



Education Message Testing Focus Groups

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For More Information:

Curtis Brown

Principal
(204) 894-3298
curtis@probe-research.com

Mary Agnes Welch

Principal
(204) 470-8864
maryagnes@probe-research.com

Probe Research Inc.

603 – 191 Lombard Ave.
Winnipeg, MB R3B 0X1
(204) 926-6565

www.probe-research.com



Key Findings

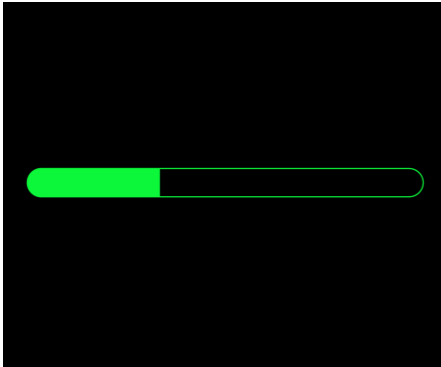
Awareness/Views on Education Reform

- Among participants, awareness regarding the key details of Bill 64 and the provincial government's efforts to reform the K-12 education system was relatively low. For many participants, their views on these changes have been coloured by seeing anti-Bill 64 signs on lawns, or by comments made by educators they know.
- Because of this, several participants indicated they have mildly negative attitudes regarding education reform. Having said that, however, some said they were somewhat open-minded to learning more about these changes and how they could be beneficial for students.

Views on Creative Concepts

- When participants were presented with the two concepts, they tended to indicate that the one they were shown second did a better job of convincing them to embrace education reform. For Winnipeg participants and the minority of rural and northern participants, this was the future-focused concept Updating Education For All. For the majority of rural participants, however, the equity-themed concept (Giving Every Child A Better Education) did a better job of advocating for changes to the education system.
- To a certain extent, the way both concepts framed the flaws in the current education system – that is, as being behind the times and not equitable across schools – clashed with participants' underlying views on the education system. To some degree, this limited their acceptance of the key messages in both concepts.
- The out of home approach used in the Giving Every Child a Better Education Concept resonated well, as participants liked the dichotomous word play (e.g. ABCs to Algebra). There were some mixed views on the North and South treatment, as some felt the imagery and messaging underlines the divisions (and perceived inequality) between schools in the north and well-off urban areas.

Key Findings (cont'd)



Views on Creative Concepts (cont'd)

- The online messaging associated with this concept also tested well, as participants particularly liked the message regarding less administration and the fact \$40 million would be redirected to classrooms.
- The out of home approach for the Updating Education For All concept also tested fairly well, although some felt this message was more critical of the current education system. Participants also liked online versions of this concept that highlighted how parents' voices will be heard in an updated school system – although a few participants questioned whether it will be good to have the loudest voices amplified.
- Participants praised the fact these concepts showed diverse groups of students from different backgrounds, but at the same time cautioned this commitment to inclusion should be organic and not feel forced.



Confidence in Government

- Overall, participants hoped education modernization leads to more resources for Manitoba schools, with a focus on improving learning outcomes for marginalized and lower-income students. At the same time, however, many participants were concerned a centralized education authority will not be attuned to local concerns, and that changes to education will actually lead to fewer resources in the classroom.
- When participants were asked to express how assured they are that the provincial government to implement beneficial changes to education, their degree of confidence was relatively low – but not rock bottom. Although changes the provincial government has made to health care (and its overall performance during the pandemic) negatively coloured their views of education reform, some participants have some degree of confidence in the government to make changes that will be beneficial for students, educators and Manitobans.

Methodology

Communications Services Manitoba (CSM) commissioned Probe Research to conduct a pair of focus groups with Manitobans, including parents, to test two creative approaches to be used to inform Manitobans about education reforms. These sessions explored:

- Top-of-mind awareness and impressions of proposed education reforms.
- Reactions to two creative approaches to advertising, including the persuasiveness and impact of each one on participants' views of the benefits of education reforms.
- Confidence in the provincial government's approach to education reforms.

Recruitment and screening favoured participants who tended to be unsure of their views on the proposed reforms or had no strong views, either positive or negative. The table on the following page provides a breakdown of the specific characteristics of each group.

