Education and Early Childhood Development Response to the Developmental Evaluation of the Implementation of the Nova Scotia Inclusive Education Policy – Year 1 Interim Report

October 2021

Introduction

Creating a more equitable, inclusive education system is a priority for Nova Scotia. An education system focused on inclusive education is driven by truly knowing and understanding its students, meeting them where they are, and helping each one learn and achieve their full potential. This cannot be accomplished without creating safe, caring environments that welcome and celebrate the diversity of learners, families, cultures, histories, and backgrounds within the larger school community.

Government made a commitment to strengthen equity and inclusion in Nova Scotia's education system. A key to achieving that commitment is the introduction and successful implementation of the *Inclusive Education Policy*. The policy was introduced as part of the response to the Commission on Inclusive Education. The three person Commission on Inclusive Education was tasked with developing a report that would provide direction to improve "inclusive education for the benefit of all Nova Scotia students" (*Students First: Report of the Commission on Inclusive Education*). In addition to the introduction of the policy, there were increased investments to support students.

Over the past three years, Government has invested progressively each year, with $45 million in additional funding provided in 2020-21, creating over 450 new positions to support inclusive education. These individuals work to support students and families each day. Examples include, additional Education Assistants, Behaviour Support Teachers, Learning Resource Teachers, School Psychologists, Speech Language Pathologists, and the introduction of Child and Youth Practitioners as a new role within the system. We have also hired more English Additional Language and French Additional Language staff, more African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq support workers, and more SchoolsPlus facilitators and community outreach workers. These investments in staff ensure that students have access not only to the supports they need to be successful, but also to more caring adults that are focused on student wellbeing and learning every day.

The *Inclusive Education Policy* was shared with schools in 2019, ahead of the September 2020 effective date. This gave schools the opportunity to review the policy, discuss implementation, and begin to shift to new practices. The pandemic has created several challenges that are not limited to the education system. It has served to highlight the inequities that exist within the system, in areas such as food security, access to technology, and access to needed supports. These challenges are not unique to Nova Scotia, but how we address them can be. The work over the last number of years allowed the system to

forge ahead with implementing the new policy despite many new public health measures being implemented. Guided by the principles of inclusive education, the end of the 2019-20 school year and the start of the 2020-21 school year focused on the needs of students. Resources were redistributed, acquired, and allocated to meet student needs. For example, non-teaching positions like educational assistants and student support workers changed how they may normally work in schools to continue to support students who were learning from home. Similarly, to respond to student need, we prioritized the purchase of 46,000 additional computers/devices to support both at-home and in-school learning**.**

The additional challenges that COVID-19 placed on students, parents, educators, and school staff also provided new opportunities and lessons that can be used to support students through the pandemic and beyond. Professionals in the education system have had to shift their focus and are working more closely than ever with students and families and revising their practices to better support the wellbeing and learning of each student.

In spring 2019, EECD engaged with the University of Ottawa to conduct a developmental evaluation of the province's implementation of the Policy. A developmental evaluation was chosen because it allows the system to incorporate and adjust to ongoing observations and feedback during implementation. In a traditional evaluation, the evaluators provide feedback and recommendations at the end of implementation, or at set points throughout implementation, and are observers of the implementation, versus providing active, ongoing collaboration. The developmental evaluation process aligns with the *Students First: Report of the Commission on Inclusive Education* (2018), which recommended that the implementation of inclusive education in Nova Scotia be evaluated to inform adjustments to strategies and to determine its overall effectiveness, especially in terms of student success.

Year 1 Interim Report

Recognizing that implementing inclusive education is an ongoing process, we want to thank the evaluators for the *Developmental Evaluation of the Implementation of the Nova Scotia Inclusive Education Policy – Year 1 Interim Report (Interim Report)* in supporting Nova Scotia's education system as we continue, improve, and adjust what we have been doing. The initial observations and recommendations will ultimately benefit our students and support the ongoing professional growth of teachers, principals, specialists, and other school staff.

