

K-12 review fallout awaits new education minister

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New Education Minister Cliff Cullen will oversee and implement the Manitoba K-12 commission's long-awaited review within the next 12 months. (Mikaela MacKenzie / Winnipeg Free Press files)

A newly-minted provincial minister is expected to oversee and begin to implement the Manitoba K-12 commission's long-overdue review within the next 12 months, raising questions about the reason for a shuffle on the education file.

The day after Kelvin Goertzen hinted the report's release was imminent, in an interview published Monday by a news outlet in his hometown of Steinbach, the now-former education minister received new titles: deputy premier and minister of legislative and public affairs.

Cliff Cullen, former minister of justice and attorney general, took over the education portfolio Tuesday.

"His boys (have) attended nothing but public school their entire lives, his wife taught in four different decades in public school, Cliff himself is a product of public school — this is a strong supporter of the public school system," Premier Brian Pallister told reporters, following a sweeping Manitoba cabinet shuffle. "He brings great capabilities."

Pallister said his government has an ambitious agenda, owing to both the COVID-19 pandemic and plans to introduce major reforms in the "very top-heavy" K-12 system.

Cullen was not made available for an interview on the subject Tuesday, given he had yet to be briefed on the K-12 review.

The review was first announced in January 2019, when Goertzen appointed a nine-member commission to undertake a comprehensive look at all things education in Manitoba. Originally slated to be made public in March 2020, the release of the final report — which is expected to prescribe the amalgamation of school boards — was postponed indefinitely amidst the pandemic.

When Goertzen announced the delay, he indicated legislation changes would be implemented this summer, at the earliest.

"Right now, it's sitting in the back of the minds of many, many members. They know it's out there. They know that change is coming, but they don't know what that change will be," said James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society.

On the subject of the new education minister, Bedford said he suspects Goertzen will be disappointed he won't get to implement the review, because he's repeatedly expressed excitement about it.

While Bedford acknowledged the change might result in more work to brief the new minister, he added: "Cullen isn't a stranger to education," given his wife's profession.

Chris Broughton, a school trustee in the province's largest division, said Tuesday he doesn't understand the province's decision to bring in a new minister who will have to be briefed on the transformational review, mid-pandemic.

Broughton said he wants the review released as soon as possible, even though he thinks it will be out-of-date because the pandemic has changed the landscape of public education in Manitoba "dramatically."

"Over the last 10 months, we've seen really the value of effective local decision making and local leadership in education," added Broughton, a parent in the Winnipeg School Division and former chairman of the WSD board.

NDP Leader Wab Kinew echoed those sentiments, saying COVID-19 has turned the education on its head and cost-cutting is not the solution. The review needs to be released sooner rather than later, so Manitobans can "digest" it before any changes happen, he said.

Meantime, John Wiens, a long-time public education advocate, said he was encouraged after learning of the portfolio change, because he's always found Cullen to be open to public engagement. He expects that will be the case following the review's release.

Wiens added he hopes the province is "not just making a scapegoat out of (Cullen)," by tasking him with making public a controversial report. Cullen's press secretary said the minister is both "honoured and excited" about his new role.

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