

Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians Demand a Better Future for Every Student

Report of the
Minister's Panel on Education

October 2014

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Chair's Message

On behalf of the Minister's Panel on Education, I am pleased to present our final report, *Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians Demand a Better Future for Every Student*. We were pleased to be called upon to lead the first comprehensive review of Nova Scotia's school system in 25 years. In a relatively short time frame of nine months, the panel worked diligently to design and implement a province-wide consultation on the current state of the public school system; read and interpret all of the feedback we received; and write this report to share Nova Scotians' views about areas for improvement.

The panel made it a priority to provide an equal opportunity for all Nova Scotians to give their input, and I believe we were successful in this regard. Through surveys and other consultation tools, we heard from more than 19,000 people across the province. Nova Scotians from all eight school board regions, nearly every village, town or city in the province, and all vantage points (e.g., students, educators, parents and guardians, community members, and members of the business community) generously answered the questions we asked and gave their time to share their comments through the survey, letters, e-mails, and formal reports.

With such a high level of response to our consultation, the panel is in a strong position to identify the issues that government—with leadership from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development—needs to address most urgently. Our report focuses on seven areas of the public school system that are the greatest concern for Nova Scotians.

Through the input received, it is clear to the panel that Nova Scotians value and appreciate the many hard-working and caring staff in our schools, who represent a clear strength in the school system. We also noted that many Nova Scotians believe in a public school system that is free and accessible to all.

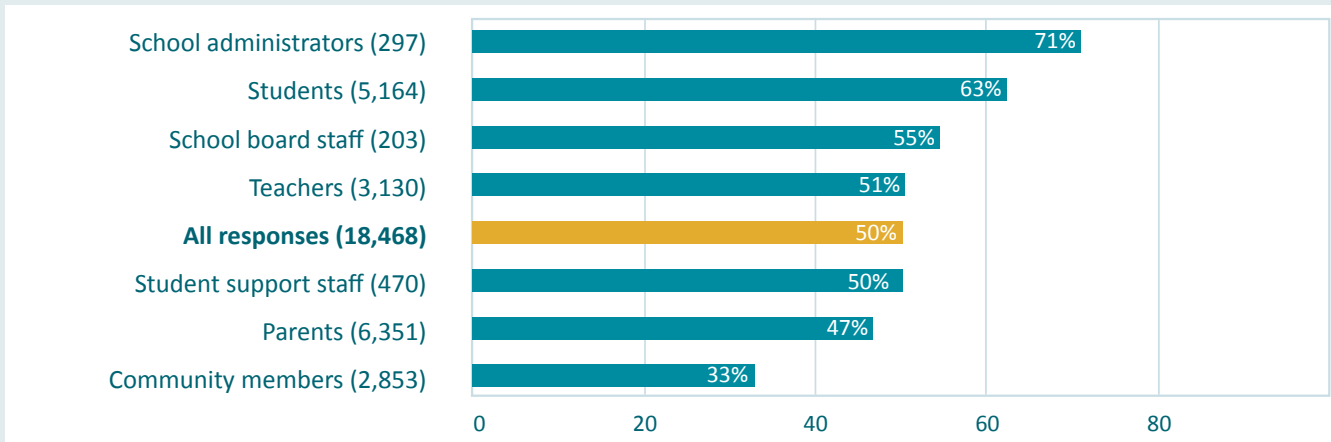
However, Nova Scotians also have mixed views about the quality of our public school system. Of the Nova Scotians who completed a survey, exactly 50 percent told us they were satisfied and 50 percent said they were dissatisfied with the current system (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 • “Overall, how satisfied are you with the public school system?”



FIGURE 2 • Overall satisfaction with the public school system, by respondent group (n=18,468)

Within this statistic there are many interesting and important differences among groups, to which we must pay attention (see Figure 2). For example, some respondents, such as school administrators, are generally satisfied, while 70 percent of community members and 50 percent of parents are dissatisfied.



Members of the Minister’s Panel on Education

- The Honourable Myra Freeman, CHAIR
- Tina Dixon
- Mike Henderson
- Kyle Hill
- Gordon MacInnis
- Donna O’Connell

A biography of each panel member is available online at ednet.ns.ca/FeaturedContent/Slider/pdf/Bios.pdf.

We believe this statistic is not acceptable. A high-quality education system is too important to the children and youth, communities and economy of the province. There is clearly a need for change.

We look forward to government’s response to the suggestions from Nova Scotians for improvement, and observing the work that will flow from these findings. As changes are implemented, we believe public attitudes will begin to shift about the school system; and, most importantly, we believe we will see increases in student engagement and achievement. It is important for the province to carefully monitor the system-wide impact of changes to ensure they are really making a difference for student learning. Our students deserve nothing less.

It has been a privilege for each member of the panel to have so many voices heard through this report, especially those who are not always included in the dialogue about educational change. We want to thank everyone who took the time to contribute to the panel’s consultation: your enthusiasm, reflections, and candour were appreciated. We also trust that you will continue to be engaged in making our schools the best they can be, and hope you will join us in our high expectations for government’s response to your thoughtful ideas for change.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Myra A. Freeman, CM, ONS, MSM
Chair, Minister’s Panel on Education

Executive Summary

The report of the Minister's Panel on Education, *Disrupting the Status Quo: Nova Scotians Demand a Better Future for Every Student*, presents the input of Nova Scotians on our public school system. The results are not acceptable—50 percent of Nova Scotians are not satisfied. Students, parents, teachers, other school support staff, and community members voiced a large number of concerns about an education system that has changed very little in the past 50 years, despite the many reports that have been published with clear recommendations for change.

The panel has identified seven areas where improvements are most urgently required:

- **Curriculum:** Strengthen the curriculum to transform teaching and learning.
- **Teaching:** Foster high-quality teaching in every classroom.
- **Transitions:** Prepare today's students for tomorrow's opportunities.
- **Inclusion:** Ensure that inclusion is working for everyone.
- **School climate:** Create a positive climate for learning in all schools.
- **Health and well-being:** Collaborate for improved student health and well-being.
- **Modern structure:** Build a modern-day structure for teaching and learning.

Drawing on the detailed input from Nova Scotians, the panel was uniquely positioned to synthesize these perspectives in a discussion section under each of the seven themes, and to make recommendations throughout the body of the report. These recommendations are developed to assist the Province of Nova Scotia in charting a course for change.

The panel's recommendations constitute a significant change for the management of our school system. There is no other choice. The assessment results of Nova Scotian students reveal that our students are not performing well in comparison to other provinces. Given that our youth need to succeed in a competitive world, this is deeply disturbing.

There is a pressing need for the government to move forward with the full range of recommendations presented in this report. Some will be challenging and some will require a longer implementation period than others, but the recommendations are interconnected. Simply picking and choosing from the recommendations will diminish the synergy to be achieved by a comprehensive response to Nova Scotians' input. The panel believes that implementation plans can be designed to minimize classroom disruption during this transitional period.

How the province approaches the change process is also critical. It is essential for all partners serving children and youth—inside and outside government—to break down departmental, resource, and other structural barriers, and work together to make cohesive changes that support classrooms and the needs of our students. We all have a stake in the success of the government's response to the panel's recommendations. The future of Nova Scotia depends on it.

Notes for readers

In this report:

- *n* = number of respondents. The number of respondents varies because not all respondents answered every survey question.
- *Parents* means parents and guardians.
- *Public school system* means publicly funded schools in Nova Scotia, serving students in grades Primary to 12 (P–12).
- *STEM* means science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.
- Totals in Figures throughout this report may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Education in Nova Scotia— Then and Now

On February 19, 2014, the Honourable Karen Casey launched the Education Review with the announcement of six panel members.¹ The panel was asked to identify “how to better adapt the education system to ensure success of all students in the changing environment.”² The Education Review is a well-timed opportunity to look back on the effectiveness and impact of changes that were introduced over the last two decades. Many of these reforms—such as new provincial curriculum and the Special Education Policy—have undergone independent reviews over the years, but the government has not undertaken a comprehensive system-wide look at the public school system to know what is working well and what isn’t.

To provide some context to key messages that the panel heard from Nova Scotians during its consultation, this section provides insight to readers about major changes that have impacted the education system since the mid-1990s, as well as how Nova Scotian students are currently performing.

What’s changed in our education system?

The mid-1990s represented a time of change in Nova Scotia’s education system. A province-wide consultation was held in the early 1990s to gather input on proposals for addressing various educational issues, leading to the publication of the government’s white paper, *Education Horizons* (1995). A period of restructuring followed, with significant changes to the Education Act to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of key players—school boards, staff, parents, and students—in the system. School boards were amalgamated from 22 to seven regional boards, and services for French First Language were harmonized through the creation of a single provincial board. School advisory councils were also established in many schools.

Since then, much has changed for students in the province. It is timely to re-examine whether our education system has kept pace with forces that are reshaping the world that students experience today and will face in the future. Although not exhaustive, the following list represents a number of fundamental shifts in the society and education policy that have affected student learning over the past 25 years.

The Public School System in Nova Scotia (September 2014)

Total Budget: \$1.3 billion

Number of School Boards: 8

Number of Schools: 405

Student Enrolment: 121,028

Societal shifts

Public expectations

For some time, schools have played a more comprehensive role in the lives of students, placing much greater expectations on teachers, administrators, and support staff to address complex needs. More attention is given to issues such as bullying, mental health, disruptive behaviours, poverty, nutrition, and family issues. We are also more aware of how these issues are affecting student learning.

The significance of early learning

In 1999, Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain captured decades of knowledge on early learning when they concluded that the quality of the first 2,000 days of a child's life would pave the way for his or her future health and well-being.³ Growing knowledge about human development has led to new levels of social commitment to early learning; significant promotion of the role of parental engagement in the first years of a child's life on student learning; the need for effective interventions for infants and toddlers; and the importance of effective transitions between early learning and public school environments.

Technology's impact on teaching and learning

The depth and pace of technological change over the past 25 years has major implications for schools. Technology offers potential for more teacher resource options, access to new learning tools for students, online learning opportunities to reach students in rural areas with more diverse course options, and more timely reporting options. However, the vast availability of information also presents challenges in understanding what is appropriate and legitimate. Social media has major implications for student relationships and bullying, and the effective management of online presence is becoming an important skill from a younger age. The need to acquire new software and hardware creates an ongoing budget pressure and requires adaptability on the part of educators to learn new tools and programs quickly and continuously.

Policy and program changes

Outcomes-based framework and reporting

Nova Scotia made the transition to an outcomes-based framework for education in the early 2000s, intending to move away from more general descriptions of learning requirements to clearly defined outcomes for student success. At the same time, standardized assessments were introduced, based on the identified outcomes.

Inclusion

Inclusion is a philosophy and approach to instruction that is guided by principles and beliefs supporting the human right to accessible, age-appropriate schooling for all students. The Special Education Policy was released in 1996, focusing on individualized program planning, parental involvement, and a collaborative team approach in the context of inclusive schooling. Follow-up reviews undertaken in 2003 and 2007 provided support for inclusive practices and the inherent human rights implications, but also noted the need for funding and a continuum of resources to ensure successful implementation.

High school programs

The early 1990s saw a move away from the practice of streaming students into general and advanced programs in junior high and high schools to a new program of common graduation outcomes. At the same time, former vocational schools were replaced by the creation of the Nova Scotia Community College, and graduation from high school became a prerequisite for entry to trades and technical programs in the province.

Grade promotion and retention

It was once common practice for students to be retained in a grade level if their progress prevented advancement. This practice began to shift in the 1990s with new knowledge and research about the impact of retention on overall student success. Today, with few exceptions, Nova Scotian students are promoted with their peers.

Interagency collaborations

The increased expectations on schools have led to increased and more specialized resource needs. Interagency collaborations between government departments and public service providers have been identified as having potential to better meet student needs through programs such as SchoolsPlus and Youth Health Centres.

Teacher preparation

In 1994, a major review of teacher education was undertaken. The Shapiro Report resulted in the closure of Nova Scotia Teachers' College (Truro) and a reduction in the number of universities offering the Bachelor of Education program from seven to three. Two other universities were added following subsequent reviews. There continues to be dialogue about the importance of strong teacher preparation, and about carefully managing the labour market to ensure Nova Scotia schools have access to high-quality teaching.

The BLAC report

Following a four-year study on institutional barriers experienced by African Nova Scotians in the education system, the 1994 *BLAC Report on Education: Redressing Inequity—Empowering Black Learners*⁴ laid out a series of recommendations to create positive change. Fifteen years later, a review was undertaken, reflecting on progress since the BLAC report. In 2009, *Reality Check*⁵ was published, which contained recommendations for addressing the significant concerns related to the learning progress of African Nova Scotian children and youth.

