



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

December 21, 2020

A version of this piece is forthcoming in Our Schools Our Selves published by CCPA National

Manitoba's pandemic learning plan A timeline of "immediately," a budget of "nothing" amid secretive legislation

Manitoba's public-school teachers are busy wrapping up the fall term— if they can stay awake. Teachers must be recognized this year for adapting, again and again in an increasingly complicated race to keep schools safe, parents working, and the economy ticking along. Public policy changes began pre-pandemic and continue to add uncertainty and stress to the public school system as well.

By mid-October, rapidly escalating case counts and test-positivity rates led the provincial government to announce sweeping changes for schools across the Winnipeg metropolitan area, which was extended to include most of the province.

Gone were the caveats of "when possible" that qualified previous directives. Departing from the inadequate but relatively clear system of green, yellow and red provisions, the government instructed schools to pivot to a new hybrid of these plans: a seasonally appropriate, if logistically impossible, "Code Orange."

Suddenly, students did require the long-recommended two meters of space, an arrangement that would have been challenging to implement at the beginning of the school year, but in mid-October, needed to be put in place by teachers over the course of a weekend. Some report it has not yet been achieved. While moving desks and repurposing gymnasiums, K-8 teachers

had the opportunity to plan how they might also offer the remote learning that was mandated for any classroom that was not a hybrid of Mary Poppins' carpet bag and the TARDIS. The province presumed all of this was possible without increased staffing.

These last-minute provisions may indeed have been "possible." But they did not come without significant costs.

The cost of providing adequate space to many students turned out to be 50%-66% of a teacher. Given a timeline of "immediately" and a budget of "nothing" the solution to overcrowded classrooms and a mandate to provide remote learning was to ask the impossible of our educators. "Duplex" teachers now split their time between two less-populated classrooms, hoping that their lessons manage to "land" once the students are left under the supervision of an educational assistant. "Triplex" teachers do the same, with the additional task of bending the space-time continuum to provide content and educational support to students learning remotely.

To say this is unsustainable is an understatement. Educators and advocates in Manitoba wrote an open letter to the Premier and Minister of Education on November 8th requesting funding for reduced class sizes, additional teachers,

there is an alternative.

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and other things deemed essential to preventing a collapse of the education system. But even should funds be released, it will be difficult to find qualified applicants for many of the positions that must be filled – especially in French Immersion programs whose enrollments have swollen over the past decade. Constant demand for substitute teachers outstrips what was already a limited supply. As isolation guidelines become more stringent, we are hovering on the precipice of a crisis.

Code Orange for schools is, in effect, code for “keep kids in the schools, whatever the costs,” so long as those costs are not at the expense of Manitoba’s provincial economy. While most will agree that the multiple roles schools play in the lives of families are absolutely critical, the clear priority of the provincial government is allowing parents to support the economy and pay their bills, unfettered by childcare concerns.

Now grades 7 - 12 students are moving to remote learning after the holiday break, ostensibly to prevent a rise in COVID numbers presuming families reduce their vigilance to COVID during the break.

While parents ponder news conferences, struggling to decipher what constantly changing directives mean for their children’s education, the government is moving to begin implementation of the still-unpublished recommendations of the Manitoba Commission’s K-12 Education Review. This commission is led by consultant Avis Glaze, whose Nova Scotia review ushered in sweeping changes to education in that province. When Manitoba’s Minister of Education Kelvin Goertzen announced on November 9th that it was working to hire 100 teachers and education assistants to staff a “remote learning resource centre”, many Manitobans were left wondering if this was a legitimate response to the concerns articulated by educators, or simply a step in the direction outlined by this review.

Then October 7th Throne Speech stated that the Manitoba government will begin implementing the PC’s 2019 campaign promise a year early in 2021 instead of

2022 to phase out the education property tax. Their plan is to replace the \$850 million of revenue received from property tax over ten years. This is absolutely regressive policy - it is impossible to find that much money without substantial cuts and all this will take place during the COVID recovery when Manitoba will need a strong public education system.

Then the Minister Goertzen introduced Bill 64 “The Education Modernization Act” but the contents remain unknown to the public. As Alan Campbell of the Manitoba School Boards Association wrote in a Winnipeg Free Press op ed “Nearly two decades ago, the similarly titled Public Schools Modernization Act laid the foundation for a sweeping elimination of school boards province-wide.” Ostensibly done to save money, no savings resulted. “The process of creating larger divisions redirected valuable focus from the classroom and placed it on the administrative and bureaucratic instead.” writes Campbell. This is not what schools need in the middle of a pandemic, or in the recovery.

The Minister of Education’s dedication to the public school system is questionable. He participated in two webinars in spring of 2020 where he stated that “(e)ducation... maybe shouldn’t even be primarily a state activity.” Given the Minister’s preference for private education, it is easy to imagine that the exponential increase in homeschooling numbers in 2020 is being considered internally as a step in the right direction rather than an indictment of the government’s handling of this crisis.

Add to this the government’s expressed interest in re-jigging Manitoba’s post-secondary institutions to directly serve the labour market, and it begins to appear that the government’s failure to accommodate educational needs during this pandemic may not solely be due to neglect and incompetence. Perhaps everything is proceeding according to plan.

Is this the new normal?

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