

UNkindest CUTS

BY GEORGE STEPHENSON

"This is a huge disappointment, a 1.5% cut. Teachers are facing large increases in student enrollment, a growing influx of refugee and newcomer students, chronic – and I mean chronic – child poverty and more special needs kids than ever, and this is what government thinks our students are worth?"

- MTS President Norm Gould

Last month the provincial government announced sweeping changes to education funding that will have a huge impact on every public school teacher in the province.

And the education minister promised there is more to come.

So far, the government has said it will:

- Essentially cut K-12 funding by keeping direct financing of education to less than the rate of inflation and limit the amounts school boards can raise through taxation.
- Freeze salaries of school staff, including teachers, for two years and limit increases for another two years after that.
- Institute a system of provincial bargaining whereby most, if not all, collective bargaining is done at a central table.
- Implement a full review of the education system that the province says will lead to the most profound changes in a generation.

While details of some of the changes are still unclear, it is apparent that the immediate changes will come at a cost to teachers and students.

EDUCATION FUNDING

The province announced it would increase funding in the coming year by one half of one per cent, much less than the expected rate of inflation. At the same time, it has ordered school boards to limit any increases to local education property taxes to two per cent.

MTS President Norm Gould says the announced "increase" is actually a 1.5 per cent cut, given that inflation is expected to be about two per cent. As well, enrolments are increasing.

"Teachers are facing large increases in student enrollment, a growing influx of refugee and newcomer students, chronic – and I mean chronic – child poverty and more special needs kids than ever, and this is what government thinks our students are worth?"

Gould points out that Manitoba is receiving \$290 million in new cash in Federal transfers this year, yet still doesn't see education as a priority.

"This makes clear that our students are an afterthought in this announcement.

Gould's concerns have been echoed by others since the announcement. The chair of the Winnipeg School Division was quoted in the Winnipeg Free Press saying it appears the government is trying to balance the books "on the backs of children."

And, Gould pointed out, on the backs of their employees.

SALARIES TO BE FROZEN

Along with the funding announcement, Education Minister Ian Wishart announced that Bill 28 -- the law that the government passed but not enacted into law -- will freeze and limit public sector workers' salaries for the next four years, beginning July 1. Under the Act, being challenged in court, salaries and monetary benefits, would be frozen for two years. They would be held to an increase of up to .75 per cent in the third year and up to one per cent in the fourth year.

Assuming a projected cost of living increase of two per cent per year, it would mean the average public school teacher would see a salary decrease of 6.3 per cent or a loss of income of \$15,400 over four years.

Wishart all but agreed with Gould that funding of education is being done on the backs of school employees. A news release from the province said: "Wishart pointed out The Public Services Sustainability Act (Bill 28) wage freeze would alleviate some expenditure pressure on divisions." When

announcing the funding, Wishart made it even clearer: "We believe this limit on education property tax is achievable in light of Bill 28 wage freeze."

While the legislation will freeze salaries, bargaining on other issues (reportedly including step increases teachers earn in their first 10 years) is to proceed, but not at the local level.

PROVINCIAL BARGAINING

The biggest shock in the recent announcements was the decision to implement provincial bargaining. As MTS President Gould said in a later letter to the minister: "Bargaining is a highly complex process, for which our locals have been preparing for the past year and a half. To make a decision like this with no consultation from key stakeholders is blatantly disrespectful and signals a retreat from established democratic systems and processes."

While MTS in the past has supported the general idea of provincial bargaining, no government has discussed what that might involve or how it might be implemented.

There are many different models and it is unknown what the province hopes to implement in the next few months.

And the province's decision leaves many other open questions, such as what happens after July 1 if local associations choose to go to binding arbitration to resolve issues, as is the case now. Will teachers still have that right? In 1956 teachers agreed to give up the right to strike and have disputes settled by binding arbitration. If binding arbitration is not available July 1, some feel it begs the question whether teachers then will have the right to strike.

Gould has asked Wishart for regular consultations.

"Make no mistake, this is a watershed moment in our 99 years of history as a teachers' union," Gould said in a letter to members. "I am sharing my deep concern with you today to underscore the detriment of this government's actions and practices against us.

"The challenges ahead of us are daunting. However, we need to stand together to work towards a resolution that will be fair and just."

Is N.S. report new template?

The Manitoba government has been following in the footsteps of Nova Scotia when it comes to introducing legislation and developing policies around education.

The most well-known piece of copycat legislation is Bill 28 -- the Public Services Sustainability Act, which imposes two years of wage freeze on all new public sector collective agreements. Manitoba has executed Bill 28 in the same manner as the Nova Scotia government, without so much as a name change.

With this precedence, there is legitimate concern that a recent controversial report on education reform in Nova Scotia, The Avis Glaze Report, may be a template for Manitoba.

The report, which studied the way the K-12 public education system is administered in Nova Scotia, suggested 22 ways to change the system. All 22 recommendations are being implemented by the Nova Scotia government.

While the Manitoba government has not yet commissioned a similar report, based on

past practice and the similar direction of the government, there is concern these changes will eventually trickle down to Manitoba's education system.