All sessions were conducted virtually using Zoom. Participants were recruited using a customized screening instrument, with nine participants recruited per session. Participants were each provided with \$100 in exchange for their time and contributions. The sessions were moderated by Mary Agnes Welch of Probe Research, with Curtis Brown of Probe Research and staff from the Government of Manitoba and McKim Communications Group observing the sessions.

Focus group findings are qualitative in nature and cannot be extrapolated to the broader population of Manitobans.



Methodology

The following table provides a breakdown of the specific characteristics of each group.

Session	Date	Time	Parent Population
1	Tuesday, August 17	5:30 pm	Winnipeg – general population <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed gender • Mixed age • Mixed education/household income • One individual identifying as a visible minority • Three parents, including two with children in the K-12 education system
2		7:30 pm	Rural/northern Manitoba – general population <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed gender • Mixed age • Mixed education/household income • One individual identifying as a visible minority • Six parents, including five with children in the K-12 education system





Awareness/Views on Education Reform

This chapter outlines participants' familiarity with – and attitudes regarding – the provincial government's proposed changes to public education in Manitoba.

Awareness of Education Reform

Participants had limited awareness of education changes beyond anti-Bill 64 signage

Participants had low-to-modest awareness of proposed changes to education in Manitoba. For many, their familiarity with these changes came from seeing lawn signs opposing Bill 64 or hearing something about changes being made to the governance of the education system.

By and large, participants were not particularly familiar with the details of the legislation beyond the very broad changes to governance (e.g., one centralized division replacing current school boards).

One participant felt the changes would be negative for children with special needs, and rural residents were slightly more likely to raise concerns over centralized control of schools taking effect from Winnipeg.



"There's the different divisions, I think they were talking about making it just one big one. That's what I've heard."

- Winnipeg participant

"The only thing I've heard is through my teacher friends and just how they're not 100 per cent for it and they feel it's pretty rushed."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"I have seen all the signs in people's yards, but I don't have too much knowledge on it."

- Winnipeg participant

"It wasn't notified through the school. It was more just seeing these Bill 64 signs popping up a month ago here. And so I looked it up because I like to read stuff like that."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

Attitudes Regarding Education Reform

Many participants interested in learning more about changes, but hold mildly negative views

Despite this knowledge gap, there was a willingness and interest among participants to learn more. Some participants had already sought out more information online, mainly by visiting websites opposing Bill 64 (such as that of the Manitoba Teachers' Society), while others said they had spoken about these reforms with teachers they know. Two participants – one per group – had even read the bill online.

One parent recalled that there will be parent advisory committees at each school, and that this may be challenging as schools will have different needs and abilities to sustain parent engagement.

- Here and throughout the sessions, participants expressed a desire for more clear, practical, detailed information about the changes and expressed some surprise at key elements of the reforms they were hearing for the first time.

Although a small number of participants felt mostly positive about the reforms – or at least agreed improvements to education are needed – most had mildly negative views of Bill 64. They were aware that teachers and school boards have significant concerns about the changes, which underpinned participants' unfavourable views of the reforms. A couple of participants felt the changes may be going too far too fast.

- It should be noted that the broad and visceral mistrust of the government's intentions and approaches that was evident in previous focus groups on this topic was not quite as evident here.

"I don't really know enough yet to speak for or against the bill."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"The one thing that kind of stood out to me was the parent advisory (councils). I believe there would be one per school area. Some school divisions are very, very different across the city and again, have huge different needs."

- Winnipeg participant

"I think I feel positive on probably 80 per cent of it. I like standards and I like policies and I think everyone should have standards across the province. But some of the stuff just needs a bit of tweaking."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"I did go on a website and there wasn't really much information available, so I didn't really do much more research on that."

- Winnipeg participant



Views on Creative Concepts

This chapter provides details regarding participants' views on the two proposed concepts developed for the Government of Manitoba's informational campaign on education reform.

Overall Impressions on the Concepts

Winnipeggers felt future-focused message most effective; rural participants leaned to other concept

Participants were generally positive about both concepts they were shown, despite some expected commentary that both concepts were “too rosy” or “vague”.

In both groups, as often happens in focus testing, participants felt the second concept they were shown was more persuasive about the proposed changes to the education system. Rural residents were slightly more likely to say the equity-focused concept (*Giving Every Child a Better Education*) makes them more open to the idea of changing Manitoba’s education system. Winnipeggers, meanwhile, overwhelmingly felt the more future-focused concept, *Updating Education for All*, did a better job of convincing them of the need to reform education in Manitoba.

