

Table of Contents

- Introduction 2
- Reaction to the Recommendations 3
 - Interagency Implementation 3
 - Educational Record-Keeping 3
 - Students Receiving Supports 4
 - ISSP Meetings 4
 - Special Education “Department Head” 5
 - Applying for Specialized Support 5
 - Alternate Courses 6
 - Behavioural Analysis and Support Plans 6
 - Assessments 7
 - At-Risk Students 8
 - Exceptionally Able Learners 9
 - Curriculum Issues 9
 - Francophone Schools 10
 - Alternate Settings 10
 - Supports for Parents 11
 - Appeals Process 12
 - Professional Qualifications 12
 - Professional Development 16
- Conclusion 17

Introduction

Since its inception, implementation and, as some would claim, its imposition, in the mid to late 1990s, the model for the delivery of educational services to children with special needs in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has come under much criticism from those who have been tasked with making it work. The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, which represents the teachers of the province's Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system, has been a voice for those concerns since April 1998. Even though there have been many initiatives to address the concerns related to over documentation, lack of human and teaching resources, non-commitment from other agencies, lack of time to meet on ISSPs, problems associated with integration while awaiting testing, diagnosis and program development and lack of adequate teacher training to deal with the demands of the diverse learner, most of these concerns have until now, not been addressed. The response that has come has implied that these concerns were merely a result of teachers' resistance to change and lack of desire to recognize children with special needs. The Provincial Government has now validated the long-term concerns of the NLTA and its members as Government has endorsed all but five of the ISSP/Pathways Commission Recommendations which call for immediate action in the very areas that have been the focus of our concern for many, many years.

In April 2006, the Minister of Education, the Honourable Joan Burke, announced her intention to review what Government perceived to be two key areas of concern in education in this province. These were the method of allocation of teaching units to schools and the ISSP/Pathways method of delivery of special services. The teachers of the province were extremely pleased by the announcement that this Government recognized that problems existed within the system and that a commitment was being made by Minister Burke to address these problems. Through individual and group submissions, participation in focus groups, surveys and direct interactions with the commissioners, teachers have welcomed the opportunity to participate in this process. The NLTA established an ad hoc committee which reported to the Ministerial Commission and held a seat on the advisory panel to the Commission.

After months of anticipation, the ISSP/Pathways Commission Report, *Focusing on Students*, was released in December 2007 with 75 recommendations for change in the special services delivery model for this province. Of those recommendations, Government has committed to accept and implement seventy. While there will need to be further discussion between the Department of Education and teachers as to how and when some of these might be implemented, the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association wishes to thank Minister Burke and her Department for having the vision to establish this commission and to listen to the views of practitioners in the classrooms of the province. The NLTA believes commissioners Bernice Langdon and Bill Somerton have heard, understood and accurately and concisely reported on many of the concerns with the delivery of special services in education in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador in their report *Focusing on Students*.

The NLTA wishes to thank Minister Burke and her officials for facilitating this review and for responding so positively to the recommendations of the Commission.

Reaction to the Recommendations

Following the order of topics and recommendations as presented in chapter three of *Focusing on Students*, this paper will give the NLTA's reaction to the Commission's "Key Findings and Recommendations". The NLTA made 22 general recommendations in its submission to the Commission, the majority of which were positively addressed by the recommendations of the Commission. We recognize that some of the NLTA's recommendations will better be addressed by the Teacher Allocations Commission and we await that report with equal anticipation that our recommendations will be addressed. We anticipate that Government will continue to be receptive to the NLTA during the implementation stage and will act quickly to address the concerns identified by educators. The NLTA's support, as identified in the pages which follow, is conditional upon the Association having direct involvement in the committees and working groups tasked with the implementation process and the understanding that this work will unfold in a timely fashion.

Interagency Implementation

The Commission acknowledged what teachers have been saying for years – Child Youth Profiles and ISSPs are almost exclusively the domain of teachers and few professionals from other departments or agencies of Government are committed to such documentation. Teachers have often felt alone in the process of documenting and supporting children with special needs. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 1 and 2 subject to the NLTA's approval of and participation in the review process.

