

# Educators across Manitoba anticipate Manitoba Commission on K - 12 education

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Amin Ali says Manitoba education is at a crossroads between the government's education reform agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pivotal role of poverty in student achievement in this province's schools. (Winnipeg Free Press)

The provincial government is continuing its education reform agenda in the middle of a global pandemic. The experience of Ontario's education reforms is a cautionary tale on how public policy can exacerbate inequality in education.

In every budget since the Progressive Conservatives were elected in 2016, the Manitoba government has increased education spending by no more than 0.5 per cent, despite seeing two per cent inflation and one per cent enrollment cost growth in 2019-20. The provincial share of operating funding has consistently declined, representing cuts to education spending in real terms and cost downloading. The 2020 Throne Speech announced the government would move a year early to phasing out all education property tax over 10 years, eliminating almost \$1 billion of revenue for education.

Pundits speculate the Manitoba government may eliminate school division control of property tax and force division amalgamations to centralize control of education funding in the hands of cabinet. This doesn't align with the priorities of major stakeholders and comes with worrisome precedents from neighbouring provinces; precedents if replicated in Manitoba would bode ill for mitigating the short-term equity crisis of COVID-19, and precedents that need to be inverted to achieve equity in student outcomes long term.

Across Canada, centralization of education funding has become the norm, with Manitoba and Quebec boards the last to wield control over the mill rate. However, seven out of 10 provinces still retain education property tax revenue overall. As of 2016, the average education funding approach was 68 per cent being funded out of general revenue and 27 per cent from property taxes.

To understand what the Manitoba government's promised property tax reforms would mean for Manitoba education, there's a cautionary case study of what happens with the centralization of education funding under an austerity-minded Conservative government: late 1990s Ontario.

In Ontario in 1995, Mike Harris's government quickly made education reform the hallmark of its first-term, introducing cuts that added up to nearly \$1 billion by 1997. Then, the government went dramatically further and introduced Bill 160: the Education Quality Improvement Act.

In an effort to carve out more dollars for tax cuts, Bill 160 transferred control of education spending from local boards and trustees to cabinet by eliminating school board property tax powers and allocating all funds through the one-size-fits-all Grants for Student Needs funding formula. The minister of education gained vast regulatory power over class sizes, school board governance, support staff levels. This authority was used to dramatic effect — evidenced by the present-day 250,000 student Toronto District School Board being the product of the forced amalgamation of six different school boards pre-1998.

In response to the draconian legislation, Ontario teachers launched in fall 1997 what was the largest work stoppage in North American history as 127,000 education workers went on strike for more than two weeks. However, the government still managed to ram Bill 160 through the legislature and upend Ontario education to this day.

By 2002-03, education spending in Ontario had fallen \$1.7 billion below its pre-centralization level. The school repair backlog has tripled from \$5.6 billion to \$16.3 billion — a reality brought into sharp relief by COVID as deteriorating schools (especially with ventilation) may enable virus transmission.

When resources are limited, equity suffers. Equity in education is not about making sure everyone has equal supports. It's about making differentiated approaches to resourcing to acknowledge students and schools have differentiated and distinct needs.

Without property tax, revenue boards no longer had the discretionary dollars to fund the unique equity programs not funded by the province.

The impacts of centralization of education funding are best distilled this way: 20 years post-Bill 160, Ontario ranked 18th out of 18 in the Great Lakes North Eastern states and provinces and 45th out of all 61 Canadian and U.S. jurisdictions in per-student funding.

Ontario's experience with more than two decades of a centralized one-size-fits-all approach has resulted in chronic structural underfunding, devastating everything from education infrastructure to class size/composition, but particularly to achieving the full promise and power of public education: opening the door of opportunity wide to everyone in society regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, ability or economic standing.

Manitoba education is at a crossroads between the government's education reform agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic and the pivotal role of poverty in student

achievement in this province's schools. The course will be charted as a result of the K-12 review and the elimination of the education property tax will completely redefine how Manitoba funds its schools.

But with reforms rooted in local autonomy, student-need versus enrollment, and ensuring COVID's inequities don't create a generational education equity crisis — a path toward a broad, bold and ambitious future for Manitoba education could be set.

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