

Better Together: The Final Report of the Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador 2015-16

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Note: This is the full report of the NLTA sponsored Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador. For a thematic summary with action recommendations please see: Anderson, K. and Sheppard, B. (2016). *Better Together: A Summary Report of the Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador 2015-16*.

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Introduction

Is our history our future? In the 1970s there was a great deal of work by unions and special interest groups to change the power relationship between workers, employers and the government. Grassroots participatory democratic movements challenged many negative myths about the fishing industry and the resulting public discourse provided a substantial framework to discuss core issues inclusive of the voices of those most affected.

This past decade, we have seen more emphasis on oil and minerals as sources of revenue for the province. To the government's credit, with increases in revenue, more investment has occurred in almost every aspect of the province's infrastructure. Education has been an area of substantial government spending as policymakers attempt to build a 21st century learning culture within this province. Yet cries for more resources abound, and some question whether past investments have been wise. Complicating the recent call for revenue to support education are declining oil and other revenues. Governments once again are staring into the abyss of unending demand and the stark choices in the face of diminishing resources. Perhaps it is not a good time to make a case for more investment in education, but when is the right time to ask?

As a province, we are once again facing the financial turmoil typical of a resource-based economy. Somewhat like the fishermen of old, those providing education services and those receiving them have not had much chance to voice their concerns in a comprehensive way. The consolidation of control of education to one large school district based in St. John's is reminiscent of the small group of companies that controlled our fishery. It seems also the case that changes are occurring without deep consultation, characteristic of the centralization of education. It is evident that our school system is at a crossroads as various voices compete for position to steer educational policy.

There has not been a royal commission or task force on education for some time. In the absence of large-scale public consultation, discussion about educational issues can fall prey to the normative thinking of those working in the field, to politically inspired agendas and in some cases to narrow views of competing advocacy and interest groups. Where is the full voice of the people on the topic of education without a major forum for public input?

Our children cannot wait, so the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) has stepped up to fill this gap. Under the leadership of President James Dinn, the Provincial Executive, and in consultation with stakeholders, the NLTA created a Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador (the Panel) to hold hearings, seek submissions and draft this report. The Panel comprised three members: President James Dinn of the NLTA, Ms. Denise Pike, Executive Director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, and Dr. Kirk Anderson, Dean of the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). NLTA Assistant Executive Director, Mr. Steve Brooks, provided administrative support to the Panel. Over a six-week period (October to November, 2015), the Panel visited 12 communities, held sessions attended by almost 300 people, heard 60 presentations, and received hundreds of online submissions reflecting the comprehensive views of the people of this province, views which are reflected in this report. All relevant stakeholders were invited to participate, although a few did not—such as representatives from the Department of Education and school districts. As such, the Panel has the substantial and credible voice of many provincial stakeholders, in particular parents, students, teachers and community groups. This report represents constituent individuals and community groups that extend well beyond just those represented by the NLTA and therefore transcends potential teacher or NLTA bias.

Dr. Bruce Sheppard and Dr. Kirk Anderson of MUN's Faculty of Education completed the data analysis and wrote this report. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from presentation attendees or anonymous online submissions.

Within this context, the public voice in public education is shared. It celebrates the tremendous successes of this high-achieving system, for which all partners deserve credit, while also drawing attention to some of the daunting challenges it faces, for which all partners share responsibility. Reflective of many positive views, yet in the context of concern, one parent mused,

Where might you ask is the good in our education system? Well, that's easy—our teachers. The reason the system is functioning is due to the hard work, dedication and efforts of our teachers and administration. For example, we know of situations where teachers have taken personal time and money to attend professional development opportunities to prepare for full-day kindergarten. It's this type of passion and effort that make the system succeed.

We offer this report and its recommendations to those many presenters and submitters, many with praise and quite a few with heart-wrenching concern for the future of their children, and to the provincial government, the school districts, teachers and parents, as well as all those working in the province's education system. We have made many great achievements, but what we have heard suggests that we may be at a tipping point. We know that a resource-based economy can ultimately fail, but a resourceful people will inevitably succeed. Supporting teaching supports children, and therein is the key to our future.

Since the hearings, there has been a change of government, and with it an austerity budget with ramifications for education. In the face of the province's fiscal challenges, we believe this report can serve to inform the new government's practice. The findings and recommendations we share are an accurate portrayal of the views we gathered in the field and through online submissions. Our recommendations express the considered views of the panelists, the analysis and the respondents. As readers may note, some of the issues may not be seen the same way by all stakeholders; this is a limitation of this kind of research, as it rests on very human perspectives. But then, education is very much a human endeavour.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through 60 face-to-face public panel hearings conducted in 12 communities across Newfoundland and Labrador through October and November, 2015. The Panel was advertised in community newspapers, invitations were sent to educational stakeholders, and panel members also spent some time on radio talk shows and television. The groups attending the presentations ranged from a low of 10 to a high of 45 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Panel Session Dates and Locations

Date	Location	Presentations	Persons Present
October 13, 2015	Corner Brook	5	30
October 14, 2015	St. Anthony	3	16
October 19, 2015	Carbonear	3	10
October 20, 2015	Clarenville	3	12
October 21, 2015	Harbour Breton	3	15
October 22, 2015	Grand Falls-Windsor	3	21
October 26, 2015	Mount Pearl	10	45
October 27, 2015	St. John's	10	42
October 28, 2015	St. John's	10	38
October 29, 2015	Happy Valley-Goose Bay	4	25
October 30, 2015	Labrador City-Wabush	2	11
October 30, 2015	Nain (cancelled)	0	0
November 2, 2015	Port Aux Basques	4	14
Total		60	279

In addition, nearly 400 submissions were posted to the NLTA website, of which 368 were useable. All collected data were transcribed and subsequently entered into the computer software program QDA Minor (Provalis Research, 2011) designed specifically for analyzing qualitative data (e.g., transcriptions of oral presentations, written submissions and reports). Using this software, the data analyst reviewed all data, categorized them by participant type, and coded specific text (phrases, sentences and paragraphs) that expressed single ideas into descriptive meaning units according to the assigned participant category (see Table 2).

Table 2. Online Submissions

Participant Category	Number of Submissions
Teachers	223
Counsellors or psychologists	32
Community organizations	26
Parents and concerned citizens	26
School principals	12
Instructional resource teachers (IRTs)	9
Retired teachers	9
NLTA personnel and branch representatives	3
Teacher librarians	6
Music educators	6
Academics	5
Technology education teachers	3
Substitute teachers	2
Others	6
Total useable submissions	368

Collectively, those participants identified 793 varied concerns (see Table 3), with individuals from specific groups often revealing common concerns. For instance, among teachers, the most common concerns related to inclusive practices, resource deficiencies, a perceived lowering of academic standards, and challenges related to technology hardware and software and Internet access. Counsellors and educational psychologists most frequently highlighted unmanageable caseloads, followed by limited professional development opportunities and the failure of the school system to implement its own policies. The issues raised by participating school principals were centered primarily on large class sizes and rural school challenges, as well as concerns about their school technology infrastructure.

Table 3. Primary Concerns of Selected School Professionals

Category	Concerns	Count
Teachers	Inclusion and related supports	144
	Challenges and resources	92
	Lowering of standards (student accountability)	91
	Workload	69
	Technology access and support	61
	Program concerns	37
	Rural school concerns	36
	Professional development	26
	Teacher stress	15
	Disruptive behaviours	15
Total		586
Counsellors and psychologists	Case load	33
	Professional development and teacher education	28
	Class size	25
	Policy and implementation	20
	School leadership concerns	16
	Health and safety issues and communication with others	15
	Teachers need voice	15
	Early career and teacher satisfaction	15
	Programs	11
	Workload	8
Total		186
School principals	Rural school challenges	6
	Class size	6
	Support service and IRT allocation concerns	4
	Technology access and support	3
	Bussing	2
Total		21
Total concerns		793

Concerns of Selected School Professionals

Teaching in Inclusive Learning Environments

Overall, classroom teacher participants raised 586 concerns related to their work (see Table 3). Among those concerns, 25 percent related to the absence of sufficient resources to support student inclusion, as per the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Inclusive Schools policy (2016a), which assures “the right of all students to attend school with their peers, and to receive appropriate and quality programming” (para. 1). While few teachers quarrel with the intent of this policy, which mandates that all children irrespective of disabilities attend their local school in regular classes with children of their own age group and have access to the regular curriculum, many have grave concerns with its actual implementation as it has been accompanied by far too few resources.

Although the current support model includes an instructional resource teacher (IRT) who works in collaboration with the classroom teacher to “enrich the teaching/learning environment” (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016b, p. 1) and provide “student-specific accommodations, strategies, modifications and alternate programming outcomes” (p. 1), the circumstances remain untenable from the perspective of many teachers and other Panel members. They emphasized that the current practice of student inclusion has unintentionally resulted in stressful classroom experiences for both students and teachers and has interrupted teaching and learning routines. One classroom teacher expressed concern that educators, without any training, “are required to teach students with learning disabilities” in classes of more than 25 students. This teacher pondered, “How do we expect anyone to get a good education this way? The teachers I work with are all stressed trying to know what to do with kids who can’t meet outcomes, and [have] behaviour problems, without the necessary supports.”

Instructional Resource Teachers’ Perspectives

All eight of the IRT participants expressed concerns about their work related to inclusion, and seven of them specifically noted workload as a concern:

- “IRTs...are over burdened with all the demands, as are classroom teachers.”
- “Inclusion as a means to address students’ individual needs just does not work.”
- “I am an IRT and am currently struggling with the workload of my job.”
- “The role of the IRT within the regular classroom is overwhelming.”
- “I do not feel safe as an IRT.”

One IRT noted that her role “within the regular classroom is overwhelming. We are expected to co-teach, deliver alternate pre-requisite programs in the regular classroom while the classroom teacher is teaching [and] provide accommodations to students with many diverse needs.”

Another IRT, who currently has 66 diagnosed students on her caseload, commented, “IRTs have [far] too many students on their caseloads, and cannot possibly provide the individualized instruction that is needed to attain success.” Yet another IRT confirmed that she and several of her colleagues were struggling with a large caseload of students with multiple and varied disabilities and learning needs; her remark underscores a generally held view by IRTs, classroom teachers and parents that more supports are required to meet the complex requirements of children with special needs:

I know of several other IRTs who are struggling with similar issues and anxiety and stress is growing among our school community. The inclusive model and delivery of accommo-

dations and services to students need to be student-centered and teachers' ability to follow through with...inclusive practices needs to be considered. Many of our students are falling through the cracks and not getting their needs met as IRTs and classroom teachers are strapped with being able to meet everyone's needs at the same time.

Although it is somewhat concerning to learn of the aforementioned challenges related to the delivery of services to children and youth with special needs, it is even more jarring to learn that any teacher might feel that “teachers don’t have the basic human rights of freedom of speech [to challenge the status quo] for fear of being reprimanded,” as expressed by an IRT who presented to the Panel. Equally troubling to several IRTs is the fact that IRTs who provide support to students with special needs are not required to have completed a special education degree and are therefore not considered specialists (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2011).

Perspectives of Classroom Teachers and Other K–12 Professionals

Classroom teachers and other school professionals raised concerns similar to those of their IRT colleagues about the existing student inclusion practices:

- “This model is not helping any of our children.”
- “Inclusion—again, in theory, a wonderful idea; realistically, not so much.”
- “In a class with students on regular, modified, and alternate programming, no matter how much planning a teacher does, it is IMPOSSIBLE for the needs of all of these students to be met adequately.”
- “So-called inclusionary practices actually exclude those very students they’re supposed to help.”
- “Inclusion, although it is a wonderful philosophy, lack[s] enough personnel to [be] implement[ed] well.”
- “More staff and more resources are needed to support students with special needs.”
- “Classroom teachers need more in-service opportunities to learn more about individual exceptionalities and how to best accommodate the needs of these children in their classrooms.”

One classroom teacher lamented,

Every day I see kids not getting the support or help they need from either IRTs or student assistants in schools because there is not enough time or personnel allocated from the school board to [meet] all the students' needs. Therefore, some of these students get frustrated and give up trying in school. Most of these kids are bright students [who] just need that little bit of help to make them become contributing adults in society. Instead they are falling through the cracks, and becoming a burden on society. The really sad part is that most time the only way they get help is to become a troublemaker in the school. Also many of these pervasive needs kids...cannot get to some of their classes because there is no...[IRT or student assistant to accompany them in that particular time period].

Another classroom teacher stated,

At a time when schools are implementing inclusionary practices, where are the supports? We are lucky to receive IRT support for maybe one or two periods of mathematics or language arts. The remaining subjects [are not considered to be as] important in the school system. I feel we are dumbing down programs so that students with accommodations feel better about themselves.

Yet another teacher observed,

The current system of IRT support simply does not work! There are simply too many needs that are not being met. No matter what the district may lead one to believe, too many students are going without the support they need and consequently they and their classmates are suffering. When a normal day includes teachers bitten, kicked, and physically abused by their students, something is wrong—something has to change! No one should have to go to work with the fear of physical harm! If a student felt threatened in any way, something would be done about it, but if a teacher feels threatened, well that’s a different story.

Consistent with the concerns expressed by teachers, a school guidance counselor shared the following account of her conversation with an IRT colleague:

Recently, I had an IRT...say to me, “If you were a lawyer and went to court day after day and never won a case, what would your advice to me be? You’d tell me, ‘I’m in the wrong profession!’ And that’s how I feel...here! I keep killing myself trying to help these kids, but I can’t get them enough to teach them anything!” How sad is that! I’ve also had parents that I know...tell me they are putting their kids in [French] immersion because they hear too many negative comments about needs in the regular classroom and they know there won’t be as many in French! This is terrible!...There are a lot of stressors in my job; however, the biggest...is the level of stress within the school with parents and teachers because of the lack of resources to support inclusion and special education.

A speech-language pathologist (SLP) in a rural region of this province who provides services to students in various schools throughout a designated area observed that “student support services teams are busting at the seams.” The SLP explained that although most schools have only one IRT, a senior officer at regional district office routinely makes “all decisions behind closed doors” without consultation with other professional team members who work closely with the individual students. The SLP commented, “To make matters worse s/he invariably promises parents a level of support beyond that which is possible at current staffing levels.”

Given the multiple expressions of concern as noted above, it is readily apparent that the following comment by a classroom teacher aptly summarizes the expressed sentiments of many of her colleagues:

There are many wonderful things happening in our schools, but inclusion is not one of them. Children with very high needs are being left in the classroom and allowed to disrupt the education of all the other students in the class. The idea of inclusion would be wonderful if the required [number of] teachers and supports were in place.

