

Manitoba details safe schools spending blueprint

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Manitoba Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen told reporters divisions have been asked to spend savings accumulated in the spring, which amounted to \$48 million province-wide, and put forward accounting for how they plan to spend additional monies.

Two weeks into the 2020-21 school year, the province has released more details about how \$137.4 million in various government funding will be spent to keep teachers and students safe amidst the novel coronavirus pandemic. The province's \$52-million safe schools fund will be distributed for personal protective equipment, cleaning and sanitation supplies, technology-related expenses, expanding bus transportation capacity, and hiring more custodians, substitute teachers and educational assistants.

An estimated \$12 million will be spent on face masks and personal protective equipment, \$32 million will be available — up to a per-pupil maximum — for school divisions and independent schools, and \$8 million is being earmarked for "serious and urgent health and safety measures" that exceed the per capita funding.

The \$85.4 million in federal funds for education will be used for similar expenses, in addition to remote learning costs. Manitoba Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen told reporters divisions have been asked to spend savings accumulated in the spring, which amounted to \$48 million province-wide, and put forward accounting for how they plan to spend additional monies.

"Rather than sort of flying a plane over and dropping hundreds of millions of dollars out over individual schools, we are having accountability processes to make sure that we know that the money is being spent on the things that parents would expect it to be spent on when it comes to keeping their students safe," Goertzen said during a call-in news conference Monday.

"Taxpayers would expect us to have that line of sight."

The money will flow as divisions submit their expenditures, he said, adding government officials are in contact with divisions on a daily basis about their needs — the most costly of which he suspects are increasing demands for staffing, school bus capacity and cleaning supplies.

In late August, both Manitoba and Ottawa announced funding to alleviate the COVID-19-related pressures on schools.

Before students in Ontario and B.C. returned to school, both provinces had already announced how they planned to spend the amount allocated for their respective provinces in the Safe Return to Class Fund, a total of \$2 billion being dispersed to provinces and territories based on student population.

Goertzen defended Manitoba's timeline Monday, saying schools have had an opportunity to get a better understanding of their expenses since classes began.

Smaller classes needed: MTS

James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, welcomed the details Monday, although he said he would have liked to see shrinking class sizes on the priority list.

"Right now, too many classrooms are running on the minimum one-metre of social distancing and, really, if we want schools to be as safe as they can be, it's got to be two metres," Bedford said.

"That's only going to be achieved by reducing class sizes, which means we need to be hiring some additional teaching staff and perhaps, school divisions have to look at more creative ways to use and find space for classes to be taught in."

Many classrooms are housing the same number of students as they have in previous years, Bedford said. The range is approximately between 15 and 30, depending on classroom and division.

As for students studying at home this year, Bedford said there is a need for consistency when it comes to remote learning.

Standardizing remote learning

Goertzen echoed those comments during the phone-in conference; the minister said the province plans to use the federal funding to ensure remote learning is standardized across Manitoba.

He acknowledged Monday it's concerning some students in the province — albeit, he said, a small per cent — still do not have access to remote learning programs mid-way through September.

"We need to better support and ensure that there's a stronger and more consistent standard of what that at-home learning is," Goertzen said about both remote learning programs for students with medical notes and those required to stay home because of COVID-19 outbreaks.

The province does not currently have plans to make remote learning an option for all families, regardless of underlying health challenges.

The Manitoba Liberals put out a release Monday criticizing the province's funding distribution plan for not taking equity into account.

"Some schools, students and families need much more support than others — rural schools, students and families who can't afford WiFi or devices," said party leader Dougald Lamont in a prepared release.

Lamont noted some of the \$32 million in provincial funding is being distributed to private schools that charge upwards of \$10,000 for tuition each year.

As of Monday, there have been potential COVID-19 exposures in nine different schools across the province.

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