

MTS President to Pallister: Patience is no virtue

# Teachers' patience running short

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## OPINION

It's said patience is a virtue and, for the most part, I agree. Some things are worth waiting for. Acquiring the discipline to bide your time cultivates maturity and no small amount of wisdom. I am a patient person.

Manitoba's 16,000 public school teachers are a patient lot as well. They wait for students, for homework, for funding to help students in need. They wait for clinical consults. Sometimes they even wait for contracts. And while they wait, they teach.

They extend themselves for that "light-bulb moment," when suddenly all they've worked for, all they've waited for, comes shining through a child's eyes. Those are the moments for which teachers patiently strive.

There is a time, however, where patience doesn't serve us, when waiting has consequences — dire ones. Truly, there is a time when we must see the writing on the wall and read the clear signals that the time has come to act. Such wisdom is the mark of an evolved, mature individual. It's the mark of good government, too.

Late last August, the prime minister announced \$85.4 million in funding to support Manitoba schools as they address added and obviously unanticipated needs arising from COVID-19. Thus far, only \$15 million of those funds have been distributed, provincewide.

While we wait, our schools and our teachers bend to the point of breaking. The Manitoba Teachers' Society and its members have cited, over and over, a lack of educators required to ensure physical distancing. Increasingly, teachers' classes are spread out over two and sometimes three separate rooms. Often these individuals are required to teach both in-person and remotely. It is simply not sustainable.

We have spoken repeatedly of deteriorating mental health — the result of relentless change in protocols, simultaneous teaching both remotely and in person, a burgeoning workload, and the lack of substitutes for teacher absences. Delays receiving COVID-19 test results and contact tracing, as well as limited access to vital PPE, persist.

Manitobans have witnessed the pandemic steadily claim the lives of vulnerable seniors in long-term care. And we watched in horror as COVID-19 raged through Maples Personal Care Home, overwhelming staff and triggering an emergency response of unprecedented proportions. This is the price of waiting.

On Monday, the education minister announced remote learning and professional development supports, and for that we are grateful. Three non-instructional days have been restored for teacher collaboration. These are positive steps by Manitoba Education. But they must not end there.

A safe and sustainable public education system is the bedrock upon which our community and economy will recover and grow. To simply salve the strain on our teachers, school leaders and staff is too little, too late — if not backed up by meaningful investment in the root cause of crisis. If not addressed, and swiftly, the repercussions may be catastrophic.

Despite the government's claim that additional teachers were hired this fall, numbers are inadequate to the task. Sufficient staffing to permit physical distancing and substitute coverage is essential. Furthermore, substitute

teachers must be assured of paid sick leave. These asks are paramount to ensuring an effective learning environment and the safeguarding of students and staff alike.

Increased access to public health support, including PPE, enhanced turnaround time for COVID-19 test results and swift contact tracing are essential, as well, to maintaining the safe environment schools have thus far provided. Additionally, any educators hired for the announced remote learning resource centre must not come at the expense of teachers in the classroom. Clear delineation and supports are required for teachers working with students in person and those teaching remotely.

MTS and its members have not been silent. The situation in our schools is no secret. This week alone, almost 500 individuals working in Manitoba schools penned an open letter to the premier and education minister articulating the perfect storm gathering before our eyes. Exhausted teachers are using their voice. What must we do to be heard?

Our teachers need support now. Not in a week. Not in a month. Now.

Patience, premier, is no longer a virtue.