

# **Province's school board decision 'bit of a mystery,' commissioner says Barely discussed abolition at odds with report's recommendations to maintain local democracy**

**Local Journalism Initiative Reporter**

By: **Maggie Macintosh** | Posted: 7:00 PM CDT Tuesday, Mar. 23, 2021

The province's plan to dismantle English-language school boards — which is at odds with the K-12 education review's recommendation to create "super school boards" with a mix of appointed and elected trustees — came as a surprise to one commissioner.

"I had assumed there was some pressure to do what we eventually wound up recommending in our report," said J.D. Lees, a career teacher from Steinbach who was appointed to the 10-person commission tasked with examining the Manitoba public education system two years ago.

Lees called the province's decision-making process "a little bit of a mystery."

*"They didn't like the answer we came up with. You can recommend, but ultimately it's the government that decides what to do."* — J.D. Lees, a teacher from Steinbach on the 10-person commission tasked with examining the Manitoba public education system

The commission, in its entirety, barely discussed the possibility of abolishing school boards, he said, adding discussions were focused around whether both the 37 divisions and their respective boards should be reduced — or simply the latter.

Recommendation 68 in the final K-12 report suggests Manitoba consolidate existing entities into six to eight regional boards, each with five to seven trustees, the majority of whom would be appointed, and others elected. These boards would then elect superintendents.



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"This approach recognizes the value of local democracy, appropriate representation, and the required skill sets to tackle the tasks at hand — to improve the achievement of Manitoba's children," the report states.

During public hearings, commissioners heard about the importance of maintaining local voices and how the last round of amalgamations didn't result in tremendous savings, as well as concerns about administrative costs related to boards and trustee qualifications.

The idea behind Recommendation 68, Lees said, was to ensure the government could appoint some trustees who had basic knowledge around how to run a meeting and other administrative duties, while some members could still be elected to ensure local voices were heard.

Lees said he anticipated the province would release the recommendations, hear public feedback and then release a strategy.



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Clayton Manness and Dr Janice MacKinnon (right to left), co-chairs of the commission hired to conduct the province's educational review and Kelvin Goertzen, far left.

"They didn't like the answer we came up with. You can recommend, but ultimately it's the government that decides what to do," he said, adding the commission's report "was obsolete the minute they released it."

The price tag of the review came to \$635,000, slightly under the \$750,000 budget allotted for it.

Led by co-chairs Janice MacKinnon, a historian and former Saskatchewan cabinet minister, and Clayton Manness, a former finance minister in the Tory government of Gary Filmon, the commission's work got underway in early 2019.

International education consultant Avis Glaze, who authored a report for Nova Scotia that recommended boards be replaced by a centralized education authority — the model Manitoba has chosen — was hired as a consultant.



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Avis Glaze, a school administration consultant.

Neither MacKinnon nor Manness responded to repeated requests for comment. Glaze declined a request, redirecting a reporter to the commission chairpersons.

(Lees said Glaze offered only information and did not pressure the commission to make any particular decision.)

When asked about the decision to disregard recommendation 68, Education Minister Cliff Cullen spoke about inconsistencies in taxation levels, differences in programming between divisions and the complications of managing 37 entities "doing their own thing" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The governance structure is one component which, I think, will give students some better outcomes down the road," he told the *Free Press*.



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Education Minister Cliff Cullen: "... Better outcomes down the road."

Laurie French, president of the Canadian School Boards Association, questions evidence supporting that claim.

"Trustees are not afraid of change, but it needs to be change that is meaningful, and that there's evidence to show that it will truly improve the claims that are being made — and that evidence does not exist. In fact, it's counter to what (Manitoba's) own review requested," French said.

Linda Markus, the only K-12 commissioner who was a working public school teacher and who lives in northern Manitoba, said the rationale behind the recommendations is "water under the bridge."

"Now, it's in the minister's hands and the minister is moving on with this in a way that allows further input from the general public," she said.

Markus added all students should have equal access to a quality education, no matter where they live — and in theory, eliminating redundancies and using taxpayer dollars "efficiently" to conduct school business will level the playing field.

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