RECOMMENDATION 1

That the Department of Education exempt teachers from the requirement to complete the Child Youth Profiles until all systemic issues are addressed.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That an interdepartmental review be conducted of the Model for the Coordination of Services to Children and Youth.

Educational Record-Keeping

The Commission acknowledged that collection of data at the classroom level has not been adequately maintained at any higher level. Thus, little has been known at the district or provincial level of the pervasiveness of the needs for special services and there has been no documentation of the time it takes to obtain services after needs have been documented. The NLTA agrees that the creation of a database of students who have been referred for testing/intervention is an excellent idea. However, the NLTA believes that the creation and maintenance of the database must be the responsibility of Department and/or district-based administrators and clerical staff. The clerical work associated with the database must not be downloaded to special education teachers, counsellors, educational psychologists and speech language pathologists who are highly trained professionals whose skills and training are best served addressing the needs of students who have been waitlisted for testing and intervention. Assuming that extra resources will be provided to collect, store and manage the data, the NLTA supports Recommendation 3.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That the Department of Education create a provincial database that will inform and guide program planning for students requiring support services.

Students Receiving Supports

The Commission acknowledged that an excessive amount of teachers' time was spent completing paperwork which was unnecessary. This has led to teacher frustration and has detracted from the quality of teaching services provided to children. Nearly 70% of ISSPs are completed for children receiving services only from the Department of Education, while the ISSP was designed for situations where two or more agencies are involved in a child's program. As well, it was noted that almost 50% of ISSPs were developed for children on Pathway 2, receiving accommodations within the regular program of the regular classroom. The need for ISSP documentation and meetings with parents of Pathway 2 students was seen as unnecessary. Replacing ISSPs with a simplified educational planning process is welcomed for Pathway 2 and should also be applied to other Pathways programming where only educational services are necessary. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 4, 5 and 6 with the understanding that the ISSP will be replaced with a less time-consuming, more user-friendly educational planning process for students accessing only educational services. The NLTA contends that the end result must be a new process that is viewed, by educators in the field, as an improvement and not simply a change in policy and procedure that complicates the documentation process further, or at best, maintains the status quo. Real change/improvement is needed.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the Department of Education give schools and parents the option of developing an ISSP if only Pathway 2 supports are required.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the Department of Education introduce a simplified documentation process for students who require Pathway 2 supports only.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That meetings with parents whose children are receiving Pathway 2 supports only occur within the context of parent-teacher interviews or at a frequency consistent with the needs of the student.

Support is also given to Recommendation 7, but concern must be expressed that if adaptation and accommodations are needed during the delivery of Public Exams curricula as well as during Public Exams, adequate resources must be found to provide these supports to students with special needs during the year as well as at exam time without adding to the present workload of the teacher.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That the Department of Education review the Public Exam Adaptations/Accommodations policy.

ISSP Meetings

The Commission acknowledged the problems associated with the excessive number of meetings related to ISSPs and the stress it causes for teachers and parents alike. There was concern that the information discussed at such meetings was not always effectively used. While the Commission made no direct recommendations within this category, its earlier recommendation that children on Pathway 2 programming not be required to have ISSPs or meetings outside normal parent/teacher interviews should significantly reduce this demand on teachers' time and hopefully increase the effectiveness of meetings that do occur in the future.

Special Education “Department Head”

The Commission acknowledged that student support teams have evolved in schools and the whole area of special services now functions as a “Department”. There is a need for coordination of these services and the NLTA has identified the need for someone within a school to have a coordinating role for special education. The NLTA supports Recommendations 8, 9 and 10.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That the Department of Education create a department head position in special education at each school level.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That the department head in special education have at least a bachelor’s degree in Special Education.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That the department head in special education be assigned time during the school day to complete duties and responsibilities incumbent in this role and be compensated to the equivalent of other designated department heads.

Caution must be expressed that department heads are presently only available to schools with grades 7 to 12, which qualify under a specific set of conditions. However, most primary and elementary schools have a high need for someone to coordinate special services and the NLTA would not want them to be denied a “Department Head” simply because of the name or label placed on the position and the present conditions for qualifying for department heads. If the concept of “Department Head” is too restrictive within the current Department regulations and collective agreement provisions, the NLTA recommends that the spirit and intent of these recommendations would still be pursued.