As the Interim Report recognizes, increased staffing support is important, but it is not the only step needed to achieve a high-quality equitable education system. Government's investments in this area are an important first step, but the shift to an inclusive education model also requires strong leadership both at the system level and within individual schools and classrooms. The *Inclusive Education Policy* sets guiding principles to support this change. These principles focus on valuing all students, recognizing their ability to learn, and committing to identify and eliminate the barriers that interfere with their wellbeing and achievement.

The language of inclusive education is becoming the language of our daily practice. The evaluators have provided significant observations based on their work, along with seven recommendations which we will address individually below. We acknowledge, as identified in the Interim Report, that there has been a time delay in the release of the report and EECD's response due to the pandemic. Although the pandemic did not stop the work of inclusive education, it did mean that we had to think about implementation differently.

EECD would also like to acknowledge that the Interim Report reflects the beginning of the journey of implementation of the *Inclusive Education Policy*. Guided by the principles of the Policy we are committed to continued improvement to support the well-being and achievement of every student in our education system. We recognize that inclusive education is a journey, and we are committed to this work.

Response to Recommendations from the Interim Report

1. Articulate and elaborate specific high-impact practices of collaborative professionalism

We recommend the continued use and spread of practices that promote collaborative professionalism, including collaborative inquiry projects, lesson and book studies, and data walls. We also recommend building on the existing coaching model to situate individuals with particular expertise in inclusive approaches to support the work of teachers and school staff in implementing the policy. Implementation plans need to reflect a significant focus on the ways in which collaborative professionalism can be developed, deepened, and sustained.

EECD agrees with this recommendation. Collaboration among teachers and other professionals working in the education system serves to strengthen professional learning, increasing the opportunities that staff have to receive constructive feedback, input, and advice to support their ongoing development. The Department will continue to work with its partners to improve opportunities for collaborative professionalism throughout the system.

EECD has for the past several years had a focus on building practices and processes that support collaborative professionalism, which means collaborating more deeply in ways that achieve greater impact (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). This has become more important than ever in the context of the *Inclusive Education Policy* and the achievement of the stated objective of that policy[1]. A recent example of collaborative professionalism is the Learning Continuity Team established in response to the impact of the pandemic on education. The core team consists of representatives from the department, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), the Public School Administrators Association of Nova Scotia (PSAANS), and Labour Relations. This group has met at least weekly since March 2020 and worked together to provide recommendations and guide implementation of learning plans and the back to school plan for public schools, seeking feedback from a wide range of stakeholders that they represented including Regional Centres for Education and the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP).

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1   The Inclusive Education Policy objective is to ensure every student has access to an equitable and high-quality education that is culturally and linguistically responsive, accepting, and respectful in supporting and valuing their learning and diverse abilities. To meet this objective, the policy provides clear, consistent direction with respect to inclusive education and equitable practices in public schools. This policy will be supported by policies, guidelines, and procedures to assist in its implementation. The Inclusive Education Policy provides a framework which will apply to all other policies, procedures, strategies, and initiatives. (Inclusive Education Policy, Nova Scotia, 2019)

Another example is the establishment of Collaborative Inquiry Teams where educators developed an action plan to either change or develop new practices to increase achievement and wellbeing for underrepresented groups. In these teams, educators work with their peers in one or more schools, to implement their action plan with funding provided by EECD. Projects of a similar nature could then be networked to learn together as a larger group from this experience.

As the evaluators point out, there are a multitude of examples across the province of deliberate networking and/or sharing, which demonstrate high impact practices of collaborative professionalism. EECD will continue to build on this success through an intentional focus on sharing high leverage practices, such as utilizing the coaching model already present in our system and expanding this practice to other areas to support the implementation of the *Inclusive Education Policy*.

2. Develop a specific network design for circulating professional knowledge and practice

Once the Network Schools have circulated their collaborative inquiries, the next step will be to connect them for mutual learning and support in the promised and planned networks. An explicit design should be developed or selected that supports purposeful, planned collaboration, including leadership considerations.

