

**Teacher Voice**

**for**

**Quality Public Education**

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union's Response  
to the Recommendations of the Report of the Minister's Panel on Education

November 2014



**Nova Scotia  
Teachers Union**



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# Introduction

*The objects of the Union are to advance and promote the teaching profession and the cause of education in the Province.*

*Teaching Profession Act, R.S. c. 462 s.7*

*Mission: As the unified voice for the advocacy and support of all its members, the NSTU promotes and advances the teaching profession and quality public education.*

*NSTU Guidebook*

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union is pleased to be given the opportunity to respond to the report released by the Minister's Panel on Education formed in February, 2014. Both the *Teaching Profession Act* and the mission of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union speak not only to the advancement and promotion of the teaching profession but the Union prides itself in advancing and promoting free quality education for all students in Nova Scotia.

The Panel's report, which was released on October 30, contains seven themes and 30 recommendations to be considered by The Honourable Karen Casey, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. The NSTU, in numerous meetings with both the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Minister Casey, have commented on some of the same themes.

This response contains our viewpoints on the Report's 30 recommendations. We are pleased that the Minister will consider our perspectives before she implements a plan of action. Issues on sufficient resources for the inclusive classroom, class composition, reducing the number of outcomes at all levels and a focus on respectful behaviour are positive areas that teachers will embrace as long as the time, resources, and appropriate training are put in place.

We do want to make note that there were no active representatives from the teaching profession on the Minister's Panel on Education. Having teacher representation on the panel may have helped to alleviate some inaccuracies that have been portrayed about our current system through the Report. Unfortunately, the public will probably believe that the report conveys only true statements about public education in Nova Scotia. The Union has attempted in the last few weeks to correct some of the misinformation through media interviews when given the opportunity to do so. Some examples of inaccurate information communicated include the belief that teachers are not evaluated and/or terminated in our current system. It will be challenging to reverse these public perceptions even when there are procedures both in the *Education Act* and *Teachers' Provincial Agreement* that contradict these statements.

It is important that the NSTU comment on the overall tone of the report. Our members have expressed concerns that the proper context to the report was not given as evidence-based results were not used in forming all recommendations. It is clear not all respondents would have had the knowledge or skill to respond in a meaningful way to the Panel's survey questions.

Drawing the conclusion that 50% of Nova Scotians are not satisfied with the public school system is a little misleading. While the panel received 19,000 responses to its survey and the sample size is large, the sample was not a random representative sample. While we know that a percentage of our population may be dissatisfied with the public education system we feel it is important not to place this dissatisfaction solely on the backs of teachers. It is not reassuring for our members and their students to have the quality of teachers in the system being questioned.

The majority of teachers will support effective change to improve learning for students but will not support change for the sake of change, based on results of a survey with no proper evidence.

The NSTU fully embraces the opportunity to work with both the Minister and the Department to implement any changes that will be effective and meaningful in support of free quality education in Nova Scotia that in turn supports a better future for every student.

The NSTU and our teachers know that student success in the classroom is ultimately tied to economic status. Students need economic security to succeed at school and any discussion of revamping our system should include measures to meet the fundamental goal of public education to be a grand equalizer, giving every student an equal opportunity to succeed.

## **What Nova Scotians and teachers believe about our public education system?**

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union believes in the importance of a high-quality education system for students and for teachers. Our mission is to unify and elevate the teaching profession and direct our programs towards improving the quality of education in Nova Scotia. We also believe that teachers should have direct input into the design and delivery of our public education system.

As the Report from the Minister's Panel has indicated, Nova Scotians have a great interest in the public education system in Nova Scotia. In an effort to gauge public opinion on a variety of public education issues, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union has been conducting scientific public opinion polling of a randomly selected and representative sample of Nova Scotians through Corporate Research Associates Inc. (CRA). CRA has been commissioned by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union to design and implement public opinion surveys for the last 13 years.

Our most recent poll was conducted by CRA from May 13 to May 27, 2014 over part of the same time frame that the Minister's Panel on Education gathered information from Nova Scotians about whether they believe the education system is meeting the needs of students and what needs to be improved. The overall results are based on 400 interviews with individuals from the population of Nova Scotia. This sample size provides results accurate to within plus or minus 4.9 percentage points in 95 out of 100 samples.

Our polling also shows that Nova Scotians have great interest in issues affecting the education students receive through the Nova Scotia public school system. Eighty-five per cent have a moderate to high interest, while 13% have a low to non-existent interest. This interest in public education

issues is not incumbent upon having either children or grandchildren in the system. Only 23% of Nova Scotians had either children or grandchildren in the public P-12 education system. Of those that did, 25% had a child or children in the system in the last 10 years and only 5% had a grandchild or grandchildren in the system over the same period of time.

Nova Scotians have consistently placed spending money on the public education system within the top three priorities for government. In the most recent survey, spending more on the public school system (12%) had the same priority as balancing the provincial budget (16%). The public education system spending priority was second to spending more on job creation (23%) and spending more on health care (21%). Nova Scotians also believe that the overall level of government funding of the system should be increased (68%). Thirty-one per cent say it should be increased a lot and 37% say it should be increased a little. Only 6% of Nova Scotians believe that funding should be decreased.

While our polling suggests that Nova Scotians believe that the provincial government is doing a fair to poor job in managing the system (63%), they are confident in the government's ability to act in the best interests of the provincial public school system (66%).