With both concepts, participants tended to push back on the underlying suggestion that the provincial education system and schools are operating behind the times or are unequal. In other words, participants often questioned whether it’s indeed true that schools aren’t all offering the same high-quality instruction or that the system has in fact failed to keep up with the times. In some cases, the framing of the concepts and messages was at odds with participants’ generally favourable perceptions of the education system as it is now (“are they saying we don’t have good schools?”), which limited how open they were to the key messages.

Concept Viewed As Being Most Effective



Winnipeg participants

Rural/northern participants



Winnipeg participants



Rural/northern participants



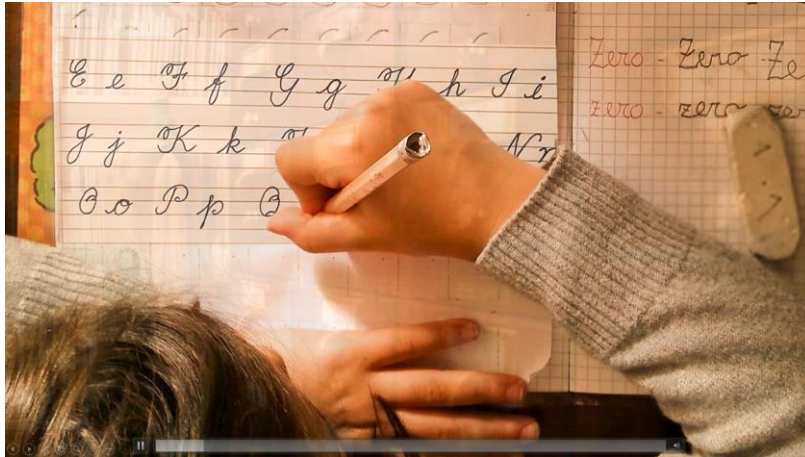
Summary of Concept 2: *Updating Education For All*



	Group 1: Winnipeg	Group 2: Rural/Northern
Order Shown	Second	First
Descriptors (based on participants' verbal comments and the session chat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress, moving forward, hopeful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vague, multicultural, progress, positive, hopeful
Overall Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seen through the lens of online learning and COVID-19 and the innovations that have occurred over the last year, which made some Winnipeg participants question how "behind" the system really is. Offered more detail and background about the reasons for the changes, and seen as more memorable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not enough detail Question of whether education reform will have a similar effect to changes to health care in rural communities
Memorable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not especially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not particularly ("in one ear and out the other")

Concept 2: *Updating Education For All*

Verbatim Comments by Participants



"So it has good words until the end, when it says we cannot be stuck in the past. I think they can use a better word than that. It's not a very good message."

- Winnipeg participant

"I would say this just made it look like our schools are really behind."

- Winnipeg participant

"I see this and I just get angry because I don't agree with the bill."

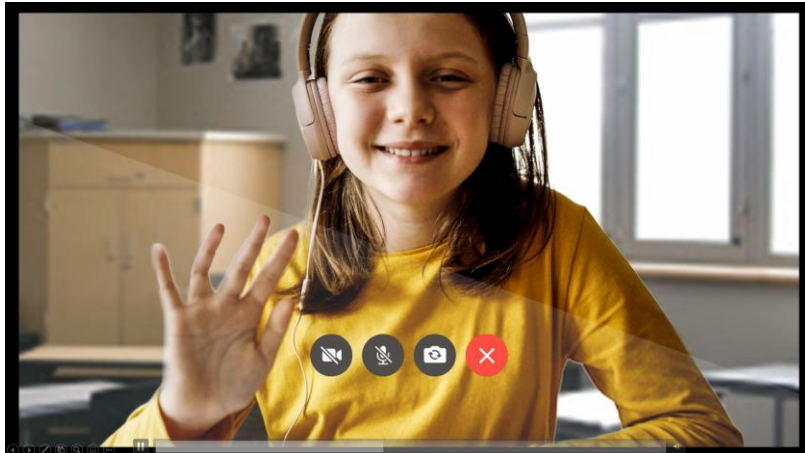
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"It was almost like a - I'm going to say a political party bashing. So this sent more negative messages than wanting me to say, 'Oh, let me learn about this better education'."

- Winnipeg participant

"It's just it's way too vague, like we're supporting teachers. Why weren't we doing that beforehand? How are we doing that now?"