Mi'kmaw education

In 1999, the Mi'kmaw Education Act became law in Canada, giving Mi'kmaw communities control of education through a tripartite agreement, including Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK, the Education Authority for 12 Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia), the Canadian government, and the government of Nova Scotia. The act recognizes MK's role in supporting Mi'kmaw-focused teaching—including language and cultural immersion—in Band schools. In 2008, five core areas for improvement were identified, including communication and curriculum, following a consultation on the effectiveness of services to Mi'kmaw learners.⁶

School improvement planning

The late 1990s marked the implementation of a formalized process for schools to analyze their performance and achievement data and to develop goals and strategies to improve performance. The expectation for annual improvement plans also required schools to engage with parents and communities and to communicate effectively about student achievement and priorities for change.

How are students performing now?

The academic performance of students in Nova Scotia has remained fairly consistent over time, based on national and international assessments of mathematics, science, and reading (see Appendix A). However, the performance of students in Nova Scotia, on average, falls significantly below the performance of students living elsewhere in Canada. Many of Nova Scotia’s youth will be competing with their fellow Canadians for educational opportunities, employment, and advancement; however, these opportunities are now more global. As such, it is essential that Nova Scotian youth are able to compete with youth from around the world. Nova Scotia’s future competitiveness depends on it. The status quo is not acceptable.

Nova Scotia, on average, falls below Canada as a whole, and typically below the provinces with the larger populations (i.e., Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia) in reading (Figure 3), science (Figure 4), and mathematics (Figure 5). Performance among the remaining provinces is very similar, though Nova Scotia generally performs above one or two provinces.

Note about confidence intervals

The symbol at the top of each bar in Figures 3, 4 and 5 indicates the confidence interval for each average. This means we can be confident that the average score of students in this jurisdiction would fall between the higher and lower of the two points indicated, 19 times out of 20, if we were to test a new sample of grade 8 students with this same test. When the confidence intervals overlap between two jurisdictions, it means the difference is not statistically significant; that is, the apparent difference in average performance may not be real.

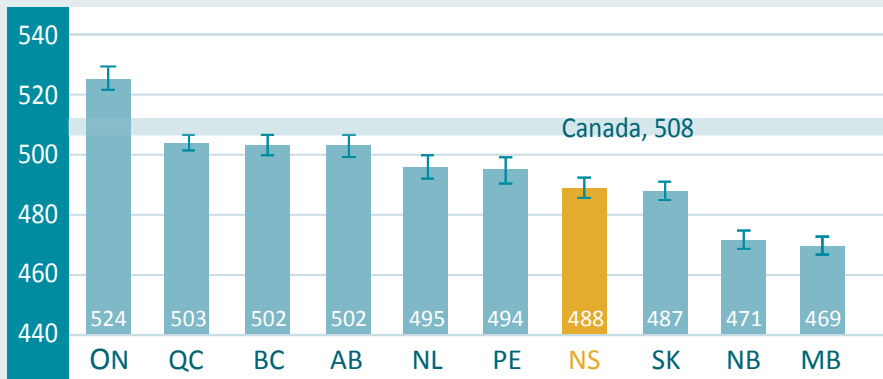


FIGURE 3 • Pan-Canadian Assessment Program, 2013 results in **reading**, by jurisdiction: average scaled score

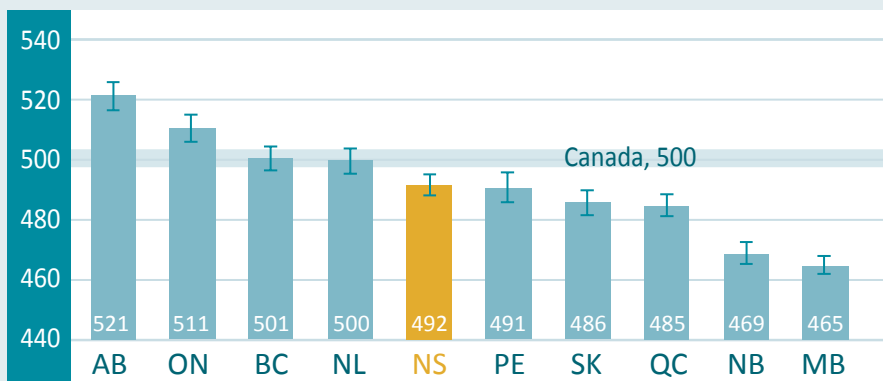


FIGURE 4 • Pan-Canadian Assessment Program, 2013 results in **science**, by jurisdiction: average scaled score

Mathematics in particular is a concern because Nova Scotia has slipped relative to other jurisdictions around the world and also relative to our performance a decade earlier. The results from the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA)—an assessment of 15-year-olds in mathematics, reading, and science—show a significant decline in mathematics from 2003 to 2012 (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5 • Pan-Canadian Assessment Program, 2013 results in **mathematics**, by jurisdiction: average scaled score

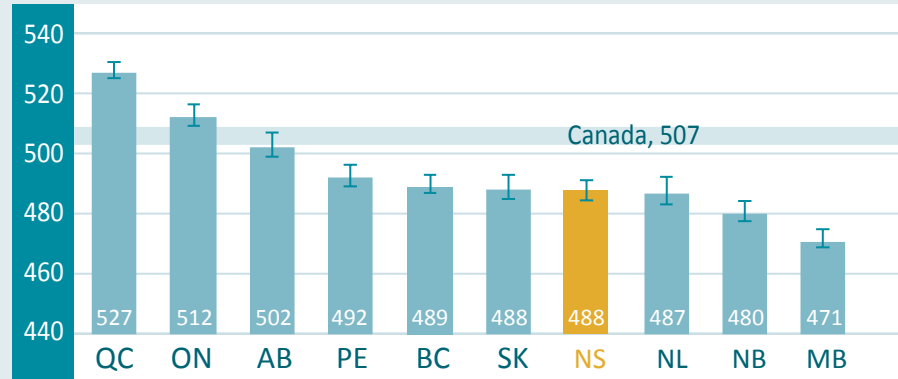
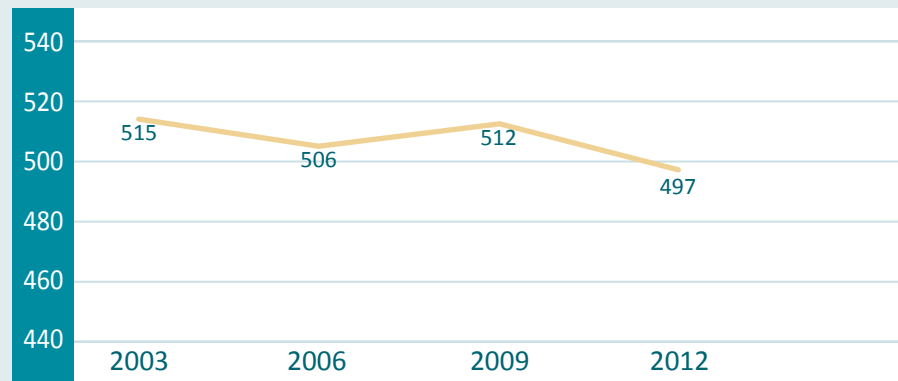


FIGURE 6 • PISA, average **mathematics** scores for Nova Scotia, 2003–2012



The average performance of students in these national and international assessments tells part of the story. The other measure is the proportion of students who meet or exceed grade-level expectations in the provincial assessments. The provincial assessments reveal that, in the elementary years, approximately 70 percent of students perform at or above the level expected. That means three of every ten students do not have the reading and mathematical literacy they will need to meet the challenges that lie ahead in their learning. And as these students progress through the grades, the problems are compounded if they have not received the support necessary to increase their learning. In junior high, just over one-half of our students are able to meet the expectations for mathematics at the end of grade 8. This has significant implications for the number of students who may choose to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs in college and university.

What does this mean? Every jurisdiction is emphasizing education as the key to its economic future and is putting in place targeted measures to increase the performance of their students. The results are showing up in the international assessments with newly participating countries rising in the standings compared to other countries. Staying the course will result in Nova Scotia continuing to slip relative to others, leaving our students at a competitive disadvantage in Canada and in the world. Quite simply, far too many students are without the skills in mathematics and literacy they will need to prosper in education and the labour market.

The Public Consultation Process

When the Minister's Panel on Education was formed in February 2014, it was asked to capture Nova Scotians' views on the state of education in the province. From the beginning, all members of the panel agreed on the basic principles of the review (see inset) and on the importance of a comprehensive and well-publicized consultation that would capture the attention of diverse voices in schools and communities across the province.

"The Education Review will be student-focused, evidence-based, attentive to marginalized students, committed to hearing from all interested parties, mindful of diverse circumstances within the province, and open to new ideas springing from technological innovation." Minister's Panel on Education, Terms of Reference (February 2014)

The panel took significant steps to engage all Nova Scotians in an assessment of the public school system. Early in the consultation process, all teachers were invited to provide input. The panel also reached out to the public through traditional and social media (e.g., Facebook), informed close to 300 businesses and not-for-profit organizations of the consultation by e-mail, and created a dedicated website for the public to access different options for providing input. Nova Scotians were invited to contribute in any of the following ways:

- 1 Complete an online survey with directed-response questions (see Appendix B) and open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide personal comments.
- 2 Send an e-mail or write a letter to the panel.
- 3 Submit a formal report.
- 4 Facilitate a group discussion and submit a response form.
- 5 Call a toll-free number to leave a message for the panel.⁷

During an extended consultation period (seven weeks) the panel reached out regularly through local events, media releases, and social media to encourage Nova Scotians to be a part of changes ahead for education in the province. To ensure that the voices of students were well represented, a survey day was also organized in junior high and high schools for principals and teachers to join in encouraging students to complete the online survey.

The response to the panel's consultation was remarkable. The panel received nearly 19,000 surveys that included over 50,000 written comments on topics ranging from the quality of the province's curriculum, to student health and well-being, to the effectiveness of the organization of the school day and year. We also read thousands of pages of input generated from e-mails, as well as 46 reports submitted by education stakeholder groups.

There has never been a more fulsome consultation in the province. Nova Scotians are clearly very passionate about our education system, for a compelling reason: the system has a significant impact on shaping our youth, tomorrow’s leaders.

Through the survey, the panel heard from parents, students, teachers of all grade levels (see Figure 7), school administrators, student support staff, school board staff (see Figure 8), and a wide range of other members of school communities, including the following:

- community and school volunteers
- governing school board members
- early childhood educators
- grandparents
- health care providers
- employers in large, medium, and small businesses
- other school support staff (e.g., custodians, secretaries, teacher assistants)
- not-for-profit organizations
- post-secondary students
- students in Bachelor of Education degree programs
- school advisory councils
- retired educators
- university and community college faculty

FIGURE 7 • Teacher responses, by grade level (n=3,167)

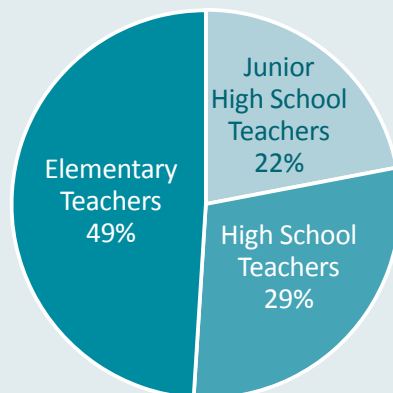
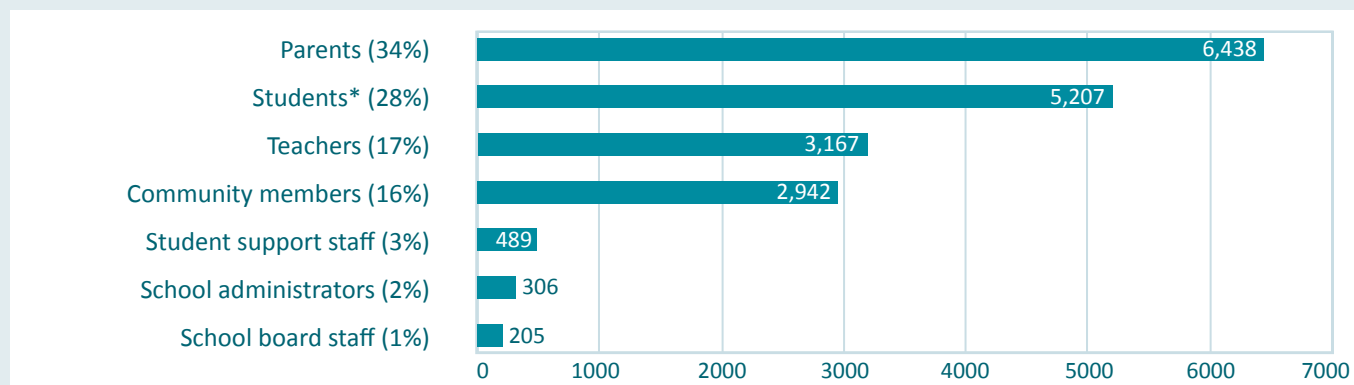


FIGURE 8 • Number of responses to the survey, by respondent group (n=18,754)



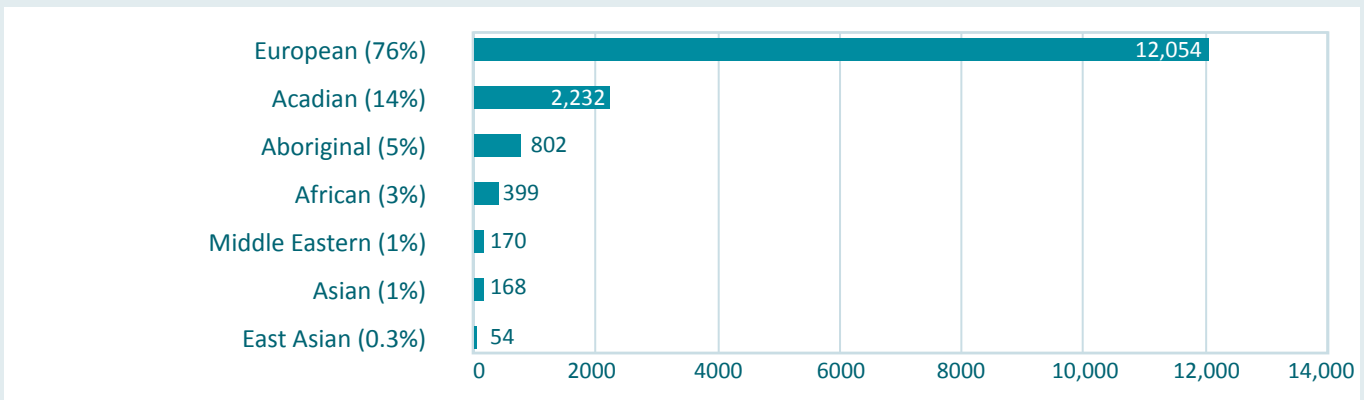
* For the most part, student responses came from two boards (one largely urban and the second largely rural) – the Halifax Regional School Board and the Strait Regional School Board. For details on student responses by board see Demographic 7 in Appendix D.