EECD agrees with the recommendation. Over the last year, Nova Scotia's educators, with the support of RCEs, CSAP, and EECD, have undertaken a pilot program that allows schools to test a theory of action, with a focus on implementation of the *Inclusive Education Policy*. Through these pilots, schools intentionally incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy to increase student achievement and wellbeing, by ensuring that students see themselves not only reflected, but celebrated, in the curriculum. Educators have communicated these experiences with other teachers, administrators, and support staff to identify and share what they have learned; however, there is an opportunity to design a system that will ensure this is happening on a consistent and ongoing basis, and that successful initiatives are shared more broadly, allowing a greater number of schools and professionals to learn from emerging ideas and practices.

Nova Scotia is committed to creating an effective method of sharing best practices and ideas (i.e. network design). We believe this approach can advance our work. We will undertake to examine existing network designs and explore the potential of their use for a made-in-Nova Scotia approach. Our approach will consider how to utilize existing networks, such as the networked schools mentioned above, to facilitate collaborative professionalism across the system. The design must also take into consideration all subject areas that are critical to inclusion and student well-being and include other government partners that play a critical role in providing an inclusive education environment to students. Finally, it must incorporate the importance of communicating with students, parents, and families and incorporating their feedback as important partners in these networks.

The department will examine existing designs and work to develop an approach that fits the Nova Scotia context.

3. Create an inclusive steering group to reduce the risk of silo-like processes of policy implementation and planning.

The need for shared ownership of the Policy and coherence across initiatives, policies and programs was raised numerous times by participants. Ongoing implementation should be planned, monitored and revised by a collaborative steering group (the guiding coalition) with representation across key areas and levels within EECD. This group should include representation from Programs (Literacy/Numeracy), Innovations (Technology), Student Services and Equity, African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq Services, the LGBTQ2 community, representation of working class and high poverty constituencies, and other key areas, as well as the evaluation team. A small task-force of no more than half a dozen members, from different positions within systems, should be created within this group to allow for expedient, focused advancement of implementation.

EECD agrees with this recommendation and believes it is critical to successful implementation of inclusive education.

Inclusive education is not meant to be a list of actions completed and checked off. It is a commitment to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. It is a fundamental philosophical shift in practice and thinking that requires time to develop, reflect, and realign current practice. The department agrees that ongoing implementation of inclusive education requires a broad, diverse, and representative steering group to guide policy implementation and ensure discussions and decisions are informed by the experiences and perspectives of our students.

We also appreciate the recommendation of a focused working group to work hand-in-hand with the steering committee. The department suggests that this group could be composed of a sub-set of members nominated by the larger steering committee. A working group of committee members would complete work on behalf of the larger steering committee, at the direction of the broader committee. The working group would bring detailed analysis, thinking, and research to the steering committee to assist in their examination of various elements of implementation and to inform continued direction and input from that group. Clear goals, terms of reference, and work plans outlining the roles of each group would be critical.

It will also be important for the steering group and the working group to ensure a connection with other ongoing government and department priorities, which may be leveraged to the greatest impact for students. For example, the goals and recommendations from the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada have resulted in new programs and processes that can be considered in any future implementation actions. Family-led decision making is a key feature of these reports that should be a key consideration in the work of the department.

4. Create a student review and reference group to provide feedback regarding experiences of policy impact.

Collaborating with students and not only for students is a key component of collaborative professionalism. It is also essential in designing a fully inclusive policy development and implementation process. A well-facilitated and widely represented student reference group will enable those responsible for implementing the Policy to become more aware of how the Policy is or is not having an impact at the school and classroom level and to be able to monitor and manage progress over time.

EECD agrees with this recommendation. There is a significant opportunity to engage with a representative, diverse group of students in the province. It is important that the department learns from those impacted by policy decisions and develops policy that is informed by those students the policies are intended to support. There is a need to ensure representation of students from traditionally underrepresented groups and those that have unique challenges and experiences throughout their education experience. We know that policies can have disproportionate impacts on some learners, and we need to learn from those individuals to uphold the principles of the *Inclusive Education Policy* in its implementation. It is also important to understand how the new support staff being added to the system are impacting students' experiences.

The department will take this opportunity to re-examine and update the mandate and composition of the current Minister's Advisory Council on Student Issues (MACSI) to ensure it meets the goal of the recommendation. We are also interested in looking at a model that can engage many voices at the local level with connections across the province. We will also explore other mechanisms to gather student perspectives generally, such as administering the student survey on well-being in Spring 2021.