Applying for Specialized Support

The Commission acknowledged problems in documenting children’s needs and in obtaining appropriate supports for these needs. Getting teaching units for specific children requires frequent re-documentation and this process takes away from the time professionals could spend actually providing supports to students. Decisions on resourcing appeared to be made at a level far removed from the individual child. These have consistently been concerns of teachers. The NLTA has been seeking a review of the model of categorical supports, a long-term approval of supports to children with documented difficulties which are not likely to change significantly from year to year, as well as having the decision-making process closer to the child and the classroom. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 11, 12, 13 and 14 with the proviso that the changes in policy be implemented for September 2008 so that students, parents, teachers and specialists can experience the improved model in a timely fashion.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That the Department of Education establish a working committee to review the model of categorical support.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That the Department of Education move the decision making for the approval of applications for categorical support to the districts.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That the Department of Education approve categorical support for students with profound needs for the duration of their academic careers.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the Department of Education extend the approval period for criteria D-G students to a minimum of three years.

The NLTA cautions that Government must commit resources to the districts to allow them to meet the needs and demands at the local level. Of particular concern is any practice of providing teacher supports on a part-time basis to children with full-time needs.

Alternate Courses

The Commission acknowledged difficulties in developing alternate courses, particularly in Pathways 4 and 5. Teachers have been identifying difficulties in this area because no alternate courses are available and such must be developed by individual classroom teachers who must also find resources to support the program without financial supports from outside the school. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 15 and 16.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That the Department of Education develop an online resource site of alternate courses and alternate curriculum, including suggested resources.

RECOMMENDATION 16

That the Department of Education provide specific funding to schools for purchasing/developing specialized materials and alternate curriculum.

While the above two recommendations will greatly assist in the provision of alternate courses, the NLTA further believes that more resources are needed by teachers, guidance counsellors and other specialists who spend an inordinate amount of time modifying curriculum outcomes for Pathway 3 students. Therefore, sample modified courses should also be developed by the Department and made available to teachers on-line.

Behavioural Analysis and Support Plans

The Commission acknowledged that children with behavioural needs were not being adequately served by the present system. The amount of time spent in documenting behavioural problems and the time lag in providing services was a frustration for many teachers. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 17 and 18 with the expectation that such a review will provide services in a more timely and effective way.

RECOMMENDATION 17

That the Department of Education conduct a review of both the Functional Behaviour Analysis and the Behaviour Management Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 18

That the Department of Education simplify the required documentation for the Functional Behaviour Analysis and the Behaviour Management Plan.

Assessments

The Commission acknowledged that students need to be assessed (formally and informally) in a timely fashion and that prescribed interventions and services must be provided at the earliest possible opportunity. Difficulties in obtaining such assessment are due to lack of personnel, lack of testing resources and a reluctance to test children too early in their development. Teachers and parents have been frustrated by the inability to obtain such assessments in an efficient time frame. The NLTA supports the concept of establishing a method of developing, monitoring and responding to assessment waitlists. However, the NLTA believes the issue will not be resolved until adequate resources are committed to the system in the form of qualified professionals and testing resources. As well, there must be a commitment from professionals in other agencies and departments of Government to provide timely services to children needing such supports. With this in mind, the NLTA supports Recommendations 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25.

RECOMMENDATION 19

That the Department of Education, in consultation with the districts, conduct a thorough review and analysis of students currently waitlisted for assessment.

RECOMMENDATION 20

That the Department of Education develop clear guidelines to promote early assessment and identification.

RECOMMENDATION 21

That the Department of Education establish provincial standards for timely completion of assessments and that procedures be established to monitor it.

RECOMMENDATION 22

That the Department of Education, in cooperation with the districts, conduct a thorough review and analysis of students currently waitlisted for assessments in departments external to the Department of Education.

RECOMMENDATION 23

That the Department of Education forward the findings of the above-noted review to the applicable agency or department, particularly those findings that are impacting program delivery to students.

RECOMMENDATION 24

That the Department of Education, in consultation with school districts, develop and maintain an electronic database of all students waitlisted for assessments.

RECOMMENDATION 25

That the Department of Education include information in relation to assessments, waitlists, ISSPs and Pathways in the yearly Education Statistics publication.