Factors in the public education system that cause concerns for teachers, which have been acknowledged within some of the recommendations of the Minister's Panel on Education Report, were also identified by Nova Scotians. Public expectations on teachers and administrators, including a focus on dealing with bullying behaviours, mental health issues, family issues etc. have meant less one-on-one time with students.

Nova Scotians are concerned over factors taken together they believe decrease the amount of time teachers are able to spend with individual students. Over half (58%) are concerned that a reduction of the overall number of teachers in Nova Scotia has an effect on teacher time with students. Over half (55%) are concerned with the increasing number of students with special needs, including learning and behavioural challenges. Sixty-one per cent are concerned with a reduction of in-class support personnel for children with special needs. Over half (51%) are concerned with the reduction of teaching materials and tools. Some factors they are less concerned with include an increase in expectations that teachers will help with social pressures (43%), but on average they rank this issue a 7 out of 10, and the growing volume of paperwork teachers must complete (36%) with a mean score of 6.5.

Because the NSTU believes that teachers' professionalism, experience and expertise are important factors in maintaining and improving our public education system we have also sought feedback from our members about the public education system.

At the beginning of the 2012-13 school year after the previous government had cut \$65 million out of the system over the preceding two years, resulting in the loss of 700 teaching positions, we asked our members how this impacted the day-to-day reality of their classrooms and schools. The NSTU had 155 members respond to the survey. Responses were submitted from teachers, administrators, and guidance counsellors in elementary, middle (junior high), and high schools.

Responses were analyzed to determine how Nova Scotia educators describe their reality today. What



are they most concerned about? What challenges do they face? How are their lives and the lives of their students impacted by changes in the Nova Scotia educational system?

The key themes that emerged include the following:

- Teachers are in the profession to educate and enrich the lives of children in their communities, but commented that cutbacks, increased workloads and additional reporting requirements keep them from doing that.
- Students' needs are increasingly not being met and teachers are increasingly feeling overworked and overwhelmed. Many reported feeling stressed, tired, and burned out. A few mentioned looking for other careers or looking forward to retirement.
- Funding cuts have reduced the number of teachers and support staff (resource, EPA, behaviour support, TAs, etc.)
- Fewer staff means more classes per teacher and more students per class.
- Increasing class size, in addition to increased numbers of students with special needs, means more students (and higher proportions per class) with special needs. So the need for support is greater, but, fewer staff means less access to support for those students.
- More classes and students per teacher has led to drastically cut prep time, less time to supervise extra-curricular activities, lunchtime spent with students, and longer work hours.
- Resources are not available. Some teachers report not having books for their students, there are too few classrooms, reduced library hours, too few desks, limits on paper and photocopying, etc.
- New reporting systems take valuable time away from teaching and increase workload. Teachers find that the new systems take longer than the former methods, with no improvement in meeting students' needs. These systems cause significant teacher and administrator frustration.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union recognizes that the most recent class size provisions at the early elementary level have alleviated some of the pressures identified, and are grateful to government for recognizing the class size concern. We are also heartened to know that Nova Scotians recognize issues our teachers have been telling us for years.

We know there are strengths in our system, strengths that our teachers identified. These strengths include: the opportunity for professional learning that help teachers meet student needs; the commitment teachers have to students and the community inside and outside the classroom; and existing programming that support a wide variety of student needs in ensuring learning success.

The following response outlines our thoughts and concerns on the 30 recommendations contained within the seven themes of the Report of the Minister's Panel on Education, which we hope you will take into account when finalizing changes to the public education system in Nova Scotia.

# Theme 1

## Strengthen the curriculum to transform teaching and learning

It is the belief of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union that each individual has the capacity to learn. Learning is a personal, lifelong process vital to both the individual and social well-being of every citizen. As educators, we recognize and value, richness and complexity of each learner's abilities. Teachers nourish the desire to learn and espouse to provide the opportunity for each student to realize their learning potential. To that end, the NSTU supports and encourages the establishment of curriculum standards and guidelines that should be the shared responsibility of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and teachers. Teachers, as part of their professional responsibility, should be fully aware of and conversant with these standards and guidelines that are of direct concern to their teaching situations.

The NSTU believes all students should have access to a multi-dimensional curriculum with a flexibility to support interdisciplinary linkages. The curriculum should foster culturally, economically, environmentally, politically, and socially responsible citizens, and be delivered with the appropriate human, physical, and technological resources. To facilitate teachers' ability to focus on, and meet the needs of the students in their classrooms, it is imperative they are working with clear, concise, and manageable outcomes at all grade levels. The development and implementation of an outcomes based curriculum, if partnered with the necessary and timely professional development and resources, will allow for appropriate programming for all students regardless of the student's level of development and needs.

### 1.1 Recommendation

Streamline the curriculum to reduce the number of outcomes at all grade levels.

The NSTU supports the reduction of outcomes at all grade levels. Teachers consistently voice the concern that there are too many expectations to be met, as outlined in the Department documents, which take away the autonomy of the teacher to be flexible and creative in the classroom in meeting the needs of diverse learners. The focus becomes how to "cover too much in too little time" rather than on the learner and the learning process. Teacher input into the process of streamlining the curriculum, as well as the necessary resources required, is crucial to the successful implementation and sustainability of this initiative.