5. Further develop and articulate the theory of change.

Numerous theories of change are explicitly and implicitly guiding the work of the implementation. A theory of change should be co-developed and clearly communicated through a compelling and consistent narrative to ensure clear direction and monitoring of the implementation over the coming years.

EECD agrees with this recommendation. The department sees the co-development of a theory of change as an important part of the implementation of the *Inclusive Education policy*. A theory of change is identifying long-term goals and then working to consider all the conditions, or outcomes, that must be in place for the goals to be reached. A systems-thinking change theory that supports collaborative action toward our shared goals is essential. Monitoring, evaluating, and making necessary changes for the benefit of our students will be a key factor in responding to this recommendation.

6. Publish the developmental evaluation reports along with EECD responses

We recommend that our evaluation feedback and reports be made public along with a response from EECD outlining the ways in which the recommendations are already or will be reflected in the ongoing policy implementation planning, in the short- and long-term. The response can also include any recommendations not accepted or not accepted presently – for reasons such as resource priorities or the COVID-19 pandemic.

EECD agrees with this recommendation and is happy to provide its responses to the recommendations presented by the evaluators. We value the approach provided through the developmental evaluation where we are able to learn, adjust, and change throughout the evaluation period. Unlike traditional reviews, EECD has secured the developmental evaluators so that ongoing feedback and evaluation can occur and improvements can be made in real-time. Communication and sharing what we are learning and our approach to continuous improvement is a valuable approach to ensuring the public and people within the system can fully participate in this transformational journey. This is also an opportunity to share the many remarkable things happening in our schools to highlight the dedication that staff have toward improving the experiences of students and families.

7. Consider using the Inclusive Education policy to guide the province's education response to COVID-19

Planning for the 2020/2021 school year and beyond is necessarily heavily focused on processes and procedures that will allow students to be able to access their education within public health guidelines. At the same time, issues of inclusion and equity have not diminished in their urgency; many in fact have been magnified. Many examples of ways in which EECD has addressed equity concerns have emerged in the COVID-19 response. These efforts should continue in exploring ways in which the Policy can inform planning in terms of student and family access to learning, student inclusion, well-being and voice, the reflection of UDL and CRP principles in both virtual and in-school offerings, and a range of service provisions based on student need within an MTSS framework. For educators, opportunities to collaborate in meaningful and productive ways to develop and share ways of responding to their own as well as student and family needs within COVID-19 restrictions are essential.

EECD agrees with this recommendation. Despite the pandemic, we have maintained our commitment to our inclusive education agenda and the *Inclusive Education Policy* principles continue to guide the decisions and actions of the system. The pandemic has highlighted the inequities experienced by many of our students and we have made the effort to consider all learners as we responded to dramatically changing circumstances for our education system.

In the early days of the pandemic, the department focused on providing non-electronic learning packages via mail delivery (i.e. at-home learning packages), providing materials to families (e.g. pencils, crayons, calculators), food delivery pilots, technology lending programs with materials pre-loaded on USB sticks, and tele-education options for delivery of student services (e.g. counselling, speech-language support).

As part of the Department's Back to School Plan, the department continued to recognize the need to support and enhance the school experience for all students, with a particular focus on our equity-seeking students. This started with ensuring teachers and staff welcomed students back to school and checking in with families to help students transition successfully after the disruption the system experienced in Spring 2020.

In terms of meeting immediate needs, we ensured food was available whether students were learning in person or from home, students had access to needed technology, that schools had proper cleaning protocols and materials, and that students with exceptional needs continued to receive in-person supports. Using provincial and federal funds, EECD purchased 46,000 computers for Nova Scotian students, and we are in the process of upgrading school wi-fi and server capacity. We also introduced new systems to provide counselling supports remotely to families and students. While in-person supports remain vital to student wellbeing, tele-supports were important during the pandemic and will continue to be important in connecting with students and families that may have had difficulty accessing in-person supports, outside of regular school hours.

We understand that there is much more to be done and as we continue to deliver education through the uncertainty of the pandemic, the principles of the *Inclusive Education Policy* continue to guide decisions and actions.