We were also very pleased that input came from all areas of the province (see Appendix C for a map of responses) and was representative of many ethnic, linguistic, and Aboriginal communities (see Figure 9). For a full list of survey demographics, please see Appendix D. A list of organizations that submitted a report to the panel is included in Appendix E.

The panel thanks everyone who responded to our call for action and took the time to share their views. We are confident that the key themes identified here reflect what respondents told us through surveys, e-mails, and other submissions.

An account of how public input was analyzed and the results of this analysis have been consolidated into a separate technical report, available online at ednet.ns.ca/educationreview.

FIGURE 9 • Number of responses to the survey, by ancestry or descent (n=15,879)



A Compelling Case for Change

The overwhelming message we heard from Nova Scotians is clear—many areas of the current school system are not working as well as they need to be. The flood of e-mails, reports, and written comments reviewed by the panel form a compelling case that all government departments with a mandate for children and youth must act quickly and collaboratively to improve upon many of the principles, practices, and programs that have been advanced over the past 25 years.

With other jurisdictions around the world, Nova Scotia shares in the challenge of modernizing a school system that was created for the realities of the 20th century. Many of the changes introduced since the 1990s were intended to create an environment for 21st century teaching and learning. We've heard that many of these reforms have not been adopted effectively or implementation has often proceeded without an appreciation for the day-to-day realities of schools (e.g., too many initiatives). We have also heard the importance of an integrated approach to change, ensuring that changes to one area of the system do not have unintended consequences in other areas of the system.

One area that *has* changed over the past 25 years is an increase in the expectations that we hold for schools. Alongside the traditional roster of academic skills (i.e., mathematics, language arts, science) and intellectual development (i.e., problem solving, critical thinking), schools today are called upon to support students in developing a wide range of social and life skills that used to be learned at home or in the community. In many ways, schools have also become *centres of care* for students and their families. If Nova Scotians agree that these are valuable and necessary roles for our schools to play, we must also rethink the current structure that places exclusive responsibility for schools with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. We also need to ensure that teachers have the ability to focus on instruction by redirecting all available resources to support other essential programs and services.

Examples of Partnerships for Learning

- Association of Nova Scotia Educational Administrators
- Black Educators Association
- Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq
- Conseil jeunesse provincial de la Nouvelle-Écosse
- Council on African Canadian Education
- Council on Mi'kmaq Education
- Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse
- Inter-university Committee on Teacher Education
- Leaders of Today
- Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey
- Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations
- Nova Scotia School Boards Association
- Nova Scotia Secondary School Students' Association
- Nova Scotia Teachers Union
- Small School Initiative
- Special Education Programs and Services Committee
- Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities
- Youth Advisory Council

In the pages that follow, the panel targets the areas that we believe need immediate attention. In a sector as complex as education, we recognize that none of the issues we identify will have a simple solution. Strong partnerships will be essential (see the inset for examples of partnerships for learning). To find an effective way forward, the government and its many education partners will need to be

- **STRATEGIC**, to identify actions that will have the most positive impact on student learning and achievement
- **EFFICIENT** and able to work effectively within the government's means, recognizing that an injection of new funding will be difficult
- **EQUITABLE**, to honour the linguistic, ancestral, cultural, and socio-economic diversity of the province, as well as the differences between urban and rural communities
- **RESPONSIVE** to new ideas and flexible to embrace the changes necessary to ensure that students in Nova Scotia are globally competitive

The panel recognizes that the scope of change outlined in this report is significant; but we believe it is necessary. More than 19,000 Nova Scotians told us that too many students and teachers are struggling in the current system. The areas that we identify for government action are those that were most prominent in the feedback we received. For the panel, they are also the most critical areas for moving the school system forward to a place where it can effectively meet the needs of all students, support high-quality teaching in all classrooms, and result in higher levels of student achievement, especially in the areas of math and literacy.

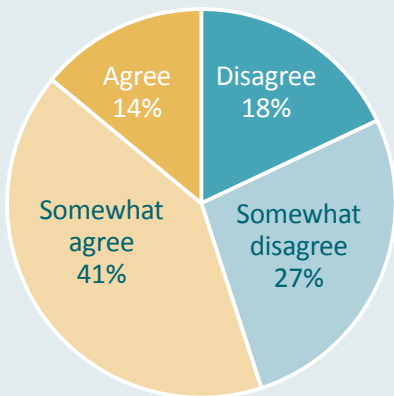
The remaining sections of our report draw attention to seven areas of the public school system that were most important to Nova Scotians. Based on the public's input, the panel believes the government needs to set a vision for the school system. It also needs to recognize that there are some critical issues that require immediate action because we know it will take time for changes to begin to have a positive impact on students. The significance of the changes presented in the following sections will require strong leadership and unprecedented co-operation among key players in the public school system and government departments.

Theme 1

Strengthen the curriculum to transform teaching and learning

What we heard

FIGURE 10 • “The provincial curriculum is focused on what students need to learn most” (n=16,150)



“I feel there are so many outcomes to cover that if you have a student who struggles at all there isn’t enough time to give that student the extra time to master these outcomes before you have to move on.”

– Parent

Many respondents believe that the provincial curriculum—which directs what students learn in each grade—is in need of significant repair. There is some praise for the comprehensiveness of our curriculum, and optimism that recent revisions or updates to some subject areas will lead to improvements. On the whole, however, we heard that the curriculum is not providing students with a strong foundation for learning.

On average, only 55 percent of Nova Scotians who completed a survey feel the current provincial curriculum is focused on what students need to learn most (see Figure 10). Of all groups, parents and community members were least likely to agree that the curriculum is sound in this regard.

The data reveals that Nova Scotians hold some contradictory ideas about the curriculum. Some respondents, for example, feel the curriculum covers too little (e.g., students have too few opportunities to learn about the arts and technology) while others feel it may be trying to cover too much (e.g., that it should focus only on the core subject areas, such as math and literacy). There is also tension between those who feel that the curriculum should direct teachers to focus on basic skills—such as spelling, grammar, and multiplication—and others who believe there is a need for greater emphasis on cross-curricular skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving.

There is, however, agreement among respondents on a number of issues related to the curriculum. Respondents told us that a one-size-fits-all curriculum (where all students are expected to achieve the same outcomes in the same grade) is not serving students well. The pace is too slow for some and too fast for others. We also heard that, while schools have made some improvements to recognize different cultural and racial experiences, there is still a significant way to go in building a curriculum that is inclusive of minority culture, race, and language experiences.

For the elementary level (grades Primary–6), Nova Scotians expressed the following concerns:

- The grade Primary curriculum is not developmentally appropriate (i.e., it's too advanced) for four- and five-year-olds.
- The current structure of the curriculum is not providing students with a strong foundation at each grade level. The curriculum is too crowded and students are moving onto the next grade before they are academically ready.
- There is a need to “get back to basics” by teaching and having all students practice skills such as spelling and basic mathematical operations.
- There are too many outcomes for students to learn.
- The early elementary years (grades 1 to 3) need to be simplified to integrate all core subjects (e.g., social studies and science) into outcomes in language arts and mathematics.

Respondents told us that, as students move to junior high (grades 7–9) and high school (grades 10–12):

- The curriculum is too heavily focused on preparing students for university, which leaves too few options for students who want to pursue other opportunities, including the arts, skilled trades and technology, or other occupations that do not require university credentials.
- There are some critical gaps in the curriculum, including life skills (e.g., career and life management skills, healthy living and nutrition), financial literacy (financial planning, filing taxes), civic engagement, entrepreneurial skills, and preparation for careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or information and communication technology (e.g., coding).
- There is a need for increased time for physical activity, art, and music.

The panel also observed that fewer than half of parents, junior high and high school teachers, and community members feel students are gaining a strong foundation in mathematics and literacy. In comments about these core subjects, we heard that the curriculum promotes so many approaches to learning basic skills that students are unsure which approach to use. Many parents, in particular, expressed frustration with the current approach to teaching mathematics in elementary schools, which offers multiple paths to finding solutions and a heavy reliance on reading. They commented that this causes many students who are struggling in reading to also struggle in mathematics.

“The curriculum needs to keep pace with today’s world ... but the basics ... reading, writing and arithmetic are always important.”

– Parent

“Schools have some programs for co-op, trades, etc. But I don’t think there is enough. The entire idea of support is laughable, it feels scripted and they expect everyone to go the same path ... there is not enough support, not enough positive attitude, too much controlling and forcing students on the same path.”

– Student

“Foundations are not a priority. Writing is no longer taught or spelling. Math foundations are being glossed over and then students are going onto more complex concepts without an understanding of the basics.”

– Community Member

Many respondents also told us that a student’s achievement depends a lot on which school they attend and the quality of teaching they experience. The implementation of curriculum varies dramatically among classes and schools.

Respondents commented that there are circumstances that are a disadvantage to students who do not have extra supports at home. Some noted that boys may be struggling to learn with the current instructional approaches to reading and writing.

“As a high school/middle school math/science teacher, I feel that students and teachers are asked to cover more outcomes during a school year than is practically possible. As a result, teachers are forced to move on from topics in these subject areas before students have a solid foundation in many of the topics.” – Teacher

“Math and reading and writing are crucial - I don’t think any school system should ever believe they are finished improving their abilities to support teachers and students in their efforts in these areas.”
– Parent

“All those statements are true if you are referring to students with adequate home support, and financial backing. What about the children who do not have access to computers at home? What about the children who do not come to school with a breakfast in their stomach or a lunch to eat at noon? [Or,] the children with learning challenges, using personally accommodated programs, move forward with guarded ability to feel prepared in the next grade?”
– Community Member

Discussion

With a limited amount of time and a very dense curriculum, teachers are forced to make choices about what they can teach in the time available. These choices result in inconsistency in essential learning from school to school and classroom to classroom. To address this reality, curriculum design needs to proceed with three goals in mind:

- identifying a manageable number of essential outcomes
- ensuring teachers have high-quality resources
- ensuring teachers have engaged in professional learning for effective implementation in the classroom

1.1 RECOMMENDATION

Streamline the curriculum to reduce the number of outcomes at all grade levels.

1.2 RECOMMENDATION

Develop a new model for curriculum design that provides teachers with

- clear direction on core and optional curriculum outcomes
- high-quality resources for implementation, including support for differentiated instruction

Having a manageable curriculum must be one of the areas of focus, but it is not enough. The panel also heard a call for clear and high expectations for student learning, particularly in the areas of mathematics and literacy. When students do not obtain the foundational skills in math and literacy in elementary school, the impacts are compounded throughout their educational experience and beyond. High-quality curricula in all grades, combined with high-quality teaching in all classrooms, can significantly move the bar on student learning.

