

**Department
of Education**
RESPONSE to

**Report and Recommendations of the
Education Professional Development Committee**

OCTOBER 2009

INTRODUCTION

The *Report and Recommendations of the Education Professional Development Committee* was prepared in response to a desire by the department and school boards to address significant concerns held by principals and other key partners about Nova Scotia's approach to teacher professional learning. These concerns related to the amount of time teachers were out of their schools for professional development and the efficacy of this professional development in terms of its direct impact on the quality of instruction and student achievement.

The Department of Education commends the 17 members of the Education Professional Development Committee (EPDC) for their comprehensive and learned approach, as well as the preceding advisory committee whose work contributed to a strong research base that was central to the work of the EPDC. The research conclusions are clear and focussed. The principals of Nova Scotia have enthusiastically supported this direction for the future, and the EPDC recommendations have been strongly endorsed by two international experts in staff development. The direction and recommendations were also reinforced through the *Classroom Sessions* consultation. The central message from the report is "*This is not a direction—it is the only direction.*"

The 19 recommendations contained within the EPDC report provide the critical elements of a Nova Scotia-based model of professional learning. A number of the recommendations build upon the significant good work that has already begun in the province, such as the introduction of mentors and coaches, school improvement initiatives, and literacy and mathematics strategies. These and other initiatives have strengthened the focus on student achievement in Nova Scotia.

The department response will be brief and will not attempt to expound upon the principles, practices, and research outlined in the EPDC report. The department agrees that the report presents a compelling case for moving forward and provides sound principles and standards to guide professional learning in the Nova Scotia public education system.

The strength of our education system lies in our focus on

- a viable and guaranteed curriculum that is delivered to every student in every school
- public school programs designed to be responsive to and engaging for all students
- a school improvement planning process that is built on knowledge and use of appropriate student and school data and on community-supported directions for enhancing student success
- a combination of pressure and support in response to school needs from school boards and the department
- structured planning and implementation processes within the context of governance structures
- a strong provincial assessment program to support policy and program development
- clear expectations of performance and accountability at every level

This direction is not about widening the berth of autonomy at the school level. It is about targeting schools' professional learning activities so that these learning activities reflect best practices. Effective professional learning for teachers is critical to the success of school improvement and high quality instruction. Public school programs, student achievement data, the school improvement plan, and the teacher's professional growth plan together provide the focus for professional learning.

All professions must have time and space in their practice to learn from their experiences, learn about new research, and collaborate on how to implement new approaches effectively. For example, medical professionals now work in teams regularly as part of their work to build upon one another's experiences and knowledge. The most successful education systems around the world in terms of student achievement have found ways for professionals to dedicate time to learning and collaboration.

Nova Scotia teachers and principals are dedicated professionals. Nova Scotia principals continue to strive to be effective instructional leaders. Teachers

and principals have told us that they need time and support to collaborate more—to learn from one other, with one other, and on behalf of one other. More and more is being known and understood about how children learn and the different approaches that enhance their learning experience. Collaboration among all of the key partners in education is critical to put these approaches into practice effectively.

DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

This response from the department to the system is intended to signal support for the recommendations in general but also to manage expectations and resources as to how far and how fast Nova Scotia can continue to move toward this model of professional learning.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) standards and the innovation configuration maps contained within the EPDC report will provide guidance for decision making to teachers, principals, boards, and the department as this approach to professional learning is implemented.

The Vision for Teacher Professional Learning

The department supports the vision in the EPDC report where

- all teachers are engaged in collaborative professional learning
- effective use of student data is central to informing teachers' professional practice and individual learning goals
- the essential curriculum is well-defined and understood across the system, and the curriculum outcomes are addressed in all classrooms
- a variety of classroom-based assessment practices provide current and reliable student data for learning and of learning
- teachers are engaged in talking about teaching and learning with a shared sense of purpose
- the principal provides critical instructional leadership in a supportive environment
- school boards and the department provide strong, systematic, and differentiated support for schools depending on school improvement goals and the learning needs of the teachers and students

There is a clear consensus in the research on the critical elements of a collaborative professional learning culture that truly have an impact on the quality of classroom instruction and student achievement. There is a deep interdependency among three strategic directions, and all three will become the hallmarks of the made-in-Nova Scotia approach. The set of strategic directions are synergistic, with each of the three building on the other two.

There is also clear consensus on the factors that truly make a difference for student achievement. The specific EPDC recommendations that speak to these factors will comprise the basis of the department response and direction forward. The other recommendations, while important

Finally, the department would like to note that many of the recommendations speak to the importance of partnerships and shared goals among the department, school boards, schools, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA), universities, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), and the Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium (NSEL). The department is enthusiastic about strengthening these partnerships in support of teacher professional learning, instructional leadership, and student achievement. If we want to make a truly significant impact on student achievement, then it has to be a collaborative effort among all of the partners.