Overall, it appears that the majority of professionals who work directly with students—classroom teachers, IRTs and SLPs—or at least those who participated in this Panel, share similar frustrations. As a matter of fact, as the sample comments noted above reveal, although many public school educators appear to support the principle of inclusion, many perceive it to be unworkable as it is currently configured. The educational professionals who participated in this panel review appear to be unequivocal in their belief that if student inclusion is to hold any promise of success, it will require significantly more resources and more specialized classroom teachers.

Confronting Human Resource Deficiencies

Parents and Community

A number of panel submissions from parents and other community members highlighted the need for additional human resource support for children with special needs. For instance, one parent suggested that more teaching assistants should be added to schools so children “with special needs can benefit more from the inclusion model.” Another parent observed, “Inclusive policies are important and progressive as long as supports are in place to do so. However, cutting teacher supports while upholding inclusive policies does not work. Everyone loses in this situation!” Yet another commented that although “there are many wonderful staff that work in our area with children identified to have a diagnosis of developmental delay, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other diagnoses [that require] additional supports,” many items need to be addressed: “Insufficient time allocations for student assistants and IRTs, limited consultation between parents and teachers, and limited collaboration between health and education resulting in inconsistency in approaches and inefficient use of time and resources for both departments.”

Relatedly, parents of a child with ASD commented specifically that the ratio of IRT support in proportion to the number of students with needs is inadequate. In their view, their child requires more “one-on-one time to be successful in the school system.” Another parent of a child with ASD expressed concern that there is no consistency from day to day in regards to the specific student assistant assigned to her child:

Every single autism expert will tell you that consistency, predictability, and scheduling are the three most important aspects in ensuring that a child on the spectrum is able to function. Maintaining [the same student assistant] ... is not a preference; it is a NEED! The student assistant that is assigned to a child in the school can change daily. A student can be under the care of several student assistants within the same day, without notice. This, quite simply, is not good enough!

Yet another parent of a child in Grade 1 who has been diagnosed with ASD registered the following list of concerns:

1. Number of Student Assistants and Student Assistant Hours. *I feel there is a great need for more student assistants as well as more hours for them to be able to do [justice] to their jobs. Right now at our school if a child qualifies for a student assistant, he/she often is sharing that person with another student that qualifies as well. For any child that is on the autism spectrum there are many reasons why this is not a good idea, nor is it safe...*

2. Instructional Resource Teachers. *We currently do not have enough of these teachers or enough hours allowed for each of the children who require this service.*

3. Occupational Therapy. *Newfoundland is the only province in Canada without an occupational therapist in schools. With the cases of diagnosed autism on the rise in our province, this should not be the case considering the role that an occupational therapist plays in the life of a child with autism, especially if that child, like many children with autism, has sensory issues.*

4. Communication between Schools and Parents. *Unless I am constantly asking questions regarding my child, there is no communication between [the school and myself] when it comes to how my child is doing. There would be no communication surrounding the autism piece if I were not the one bringing it forward. I do not understand this... There is no cookie cutter description and I am under the impression that knowledge of autism and what it consists of for each individual child is not what it should be in our schools.*

5. Education for Teachers and Support Staff. *I feel that all teachers and staff at our schools should be educated in Autism Spectrum Disorder! Considering the rise in ASD, it should be mandatory that the people involved in our children's lives on a daily basis be equipped with the tools necessary so no child is left to fall through the gaps like so many of them have in the past... Equipping teachers and administrators with the proper knowledge base and skillset will allow them to ensure the safest learning environment for children on the autism spectrum.*

It is apparent that many parents are concerned and frustrated with the level of support provided in the K–12 public school system for students identified with special needs. To that effect, the following comment from a discouraged parent of an 18-year-old son with a late diagnosis of autism who has not been able to attend school since Grade 8 may aptly capture the concerns of many others:

I feel like he has slipped through the cracks. I took him to school on the first day this year and his anxiety was too high for him to enter the building... Unfortunately there was very little help for my son. I feel like he is a square peg that does not fit in the round holes of the high school and thus never belonged. He looks normal and sometimes is mistakenly labeled a behaviour problem... There is a need for more education for the teachers, and more support for the special needs kids. There needs to be accountability for the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and Individual Support Services Plan (ISSP)... I'm not even sure if my son still has an IEP... I feel like the school system has failed my son!

Several parents and community members raised concerns regarding classroom teachers' knowledge and the overall capacity of public schools to provide the necessary supports for the many children and youth with exceptionalities, such as ASD and mental illness. For instance, one panel presenter opined,

While instructional resource teachers and student assistants are assigned to schools to assist those students with exceptionalities, the reality is that the needs are far greater than the allocations provided, ... as statistics show about one in five students is experiencing mental health challenges."

Given the amount of time a guidance counsellor must spend in providing essential support to such students, the presenter argued, "There is limited time remaining to provide proactive programming." Adding to this concern, many schools do not have full-time counsellors, and classroom teachers certainly do not have the required expertise to provide the needed supports:

While they have considerable knowledge of instructional strategies, they are often less confident dealing with students who tip over desks, display physical and verbal aggression toward others, or threaten to harm themselves or others. These situations are becoming increasingly common in classrooms, and teachers feel unprepared and uneducated to provide health supports within the school setting. ... This is causing teachers increased stress and they are left with uncertainty about what it means to do the "right thing."

This presenter recommended (a) "the provision of additional human resources to schools to support the increased number of students with mental health needs and their families with whom teachers work" and (b) the provision of the necessary professional development to educators to assist them in dealing with the "ever-increasing mental health challenges" they face. Similarly, a parent recommended it be mandatory that all public education personnel—teachers and staff—be educated about ASD.

One parent suggested that given the apparent increase of both in-school and cyber bullying, teachers and school leaders must be better educated in conflict resolution and in identifying and dealing with drug abuse. Another parent raised a caution “of the blurring [of] education and health care” and queried, “If teachers are overwhelmed with health care issues, who will do the teaching?” Another presenter commented,

I don't expect teachers to be counsellors; however,...we can...equip them [at least] with some of this skill set...in working with a child with a mental illness or dual diagnosis... Student assistants receive ample training in dealing with behaviours, anxiety, or implementing sensory strategies applicable to the individual child whereas the classroom teacher, who provides direction to the student assistants, is not approved to attend the same trainings.

Clearly, similar to many teachers, parents and other interested community members have notable concerns regarding the current allocation of resources to address the multiplicity of student needs that exist within public schools within this province.

Groups and Associations Supporting Children, Youth and Families

Several agencies, special interest groups and advocacy organizations have raised parallel concerns about what they perceive to be inadequate support for students with special needs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Groups and Associations Supporting Children, Youth and Families

Organization Type	Name of Organization	Number
Groups working directly with schools or students	Avalon Employment	8
	Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador	
	Canadian Hard of Hearing Association–NL	
	Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland and Labrador	
	NL Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association	
	Stella's Circle	
	Thrive Community Youth Network	
	Waypoints	
	Ability Employment Organization	
Organization Type	Name of Organization	Number
Groups working indirectly with schools or students	Advisory Council on the Status of Women–NL	13
	Association for New Canadians	
	Coast of Bays Community Advisory Committee	
	Code NL	
	Harbour Breton Community Youth Network	
	Jimmy Pratt Foundation	
	Leaders for Financial Awareness	
	Memorial University (individual faculty members and students)	
	Ministry of Education Nunatsiavut	
	Planned Parenthood–NL Sexual Health Centre	
	Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education Consortium	
	St. John's Chapter of Council of Canadians	

For instance, regarding ASD, the executive director of the Autism Society, Scott Crocker, raised an alarm about the unmet needs in the public school system. He contended,

Our delivery model is not based on need; instead, it's based on budgets that are too low... Working together with government, we must create a "provincial strategy," an action plan with urgency, and dedicate resources to implementing real solutions that help improve student and family lives and give an opportunity for learning, happiness, enjoyment, strong, lasting relationships, meaningful employment and careers. This has to be a provincial priority. The inclusive classroom is a wonderful concept—not so much in practice. It's not working for many students.

Within that context, Mr. Crocker proposed with considerable explanation and detail the following five solution categories that could improve teaching and learning for all students and teachers in inclusive classrooms:

1. Professional development
2. Early intervention
3. Occupational therapists
4. Student assistance, IRT and guidance allocations
5. Education as a right.

Regarding professional development, he recommended (a) the addition of compulsory courses in the provincial program of studies for “all educators and guidance counsellors in [the] K–12 public education system” and (b) the development and implementation of an action plan for advanced education for all educators, student assistants and support staff already working with students with ASD to ensure they fully understand best practices related to teaching and learning strategies to meet the individual needs of each student with ASD.

For early intervention, he anticipated that it would occur prior to school age unless it is delayed. Concerning occupational therapists, he contended they must be members of the professional staff in schools. As for the allocation of student assistants, IRTs and guidance counsellors, he asserted it must be needs-based rather than formula-driven. He emphasized, as well, that the Autism Society recommends that “medically diagnosed anxiety” should be considered a criterion for the allocation of IRTs and student assistants, and he noted that current policies that allow “forced home schooling,” and “partial-day” schooling should be eliminated. Also, he maintained that policies should be developed to limit the number of days a student can be removed from school. When students are forced to remain at home, however, appropriate supports must be provided. Furthermore, the Autism Society has found that “alternate schooling has to become a reality in this province; it should be provided whenever a child or youth is deemed a too severe safety risk to attend regular school.”

The Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (LDANL) “acts as the provincial voice for individuals with learning disabilities and those who support them” (2016, para. 1); it has raised similar concerns to those raised by the Autism Society. The spokesperson for LDANL, for instance, highlighted that although many parents of children with learning disabilities have had positive experiences with their children’s schools, “even more parents [have] been frustrated by long wait times for assessments and meetings, non-collaborative school personnel, and inconsistent or unavailable accommodations in the classroom.” In light of such frustrations, LDANL has stressed the importance of the 2012 Supreme Court ruling in the Jeffrey Moore case that “adequate special education [in the public education system]...is not a dispensable luxury. For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to all children.”

Within the context of this recent ruling, LDANL recommended the following changes:

1. Regulations at Memorial University and the Department of Education be changed to require that “teachers...receive at least two courses in exceptionalities during teacher training programs as well as require those same two courses for teacher certification.”
2. “Greater consistency between educational policies emanating from the department level to educational practice at the school and classroom level.”

Acknowledging the existence of varied and multiple needs of children and youth in the school system, the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors and Psychologists Association (NLCPA) NLTA Special Interest Council emphasized the importance of qualified school counsellors in the area of counselling and mental health. They contended, “Comprehensive and developmental school counselling programs coordinated by qualified school counsellors, with a focus on early intervention and education of all members of the school community, can make a positive and significant difference in the lives of children and youth.” To that effect,

NLCPA recommends that the provincial government prioritize prevention and early intervention strategies targeting children and youth. We strongly believe that a comprehensive child and youth mental wellness & resiliency plan should include the placement of school counsellors in every elementary, middle, and secondary school...Having full-time school counsellors in every school will allow these school-based mental health professionals to contribute to timely and effective interventions that will have a positive, long-term impact in the lives of children and youth. The allocations should be: 1 school counsellor per 250 students.

The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA-NL) presented a brief to the Panel as well. Noting that it represents exclusively “persons with hearing loss (not students who are deaf),” the association’s executive director, Leon Mills, highlighted that

[although] CHHA-NL is not a formal partner, staff and volunteers...interact often with teachers and specialists... [thereby gaining]...[an] appreciation for the current school system, the challenges it has, what is and is not working and what could be better for all students, not just those with hearing loss.

Within that context, Mr. Mills observed that schools and school personnel appear committed to their students and strive to provide positive learning experiences. Nevertheless, he emphasized that CHHA-NL is concerned about the adequacy of resources available to assist students:

It needs to be emphasized that all students, and in particular those with disabilities, are entitled to fully participate in, and to receive the best possible education regardless of school attended, and therefore, should have whatever resources are needed to be successful. However, it appears that such isn’t always the case, despite the claims of some education officials and politicians to the contrary.

To that effect, CHHA-NL recommended the following refinements:

- a fully inclusive and resourced education system for all students with and without disabilities;
- a better designed and built environment based on Universal Design Principles to ensure better accessibility for all;

- a fully hearing-accessible school environment that is better acoustically designed to improve teacher/student interaction and communications (hearing, listening and understanding);
- a school environment that has HUSHH-UPS and Sound Field Systems in all classrooms and meeting areas to reduce background noise, reduce stress levels, and enhance the ability to hear and understand (which is good for all students and teachers, not just those with hearing loss);
- a school environment that uses Visual and Tactile Fire Alerts that are specially designed for persons with hearing loss and other disabilities but are also useful for everyone;
- a school environment that allows students to use their FM systems in school and to take them home where their use is equally, if not more, important;
- a school system that requires all teachers to participate in professional development opportunities related to disability issues, how those issues affect students' learning, and to learn how to make their classrooms more inclusive and supportive for students with disabilities;
- a school system that is future focused, uses technology creatively and widely to promote independent learning, where educators are both teachers and facilitators of learning, and where students are engaged and learning, but more importantly, are enjoying the learning.

The Panel received submissions as well from three community-based organizations specifically focused on providing supports for youth and/or school-aged children: Thrive Community Youth Network (Thrive-CYN), Stella's Circle and Waypoints. Thrive-CYN, a community youth network established in 2000 by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador through the National Child Benefit Reinvestment Fund, "offers a continuum of alternative educational opportunities for youth ages 15 and up...[who struggle] to find success [or the necessary supports] in the public education system" and have dropped out of school. Although these youth are from all socioeconomic classes, most are from families living in poverty, and many of them "have experienced exploitation, violence, poor mental health, and addiction." The Thrive-CYN representative emphasized that as a result of the youths' engagement with Thrive-CYN, they "envision a future where they are included in public education in a way that is meaningful not only for them, but for their children." In raising concerns about what this organization perceives to be the failure of the public school system to meet the needs of the youth that it serves, Thrive-CYN contended, "Newfoundland and Labrador is one of the few jurisdictions in Canada that lacks an alternative school for youth who are not finding success in our mainstream public schools."

Waypoints, another community-based organization that supports school-aged children and/or youth who have been exposed to challenging life circumstances, expressed concern that when clients return to school, they are sometimes perceived by teachers and other school personnel as "problem kids" and are therefore treated differently. However, the majority of the youth for whom Waypoints provides support are not problematic; rather, they have generally been exposed to traumatic experiences

and have often been removed from their family home... They are frequently diagnosed with various disorders such as ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder]...or learning disabilities and developmental delays [and at] times they present behavioural issues in class [as a consequence]. Accordingly, many of these youth require specialized supports and services at school.

