

TASK FORCE ON SPECIAL NEEDS FUNDING ONE REP'S PERSPECTIVE

On January 7, 2016, at Glenlawn Collegiate, the Manitoba Government made an announcement that they were going to engage in a pilot project surrounding funding as it pertains to special needs students. How to appropriately fund special needs students is not a new issue - it is as old as the "inclusionary vision" that was introduced some 32 years ago.

The pilot program will take place in eight (8) schools in the Louis Riel School Division. When I heard the announcements, my immediate concerns were twofold.

1. Will this have a profound effect on the needs of the special needs children?
2. Will there be a reduction in the number of Educational Assistants (EAs) in the workforce?

My rationale for both concerns need further explanation. As the parent of a special needs child, I have seen how the parents must remain diligent on seeing that the funding for your child is fully funneled to your child. Will parents be able to be effective advocates for their children to ensure that the child gets the appropriate funding and resources through a new model?

While we have been assured by the Minister of Education that no EAs should lose their jobs, a degree of scepticism must be applied here. I have every faith that James Allum will live up to this promise. Where the scepticism comes in is that there is an election this April, and we do not know if Minister Allum will remain in his portfolio.

But another concern is that the make-up of the Task Force, while saying they involved the stakeholders, did not consult or seek the opinions of any EAs. This is an important piece, as it is the EAs who work directly with these funded students.

While I am not one of those people who is afraid of change, I do walk into this with an open mind. But an open mind does not mean blind acceptance. So let's review what we know. The Task Force did get input from parents on what were the issues closest to them. It is never a bad idea to consult with the "client" before looking at solutions or re-vamps to the system. For example, this is something that the Rehab Centre for Children has done prior to their scheduled move to the new Notre Dame location.

The Task Force also believed that, "*Furthermore, any funding recommendation should encourage or promote resilience, inter-agency collaboration, support to teachers, and the decrease of marginalization or labelling of children*". I think this quasi-mission statement meets the goals for this issue, although I am assuming that support to teachers also means support to EAs as well.

There was also a proposal that the recommendations include an increase to the overall funding. The government has met this by announcing at the January 7th press conference an additional \$1.7 million in funding for special needs students.

So let's get into the guts of the report. There were four models that were taken into consideration.

Option 1: *Application-based funding process (current model)*

Option 2: *Application-based process with some refinements, such as expanding criteria and/or including more specific diagnoses/broad categories*

Option 3: *Formula-based funding, combining the existing Student Services Grant and the Levels 2 and 3 (excluding EBD3 or URIS Group A, which would continue to be application-based)*

Option 4: *Formula-based funding model for Levels 2 and 3, excluding EBD3 or URIS Group A, which would continue to be application-based, with the Student Services Grant remaining unchanged*

It was the decision of the Task Force to pilot Option 4. But there was also a codicil that referenced the unique relationships with the Federal Government, the Frontier School Division and the Division Scolaire Franco-Manitobaine (DSFM). And while the recommendation was to look at Option 4, it was suggested to be phased in for the remainder of the 2015/16 school year. This would be similar to the new Provincial Report Card implementation process.

Other recommendations to the Minister include:

1. *Increase overall funding for students with special needs.*
2. *Expand the Special Needs Coordinator/Clinician grant to provide additional support in the area of mental health.*
3. *Explore Option 4: A formula based on data that would replace the current Special Needs Grant and leave the Student Services Grant as is (excluding complex, interdepartmental applications for L3 Health Care and L3 Emotional Behavioural Disorders) to determine if an acceptable formula can be created to replace the current application-based Special Needs Funding model.*

The long and short of it is, the changes do not automatically constitute job losses for EAs. The extra funding should also ease that possibility. However, many resources are required for special needs students beyond just teachers/EAs. The list of other resources and/or programs would vary from student to student, with those students who would be deemed URIS Level 3 being particularly high in requirements. It truly does "take a village" to raise a child. And the special needs students are perhaps the best example of this.

What I do know is that CUPE is the Bargaining Agent for the EAs in the Louis Riel School Division. This is fortunate, as it will allow us to monitor the pilot program and arrive at our own conclusions on whether the pilot model (Bloc Funding) is a better way to deal with the matter, or whether the current model is a case of "*don't fix it if it ain't broke*".

Time will tell. At least that is one Rep's perspective...

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