## 1.2 Recommendation

Develop a new model for curriculum design that provides teachers with

- clear direction on core and optional curriculum outcomes
- high-quality resources for implementation, including support for differentiated instruction.

The NSTU concurs with the need for change in the current model of curriculum design and implementation. Teachers have been requesting clear direction and necessary supports for implementation of the curriculum, particularly in the area of new initiatives. Teachers should have direct input into the design, implementation and resources for curriculum revision and writing. In addition, any new initiatives must be supported with appropriate and timely professional development and resources.

## 1.3 Recommendation

Redesign the early elementary curriculum to focus primarily on foundational skills in mathematics and literacy.

The NSTU agrees in part to a focus on foundational skills in mathematics and literacy within the elementary curriculum, but with caution that the narrowing of the curriculum should not result in emphasizing the preparation of students for standardized assessments in these subject areas. Also, consideration must be given to providing a balance between these foundational skills and fostering critical and creative thinking while meeting the needs of all students.

## 1.4 Recommendation

Revise the junior high curriculum to ensure that options are available that are engaging and relevant in order to better meet the developmental needs and interests of students.

The NSTU supports the revision of the junior high curriculum to meet the needs and interests of all students. Teachers have been continually requesting changes to the junior high curriculum to better engage students with different levels of ability and interests. Offering an introductory level to programs such as Options and Opportunities (O2), Cooperative Education and Skilled Trades at the high school level would be beneficial to students in junior high in preparing them for the various pathways available to them, as well as assist in more appropriate placements at the high school level. Curriculum should have an element of exploration opportunities that allow the student to evaluate and choose an effective life path.

## 1.5 Recommendation

Fill critical gaps in the junior high and senior high curriculum, in life skills; financial literacy; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or information and communication technology (ICT); physical education; art; music; civic engagement; and other areas.

The NSTU ultimately supports the need to fill critical gaps in the junior and senior high curriculum in the effort to better prepare students to develop the skills needed to be personally and socially responsible citizens. With this in mind, there must be consideration into providing the necessary supports such as adequate staffing, physical space, resources and professional development to ensure successful implementation of any and all initiatives required to fill the gaps that have been identified.

## 1.6 Recommendation

Design a strategy for the effective use of educational technology to support learning and improve access to specialized courses for all Nova Scotian students.

It is the belief of the NSTU that while technology tools can enhance the ability of teachers to deliver educational programs and enrich the educational environment for students when applied in a pedagogically sound manner, people are the most important resource in the teaching/learning process. Technology should be used as a tool to improve the quality of the student-teacher relationship and not to hinder or replace it. Technology must be integrated into the system with consideration for equity of opportunity for students and teachers. Teachers also must be provided with the access to timely, appropriate, comprehensive and on-going professional development for the integration and implementation of any new initiative or strategy being introduced. In addition, technology infrastructure must be in place prior to implementation of technology initiatives to achieve the intended curriculum/information technology outcomes. This requires ongoing budget support for technicians, upgrading of hardware and software, and consumable supplies to be effective. It is imperative that any change in the existing framework of the Virtual School delivery of on-line courses be done with appropriate student supports, in collaboration with teachers and consistent with the *Teachers' Provincial Agreement*.

# Theme 2

## Make high-quality teaching the norm in every classroom

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union joins the Minister’s Panel on Education in its desire to have high quality teaching as the norm in every classroom. Our mission supports the need for quality teaching to ensure we advance public education and teachers. The NSTU has worked collaboratively in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, school boards, universities and others to ensure we recognize and support excellence, reach out to those needing support and follow due process in exiting teachers from the profession. With the reality of today’s classroom composition, the changing landscape of schools from centres of education to centres of care, and shifts in education policies/direction every four years, we are pleased to see that 70% of people who responded to the panel’s survey agreed that students are receiving highly effective teaching in their classes. Our teachers have been and continue to be resilient in the face of changes, adversity, and societal shifts. This is due to their high levels of certification, knowledge, collegiality, experience and tenacity. Nova Scotia’s teachers have often been called to do more with less than other provinces and they have risen to this challenge.

### 2.1 Recommendation

Establish common and stringent criteria for admission into teacher education (B.Ed) programs, including high academic qualifications, aptitude for teaching, and alignment with labour market needs in Nova Scotia.

The Report notes that it received a “relatively low” frequency of comments about B.Ed programs. The NSTU would suggest that before any action is taken, further inquiry is necessary. The NSTU does not understand that Nova Scotia B.Ed programs are admitting applicants without “high academic qualifications.” Based on the NSTU’s work with early career teachers, both in situations of celebrating successes or working through challenges, it appears that Nova Scotia B.Ed programs offer a strong academic and practical foundation. “Aptitude for teaching” is a difficult criteria to assess, especially in advance of any teacher training. It is not clear how our universities might address this recommendation.

Since 2000, the criteria for an Initial Teaching Certificate has required a significant academic subject matter foundation across disciplines for elementary teachers, and within at least two disciplines for secondary teachers.

The Province of Nova Scotia certifies teachers who have completed B.Ed programs both within and outside of Nova Scotia. Obviously, the Province of Nova Scotia can only influence entry into B.Ed programs here in Nova Scotia. Directing Nova Scotia B.Ed programs to align with

current “labour market needs” might serve only to encourage Nova Scotians to undertake B.Ed programs outside of Nova Scotia. The Province of Nova Scotia and/or school boards should consider incentives to attract B.Ed students to areas of need.