The materials needed to conduct assessments are expensive and in limited supply, frequently being shared among professionals and schools. This was identified by the Commission as another area of concern in obtaining timely assessments. The NLTA supports Recommendations 26 and 27.

RECOMMENDATION 26

That the Department of Education provide sufficient funds to individual schools and district offices to purchase appropriate testing materials.

RECOMMENDATION 27

That the Department of Education establish guidelines for comprehensive and ethical assessment practices.

At-Risk Students

The Commission acknowledged a group of at-risk children who have no identified exceptionality, often called remedial students. The NLTA holds the position that there should be an allocation of remedial teachers who can work with regular classroom teachers to assist these students and help them avoid experiencing failure in the regular program. Conditionally, the NLTA supports Recommendation 28 with the hope that such an outline of procedures is supported by the allocation of additional personnel to assist this at-risk group of students in the educational system.

RECOMMENDATION 28

That the Department of Education outline procedures to address the needs of all at-risk students.

The Commission further observed that inclusive education creates challenges in the classroom which requires that teachers have appropriate teaching resources and strategies. As well, the Commission notes that smaller class size can help deal effectively with inclusionary practice. Many teachers feel the inclusionary model has been adopted by the province without adequate planning, resourcing or teacher training. The NLTA supports a clear articulation of “inclusive education”, appropriate training of all teachers and the development and in-servicing of a teacher handbook on diverse learners. We do note though that it is the responsibility of the employer to provide these supports. The time needed to train teachers is to be found within the school year as presently defined by the Collective Agreement without a reduction in the present availability of professional development opportunities. Therefore, an infusion of new professional days will be needed. We also recognize the tremendous benefit of having the expertise and experience of a special needs teacher working with the regular teacher in the classroom in promoting the implementation and ongoing success of inclusive education. In order to facilitate team teaching in a classroom that embraces the principle and reality of inclusive education, additional special needs teacher units are a must. With these provisions, the NLTA supports Recommendations 29, 30 and 31.

RECOMMENDATION 29

That the Department of Education develop a clear articulation of “inclusive education”.

RECOMMENDATION 30

That the Department of Education make a commitment to training all teachers on differentiating instruction.

RECOMMENDATION 31

That the Department of Education, in collaboration with school districts, develop a teacher handbook on meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Exceptionally Able Learners

The Commission defined the “exceptionally able learners” and acknowledged that the 3-5% of the student population who have exceptional abilities are not having their needs met under the current system of instruction. The eradication of enrichment teachers and a lack of appropriate instructional resources have helped to ensure that the exceptionally able learners are falling between the cracks. In fact, the Commission has acknowledged that “up to 20% of high school drop-outs may be gifted.” Furthermore, the Commission states... “Given the emphasis on entrepreneurship, economic development, and leadership, it is disconcerting to find that one of our most valuable resources is being ignored.” Like the Commission, the NLTA feels strongly that it is time that the exceptionally able learners of Newfoundland and Labrador are identified and receive appropriate program instruction in their “most enhancing environment”. Therefore, the NLTA supports Recommendations 32, 34 and 35. The NLTA also supports the principle of Recommendation 33 but reserves the right to be a contributing partner during the program development process.

RECOMMENDATION 32

That the Department of Education identify the needs of exceptionally able learners within the school population.

RECOMMENDATION 33

That the Department of Education and the individual school districts make a commitment to develop appropriate programming and resources to meet the needs of exceptionally able learners.

RECOMMENDATION 34

That the Department of Education appoint a consultant for Gifted Education as a joint appointment to Program Development and Student Support Services.

RECOMMENDATION 35

That the Department of Education’s future publishing contracts include the provision of enrichment sections in textbooks, in CD/DVD and print formats.

In relation to Recommendation 35, the NLTA believes that the publishers of recently implemented curricula/ resources should be contracted to provide the supplementary resource components (i.e., enrichment in CD/DVD and print formats) as many of the new curricula are slated to be in place for many years to come.

