

Bill 64 opposition not just 'vocal minority'

By: Melanie Janzen

Posted: 4:00 AM CDT Tuesday, Jun. 29, 2021



MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Education Minister Cliff Cullen underestimated the still-growing resistance to Bill 64 when he referred to its opponents as 'a vocal minority.'

OPINION

Education Minister Cliff Cullen has characterized the criticism of Bill 64: The Modernization of Education Act, as a campaign of misinformation from "a vocal minority" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, June 15). Cullen's comments imply the disapproval of Bill 64 is from a handful of ill-informed and mal-intended ragtags. But the resistance to Bill 64 is nothing of the sort.

In fact, it's a perfect example of the values we uphold in our social democracy — values of political engagement and critique, which represent our commitment to the public good of education.

First, there is nothing "minor" about this "vocal minority" — who might more aptly be called dissenting citizens. In fact, the organizations that represent these dissenting citizens include the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the Manitoba School Boards Association, the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

There are also local teachers associations, parent councils, Facebook groups, a coalition of the faculties of education in Manitoba, and community groups such as ProtectEdMB. These organizations and activities span urban and rural communities, central and suburban neighbourhoods. They include parents, teachers, trustees, researchers, students and community members.

And the actions of the dissenting citizens are numerous. Parents have been hosting local community events, such as the protest rally organized by the Waskada School Parent Advisory. Municipalities, such as the Rural Municipality of Taché, have passed resolutions formally opposing Bill 64. The Louis Riel School Division board of trustees hosted an online conversation about the bill, with more than 950 people registered.

At that meeting, a group of Grade 9 students presented their thorough and articulate critique of Bill 64 (which is available on their YouTube channel). There is a barrage of yard signs, letters to editors, hashtags, online toolkits, webinars, forums, rallies, and protest T-shirts. One petition circulating online has more than 15,000 signatures.

These dissenting citizens see that Bill 64 gives enormous power and oversight to the yet-to-be-created Provincial Education Authority Board, which will be comprised of the minister, six to 11 appointed board members and a CEO. This body will have the authority to appoint all regional directors (one per region), "designate" school principals, and employ (and thereby choose to not employ some) teachers.

This means all current influence that parents, community members, educational leaders and trustees have will be lost, and all decisions will be subsumed into a partisan bureaucracy, which will change priorities to reflect the ideologies of the political party in power. It is important to note that the current education governance structure allows for relationships between parents, school boards and superintendents that are

collaborative and reflective of democratic principles. Currently, these relationships are also rarely (if ever) partisan.

Dissenting citizens have identified other elements of Bill 64 that will erode the public good of education — too many to mention here. However, I will note that the non-elected Provincial Authority Board will oversee decisions about closing local schools, charging school fees, determining educational programming and creating budgets. Again, these are currently decided by community-elected officials, but under Bill 64 will be in the hands of a partisan few.

An additional concern is about students and the ways in which Bill 64 considers students to be a homogenous group whose main concern should be to "develop competencies" for "entry into the workforce." Dissenting citizens want more for children than an education that is focused solely on creating compliant workers — we want more for our society, too.

There is a lack of acknowledgement in the bill about the diversity of students; that students are agentic; that they come from different families, communities and circumstances; and have different languages, races, ethnicities, abilities and interests. And deplorably, there is no recognition of the need for and importance of our collective commitment toward reconciliation.

In fact, there is no meaningful recognition of reconciliation or of Indigenous rights in Bill 64 at all.

This is — in part — what Cullen has so poorly understood; the rejection of Bill 64 is not the perspective of a misinformed vocal minority. This movement is a passionate and dissenting citizenry that shares a collective commitment to public education — a public education that must remain free for all, non-partisan and committed to all children.

Melanie Janzen is an associate professor at the University of Manitoba, a former public school teacher, and a dissenting citizen.

The Winnipeg Free Press invites you to share your opinion on this story in a letter to the editor. A selection of letters to the editor are **published daily**.

To submit a letter:

- fill out the form **on this page**, or

- email letters@freepress.mb.ca, or
- mail *Letters to the Editor*, 1355 Mountain Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2X 3B6.

Letters must include the writer's full name, address, and a daytime phone number. Letters are edited for length and clarity.