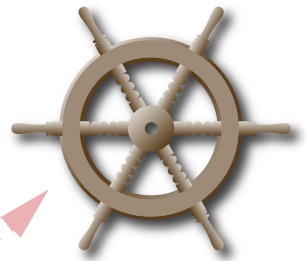


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



The NSTU responds to the Ben Levin Report

by Ron Brunton, Executive Staff Officer, Research & Professional Initiatives

There are many positive aspects to the Ben Levin Report – *Steps to Effective and Sustainable Public Education in Nova Scotia*. The report's overall approach does not suggest the province move away from the paths we have been advocating, and in many instances actively advancing, for many years. The report acknowledges the high quality of public education in Nova Scotia and that our system is not broken or in need of a major overhaul.

Dr. Levin calls for a major limitation on the number of initiatives and priorities established by the Department of Education and for there to be provincial coherence concerning those initiatives and priorities. We wholeheartedly support this. Teachers have been arguing for years that they are being swamped by new demands and expectations, both concerning the expectations for program delivery and the paperwork to be "accountable." Teachers and administrators have front-line experience that when the department calls for a reduction in one area, regional school boards may take that as license to either go forward with their own version of the same thing or to embark on another project that maintains or even adds to the workload of teachers. The Literacy Development Records (LDR) and Math Development Records (MDR) situation in some boards serves as a case in point.

Dr. Levin emphasizes "trust and leadership" as critical and catalytic to building an effective education system to meet the needs of all students. The NSTU has been consistently engaged with the education partners, formally and informally, on how to promote both. We were partners in the Education Professional Development Committee that looked to find the most effective approaches to professional learning and professional development. We have worked to establish the Instructional Leadership Program for Principals that will help administrators gain the detailed expertise to provide instructional leader-

ship and to build the trust and collegial framework among their staffs so crucial to effectively applying that expertise. We work with the Student Services Branch of the Department of Education to improve our ability to address the needs of all students in an inclusive framework. Our joint efforts with the boards and department have produced a number of actions to recognize and support diversity throughout the system.

We have also been working with the education partners to establish clear meaning and process to professional learning communities (PLCs) so that all three words are valid. These PLCs must recognize the **professional** capacity of teachers and administrators to understand the needs in their own schools and classrooms and with their own students. They must be collaborative and that requires a fundamental level of trust and collective efficacy. Teachers and administrators must be able to **learn** from each other to help support student learning. And there must be **community** in which the views of all are respected and heard.

We fundamentally disagree with the proposals to prohibit students from repeating courses and to recognize external credentials for graduation credits. Both proposals favour families who can afford to enrol children in private educational experiences and disadvantage families who cannot. In addition, both proposals reduce public education to a checklist of the minimum required. By analogy, if a teacher were to take students to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia she might indicate that because of the limited time for the trip, each student should be sure to study five paintings very closely. We would not think it reasonable for a student to say that he had seen two paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and therefore he should only have to look at three paintings. Similarly, we would not discourage the student who wanted to pay



Dr. Ben Levin

close attention to seven.

Dr. Levin calls for a rethinking of how we treat students with special needs, but in what is the greatest failure of the report, misses the fact that what he suggests we do is what we have been determinedly working on for more than a decade. In spite of the constant struggle for resources and the mountain of paperwork often required, Nova Scotia has one of the best school retention rates in the country, one of the smallest gaps between students of different economic means and one of the smallest differences between the achievement of boys and girls.

Many of the ideas promoted by Dr. Levin are presented within a context of saving money by making the system more efficient. Unfortunately, if his suggestions are properly implemented in a way that supports student learning, there is often no cost saving and there may actually be a need for more resources. This would be the case if we were to require every student to complete an independent study as a graduation requirement. Independent study requires an intensive relationship between the student and teacher (or teachers) with planning, progress and evaluation meetings throughout the process as well as teaching most students how to engage in

independent study.

Finally, Dr. Levin calls for the system to reduce failure at all levels. We certainly support this and again it comes not as something new, but as something we have been striving toward for most of our history. We welcome all the approaches that can be provided that give teachers and administrators additional tools, time and resources to address students' learning needs. We believe "all children can learn." This has been the evolving focus of our system since the late 1980s.

We look forward to the public conversation concerning the implementation of the report's recommendation and the development of a clear vision for public education.

The full report can be found on the department's website at the following link: http://www.ednet.ns.ca/events/levin_report/index.shtml.

The Minister of Education is seeking input from students, parents, teachers, principals, school boards, elected officials, and the general public. We encourage you to try and take the time to read the report and provide your input. **The deadline for input is July 8, 2011.**

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