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant



Summary: Concept 1: *Giving Every Child A Better Education*



	Group 1: Winnipeg	Group 2: Rural/Northern
Order Shown	First	Second
Descriptors (based on participants' verbal comments and the session chat)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive, equality, inclusive (including of teachers and parents), upbeat, supportive of all students, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pleasant, "didn't feel appalled by it."
Overall Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too general and less memorable – raises more questions about what the changes really are Made some feel as if schools are currently "mediocre"/sub-par Sounded too "rosy" Raised the specter of centralizing control in Winnipeg for some rural residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Felt like it will lead to centralizing education in smaller communities and Winnipeg Makes it seem as if current education system is lacking Confusing in the sense children attend school based on where they live and do not have a choice on where to attend
Memorable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not overly – participants felt they would forget the content/message fairly quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not asked

Concept 1: *Giving Every Child A Better Education*

Verbatim Comments by Participants



"I don't think I'd remember the ad in a day or an hour. It was very nice, but I don't think I'd remember anything about it."
- Winnipeg participant

"The message was sort of all nicey-nice, we're going to support all the students, everything's going to be better, schools are going to be better. Which is saying that they're not good today. Which is saying that kids aren't getting the support they need today, which is saying that teachers aren't getting the support they need today."
- Winnipeg participant

"When they say we're going to make the best school in Manitoba, it makes me think that everything's going to just be centralized."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"When you're going from 36 school divisions to one school division or two...it's hard for me to fathom that these people are going to be able to make the decisions for all matters for children and make it necessarily the same way."
- Winnipeg participant

"It's kind of saying it's kind of mediocre today, but we're going to make a great."
- Winnipeg participant

"Your kid goes based off of where you live. So I don't have options, and I have never had an issue with it."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant



Out of Home: *Giving Every Child A Better Education*

Dichotomous word placement worked for participants; mixed views on “North and South”

Participants generally liked the dichotomous messages shown in the out of home treatments for the *Giving Every Child a Better Education* concept (e.g., Athletes and Mathletes, ABCs to Algebra...).

However, there were some polarized views about the North and South image. Some participants said this perhaps comes off as divisive or pits well-off urban children against those in the North. Some also felt it suggests that those from less-advantaged areas will receive more resources.

One participant (a new Canadian originally from Vietnam) said the North/South phrasing conjured up images of conflict when that country was partitioned. Others, however, praised the contrast between the northern lights and the city skyline as appealing. As well, for one low-information participant, this North and South concept did bring to mind the idea that poorer schools will get more resources under Bill 64.



“They're saying that they're trying to give every child the opportunity, no matter where you come from or what your skills are, because every kid has different skills and different strengths.”

- Winnipeg participant

“I really like the North and South one. I like the contrast there with the lights in the city skyline.”

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

“Get rid of North and South...There's a large Aboriginal population in the North who economically struggle to begin with. So now this is just saying you haven't been giving us fair education in the province.”

- Winnipeg participant

Online Presentation: *Giving Every Child A Better Education*

Message focusing on lowering administration costs resonated in both sessions

By and large, participants frequently said they wanted less “fluff” and more facts about the changes contained in Bill 64. As the online and social media treatments shown began to provide more detail, participants tended to find them more appealing. In fact, several participants said the information provided in these versions would encourage them to click on the link to learn more.

Participants generally liked the message of the social media ad associated with *Giving Every Child a Better Education* that touts \$40 million being redirected into schools. For some, the message focusing on reducing bureaucracy and investing in front-line services was appealing. Indeed, the \$40 million figure was seen as being new, memorable and intriguing.

- At the same time, however, some participants wondered whether this amount of money will make a discernible difference in the classroom, especially given the size of the overall education budget.

“Less admin, more funding - it’s definitely telling me what I want to hear...It’s the front line workers that need help, not more management, not more program secretaries, not more administration. We need more people doing the work.”

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

“Like we’re just throwing numbers out there, like \$40 million will be saved and redirected to classrooms. Where is the \$40 million from? That always makes me wonder.”

- Winnipeg participant

“I think they stand out a little bit more in that they give a little more information.”
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant



Out of Home: *Updating Education For All*

Messages associated with concept were viewed as being critical, negative

With the out of home presentations for *Updating Education For All*, most participants said the message was clear and easy to understand.