The panel heard that many areas of the curriculum are in need of revision. Given the importance of strong foundational skills, and current concerns about student achievement in literacy and math, the panel believes that priority needs to be given to grades Primary to 3. The curriculum redesign for math has been undertaken. For other areas in grades Primary to 3, the curriculum needs to be redesigned to reduce the number of outcomes to focus on the most essential learnings. The redesign needs to focus on integrating science, social studies, and health in a way that focuses and strengthens skill development in language arts and math. Teachers need to be responsible for mastering a deep understanding of curriculum

“Teachers are spread so thin trying to get to everyone, that none of the students get the grade level focus they need.”
– Parent

Differentiated instruction means that the teacher observes and understands the differences and similarities among students and uses this information to plan instruction, making adjustments for different students or groups of students so that each student makes progress in his or her learning.

content, using a range of supports that include planning guides with proven teaching strategies, guidelines for differentiating instruction, and resources to support effective communication with parents. All curricula must be developmentally and age appropriate, noting that some students now enter school at age four. All curricula must also be inclusive of African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaq, and other culturally appropriate content to engage all students and promote their success.

1.3 RECOMMENDATION

Redesign the early elementary curriculum to focus primarily on foundational skills in mathematics and literacy.

One of the trends in Nova Scotia relates to the impact of declining enrolment. With fewer students at the elementary level, we are seeing more multi-grade classrooms. Curriculum documents should include strategies for teachers in combined-grade classes. It may be helpful to create opportunities for networking among teachers who are in these different learning environments so that they can share successful instructional strategies with each other.

Although the panel feels that the priority for curriculum reform should be placed on the lower elementary grades, it is also clear that the one-size-fits-all academic curriculum of junior high and high schools needs to be revised. Curriculum reform at these levels should focus on preparing students to take various pathways, including trades and technology courses and emerging programs, such as coding, associated with STEM careers. Consideration should also be given to time for physical activity and healthy lifestyles, as well as civic engagement and opportunities for students interested in fine arts and music. Because course options and selection are not available until grade 10, students are often inappropriately placed in highly academic courses with little or no supports in place. The junior high program is in need of a complete overhaul.

Nova Scotia's Education Act requires that students in grades Primary to 2 have a minimum of 245 minutes of instruction, and that all other students receive between 300 and 360 minutes of instruction each day. It is noteworthy that most schools are close to the 300-minute end of the range. For all grade levels, the department should encourage school boards to use more of the time allowed in the legislation for student learning, particularly at the junior high and high school levels.

“School and curriculum is designed for academic learners. It is designed for university-bound students. We need to consider alternative programs that start at the junior high level, not waiting until high school when many have already become discouraged and left the school system.” – Junior High Teacher

1.4 RECOMMENDATION

Revise the junior high curriculum to ensure that options are available that are engaging and relevant in order to better meet the developmental needs and interests of students.

1.5 RECOMMENDATION

Fill critical gaps in the junior high and senior high curriculum, in life skills; financial literacy; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) or information and communication technology (ICT); physical education; art; music; civic engagement; and other areas.

Finally, a section on curriculum would not be complete without commentary on the rapid growth of technology in schools, and in society overall. In the public consultation, Nova Scotians had mixed views on technology in schools—some thought there was too much, others too little—but all agreed that technology can fundamentally change the way curriculum is delivered. Technology can also change the way students engage in the learning process, and can be a powerful tool to convey complex ideas to students with diverse learning styles.

Technology can be particularly beneficial for Nova Scotia's rural communities. Many rural schools struggle to access specific courses and content, and course offerings vary dramatically among schools. Technology has the power to bring specialized curriculum to rural Nova Scotian students by embracing online learning.

1.6 RECOMMENDATION

Design a strategy for the effective use of educational technology to support learning and improve access to specialized courses for all Nova Scotian students.

Theme 2

Make high-quality teaching the norm in every classroom

What we heard

The panel heard that teachers and other staff in schools are the bedrock of the public school system. The number-one strength identified in the survey was the many highly competent and dedicated staff working in our schools. Respondents generally agree that most teachers are well qualified, attentive to students' individual needs, and available to provide extra support when needed. As one parent said, "... they are inventive, attentive and able to differentiate their teaching practice."

"[Our school] has awesome teachers - they offer opportunity to all students. They do their best with what they have to work with. Hats off to the principal and teachers and staff." – Parent

The panel also heard general agreement that many students are receiving highly effective teaching in their classes. However, some respondents described the following cracks in the bedrock:

- In some classrooms, teaching is not effective.
- The levels of student engagement are generally low, especially in junior high and high schools.
- Many teachers are struggling because of the complex student needs in the classroom: the demands often outpace the time available.
- There are mismatches between teacher qualifications and teaching assignments.
- Administrators and school boards are not responding appropriately when they become aware of ineffective teaching.

Nova Scotians believe there are two critical areas where improvements are needed to create the conditions for high-quality teaching and learning in every classroom:

- 1 support effective teaching and learning; and
- 2 improve management of the system's personnel.

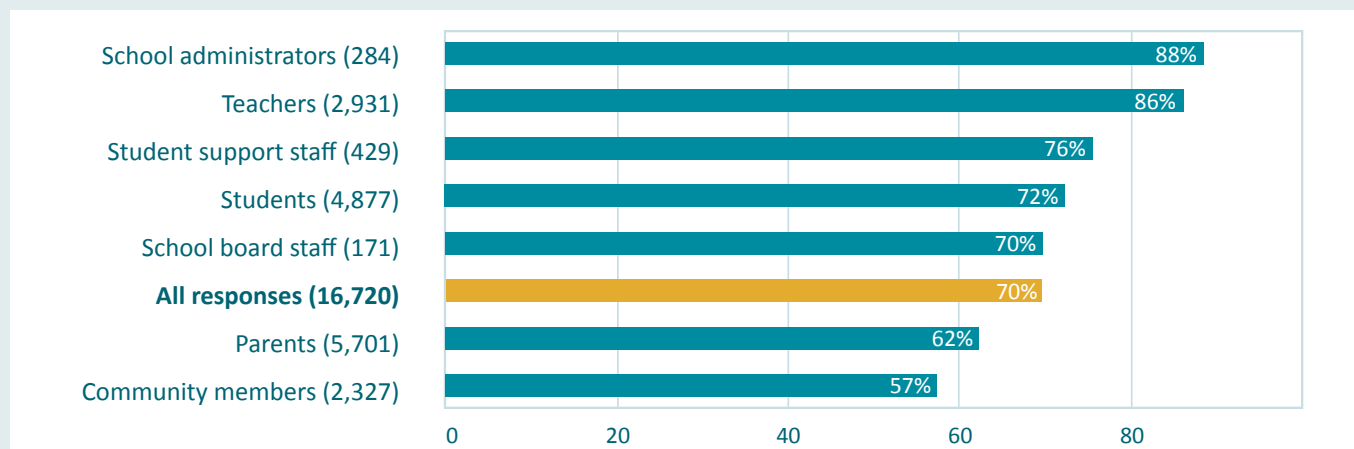
Support effective teaching and learning in every classroom

Overall, about 70 percent of people who responded to the panel’s survey agreed that students are receiving highly effective teaching in their classes. However, there are some significant differences: parents and community members are about 20-percent less likely than educators to rate teaching effectiveness positively (see Figure 11). On the whole, feedback received by the panel pointed to issues with teaching quality that need to be addressed.

Nova Scotians offered the following suggestions to improve the quality of teaching in classrooms:

- Engage students in learning that is hands on, relevant, and interactive.
- Challenge students to be their personal best.
- Demonstrate respect for students.
- Ensure teacher qualifications, content backgrounds, and subject assignments are closely aligned, giving priority to areas involving math and literacy.
- Use criteria other than seniority when making decisions about teachers transferring to new assignments within or between schools.
- Ensure each teacher has undertaken the necessary professional preparation to support new curriculum implementation, and monitor to support consistency across schools and classrooms.

FIGURE 11 • “Students receive highly effective teaching in their classes,” percentage agreement by group (n=16,720)



From the perspective of educators, the quality of teaching is vulnerable to many forces in and outside of the classroom. Survey data, e-mails, and other written submissions made it clear that many teachers are finding it hard to be the kinds of teachers they want to be, noting the following:

- Teacher workloads are too high, and paperwork and non-classroom-related expectations take time away from working directly with students.
- There are too many interruptions in the classroom, especially from disruptive student behavior.
- There are too many new initiatives introduced by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, without consultation or support for implementation.
- Standardization of the system does not leave teachers with the autonomy they need to customize learning to the needs of a class.
- The curriculum is crowded by too many outcomes and lacks appropriate levels of resources and professional development for effective implementation.

“I believe that teachers are prepared to meet the needs of most students. However, we are seeing ever more students in our classes with special needs. Without sufficient help, the task of providing quality teaching is difficult.” – Teacher

Without a doubt, the largest challenge to high-quality teaching that the panel heard about is class composition. Teachers are being asked to work with too many complex student needs with too few supports. Today, teachers are working with students with identified special academic and physical needs, students with mental health challenges, and behaviour problems. The learning needs range from students who are struggling and require extra help to those who are excelling and could benefit from enrichment.

There is a strong belief among respondents that classrooms today are much more complex for many reasons:

- A standardized or one-size-fits-all curriculum makes it hard for teachers to respond to student needs.
- Social promotion (see page 33) creates large gaps in fundamental skills, such as reading and basic operations in math, among students in a class.
- Behaviour issues frequently disrupt learning.
- Too few supports exist for students with identified special needs (also see page 40).
- Teachers are expected to address student needs that are more complex than they were in the past, with an increased number of adaptations and individualized program plans.

All of these factors contribute in significant ways to teachers’ abilities to teach to standards that they hold for themselves and students.

Improve the management of the system's personnel

While the frequency of comments about initial teacher training (Bachelor of Education programs) was relatively low in the data, many of the comments about high-quality teaching lead the panel to reflect on the important role of initial teacher preparation in addressing a number of concerns noted above. Many respondents told the panel that the system (i.e., universities, school boards, and the department) needs to set higher standards for the knowledge, skills, and experiences new teachers bring to the classroom. The teachers we train, certify, and hire must

- be passionate about teaching
- have strong literacy and math skills
- hold related subject qualifications and know how to engage students in the subjects they will teach
- understand how to differentiate learning for different learning styles and students with special needs
- reflect the cultural diversity of students attending schools in the province

There is general agreement among respondents that professional development (PD) has the potential to benefit teachers and students. However to ensure these benefits, the province and school boards need to establish higher standards for the use of resources and the approach to PD. For example, where PD is tied to a potential license upgrade or pay increase, it should be subject to a set of criteria that ensures Nova Scotian students will benefit. Criteria should include relevance to a teacher's current or planned assignment, be the most effective and efficient means of gaining the PD, and meet quality standards set by the province.

The data was clear in its support for ongoing teacher PD, but many parents and community members voiced concerns about how it is scheduled. There is a sense among some that there are too many PD days during the school year and too many interruptions to learning when teachers attend PD outside of scheduled system-wide days. In place of the current schedule of PD days, some respondents suggested that the quality of PD would improve, and the impact on learning time would lessen, if teachers made use of storm days, as well as scheduling longer blocks of time when school is out of session, such as over the summer holidays.

Finally, Nova Scotians who shared their views with the panel feel that the system needs to do a much better job of dealing with poor performance. There is a call for the province to develop a new performance management system that mandates accountability for the quality of instruction received by students and the learning that occurs, while allowing for some flexibility at the classroom level.

"Ineffective/disengaged teachers need to go. There appears to be no accountability in managing a teacher's performance....other than acceptance, which is totally unacceptable. In our family's experience we have had some EXCELLENT teachers, for which we are grateful." – Parent

Discussion

The panel believes it is important to validate what we have heard from educators: classrooms today are much more complex and this requires us to reconsider how effective teaching and learning are supported in classrooms. We also strongly believe that there is no compromise for high-quality teaching. Creating the conditions for high-quality teaching requires a balance of accountability and support. The province needs to establish standards for high-quality teaching and, along with its education partners, create effective structures to support teacher skill development at each stage of a teacher's career. This support must be coupled with professional responsibility for the use of the most effective teaching practices and for the learning that occurs in the classroom.

Initial teacher training takes place in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programs that prospective teachers enter after completing an undergraduate degree. It is critical that B.Ed programs set a strong foundation for effective teaching by setting high standards for admission, such as those highlighted above, ensuring the B.Ed curriculum is relevant to today's learning environment, graduating teachers in high-demand areas, and integrating effectively both theory and instructional practice, particularly in the area of differentiated instruction. Classroom management skills and developing strong competencies in applying the most effective teaching practices are critical.

2.1 RECOMMENDATION

Establish common and stringent criteria for admission into teacher education (B.Ed) programs, including high academic qualifications, aptitude for teaching, and alignment with labour market needs in Nova Scotia.

2.2 RECOMMENDATION

Examine the content and delivery of the curriculum in teacher education programs and take steps to ensure the following:

- a) Teacher candidates are well prepared for the realities of today's classrooms and the range of student needs.
- b) Graduates have the knowledge and skills to apply the most highly effective teaching practices in their classrooms.

The panel is concerned that current hiring and placement practices are not setting new teachers up for success. Because of the complexity in hiring practices established through the collective agreements, and more teachers entering the field than the labour market can support, new teachers often

struggle to get on a secure path to employment. After five years, on average, only one-quarter of eligible candidates have been hired into permanent positions. Once hired, seniority allowances related to assignment change, and other considerations, often result in too many new teachers being required to change schools and positions every year. This also makes it difficult for novice teachers to establish important professional networks of support. Nova Scotia is at risk of losing a rich set of human resources if it fails to address these roadblocks to effective hiring and induction into the profession, such as the practice of hiring retired teachers to fill substitute and term positions.