## 2.2 Recommendation

Examine the content and delivery of the curriculum in teacher education programs and take steps to ensure the following:

- a) Teacher candidates are well prepared for the realities of today’s classrooms and the range of student needs.
- b) Graduates have the knowledge and skills to apply the most highly effective teaching practices in their classrooms.

The NSTU has no opposition to the two recommendations above. We have always been collegial in partnership with universities and others focused on these recommendations. We have a long-standing relationship with universities offering B.Ed programs in Nova Scotia in providing workshops and sessions for their students on the realities and needs of today’s classrooms. Also, we support many teachers who graduate from Nova Scotia B.Ed programs and teach within our system. One of NSTU’s professional objectives is to support universities in meeting the needs of preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

The NSTU has participated with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, school boards and universities in meetings and conferences on pre-service and in-service education. At the last Educational Forum of this group, in June 2012, all groups held as one of its actions *Recommendation 2.2 b)* contained in the Report. This group agreed to meet regularly to focus on pre-service and in-service education. The Department at that time agreed to take the lead on this. To date this has not happened. The NSTU looks to the Minister to revisit establishing a forum for partners to work collaboratively together on *Recommendations 2.2 a) and b)*.

## 2.3 Recommendation

Improve hiring and induction processes to provide opportunities for employment (substitute and long-term) for teachers who are new to the system; create more stability in annual teaching assignments for new hires; and apply a fair and rigorous performance evaluation program during the probationary period.

The NSTU is also concerned with the long duration of time that some teachers face prior to achieving a probationary contract. However, the issue of providing opportunities for employment has great complexity. In recent years, school boards have had to absorb cost pressures and reductions to their budgets making it difficult to hire new teachers. School boards are unable to hire teachers new to the profession if there are no positions to fill. With

recent and future planned reinvestments in education, it is reasonable to expect that school boards will be in a better position to hire new teachers as current teachers retire. Currently, the NSTU is receiving reports of insufficient numbers of substitute teachers in some areas of the province including the Halifax Regional School Board to replace absent teachers.

The NSTU is concerned with the lack of knowledge regarding teacher evaluation. As outlined in more detail in our response to *Recommendation 2.6*, the *Education Act* requires that all teachers be evaluated on a yearly basis and all school boards have teacher evaluation policies and procedures in place.

## 2.4 Recommendation

Ensure that all teachers are qualified for their current or planned assignments.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union is in agreement with this recommendation. This is not a new issue and has been the matter of discussion for a number of years. In 2013 the NSTU was a member of the *Partners' Working Group* that examined the aligning of teacher academic background and courses taught, and made recommendations to the Department to improve the aligning of teacher academic background and courses taught.

School boards have the responsibility for providing professional development to teachers through in-service training. Often, this professional development is designed to in-service teachers on Department of Education and Early Childhood Development initiatives at the grade or curriculum level.

However, it is important to recognize that teachers, as professionals, need to have control over their professional development and upgrading to best prepare themselves for present and future assignments and hone their teaching practice in meeting student needs.

## 2.5 Recommendation

Develop a province-wide strategy for teacher certification and professional development to ensure the following:

- a) All teachers are completing a minimum number of hours of professional development, and the PD is closely related to their current or planned assignments.
- b) PD opportunities are available to support teachers and are directly tied to job requirements.
- c) Teacher certification requirements are designed to meet system and student needs. Initial teacher classification, advancement in classification levels, and pay increases need to be tied to system requirements and strong performance in assigned duties.

The NSTU agrees in part with this recommendation. The Panel noted within its own document that it recognizes that teachers regularly participate in professional development. It also refers to the history of having teachers participate in at least 100 hours of professional development over a five-year period. To support this endeavor, the NSTU along with school boards asked teachers to complete a PD profile, noting the numbers of hours they participated in professional development. In completing their PD profiles, teachers showcased that they not only met the 100 hours of professional development, but also exceeded it. The lesson learned from this action was that teachers spend a lot of time in pursuit of professional development. The focus should not be on the quantity but the quality.

Teachers have long been requesting relevant, purposeful and supportive professional development. Too often, teachers are held hostage to spending full days of inservicing managing and monitoring former accreditation/CSI plans and sessions focused solely on numeracy and literacy education. The NSTU passed a resolution in 2013 asking the Department the following: *2013-82 BE IT RESOLVED THAT the NSTU press for increased, appropriate and timely professional development for its members before, during, and after the implementation of new initiatives from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.* The NSTU's Professional Development division has been supporting the need for relevant purposeful professional development in providing members over 200-plus sessions a year. Our members attend NSTU and other professional development sessions after school, in the evening and on weekends giving of their own time in pursuit of relevant supportive professional development. The NSTU professional development staff and its members are most willing to support the Department in establishing professional development for our teachers.

The NSTU does not support recommendation c) as written. Initial teacher certification and upgrading is governed by Regulations under the *Education Act*. The Department overhauled these Regulations in 2000 as the result of an in-depth and thorough study with participation from stakeholders including the Nova Scotia Teachers Union. At that time the requirements for certification and upgrading were rendered more onerous and specifically began to target subject matter areas with the introduction of certification restricted to elementary or secondary levels, and at the secondary level, endorsement.

