

Teachers seeing red in education overhaul fight

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Aaron Beckman, a Winnipeg resource teacher, designed the red 'Fight Bill 64' T-shirts. The sales of the T-shirts raise money for school breakfast and lunch programs.

A new anti-Bill 64 campaign calls for public education supporters in Manitoba to wear "Red for Ed" on Fridays, in solidarity against the Pallister government's controversial plans for the K-12 school system.

Organizing under the banner ProtectEdMB, local teachers are making the international Red for Ed campaign their own to raise concerns about the province's plans for public schooling, which include replacing elected boards with a centralized authority of government appointees.

The red T-shirt movement began in West Virginia in 2018, as a teacher strike related to wage-hike demands.

The colour — a symbol of Republican states, an apple on the first day of school, and being either angry or in-the-red, when it comes to finances — has since been co-opted by campaigns in favour of increased funding for public education across the United States and Canada.

When Aaron Beckman heard a group of educators in Winnipeg had started wearing red to signal their opposition to the Education Modernization Act, he searched his closet.

"I didn't own a red shirt, but I wanted to get this going and promote it a little bit more because I was displeased with Bill 64," said the resource teacher, "so I designed a T-shirt."

Beckman is now leading an official campaign to raise money for breakfast and lunch programs in Manitoba schools by selling T-shirts that bear the phrases, "Fight Bill 64" and #RedforEdMB. To date, the group has sold more than 200, at a price tag of \$25 each.

His concerns about the province's plans are how the new governance structure will properly represent marginalized communities, an emphasis on standardized tests is not inclusive for students with disabilities, and they do not address tangible ways to tackle child poverty.

Both the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba and Manitoba Teachers' Society called for increased funding to support universal nutrition programs during the K-12 review, which informed Bill 64 and the Better Education Starts Today strategy.

The provincial strategy states Manitoba will create a task force to examine linkages between poverty and education, and support strategies to improve engagement and outcomes for all students.

Education Minister Cliff Cullen has said high child poverty rates cannot be an excuse for not striving to improve student outcomes. Cullen backs the blueprint as one that will empower parents and result in up to \$40 million being redirected to classrooms.

"When a child comes to school trying to focus on their education, when their home life is so rocky for many different reasons, there's not a lot of education that's going on. You're basically managing their mental and physical health as best you can," said Bryan Goods, who recently retired as a teacher after more than 25 years, and is an organizer with ProtectEdMB.

The educators plan to donate the more than \$3,000 and counting in campaign proceeds to the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba.

In a statement Friday, Cullen said he hopes teachers are taking the time to become informed on the province's strategy. "It is this five-year strategy, working with Manitobans and front-line educators, that will help improve our education system for everyone sooner, rather than preventing progress and maintaining a status quo."

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