[**Rural Voices United**](https://www.facebook.com/RuralMbVoices/?__cft__%5b0%5d=AZX7jwnu9skfC8-Q8OOsSBWZIf3QeXb7GnUH6TtGSTXx68ws9A3dA5Be97unn3pTaWekm8KVrii-A9GXVvoOYMi7QaGyFaGdZkARVM2si7X-sgXvjlr3nsKjP3dcNOj4a6fAZrtU3Hbv56b_iZzVUMw_Y6GB-ObRy6tpLFZ0eFosDw&__tn__=-UC%2CP-y-R)

Rural Voices United is committed to standing up for education in rural Manitoba; Bill 64 does not do this. Bill 64 is not a political issue, it tries to turn education into one. This letter to Minister Cullen from Prairie Spirit School Division is an example of many of the questions that have been raised to the minister's explanation of the legislation. The minister says others are spreading misinformation about the bill. If he does not want to be accused of doing the same, he should have no problem answering these questions presented by his local school board.

June 18, 2021

Dear Honourable Cullen,

The Prairie Spirit School Division Board of Trustees feels compelled to address several points of confusion in your recent Guest Editorial, released at the beginning of May, as well as your statements alleging that we are part of a politically motivated disinformation campaign. We agree with you that Bill 64 has created “fear and anxiety for parents, school staff, and students,” and we would like nothing more than to dissipate the fear and anxiety that is now hanging over Manitoba’s education system. Rather than assuming that people who disagree with this Bill hold a political agenda, we invite you to engage in open conversation around our legitimate concerns. To assume critics have an agenda other than a genuine desire to do what is best for our children may be politically convenient, but misses an opportunity for meaningful collaboration.

In order to help us speak to the fears in our local communities, we respectfully request that you clarify your statements below:

#1 Minister Cullen states “Our strategy...empowers more diverse local voices to be involved in education decision making…” Bill 64 - as written, read and understood - removes all local decision making regarding education. We request that you provide evidence of where it states in Bill 64 that there will be local decision making authority, or to provide amended wording for Bill 64 that will formally enshrine the government’s stated intentions in legislation.

➔ We request that you explain your viewpoint of 38 school divisions being a “monopoly” when Bill 64 will create a provincial centralized monopoly in public education with the appointed board in Winnipeg holding all the decision authority.

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence of how a centralized model empowers diverse local voices in the daily experiences of parents, students, staff and community members compared to our current system of support?

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence regarding school board diversity in comparison to other levels of government in Manitoba and in Canada.

◆ While considering:

● That school boards are the only level of elected government in Canada with equal gender representation.

● The diversity of the current provincial PC caucus.

● That the acclamation of trustees may also be viewed as a signal that the electorate is satisfied with trustee representation.

#2 Minister Cullen initially states that “the K-12 review shone a light on the vast disparities of our education system” but then later says “addressing poverty is not strictly an education issue.”

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence on how Bill 64 will improve the disparity of outcomes within our education system with respect to the concept of a “whole of government approach?”

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence on what mechanisms will prevent the proposed Provincial Education Authority from being a partisan board subject to significant change during every provincial election?

◆ While considering:

● The well-established and documented link between child poverty and academic outcomes.

● The widespread concern that a centralized, partisan-appointed provincial board will not result in improved student outcomes given the diversity of communities across Manitoba.

#3 Minister Cullen states that “Maintaining the status quo only puts our students at a further disadvantage compared to the rest of Canada.” We strongly agree that the status quo can be improved upon; as a school board, we consistently prioritize and support the

adoption of better pedagogy, additional divisional support and more efficient operations in order to focus maximum resources in our classrooms.

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence regarding comparison to the rest of Canada and feedback collected from the Education Review.

◆ while considering that:

● The first two provinces to remove elected school boards, NB and PEI, have since reinstated them. With the exception of NS, all other provinces have elected school boards as part of a responsive education system where local interests are a priority.

● 58% of K-12 Review Public Survey respondents did not want “changes [to how] the school system is structured” and of the 42% in favour of changes, many were in favour of amalgamation, not elimination, of school boards.

● Due to the reduced capacity of the health system and the Department of Education in recent years, school boards have collaborated at the division level to hire dedicated psychologists, occupational therapists, and data analysts to fill these gaps.

#4 Minister Cullen stated that “Manitoba is one of the last provinces to have education taxes connected to their property values.”

We agree wholeheartedly that the quality of a child’s education should not depend on local property values, and we have consistently encouraged a return to more equitable distribution of funds at the provincial level.

➔ We request that you explain and provide evidence on the above statement.

◆ While considering that:

● The provinces of BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia all levy education taxes on property values at the

provincial level, but Manitoba is the last province to retain local authority over education property taxes.

● The ratio of provincial to local funding sat at approximately two thirds/one third for decades, ensuring a level of equality throughout the province, while still allowing for unique community projects to be funded locally.

● Over the years, provincial funding failed to keep up with rising costs, gradually shifting to today’s 57/43 ratio.

#5 Minister Cullen has stated that he “will redirect up to $40 million in savings...to our classrooms.”

➔ We request that you provide a detailed breakdown and evidence of Bill 64’s estimated savings and how these savings will benefit kids in the classroom.

◆ While considering that:

● The Minister’s expected total savings of eliminating boards has quietly decreased - “we expect there could be savings of upwards of $10 million.”

● The administrative costs of managing and maintaining schools, staff, and bussing will not change significantly.

● The lack of realized savings from past amalgamations.

● The added costs of establishing and maintaining the Provincial Education Authority and Parental Advisory Council for Education.

● The added costs of funding Parental Engagement Officers for 690 schools.

● New budgets for 690 School Community Councils.

● The costs of harmonizing collective agreements, programming, wage scales, software licenses, etc.

The Prairie Spirit School Division has never been in the business of advocating for the status quo. As parents, grandparents, and Manitobans, we believe that there is significant value to society in having both locally elected school boards and a strong provincial Department of Education staffed with professional educators.

We agree that amalgamations can make sense and are necessary in some areas of the province. The Board of Trustees has a long history of fiscal responsibility. With efficient management, all publicly funded services come down to a balancing act between the cost to the taxpayer and the broader benefit to society. As shown by our involvement in the Education Review, we would like to work with the provincial government and other school divisions, educators, and parents to improve our current system and student outcomes, while retaining locally this important level of democracy, engagement, authority and accountability in our community schools.

A healthy, well-funded, non-partisan public education system levels the playing field for our children and has been consistently shown to provide a high return on investment for society in terms of resulting decreases in health care, social assistance and justice costs, and increased economic productivity.

We welcome an open discussion with you and our local MLAs regarding Bill 64 to ensure our mutual goals of achieving better student outcomes are reached in an effective and proven manner. We formally invite you to join us for a discussion regarding how we can come together and find solutions.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Board of Trustees

Prairie Spirit School Division