2.3 RECOMMENDATION

Improve hiring and induction processes to provide opportunities for employment (substitute and long-term) for teachers who are new to the system; create more stability in annual teaching assignments for new hires; and apply a fair and rigorous performance evaluation program during the probationary period.

To ensure effective teaching in every classroom, school boards need to ensure a strong alignment between teacher qualifications and their assignments. There are still many classrooms where these two factors need to be better aligned. The panel is aware that the issue of alignment has been examined by a diverse group of education partners and recommendations proposed to improve alignment between teacher academic content background and courses taught.⁸ Where possible, efforts must be made to clear any obstacles that prevent timely implementation of recommendations offered by this group of education partners.

2.4 RECOMMENDATION

Ensure that all teachers are qualified for their current or planned assignments.

There is a need to listen carefully to the many teachers—new and experienced—who say they are struggling to be the kinds of teachers they want to be. The panel has addressed this issue in Theme 1 (Curriculum), Theme 4 (Inclusion), and Theme 5 (School Climate), but wishes to reiterate here that the province needs to reduce the risk of teacher burnout by taking immediate steps to do the following:

- Ensure curriculum expectations are clear and feasible (i.e., so that teachers have the time they need to support effective instruction).
- Surround students with more supports from all sectors (e.g., Education and Early Childhood Development, Health and Wellness, Community Services, and Justice).

- Ensure that principals are able to respond quickly if a teacher is struggling with disruptions to learning or to support the range of student needs (e.g., academic, social-emotional) in his or her classroom.
- Create a culture in schools and across the province that recognizes and celebrates teacher excellence.

An improved approach to professional development will also contribute to high-quality teaching in the province. The panel recognizes that teachers regularly participate in professional development, but feels there may be too little attention to the alignment of this learning to the needs of students in the system. Since the year 2000, every teacher who has a probationary or permanent contract is required to complete 100 hours of professional development every five years.⁹ In-service days scheduled during the school year, and teachers attendance at professional workshops or conferences, whether supported by school boards and/or paid for by teachers themselves, qualify as professional development. In addition, teachers may engage in career development activities that result in license upgrades. In any case where professional development—in-service or career development—is funded by school boards, all activities should be supported by a demonstrated relevance to required classroom skills and knowledge.

2.5 RECOMMENDATION

Develop a province-wide strategy for teacher certification and professional development to ensure the following:

- a) All teachers are completing a minimum number of hours of professional development, and the PD is closely related to their current or planned assignments.
- b) PD opportunities are available to support teachers and are directly tied to job requirements.
- c) Teacher certification requirements are designed to meet system and student needs. Initial teacher classification, advancement in classification levels, and pay increases need to be tied to system requirements and strong performance in assigned duties.

To achieve an effective balance between accountability and support, we also urge the government to create a *provincial* performance management system that would require mandatory performance appraisals. Performance appraisal processes may lead to recognition of excellence, plans for professional development and growth, or identification of staff (teachers, principals, and support staff) who are not meeting the requirements of their positions.

2.6 RECOMMENDATION

Implement a provincial performance management system that recognizes teaching excellence, supports professional growth, and empowers school boards to dismiss teachers when performance issues warrant.

At present, personnel in the education sector are managed through a system where many supervisory staff (e.g., principals, supervisors, directors, and superintendents of school boards) are members of the same union as teachers. The effectiveness of any managerial system is ultimately dependent upon the skills of individual managers. The panel observes, however, that the practice of supervisory staff being members of the same bargaining unit as the employees they supervise is unusual by accepted labour relations practices.

A more effective approach to managing the system would call for a model where supervisory staff are not active members of the same union as teachers. This, in turn, would provide a more structured approach to issues of hiring, work assignments, professional development, and performance management.

2.7 RECOMMENDATION

Consider if supervisory staff—including principals, supervisors, directors, and superintendents of school boards—should be members of the same union as teachers.

Theme 3

Prepare today's students for tomorrow's opportunities

What we heard

While the mandate of the panel was primarily focused on the public school system, respondents also commented that more needs to be done to support students in successfully transitioning to and from the school system, as well as from grade to grade.

Transitions to school

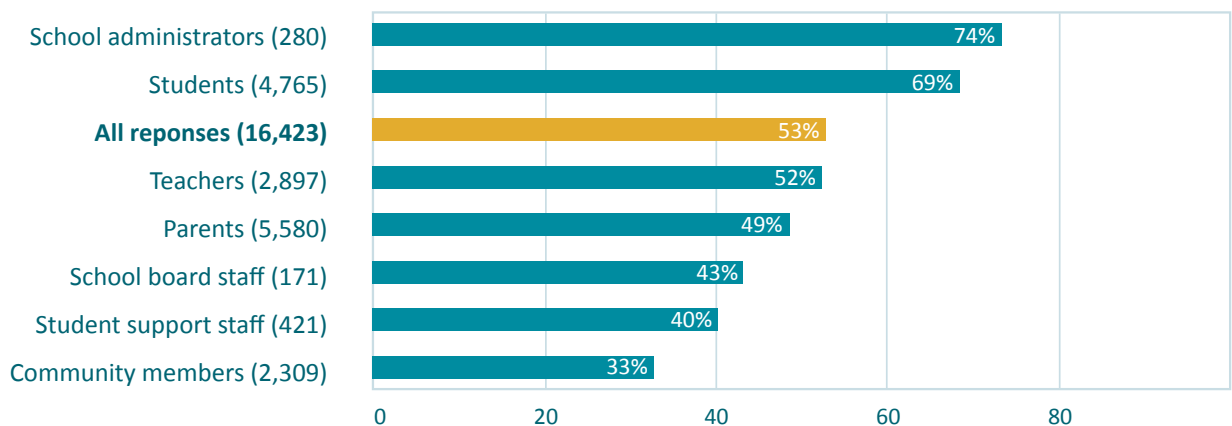
Comments in this area noted the change in 2008 in age of entry to grade Primary. Moving the cut-off date from September 30th to December 30th means that more children under the age of five are entering Primary.¹⁰

Respondents noted the unresolved need to revise the curriculum so that it is developmentally appropriate for younger students.

Organizations working with pre-school children also alerted the panel to the need for increased access to early screening for developmental needs. They also noted the importance of early intervention programs to better support young children and their families and improve their transition to school.

"In many cases the curriculum does not address the developmental stages of the children, especially now since the entrance age has been lowered." – Teacher

FIGURE 12 • "Students are well prepared to move on to the next grade," percentage agreement by group (n=16,423)



Transitions within school (Grade Primary–12)

“Social Promotion”

The panel received significant input on what many Nova Scotians call social promotion—the practice of advancing all students to the next grade with their peers each school year. Many of the people we heard from feel that students are being moved to the next grade before they are academically ready (see Figure 12 on previous page).

From the perspective of many who commented on this topic, too many students in the elementary grades (P–6) are promoted to the next grade before they have met critical outcomes in reading, writing, and mathematics. This practice creates gaps between students who have a foundation for learning and those who do not. While the gap can seem small in the elementary grades, it grows significantly over time and leaves students at a real disadvantage in their junior high and high school courses.

Many parents and community members said they find it hard to understand why a student would be advanced with his or her peers if they are struggling to meet the outcomes. In their opinion, academic achievement alone should determine a student’s promotion to the next grade, otherwise it is felt that schools are “pushing students through” and not looking after their best interests.

Some teachers also expressed frustration with the assumption that all students should advance with their peers. Along with student support staff and some parents, teachers noted that not all students learn at the same pace; therefore, teachers should be able to recommend, without interference from principals and parents, that a student stay in his or her current grade if they are not ready to graduate to the next level.

High School Pathways

The panel heard some comments on the need to improve access to the number of pathways available to high school students. On the whole, most survey respondents (73 percent) agree that high school students have the right options available to them. Of all groups, students agreed with this question most enthusiastically (85 percent). There are, however, some important nuances to the data in this area:

- If a student plans to attend university after Grade 12, course options are comprehensive but access to courses varies dramatically among schools. For example, students in smaller high schools may not be able to enrol in classes for all the subjects they need and they may feel that virtual courses are not a fair substitute, as some students struggle to learn through this format.

“The education system needs to focus on EDUCATION and not parents, and that means we need to assess and advance kids as they deserve and not just continue with social passing of everyone.” – Parent

“Failing students means the teacher has failed. Not failing students means the system has failed. Even if research says failing a student does not help, forcing them through does not help either.” – Teacher

Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS) provides online high school courses to students as part of the student’s overall program. Students are drawn to these online courses in order to take a course not offered at their high school or a course not available at a time that fits the student’s academic plan.

- If a student plans to enrol in community college or an apprenticeship program after Grade 12, they can apply to Co-operative Education, Options and Opportunities (O₂), and skilled trades programs. The panel heard very high praise for all of these programs. Again, however, respondents identified access as an issue because these options have limited enrolment and are not available at all schools. As well, if a student is enrolled in another program (e.g., French Immersion or music) it may not be possible to also participate in these program offerings due to scheduling difficulties.

The high school years represent a critical time for students in thinking about transitions to further learning and work. How well high school programs meet these needs was a point of disagreement among those who wrote to the panel or completed a survey. Some respondents feel that high schools focus too much on preparing students for university, while others say too many resources are directed to preparing students for skilled trades and the workforce. A small minority of respondents say they ought to be able to focus effectively on both by supporting different pathways.

Planning for the future

Schools today are viewed as important sources of guidance for students as they make decisions about their futures after high school. It would appear, however, that the current approach to providing this guidance is not working well. Of 13,000 Nova Scotians who commented on this issue, only 53 percent agree that students are receiving the support they need to make informed decisions about their futures. Within this group, parents were *least* likely to agree, especially if they were parents of students attending community college or university.

There appear to be a variety of barriers to students receiving the support they need:

- Guidance counsellors do not have enough time to meet with individual students. They are being pulled in too many different directions (e.g., personal counselling, behaviour issues, career and life management) and in some schools there are too few guidance counsellors for the number of students enrolled.
- Many guidance counsellors do not have up-to-date training and information to support career decision-making, and so
 - advice tends to be limited to traditional university programs
 - advice about programs and required courses for admission is not always accurate
 - there is a lack of information about current workforce trends

The **Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling Program** is designed to meet the personal, social, educational, and career development needs of students at all grade levels in the public school system. The program provides for the integration of guidance and counselling services into a comprehensive model to meet student needs. 144 schools in the province now have the program, including 82 elementary schools.

- Guidance about course planning and post-secondary options is sometimes too generic. Students would like counsellors to take more time to get to know their skills and aptitudes.
- There is a perception that some teachers and guidance counsellors have a bias toward university as the anticipated outcome of high school, and that not enough effort is made to counter the stigma attached to other options.

Although smaller in number, the panel also heard from educators that guidance counsellors and teachers can sometimes be available to provide advice, but cannot require students and their families to follow it.

Ready for life after high school

The panel was struck by the large number of people who feel students are *not* ready for the workforce and post-secondary learning when they graduate from high school. With the exception of students — who were generally more optimistic about their preparation for life after high school— most groups felt that students are not as prepared as they need to be, especially for the workforce (see Figure 13).

Many respondents told the panel that young adults lack skills for the workplace (e.g., counting change, communicating with the public, resumé writing) and post-secondary learning (conducting research, writing an essay, critical thinking skills). Many also lamented that many young people lacked a sense of responsibility for attendance, meeting deadlines, making an effort to do well, and solving problems on their own at work.

“We prepare our students to meet the requirements of postsecondary courses, but we do not prepare them enough for non-academic life after they have finished high school.”