Although some liked the idea of improving the education system, some felt the message is overly negative or critical about the current state of schools in Manitoba, as it suggests they have not been updated in any way during the past 50 years – which many said is simply not true.

"I see it and I do agree that there is a lot that needs to change with the education system."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"It tells me that probably things do need to change, because I think it's effective in the sense that how we're dressed in the '70s and even for when I was growing up, is not necessarily going to work for us today."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant



"I'm losing interest because you're bashing the past and, oh, here you want to tell me about something good in the future?"

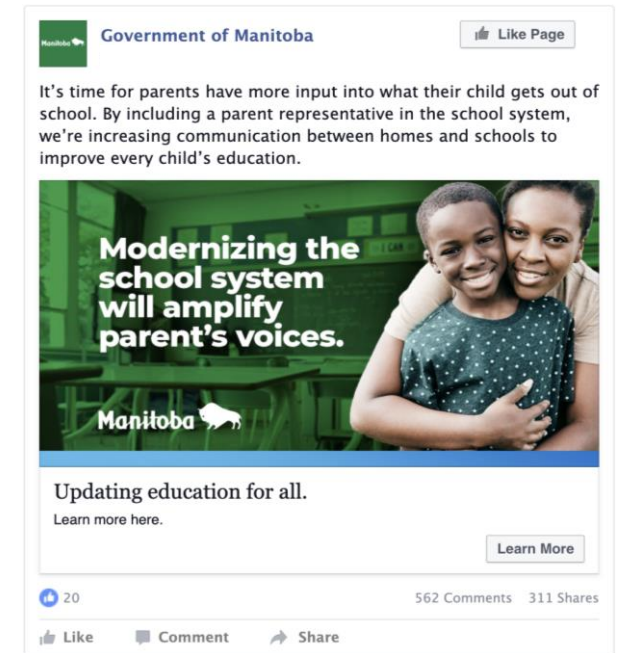
- Winnipeg participant

Online Presentation: *Updating Education For All*

Parental involvement seen as positive, but some wondered how this will work in practice

For the social media treatments used as part of the c concept, the message about how reforms will amplify parents' voices was received quite well. Some participants who had concerns about school boards being eliminated said having something else that will give parents a voice in the school system helps alleviate any concerns about this step. For rural participants, this was especially the case, as many expressed concerns about having a single education authority based in Winnipeg running their community's school.

Several liked the principal of having more parental involvement in school - although some pointed out that they do not see themselves as experts and defer to the opinions and expertise of educators. Similarly, some rural participants expressed concerns about the degree to which "small town politics" may play a role in the operation of these parent councils.



"A lot of times in small towns, some of the most vocal parents are the ones you really don't want in there (on the parent council)."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"What's that one lonely parent actually going to be able to achieve in the school system?"

- Winnipeg participant

"I like that they use the word communication and community. For people in small towns – I grew up in a small town and for my whole life I still live in a small town – it's reassuring that you're still going to have a voice as a small community person, as a parent with someone in school."

- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

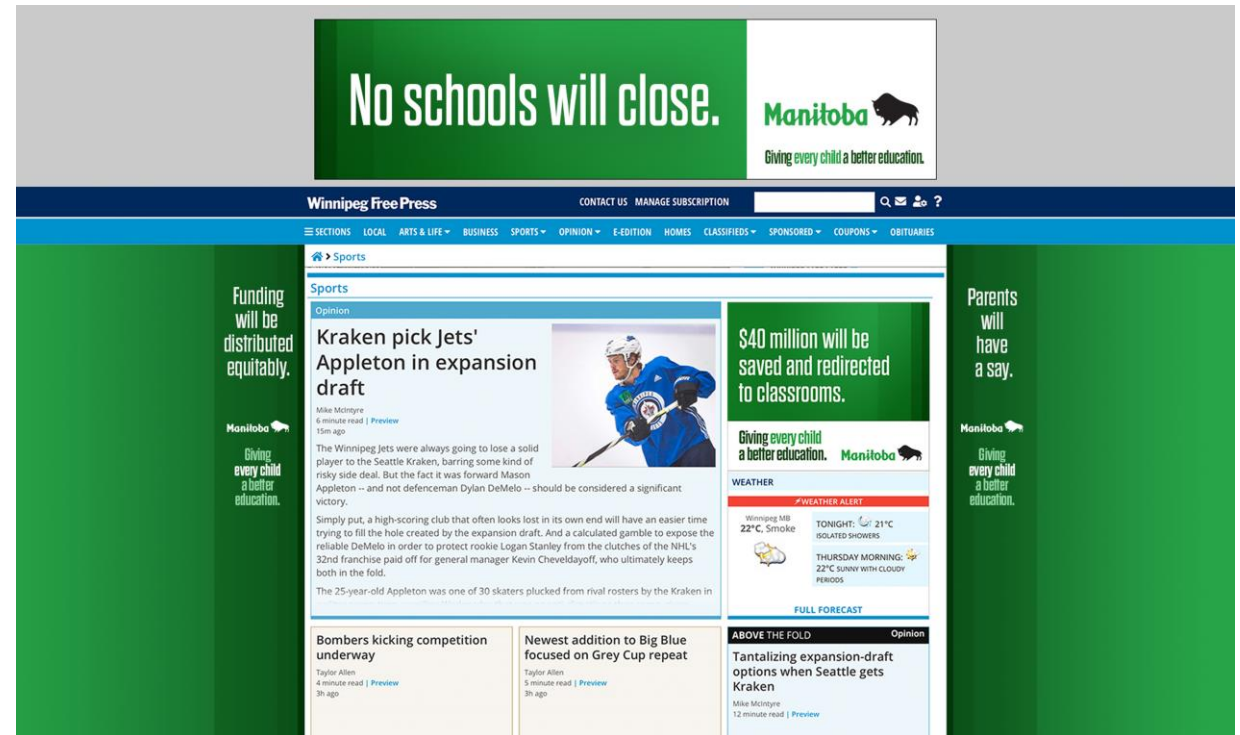
Views on Wraparound/Key Facts Treatment

Some questioned whether the government can promise no schools will be closed

Participants found the wrap-around online ads appealing, particularly the colour around the website.

The “No schools will close” banner was eye-catching and interesting to many participants, although some participants questioned whether the government can – or should – promise this given that at some point in the future, it may make sense to close schools due to low enrolment.

The use of the word “equitable” caught the attention of some participants, with some suggesting this specific term may be problematic for some individuals who may think it means funding will be distributed on an equal basis rather than to the places where it is needed most. A couple of participants wondered if a different word should be selected just so the public does not get this impression.



"I find most people don't really understand the difference between equitable and equal. And so that word might be troublesome."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"No schools will close, how can you say that? That might be today, but you can't say that for the future."

- Winnipeg participant

Diversity and Inclusion in the Concepts

Participants noted diversity, but wanted inclusion to be organic rather than seem forced

Participants in both groups tended to value diversity and praised each concept's inclusion of Black and Indigenous children - although one noted the ads did not appear to feature a child with disabilities. Indeed, participants wanted this inclusion to feel authentic and not "over-done" or token.

Participants also spoke peripherally about the importance of Bill 64 ensuring schools in lower-income areas receive more resources but, as noted, wondered if the term "equitable" means the same as "equal" and what this means in practice. Participants noted that many schools need extra resources instead of the same funding for all.

"I notice there is not a single child involved in any portion of (the concepts) that is anything other than a perfectly healthy child."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant





Confidence in Government

This chapter assesses how participants felt about the provincial government's ability to deliver beneficial changes to education.

Hopes/Fears Regarding Education Reform

Participants open to modernization, but question the government's approach so far

At the end of each session, participants were asked to describe what they hope comes out of changes to the education system, as well as what their biggest fears or concerns about this process are.

By and large, participants were open to the idea of modernizing the education system and hoped that more resources will go into the system, particularly to improve learning outcomes for marginalized and lower-income students.

The main concern was centralization, and the notion that a single, province-wide school division will not be sufficiently attuned to local needs and concerns. This was true in both the rural session – where participants were very sensitive to the idea of having a distant bureaucracy running their community's local school – but also among Winnipeg participants who felt this may not be beneficial for communities with different needs and demographic realities.

A couple of participants expressed concerns about the government's approach to making major changes to social services, pointing specifically to reforms in health care. One participant who works in health care expressed worries about the effects of unintended consequences flowing from changes to the education system that will be detrimental to students and those working within the system.