Although the Waypoints representative acknowledged the availability of the necessary supports in public schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, there was a specific concern related to how those youth are sometimes received by school personnel:

There appears to be a stereotype that comes with being labelled a “group home kid” which carries with it many misunderstood and negative characteristics: For example, thinking a youth is in care because of [his/her] behaviour when the truth may be that s/he was placed in care for...protection. The reality is that many times [the youth’s] behaviour is a symptom of maltreatment and a loss of safety and certainty in his/her life. Due to this preconceived idea, when behavioural issues arise, many [school] administrators are very quick to call the child’s “workers” to come get [him/her] rather than trying to deal with the issue in the school.

Additionally, the Waypoints spokesperson underlined that schools seem to be unable to provide the timely assessment that is needed to develop an academic plan and provide appropriate supports. Notwithstanding these concerns, however, the Waypoints spokesperson acknowledged that the public school system “is stretched to capacity” and appealed for additional “resources in terms of guidance counsellors, itinerant teachers and specialists in the school[s].” Furthermore, Waypoints recommended (a) the addition of child and youth care workers in schools and (b) training for teachers and school personnel on the nature and purpose of group care and on the importance of a therapeutic trauma-informed approach to working with group care youth.

Another community nonprofit organization, Stella’s Circle, based in St. John’s, “offers a range of vocational programs intended to help [school dropouts] identify interests, discover skills and [develop] the confidence necessary to increase their employment readiness.” The presenter noted that the majority of students who attend the Adult Basic Education program provided by Stella’s Circle have had challenging socioeconomic circumstances. They did not find their schooling experience to be enjoyable from either an academic or social perspective and therefore dropped out. Although Stella’s Circle personnel acknowledge that “there is often not one single cause, but several factors that led [their clients] to originally not finish school,” they opine that “if problems were identified earlier for struggling students, and strategies identified to assist prior to the circumstances becoming too overwhelming, the chances of [their dropping out] would likely decrease.” The presenter recommended improved cooperation between the school system and the organization in order to improve programming for clients. For instance, one suggestion was that if Stella’s Circle personnel could access their clients’ public school psychoeducational assessments more readily, unnecessary delays would be negated.

Another organization, Avalon Employment, is one of 19 supported employment agencies funded under the Labor Market Development Agreement and cost shared with the provincial government that... provides employment services [throughout the province] to over 700 individuals with developmental disabilities, assisting them in finding and maintaining long-term paid employment in the community.

The spokesperson for Avalon Employment lamented that although these individuals are well supported while they are in the public school system, when they graduate, the supports are not readily available. Fortunately, with resources, support and commitment focused on “partnerships and development of relationships,” he believes it is possible to include individuals with disabilities in an employment plan that is realistic and will enable them to enjoy a productive, rewarding life.

Although each of the aforementioned organizations provides an important service to the youth they serve, collectively they highlight the necessity of an increase in both resources and personnel that include the addition of other professionals such as social workers and occupational therapists that

have not been heretofore members of the K–12 public education system. To that effect, for instance, a member of the NLTA professional staff highlighted both the advancements achieved and the additional work required in public education in Newfoundland and Labrador:

Compared to just several decades ago, [Newfoundland and Labrador] has made monumental advancements in inclusionary practices...[that] have enabled countless individuals to lead productive lives and contribute to society...The move from exclusionary practices to inclusionary practices came with considerable investment, but that investment is not complete...[because] the introduction and evolution of the inclusionary model of education has not been accompanied with sufficient investment and supports—teachers, student assistants, social workers, nurses—to properly implement it in the schools of the province... Without sufficient investment in...human resources, the implementation of the inclusionary model is being met with resistance and limited success as teachers are being overwhelmed with paperwork, supervisory responsibilities, programming and preparation.

This quotation highlights the tremendous responsibilities placed on the educational teaching professionals and specialized support personnel who work in the public education system as they strive to meet the needs of many school-aged children and youth. Professionals other than teachers—social workers, nurses and others referenced in the previous quotation—have been advocating for several years to be included as part of each school staff. In this regard, both the existing student needs and the concomitant public expectations far exceed the human resources currently allocated to the public education system. This needs–resource gap has serious consequences, not only for the children and youth who need the support, but also for their families and the many professionals who work within what appears to be a somewhat resource-starved environment. This leads to important considerations as our schools and parents need help to build on the capacity that does exist; yet, in some rare cases, alternate forms of schooling may be needed.

Discussions with parents in particular about autism and learning difficulties, and other issues around care and mobility, were sometimes heart-wrenching. Government, teachers and parents have seen improvements, but much more needs to be done to operationalize full inclusion with the increase in high needs in a system that seems to be at a tipping point. Too many parents, teachers and administrators are not well prepared to meet the challenging needs brought on by the dramatic increase in students with autism and learning disabilities. The lack of training and support is compounding the stress for students, parents and teachers.

Autism and Learning Disabilities

While many Panel submissions stressed the need to improve the system’s capacity to deal with learning disabilities, presentations also reflected a dire need to better deal with what seems to be a significant prevalence of autism. Some schools are ready while others are not; some teachers are ready but others are not. The Panel listened with great empathy as parents discussed the anguish felt in having their child enter a school and not be well accommodated. Indeed, even with an accommodation plan in place there seemed to be little room to adjust the resource allocations if needed, or to move resources when needed. We heard of how a child flourished in one location, only to wilt in another. Teachers too cited many cases of simply not knowing what to do, and many were actively taking courses online to improve their skill set. Clearly, immediate action is required.

Other Means of Confronting the Needs–Resource Gap

Within the context as described above, the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour contended, “One of the key pillars of an equal and equitable society is public education. [It] plays a major role in reducing poverty, improving physical and mental health, reducing inequality of all forms and increasing participation in the democratic process.” To that effect, the Federation highlighted what it perceives to be the problems and inequalities in the current approach to public education in Newfoundland and Labrador:

We essentially have three components to our education system: a childcare system which is mostly privately delivered, a... K–12 system that is drastically under resourced financially and from a human resource perspective, and a post-secondary system that still burdens most students with significant debt upon completion. In addition, the fact that these three components are not aligned or well-connected under one umbrella structure inhibits the ability for long-term planning and vision.

The Federation recommended three key changes:

- 1. All aspects of the education system be adequately resourced based on need, including teacher allocation, administrative resources, curriculum, teaching assistants, and specialized services such as mental health supports and guidance counselling. This also includes an affordable and accessible public childcare system and continued investments in post-secondary that progressively reduce tuition costs.*
- 2. All aspects of the education system be placed under one umbrella structure and include the development of a publicly funded, administered and affordable early childhood education and childcare program.*
- 3. The development of education policy be linked with other key public policy frameworks such as poverty reduction, workforce development and youth retention and attraction.*

Although the above-mentioned recommendations by the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour do not specifically address the components of its envisioned “umbrella structure,” it may be reasonable to assume that in addition to the current teachers and support staff, professionals involved in education might also include groups such as the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Occupational Therapists (NLAOT). As a matter of fact, NLASW and NLAOT already have direct associations with school-aged children and youth, and, as these groups have suggested, may better serve them through direct access as school system employees. NLASW pointed out that school social workers are already an important part of the school professional team in many other jurisdictions within Canada and internationally and recommended that Newfoundland and Labrador follow this example:

Incorporating social work into the education system in this province would assist in the implementation of the Newfoundland and Labrador English School Board’s Safe and Caring Schools Policy and in addressing the multiple complexities that impact...academic achievement in the school environment...such as...poverty, family relationships and dynamics, violence, drug and alcohol use and mental health, ...[and] challenges relating to...transitions in [students’] lives.

In support of its appeal to have social workers in schools, NLASW provided a review of the current literature that supports the need for enhanced mental health services and programs in schools. As well, NLASW drew attention to an appeal by the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils

(NLFSC) “for more on-site staff resources to address social problems, which are beyond the scope of the current personnel complement.” NLASW concluded, “Social workers within the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador could provide [the] necessary services, supports and programming to positively impact the school environment and improve student academic achievement” and recommended that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development develop a strategy to ensure a timely integration of social workers in the K–12 education system.

Similarly, NLAOT has been advocating and lobbying the Newfoundland and Labrador government since 1974 to have occupational therapists included as essential staff in the public school system, emphasizing that “Newfoundland and Labrador is the only province in Canada without occupational therapy services in the education system.” Given the daily classroom challenges already documented in the submissions to this Panel, it appears that the services provided by both social workers and occupational therapists could be essential to improving the situation.

Teaching and Learning With Technology

In the past few decades the application of emerging technologies in public school classrooms has become commonplace in most jurisdictions around the world, including Newfoundland and Labrador. Technology has become a routine part of how school-aged students live, socialize, play, work and learn; however, there is considerable evidence to suggest that many classrooms in Newfoundland and Labrador and elsewhere remain largely unchanged (Seifert, Sheppard & Wakeham, 2015; Sheppard & Brown, 2014; Sheppard, Seifert & Wakeham, 2013). For instance, following a province-wide study of sample classrooms deemed to be exemplary in their application of emerging technologies as a central component of the teaching and learning process, Sheppard, Seifert & Wakeham (2013) concluded that although technology exists in many classrooms and there are numerous examples of innovative teachers who are employing emerging technologies in support of student learning,

Many teachers still do not have ready access to the emerging technologies in their classrooms, and even when they have access, the majority of teachers have no formal training in the classroom use of those technologies. This challenge is exacerbated by outdated or inadequate curriculum documents that are perceived by many as of little value as a resource for classroom technology use. Of further concern is the limited access to quality, sustained teacher professional development focused specifically on the classroom use of emerging technologies in support of student learning. (p. 33)

The presentations to this panel highlighted similar issues; participants collectively identified over 60 expressions of teacher-related concerns. Several rural school principals expressed concerns regarding their students’ access to emerging technology hardware and software. One rural principal observed that the computer hardware in the school is very old and the “connectivity absolutely dreadful!” In fact, this principal noted that the connectivity issue is of particular concern for students completing courses through the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI). Although there are interactive whiteboards in every classroom, the level of connectivity renders them nearly useless as it “takes about 30 minutes to watch a 10-minute video.” As an aside, the principal commented the school does not have sufficient funds to replace the bulbs in these interactive whiteboards. A recently retired teacher raised similar concerns regarding Internet connectivity in rural schools: “It is essential that they have good Internet connections to ensure that the distance courses can be taught adequately.”

In addition to these most common concerns regarding the application of technology in schools, another teacher flagged the potential health risks to children of integrating various electronic devices such as

tablets and cellphones into the teaching learning processes, as “not enough is known about the impact of these devices when children are exposed both in school and out.”

Technology Infrastructure, Replacement and Support

It appears that among the most common teaching and learning concerns expressed by teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador are those related to inadequacies in the overall technology infrastructure and the absence of an appropriate level of IT support in individual schools. For instance, a teacher in a rural school noted, “Many rural schools in NL are still having issues with Internet speed, and this is impacting the delivery of programs and productivity of both students and staff.” Another working in rural Labrador commented, “While bandwidth may not be an issue in Newfoundland urban areas, it is certainly not the same for isolated areas and for Labrador.” Yet another teacher complained that the school district provided electronic tablets for students’ use, but not any Wi-Fi connection. Another complained, “While there is a great deal of discussion about creating 21st century learners, we are given refurbished computers and not nearly enough of them, very little in-servicing and almost no technology support!”

Regarding technology support and poorly maintained technology, one teacher commented,

Schools are a wasteland of technology that never works properly and is rarely used to its full potential. There [should] be IT specialists on staff who do not teach. There are technologies purchased and never taken out of the box or rarely used because teachers are not trained to use them or they need servicing that is not provided readily. Hire more [specialist teachers]...so our investments don't go to waste. They are usually out of date by the time anyone knows how to use or fix them.

Another noted,

Many schools in the province have antiquated computer systems that are poorly set up and poorly maintained. The infrastructure for technology needs to be upgraded, and trained computer technicians need to be available on a daily basis so problems can be identified and repaired immediately... Investment in technology is a must to ensure our students are leaders in the world.

Astoundingly, another teacher stated that her school has had 15 new laptops for a year that are still not properly set up. She noted, “To make matters worse, there are only 18 functioning computers in the technology room [designed] to accommodate over 600 students.” In addition to those issues, she observed that teachers are frequently frustrated that they cannot find a classroom where there is an interactive whiteboard or a working computer. Yet another said, “I’m extremely frustrated with our current education system. We are expected to use technology in our schools, but we are not provided with appropriate IT support and technology.” A frustrated teacher in a different school reported that none of the “10 new computers, delivered a year ago, are currently functioning,” and the school is still waiting for an IT specialist to repair them.

Observing the increased use of technology embedded in practically all areas of the curriculum, a teacher expressed frustration with the inadequacy of the technology support personnel: “With only one technician spread across many schools with increasingly more technology in every room, teachers have to wait for many weeks to fix issues, meaning they can’t possibly achieve the outcomes using technology.” Similarly, a teacher from another school commented, “The school districts/government have equipped schools with a lot of technology over the last 10 years with no plan to support replacement/repair costs.” It appears that the frustration among teachers regarding the level of support for technology are palpable and may be appropriately represented by the following comments by a classroom teacher:

We are pushed to include technology in our classrooms as we have students who have grown up in a technological world; however, we DO NOT have the tools needed to do this. Because of the new system of putting in problems into a help desk...many small problems are being unseen... There has been a teacher dealing with a broken Smart Board for over a year, boxes of laptops and iPads [have not been set up]. While there are people [who] can do this, they are not permitted as this [encroaches] on someone's position at the board. We have gone two years without a computer in our Learning Resources Centre!

Another suggested,

All K–12 schools should have a full-time technology [support] teacher [whose responsibility will be] to co-teach and collaborate with teachers to help integrate those resources in the curriculum. Technology must be accessible and functioning properly. [Also] schools need support professionals available to fix and/or maintain equipment in schools and classrooms.

Professional Development and the Use of Classroom Technologies

Several teachers expressed the need for professional development and training for all teachers in the application of the various classroom technologies. One teacher observed,

Students are more technologically advanced than many teachers today, putting instructors at a disadvantage in the classroom... When teachers don't have the techno-savvy to compete with those devices, by bringing education and technology together, it can be difficult to keep students' interest and attention to properly teach new concepts. Technology needs to come into the classroom to keep up with the learning demands of the 21st century.

