in every four — of all children in the province.

This is the highest rate of child poverty of all the provinces in Canada. Manitoba's child poverty rate is 10 percentage points worse than the national average. These astonishingly high rates of poverty have been found consistently over decades in Manitoba.

Rates of poverty are even worse for Indigenous children: 53 per cent are growing up in poverty in Manitoba. Consistent with all the evidence about the correlation between high levels of poverty and low levels of educational attainment, Indigenous people have, on average, lower levels of educational attainment than the population at large.

A major study done a decade ago found Indigenous people were, on average, approximately half as likely as the population at large to hold a high school diploma and to hold a university degree.

These educational outcomes are directly related to poverty. A study completed seven years ago found the incidence of poverty among Indigenous people in Winnipeg was almost 2.5 times that of the non-Indigenous population. In Brandon, the incidence of poverty among Indigenous people was three times, and in Thompson four times that of the non-Indigenous population.

That study, consistent with the 2020 Social Planning Council of Winnipeg study, found very high levels of poverty among Indigenous children under the age of six years — in other words, preschool children.

Given the proven connection between poverty and educational outcomes, it should be no surprise that, on average, Indigenous children experience lower school-readiness scores than non-Indigenous children. However, what is especially revealing and important is that when these data are controlled for parental income and education, the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children almost completely disappear.

For those children who are not ready for school, it is their poverty — not their Indigenous identity — that is the cause.

The provincial government's proposed re-organization of K-12 education completely ignores these realities. The proposal to create and delete committees and councils — to shuffle administrative bodies far from the classroom and the community — while doing nothing whatever about the poverty that produces poor educational outcomes, would be laughable were it not such a total waste of time and energy.

The evidence is unequivocal: high levels of poverty produce poor educational outcomes. If we want to improve educational outcomes, we have to address the poverty. Bill 64 completely ignores this reality.

Imagine that the provincial government's proposed re-organization of K-12 education were a classroom assignment, with the instructions being to design a plan to improve educational outcomes. Any reasonable teacher would see that the student's assignment has not followed the instructions. It has nothing to do with improving educational outcomes.

"Please rewrite the assignment, remembering to follow the instructions," might be the teacher's comment. The grade assigned would be F.

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