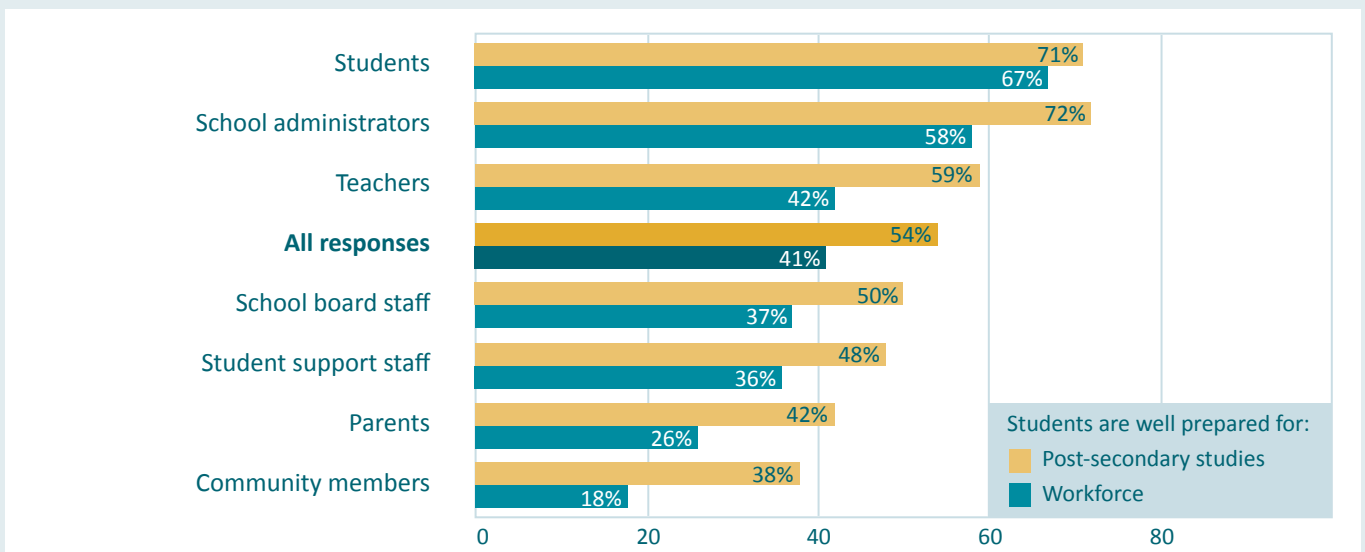
– Teacher

“In high school it is important to emphasize more than just knowledge. Work habits are also very important, but teachers cannot deduct marks for work handed in late etc. ... we are not making students accountable.”

– Community Member

FIGURE 13 • Percentage agreement to two questions:

- “Students who want to attend college or university after they graduate are well prepared to do so” and
- “Students who want to enter the workforce after they graduate are well prepared to do so”



Many parents and community members voiced concern with the large number of students who struggle—and often drop out—in their first year of university because they feel unprepared. Students also voiced concerns about their readiness for university, pointing out that they wished they had been challenged more in high school to be prepared for higher expectations and to be competitive with their peers from other provinces.

Many Nova Scotians want schools to do a better job of teaching students to be skilled in life after school. Respondents appealed to schools to hold students more accountable for the types of expectations they will encounter in the real world—including standards for high-quality work, problem solving, being on time, handing in assignments on time, courtesy and respect, and so on. Many also called upon schools to help students learn important life skills such as financial literacy (e.g., financial management and budgeting, filing a tax return, securing a loan or mortgage), job readiness (e.g., interview skills, resume writing), healthy nutrition and fitness, stress management, civic engagement (voting, volunteering), and environmental awareness.

“I entered university directly after high school and wasn’t prepared for what was to come at all.”

– Student

“The gap between high school and post-secondary is still huge. I think the schools and these institutions need to work together more to close this. Co-op is huge! [It] really helped me gain job skills. Regardless of education quality, this is a very hard time to enter the workforce. Students need a strong background in math, science, technology. But they also need soft skills like writing etc. or they will not function.” – Community Member

“Students need to be taught more real life-based things in school. It’s a great thing to know the Pythagorean Theorem but unfortunately, students with 95% averages are leaving high school with NO idea how to apply for a loan, buy a car, do their taxes, or rent an apartment.” – Student

Discussion

In discussions over the past few months, the panel has adopted a holistic view of education that includes learning from pre-school through to high-school graduation and beyond. Therefore, while early learning was not within the mandate of our work, we feel it is essential to highlight the importance of a solid foundation for learning in the early years and a successful transition to the early years of school.

Each year, students arrive in grade Primary with varying levels of readiness to learn. The province needs to make sure the curriculum and supports are in place to respond to the range of strengths and needs grade Primary students bring to school. The panel wishes to highlight and reinforce the call for increased screening and early intervention programs to ensure all children get a strong start in their physical, academic, and emotional development. By clearly identifying students' strengths and needs, such programs will also ensure that schools are better prepared to continue providing students with the programs and services they need to thrive in the elementary grades and beyond.

The importance of a strong start to learning was a theme underlying the panel's discussion of age-based promotion. The panel is concerned that the school system may not be considering the long-term implications of this practice for students in later years. If a student advances from grade to grade and graduates from high school without basic skills, the school system has not served him or her well. We are aware that the philosophy of promoting students with their peers is grounded in years of research; however, the evidence also clearly points to the fact that the practice will only be effective for the student if they receive *appropriate supports in the next grade*.

Determining how to best meet students' academic needs is a complex process, made more difficult in part because the current system is built on an assumption that all students will learn at roughly the same pace. The panel believes there is a need to make learning environments much more flexible than they currently are. We need to provide students with more opportunities to learn at their own pace, broaden the notion of a peer group, and advance students based on readiness for learning, and not on their age alone. To ensure that teachers are in a strong position to adapt instruction for more flexible groupings, it would be critical for the province to provide curriculum and supports for teaching multi-age groups of students.

3.1 RECOMMENDATION

Set provincial standards to guide the practice of age-based promotion, including recommendations on appropriate supports; and introduce curriculum to allow for greater flexibility in grouping students for progression through learning.

“Provincial curriculum needs to focus more on topics that are going to be pertinent to life situations for students. In mathematics, students need more focus on number sense, mental calculations, financial mathematics and problem solving. Those students who are more interested in higher level mathematics could quickly catch up in high school on some topics that are currently taught at the junior high level. In language, students need to be focused more on media literacy, social networking, grammar and sentence structure.” – Junior High Teacher

The panel encourages the province to look closely at the placement of transitions between elementary and junior high and high school—specifically, whether grade 6 should be part of a grade Primary–6 or grade 6–8 junior high school configuration, and whether grade 9 should be part of the junior high or high school program.

It is clear that the province has taken strides to improve course and program options for high school students. However, there is still a strong perception that junior high and high school courses are best designed for students who want to enrol in university after graduation. In comparison, pathways in the arts, or trades and technology, are more difficult to access and sometimes perceived as less valuable options. We were also struck by the number of respondents who told us that today’s students are missing opportunities to learn important life skills (e.g., financial literacy, healthy living, and civic engagement) in high schools.

In an effort to create a common curriculum for all students, it is possible that the system has closed off valuable pathways to students. This may have narrowed the focus of high schools to the detriment of learning experiences that support adolescents in becoming well-rounded and engaged adults. We encourage the province to look at high schools to ensure that the focus of programs and courses is a strong fit with the skills and knowledge students need for their futures. We also strongly encourage the province to review attendance and assessment policies and ensure their implementation is not having the unintended consequence of lowering expectations for students to attend and strive to do their best in all of their classes.

3.2 RECOMMENDATION

Ensure that policies reinforce the importance of job and life-related competencies, such as punctuality, attendance, organization, and responsibility.

As financial resources permit, the panel also believes the province needs to develop a plan for expanding access to high school course and program options. Such a plan would recognize that all programs cannot be offered at every school, but there are many ways for students to access learning. The province should, for example, consider the feasibility of expanding the assignment of circuit teachers to a wider range of courses (e.g., physics) in smaller junior high and high schools, and take steps to improve the

effectiveness of virtual learning. We also recommend consideration of structural alternatives, such as regional comprehensive high schools. These types of high schools offer a range of specialized learning programs and are often considered centres of excellence in areas such as the arts, trades or technology, or STEM programming.

3.3 RECOMMENDATION

Ensure junior high and high school students have opportunities to learn the skills and knowledge they need to be well-rounded global citizens and prepared for post-secondary options.

The panel recognizes that increasing student access to curriculum options is difficult without additional time in the timetable. However, the panel is aware that while 24 credits are possible in a student's schedule over the course of grades 10, 11, and 12, only 18 credits are required for graduation. This can lead to as many as six free periods throughout high school. Many students who leave the school property during these free periods do not return. Raising the number of mandatory credits required for graduation will make valuable time available for students to explore new curriculum options and will help to keep students on campus during school hours.

3.4 RECOMMENDATION

Increase the number of credits required to graduate from 18 to 21 and reduce the number of "free" periods to a maximum of three to be taken in grades 11 and 12, with no more than one "free" period in a semester.

In transitions from junior high to high school, and from high school to post-secondary options, the panel heard that students are not getting the career guidance they need. It appears that the training and role of guidance counsellors has changed significantly in the past 25 years to focus less on career counselling and more on supporting students' social-emotional needs. In our view, this is an understandable shift in focus, but it has also created a gap in students' access to advice on course selections and options for post-secondary learning and careers. To fill this gap in services to students, we need to look for partnerships and creative solutions. The province could, for example, look at ways to bring well-qualified professionals from regional employment centres to schools to offer career counselling services.

3.5 RECOMMENDATION

Create opportunities, within and outside of school hours, for students to meet with professionals qualified to provide career counselling, post-secondary learning advice, and other life skills training, such as fitness and nutrition.

Theme 4

Ensure that inclusion is working—for everyone

What we heard

Today’s classrooms reflect the province’s long-standing commitment to inclusion — “an attitude and value system that promotes the basic right of all students to receive appropriate quality educational programming and services in the company of their peers.”¹¹ In addition to working with students who receive funded supports through the provincial Special Education Policy, teachers and other school staff are expected to do the following:

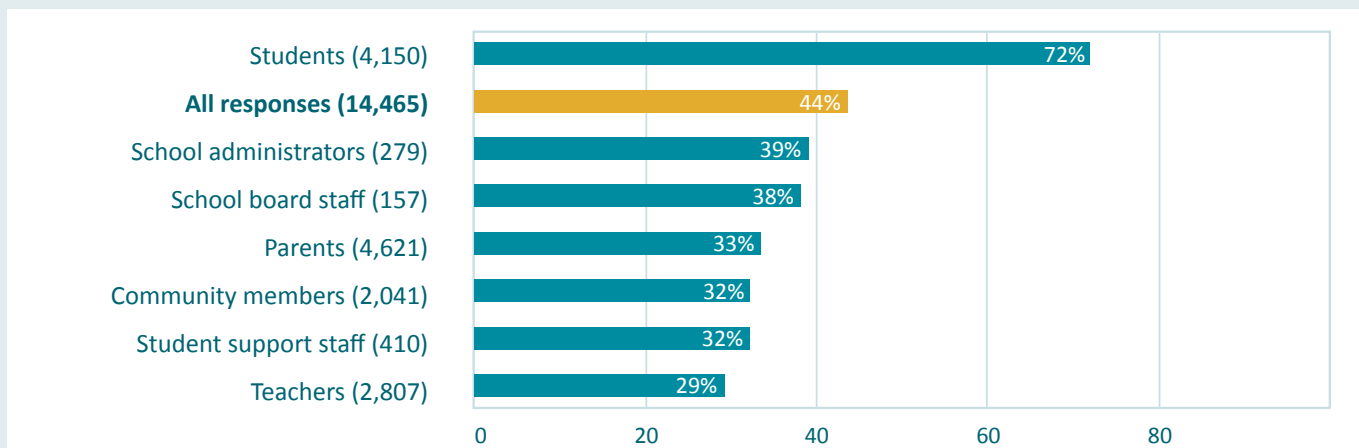
- Differentiate instruction for students who are struggling or excelling in a subject.
- Help students with behavioural issues, enabling them to thrive in their classes.
- Counsel at-risk students who are struggling in school because of complex academic, financial, family, or health issues.

The panel heard that programs and services in place to support students’ diverse needs are often high in quality, but insufficient to meet the needs of all students. Many respondents told us that the implementation of the province’s inclusive education model and the provision of other student supports are not working well for students or teachers. There is a shared opinion that current levels of funding and other resources are hindering the educational experience of *all* students in the system because the resources are not keeping pace with the growing needs of students. Almost 70 percent

“Not enough is spent on the average struggling learner that has potential to be an independent productive member of society.” – Parent

“With so much attention on so many different special needs, the focus on basic academics is being watered down. This is not fair to kids who don’t have special needs.” – Parent

FIGURE 14 • “Special programs and services are meeting the needs of all students,” percentage agreement by group (n=14,465)



of parents, teachers, student support staff, and school community members disagree that current programs and services are adequate (see Figure 14).

The panel heard the lowest level of agreement from elementary teachers, with 76 percent disagreeing or somewhat disagreeing that the right levels of support are in place (see Figure 15).

