

Manitoba education minister laments poor student performance as 2021-22 funding announced

Cliff Cullen hints at changes coming from long-awaited K-12 education system review

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Manitoba's kindergarten to Grade 12 system underwent an independent review in 2019 but the report, originally due to be released to the public in March 2020, has been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Syda Productions/Shutterstock)

Manitoba's public school system will get \$20.8 million more in the next academic year, for a total \$1.35 billion.

That's a 1.56 per cent increase in funding over the current year, Education Minister Cliff Cullen said on Friday.

The funding includes \$6.7 million for base funding for public schools, a 0.5 per cent increase over last year, and \$5.5 million is for special-needs funding, Cullen said.

It's the highest dollar investment in Manitoba's education history, he said.

Cullen, who was appointed education minister in early January, also said the province "remains committed to modernizing Manitoba's education system" to prepare students for post-secondary education, joining the workforce or starting their own business.

He did not elaborate. When asked to clarify, he hinted that something would come out of the independent review of the province's kindergarten to Grade 12 system in 2019.

The review, which is expected to force the amalgamation of school boards, was originally expected to be released publicly in March 2020 but was delayed due to the pandemic.

- **Hold line on tax increases or face administration cut, Manitoba education minister warns school divisions**
- **New minister at head of the class will deal with implementing long-awaited K-12 education reform plan**

Manitoba has the third-highest spending per student in Canada at \$14,815, after Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, yet Manitoba students often score well below their counterparts across the country in national assessments, Cullen said.

"And in fact, many times we're very near the bottom in terms of outcomes," he said.

"Clearly, that's why we asked for the K-12 review. We now have that review in front of us and we look forward to bringing that review to Manitobans in the very near future."

Cullen said the government will say "shortly" when the report will be available.

When it is released, the government will reveal its plan to improve the education outcomes for Manitoba students, he said.

Hours after announcing Cullen's appointment last month, Premier Brian Pallister made clear his government intends to revamp the education system, which he called "very top-heavy" and in need of reforms.

- **Possibility of amalgamated school divisions 'no secret' as province asks for cuts, says superintendent**
- **Are fewer school boards an answer to what ails education in Manitoba?**

If the report is released soon, the government must hold a new round of consultations before anything is implemented, said Alan Campbell, president of the Manitoba School Boards Association.

The report was completed a year ago, before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Manitoba. The province's education system is not the same as it was then, he said.

Alan Campbell, president of the Manitoba School Boards Association, says the pandemic has changed the education system since the province's kindergarten to Grade 12 review was conducted. (CBC)



"The message from the school boards association has been very clear — that the system is under significant strain and now is not the time to start adding more ... chaos," Campbell said, noting the last word is directly from Cullen's predecessor, Kelvin Goertzen.

"That is sort of an alarming term, if you want to be honest, about what the review will bring to education."

Campbell is not opposed to the report coming out, so people can see it and get a better understanding of it.

"But to start implementing widespread change in the middle of a pandemic would be completely irresponsible on the part of government," he said.

Education property tax freeze

The government will also freeze education property taxes for the coming year and give school divisions a grant of \$22.8 million to offset that revenue loss, Cullen said on Friday.

- **'High degree of anxiety' as Manitoba's education system braces for major reforms**

For the past two years, the province has demanded all school divisions hold education property tax increases to two per cent.

"This year we're asking them to freeze it at zero per cent," Cullen said.

The offset grant is on top of the \$20.8 million funding commitment.

The province also promises school divisions' per-capita funding will not be reduced due to enrolment variations because of COVID-19.

Cullen said all school divisions will receive no less than 98 per cent of the operating funding they received a year earlier.

Campbell said the school boards association appreciates the funding announcement, calling the \$20.8 million "a significant increase compared to what we've seen since this government took power."

And until now there has never been an increase at all from the Pallister government for special needs, so that is a welcome change, he said.

'Short-changing the students'

All of that aside, however, the base funding improvement of 0.5 per is far below what school divisions need when their inflation costs year-over-year typically go up two per cent, Campbell said.

"So many school divisions will actually have a decrease in their funding, or their funding will remain flat," he said.

James Bedford, president of the Manitoba Teachers' Society, echoed that sentiment. Although there is more money in terms of a dollar figure, the rate of inflation means there's less spending power in those dollars, he said.

"We're really short-changing the students in the province of Manitoba," he said.

"Teachers right now are spending out of their own pocket to support the needs in their classrooms, and that's going to continue under this announcement."

MTS believes, based in its own funding analysis, that 16 school divisions will receive less funding next year than this year.

That's almost half of the province's 37 divisions.

Spring break

Some school divisions in other provinces, particularly Ontario, have floated the idea of cancelling March break in an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Cullen said that's not on the table in Manitoba.

"We think that teachers, students and probably parents require a break," he said. "So the plans will continue forward with spring break as we know it."

People are urged, though, to stay home and be mindful of the public health orders in place, and not travel for non-essential reasons, Cullen said.