Initial teacher certification is designed to meet system, student and teacher needs. Certification upgrades are undertaken at the discretion of teachers subject to meeting the requirements of the Regulations. Generally, upgrades are available for academic work in subject matter areas (e.g. Masters of Mathematics) or professional studies (e.g. Master of Education). Teachers must continue to have flexibility in choosing whether, and what professional upgrading to undertake.

Teacher self-evaluation and reflection must be the driving force as teachers have a significant degree of influence over where and what they teach. The system cannot meaningfully direct or restrict certification upgrades as it cannot know a teacher's future assignment or career plans. The prospect of tying upgrades to "strong performance in assigned duties" is counter intuitive and would operate to bar or restrict a teacher who recognized a weakness in his or her practice



from seeking academic supports. The NSTU has no objection to the Department or Boards offering incentives to teachers to upgrade in a particular area that the system requires.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should consider consulting the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification for further information, context, and response to these recommendations. Further, any amendments to the requirements for certification and upgrading are subject to mutual agreement between the NSTU and the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

## 2.6 Recommendation

Implement a provincial performance management system that recognizes teaching excellence, supports professional growth, and empowers school boards to dismiss teachers when performance issues warrant.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union is concerned with the Panel's lack of knowledge regarding teacher evaluation. Section 39 of the *Education Act* requires the Superintendent to conduct an annual performance appraisal of teachers in the board. To that end, each school board has an evaluation policy that evaluates teachers on a yearly basis. The NSTU's position is that teachers have a right to be evaluated by their employer. Further, the NSTU would welcome the opportunity to work with school boards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to develop a provincial teacher appraisal policy that would be common to all school boards.

In reference to empowering school boards to dismiss teachers, Section 34 of the *Education Act* gives school boards the authority to terminate or discharge teachers for performance related issues.

The NSTU is of the opinion that *Recommendation 2.6* is not factually accurate and recommendation(s) and/or assumption(s) that flow(s) from *Recommendation 2.6* should be viewed with skepticism.

## 2.7 Recommendation

Consider if supervisory staff—including principals, supervisors, directors, and superintendents of school boards—should be members of the same union as teachers.

The Panel's consideration of the above recommendation is suspect. The panel suggests, "*A more effective approach to managing a system would call for a model where supervisory staff are not active members of the same union as teachers.*" Research has shown that school improvement is fostered by a collegial relationship in which teachers and teachers with administrative responsibilities act first and foremost as educational leaders promoting a shared vision developed in consultation with the school community.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union, like many other teacher professional organizations in Canada, are organized to support teachers with administrative responsibilities. Instructional leaders in public education systems in all but two provinces in Canada have representation from the same professional association or teacher organization as classroom teachers. Provinces that have removed principals and central office staff from their teachers' unions have created a more confrontational atmosphere. In British Columbia and Ontario schools, the focus of the teachers' union is on protecting the interests of member teachers. Administrators and central office staff rights within the school are explicitly limited by collective agreements enforced through grievance procedures and other legal means. Collegiality is replaced with a traditional and confrontational model based on a labour management paradigm. With our model, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union places emphasis upon conflict resolution and promoting healthy staff relations. This reduces the number of complaints that must be resolved by more formal processes and serves the interest of teachers, students, administrators and parents as well.

Our members at all levels have expressed a desire to remain as members of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union in support of responsibilities held within the *Education Act*. The Act speaks to the role of the teacher, principal and superintendent as working together in support of students and public education. Considering the creation of a structural division between teachers and administrators based upon an industrial labour relations model would undermine this unity and adversely affect what the Report of the Minister's Panel on Education hopes to achieve—quality education for all.

Currently the Nova Scotia Teachers Union supports both contractually and professionally the needs of administrators. Our School Administrators Association, along with our Teachers with Administrative Responsibilities Committee supports the maintenance of professional conduct, access to professional development opportunities and a voice within our governing body. The NSTU has staff designated to provide a range of services that respond to the needs, roles and responsibilities of teachers with administrative responsibilities. NSTU has had a long term working relationship and partnership with the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium (NSELC), school boards and universities in developing and promoting education leaders in our province. Through our collaboration with the NSELC the NSTU has been instrumental along with other education partners in establishing its Nova Scotia Instructional Leadership Academy. We also join the Council of Atlantic Provinces Teacher Organizations in providing our members with an annual summer institute for administrators, Developing Successful Schools. Teachers with administrative responsibilities are strongly supported within the NSTU and are provided with a focus on supporting teachers and students and advancing public schools.

# Theme 3

## Prepare today's students for tomorrow's opportunities

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union agrees that more needs to be done to support students successfully transitioning within the school system and beyond. The diverse and complex needs of students and the increasing pressure on the system to fill gaps in our society's social and economic fabric has resulted in our human resources being spread too thin. All five of the recommendations in Theme 3 require time for teachers, and more teachers overall, to implement the various existing strategies and programs. The problems identified are not new and do not require even much study or preparation of curricula or policy. The Minister needs to invest in human resources to allow the boots-on-the-ground action teachers desperately want to provide students.

### 3.1 Recommendation

Set provincial standards to guide the practice of age-based promotion, including recommendations on appropriate supports; and introduce curriculum to allow for greater flexibility in grouping students for progression through learning.