Curriculum Issues

The Commission acknowledged that “the provincial curriculum has undergone substantive changes since the 1980s.” It also intimated that the current curriculum is not meeting the diverse needs of our students, especially at the intermediate and senior high levels. Unfortunately, the findings and recommendations of the Canning Report (1996) re the need for vocational training, basic numeracy and literacy training and a re-balancing of the curriculum were ignored during the last decade. Now our province faces a shortage of skilled trades persons and the race is on to address the issue. It must be recognized as well that, during the last decade, countless students were forced to avail of Pathway 3 and 4 programming simply because they did not show a propensity for the academic program offerings prevalent in the existing school system. These students, and their teachers, were frustrated by the process and the myriad of obstacles that were presented to them and many students became disenchanted and disenfranchised by the system. The NLTA must also agree with the Commission’s views re the issues surrounding French Immersion, Intensive French, etc. Certainly many teachers and school administrators in urban centers will acknowledge that parents have often used French programs as a form of streaming and

enrichment for their children with negative consequences resulting for the students who comprised the remaining English classes. Anticipating an active role in this review, the NLTA supports Recommendations 36, 37 and 38.

Recommendation 36

That the Department of Education conduct a review of the current intermediate and senior high curriculum in an effort to offer a wider variety of courses to meet the needs of all students.

Recommendation 37

That the Department of Education design and implement curriculum and programs to improve employability skills, which will help to prepare students to be productive, contributing members of society.

Recommendation 38

That the Department of Education, in consultation with the districts, review the provision of support services to students in French Immersion programs.

Francophone Schools

The Commission acknowledged, and the NLTA concurs, that training, in-service and resources should be provided to teachers in Francophone schools in French. This measure may be helpful in reversing the unusually high turnover rate of teachers in Francophone schools that has been the norm in past years. While the NLTA believes other measures will also be needed to address this complex multi-faceted turnover problem, we support Recommendations 39 and 40.

RECOMMENDATION 39

That the Department of Education deliver all training and in-service to Francophone schools in French.

RECOMMENDATION 40

That the Department of Education supply all information and documentation regarding student support services to Francophone schools in French.

The NLTA also believes that the students of Newfoundland and Labrador who choose to be educated in Francophone schools, French Immersion, Intensive French, etc., deserve equal access to all specialist interventions and supports that are currently available to English stream students. Services required to ensure the success of French students who present with learning difficulties include special education, remedial, guidance, Education Psychology, Speech Language Pathology, etc. In addition, the special needs of exceptionally able French students must also be addressed.

Alternate Settings

The Commission acknowledged, based on a review of the literature and existing successful policies and programming opportunities in other jurisdictions, that the provision of alternative settings for those students who need them for respite or in the long term is essential to ensure that all students have an opportunity to learn in their most enhancing environment. Denying students with special needs the opportunity to be educated in an alternate setting is invariably detrimental to the student in question as well as to other students whose education is disrupted when misplaced students behave inappropriately in a regular classroom. Therefore, the NLTA is

in favour of Recommendations 41 and 42, as it believes that a total review of the issue of alternate settings is overdue. It has been a major concern for parent associations, educators and the general public for a long time. The NLTA believes that Government can help ensure the success of students in alternate settings by providing appropriate programming, adequate resources and additional staffing outside of the current staff allocation. The NLTA further advocates that alternate settings be established in rural, as well as urban areas, to meet the needs of students in our rural schools who present with exceptionalities that cannot be effectively addressed within the regular school setting.

RECOMMENDATION 41

That the Department of Education review the programs currently offered in alternate settings to ensure effective linkages with the neighbourhood school and regular curriculum.

RECOMMENDATION 42

That the Department of Education provide appropriate resources and personnel to staff alternate educational settings.

The NLTA is also concerned with the reintegration of children who have been in alternate settings back into the regular program. We believe teachers must be *fully* informed of the nature of a student's case and the resources of that alternate setting must be available to the school during that reintegration period. This is extremely important in situations where children have returned from secure custody, foster care or group homes.