The department believes there are three strategic directions that will begin the change process. We

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and contributing to the overall goals, will not be discussed in detail in this response. They will be brought forward to support and augment the primary departmental direction as outlined below. Examples include action research to examine the relationships between effective professional learning and improvements in student achievement, support for networked learning components, and a coaching program for principals.

will focus on these specific strategies, and they will become part of the learning culture of the Nova Scotia school system. In principle, we believe that in order for these three strategic directions to be effective, the Department of Education, NSTU, and school boards need to work together and engage in a process to develop strategies and opportunities for teacher reflective dialogue and shared learning.

STRENGTHENING OUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CULTURE

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1:

Develop a comprehensive instructional leadership program

A comprehensive program will be developed to support principals, vice principals, teacher leaders, and leadership incumbents in their instructional leadership roles. This program will also support skill development among the consultants and others who directly support schools at the school board and department level. The goal of this program is to support the knowledge and skill development of instructional leaders, much of which is already in development, as they focus their schools on the core business of teaching and learning by

- creating a student-centred environment that integrates high academic expectations with personalization and caring
- analysing and using assessment data on student learning for program planning
- ensuring implementation of provincial curricula
- introducing and encouraging best learning practices
- promoting a range and variety of instructional and assessment strategies
- supporting new teachers as they begin their teaching careers
- using technology to support teaching and learning
- evaluating delivery of programs to ensure alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- monitoring instruction to ensure high expectations and active student involvement in learning
- modelling effective teaching practices
- current knowledge of best practices in instruction
- understanding adult and teacher development within the change process
- approaches to supervision and instructional leadership
- understanding the coaching process
- reflective practices to improve instruction
- conducting instructional conferences
- harmful behaviours and positive behaviours of supervisors
- high quality instruction in the context of equity and diversity
- dealing with conflict and facilitating difficult conversations
- effective strategies for motivating teachers

The program will be developed and delivered by an expert team of Nova Scotian educators with strong content backgrounds in various aspects of instructional leadership. The development will be augmented by effective practices, resources, and content experts in other provinces. The development and implementation of this program will be undertaken in co-operation with the NSEL and universities. The program development process will be guided through meetings with the Education Consultative Forum (ECF), Education Programs Committee (EPC), and other representatives from the Department of Education, school boards, and universities across the province.

A number on integrated courses will be developed including the following components:

- current research about supervision, instructional leadership, and professional development

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2:

Increase the number of mentoring and coaching opportunities for principals and teachers

The most effective way to increase student achievement is to continually improve the quality of instruction. One of the key strategies to support instructional improvement is through mentorship and coaching.

Mentorship occurs through both formal and informal relationships. The provincial direction to support more collaborative learning and a stronger focus on instructional leadership will provide more opportunities for informal mentorship and will require less dependency on the formal mentors in the system. Collaborative learning strategies such as classroom walk-throughs, small-group study, lesson study, development of common assessments, and networked learning will provide enhanced opportunities for teachers to learn from one another within their classrooms and schools.

The Department of Education has worked to develop a cadre of mentors and instructional coaches. The typical focus of formal mentoring programs in jurisdictions outside Nova Scotia is to work with teachers in their first three to five years of teaching. Mentoring by master teachers during a student teacher's practicum experience is also an important part of the career development process. Coaching is intended to support continual instructional improvement throughout a teaching career. The current mentoring and coaching program in Nova Scotia will be evaluated in order to support our approach to professional learning based on best practices. The evaluation will include recommendations on how to increase the success of the program and enhance the effectiveness of mentors and coaches in literacy, mathematics, French, and technology.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3:

Develop the capacity, knowledge, and skills of teachers, principals, and schools to implement effective practices in professional learning

The department will continue to work with school boards, and other partners to support capacity building, understanding, and knowledge among teachers, principals, and staff about how to collaborate effectively in a learning community, how to use data to support student achievement, and how to implement promising current practices in professional development. The goal is to facilitate skill development so that high-quality professional development is happening in every school and every school board across Nova Scotia in line with the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) standards highlighted in the EPDC report.

The focus will be on developing effective learning practices for teachers, a rationale for their use, and the steps involved in introducing and using each strategy. It will include methods such as

- facilitating study groups
- conducting action research
- studying student work
- engaging critical friends
- conducting a lesson study
- data analysis
- conducting classroom walk-throughs
- strategies for professional learning communities
- other effective practices in assessment and instruction

A data strategy will be pursued to support the availability of timely and accurate student achievement data to enable targeted school improvement and focus the professional learning of teachers. The data strategy will ensure teacher access to and understanding of student assessment results from an individual, classroom, and school perspective.

When teachers are working together in learning teams the focus of their discussion will often be on student achievement data in the broadest sense of the term. Without these current, reliable, and accurate data across classrooms and throughout the school it is difficult for teachers to reflect on where they would like to improve their practices. It is difficult for teachers to have the needed conversations and for the system to know the rate at which students are progressing and where they are struggling.

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Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Department of Education Response to Report and Recommendations of the Education Professional Development Committee / Nova Scotia. Department of Education.

ISBN 978-1-55457-250-2

1. Teachers, Training of—Nova Scotia 2. Teachers' workshops—Nova Scotia
I. Nova Scotia. Department of Education.

370.7 – dc22