The NSTU supports the development of pathways that assist all students in gaining the necessary education they need for future aspirations. We agree there is merit in providing options for students both at high school and junior high. Junior high teachers and principals have long asked for flexibility of programming and resources in support of all learners. Nova Scotia has some exemplar programs taking place at high school level—cooperative education and O2 to name a few. Consideration and review needs to take place to see if these programs could be adopted and adapted at the junior high level.

### 3.2 Recommendation

Ensure that policies reinforce the importance of job and life-related competencies, such as punctuality, attendance, organization, and responsibility.

Teachers have long identified the need to support students in the essential life lessons of personal responsibility. The current policy of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development prohibits teachers from imposing any consequences for late assignments, even last-day-of-semester late assignments. Many students now consider due dates as mere suggestions. This practice has resulted in devastating academic consequences for students. Learning is not practiced and reinforced through the school year and procrastination is incentivized. Teachers cannot fully prepare students for university or the work force in

these circumstances. Until fairly recently, teachers and schools were empowered to require punctuality, attendance and age-appropriate responsibility from students. This authority needs to be restored so teachers and schools can meaningfully help students in these areas.

### 3.3 Recommendation

Ensure junior high and high school students have opportunities to learn the skills and knowledge they need to be well-rounded global citizens and prepared for post-secondary options.

The NSTU believes that to encourage and enable our students to develop a sense of global citizenship, they must be provided the opportunity to acquire skills which promote the ability to act as mature, responsible citizens, with a commitment to create positive futures for themselves, their communities and the larger global community. Teachers are caught between the expectations of external forces and the human element of teaching and learning, a process that fosters a caring, supportive relationship with students. They are the classroom experts and it is imperative that educational decisions be informed by their professional knowledge and expertise.

### 3.4 Recommendation

Increase the number of credits required to graduate from 18 to 21 and reduce the number of “free” periods to a maximum of three to be taken in grades 11 and 12, with no more than one “free” period in a semester.

The NSTU supports this recommendation to increase the number of graduation credits as well as reduce the number of free periods a student can take in grades 11 and 12. Any decisions resulting in changes in the required number of core subjects, as well as the curriculum content, should be informed by input from teachers rather than by people with little or no background in public education. The increase in credits offered at the high school level will also increase the demands and expectations on the school and teaching staff, which must be aligned with proportionally increased resources and funding.

### 3.5 Recommendation

Create opportunities, within and outside of school hours, for students to meet with professionals qualified to provide career counselling, post-secondary learning advice, and other life skills training, such as fitness and nutrition.

The system is fortunate to have highly qualified professionals with expertise in career counselling, post-secondary learning advice and other life skills in its employ. The Minister can make these important opportunities more readily available to students during school hours by increasing funding to school boards to allow adequate time for guidance counsellors, physical education teachers and other teachers of these subject areas.

# Theme 4

## Ensure that inclusion is working—for everyone

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union supports inclusive practices and inherent human rights of every student and lobbies for the necessary resources and funding to ensure successful implementation. It is the belief of the NSTU that a caring society provides an education for all children. Children with special physical, intellectual or emotional needs benefit from learning in the most enabling environment, characterized by flexibility, responsiveness and support. While regular classroom placement may best serve many exceptional children's needs, it is recognized that self-contained classrooms (congregated) and other environments may be the most appropriate short and long-term placement options. Ongoing, designated and substantial funding should be provided to support the inclusive practices necessary to provide the human and material resources for successful programming. To allow for maximum success for teachers working with students in an inclusive environment, they must receive the supports and professional learning opportunities necessary to provide a positive learning environment and experience for all students.

### 4.1 Recommendation

Examine implementation of the province's inclusive education model to ensure that it is

- a) flexible to allow schools to meet the needs of all students
- b) sustainable within the broader resources of the government
- c) appropriately supported for timely access to assessments and special programs and services.

The NSTU agrees there is a need to examine the current inclusive education model being implemented in our schools across the province. It is our contention that it is essential for schools to promote inclusion of all students and to foster respect for the dignity and human rights of all students. We believe diversity and inclusion should be a core value of public education. With that in mind, teachers must be awarded the flexibility to use their professional judgment and expertise to develop a program for each student based on identified strengths and challenges. Teachers must be supported in this process with the necessary time, resources, outside agency support and funding required to provide each student with a quality education in the setting that best meets their needs.

## 4.2 Recommendation

Assist schools and school boards to create a range of learning environments for students with special needs, including congregated classes taught by highly qualified specialist teachers, where appropriate.

The NSTU agrees with the concept of creating a range of learning environments for students with special needs. To ensure success in these environments, it is necessary to provide teachers with adequate time during the school day to meet, plan, and prepare to teach in diverse and inclusive classrooms. There must also be timely and appropriate access to professional development to enhance inclusive practices.

## 4.3 Recommendation

Explore options to bring the broader resources and funding for services of government departments together in support of inclusive education.

The NSTU continues to maintain its strong commitment to inclusive education within the public school system. To secure effective inclusionary practices, it is essential that appropriate and adequate support and resources are provided to the system at the board, school and classroom level. Rapid organizational changes such as the support of new and revised curriculum, the pursuit for higher standards and large-scale assessments, to name a few, have added to increased responsibilities for teachers and added to the complexity and stress of teaching. There is a need for innovative approaches to collaboration of agencies, building capacity in terms of partnerships, while working with the existing resources, such as guidance counsellors, speech language pathologists, school psychologists and social workers in our school system. Although increased funding may not be the answer in and of itself, the concept of inclusion cannot be used as a cost-saving measure.

