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September 1, 2020

The Honourable Brian Pallister, M.L.A.  
Premier of Manitoba  
Room 204 Legislative Building  
450 Broadway  
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

Dear Premier Pallister:

I was pleased to hear, thanks to a commitment from the federal government, that public schools in Manitoba will now have access to \$85.4 million to ensure they are safe and ready for the return of students and staff.

However, your evasive comments around the *Safe Return to Class* federal funding gave me pause. I am concerned that your government will use the federal funds to offset the \$52 million provincial funding, announced on August 24, 2020. The prime minister was very clear that while provinces and territories have discretion on how to use the funds, they are earmarked to help provinces and territories provide the additional layers of protection necessary to ensure the safest possible return to school. A lack of immediate and concrete designation for this funding is concerning, and we call on your government to commit to resourcing return to school in very tangible ways.

While the province has shown a commitment to safety by providing masks for students and staff, we have many concerns that remain unaddressed. Limiting close and sustained contact is a fundamental practice to reduce the spread of COVID-19, making it imperative that classrooms allow for proper physical distancing. Since the number of students in a classroom is directly related to the ability to physically distance, class sizes and spaces are of great concern. Large class sizes in small classroom settings render adherence to the recommended two-metres of distance impossible in an active learning setting. Immobile students in rows of desks does not create an effective learning environment.

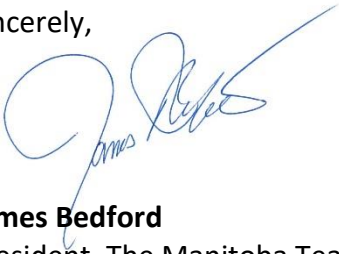
Federal and provincial funds must be used to help achieve the two-metres of physical distance by facilitating a reduction in class size. In fact, an estimated 1,400 full-time teachers would fill the demand for staffing smaller class sizes. The creation of more classroom space through portables and creative use of community spaces would also support a safe return to school. Consider the situation in health care, where MPI service centres, City of Winnipeg pools and other public places were converted into temporary COVID-19 testing sites, in some cases overnight, to accommodate the increased demand for testing.

Smaller class sizes are certainly attainable for the start of this school year, but this is dependent on your government's willingness to prioritize the health and safety of students and staff in its public schools.

Another area of major concern is the availability of substitute teachers. There is a shortage of substitute teachers under normal circumstances, which will now be far more pronounced as teachers heed Public Health advice to stay home when sick. However, because substitute teachers do not have access to sick time it may influence their decision to teach in the upcoming school year. To help alleviate these concerns, a portion of the federal funding could be used to help establish a bank of sick days for COVID-19 related purposes, accessible by substitute teachers. Additionally, a plan for recruiting and retaining substitute teachers could include the hiring of supply substitute teachers on term contracts, as well reassurances about financial safeguards should they become ill.

Mr. Premier, at the end of the day, we all want the same thing - a safe and sustainable return to school. This is possible as long as your government is prepared to plan and pay for it. I look forward to your response and hope that we can continue to work together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all those who set foot in our public schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Bedford', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

**James Bedford**

President, The Manitoba Teachers' Society

- c. Wab Kinew, Manitoba New Democratic Party  
Dougald Lamont, Manitoba Liberal Party