Supports for Parents

The Commission acknowledged that parents/guardians play an integral role in the education of a child. Like many educators, parents/guardians have experienced their share of frustration with the ISSP/Pathways process. This frustration was often brought about as a result of the unavailability of appropriate programming, resources and staffing which was left to the specific school personnel to communicate and "handle". As stated by the Commission, the Model for the Coordination of Services to Children and Youth was designed to be the responsibility of the departments of Education, Health and Community Services, Human Resources, Labour and Employment and Justice. The Commission stated, "The overwhelming theme that emerges from the data contained in both tables (see pp.32 and 33) supports the perception that the ISSP has become almost exclusively the education document and a clear question of the commitment of other departments arises." The NLTA understands and applauds the recognition that parents/guardians need to be better informed re the ISSP/Pathways Model. The NLTA further supports the notion that "the responsibility for training in the Model for the Coordination of Services to Children and Youth (and, subsequently ISSPs) rests with the provincial and regional integrated service management teams." Parents/guardians and educators all need training if the ISSP/Pathways Model is to be successfully implemented. Thus, the NLTA supports Recommendations 43, 44, 45, 46 and 47.

RECOMMENDATION 43

That the Department of Education, in consultation with school districts, develop policies to ensure that all consent has been fully informed and that educators understand their role in obtaining such consent.

RECOMMENDATION 44

That the Department of Education make representation to the chairs of the Regional Integrated Service Management Teams and to the chair of the Provincial Integrated Service Management Team to provide ISSP training for parents.

RECOMMENDATION 45

That ISSP training sessions for parents be publicized using local media, government websites, school websites and newsletters.

RECOMMENDATION 46

That the Department of Education, in consultation with school districts, develop, for parents, a standardized Pathways training package, with a clear implementation plan.

RECOMMENDATION 47

That the Department of Education, in collaboration with key stakeholders, develop a handbook (also available in audio format) and website for parents of children with special needs.

Appeals Process

(**Note:** The Commission's recommendations were *not* accepted by the Department of Education.)

The Commission acknowledged that many parents feel isolated and alone when dealing with the educational needs of their children. As well, some feel frustrated by the educational system when trying to obtain services. In rejecting recommendations 48, 49, 50 and 51, Minister Burke felt there were presently supports and appeals processes available to address these concerns and thus, Government should not establish new agencies or processes. If this is so, the NLTA supports the Minister's decision. However, if the Commission has heard this concern to such a magnitude that it felt compelled to report on it, the NLTA suggests that Recommendation 51 may need to be revisited and a list of parent support groups and organizations be compiled and made available to parents seeking such information.

RECOMMENDATION 48

That the school districts, in consultation with the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, encourage the development of a parent support network for parents of children with exceptionalities.

RECOMMENDATION 49

That the Department of Education develop an effective appeals process for families which reflects the principles of due process.

RECOMMENDATION 50

That the district office avail of independent expertise in mediation and conflict resolution to offer parents objective and effective avenues to resolve concerns in a timely fashion.

RECOMMENDATION 51

That the Department of Education and the districts clearly outline and publicize the appeals process for parents.

Professional Qualifications

The Commission acknowledged a variety of issues within the scope of professional qualifications, dividing them into the categories of teacher assistants, classroom teachers, special education teachers and guidance counsellors and psychologists.

The NLTA believes student assistants have a valuable role within the environment of an inclusive classroom and believes there needs to be an adequate allocation of student assistant hours which must be assigned in a timely fashion. The Commission recommends an expanded role for such assistants to make them teacher assistants rather than student assistants. The NLTA is prepared to explore this expanded role but is very concerned that such a move would result in a proliferation of teacher assistants at the expense of teacher allocations. If this concern can be addressed, the NLTA supports Recommendations 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56, provided the NLTA is a participant in any re-examination of the current role and requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 52

That the Department of Education establish a committee to redefine and expand the role of student assistants into that of teacher assistants.

RECOMMENDATION 53

That the Department of Education pilot this expanded role of teacher assistant.

RECOMMENDATION 54

That the Department of Education, in consultation with key stakeholders, design and offer a diploma and/or certificate program to meet the training needs of teacher assistants.

RECOMMENDATION 55

That the Department of Education provide existing student assistants with reasonable opportunity to obtain the necessary academic requirements to qualify as teacher assistants.

RECOMMENDATION 56

That the responsibility for allocation of teacher assistants be assigned to the respective school districts.

