

Education blueprint receives failing grade

By: Kyle Darbyson, Brandon Sun Posted: 3:00 AM CST Saturday, Feb. 6, 2021



Education Minister, Cliff Cullen, answers media questions Friday after announcing a \$20.8 million dollar increase to the Funding of Schools Program, bringing the total amount of funding to \$1.35 billion, a record high in Manitoba. (Winnipeg Free Press)

Representatives from both the Brandon School Division and the Manitoba Teachers' Society did not have a lot of positive things to say about the province's 2021-22 education blueprint, which was unveiled during a Friday morning news conference.

During this announcement, Education Minister Cliff Cullen revealed Manitoba's public schools system will see another \$20.8 million, or 1.56 per cent, increase to the Funding of Schools Program for the upcoming school year.

This means Manitoba's 37 school divisions will receive, for another consecutive year, a \$6.6-million boost in base funding, or the equivalent of a 0.5 per cent increase.

While Cullen insisted the province's total \$1.35-billion commitment to K-12 school operations in 2021-22 represents "the highest total investment in Manitoba's history," Manitoba Teachers' Society president James Bedford said that claim is misleading.

In a Friday afternoon press release, Bedford argued this increased investment of 1.56 per cent continues the government's trend of funding public education below the rate of inflation, which is an especially poor strategy since schools are dealing with a lot of extra costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"At the end of the day, when the government does not fulfil its funding responsibility, it's the students that suffer and quite frankly that is unacceptable," Bedford said.

Brandon School Division board of trustees chairperson Linda Ross was similarly discouraged by Friday's announcement, particularly with the additional revelation that

school divisions are being asked to freeze property education taxes in planning their upcoming budgets.

"They've frozen taxes, so we can't do anything with the property taxes, and the money that they're giving us is going to raise some real challenges for us," she told the Sun on Friday evening. "I'm not quite sure how we're going to deal with it."

Even though the province said it will provide a Property Tax Offset Grant, equivalent to a two per cent property tax increase or \$22.8 million, to help compensate for the freeze, Ross doesn't think it will be enough.

Admittedly, Ross is still waiting to pass final judgment, since she didn't receive the specifics of this funding announcement, as it pertains to the school division, by the end of office hours on Friday.

However, based on all the information she has received from the province so far, the division chair said she is feeling pretty "dismal" about the whole affair, especially since the school division is stretched in terms of its staff and resources.

"We're using school counsellors in the classroom and we could certainly use some more people, but we can't find them," she said. "And I don't think we're alone. I think, probably, every division in the province is in the same position."

However, Bedford did praise the province on Friday for its decision to allocate an additional \$5.5 million for students with special needs.

"We are pleased to see that (the) government is responding to concerns we have been raising around special needs funding," the Manitoba Teachers' Society president said.

"We look forward to hearing the details on how these funds will be used in the classrooms to meet these diverse student needs."

On Friday, Cullen also revealed the province's K-12 education review will finally be released to the public "in the very near future" after many delays.

kdarbyson@brandonsun.com