Although emerging technologies are clearly ubiquitous in schools throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, it is quite evident that many schools, particularly those in rural and remote regions, require not only additional technology software and hardware, but major infrastructure improvements to improve connectivity that most likely require support from both the major Internet service providers and government. It is equally clear that training and professional development for teaching professionals in the application of the various technologies to facilitate teaching and learning is essential. In fact, it appears that respondents' central issues or concerns related to the application of emerging technologies in support of teaching and learning remain essentially the same as those identified by Sheppard, Seifert, and Wakeham in a 2013 study conducted for the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation. Sheppard et al. concluded that although schools and school district leaders had committed substantial resources toward the purchase of various technologies and teacher professional development,

Many teachers did not have ready access to the emerging technologies in their classrooms; the majority of teachers had no formal training in the classroom use of those technologies; curriculum documents provided little guidance as to the application of classroom technologies; and teachers had limited access to quality, sustained teacher professional development focused specifically on the classroom use of emerging technologies in support of student learning.

It appears that to transform learning through the use of technology in classrooms, teachers and students must be involved in decision making related to the acquisition and use of particular technologies, and must have ready access to them within their classrooms. As

well, sustained professional development for teachers that explicitly addresses how technology can be used to transform learning is essential. As it stands, it appears that the provision of quality professional development is a huge challenge in respect to the availability of expertise, time and resources. (p. 34)

In addition to the submissions by individual panel participants regarding teaching and learning with technology, submissions by the NLTA Technology Special Interest Council (TESIC) and the NLTA Advisory Committee on the Integration of Technology into the K–12 system provided advice that could inform future policies and decisions related to the resources and the processes required to realize meaningful implementation of educational technologies in schools throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Thomas Kennedy, the president of TESIC, noted “an ever-growing void of professional learning opportunities for teachers in our province.” He lamented that although few would deny the fast pace of change in emerging technologies and the public expectation that these technologies (both hardware and software) are used routinely in teaching and learning processes, few teachers have been provided adequate training and professional development. He asked,

Where is the professional learning to make the expectation placed on teachers realistic? Where are the sessions for teachers on how to use educational technologies like the interactive whiteboard that has made its way into the majority of NL classrooms? It has been years since I have heard of such a session despite new teachers entering the classroom each year and many full-service teachers are still untrained. How about the opportunity to learn how to integrate mobile devices that we are investing in? Or even training on using all the features of our mail client—an application used daily throughout the province by thousands of teachers in over two hundred schools?

Mr. Kennedy contended that although TESIC has organized and facilitated professional learning for teachers throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, the school districts have not provided a sufficient level of support. In light of the challenges facing teachers in this regard, TESIC recommended three key changes:

- Quality professional learning, grounded in the shared experiences of NL teachers and reflective of the daily expectation on teachers to perform their duties, should be offered throughout all regions of the province.
- All professional development relating to the integration of emerging technologies must be dependent upon the demand set by teachers and offered in association with groups that specialize in the respective areas.
- Professional learning that highlights the effective integration of educational technology for teachers must keep pace with the ever-changing technologies.

Also, having received input from over 1,500 NLTA members, the NLTA Advisory Committee on the Integration of Technology into the K–12 system, established at the 2013 NLTA Biennial General Meeting, proposed 14 recommendations that “NLTA believes capsulize the main issues and challenges related to technology integration in the K–12 education system.” To that effect, the NLTA contended, “It’s imperative that the provincial government and the school districts take ownership for [the following] fourteen recommendations and implement whatever action is required to ensure that the issues identified...are addressed in a reasonable timeframe.”

Be it resolved that NLTA lobby:

- school boards to ensure adequate funding is in place to provide onsite teacher supervision of students during distributed learning and other e-learning environments.
- the Department of Education (DOE) to provide sustainable funding for an independent longitudinal research study of distributed, online and e-learning effectiveness and impact on teacher conditions of professional practice.
- the DOE and school boards to promote and provide ongoing funding, support, resources and time for teacher professional development related to the infusion of technology into pedagogy and curriculum.
- the DOE and school boards to develop policies and strategies to address issues of student and teacher safety, cyber bullying and the appropriate uses of online and digital technologies.
- the DOE to provide sufficient funding to school boards to address the total cost of ownership for technology, including maintenance, provision of technical support and training, software acquisition, infrastructure, subscriptions, upgrading, security and ongoing professional development.
- school boards to develop policy regulating student access and use of digital technologies in schools in consultation with the NLTA.
- the DOE to develop procedures to involve teachers in the ongoing review, approval and evaluation of the suitability of technology for education.
- school boards to ensure that a system is in place whereby substitute teachers have access to technology and related professional development.
- school boards to establish, implement and fund technology plans that simultaneously address all of the essential conditions for effective technology infusion: professional development, infrastructure, software acquisition and technical support.
- the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador to provide, at no cost to schools, high speed Internet access for every Newfoundland and Labrador classroom.
- the DOE to amend its per pupil funding formula to include additional funding for the purchase of assistive technology, including the necessary technical support required by students with diverse learning needs, to enable these students to (1) more easily meet the learner outcomes in the program of studies; (2) foster independence for those who are on an alternative curriculum; and (3) meet the goals and objectives stated in their Individual Education Plans.
- School boards to ensure that students enrolled in distributed, online and e-learning are pre-screened for appropriate placement in these more flexible learning environments and provided with advance information about course requirements, equipment needs, technical training and support throughout the course, including opportunities to meet teachers face to face.

- school boards to ensure that distributed, online and e-learning teachers have access to appropriate professional development programs, substitute teachers and resources to address their unique teaching situation.
- the DOE and the school boards to develop and utilize consistent communication procedures to inform teachers in a timely manner of relevant changes to technology in education policies and protocols, before the changes are implemented. (NLTA, 2013)

The evidence derived from multiple teacher voices and classroom observations during a recent provincial study of classroom uses of technology by students and teachers in support of learning (Sheppard et al., 2015) are quite similar to those recorded during the Panel consultations. Overall, although there appears to have been significant investments in the acquisition of technologies, and many teachers and students are routinely employing learning technologies in support of classroom teaching and learning processes, huge challenges related to infrastructure acquisition and support and the development of an optimal level of teacher expertise remain. Greater collaboration can improve teaching and service delivery. As noted above, such concerns were also shared from multiple teacher voices about supporting technology and increasing bandwidth in schools.

Class Size, Workload and Professional Development

The most common work-related concerns expressed by teachers who participated in the Panel were class size, workload and the absence of timely access to quality professional development. Twenty-six percent of the 236 teacher respondents identified class size (student–teacher ratio) as extremely challenging while a slightly larger number (39%) indicated that workload is a concern (see Table 5). Similarly, of the 13 participating school principals, six raised concerns regarding class size, as did one parent and a retired teacher. Regarding their own workload, eight of the 13 principals expressed concerns. Among the responding 33 counsellors and psychologists, all but one respondent perceived their caseload to be challenging and several others (two principals and two concerned citizens) shared their views. Of the eight participating Instructional Resource Teachers, six raised concerns about workload and three of them indicated a belief that excessive demands of larger classes negatively impacted their ability to adequately serve their clients.

Table 5. Class Size and Workload by Respondent Type

Respondent type and issue	Referents					
	Teachers	Counsellors & psychologists (CP)	Principals	SLPs	Retired Teachers	IRTs
SLP caseload				2	1	
CP caseload		32			1	
Principal workload			8			
Principals re teacher class size	6					
Principals re CP caseload		2				
PCC* re class size	1					
PCC* re CP caseload		2				
PCC re SLP caseload				1		
PCC re IRT caseload						1
Teacher challenges: workload	91					
Teacher challenges: class size	61					
Retired teachers re class size	1					
IRT caseload						6
IRL class size concerns						3
Totals	160	36	8	3	2	10

*Note. PCC = parents and concerned citizens.

Class Size and Workload

Highlighting what seems to be a pervasive concern among teachers throughout the entire K–12 system, one teacher commented: “In our public education system, class size is a major concern!” Similarly, another teacher of primary children said, “The student to teacher ratio of 27–1 in primary is ridiculous!” Another primary school teacher lamented,

Large class sizes are leaving teachers and students frustrated. Classroom soft caps are causing primary classrooms to have 26–28 students. These large classrooms are making it difficult for many students to develop the foundational skills in literacy and mathematics, and as a result, students are entering elementary without the fundamental skills needed to read and write.

Similarly, another argued, “Teacher allocations based on a number of students in a class versus taking into consideration the issues of the students [do] not do justice to the challenges and needs of the students or the teachers.” This view suggests that allocating teachers on the basis of a simple pupil–teacher ratio is naive and obsolete in the current context, where teachers seek to attend to the learning needs of individual students rather than simply dispense information. Another teacher observed,

Children with pervasive needs are often doubled and tripled up in classrooms with one student assistant between them even though each child has [his/her] own unique and specific needs. IRTs have way too many students on their caseloads, and cannot possibly provide

the individualized instruction that is needed to attain success. In order for full-inclusion to be successful in its current framework, we need a major increase in actual human resources... These... issues are leading to teacher burnout, mental health issues, and... dissatisfaction that are leading early career teachers to leave the profession.

An elementary teacher who works in an urban context observed that both the number of students and diversity of needs in her classes have gradually increased over time, while available classroom supports have remained the same:

We have classrooms approaching thirty students with diverse compositions. Oftentimes there is a span of students functioning at as much as five different grade levels in one classroom. The IRT and ESL support is limited and the class may have students that have significant behaviour problems (violent tendencies, oppositional behaviour, childhood mental health issues, social and conduct disorders, unstable home environments, etc.). Little or no attention is being paid to class composition with the focus being on numbers.

Similarly, a high school teacher described her particular circumstances as an example of how class size negatively impacts the support that a teacher can provide to individual students:

I teach in a school where there are many classes in the 32–35 range, and some even higher. There is no way that a class of 35 students can get the same one-on-one attention as that of a class of 28 students. A 25% increase in class size means less individual attention given to students, less explanation and clarification if experiencing difficulty, less opportunity for the teacher to provide feedback, and an obvious increase in teacher workload... I have 32 [students] in clothing class. Too many for the space in my classroom! Too many for me to physically help in a hands-on course! Safety issues! There should be a cap on numbers for this course.

Several science teachers described comparable circumstances and echoed these concerns. Also, an IRT described the challenges in attempting to accommodate the differing complex needs of each student in high enrolment classes. She has 66 diagnosed students on her caseload distributed throughout a number of subject areas and classes; she acknowledged being challenged in providing the needed supports and contended there should be a “formula/cap for IRTs’ caseload.”

Acknowledging the differing viewpoints of teachers, politicians and government officials regarding class size and teacher allocations, one teacher offered the following perspective:

Politicians speak about our lowest pupil–teacher ratio that we have had in years and one of the lowest across Canada. Why then is our job becoming more difficult? While there may be more specialists in our system, it is not a true reflection of the actual numbers in the classrooms. These specialists act as resource people on a consultation basis. The level of consult[ing] service we actually receive is minimal and these extra bodies may better serve us if they were placed in a classroom with their own student.

The following two simple and succinct, but powerful, comments from two individual teachers appear to suitably summarize teachers’ collective view of class size concerns:

- 1. Class size! This has to be a priority. Quality of education, teacher stress, safety ... they all revolve around this one issue!*
- 2. Class sizes are just too big! Although we as teachers try our best to accommodate every student in our classroom and meet their needs, it is just impossible. There are not enough*

hours in a day [or] support to get to each child. When we have a class of 27/28 children most of our time is spent dealing with behavior [issues] and getting through the day with our sanity intact. At the end of the day, I don't feel like I have done my best as a teacher!

In a context where many working classroom teachers expressed concerns about class size and workload, two substitute teachers who presented to the Panel were frustrated with their inability to obtain full-time employment or even get enough teaching experience to get a replacement position. One suggested the NLTA should negotiate an agreement that provides fair access to substitute teachers, allowing them to accumulate seniority leading to a permanent position, while the other complained that the Faculty of Education at MUN should restrict enrolment to avoid an oversupply of teachers. Contrary to the view that the Faculty of Education should restrict enrolment, it is reasonable to argue that given the number and intensity of the concerns expressed regarding class size and caseload, no qualified, competent teacher should be frustrated with not being able to obtain full-time work. Although, as previously noted, the Panel received several detailed submissions from various community organizations representing parents of children needing special supports, only one direct submission was received from parents of a student regarding IRT caseloads and the impact of high caseloads on the child:

We are writing to you with concern regarding the lack of IRTs available in proportion to the number of students with needs. As parents with a 5-year-old child with ASD, we feel that our child is not receiving the one-on-one time to be successful in the school system.

Several SLPs likewise noted that their caseloads prevented them from providing meaningful support to their student clients. For instance, an SLP working on the Burin Peninsula stated,

There simply are not enough SLPs to provide the service our students require. Currently, ...I am servicing 13 schools! That's one SLP for [more than] 500 students; [however], the expectation and pressure to complete all assessments and therapy is still present daily.

A recent SLP retiree lamented,

We have students with a multitude of speech language issues and we do not even have someone in the position. Last year, services were absolutely outrageous... I know for a fact a student was supposed to receive support weekly, [but] I can count the number of sessions that child got for the entire year, and I do not need two hands to do the counting.

An SLP in the metro St John's area noted a significant need for more SLPs there as well: "Large schools need their own SLP! SLPs in education cannot possibly make that much of an impact by visiting a busy school once a week; this is a Band-Aid service!" In concert with the aforementioned concerns expressed by professional SLPs, a parent of a kindergarten child in Labrador West expressed considerable concern that "the case load on both the speech-language pathologists and itinerant teachers...in Labrador West is extremely large and stretched entirely too thin!" In this parent's view, although these individuals are dedicated professionals who do excellent work, they cannot provide an acceptable level of service to the children of Labrador West: "I would like to see more resources allocated to the region to enable these professionals to provide the quality and quantity of service that I know they can provide."

In addition to concerns regarding students with special needs, several teachers stated that their workload has become challenging, remarking that they are getting less work completed within the regular school day and consequently taking more work home. One teacher believed that there was little respect for a teacher's personal time. While many teachers spoke of increasing expectations, a teaching principal in a small rural school described what appears to be an extremely challenging role:

I am the teaching principal of a school with just under 40 students ranging from kindergarten to grade 12. We operate with 5.8 teaching units. K–3 is in one class, Grades 4–6 in another, Grades 7–9 in the [third] room and the senior high splits up according to their various courses. In order to cover the curriculum, I teach nine courses. That’s a full load...I find that I am totally overwhelmed with the amount of work required to stay on top of things!

In addition to the aforementioned quotations, the following are several samples of teachers’ frustrations and concerns with what they perceive to be an increasing and unmanageable workload that is creating considerable stress among teachers throughout many schools in the province:

1. It is time for the supervision aspect of a teacher’s day to be removed and contracted out to people who want to do it, similar to how crossing guards are hired. Supervision adds extra stress to a teacher’s day... Let teachers do what they are trained to do. Let’s fix this, please.

2. Teachers spend far too much time on duty. With little preparation time as we get, we are expected to do at least 150 minutes of duty. Two days a cycle I get 25 minutes[?] break in a six-hour workday. Other agencies could do this [duty work].

