

Expertise should guide schools plan

A KEY promise of the provincial government's planned revolution of the education system is to give much more power to the parents of students. Speaking as a parent, I would rather the main responsibility for schooling Manitoba children stay with educators who are trained and experienced in the best ways to help students learn.

Parents should be involved and supportive, but it's teachers who know what to teach and how best to teach it. It's arrogant and ignorant to dictate to professionals about their field of expertise, whether it's doctors about medicine or mechanics about vehicles.

When proposed changes were announced this week, they included a "community council" of parents at each school. Many of us initially assumed this was just a name change for the current parent councils, which, among other roles, are an effective liaison between educators and parents.

In elaborating on the change, however, Education Minister Cliff Cullen said the new community councils will put parents "front and centre." Parents will weigh in on matters that used to be the responsibility of school trustees, such as student achievement, hiring decisions and capital projects.

Premier Brian Pallister was more specific: "They will be responsible for assessing the effectiveness of programming at the school. They will analyze the student achievement learning outcomes. They'll determine the areas of focused improvement.

"The principal must be accountable to them."

Who will compose this newly powerful community council? Parent volunteers. No expertise in education required.

The theory is each school's community council will engage with a regional director of education. The problem is that the single Winnipeg region will replace six existing English school boards. It's unrealistic to expect this single director of education can effectively guide community councils from schools totalling about 100,000 students.

My wife and I were active parents in the education of our three sons, all in Winnipeg schools, from the memorable first day of kindergarten to the equally memorable celebration of throwing their mortarboard caps into the air at university graduations.

As other parents can attest, you get to know the families of your child's classmates beginning in elementary school. You chat to other parents as you pick up and drop off, on the sidelines of sporting events, at school plays and

concerts, at parties your child attends or hosts, and through the social-media networks of fellow parents.

I apologize in advance if I am about to insult any of the dozens and dozens of fellow parents I met through our sons' schools, but here it is: none of us parents was qualified to guide the professional educators to the degree the PC government is proposing for parents.

As we volunteered together on field trips, fundraising events and parent councils, we had lots of opinions about the schools. We swapped information about which teachers were dynamic and inspired our children, and which teachers were burned-out and coasting to retirement. We warned each other about which students were bullies and which were druggies. We opined on whether the principal seemed empathetic or egotistical.

But none of us was well informed about, or deeply interested in, pedagogy. Like mother bears protecting their cubs, our view focused narrowly on how the school could help or hurt our individual child. Our obsession with our offspring made us poor candidates to have a say on the greater good of the larger student body, as the professional educators are trained to do.

Our family's personal experience with Winnipeg schools began 18 years ago and is almost finished — our youngest is working on a doctorate and doesn't need us to supervise his homework — so it's possible my view of parental involvement is outdated.

Perhaps the parents who are today walking their children to elementary school and chatting to other parents outside the school fence are better informed than we were about education theory and practice. Perhaps they know about social and emotional learning (SEL), gamification and mobile-first learning, which is a sample of knowledge that should be necessary if they are to volunteer for the community council to evaluate educators and judge learning outcomes.

It's also possible the plan for the increased role of parents is currently being exaggerated by the government and, for practical purposes, the community councils will be much like the current parent councils. I hope so.

A parent's role in education is hugely important to their child's success. But the child is best served if the parent's role includes respectful acknowledgement of the competence of educators.

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