

Manitoba building distance learning support hub

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter By: **Maggie Macintosh** | Posted: 11/9/2020 7:00 PM

Teacher and school staff calls for financial support to address burnout and COVID-19 safety concerns went unanswered Monday, with Manitoba Education instead announcing the creation of a remote learning support centre.

During a morning news conference, Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen and deputy education minister Dana Rudy announced a \$10-million provincial initiative to equip teachers and parents doing remote learning with additional resources and tech support.

The provincial officials indicated the new centre, which is expected to launch this month, will be a hub for professional development and both distance learning and assessment content for K-8 students.



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Dana Rudy, deputy minister, Manitoba Education announces supports for remote learning at press conference at the Legislative Building, Monday.

It will be staffed by 100 teachers and 20 educational assistants, as well as clinicians and information technology support, Goertzen said.

The province is hiring for the positions at present — one of the final steps in putting together the project, the minister said, noting a consultant has been involved in its planning for weeks.

The announcement came hours after nearly 500 teachers signed an open letter to Goertzen and Premier Brian Pallister, claiming Manitoba's education system is at a "breaking point" and collapse is imminent, if the province does not address it.

The letter describes emotional exhaustion and burnout stemming from teachers being tasked with a combination of remote and in-person instruction, the inability to fill vacancies due to a shrinking pool of substitute teachers, and principals doing preliminary contact tracing because public health officials have been dealing with a backlog.

EDUCATOR DEMANDS IN NOV. 8 LETTER TO GOERTZEN, PALLISTER

- Reduction in class sizes through the hiring of additional educators and support staff.
- Sustainable workloads for teachers, which includes reasonable classroom/learning arrangements.
- A golden universal standard for a minimum two metres distancing for all students.

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When pressed about the letter, Goertzen said: "This is a very challenging time everywhere in society. In our schools? Absolutely. In the health-care field? Absolutely. In the service sector? Yes. In every part of society, there are very, very difficult and challenging times and so, when we hear those concerns from the school system, absolutely it concerns us.

"This announcement today isn't a reaction to that. It's been planned for a while, but it is a recognition that this was going to be a difficult school year."

In the letter, signatories — teachers, educational assistants, principals, school psychologists and counsellors — endorse numerous points to improve the situation. They ask the province immediately access the \$85.4 million in federal taxpayer funds earmarked for back-to-school.

Among the suggestions are reduced class sizes, sustainable teacher workloads, a "golden universal standard" of two metres of distance between students, timely and transparent school exposure information, and rapid testing for staff and students.

The minister acknowledged few of the specific items Monday, although he did state school divisions have hired approximately 400 new staff since March, and he wants to provide rapid testing in schools.



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Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen.

"There's nothing in today's announcement that gives (teachers) hope that the workload, the stress, the anxiety will be lowered, even by a little bit, tomorrow," said James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society. What teachers wanted to hear, Bedford said, was they would no longer be asked to teach remote students and in-class students at the same time — something he likens to texting and driving.

One Winnipeg teacher, who spoke to the *Free Press* on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal at work, echoed those sentiments, saying she was "not impressed at all" Monday.

Teachers don't need another bank of resources they have to flip through, she said, adding the program sounds similar to the Manitoba Professional Learning Environment (MAPLE) program. She said teachers want the province to fund more public school hires in order to distribute teachers' dual-teaching model workload.

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As for the province's efforts to hire its own roster of 100 teachers for its support centre, details remain murky on how realistic that is, said Rick Haley, a retired principal who is currently on a student services term contract in a Winnipeg school.

A Manitoba Education spokesperson said the province plans to hire teachers who chose not to return to a classroom setting in September.

"We've got unfilled jobs pretty much every week on the substitute list, so where are they going to find 100 teachers? I really have no idea. Same goes for educational assistants," Haley said.

When asked Monday whether all classrooms will go remote in the coming days, given the spiking COVID-19 caseload, Goertzen deferred to future public health advice.

Also Monday, the province announced it is adding three more professional development days to the 2020-21 school year.