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For principals, Bill 64 a matter of principles



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OPINION

IF you want to be a school principal in 2022, it would be to your advantage to be a long-standing, card-carrying Conservative, a compliant person who thrives on unquestioning obedience in the face of contradictions and conceptual confusions, and who welcomes day-to-day insecurity.

That is what Pillar 4, Section 4.3 (Enhance School Leadership) of Better Education Starts Today (BEST), the implementation outline for Bill 64, offers you.

Under Bill 64, the Education Modernization Act, principals will be civil servants who, in essence, hold their positions at the pleasure of the minister of education. In the highly centralized, top-down governance system envisioned by this government, principals will be hired by regional directors of education appointed by the minister. There is no guarantee that director positions, open to anyone who possesses "the qualifications required to ensure they are able to achieve success in their role to oversee the administration of education across their region," will be filled by educators.

BEST states, "The role of the principal is second only to the role of teachers in terms of school-related factors that impact learning." It then goes on to call the role "enhanced with a new emphasis on school governance and the establishment of school community councils."

To achieve these tasks, it promises to "develop a new provincial school leadership framework to strengthen the role as... instructional and school leaders" who "need to operate clearly within the management domain — removed from the real or perceived conflict of interest that exists with management and employees in the same union."

While the importance of the principal's impact on the school environment is hard to overstate, the research is clear that it is not the management function or the political role that are related to student success. It is clearly the instructional leadership responsibility, defined as teaching knowledge of curriculum, collegial support for and

with teachers and emphasis on supportive student-teacher relationships, that makes the difference.

These are the dispositions most principals have embraced and competencies they have fostered over the years, all the while effectively handling the business end and the advocacy of schools.

Responsible management of school matters, including the handling of public monies, is important, but it has little to do with student success. To a large extent, the same can be said for heavy-handed, possibly overbearing, teacher supervision. While the practices of a small minority of teachers, from time to time, might require oversight, such cases are rare.

And where a teacher's actions are inappropriate, they need to be curtailed or disciplined, but experience shows that the rarity of these cases does not require prioritizing the paranoid stifling vigilance implied by BEST.

The contradictions are stark. Management and leadership are not the same.

Business and operations management requires conformity to established predictable practices that do not tolerate exceptions easily. Instructional leadership, on the other hand, requires judgments — collegial responses to a variety of contexts and situations, dependent on the uniqueness of teachers, students and the school community.

Other inferences drawn are just plain wrong, lacking any connection to school realities. The implication that the job is somehow so unmanageable that principals need a government rescue package is disingenuous, considering that BEST makes the job more unreasonable and impractical.

In addition to doing work currently done by school board offices, principals will be tasked with providing school community councils with expertise and competence, meanwhile taking councils' advice on matters from personnel issues to teacher supervision to judgments on student achievement, while ensuring that all parents work together harmoniously — all while not being distracted by concerns about job security and arbitrary discipline and dismissal.

Current principals have "the option ... of returning to classroom teaching to remain in the teacher union and thereby protect their seniority, pension, benefits and other

entitlements." Good luck negotiating separate contracts for seniority and benefits, let alone protection and reasonable compensation for increased duties.

While it is unclear how principals can lose their legally negotiated benefits through capricious legislation, the intent is clear: principals, conform or you're gone. Can't keep parents happy? Same. Don't keep teachers in line? Out you go. Find another position? Be reassured, "principals ... will be hired ... through a competitive process" (according to the government's Bill 64 "Fact vs. Fiction" release).

In the face of rigid partisan directives, it would be difficult for a principal to register open opposition. Good principals will push back against ideas that are not good for their students, teachers, parents and community; but if they do, it's likely they will not be long for the job.

This horrible deal can only end badly for principals and the principalship... and for all of education.

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