"If it's done the right way with finesse, I think it can be good."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

"I think that concern's always going to be there when you have one body of people representing an entire province."
- Winnipeg participant

"My worry is that they didn't think things through. Again, I think I'm a little bit jilted from working in health care and being kind of over the government at the moment."
- Rural/northern Manitoba participant

Confidence in Government

Confidence is lower – but not rock bottom – in the government’s ability to implement changes

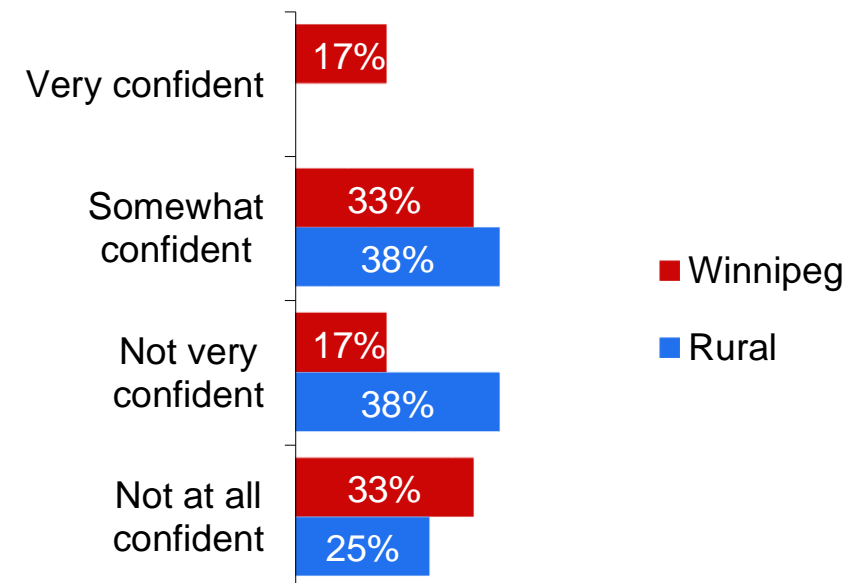
Confidence in the government’s ability to make positive changes to education was low, but not rock bottom. Most participants indicated they were not very confident in the provincial government’s ability to make the education system better for Manitobans, which some acknowledged was informed in part by the province’s handling of the pandemic and health care reform.

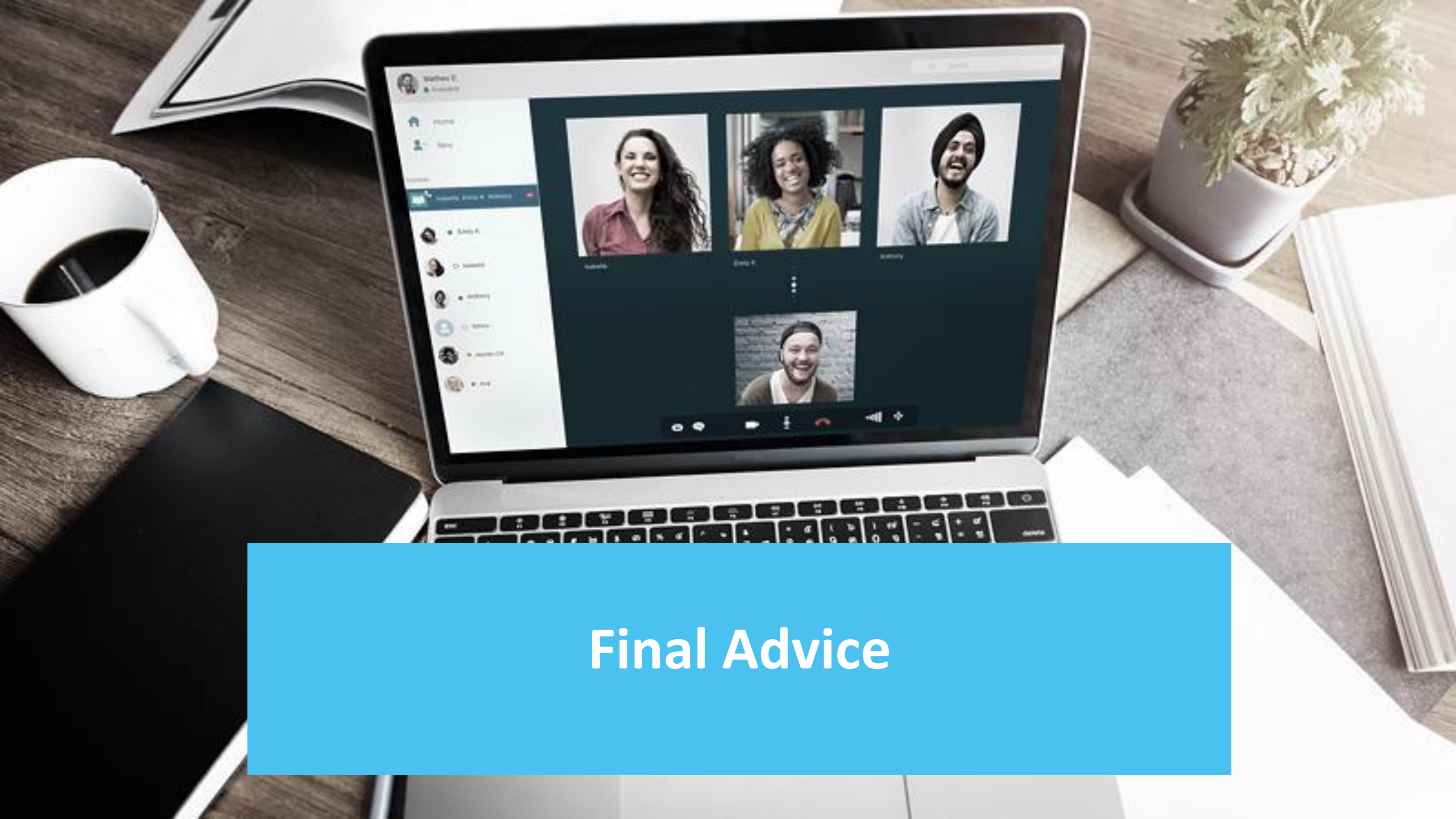
Some participants felt the changes to education are not necessarily being made with the interests and educational outcomes of children in mind, while others felt there has not been enough transparency around each of the key changes (e.g., where exactly the \$40 million in savings will come from, how exactly teachers will be supported better than they are now).

