

# New minister at head of the class will deal with implementing long-awaited K-12 education reform plan

No matter who is in charge, education sector still uncertain over controversial reform of public schools

[Ian Froese](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jan 06, 2021 8:52 PM CT | Last Updated: January 6



The Manitoba government is still planning to release the contents of its long-overdue education reform report in the near future. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

14

comments

The unease some Manitobans are feeling over a proposed shakeup of the public school system isn't going away with a new person in charge of the department.

Hours after appointing Cliff Cullen as his new education minister on Tuesday, Premier Brian Pallister made clear his government has every intention of transforming an education system he decries as being "very top-heavy."

Cullen will take over the education portfolio from Kelvin Goertzen, who was named deputy premier and minister of legislative and public affairs in Tuesday's cabinet shuffle.

The president of the Manitoba School Boards Association said the leadership change won't affect his advocacy work on a long-awaited review of kindergarten to Grade 12 education, which is expected to force the amalgamation of school boards.

"The conversation with Minister Cullen will continue from where it ended with Minister Goertzen," Alan Campbell said.

"Our position is maintained that the K to 12 review should not be released and should not be implemented any time in the immediate future, given the incredible strain that the system is under" during the pandemic, Campbell said.

## K-12 review expected soon

In addition to forcing schools to accommodate remote learning, the COVID-19 pandemic indefinitely shelved the K-12 report, which has been delivered to the province and was [originally expected](#) to be released publicly last March.

In October, [Pallister said](#) the pandemic wasn't an excuse to stop much-needed reforms and the review would be made public in the "not-too-distant future."

Critics worry that overhauling the public school system will prioritize saving money over improving education. But Campbell notes he doesn't know for sure.

"It's difficult for me to say that I'm concerned about the path [for education in Manitoba]. We have no idea what the path is."

- **Promise to transform Manitoba education comes as system already hurting from pandemic: unions**
- **'High degree of anxiety' as Manitoba's education system braces for major reforms**

The province has hinted at changes. Pallister has made repeated references to overspending on education administration, while Goertzen said he needed to be convinced 290 trustees across 37 school divisions was the right fit for Manitoba.

In November, the province introduced a bill focused on "education modernization," but never publicly released its contents.

Cullen, the former justice minister, will now be tasked with implementing any controversial reform to the education system — and dealing with the repercussions.



Progressive Conservative MLA Cliff Cullen, described by his boss as a "strong supporter" of the public school system, is the new education minister in Manitoba. (Austin Grabish/CBC)

His office said he was being briefed on his new portfolio and wasn't available Wednesday for an interview. The premier said Tuesday that Cullen "is a strong supporter of the public school system," having graduated from that system himself, and having children who attended public schools and a wife who teaches in the system.

## **'Step away from ideological fear': prof**

The Manitoba Teachers' Society doesn't expect Cullen to persuade the government to back down from its plans to transform the public school system.

"Cabinet shuffles are a decision of the premier, and the premier has very much made himself clear in the last year that he wants to move forward with those recommendations," president James Bedford said.

He said the pandemic has likely added to the anxiety some teachers are feeling over potential reforms.

Laura Reimer, a University of Manitoba professor who has written two books on school boards and leadership, said the scheduled reforms can chart a new path forward for education reform.

"I think that at the very least, it's wise to review what's happening, step away from ideological fear, step away from ideological conviction, and think about the role of education."

School boards may not be the best avenue for local oversight, she said.

"What we're seeing, in particular through COVID-19, is an active provincial government working directly with schools," she said. "Are we seeing school trustees out knocking on doors?"

## **Tying schooling to labour needs**

The post-secondary sector is also facing lingering uncertainty.

The province has signalled its desire to tailor funding with the needs of the labour market. If the government proceeds, this responsibility will fall to Wayne Ewasko, who was appointed Tuesday as minister of the new Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration.

The new minister told reporters Tuesday that post-secondary institutions should prepare students for a career and the means to succeed in the world.

- **Manitoba reverses planned post-secondary funding cut, but says institutions must meet workforce needs**

Scott Forbes, president of the Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations, said he's encouraged by Ewasko's early comments, but words are not enough.

"We have a behavioural pattern already established by Mr. Pallister, and it's not that higher education is different than any other portion of the public sector — Mr. Pallister has clearly indicated he wants to shrink the role of government and the size of government," Forbes said.

"We're sitting here, waiting to see what the next move is," he said. "The previous moves have been discouraging."