

Literacy/numeracy foundation, solutions flawed



Try building a house on quicksand. It's tough – you get stuck, and you sink. Try building a life without a foundation in literacy and numeracy.

It's hard to overstate the importance of solid skills in reading and math. Students lacking in these areas are more likely to become frustrated, discouraged, and in later years, drop out of school.

There's no shortage of debate about how to foster strength in reading, writing and math. And there are plenty of ways to measure how children in schools are faring. On a global scale, there's the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development every three years. PISA is a product of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a policy think tank that examines the economic role of schools and education. It provides a ranking of student achievement across the globe in core subjects.

Manitoba, like provinces across Canada and countries around the world, participates in PISA testing, however there's a growing movement to halt the program. The reason: the testing methodology, and therefore the findings, are flawed. One researcher went so far as to deem PISA results "useless and meaningless."

Academics around the world are speaking out over concern that the test results, and the intense media coverage they receive, pressure countries and provinces – "economies", as PISA defines them – to make drastic and detrimental changes to their education systems. All of it rooted in defective data.

Great Britain has announced that it will no longer take part. And even though PISA results place Alberta students at the top in reading and science, the Alberta Teachers' Association has called on the province to "end the PISA obsession", noting methodological deficiencies that render results, both negative and positive, unreliable. Inconsistent test questions between countries and even between individual students, and the lack of provision for cultural or socio-economic differences between countries are cited as fatal flaws.

In a 2015 article for the Washington Post called "Can PISA be saved?", researchers Alma Harris, professor of educational leadership at the Institute of Education and University College London, and Yong Zhao, presidential chair and director of the Institute for Global and Online Education at the University of Oregon argue that "it is as if every country in PISA is devoid of historical, social, economic and cultural heritage. These influences are forensically airbrushed out in favor of neatly wrapped causal attributions that can be conveniently turned into policy solutions and commercial packages. This homogenizing is not only devaluing but it is potentially dangerous."

Dangerous indeed. With intense pressure to achieve high scores, some PISA participants may test only their most proficient students, artificially inflating their results and leaving decision-makers to base education policy on fallacy over fact.

Enter into the fray the Manitoba government, which promised a plan on improvement to literacy and numeracy prior to its election two years ago. The plan has yet to emerge. Consultation, however – in a form – is underway. With consultants, not teachers.

And now the province has extended its consultation on education policy to insurance companies and software developers through the North Forge Technology Exchange, an innovation-based economic development agency.

As governments and teachers alike seek to improve student comprehension of basic and essential skills, suggestions are always welcome. Solutions, however, should be expert driven. Some 16,000 are available, and they're already on the payroll.

For more information, attend your MTS regional meeting, talk to your colleagues, students' parents and follow MTS on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for updates on this issue and others impacting you and your classroom.

Concern grows over future of French education



The dismantling of the Bureau de l'éducation française (BEF), the organization responsible for the creation and administration of French-language education in Manitoba, is ringing alarm bells as both educators and parents wonder if this is the first of many cuts to come to francophone programs.

In October 2017, the position of assistant to the deputy minister (ADM) focused on French-language education was abolished and all other BEF staff were transferred to jobs in English-language education.

This is cause for concern since a fully functioning BEF is essential to the quality of French-language education that Manitoba educators and schools provide to students.

Over the past 14 years, French language programming has represented the fastest growing segment of Manitoba's K-12 education system with enrolment up nearly 40 per cent.

Currently, there are more than 30,000 students enrolled in French-language education and this number is expected to increase in coming years based on factors like immigration, increased opportunities for French speakers, partly due to the enactment of *Bill 5-The Francophone Community Enhancement and Support Act* which promises bilingual capacity for frontline services, and recognition of the value of being immersed in the French-language education system.

The government's commitment to improving the number of public services offered in French does not align with the cuts to French-language education and begs the question of how they plan on providing French-language service when the future of quality French-language education is being threatened.

Suffice to say, all indicators point to the need for more investment to strengthen French-language education, not less. Join us in calling on the province to restore government funding and resources to the Bureau de l'éducation française and to reinstate an assistant to the deputy minister to ensure that French-language education remains a priority.

Community meetings will be held in early March to further discuss this issue. Please ensure that your members, students and students' parents are informed about these meetings.

For those of you on Facebook, join the community group Ensemble pour l'éducation française. This group is a great resource and offers a space where concerned community members can express themselves and share information in regards to the history, current issues and the importance of French- language education in Manitoba.

To join the group, simply log in to your Facebook account and search *Ensemble pour l'éducation française* or type the following link into your address bar. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/527049504345984/>

Bill 28 to cost teachers \$15,000 in future earnings



Earlier this year, the provincial government introduced Bill 28 – The Public Services Sustainability Act, more aptly referred to as the “wage freeze bill”.

This bill would impose a two-year wage freeze for all new public sector collective agreements, with minimal increases of 0.75 per cent and one per cent in the subsequent years of a four year agreement.

Bill 28 would also restrict the ability to bargain for increases to other monetary benefits such as premiums, bonuses or allowances. However, the bill does not affect an employee’s entitlement to a pay increase as a result of promotion or reclassification, or to a periodic or performance-based increases within established pay range.

The government claims that the wage freeze is needed to bring the deficit under control, except the “savings” from freezing the wages of the province’s 120,000 public servants is being directed to the Fiscal Stabilization Fund (Rainy day Fund), rather than to reducing the deficit.

Either way, this bill will have a significant impact on future earnings for Manitoba teachers. It is estimated that each full-time public school teacher will lose out on an average of \$15,000 in future earnings.

This amounts to about \$217 million in foregone salary increases by the time the next provincial election comes around (2020).

The Manitoba Teachers’ Society and other public sector unions have deemed this bill unconstitutional as it undermines the process of meaningful, good faith bargaining. The unions have joined together and formed the Partnership to Defend Public Services and filed a statement of claim in the Court of Queen’s Bench which includes a request for an injunction against Bill 28.

A court date has been set for May 29, 2018.

The injunction, if successful, will stop Bill 28 from coming into effect.

As we await the court date, we encourage you to speak out and stand up against this unconstitutional legislation.

Talk to your neighbours, family and friends and consider sending a letter or email to your MLA stating your disappointment with this legislation. Spread the word amongst colleagues and encourage them to do the same.

It’s more important than ever that we work together to raise awareness and to support each other as we fight to safeguard public education and the status of the teaching profession.