

Bill 64's possible impact on northern School Divisions

In reviewing the government's Bill 64, one is struck by the manner in which thirty-seven Manitoba school divisions are to be abolished and replaced by 15 regional advisory districts, while the French language School Division is left untouched. Even the region of the former Minister of Education 's own riding in Hanover will see no change. Trying to make sense of the reasons behind the restructuring still leaves one bewildered. These new regions will contain student populations that vary in size from about 2,500 to over 100,000 students, while each regional area is to have one government appointed Regional Director. Student population then doesn't seem to be a common denominator. When the new geographical extent of each new region is considered, there are staggering differences among them. One of the most egregious moves is to replace the four current northern school jurisdictions with one massive region in an area which covers two-thirds of Manitoba (and greater in area than Great Britain).

Isn't it typical for politicians inside Winnipeg's perimeter highway to think of us northern citizens as one homogeneous population? This clumping together also ignores some very unique organizational features of our northern area. For fifty plus years Frontier School Division has worked hard to meet the governance, cultural and educational needs of dozens of mainly small communities. Its ability to attract and retain staff in many isolated communities requires the operation of a recruitment and housing program unlike any other in the province.

In doing so successfully, they have accommodated five indigenous languages in forty mainly isolated school sites, and yet have been able to instill a sense of pride among its students and communities. These achievements have resulted in numerous First Nations authorities signing education delivery agreements with Frontier School Division, with subsequent Improvement in academic, cultural, and vocational course access that helps in achieving improved graduation rates. The Frontier school board is diverse as well with over half of its members Indigenous. It is unrealistic to expect that First Nations would remain an education partner in a new massive government controlled political School Board structure.

While the school jurisdictions of Kelsey, Flin Flon, and Mystery Lake have targeted their students specific learning needs in ways that address each community priorities and interests, even as separate jurisdictions these northern school divisions have cooperated with each other when it was to their mutual advantage. One begins to wonder how many of Frontier School Division's current 42 schools, most being smaller than those in Winnipeg, could be closed now that the school closing process is to be government-controlled and focused on expenditures. And as one big geographic region encompassing about fifty-five individual proposed school councils, what chance does that lone parent to be elected from this conglomerate to the Provincial Advisory Council on Education have to adequately represent such a varying group of parents?

It may be inevitable that this loss will be forced on us, but it seems to make more sense to let Frontier School Division continue its unique governance of an area of the province that is like no other. The remaining three School Divisions, which are more similar in community composition and less spread out over a wide area, could work within a cooperative governance structure needed to continue addressing their more urban and special student needs.

If you agree with such a revised scenario, you should sign up to speak virtually, even briefly, at the Bill 64 hearings to be held this Fall. It may be the last opportunity as citizens to make your views known.

- 30 -

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