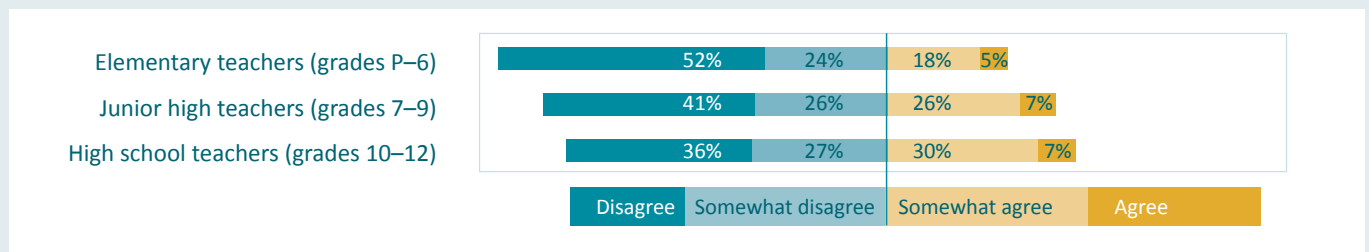
A small number of respondents advocated for a return to former models of congregated classes, but the majority called for a sustainable, improved approach to the current model of inclusive education and other student supports. To improve inclusion, respondents suggested the following:

- Increase supports to students and teachers in the classroom (e.g., teaching assistants) and schools (e.g., psychologists, resource teachers, transition coordinators, guidance counsellors etc.).
- Give greater attention to supporting successful transitions from the early years into grade Primary.
- Provide teachers with more classroom-based support and training opportunities to effectively differentiate instruction.
- Create a more flexible model and explore a range of opportunities for students to be in classes with their peers or in congregated settings, depending on the needs of the students.
- Reduce waiting times for psychology and speech-language assessments so that students can receive appropriate services in a more timely manner, and better coordinate the transitions from early childhood to school for students receiving these services.
- Improve access to programs and services that vary among schools, especially in small rural schools.
- Provide parents with more information about services and how to access them.

Congregated classes provide intensive support outside the regular classroom for students with special needs. The Special Education Policy (introduced in 1996) supported inclusive education within a continuum of programming and services, recognizing that many students are able to succeed in a regular classroom with supports, while some students require special self-contained or congregated classes for some of their programming and services.

“Inclusion only works [if] enough resources and personnel are available. Students sitting together in a classroom does not equal inclusion in the real sense of the word.” – Parent

FIGURE 15 • “Special programs and services are meeting the needs of all students,” percentage agreement from teachers by grade taught (n=2,780)



Discussion

There is widespread support for the province’s model of inclusive education. Under section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.” Nova Scotia’s inclusive education model upholds the province’s commitment to this principle.

In the history of public education, inclusion is a relatively new approach to teaching and learning. Our ability to identify and support students with special needs has advanced in recent years. Inclusion has brought a real-world reality to the classroom. In the absence of appropriate levels of support, however, inclusion has also introduced a new layer of complexity to classrooms, and teachers are struggling to effectively meet the needs of all students. It may be helpful to note that inclusion does not necessarily mean all students are integrated into regular classrooms all of the time.

While many agree that the principle of inclusion is sound, few agree that its implementation has been successful since the current model was first introduced in the 1990s. The panel was struck not only by the volume of input on this topic, but by the level of concern. Under current circumstances, it would appear that *neither* students with special needs *nor* their peers are being served well by the model in its current state. The implementation of the model is not working.

4.1 RECOMMENDATION

Examine implementation of the province’s inclusive education model to ensure that it is

- a) flexible to allow schools to meet the needs of *all* students
- b) sustainable within the broader resources of the government
- c) appropriately supported for timely access to assessments and special programs and services

4.2 RECOMMENDATION

Assist schools and school boards to create a range of learning environments for students with special needs, including congregated classes taught by highly qualified specialist teachers, where appropriate.

By suggesting that the current model of inclusion lacks appropriate supports, the panel is not recommending that current challenges with inclusive education can or should be fixed by increased funding alone or by simply adding teaching assistants. It is possible that the resources schools need to effectively implement the model of inclusion already exist, but are not within the purview of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, or more broadly within government.

There is also significant room to improve initial teacher preparation, as well as training for school administrators on teaching students with special needs and differentiating instruction. The panel also notes increasing the level of interagency collaboration will assist in ensuring that all available resources are brought to bear. These changes would support the model of inclusion working for all students and teachers.

“Departments of Education, Justice, Social Services, Health, and others must work hand in hand here to develop a better model.” – Teacher

4.3 RECOMMENDATION

Explore options to bring the broader resources and funding for services of government departments together in support of inclusive education.

Theme 5

Create a positive climate for learning

What we heard

The majority of respondents agreed that schools are building positive climates for learning and seventy-seven percent of respondents said they feel safe in schools. On average, relationships between students and staff are also generally respectful and staff work to foster positive relationships with parents. We also heard praise for the positive impact of anti-bullying initiatives and great appreciation for schools that go the extra mile to create a strong feeling of community and caring for students and staff. However, respondents also identified the following issues:

- Bullying remains a persistent issue in *and* outside of schools, and is sometimes overlooked by staff.
- African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq students and their families are less likely than other Nova Scotians to feel welcome in schools.
- Teachers need more support to address classroom behaviours that are disruptive to learning and are sometimes unsafe.
- Consequences are not always appropriate for the severity of incidents, such as violence toward teachers or among students.
- The learning climate depends on staff and is very different from one school to the next.

"I feel safe, but bullying is a huge problem at school for me, no matter how much our school talks about it." – Student

"Without a doubt [we need] a better way to deal with classroom disruptions. Too much time during a classroom session is spent dealing with students who constantly disrupt the education of others." – Parent

"On a regular basis I see the majority of others in the class look worried, sad, angry, and even bored that the students who disrupt just get to do it again, and again, and again. The teacher must waste countless minutes and hours of classes dealing with these behaviour issues. During the years countless students have spoken to me and told me how disheartened they are and they ask me why nothing is done about this, especially those who are bullied."

– Teacher

"I have felt safe, but also unsafe at school and I am sure many students have felt that way as well. I think this is highly dependent on the school you are in, as well!"

– Teacher

As schools are workplaces for teachers, it is not surprising that the issue of respect appeared frequently in this group's comments to the panel. Many teachers feel it is their role to maintain respectful and constructive relationships with students and parents, but this can sometimes be difficult when dealing with challenging issues of student behaviour that are disrupting teaching and learning in the classroom. There is also a perception among some teachers that a decline in public support for the teaching profession coincided with a decrease in expectations of students in areas such as attendance and completing schoolwork. As a result, teachers are challenged more often and sometimes feel intimidated by parents and students than they were in the past.

Conversely, the panel heard that some teachers and parents do not always model respect. Respondents agree that teachers need to be empowered to respond to disrespectful behaviours, but they also feel they should be more respectful of students and should teach by example. Parents, too, are called upon to take a more active role in teaching young people about respect at home, as well as being role models for respectful behaviours in schools and other community settings.

Under this theme, the most critical message we heard from Nova Scotians is this: creating a positive school climate is a shared responsibility that requires all staff, students, parents, and community partners to work together to model respect and take action against bullying and violence in schools.

From the perspective of many Nova Scotians, building effective partnerships for learning is also a shared responsibility for schools, parents, and students.

"When did it become wrong to expect things from our children? When did it become optional to follow rules? When did excuses become the norm and not the exception? ... When did it become okay to move the good kids, disrupting his life, and everything go on as usual for the bully?"
– Parent

"Teachers are hesitant to talk to parents – they become defensive."
– Parent

"Parents cannot leave all of the behaviour coaching to schools ... they have a responsibility here too."
– Community Member

“Schools have to be a more welcoming place for the community and parents.”

– Teacher

“I think there is a lack of understanding of systemic issues. Everyone is ready to tackle overt issues and wear a ribbon, but institutional issues are less understood.”

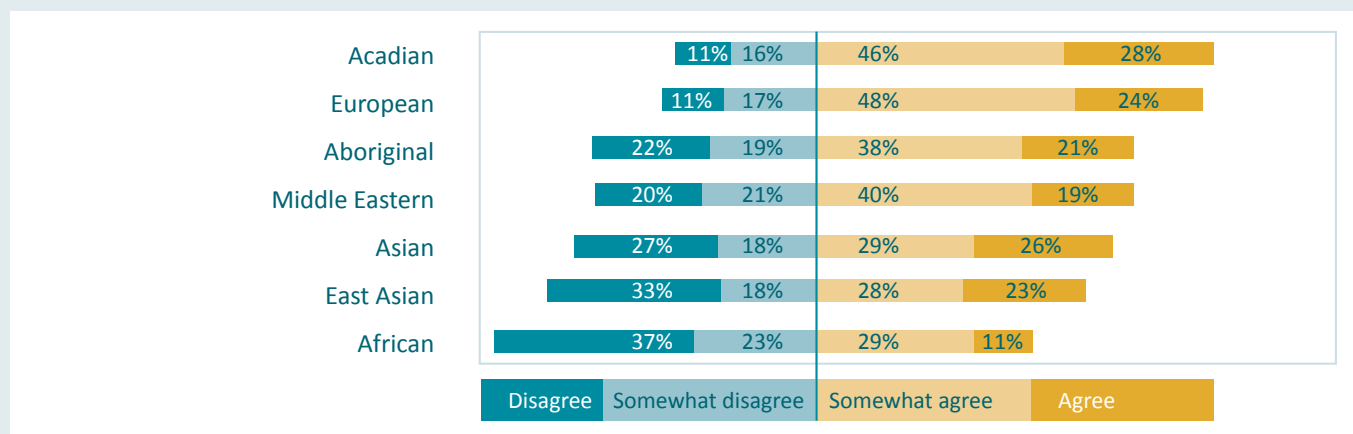
– Community Member

“I see my culture because it is the norm, but I don’t see other people’s cultures.” – Student

For schools:

- Respondents told the panel that more work can be done to improve relationships with parents, especially when issues arise or parents want to problem-solve with teachers and principals about their child’s learning. Many parents told us that the new parent portal is an effective tool for communication about student learning, but remains an area in need of significant improvement.
- The quality of the provincial report card was expressed as a concern by respondents. The panel notes the department’s recent commitment to change the way report cards are written to “ensure the use of clear, jargon-free language, individualized comments, and suggestions of how parents can support their child’s learning at home.”¹² This is a move in the right direction.
- The panel recognizes that the majority of respondents (70 percent) agree that schools reflect diverse cultures and are committed to equity and human rights. However, we are also struck by important differences in the data (see Figure 16). African Nova Scotian respondents were 30 percent less likely than respondents of European or Acadian descent to agree that schools are committed to equity and human rights; and only half of all Aboriginal, African Nova Scotian, Middle Eastern, Asian, and East Asian respondents agreed that classrooms reflect their cultures, compared to 70 percent of respondents of European and Acadian descent.

FIGURE 16 • “Students and their families see their cultures reflected in their schools and classrooms,” percentage agreement by ancestry (n=12,320)



- The panel was pleased to see that 74 percent of Acadian students and families see their cultures reflected in their schools and classrooms (see Figure 16), which was the highest response among all respondent groups. More broadly, Acadian respondents were at or above the Nova Scotia average on every single question in the survey. We interpret this as a testament to the hard work of personnel in the French-language school board, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP), and to the collective efforts of all Nova Scotians to recognize the province’s linguistic history and culture.

For parents:

- The panel also heard that sometimes parents need to do more to be present at school events and parent-teacher conferences; to be more responsive to communications from teachers; and to be proactive in seeking feedback about their child from teachers. Some teachers feel that parents need to be more engaged and accountable, but also recognize that engagement levels may be influenced strongly by parent’s prior experiences with the school system when they themselves were students. The panel also heard from a small number of teachers that parents can sometimes be “too involved” and perceived as unduly pressuring staff.

For students:

- Parents, educators, and school community members agree that students need to take on greater responsibility for their own learning. This means attending their classes, meeting deadlines, and making a genuine effort to do their best. Many feel that this responsibility extends to not disrupting learning for other students, which is something many also feel merits stronger consequences than is currently the case in some classrooms.

Discussion

The panel heard that schools are generally positive spaces for learning, but there is an underlying theme in the data that the most important relationships in schools—those between students and teachers—are not always respectful. We strongly agree that respect is a shared responsibility that includes teachers, school administrators, support staff working in schools, school bus drivers, parents *and* students. There are many elements to promoting this shared responsibility:

- Parents, teachers, and other adults working in schools are accountable for modelling appropriate behaviors.
- As a society we have a shared role in helping students to develop healthy social-emotional skills and adopt positive online behaviours.
- Schools and other agencies—including government—have to work together to build awareness of the strong connections between positive relationships and learning.
- As a system, public schools need to be inclusive of diverse communication and learning styles that are influenced, for example, by students' race, culture, ancestry, and/or gender.

5.1 RECOMMENDATION

Instruct educators and support staff about the impact that healthy, positive relationships with students can have on the climate of the classroom, student engagement, and student achievement.

As a foundation for positive learning climates, we need to deepen the understanding of and commitment to the principles of respectful relationships in schools and other social institutions. Schools also require effective mechanisms for responding when student conduct is dangerous, unlawful, and/or disruptive to other students' ability to learn. The panel understands that the province is currently reviewing the Provincial Code of Conduct Policy; and this, in turn, may lead to changes in board and school policies. As part of this review, it is imperative that the province evaluate whether current approaches to promoting positive behaviours and responding to disruptive behaviours, such as restorative justice, are working well.