Two of the recommendations are especially concerning because they would directly impact the structure of The Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) and its ability to serve its members.

The report called for the removal of principals and vice-principals from the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union (NSTU) in an effort to eliminate conflict of interest when both management and employees are represented by the same union. Principals and vice-principals will now be moved into a new professional association and will no longer be members of NSTU.

MTS believes inclusion of principals and vice-principals in a union that represents teachers is vital, since these individuals are in fact the "first teachers". It creates an environment based on collaboration and trust where teachers and school leaders work together to ensure the success of students. The

removal of principals and vice-principals will have the opposite effect, creating adversarial cultures in our schools, breaking the trust between colleagues, pushing different agendas (principals might not be required to have a teaching background) and eventually leading to a weakened school system.

Nova Scotia is also moving forward with the creation of a new licensing and governing body for the teaching profession - a provincial College of Educators, similar to the College of Physicians and Surgeons which regulates the practice of medicine by doctors.

The aim is to take supposedly "weak" teachers out of the classroom and provide them a chance to improve their skills or in extreme cases, provide a mechanism to get rid of teachers who fail to improve.

The establishment of a College of Educators in Manitoba is simply unnecessary, since its duties are already covered by The Manitoba Teachers' Society.

Poll shows public oppose cuts

BY SAMANTHA TURENNE

The province's effective cut to education funding would have come as a surprise to more than half of Manitobans and is further evidence the provincial government's actions are opposed by a majority of voters.

In a recent poll of the public, commissioned by The Manitoba Teachers' Society, 55 per cent of respondents predicted the government would increase education funding (13.3 per cent) or keep it at the same level (42.2 per cent).

Instead, the government announced what amounted to a 1.5 per cent cut when taking inflation into account.

That wasn't what those polled thought was needed. More than 82 per cent agreed that in order to effectively meet the growing demands of today's students, the government must provide more support, not less. Ninety-one and a half per cent said that the provincial government should increase education spending (61.3 per cent) or maintain the same level (30.2 per cent).

Only 4.1 per cent of respondents were in favour of cutting funding for education.

The subpar education funding announcement appears to be another strike against the Conservative government of Brian Pallister because Manitobans were already unhappy with the direction the government has taken.

Of the 805 Manitobans who participated in the poll, close to half (47.4 per cent) said that the government was moving in the wrong direction. The consensus has almost completely flipped from last year, when 44 per cent of Manitobans were in favour of this government's course of action.

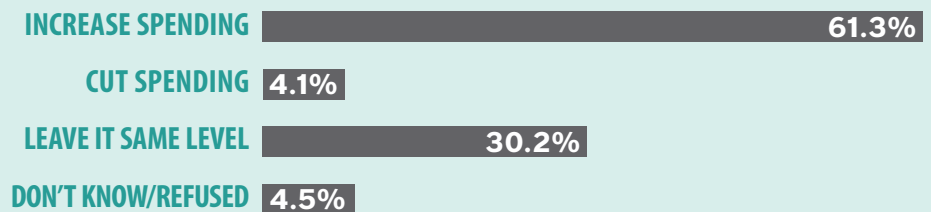
As it stands, more than half of Manitobans (50.2 per cent) agree that their impression of the Pallister government has worsened somewhat (32.3 per cent) or worsened a lot (17.9 per cent) in the last year.

Furthermore, 34.3 per cent believe that they are worse off (25.4 per cent) or much worse off (8.9 per cent) than they were four years ago, an increase of 10 per cent from last year's polling results.

When asked specifically about providing quality public education from K-12, only four out of 10 Manitobans (43.6 per cent) think the government is on the right track. And this was before the latest education announcements.



What do you personally think the Manitoba government should do – increase spending on education, cut educating spending, or leave it at the same level it is now?



The public attributes the bulk of the problems facing Manitoba's public schools to the provincial government (34 per cent) or school trustees and boards (32.7 per cent). Only 7.1 per cent of Manitobans feel that teachers are the most responsible for problems facing public schools.

While the government has fallen out of favour with Manitobans, teachers are still the most reliable and credible source when it comes to education matters. Almost nine out of 10 Manitobans (87.4 per cent) believe teachers are very reliable (50.1 per cent) or somewhat reliable (37.3 per cent) as a source of accurate information about education issues.

Interestingly enough, 87.4 per cent of Manitobans also have a favourable view towards public school teachers, further reinforcing the important role of teachers

as advocates for the sustainability of quality public education. The Manitoba Teachers' Society also fares well, with 74 per cent of respondents agreeing that the organization is a trusted source.

On the other hand, 41.6 per cent consider the Premier of Manitoba to be unreliable on education issues, a significant drop in confidence from last year's 26 per cent reliability rating. According to the poll, Manitobans find Education Minister Ian Wishart to be far more palatable than the Premier with a 54.2 per cent on the credibility rating scale (9.4 per cent very reliable, 44.8 per cent somewhat reliable), however this is also a decrease from last year's rating of 59 per cent.

This poll was conducted by Viewpoints Research in January 2018.