3. Teachers are over worked with very little preparation time... I speak from a primary/elementary viewpoint... As teachers we are always playing catch up and hence never feeling adequate in our jobs. We have new report cards that we have to figure out...and do... on our own time. There is no downtime in the elementary grades... [W]ith the many needs in our classrooms and the lack of support, ...it is sad that students who...could have [an] opportunity to advance will not get the [necessary] support.

4. We are expected to do more on our own time. Those involved in coaching...do so on weekends... [Also], teachers are expected to be technological wizards, ...tak[ing] us away from time with family as the time during the school day is not sufficient to do what is expected of us.

5. What other government employee is required to serve on committees such as school council, school development, safe and caring without compensation ...and expected to cover the duties of a secretary or a maintenance/cleaner since replacements are often not provided?

Teacher Professional Development

Twenty-nine teachers commented on their perceptions of teacher professional development in Newfoundland and Labrador. Three of those teachers expressed a belief that professional development opportunities have improved over the last couple of years and are now more practical and relevant to teachers. The other 26 teachers, though, expressed considerable concern about their professional development opportunities. The majority of these concerns related to the absence of teachers’ input into the topics or issues to be explored and hence, the teachers’ perception that the majority of sessions lack relevance to their work. One teacher commented, “PD [professional development] is dictated by the Board, not teacher led or initiated!” A French department head voiced a similar complaint,

We had our goals to work on, but obviously . . . mathematics [was deemed more important by the school district itinerant teacher who] was at the school again. I’m so sick and tired of every minute of every PD and every focus of every meeting being on mathematics. I teach 6 other courses[,] and I’d like to be able to put some time into [those courses] too. The issue of teacher wellness came up in our external review (loudly and clearly) and we spent about eight minutes on that today, even though it’s one of our goals.

Another teacher stated, “Most of the PD days are not used effectively. The decrease in discretionary days for PD is pathetic!” Several others observed that many of the in-school professional development days are district driven and focused on school growth and development plans that are perceived by many to be little more than a perfunctory exercise in completing the necessary paperwork, rather than being focused on “actually implementing what it is we [really] need to do to improve our schools.” These and other respondents contended there should be more input from teachers and more professional development time within schools to facilitate collegial learning opportunities.

Another issue of considerable concern raised by several teachers is the lack of teacher training in mental health issues and in 21st century teaching and learning practices. A school guidance counsellor remarked that there were limited professional development opportunities in counselling provided by the school board or the Department of Education and no available funding to attend conferences outside the province. Another beginning teacher expressed frustration that the school district’s half-day introductory session for beginning teachers on both school and district policies and regulations is inadequate, noting that a more formal and detailed process is required: “Professional development and the sharing of resources by experienced teachers could certainly provide needed support to beginning teachers.” Clearly, providing relevant professional development for teachers who are assuming positions that are somewhat outside of their expertise or experience would alleviate concerns and, it is hoped, ensure a more robust teaching and learning experience for both students and teachers.

In light of the many concerns related to the available professional development opportunities expressed by the professional public school educators who participated in Panel hearings, it appears that the following comment provides an apt summary: “There is a serious lack of professional learning for teachers [and other public school education professionals]. The present model would work if [they] had time to collaborate and spend time together. [But] there is no time!”

Support for Teacher Development

The submissions above dealt primarily with issues related to the daily functioning of schools such as class size, classroom teacher workload, teacher–specialist caseload, the level of support provided by IRTs and other educational specialists, and concerns directly impacting students, parents, and teacher professionals. In addition to those contributions, the Panel received submissions from various community organizations that focused on school–community partnerships and underlined the importance of the school in the community, especially in rural communities, beyond the teaching of the mandated provincial curriculum.

In cooperation with the Faculty of Education, the NLTA, the province and school districts need to create a cadre of faculty associates linked to the faculty, the district and schools as part of a province-wide initiative to link teacher education, professional development and policy implementation.

Perspectives on Programs and Program Access

Although parents and other groups (individual citizens, academics, special interest groups, teachers, and local, provincial and national organizations) who presented or submitted written briefs appeared to be generally supportive of public education in Newfoundland and Labrador, collectively they identified a number of distinct program concerns beyond those related to human resource support for children with special needs. Furthermore, in the context of their identified concerns, the presenters offered a number of recommendations regarding improvements to programs and program access, including the provincial earth science and mathematics curriculum, the student evaluation policy, full-day kindergarten and improved access to French immersion and high achiever programs.

Several respondents highlighted their concerns related to existing program offerings and/or access to programs in the public school system. For instance, a parent of two children in Grades 1 and 4 who are excelling in their studies expressed concern that not enough focus is placed on providing challenging learning opportunities for the most able learners:

While I believe in a school system that supports all types of learners, I am left to wonder if we have not gone too far the other way. Are we now excluding the children who excel because so much of a teacher's time is taken up with children who need extra help on a daily basis? What's left for the children who grasp concepts easily? What's there to challenge them and make them even better learners than they already are? What resources are being used in our system to support these children? They deserve support just as much as a child who struggles. It is very concerning to me as a parent that perhaps my child's needs are not being met.

Another parent suggested that public school programs should be more focused on “preparation for post-secondary, workforce and adulthood” and therefore include mandatory courses in fields such as fiscal management, budgeting, career focus, job searching and computer programs. She noted as well that students should be held accountable for their actions such as missing deadlines or absenteeism. This same parent expressed concern about the availability of extra-curricular activities, noting that unlike when she attended school, they “are [now] relatively non-existent” in her children’s school.

Yet another parent expressed the same concern that extra-curricular activities have diminished over the past few years, especially activities for the general student population that are focused on physical activity and fun rather than on competitive sports. This parent expressed a belief that a general sense of community has been lost in schools: “[Just] one board for English schools in the province! The needs in the metro area are very different from those in rural areas, yet this is seldom taken into account!”

On the topic of the school board, several parents complained about the existing school board evaluation policies. For instance, one parent complained, “The evaluation policy is not helping my children prepare for the real world! ... Our children do not know how to accept failure because they do not experience failure in the school system.”

A school council member and parent of three school-aged children articulated concerns with the existing curricula, contending that (a) the mathematics program must be revised; (b) the curriculum must become more focused and should include health, physical education and nutrition; and (c) class size must be revisited, especially in the context of inclusion.

In addition to these concerns related to program offerings, several parents complained of program and resource access difficulties. For instance, one parent complained that her child’s access to a French immersion program was denied as a consequence of resource limitations where access was determined on a “first-come first-served” basis through an Internet registration system. In questioning the legitimacy of such a process, she was informed by a Department of Education official that French immersion was an optional program and students had no entitlement to it. In her view, although the French immersion programs offered in Newfoundland and Labrador schools are excellent, limited access on a first-come first-served basis in specific locations “is unacceptable and exclusionary!”

Another parent noted challenges in gaining access to necessary assistive technologies for students who require them as part of their accommodations and maintained that funding is required in schools to ensure the learning technologies are up to date, including routine upgrades to the schools’ networks and wireless capability. As well, there should be a replacement plan for interactive white boards. Given

so many observations on the need for additional funding for technology, it is somewhat jarring to learn that at least one school technology teacher has found that “at times, schools are provided with technology for which they have no perceived need. Too often equipment shows up that is never taken out of the box. No one checks with...school technology teachers...[to] see what we need.”

Several individuals and groups other than parents and classroom teachers commented on the prescribed and co-curricular school programs. For instance, a school counsellor noted,

We need a high school program that is truly preparing our young people for the next step in their career training path—whether that is academia, technical trades, trades, the arts, etc. or directly to the world of work. We have strong academic and advanced programs, fair arts programming, but poor programs for the future technicians and trades people. Our large urban schools appear to have good trades preparation; however, with our smaller and rural schools, this is clearly lacking.

The following comment from a parent who is also a teacher provides a succinct summary of a perspective regarding current approaches to education shared by many parents and teachers:

The current approach to education...seemingly an offshoot of the idea of “Leaving no child behind” [in the United States], is well intentioned, but problematic. The top-down theory of policy trumping practice, when based on shaky empirical evidence (e.g., no zero coming from one study from UBC) is making education in this province more challenging for all stakeholders. As a teacher I put my head down and work. As a parent, I am furious. My daughter is getting an education that does not rival mine, and this is entirely due to policy. No matter what some in positions of authority might say, not only has policy trumped practice, but it has also trumped common sense! While I’m all for implementing the same program in a similar way, given the vast needs of today’s students, weakening discipline through safe and caring schools, or watering down curriculum or work ethic and calling it a victory due to graduation rates, is wrong!

Rural School Programs: Successes and Challenges

This section of the Panel report highlights local and regional program issues, concerns and initiatives related to public education, schools and school community partnerships in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

Several parent-community presenters representing rural schools spoke quite positively of their local schools, teachers and principals. For instance, one parent praised teachers’ dedication to their work and noted their commitment to providing a diversified co-curricular program for students:

While rural schools face additional financial challenges relating to travel to compete in provincial competitions, ...teachers go above and beyond to open the doors for student participation in as many events as possible, and the hours spent after school and travelling with our children reflect that effort. Again, these efforts are in addition to their already heavy teaching workload [that requires them to teach many varied subjects, some of which are outside of their field of expertise].

Other participants, however, expressed concerns about students’ access to extra-curricular activities due to “cuts to teacher allocations” and financial challenges that thwart participation in regional and provincial sporting events due to travel distances. Noting that “participation in such events encourages

holistic development of children, raises self-esteem, encourages social skills development, and enhances the overall well-being of children...[as well as] raising the spirits of the school community,” one participant questioned “why funding for such extra-curricular events is not readily provided as it is with other areas of education.” Similarly, another articulated a belief that students in urban areas have better and more opportunities than students in remote rural areas; for instance, in urban regions authentic experiences such as field trips are more likely to be readily available, whereas in rural regions considerable travel is typical and trips are therefore more costly. This presenter suggested that to counter the inherent inequity, the instructional budget allocation to small rural schools should not be based solely on student enrolment. A teacher noted, “The system is under-resourced. Small schools, in particular, have a harder time meeting the needs of a diverse group of students in a classroom.” Yet another observed that “smaller schools are disadvantaged to attend/participate in educational field trips (i.e., funding, bussing...etc.). School travel should be subsidized.”

Arguing for a better understanding of rural schools and support for multi-aging, a teacher underscored that the Newfoundland and Labrador school curriculum guides are not well suited for rural contexts, and contends both the Faculty and Department of Education should address those issues immediately. Although the Department of Education, through the creation of the CDLI, has provided enhanced learning opportunities to rural schools, several presenters expressed concerns that rural schools are still having issues with Internet speeds that negatively impact the delivery of programs and the productivity of both students and teachers. For instance, one school principal stated that in her school, there is insufficient bandwidth to support multiple users during CDLI periods or when a class is in the computer lab.

Another stated,

While it is great that [CDLI] can offer the courses that they do, it's not enough. Not enough slots, not enough courses...very few quasi-academic courses and absolutely no basic ones. How can students get an equitable education if they cannot avail of the courses [that suit them best]. The other CDLI issue is that small schools have nobody available to supervise or help out in the CDLI room. Everybody is teaching class!!! Small schools (under 60 students) need a full unit for CDLI.

Another argued for an improved teacher staffing formula for small rural schools:

While I do understand that with declining enrolment there will be changes to the teacher allocations, the current formula being used over the entire system is very disturbing to me since our education is not a one size fits all system. The programming in our schools today is so complex and diverse that it doesn't matter if you have three students or 20 students in a particular grade... When dealing with [the required] outcomes, the curriculum still has to be taught. There comes a point when you have to say, “Okay, this is as far as we can take this... You still have to maintain a certain [number] of teachers in that building to be able to offer the curriculum that needs to be offered.”

Somewhat connected to the concerns noted in the Teacher Professional Development section regarding the availability of relevant professional development opportunities in select specializations, a beginning teacher lamented that the teacher education program at MUN does not prepare teachers adequately for teaching in small rural schools, where many teachers will begin their careers. Reflecting this shortcoming, another panel presenter expressed concern about the teacher education program at MUN: in spite of the fact that over 60% of the province is rural, the majority of teacher education coursework

and the provincial curriculum guides are designed for a single grade level. This presenter explained that in the rural setting it is more typical to teach in a multi-grade environment, where the number of students at any specific grade level may preclude opportunities to engage them in group work. To that effect, the presenter suggested that

in order to prepare teachers for this eventuality, the [Faculty of Education] at Memorial University should make it mandatory to complete a course on multi-age/grade education and/or rural education, and these courses should be taught by teachers who have experienced these methods of instruction.

Rural School Partnerships. In a number of rural schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, both schools and community organizations have benefited from various partnerships (see Table 4, Groups and Associations Supporting Children, Youth and Families). For instance, a submission by the executive director of the Harbour Breton Community Youth Network (HBCYN) highlights the benefits of the organization to the youth, the participating schools and their communities as a whole:

The network provides community-based facilities for youth aged 12 to 18 years, in addition to offering programs and services to other ages from 5 to 29 years. There are currently 24 hub sites with an additional 12 satellites throughout the province, all with the capacity to serve several other communities within their respective catchment areas.

HBCYN has been particularly involved in one high school. During this 10-year partnership, students have participated in two programs that connect them with a career course in the high school curriculum. According to the teacher of this course, the students' involvement in these programs "foster[s] life-long learning and skill development very pertinent to future careers." In addition to being involved in the school's career and business programs, HBCYN has supported school campaigns and programs to combat bullying and dating violence and has generated additional resources to "expand learning opportunities for students and provide professional development opportunities for educators."

The submission by the Coast of Bays Community Advisory Committee (CAC) highlighted the interconnectivity of the school and community in rural contexts. As a consequence of alarming statistics that reveal the population in the region has higher rates of diabetes and heart disease than the provincial average, the CAC has established a Health and School Alliance Committee composed of students, parents and education representatives from each of the nine schools in the region. At the time of its submission to the Panel, the committee had established goals and had developed a two-year work plan focused on healthy eating and physical activity. Noting that it is quite possible that schools in other communities have similar issues that have not yet come to the fore, the CAC suggested it might well be time for a province-wide focus on school and community healthy eating and active living programs in all schools.

In a partnership prior to the consolidation of all English school boards into one provincial board, the Clarenville-Bonavista region (the Vista region) of the Eastern School Board had supported a partnership between schools and the Ability Employment Corporation (AEC) to help students with intellectual disabilities: To "prepare [them] for work, find them appropriate suitable employment, prepare them for interviews, resumes etc. and...when employed...monitor them in their work placement to ensure the placement is a success." The spokesperson for AEC noted that although the program was successfully implemented in the past with the cooperation of personnel in the Vista region, with the consolidation into one school board the organization is "now finding it increasingly difficult to access schools." Emphasizing that persons with intellectual challenges who work during their school years have a greater level of success in getting employment after their school years, AEC is seeking support "from

the nine high schools in the previous 'Vista region' of [the] current NL English school board so they can renew...their transition to employment programs for youth with intellectual disabilities within the region." This presentation revealed the importance of locally based school district personnel in maintaining or reestablishing important school–community partnerships.