The Commission acknowledged that almost 50% of classroom teachers have no special education courses, yet in an inclusive classroom environment the regular classroom teacher is primarily responsible for identifying and referring children with special needs and promoting interventions. The classroom teacher is also responsible for developing and delivering Pathway 2 supports. The NLTA recognizes the discomfort of classroom teachers who are charged with being accountable for providing specialized programming and intervention but who feel inadequately trained to work alone in these inclusive classrooms. The Commission noted that 60.4% of classroom teachers felt that special needs children should be taught by someone else. The NLTA notes that the same information could have been used to report that 71.9% of teachers' responses ranged from strongly disagree to somewhat agree. No matter how one reads this information, this figure is not consistent with the spirit of the rest of the report, and the NLTA believes any reluctance on the part of teachers to accept full responsibility for teaching children with special needs is due to the reality that other resources are needed to assist the classroom teacher in providing the full educational program to the class while addressing the diverse needs of every child. Given that the current ISSP/Pathways Model provides services in an hierarchical manner with the student(s) with the greatest need receiving specialist intervention while other students with documented exceptionalities receive no or reduced services, a classroom teacher's teaching responsibility can change with little notice or any recourse.

While Government has not supported Recommendation 57, the NLTA believes this is a good recommendation which Government should explore with Memorial University. In fact, the NLTA believes that Recommendation 57 should be amended to include the need for teacher training in the area of learning disabilities as well, given that 15% of the students of our province present with a diagnosed learning disability. The NLTA also supports Recommendation 58 believing all new teachers need to be prepared for the realities of today's classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION 57

That Memorial University amend the requirements for the undergraduate education degree programs to include a minimum of two courses in exceptionalities: one course in the nature and characteristics of the exceptional learner, and one course in inclusive strategies for contemporary classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION 58

That the Department of Education amend teacher certification requirements for all new teachers to include a minimum of two courses in exceptionalities: one course in the nature and characteristics of the exceptional learner and one course in inclusive strategies for contemporary classrooms.

The Commission acknowledged that 40% of present special education teachers do not have a special education degree. It is a concern that those tasked with providing these specialized services do not have the necessary qualifications for the job. The NLTA believes that professionals should have the qualifications of their chosen field. However, we recognize that there simply are not enough trained people to fill the positions that exist in special education. Thus, the reality is that the system must rely on individuals with less than the optimum level of training. Further, to provisionally license teachers without the recognized qualifications may well do nothing to solve the issue, but rather lead more teachers to seek positions outside the special services area. The NLTA is also concerned that forcing teachers to complete special education programs within a specified period may not be the best way of solving this issue. While the NLTA recognizes the problems associated with under trained special education teachers, the NLTA is not prepared to support Recommendations 59, 60, 61, 62 or 63. We are certainly prepared to work with the Department and school districts in finding ways to support special education teachers in improving their qualifications.

RECOMMENDATION 59

That Teacher Certification require all special education teachers have a special education degree.

RECOMMENDATION 60

That school boards be required to have Ministerial approval before they can hire unqualified special education teachers.

RECOMMENDATION 61

That the Department of Education, in collaboration with the NLTA and the school districts, develop a policy that stipulates new teachers hired in special education positions without the proper qualifications be required to complete a special education degree within four years.

RECOMMENDATION 62

That permanent contracts not be granted new special education teachers until qualifications are completed. At the end of four years, the contract will be terminated if conditions are not met.

RECOMMENDATION 63

That school districts be required to conduct an annual review of the status of training of special education teachers hired initially without proper qualifications.

Thus, the NLTA wholeheartedly supports Recommendation 64 believing there are ways to create incentives, rather than punitive measures, which encourage teachers to obtain special education degrees. Easier access to courses, reimbursement of tuition fees, salary allowances in special services, acceptance of a concept of professional development credits and other such measures might well be better methods of addressing this situation. Further, the proliferation of part-time special education positions creates, in itself, a disincentive for further training. Teachers who obtain only part-time employment in special education are reluctant to commit their time and money to a program of study in special education when the major portion of their teaching may be in some other area which offers greater career opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 64

That the Department of Education, the NLTA and school districts explore ways to encourage existing unqualified personnel to obtain a special education degree.