“I’m just, at this point, trying to trust the government a little bit, just hoping that they will make things work out for everyone, students and teachers included.”
- Rural/northern participant

“The \$40 million has to come from somewhere. So this isn’t new money. It’s coming from somewhere. And if it’s distributed, I don’t know how it’s distributed now and how unequal it is.”
- Winnipeg participant

Zoom Poll: “How confident are you that the provincial government’s changes to the education system will make it better for Manitobans?”





Final Advice

Final Observations/Advice

- **Among participants, there was very low awareness of the specifics of Bill 64, but a collective sense that this legislation will have a negative effect on education.** This is not completely surprising given there was a priority on recruiting participants who did not have strong opinions about this bill. However, their comments indicated quite clearly that the views of lower-information Manitobans are being coloured by opponents of education reform. This speaks to the value of a fact-focused social marketing campaign of this nature. However, it may be difficult at this late stage to shift opinion regarding the specifics of education reform, as anti-Bill 64 messaging may be quite entrenched after several months.
 - **Having individuals or organizations who will validate the need for education reform could certainly strengthen the delivery of the message.** However, this is likely to be difficult because most education sector stakeholders appear to be firmly opposed to the scope of changes contained in Bill 64. Secondly, many individuals and organizations who could be in favour of reform will have limited recent experience with the public education system. For example, community or business leaders could advocate for changes, but their frame of reference will be limited and they will not have that direct, hands-on experience and perceived expertise of educators.
- **Both concepts have a certain degree of appeal, but the final decision should depend on which core message the provincial government wishes to emphasize.** Across the two groups, there was a slight lean towards the future-focused *Updating Education For All* as the concept which does the best job of advocating for education reform. While we would caution against making the decision solely on the basis of two focus group sessions, it was clear from the discussion that either concept could work. Therefore, the provincial government should make its determination based on whether it wishes to emphasize the need to update the education system after 50 years, or whether it wishes to emphasize the fact that education reform will make resources for schools more equitable.
 - **If the future-focused message is most important, the province should be careful in its messaging and tone.** Being overly critical of the current education system and painting it as significantly out of date may be out of step with how Manitobans view their schools, and thus create a barrier to listening further to the province's message.
 - **If the provincial government opts to focus on the message of equity, it may wish to consider using a different word that means the same thing.** Many people will interpret equity or equitable as meaning equal funding for all rather than allocating resources to where they are most needed.