In most communities, community organization spokespeople's presentations and submissions relayed "loss of local agency" as they discussed a configuration of issues around schools in their respective communities and a multitude of interest groups. Even so, their support for the core function of schools' teaching and learning mission was strong. Evident in the submissions and often highlighted in the public presentations was a need to formally see schools as centers of a continuum of services that fill needs in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas community schools would better enable a "cascade" of services with access for related support groups. In some cases, resources could be combined: technical support for the community and the school, for example, or social services and public health. This could include the placement of social workers, occupational therapists, and other services in schools. Yet another example would see early learning centers in schools to support preschools in communities. As a case in point, the extensive number of support groups we saw in Harbour Breton are evidence that the system should support a community school structure. Furthermore, across the province, typified in the presentations in Labrador, Port Aux Basques and St. Anthony, the Panel saw both frustration over the lack of coordination of services and a sincere desire to do better. It seems that community schools with great local autonomy could improve this process.

Among the many community-based submissions, the Panel received a submission from the Nunatsiavut Government that highlighted specific concerns regarding public education in Nunatsiavut. Their submission emphasized that although education is a high priority, far too many youth are not completing high school, similar to many Inuit across Canada, "and for those that do, they find that their education does not compare to that of non-Aboriginal Canadians." Although their submission acknowledges there may be multiple factors that contribute to this reality, they have determined that an important factor relates to the teachers they hire. In fact, they noted, "There have been many studies done across different Aboriginal groups that show a marked improvement in a child's success in education when they are taught using a culturally relevant curriculum as well as being taught in their mother tongue." Within that context,

The Nunatsiavut Government Department of Education and Economic Development has partnered with Memorial University of Newfoundland and the College of the North Atlantic to develop and deliver the Inuit Bachelor of Education (IBED) degree program. The IBED is designed to deliver the current primary/elementary Bachelor of Education degree currently offered by MUN, but the curriculum will be infused with Labrador Inuit specific cultural content. In addition to this, the Inuktitut language is being taught using the...new Labrador Inuktitut Training Program curriculum...specifically designed to teach the language to adult learners.

Although this program provides hope, Nunatsiavut government officials acknowledged that a potential challenge might be that there will be no vacant teaching positions for the graduates of this new program. To address this concern, they have requested commencement of a conversation with various stakeholder groups so a plan will be in place to ensure the first graduates of the new program will be employed in Nunatsiavut schools. Clearly, this panel submission promises improved educational opportunities for Nunatsiavut children and youth, but its success appears to be highly dependent on genuine collaborative efforts of various groups.

It is apparent that although the majority of Panel participants indicated that they were content with the provincial curriculum, several expressed concerns related to limited access to French immersion programs, advanced programs in mathematics and other subjects; the absence of courses on financial management and budgeting; and the low priority given to physical education and extra-curricular activities. Two overarching concerns for several Panel participants in rural areas of the province relate to unacceptable Internet connectivity and the perceived absence of priority placed on teaching in rural settings within the Faculty of Education at MUN.

Schools and Community

John Ralston Saul has contended that in order to understand the roots of democracy in Canada, we have to look at the principal players of the 19th century who were “obsessed by public education” (as cited in Gariépy, 2000, para 4). Moreover, according to Gariépy’s account of Saul’s presentation to the Alberta Teachers’ Association in 2000, Saul stated that leaders at that time considered the terms “public education” and “democracy” as interchangeable. Notwithstanding the priority given to public education then and now, Saul observed both that democracy and public education “will always be a struggle ... as self-interest then, as today, leads many people to wonder why they pay more for something they are only getting a small part of—in this case, the education of other people” (as cited in Gariépy, 2000, para 4).

Fortunately, the level of engagement of many individuals, groups and organizations in this Panel consultation reveals an overarching societal commitment to quality public education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Moreover, while the developers of the *2014–2017 Strategic Plan* (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014) may not have fully considered the scope of the word “community” in the department’s vision statement¹, the engagement of varied and multiple constituents in this Panel consultation provides clear evidence that the interested and engaged public education “community” in Newfoundland and Labrador is truly inclusive, broad and diverse.

There is strong support for the high quality of our schools. For the most part, NL public schools seem to be of high quality and exceed their counterparts in many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Having said this, the loss of local agency in many regions and communities was evident in many of the presentations and submissions. As one size does not fit all, the current centralized “St. John’s conceptualization” of our public school system is seen as lacking flexibility. We need to reflect the distinctive interests expressed by innovators, parents and students. In larger centers, there are many groups pointed to the distinct interests and needs parents might have for their children: rather than have these students go to private schools, is it possible to have these elements of choice reflected in “themed” schools within larger centers? This is already reflected in concepts such as French immersion and could be considered for themes such as the arts, sports, or even autism, modified calendar or other areas of interest. This is not about developing charter schools, but schools which allow greater parental and student choice as well as to allow school authorities to innovate with new ideas and school configurations within the auspices of a school system, a supportive school council and the NLTA.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils

Among the most supportive and influential stakeholders of public education in Newfoundland and Labrador are the individual school councils and the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School

¹“A *community* that fosters care and learning in safe and inclusive environments enabling individuals to reach their full potential.” Department of Education (2014).

Councils (NLFSC). Representing individual school councils, the NLFSC is a central partner within the K–12 public education system and, as previously noted, a member of this Panel consultation team. In addition to being a Panel partner, the NLFSC contributed two submissions. The first submission by Peter Whittle, the Federation’s president, describes NLFSC as

a major stakeholder in education...that...express[es] its point of view and work[s] to influence policy or program changes before final decisions are made. The Federation works to strengthen communication between the Department of Education, school boards and [school councils], and work[s] with these educational partners to bring areas of concern to the government’s attention... The Federation of School Councils strives for excellence in education for all children and acts as a collective voice for school councils and for all parents/guardians. We provide leadership, representation and services to all volunteers in school councils and parent organizations.

By way of emphasizing the NLFSC’s level of engagement as a major stakeholder in public education, Whittle noted that the Federation receives an average of between 150 and 200 phone calls per year from parents, councils, various government departments and agencies. Additionally, its communication network includes a membership Listserv, a Facebook and Twitter account, and a website. He observed that NLFSC receives routine contact from various provincial and national media outlets and other education stakeholders and agencies that seek its input on various education issues. He expressed concern, however, that in spite of its level of engagement in important matters of public education and its repeated requests to government for increased funding, its operating grant has been reduced to \$20,000, a 50% reduction since 1999, resulting in a dependency on generous in-kind support from various other stakeholder agencies that have provided services free of charge (e.g., office space, printing and bulk mailing). He concluded that in order for the NLFSC to continue in its goal of supporting local school councils and parental involvement in local schools, an increase in its operational grant is essential. In addition to his specific focus on the Federation, Mr. Whittle also highlighted “the outstanding work of [individual] school councils in Newfoundland and Labrador and the need for funding to help them carry out their mandate.”

A second submission by NLFSC vice-president Terry Green emphasized,

Education is an investment and must remain a priority. Newfoundland and Labrador can take much pride in its public education system. However, we cannot be complacent about what we have been able to achieve. We believe that a sound fiscal plan is a necessity for this province, but there are, of course, important programs and services that require investment—especially education.

He argued that reductions to the allocation of teachers, school administrators and other teaching specialists such as learning resource teachers “put the students of this province at an extreme disadvantage.” Of particular concern is the fact that

approximately 40% of the teaching units cut in past budgets has come from the “needs-based” part of the teacher allocation model...that is intended to provide additional teachers to meet needs that districts identify, but which cannot be met by the “formula-based” allocations under the teacher allocation model. With fewer teachers allocated under that part of the model, districts are simply not able to address those identified needs... Government simply cannot continue to go down this road and expect a quality education...[especially when] the actual “needs” in our classrooms today are greater than ever.

Given the voluminous concerns highlighted by others groups as documented in previous pages of this report, the NLFSC vice-president's plea that "government simply cannot continue to go down this road and expect a quality education" cannot be ignored.

Equally concerning for Mr. Green are cuts to allocations of learning resource teachers, who play an important role in support of the application of emerging learning technologies and 21st century learning. They assist teachers in differentiated learning strategies, provide quality books and resources to students to help them meet curriculum outcomes and promote literacy through reading for pleasure. He lamented,

To my knowledge, there isn't one full-time teacher-librarian in any school in Newfoundland and Labrador. In a province that is still struggling with literacy issues, this is shameful! Students who at one point could venture into their library in search of a good book, or to get help with finding resources for a project, now find a locked door.

Overall, Mr. Green emphasized that school councils across this province are extremely disappointed that the progress made regarding teacher allocations in recent years has now been totally disregarded:

NLFSC believes that a needs-based formula as recommended and accepted by government in previous years, but has not been fully implemented, is critical to our schools and students. A needs-based teacher allocation formula would address many deficiencies in our education system, especially in the areas of special needs and inclusion. It would improve class sizes at all levels and provide full educational programming in our rural schools... It would ensure that students all across this province are treated fairly by ensuring they are all offered at least a defined level of education.

Given the classroom challenges described by many panel participants and documented in this report, Mr. Green's plea for more resources appears quite justified. Within that context, it is somewhat disconcerting that neither the English or Francophone school boards in the province presented to the Panel. As major stakeholders of public education in Newfoundland and Labrador, in the words of one presenter, "their silence is deafening!" Interestingly, though, the co-chair of a school council on the Avalon Peninsula highlighted the vital role played by school board trustees in policy making and governance of our school system and called upon government to set a date for school board elections. This person noted, however, that with a single English school board for the entire province, individual school councils "play an even more vital role in ensuring our school system is meeting the needs of our students from the parents' perspective and from our community," and hence, additional resources must be allocated to both the NLFSC and local school councils for operations and member training.

To allow more regional cooperation and innovation, and indeed parent, student and teacher choice, government in cooperation with the NLTA needs to consider the creation of community or themed schools. These schools could become exciting areas for student learning as well as university research into such innovations. The Panel learned of examples of how local or self-governing regions can help to foster improvements, apparent in the presentations in Harbour Breton and from the Nunatsiavut Government. In Harbour Breton, a variety of community groups and school leaders were acting in a loose coalition to the benefit of the area's schools and the region as a whole. More local agencies to support such efforts would increase the collective efficacy of these groups.

An example of an exemplary partnership in education and evidence of the benefits of self-government was seen in the Faculty of Education and Nunatsiavut partnership to deliver a community-based teacher

education program. Fifteen students in this program gave compelling evidence of what can work for them in their education system and left the Panel with great hope for this group of soon-to-be teachers. These are not developments that can be led from St. John's, but they can be supported through meaningful partnerships that give the people of a region support from government in the exercise of real local authority to make decisions as to their future education. It seems greater local autonomy within the community schools concept could aid this process.

The adjacency principle is a well-understood practice in maritime law. Essentially, the adjacency principle means that those closest to a resource should be the prime beneficiaries of that resource. Applying this principle to the province, supported by the evidence from respondents that greater local decision making works while the lack of it frustrates innovation, we believe the province needs to loosen its centralization of educational decision making. We believe that, with the exception of a few core areas, the concentration of decision making in St. John's is not an effective means to deal with many issues facing the diverse regions of our province. In this respect, more delegation to school administrators is needed. As well, an enhanced role for local school councils in the absence of localized school districts, or regional professional development in partnership with the district, the Department of Education and MUN, should be made available.

Other Community Partners

In addition to the individuals, groups and organizations who consider themselves insiders or who advocate for more direct involvement with select groups of students in the public education system (e.g., NLFSC, Autism Society, Canadian Hard of Hearing Association-NL, LDANL), representatives of 13 other community organizations who interact with schools and/or school-aged children and youth submitted briefs or presented at one of the panel sessions (see Table 4, Groups and Associations Supporting Children, Youth and Families). Although not directly associated with school-aged children or K–12 public education, their engagement reveals the interconnectedness and overarching societal commitment to quality public education within the social fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador.

For instance, it is likely that few would be aware of the Association for New Canadians' engagement in public schools in both English and French school districts throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. Through the Settlement Workers in the Schools (SWIS) program, the Association "help[s] facilitate language and literacy acquisition, promote cultural awareness, and foster community engagement." At the time of its submission, the SWIS program team was supporting approximately 200 newcomer children and youth in 25 different schools in the greater St. John's region as well as other schools across the province. Because the SWIS program has had tremendous success and has been welcomed in schools across the province, the Association for New Canadians recommended the following practices:

- 1. Implement diversity training as part of professional development for school personnel with the assistance of the SWIS Team. "Cross-cultural awareness training would not only help to inform the broader school community regarding refugees' pre- and post-migration issues, but it would also provide teachers and administrators with valuable insight into the challenges faced by newcomer children and youth."*
- 2. Implement additional resources for the ESL (English as a Second Language) and LEARN (Literacy, Enrichment, Academic, Readiness for Newcomers) programs. Currently, these programs are offered in only one or two schools within the St. John's metropolitan region. As a consequence, there are concerns relating to program access for students who live outside of the catchment areas for those schools. The LEARN program, based on the K–3*

language arts program, is currently available to “newcomer students who have little or no prior schooling.” The SWIS team recommends that reintroducing this program at the elementary school level would be quite beneficial.

3. Implement an increased focus on skilled trades training in the classroom for newcomer youth aged 16 to 21. Some newcomer youth arrive with experience in a skilled trade having spent many years as informal apprentices; consequently, the provision of some courses in the skilled trades “could place them on a pathway to a rewarding career.”

Similarly, the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women (PACSW) has recognized the importance of public education, noting that the “issues affecting the women of Newfoundland and Labrador are closely connected to their levels of education and the supports that are available in the public school.” PACSW contended that

detecting signs for...social exclusion and family violence at an early stage is essential in ensuring that corrective measures can be taken. Furthermore, advancing the economic security of women in our province begins with a strong educational background, which ensures that both girls and boys have the same information and opportunities available to them for selecting a career most suitable to their skills and interests, while keeping in mind the needs of the province’s labour market.

