Advocates call for French-language education improvements

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Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (DSFM) superintendent Alain Laberge wants the province establish a bilingual deputy minister of education and reinstate a bilingual assistant deputy minister of education responsible for French education. (Andrew Ryan / Winnipeg Free Press)

An alliance of educators and parents is calling on Manitoba to improve French-language education, offering up a report containing three proposals it says won't cost the province a dime.

Partners for French Education recommends the province establish a bilingual deputy minister of education and reinstate a bilingual assistant deputy minister of education responsible for French education to work with school divisions and teachers. Because those roles previously existed, the group said Monday the province should be able to bring them back without cost by shuffling existing positions.

The report also suggests the province create a new administrative structure to oversee all French-language education, including immersion and second-language education.

In October, the assistant deputy minister for French education was moved to an advisory role, while other staff in the Bureau de l'éducation française were shuffled to positions in English-language education and other job vacancies were left unfilled.

Those vacancies haven't been filled, and the province's French-language educators lost an important ear in the ministry when the assistant deputy minister position was axed, Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (DSFM) superintendent Alain Laberge said at a news conference Monday.

Laberge also said the group has met with Minister of Education and Training Ian Wishart to discuss their concerns.
Partners for French Education's proposed administrative structure would be the responsibility of Education and Training, and would be managed by the francophone assistant deputy minister. The group suggests the structure could start as a pilot project — but could eventually be viewed as a model to be followed across Canada.

To help align all of the existing French-language education services, Partners for French Education suggests bringing together stakeholders from the government, the Éducatrices et éducateurs francophones du Manitoba, Fédération des parents du Manitoba, Université de Saint-Boniface, DSFM, Pluri-elles Inc. Manitoba, and Conseil jeunesse provincial. The proposed group of stakeholders would meet three times a year.

"We look forward to reviewing the group’s suggestions, and thank them for their dedication to French education in Manitoba," Wishart said Monday in a statement.

"The province continues to compile findings from the April 21 summit on French education in Manitoba that we co-hosted with les Partenaires de l'éducation en français. We have committed to reviewing the entire kindergarten to Grade 12 public education system in 2019, and will invite public feedback in various areas, including French education."

Partners for French Education also said it has consulted with the francophone community at large. Those meetings resulted in 94 suggestions to the province, school divisions, community and other stakeholders the group says would help the French language and culture thrive in the province. However, the group is not yet calling on the province to implement the suggestions.

Between the DFSM, immersion and French-as-a-second-language classes, more than 95,000 students are learning French in Manitoba. Immersion enrolment has experienced an increase of about six per cent in the last decade, according to the Manitoba Teachers' Society.