The Commission acknowledged problems with the training of guidance counsellors and educational psychologists with respect to the roles and responsibilities expected of them in the present educational system. With the inclusion of sufficient representation from, and consultation with, the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association, the NLTA supports Recommendations 65 and 67.

RECOMMENDATION 65

That the Department of Education review the role of guidance counsellors.

RECOMMENDATION 67

That the Department of Education review the roles and qualifications of psychologists in the educational system.

The NLTA reserves support of Recommendations 66, 68 and 69 until there is further discussion with the guidance counsellors and educational psychologists. We recommend that the reviews outlined in Recommendations 65 and 67 include in their mandate a further discussion on Recommendations 66, 68 and 69.

RECOMMENDATION 66

That the Department of Education require guidance counsellors to have a minimum of two graduate courses in assessment and two graduate courses in exceptionalities.

RECOMMENDATION 68

That the Department of Education require all people hired in leadership positions for special education have a minimum of a Bachelor of Special Education degree.

RECOMMENDATION 69

That the Department of Education, the NLTA and the school districts establish a working group to address the absence of training among persons who hold current positions in leadership for special education.

The NLTA further believes that full-time guidance counsellor services must be made available to every school in the province.

Professional Development

The Commission acknowledged the need for professional development as a mechanism for informing teachers of the policies, practices and intricacies associated with the ISSP/Pathways Model. In fact, the Commission stated, “Research has invariably shown that professional development can be an effective contributor to the teaching-learning process.” As noted by the Commission, prospective educators receive little, if any, professional development during their pre-service experience. More troubling is the realization that nearly 50% of classroom teachers, administrators, counsellors and special education teachers report not having received training in ISSPs or Pathways. Thus, it is essential that teachers and other educators have opportunities for well-developed, effective professional development upon entering the profession and at set intervals to ensure that they are always current in their understanding of policies as well as methodologies. However, the “Train-the-Trainer” Model used to implement many past and current curricula and programs *must* be avoided as it is fraught with problems, including the reality that the original intent/message is often lost or misinterpreted with each successive generation of trainers. Given the importance of professional development to the teaching/learning process in all areas of education, the NLTA strongly supports Recommendations 70, 71, 72, 73, 74 and 75.

RECOMMENDATION 70

That the Department of Education, in cooperation with the school districts, conduct a review of the training of all personnel in the ISSP and Pathways models.

RECOMMENDATION 71

That the Department of Education, in consultation with the districts, develop a standardized provincial training program in the Pathways model.

RECOMMENDATION 72

That the Department of Education make representations to the Chair of the appropriate Regional Integrated Services Management Team and to the Chair of the Provincial Integrated Services Management Team regarding training needs related to the Model for the Coordination of Services to Children and Youth (ISSP) and that a plan be developed to address these needs.

RECOMMENDATION 73

That the Department of Education establish provincial standards and guidelines requiring that all educators and appropriate district staff (existing and newly hired) receive a minimum one-day in-service on the Pathways and ISSP models.

RECOMMENDATION 74

That regular “refresher training”, at a minimum of every five years, be provided educators, and that records of this training be maintained.

RECOMMENDATION 75

That the Department of Education, in consultation with the school districts, develop an ongoing professional development plan for accommodating diverse learners in the classroom.

Conclusion

The ISSP/Pathways Commission has made 75 recommendations of which the Minister of Education has said she is prepared to action and implement seventy. The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association supports the vast majority of these recommendations and is committed to work with Government to see those recommendations actioned sooner rather than later and to resolve the concerns it has on the recommendations it presently cannot support. Moreover, the NLTA wishes to dialogue with the Department on the myriad of issues not addressed in the Commission Report that are a reality for other specialists, namely Speech Language Pathologists, teachers for the visually and hearing impaired, teachers for children who present with learning disabilities, etc. We recognize that the acceptance of these recommendations is step one. The implementation process is still a major part of the success of this Commission. The NLTA will work with all other interested parties to ensure that the concerns raised in the ISSP/Pathways Commission Report are addressed and the Commission's recommendations become a reality for the children of our schools, for the dedicated educators who provide programs and services to them and for the society which has a responsibility to ensure our future generation has the tools it needs to become tomorrow's leaders.