Within this context, PACSW expressed concern about high levels of absenteeism (particularly unexplained absenteeism) in our public schools. Highlighting the gravity of their concern, they cited research evidence from a April 2012 Gardiner Centre NL report that suggested, “Truancy and chronic absenteeism can be precursors to school drop-out, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency.” They recommended:

- Increased stakeholders’ awareness of the risks and challenges related to absenteeism and possible solutions to remedy the situation.
- Increased focus on healthy relationships. Our schools need to focus attention at every level, in an age-appropriate manner, on healthy relationships, sexual assault and Internet/online safety...
- The schools of Newfoundland and Labrador make active use of restorative approaches in building healthy relationships[,] both preventing conflicts from happening in school environments and solving conflicts [that] have happened.
- Train staff in their active use of restorative approaches in building healthy relationships in school environments in Newfoundland and Labrador and in preventing conflicts from happening and solving conflicts when they do happen.
- Availability of supports to implement inclusive educational practices...as a way to prepare pupils for life outside of the school, respect for deadlines, discipline and related consequences should be emphasized in schools.

Another community organization, the Planned Parenthood-NL Sexual Health Centre (PP-NLSHC) took time to present to this Panel to highlight its commitment to the children and youth in public schools. It provides direct supports to public education by offering sexual health education sessions and relevant resources, supporting school health fairs, renting out sexual health kits as a teaching supplement and providing pregnancy testing and options counselling for youth between the ages of 12 and 18.

Additionally, PP-NLSHC supports and is available as a resource to school Gay–Straight Alliance clubs and offers an LGBTQ youth group and LGBTQ youth leadership camp every summer. Although PP-NLSHC has been a willing partner in the provision of services to schools, its spokesperson articulated considerable concern about what it perceives to be the low priority given to sexual health education in the school system and the “extreme lack of support for teachers of this curriculum, [many of whom have no] background, desire, or comfort level to teach...sexual health.” In the context of the supports that PP-NLSHC provides to public schools, it is seeking “a better collaborative effort between PP-NLSHC and the NLTA and increased financial supports” in order to maintain the current level of service to schools and school-aged youth.

A relatively new organization in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education Consortium, has a primary focus on children and youth in school environments. It presented to the Panel to increase public awareness of its existence and its potential benefit to schools and other community agencies. The consortium:

envisions communities where the inherent worth and well-being of all involved are honoured and promoted. It recognizes the significance of authentic relationships in the healthy development of youth in NL.

aims to nurture and support relational organizational cultures where children, youth, and adults alike thrive.

promotes, supports, and encourages creating and sustaining relational educational cultures in NL and the development of relational policies within a variety of organizations engaged with youth.

The presenters highlighted that this initiative is founded in educational research on school climate and culture that when students feel they belong, they are more likely to flourish and optimal learning is more likely to occur. They lamented, however, that in many schools students “feel unsafe, uncared for, and marginalized.” Clarifying that “restorative justice in education is rising to the surface globally as a means for understanding how to move schools from being rule-based to relationship-based cultures,” they noted that as a result of their organization, the practice of restorative justice is growing and already has begun to have a positive impact in Newfoundland and Labrador:

NL is leading the country in understanding how it is far more than another approach but rather a change in mindset, a new paradigm. Here we have identified that Relationships First encapsulates this essence of restorative justice. Engaging practically with its philosophy and theory is supporting its implementation and sustainability.

In addition to the four above-mentioned groups that provide services directly to students or schools, several other groups and organizations, although not directly engaged in providing services to school-aged children and youth, are committed to the improvement of public education programming. For instance, the Panel received a comprehensive written brief from the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, a private philanthropic foundation established in Newfoundland and Labrador to promote resiliency in children and their families, on early childhood education and full-day kindergarten. Having recognized the critical importance of

early identification and intervention... [and having concluded] that the best way to reach those vulnerable is to reach all children through universal quality programs, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation...prioritized quality Early Childhood Education (ECE)...and partnered

with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation to inform public policy on ECE in our province. To that end, [both] foundations partnered with the Leslie Harris Centre at Memorial University of Newfoundland in conducting an informed, public conversation on what ECE could look like in our province.

There appears to be little doubt that the aforementioned initiatives by the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and the Leslie Harris Centre public forums contributed significantly to the provincial government's commitment to an early childhood learning strategy and its decision to implement full-day kindergarten commencing September 2016. In the context of this government commitment to ECE, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation submission highlighted several questions to be considered by the Faculty of Education and the College of the North Atlantic. The McCain and Pratt foundations are heavily involved in support of the Department of Education's implementation of full-day kindergarten and play-based learning. This raised interesting questions about the role of foundations in shaping or influencing public policy. The Pratt submission raises questions as to the Faculty of Education's readiness to develop teachers in the context of early learning as well as play-based learning.

While we question whether the inclusion of early learning in schools will lead to significant improvements in student achievement, and the timing of the start of full-day kindergarten, in principle we support these efforts as part of a cascade of improvements that can result in the changes needed in our schools and society.

Another nonprofit organization, Code NL, "advocates for computer programming education...believing that computer programming should be a required subject in schools...as it is crucial that young people...have the skills to use technology effectively." Code NL contended, "Programming is the new literacy ...[and to] thrive in tomorrow's society, young people must learn to design, create and express themselves with digital technologies." It contended, also, that in addition to the inherent benefits of being able to code, computer programming teaches problem solving, logic and principles of design; as well, it encourages creativity. The Code NL submission argued that "teaching programming in schools is the only way to effectively combat the under-representation of women and other minorities in computer science and other computer programming-related fields." Although the representative stated that Code NL is not necessarily asking for a dedicated computer programming course for every student in every grade, it advocates for at least one required course at each of the three schooling levels (primary, elementary and intermediate). In an apparent demonstration of Code NL's commitment to its stated objectives, the written brief concluded, "We would be happy to provide assistance in reaching these goals. We can provide helpful resources, and help teach computer programming to educators, all totally free of charge."

Yet another organization, the Leaders for Financial Awareness (LFFA), has perceived "a serious lack of financial education in our communities and schools which leads to families and individuals putting themselves at serious risk of financial crises, or at least forever struggling to achieve their goals." To that effect, LFFA proposed an increased focus on the development of financial literacy in our communities and our schools.

Equally passionate about its cause, the St. John's Chapter of the Council of Canadians stated that it "feel[s] strongly about the general decline in democratic engagement among young people in our province, and how this may be linked...to the attention the curriculum gives or doesn't give to 21st century economic, democratic and citizenship issues." In particular, the Council is concerned about

what it perceives to be an “overemphasis on STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subjects” at the expense of other parts of the curriculum that has contributed to “a neglect of democratic and economic issues in the senior high social studies curriculum.” Its brief highlighted, for instance, the removal of a democracy course in the late 1990s, which has “not been reintroduced even though in 2011 only 29% of our young people under [age] 25 bothered to vote in the federal election.” As well, the council’s submission raised concerns about senior high economics courses, arguing, “The economics education program in the senior high system neglects fundamental economic issues,” thereby denying students the opportunity to understand the implications of globalization:

It’s not just that students are missing important chunks of information about the economic and political developments of the 21st century. We are concerned that the courses that were dropped from the curriculum were the very ones that promoted discussion and debate. The courses that replaced them emphasize, instead, the mastery of discrete skills...but they are not conducive to promoting critical thinking around broad political and economic issues.

In pondering why there has been a downgrading of civil discussion, debate and intellectual questioning, the St. John’s Chapter of the Council of Canadians proposed that at least one of the causes “was the introduction in the 1990s of outcomes-based education that does not support discussion.” A second cause, the Council suggested, “was the emergence of the STEM curriculum with its emphasis on measurement and skill-based education. The education system’s priority became giv[ing] students a solid math and science education in preparation for the hi-tech, highly skilled jobs of the 21st century.” From the Council’s perspective, however, this will not provide the promise expected; rather, as the Council highlighted,

The Newfoundland and Labrador government has just released its Labour Market Outlook for the next 10 years in which they forecast a decline in demand for professional and science graduates. [As well] a 2014 study by the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers reported that only 30% of engineering graduates at the Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D. levels in Ontario were working as engineers or engineering managers.

“The new reality,” the chair of the council stated, “is underemployment and precarious employment... We have an education system that made serious mistakes in direction...by downgrading intellectual debate and democracy education in favour of skills training—skills that will now be needed most.” In light of these concerns, the Council recommended that the NLTA take a more proactive role in professional development with an emphasis on strengthening conversations around democratic participation, specifically at the high school level:

There needs to be some sort of joint task force of the Department of Education, the school boards, the NLTA, and higher education institutions like Memorial University to look at the status of education in our province as it relates to the changing needs of our society. There needs to be more collaboration between these stakeholders and a willingness to consult with teachers and communities. ...Historically, Newfoundland and Labrador teachers have taken a leadership role in defining the goals and values of society. We would like teachers to reclaim that leadership role.

Highlighting the differing perspectives and priorities that must be weighed and balanced by those who make curriculum and program decisions for public schools, the presentation by the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering at MUN contradicted the claim of a decline in the demand for science graduates as projected by the St. John’s Chapter of the Council of Canadians. As a matter of fact, the Dean

projected a marked shortage of engineers in Canada by 2020 rather than an oversupply. Moreover, with a perceived need for additional engineers, he contended that the breadth of public school programs in Newfoundland and Labrador has created scheduling conflicts that have negatively impacted student enrolment in science and mathematics, which has compromised program quality. He proposed that schools improve student awareness of what engineers do and how they contribute to society and refocus “on depth of math, science and computer literacy in senior years to address the lack of preparation for technical fields like engineering.”

The Panel members believe that improvements in literacy and numeracy are needed, but not merely in response to rankings. Rankings are not static, so our question would be about improving our relative ranking as well as our overall performance. Having said this, while we believe that the sky is not falling, there are clouds. The “math wars” and “sky is falling standard achievement” cries were not evident in the Panel presentations and submissions as we had expected, but important points were raised.

The Premier’s mandate letter to the Minister of Education speaks boldly of ending Newfoundland and Labrador’s chronic underachievement on national indicators. We support this notion, although the awareness of our education as a high-performing system internationally is sometimes missed in such statements as we are compared to other provinces in what is the highest performing English language system in the world. Since the link between socioeconomic status and student achievement is well known, the province needs to improve the economic welfare of the people while taking special measures to ensure improvements in key areas related to our children’s performance.

Two areas of concern regarding numeracy were evident: (a) changes in curriculum, particularly math, and related teaching styles; and (b) a perceived claim expressed by MUN presenters about a gap in the math performance of Newfoundland and Labrador high school students entering the university. A parent in St. Anthony spoke of the frustration of helping her grade 3 child with math and her engineer husband who said, “Just carry the damn one.” More thoughtful in this regard was a current elementary school principal and former district numeracy specialist from Clarenville who spoke of the tremendous potential of the new approach to teaching and learning as well as the complexity of implementing it. The upshot is that we have a new approach to math and not enough support to teachers and indeed parents in making this transition. This reality, and very vocal critics of the transition, seem to be undermining a promising solution to the province’s chronic low standing in math performance.

This debate is a complex one, as the research cited often looks at US results, which our system exceeds, admittedly not as well as many other Canadian provinces, but still quite well compared to other OECD countries. Perhaps related to this shift in how math should be taught and the supports students need, as well as a long-standing decrying of math performance from faculty at MUN, the Panel felt questions by the Dean of Engineering about some aspects of math readiness were important. Why aren’t our students entering MUN with the success evident from their high school performance? A counter consideration is whether the legacy claim about first-year student readiness at MUN is correct. Is the gap at MUN’s expectations or the school system’s outcomes? Another important and related question is, how do the province’s students perform in math on entry to other Canadian universities? This suggests the need for more support for the curriculum implementation, as well as research into the issues the province’s students face when they enter MUN as well as other Canadian universities.

Developing young minds into knowledge workers should not be seen as a form of child labour in an effort to respond to the false cry of falling achievement, nor should it downplay the importance of being an educated and healthy person. Each need should be met in a balanced way. We also need to

seek to better support emotional and physical wellness in our schools. We need to have a school day that is less condensed and allow children more time to learn experientially and to simply be children during the day.

Concern about student performance on national and international tests was not as evident as we had expected. Parents and teachers, while acknowledging areas that need improvement, praised our schools and suggested the system is a high achieving one despite periodic and alarmist attacks on performance by special interest groups. The key concern raised repeatedly across the province was that wellness of all kinds was most important. Parents and teachers were concerned about quality of life and made compelling pleas to support a less hectic pace and a more balanced lifestyle in our schools. Parents want “happy, healthy and well-balanced” children who learn to participate in the building of our society, who care for others and who are active in our democratic processes. They should go outdoors more as part of schooling. In other words, schools should enable an enhanced emotional and physical lifestyle, not a birth-to-death treadmill of high stress demands based on unhealthy notions of student success under a false cry of global competitiveness. This finding bolsters that recommendations for more supports for schools mentioned throughout this report as well as the need to look at alternative forms of schooling.

Alejandro Buren, an academic at MUN, underscored the importance and benefits of children’s right to free play, consistent with several others who raised concerns related to health and physical education in particular. First, he pointed to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Education should be directed to a broad range of developmental areas, including the child’s personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities. Play and recreation activities can play a significant role in fulfilling the child’s right to “the highest attainable standard of health” and to “preventive health care,” as set out in the Convention.

Within this context, Dr. Buren advocated that educators and education administrators must view recess to be essential for children. Recess gives students time away from structured work and provides them with opportunities for physical exercise and free play through which they learn social skills (communication, cooperation, compromise), explore their own ideas and engage in problem-solving activities, while “re-charging their minds after periods of structured activity.” He observed, as well, that the research evidence has suggested that “adequate recess time actually improves student behavior and academic goals.” Furthermore, he noted, “There are educational experiences (for example in New Zealand) that indicate that when children are allowed to play freely, the instances of bullying and tattling among students are markedly reduced.” In light of such evidence in support of adequate time for recreation and play, Dr. Buren highlighted that in public schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, both the morning recess break and the lunch break is typically quite brief, not allowing sufficient time for free play, especially when children must dress for outside play. He recommended the following policies:

- In general, encourage and emphasize free play in all recesses.
- In particular, extend the lunch break 20 minutes (10 minutes for primary and 10 for elementary) to allow enough time for children to get dressed for the weather, play outside and get ready for instructional time. Cost—none.
- Potential cons—reduced instructional time. This is not necessarily negative. It would be negative if less instructional time would impact the children’s academic development. However, this hinges on the premise that more instructional time implies better development. The Scandinavian experience in this matter tells us that this premise is not true.

In respect to physical activity through organized school sports, a parent and school coach in western Newfoundland raised concerns related to the requirement that a teacher sponsor must be present for school games and practices in cases where the actual coach is not a teacher, even when the coach is a responsible adult who coaches similar community teams (e.g., minor hockey) and could quite easily obtain the necessary legal documentation (e.g., criminal record check) to supervise children. This parent observed that since the initial implementation of this policy, there has been a great deal of school consolidation, many teachers commute and the expectations on teachers have grown. S/he contends, requiring teachers to give up evenings and weekends just to fulfill a perfunctory, redundant role, already performed by a responsible coach must be revisited!