# Theme 5

## Create a positive climate for learning

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union believes that a positive classroom climate is essential for learning. We know that a teacher's working environment is a student's learning environment. The NSTU has been proud to collaborate with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on initiatives that have led to positive classroom environments. The NSTU was a member of the Steering Committee for the *Speak Up 2013 Anti-bullying Leadership Conference*, a member of the *Supporting Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Students Guidelines Committee*, and a member of the committee that reviewed the Health Education Curriculum. In addition, the professional development department of the NSTU continues to provide teachers with workshops addressing needs related to *Safe and Inclusive Schools* and *School Climate*. While bullying remains a problem, helping school staffs deal with disruptive students should be a collaborative endeavor among teachers, school boards, and parents that ultimately leads to a more positive learning environment for Nova Scotia students.

### 5.1 Recommendation

Instruct educators and support staff about the impact that healthy, positive relationships with students can have on the climate of the classroom, student engagement, and student achievement.

The NSTU is aware that the quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management and teachers should not leave relationships to chance. Without these positive relationships, learning environments worsen and student engagement, achievement and success diminish. Relevant professional development to instruct educators and support staff about healthy, positive relationships should take into account the seven absolutes of engagement which are safety, what's in it for me?, connection, engagement and exploration, feedback, time for reflection, and plenty of practice.

### 5.2 Recommendation

Create learning environments where respectful behaviour is an expectation for students, teachers, and parents, and where mechanisms are in place to respond to disrespectful behaviours, especially when they are disruptive.

The NSTU believes that respectful environments are needed for learning and engagement to occur. We also believe that respect should be modeled. Respect, however, is not the sole responsibility of the teacher. All partners including students, parents, and school board personnel play a role in modeling positive behaviour. It should also be noted that teachers need

supports to address severely disruptive classroom behaviours. The NSTU facilitates a number of professional development workshops, which educate teachers about safe and inclusive classrooms/schools. We are willing to work with the Department to bring these and other relevant, purposeful workshops/in-services to teachers across the province.

### 5.3 Recommendation

To ensure that all families feel welcomed and that students' cultures are an integral part of the learning environment, train and support school administrators to build cultural proficiency among all staff in schools.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union strongly supports equity and diversity within our organization as well as the broader school community. We have recently amended our policies to reflect recent changes to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act regarding issues of gender identity and gender expression. Over the years we have undertaken to educate our members regarding the changing face of Canadian families. The NSTU was the first teacher organization east of Montreal to host a conference regarding sexual orientation issues in education. The NSTU Equity Committee recently updated its mandate to be as inclusive as possible. We acknowledge that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has mandated RCH coordinator positions within all of the school boards. We encourage the Department to continue to provide cultural proficiency training to teachers across the province. We also encourage the Department to update its Racial Equity Policy (2002) to be more inclusive of the realities of the make-up of Canadian families in 2014.



# Theme 6

## Collaborate for improved student health and well-being

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union agrees that there is an urgent and significant need to support students in areas of health, especially mental health and physical activity. Guidance counsellors have the training and expertise to work with, and refer as necessary, students in need of mental health supports. Currently, the funding allotted to school boards for guidance counsellors is inadequate and does not allow schools to come even close to meeting student need. Teachers, other than guidance counsellors, welcome training and professional development in this area. Physical education teachers provide students opportunities for physical activity. As the Panel's report notes, current in-school physical activity falls well below 60 minutes per day per student. While physical education teachers and other teachers volunteer countless hours each week to provide students with additional sport and exercise opportunities before and after school and on evenings and weekends, the NSTU supports more curricular physical education time for students.

### 6.1 Recommendation

Achieve national guidelines for daily physical activity, using creative solutions for funding and human resources and taking advantage of co-curricular (i.e., before and after school) opportunities.

The Panel's Report suggestion that school boards use "*creative solutions for funding and human resources*" portrays a lack of understanding of the system. For many years the school system has grappled with underfunding and it has always done the best it could with inadequate resources.

Every school day, in every school, teachers are volunteering time before school, over the lunch hour, after school and on evenings and weekends because they value student activity and sport. The Panel report repeatedly recognizes that schools and teachers today are subject to unreasonably broad and onerous expectations ranging from the academic to the emotional and psycho-social realm. It would be foolhardy to suggest increasing these expectations by mandating the current human resources of the system provide additional before and after-school opportunities.

### 6.2 Recommendation

Promote improved health and fitness through a curriculum that identifies healthy, active lifestyles as core competencies in junior high and high school, and make effective use of time available in the semester timetable.

The current curriculum already includes curriculum outcomes related to healthy, active lifestyles at all grade levels. In semestered high schools, it may be possible to offer more half-credit and/or full-year course options to allow students to have physical education courses in both semesters. Half-credit and/or full-year course options would have to be available in all subject areas to allow for efficient scheduling of teachers. Any changes to physical education course requirements will need to take into account availability of physical resources (both space and equipment).

