

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

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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... [It's their] passion and effort that make the system succeed. (~ a parent)

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Challenging and Exceptional Needs	4
Supports for Students With Challenging Needs.	4
Autism and Learning Disabilities	5
Early Learning	5
Multi-Aging	6
Local Agency and Innovation: Community Schools (Urban and Rural).	6
Local Agency: Regional Autonomy	7
Wellness	7
Wellness as Safety	8
Wellness as Resilience	8
Wellness as Physical Health	8
Greater Cooperation in School and Teacher Development: Better Together	9
Changing Practices: Assessment and Numeracy	9
Support for Technology Education	9
Support for Teacher Development	10
To the Future.	10

List of Tables

Table 1. Panel Session Dates and Locations	3
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Introduction

Note: This is the summary report of themes and recommendations drawn from the full report as follows: Sheppard, B. and Anderson, K. (2016). *Better Together: The Final Report of the Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador 2015-16*.

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.

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.

In the absence of a large-scale public consultation, discussion about educational issues can fall prey to the normative thinking of those working in the field, 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 focused 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 as part of its mandate. In particular, the *Teachers' Association Act* states that the objectives of the NLTA are:

- (a) to promote the cause of education in the province by
 - (i) affording to educational authorities, teachers and the public in general the benefits of the collective experience and advice of teachers on practical educational matters,
 - (ii) circulating information regarding educational methods and movements in the province and elsewhere,
 - (iii) stimulating through the media of communication an interest in education among the people generally, and
 - (iv) organizing and supporting groups for improving the knowledge and skill of teachers.

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 a final report (*Better Together: The Final Report of the Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador 2015-16*). The Panel comprised three members: President James Dinn of the NLTA, Ms. Denise Pike of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, and Dr. Kirk Anderson 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. 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. The 60 face-to-face public panel hearings were conducted in 12 communities across Newfoundland and Labrador through October and November, 2015. 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	Clareville	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

As well, nearly 400 submissions were posted through the NLTA website. To further encourage participation and dissemination, the Panel process 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 larger report outlines the variety of sources of the submissions and presentations. While the majority of the presentations and online submissions were from teachers, a significant number of other organizations and private citizens took the opportunity to contribute. In fact, the breadth and depth of participation lend serious weight to our view that this report reflects broad public perspectives on public education. The larger report reflects these perspectives in detail, and there is much to be gained in considering the multitude of viewpoints that express both praise and concern regarding public education in this province. Reflective of many these views, 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... [It’s their] passion and effort that make the system succeed.

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 budget challenges, we believe this report can serve to inform the new government's policy and practice. In this summary we highlight major themes from the full report as well as recommendations to help deal with the concerns raised:

- Challenging and exceptional needs
- Early learning
- Multi-aging
- Local Agency and Innovation
- Wellness
- Greater cooperation in school and teacher development: Better together
- To the future

Please note that this summary is arranged using the above themes which means the recommendations are clustered with sections to support the themes.

Challenging and Exceptional Needs

In the presentations and submissions, it was evident that the education system is under serious stress due to a lack of personnel needed to deal with the special needs of students. In many cases the solution seems to be a matter of better applying or modifying existing formulas for allocations, while in some cases there is a shortage of programming availability. For every family and school affected, the need is immediate; for the education system it is urgent, and we may be at a tipping point should these needs not be addressed.

Supports for Students With Challenging Needs

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.

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.

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, related to Recommendation 1, 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.

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.

Other supports, or improvements to current supports, were suggested. The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers felt its members 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 system.

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

Similarly, the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Occupational Therapists (NLAOT) noted 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.

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.

Early 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. Early learning is a social good and serves a need that can improve learning for many students.

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.

Multi-Aging

Multi-grading has a negative history in the province, but this should not be confused with a more robust and professional response to non-graded classroom configurations and multi-aging, which should be encouraged in many locations. In some instances our schools have excelled at multi-aging as a form of teaching. Indeed, in both rural and urban settings, multi-aging is a viable option if embraced and supported properly. As noted by one presenter, “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.” Also evidenced in this effort is the need for better supports not just for multi-aging, but for small, rural and isolated schools with a voice in the NLTA.

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 Special Interest Council.

Local Agency and Innovation: Community Schools (Urban and Rural)

In some regional, rural and more isolated settings, there is a need for increased local autonomy and local cooperation. 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.

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.

Local Agency: Regional Autonomy

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(s), the Department of Education and MUN, should be made available.

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.

Wellness

Quality of life was a key consideration shared by almost all respondents. Respondents, 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. Concerns about wellness of all kinds were raised repeatedly across the province.

Wellness as Safety

In some cases respondents lamented that in many schools students “feel unsafe, uncared for, and marginalized.” The Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education Consortium noted 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.” As a result of the efforts of this 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.

Indeed, specific evidence of the benefits of working together has been shown in the NLTA, the Faculty of Education at MUN and the Department of Education as partners in the Relationships First Network.

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.

Wellness as Resilience

Respondents pushed for more services in dealing with the emotional needs of children in schools. 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.

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.

Wellness as Physical Health

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

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.

Greater Cooperation in School and Teacher Development: Better Together

There are many areas of mutual dependence and cooperation among the various educational stakeholders. The Department of Education, the school districts, the NLTA, MUN, the Federation of School Councils and other partners have the ability to form creative and effective partnerships. As noted above, the partnership with the Relationship First Consortium is an exemplary one. Indeed, at some point, many members of these groups have been affiliated with other groups, so as leaders in education they are well known to one another. Each group needs to seriously consider how we can be “better together,” to cooperate to solve the issues the province faces and along the way achieve greater collective efficacy.

Changing Practices: Assessment and Numeracy

At various presentations issues were raised by parents and teachers regarding changes in long standing practices. This was particularly so for the new evaluation policy in schools and the changing approach teaching of mathematics. 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.” Parents and teachers seemed focused on Assessment as “the no Zero policy” which seems to need clarification.

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.

The province’s mathematics curriculum and with it the changes in learning approaches also seemed problematic. Others highly praised the changes being implemented in mathematics but suggested the implementation process does not seem to have enough support for teachers—or parents—to make this transition. This has led some to attribute this recent innovation to a long standing gap in readiness in the province’s students when they enter MUN (and perhaps other Canadian universities). This suggests the need for more support to implement the mathematics curriculum and more research into the issues facing post-secondary students.

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.

Support for Technology Education

Greater collaboration can support improved teaching and service delivery when it comes to technology. Concerns were shared from multiple stakeholder voices about supporting technology and increasing bandwidth to improve Internet access in schools.

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 programming and professional development.

These concerns are reflective of the findings of a recent provincial study of students' and teachers' classroom uses of technology in support of learning.¹

Support for Teacher Development

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.

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.

To the Future

John Ralston Saul's concluding words to the Alberta Teachers' Association 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.²

All the province's people need to be involved in and consulted on this process. Such a forum essentially depoliticizes the education debate while engaging public policy development to guide the future direction of the education system. We see a need for an even greater public consultation in education, one that depoliticizes the reform process. Therefore, we make our final recommendation to the provincial government:

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

¹Sheppard, B., Seifert, T., and Wakeham, M. (2013). Teaching and learning in 21st century classrooms: A leadership challenge. St. John's, NL: Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation.

²As cited in Gariépy, R. (2000). Public education is the foundation of democracy. *ATA News*, 34(18), para. 14.