Stephen Piercey, another MUN faculty member representing his colleagues in the Department of Earth Sciences, expressed concern with the existing earth sciences curriculum. Although he commends the Department of Education for increasing the content of earth sciences in the K–9 curriculum in the last decade, he expressed grave concern that

despite the significance of the earth sciences to our province and globally,...negative perceptions of earth sciences persist and exist because they are institutionalized within the education system...[as] students clearly get the message that earth sciences is...not as rigorous as the other sciences (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics).

Lamenting that such negative perceptions of a science so critical to Newfoundland and Labrador continue to persist, Dr. Piercey made the following recommendations on behalf of the Earth Sciences Department at MUN:

- The attitude towards earth sciences must change in the K–12 curriculum so it is treated as a rigorous, quantitative science equivalent to other scientific disciplines...
- Instructors of earth sciences should be trained as earth scientists, and if this is not possible, they should have some form of education, either through formal or informal means, in the earth sciences so as to ensure that curriculum is taught rigorously, quantitatively, and with the message that it is an important science both provincially and globally...
- [Earth sciences should] be taught in more schools in the province and given equivalence to other sciences.
- The province should develop a 2000-level course and provide it in more high schools provincially. Creating a 2000-level course would show that earth science is equivalent in rigor and importance to physics, chemistry, and biology, all of which have 2000- and 3000-level offerings.
- [The Earth Sciences Department] encourages that earth sciences courses, as well as all other science, technology, [engineering] and mathematics (STEM) courses be taught more rigorously and quantitatively, with emphasis on problem solving, so as to increase the problem-solving and quantitative skills of our students.

In addition to these submissions from various groups and individuals, the Panel received several submissions about music programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. Of particular note were two major submissions: (a) Kathy Conway-Ward, the president of the NLTA Music Special Interest Council; and (b) a graduate class in music education at MUN. The president of the Music Special Interest Council noted,

Traditionally, schools in Newfoundland and Labrador have been celebrated nationally and internationally for the strength of their music programs. Musical ensembles have travelled all over the world to participate in festivals and competitions, and have been quite successful when representing our province. All students in grades kindergarten to six participate in classroom music, choir and/or instrumental ensembles, and students in grades 7–12 are afforded the opportunity to take music courses [and] participate in bands, choirs, orchestras, and other musical groups.

The success of school music programs in this province, Ms. Conway-Ward suggested, are a result of several factors; MUN's School of Music and Faculty of Education play a huge part. Of note, the music education students and their professor, Dr. Andrea Rose, demonstrated their continued leadership by submitting a detailed brief to this Panel recommending that the Department of Education, in collaboration with

- school districts, establish a system of accountability ensuring all intermediate students have access to music education.
- Memorial University's School of Music, conduct an investigation of student enrolments in arts courses at the intermediate level to determine why enrolments are so low, given that these programs are mandatory.
- school districts, develop a new teacher allocation formula that serves the needs of program implementation in small rural schools by including an appropriate ratio of music teachers to ...students...
- school districts and the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI), provide access for intermediate and senior high students in small multi-level K–12 rural schools (65 or less students) to music education programming via a music specialist through CDLI.
- CDLI, develop intermediate music courses to be delivered through distance learning technologies, ensuring availability of music to all students in small multi-level K–12 rural schools in Newfoundland [and] Labrador.
- CDLI, hire two music specialists to provide [through distance education] classroom music programming as well as performance courses in tin whistle, guitar, and/or fiddle, for intermediate students in small multi-level K–12 rural schools throughout Newfoundland [and] Labrador.
- school districts, tender for the purchase of tin whistles, guitars, and/or fiddles to be used for instruction in the CDLI intermediate music program throughout Newfoundland [and] Labrador.
- school districts, tender for the purchase of additional CPUs to support distance music education for the thirty-two small multi-level K–12 rural schools in Newfoundland [and] Labrador.

Another music educator in this province for 20 years supported the recommendations presented by the NLTA Music Special Interest Council but added that one of the biggest deterrents to music offerings in our schools is the allocation of the music specialist. This educator expressed considerable concern about

detrimental cuts...to the quality of [music programs]... In the last ten years, allocations have been lost, time has been cut [and] equipment is aging [and] teachers are trying to offer quality programs with less supports, [fewer] dollars and less time.

As a consequence of such cuts, music specialists have struggled to offer music programs that this presenter believes would otherwise be very strong. This educator teaches in two schools with responsibilities for classroom music, band and choir at both the junior and senior high levels, with additional responsibilities in offering enrichment and remedial work, directing several co-curricular groups, preparing courses and maintaining aging instruments—and noted, “You can see the difficulty in offering a quality program!”

Every day is a challenge for me as I attempt to maintain a quality music education for my students. I know I am not alone in this. I have had conversations with my colleagues about the decline in band programs across the island... It is preposterous to realize how quickly the decline has progressed. Government really needs to re-evaluate the cuts in reference to specialist allocations at the intermediate level, especially the combination of art and music. If they do not reinstate some of what has been lost, I fear for the future of our music program as a quality offering.

Finally, another professor in the Faculty of Education at MUN, a recent past superintendent of education in another province, expressed serious concerns related to the relatively recent consolidation of all English school boards into one. He opined that the extent of the consolidation has reduced the amount of professional collaboration and therefore the exchange of innovative ideas. As well, he lamented that program specialists in the English school district are now faced with the nearly impossible task of providing service support due to the excessively large geographical area to be served. He noted,

The problem of operating a school board over such a large geographic area is daunting, and the concomitant difficulties associated with travel, budget resources, and time are an absolute nightmare. We have a cadre of very capable program experts within our province but we have disenfranchised them, removed them from where they ought to be, broken established service traditions and left our schools increasingly isolated.

In his view, “The result has already proven to be problematic at best and a cause for increased concern. We have gone from a system of education that had local school governance to a system run from the Confederation Building.” He concluded,

The damage to our province’s public school system will take years to undo. This ill-informed, far right of center provincial policy...will cause ongoing damage until it is reversed... Research evidence consistently shows amalgamations do not save money... While...reinstating school boards will entail costs, ...the cost of not reinstating them will be far greater in the loss of student learning and the increased number of students who will likely fall through these widened cracks in our system. Thus I give the province’s policy makers an F.

In support of both a better pace of learning and well as more experiential forms of learning, many respondents felt students should go outdoors more as part of schooling. The lack of experiential learning is suggestive of a failure to see the province outside the school walls as part of the learning environment. This view also reinforces recommendations for more supports for schools throughout this report as well as the need to look at alternative forms of schooling.

The diverse panel presenters and the groups they represented demonstrated a commitment to public education, one that is being frustrated by a sense of lost local agency, revealing one of the most serious challenges evident in public education and related decision making in a democratic society such as Newfoundland and Labrador. This was true for many issues around support for schools and teaching, ranging from learning resources to building repairs, and for more site-based professional development, suggesting the one large school board is challenged to meet such needs.

The larger school board and the Department of Education are nobly struggling to meet demand, but the interest and flexibility needed at the site or region seems missing. In most cases we felt that if there were a local presence with appropriate delegation of resources, many of these issues could be resolved locally. We believe that local governance and decision making works, and with the exception of a few core areas, that the concentration of decision making in St. John's is not an effective method to deal with many issues. In this respect, more delegation to school administrators is needed, local school councils need an enhanced role and more regional professional development in partnership with the district, Department of Education and MUN should be made available.

Clearly, no one person, group, organization or government can unilaterally control education. In fact, the evidence from this consultation confirms Sheppard, Brown and Dibbon's (2009) observation that although the policies and practices at the provincial, district and school level interact to exert a direct influence on school and school system priorities and objectives, and how teaching and learning are manifested in school classrooms, many groups (e.g., unions, professional associations, parents, community and business groups, researchers and the media) and varied conditions have a huge impact as well.

In Conclusion

Both the breadth of public engagement and the depth of the presentations to this Panel leave little doubt that public education in Newfoundland and Labrador is a central priority for many of the province's private and public organizations. The following concluding remarks by the vice-president of the NLFSC provide an apt summary of hope embedded in the majority of the presentations to this Panel:

It is our belief in our children and their future, as well as the future of this province, that compels NLFSC to do everything in [our] power to encourage government to invest more human resources in our schools... It is our wish that government simply listen to concerns from school councils, parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and students themselves... [We] want to work with government to find fiscal solutions that do not unravel years of advancement. We believe the best solution to our province's pressing economic and social challenges lie in providing our children with the best learning experiences possible. These children will one day be our workforce, business-owners, and political leaders.

Finally, returning to John Ralston Saul's comments to the Alberta Teachers' Association, his concluding words to his audience, as reported by Gariépy (2000), make a fitting conclusion to this report:

The success of democracy is to create a broadly based educated population that is taught to think. The purpose of education is not simply to prepare students for possible employment. We must recognize that public education is intimately tied to the roots of our democracy and the way our society works and has always worked. We have to rediscover that, and we have to re-energize that and our commitment to universal education (para 14).

It is within the notion that we see a need to conduct an even greater public consultation in education, one that depoliticizes the reform process. Perhaps it is time to establish a Royal Commission on the Future of Education?

In addition to this full report, we have produced a summary document which highlights the major themes as well as the related recommendations for action needed to help deal with the concerns raised.

The major themes are:

- Challenging and Exceptional Needs
- Early Learning
- Multi-Aging
- Local Agency and Innovation: Community Schools (Urban and Rural)
- Local Agency: Regional Autonomy
- Wellness
- Greater Cooperation in School and Teacher Development: Better Together
- To the Future

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Appendix A: Recommendations

Recommendation 1. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with the NLTA, Faculty of Education and other stakeholders develop a plan to increase the number of instructional resource teachers, school counsellors, educational psychologists, speech language pathologists and student assistants. The allocation formula providing supports for students with special needs and challenging needs should be truly a needs-based assessment and generous in application.

Recommendation 2. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with the NLTA and other stakeholders establish a new class size cap for classes with a composition diversity of greater than 10% in primary, elementary, intermediate and senior high schools.

Recommendation 3. That the Department of Education and the School District(s) in consultation with stakeholders consider the creation of an alternative path for some children. In such cases this would normally be short term, as the school district would then assess school-based supports and initiate training in preparation for a return to school.

Recommendation 4. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with schools, the NLTA and Memorial University create training and support programs for parents of learning disabled and autistic children, and others as needed.

Recommendation 5. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with the Faculty of Education and the NLTA, initiate province-wide professional development, new degree configurations and mediums of delivery to improve the training of current teachers and administrators in autism and learning disabilities. These efforts should have links to credentialing through the university and provincial certification.

Recommendation 6. That Government give serious consideration to the inclusion of social workers as professional employees within schools to support existing personnel.

Recommendation 7. That Government, consistent with the practice in other provinces, include occupational therapists as professional employees in schools.

Recommendation 8. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders take the steps necessary to ensure a greater coordination of services between the education and health sectors.

Recommendation 9. That Memorial University and the Department of Education support the Faculty of Education in its process of arm's length research into early learning. This could be in the form of a Canada Research Chair (CRC) or a faculty member as an existing Faculty Research Chair (FRC).

Recommendation 10. That the Faculty of Education seek to create a model classroom as an early childhood learning centre.

Recommendation 11. That the Faculty of Education create a path or specialization within the primary-elementary program in early childhood learning.

Recommendation 12. That the Department of Education assist the Faculty of Education to develop a plan for the Faculty of Education to hire additional faculty or associates to address early learning teacher development.

Recommendation 13. That the Faculty of Education and Department of Education place more emphasis on teaching in multi-age settings, not just for rural schools, but wherever a school community seeks to embrace the concept.

Recommendation 14. That the Department of Education in cooperation with stakeholders develop multi-age and multi-grade curriculum documents for various grade level and age configurations.

Recommendation 15. That the NLTA reestablish a Small Schools (Multi-Age) Special Interest Council.

Recommendation 16. That the Department of Education, NLTA, and Nunatsiavut Government negotiate a path of entry for graduates of the IBED program targeted at schools within the Nunatsiavut territory.

Recommendation 17. That Government seek to create community schools in cooperation with other agencies.

Recommendation 18. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders review the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District with a view to creating local educational authorities. Failing this, create regional professional growth and development centers in partnership with the Department of Education, district personnel, schools, MUN and NLTA (support for instructional leadership, professional development, technology and literacy/numeracy).

Recommendation 19. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders delegate more decision-making power to the school level. This includes granting more administrative time to schools and more support and training for school councils.

Recommendation 20. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders provide more support for a provincial organization of school councils, and perhaps an elected regional affiliation with the school districts.

Recommendation 21. That the Department of Education and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders embrace the work of the Relationships First Consortium in support of the principles of restorative justice, school discipline, and safe and caring schools.

Recommendation 22. That Government provide additional resources to address child mental health concerns and in particular embrace the ratio of 1 counsellor to 250 students.

Recommendation 23. That the Department of Education reevaluate curriculum and learning as being Internet dependent and consider outdoor, experiential, land-based and ocean programs as tools for learning.

Recommendation 24. That the Faculty of Education support more arts, outdoor, experiential, land-based and ocean programs as part of its teacher development programs in addition to the use of technology.

Recommendation 25. That the Department of Education and the School District(s) clarify and, if necessary, revise student evaluation and assessment policies and procedures. This should include a communication plan for parents and guardians as to the policy.

Recommendation 26. That the Department of Education, NLTA, Memorial University and the School District(s) review and improve the supports for numeracy and related mathematics teaching approaches in order to better support the ongoing implementation of the mathematics curriculum. This would include a strategy for informing parents as to their role in this transition.

Recommendation 27. That the Faculty of Education and the Department of Education jointly research the relative performance of the province's high school graduates on entering Memorial University and the College of the North Atlantic, as well as other Canadian universities.

Recommendation 28. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders encourage regional and local partnerships with schools and other organizations to support common infrastructure and technology needs.

Recommendation 29. That Government and the School District(s) in cooperation with stakeholders ensure that schools that are reliant on the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) have adequate bandwidth to allow for uninterrupted instruction.

Recommendation 30. That the Faculty of Education and the Department of Education need to consider technology training as part of their respective programing and professional development.

Recommendation 31. That the Department of Education, the School District(s) and the Faculty of Education work to create a cadre of faculty associates focused on core specializations (e.g., numeracy, technology, literacy, assessment and early learning). These efforts should have links to credentialing through the university and provincial certification.

Recommendation 32. That Government establish a Royal Commission on the Future of Education in Newfoundland and Labrador.