### 6.3 Recommendation

Consolidate the resources of multiple agencies and government departments to enable all schools to be able to provide comprehensive support for students' physical, social-emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Consolidation and coordination of resources for children and youth has long been identified as an important endeavor that would serve our community. The Nunn Commission Report (December 2006) and Nova Scotia's response (Helping Kids, Protecting Communities January 2007) should not be forgotten. For instance, recommendations, all of which were agreed to by the Province, provide for an interdepartmental strategy to coordinate programs and services for youth and more supports (funding and training) for schools.

The NSTU supports the notion that additional resources, sourced from multiple agencies and government departments, would be of benefit to students' well-being. Additional resources would allow school boards to provide more teaching staff, including those with specialized expertise in these areas.

### 6.4 Recommendation

Ensure the curriculum for initial teacher preparation and guidance counsellor training reflects best practices for promoting healthy social-emotional development with children and youth.

The NSTU supports this recommendation, but does want to reinforce that the present M.Ed in Counselling at Acadia and Cape Breton University's Counselling and Teaching program currently includes the most up-to-date training. Our members lament that current curriculum supports the social emotional development of children; however, societal shifts in parenting have seen a decrease in the social and emotional development of children at home. Many students are arriving at school not having developed self-regulation skills supportive of social interaction. Focusing solely on the classroom will not cure the ills of society. There has to be a broader approach to support the social-emotional growth of children and youth. The first teacher in a child's life is the parent. Too often this teacher group—parents—are not equipped or do not take responsibility for this important role.

# Theme 7

## Build a modern-day structure for teaching and learning

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union is in agreement of the need to build a modern day structure for teaching and learning. Nova Scotia's school system is not static but is in a constant state of change as teachers adapt to meet the ever-increasing demands on the system. Further, Nova Scotia's schools do an excellent job in preparing students for their future endeavors. However, improvements can always be made and the NSTU is prepared to work with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to make these changes.

### 7.1 Recommendation

Agree on the outcomes we want for children and youth in the province, and reorganize all related funding and services through the partial restructuring of provincial departments (e.g., Community Services, Education and Early Childhood Development, Health and Wellness, Labour and Advanced Education, Justice, Immigration, etc.) into a centrally managed set of programs and services to be delivered in our schools.

The NSTU is in agreement with the concept of restructuring government departments to increase the level of funding and services that can be provided to students and schools. However, resources and services that are to be provided to students need to be controlled and directed by teachers.

### 7.2 Recommendation

Implement comprehensive and effective shared services models, and restructure school boards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to optimize the quality of programs and services to students.

The NSTU believes that the implementation of shared service models and/or the restructuring of school boards should not be seen as a panacea for Government's requirement to adequately fund education to meet the diverse learning needs of students.

# Concluding Comments

Through the *Teaching Profession Act*, the Legislature of Nova Scotia granted the NSTU the statutory authority “*to advance and promote the teaching profession and the cause of education in the Province.*” The NSTU stresses the significance of teacher voice in the changes to the education system. As the voice of teachers in Nova Scotia, the NSTU supports the following:

The NSTU wants to partner with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in the establishment of curriculum standards and guidelines.

The NSTU wants to partner with the Department to develop clear concise and manageable outcomes at all grade levels that will allow teachers to meet the needs of students in their classrooms.

The NSTU supports high quality teaching in the classroom. In doing so it is imperative that consideration be given to class size at all grade levels, class composition, societal shifts and socio-economic conditions and demands.

The NSTU supports the establishment of a forum for partners to work collaboratively to address the needs and challenges to the delivery of the current teacher education programs in the province.

The NSTU commits to working in conjunction with the Department, to develop a province-wide teacher evaluation/appraisal policy.

The NSTU supports the role of the Minister’s Advisory Council on Teacher Certification. The Department and Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development should continue consultation regarding teacher certification with the Minister’s Advisory Council on Teacher Certification ensuring any changes or amendments to the requirements for certification or upgrading are within mutual agreement between the NSTU and the Minister.

The NSTU believes the collegial model best meets the needs of students in the educational system, and therefore continues to support the inclusion of teachers with administrative responsibilities within the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.

The NSTU feels it is imperative the Department invest in human resources to allow teachers and schools to provide meaningful and relevant learning experiences.

The NSTU supports decisions affecting changes and adaptations to public education being made by informed teachers with expertise and professional knowledge. Active teachers should be a voice when considering any changes impacting current practice and policy in public education.

The NSTU looks forward to continuing to partner with the Department and school boards in ensuring an effective special education policy that is flexible and appropriately resourced. Teachers continue to identify that class size and class composition are major factors in the success of any inclusive education policy. Teachers relish the prospect of a system that supports their professional judgment in meeting individual student needs.

The NSTU is eager to provide its expertise in training members of the school community in creating a positive climate for learning. Teachers recognize that student engagement and success is predicated within the context of welcoming environments that respond to the cultural and socio-economic reality of students and their families. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate in fine-tuning mechanisms available to schools in fostering a respectful learning and teaching environment.

The NSTU is prepared to work with the Department to provide support for students in all areas of health, especially mental health and physical health.

The NSTU believes that efficiency is an important goal in any system but it must always be considered through the lens of providing quality education for all students. We would be pleased to participate in endeavours designed to marshal the resources of the current system.

The statutory authority to promote the cause of education in Nova Scotia is a responsibility the Nova Scotia Teachers Union takes very seriously. We have worked in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to improve public education in Nova Scotia for many years and it is our expectation that we will continue this partnership as we move forward on the Recommendations of the Report of the Minister's Panel on Education.







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