We also strongly encourage the province to take steps to allow schools to respond quickly if a teacher is struggling in a classroom because of behaviour issues. When a student or students are disrupting the learning of others, schools need to respond with individualized planning for students and draw upon a network of support for teachers to design

strategies. This network could include external agencies, such as Health, Community Services, and Justice. The strategies should focus on learning in the classroom and maintaining healthy positive relationships. Related to an earlier recommendation, it is important for initial teacher preparation programs to include relationship building and classroom management in the B.Ed program to develop teachers' skills in responding effectively to disruptive behaviours and building a climate of respect in classrooms.

5.2 RECOMMENDATION

Create learning environments where respectful behaviour is an expectation for students, teachers, and parents, and where mechanisms are in place to respond to disrespectful behaviours, especially when they are disruptive.

Too often, positive learning climates are discussed without the appropriate attention to the environment itself. For example, how individuals act and treat each other contributes to a positive climate overall, as seen in the relationships between teachers and students, between staff and parents, and between schools and their communities. It is critical for all schools to be welcoming and responsive to the students they serve by ensuring the following: curriculum is inclusive; teaching is responsive to linguistic, gender, and cultural diversity; student clubs and school events are inclusive; and all school staff are trained to be culturally proficient.

5.3 RECOMMENDATION

To ensure that all families feel welcomed and that students' cultures are an integral part of the learning environment, train and support school administrators to build cultural proficiency among all staff in schools.

To establish a positive climate for all learners, the school system and all of its partners need to continue working together to make teaching, and aspirations to the role of principal, an attractive career choice for diverse candidates. There is a need through the hiring process to encourage and seek members of under-represented groups—such as male teachers and administrators in elementary schools—to apply to teacher training institutions or teaching positions at particular grade levels. Representation in classrooms and in positions of leadership is a critical factor to students' sense of belonging at school and to student achievement. Decades of working to remedy the under-representation of certain groups in the teaching profession have made some difference, but more needs to be done.

Cultural proficiency includes the values and behaviors of individuals and/or the policies and practices of organizations that reflect an effective response to *diversity*, including differences in language, physical and intellectual needs, culture, religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation that make up the culture of an organization, such as a school.

Theme 6

Collaborate for improved student health and well-being

What we heard

Many Nova Scotians believe schools are taking steps to contribute to students' health and well-being. We heard, for example, that many schools provide good opportunities for students to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities. They also provide healthy food choices. At schools where programs like SchoolsPlus are operating, there was praise for the increased attention to supporting students with mental health issues. However, despite the progress, there is agreement among respondents that much more needs to be done in these areas.

"There is a very good range of extracurricular activities offered by the schools that supplement the education and help improve the experience in school."

– Student

"Physical education must be increased. We have alarming obesity rates ... If you increase physical activity, you will see and immediate increase in test scores, and a decrease in behavioural problems."

– Community Member

The need for more physical activity during the school day was a frequent theme in reports, survey comments, and e-mails received by the panel. Respondents noted that students need more physical education classes each week, especially in high schools where only one physical education credit is required. Many also recognized that meeting the national goal of 60 minutes of physical activity a day¹³ requires more than just formally scheduled physical education classes. Meeting this goal requires the involvement of a network of organizations beyond schools. In addition to promoting physically active lifestyles, many Nova Scotians are also looking to schools to help students develop healthy habits and to provide healthy food choices through the school cafeteria.

Of all the input received on this topic, mental health supports stood out as the most significant issue. With the exception of students, fewer than 40 percent of respondents feel that the right programs and services are available in schools to help students with mental health issues. Teachers and school administrators noted that services exist, but not nearly enough to meet the level of need among students. We also heard that where supports are available, they are focused on addressing the most severe cases, leaving little help for students struggling with less severe anxiety and depression.

There is agreement that schools and other agencies need to do more to create awareness about mental health in elementary schools to help remove the stigma that continues to surround mental illness. As well, respondents wrote about the need for more guidance counsellors in elementary schools to work through social-emotional challenges with individual students and to teach students about creating healthy relationships and being resilient to everyday challenges.

There was concern among some respondents that teachers are expected—without appropriate levels of training—to help students with some complex social-emotional needs. The data was clear that the responsibility for the provision of these supports extends well beyond the school system to community services, health services, and families.

Discussion

In the past 25 years, schools have taken on a more active role in promoting student health and wellness. They do so through the curriculum on physical education and health, student services such as guidance, and extracurricular activities. Schools also provide a range of programs that build awareness about mental health, promote the importance of physical activity and healthy eating, and speak out against bullying and discrimination. The needs of students, however, are outpacing the resources that schools have, particularly in the areas of mental health and obesity. These are also significant challenges to the provincial health care system.

In their responses to the panel’s survey, many Nova Scotians (74 percent) agreed that students have the right opportunities for activity at school. However, all other evidence confirms that there is an urgent need to improve the physical health of children and youth in the province. We have a wealth of knowledge on the benefits of healthy nutrition and daily physical activity for learning and on the overall health of the population. It is also clear that the time and money we invest in healthy living today will have significant returns in the future for individuals, families, and the health care system. Tackling issues of childhood obesity and the impact of sedentary lifestyles is a shared responsibility that includes families, municipal and provincial services, and the network of not-for-profit agencies that contribute significant resources to addressing these issues. However, we also recognize the unique roles that schools play in building awareness about healthy living and in engaging students in active living through physical education, encouraging students to walk or bike to school, taking students outside to learn about the environment, and more.

“We recognize that schools and teachers are often expected to not only teach traditional academic subjects such as reading, writing and sciences, but also the ever-growing topic of health and wellbeing. Doctors of the province believe that by encouraging physical activity and healthy eating, students and teachers will both be able to achieve their goals. Physical activity helps children to think and process information, concentrate and behave appropriately in class, leading to improved performance.”

– Doctors Nova Scotia

6.1 RECOMMENDATION

Achieve national guidelines for daily physical activity, using creative solutions for funding and human resources and taking advantage of co-curricular (i.e., before and after school) opportunities.

6.2 RECOMMENDATION

Promote improved health and fitness through a curriculum that identifies healthy, active lifestyles as core competencies in junior high and high school, and make effective use of time available in the semester timetable.

In the effort to find effective, sustainable ways to meet the needs of all students, there is a pressing need to expand interagency collaborations in their scope *and* their reach across the province. Nova Scotia has some excellent examples of government departments and community agencies collaborating to bring the programs and services that students need most to schools. SchoolsPlus, for example, has sites in all eight school boards. SchoolsPlus involves interagency teams collaborating to integrate the delivery of social, mental health, addiction, and health services in schools (see inset). The Health Promoting Schools initiative is also coordinating the knowledge and efforts of health and education partners, including school boards and community agencies, to create a comprehensive health approach (i.e., physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being) in all schools.

Initiatives such as SchoolsPlus are meeting critical needs in our school communities but their scope and reach need to grow. Government and non-government agencies also need to build awareness among parents and the role they can play to support healthy physical, social-emotional and mental health. As we discuss at length in the next section, schools today are often seen as the best places for promote healthy and active living among students. The public also looks to schools to support students' social-emotional development and to help students navigate complex mental health issues. For schools to carry out these roles effectively, training programs for guidance counsellors will need to continue to advance best practices in counselling. We also need to challenge all partners to think in new ways about the resources—time, funding, staff—that are available across sectors to bring these learning experiences and supports to students as an integrated part of the school day.

SchoolsPlus is a collaborative interagency approach to supporting students and their families. The initiative promotes an integrated service delivery model through the co-location of service providers (e.g., SchoolsPlus facilitators, community outreach workers, and mental health clinicians) and/or partnership of services within a school, including Community Services, Justice, Mental Health, Addiction Services, Health, and other community organizations.

6.3 RECOMMENDATION

Consolidate the resources of multiple agencies and government departments to enable all schools to be able to provide comprehensive support for students' physical, social-emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

6.4 RECOMMENDATION

Ensure the curriculum for initial teacher preparation and guidance counsellor training reflects best practices for promoting healthy social-emotional development with children and youth.

Theme 7

Build a modern-day structure for teaching and learning

What we heard

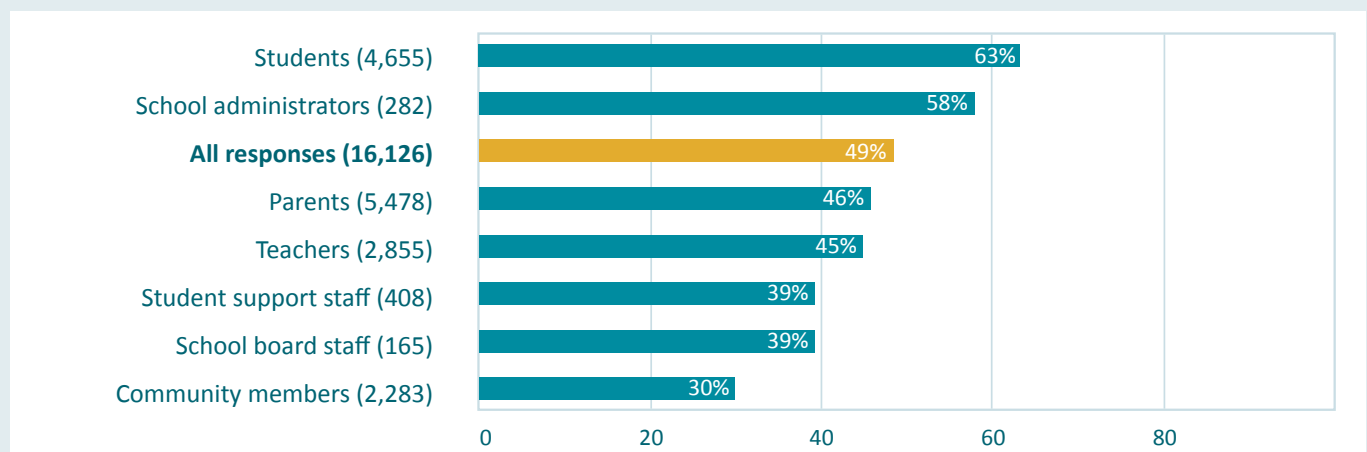
A recurring theme in the input received by the panel is that the school system is not working as well as it should for students. Despite significant changes in the student body, families, and society, teaching and learning today look very much like they did 25, or even 50, years ago. We hold high expectations for schools as core social institutions, yet the structures are not changing in response to their environment.

Skills that students need to be successful in today's environment are lacking. For example, less than half of the Nova Scotians who completed a survey believe that students are becoming effective problems solvers (see Figure 17).

Comments received from parents and students also drew our attention to concerns that Nova Scotian graduates do not feel well prepared for post-secondary learning. Students who aspire to careers in the skilled trades or technology-related occupations lack access to the pathways they need for success.

“Many parents across the province are commenting on the same points: their children need to be taught how to think, how to learn, how to apply their thinking in new and problem-solving situations, how to work independently, and how to persevere when comprehension or answers are not immediate. Yes, there is a parent responsibility here, too, but classrooms provide ongoing opportunities for these skills to be taught in meaningful contexts.” – Parent

FIGURE 17 • “Students are becoming effective problem solvers,” percentage agreement by group (n=16,126)



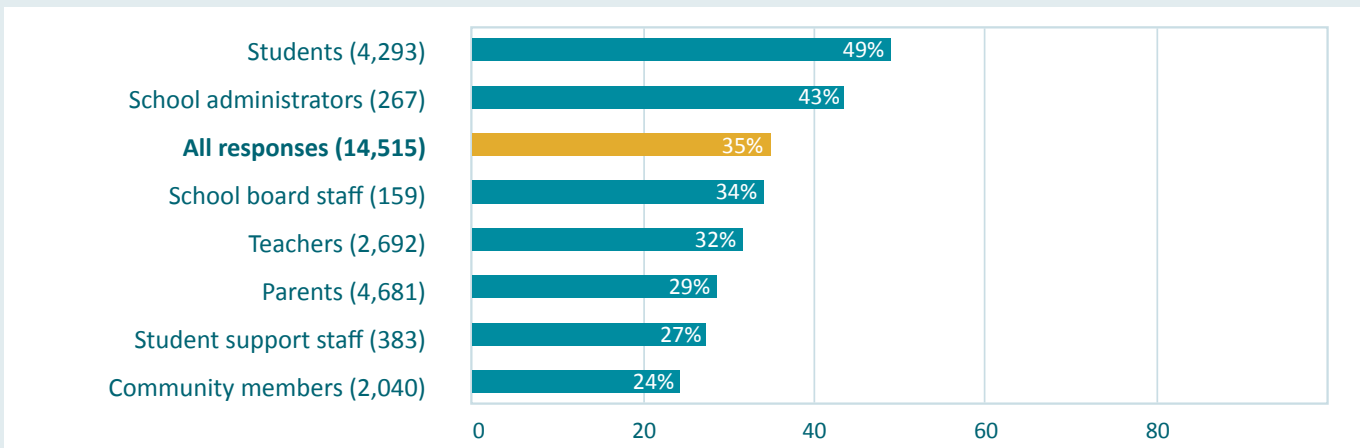


Schools today are expected to teach social skills, financial literacy, healthy living, nutrition, career skills, and life management skills, and to support a wider range of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional needs.

There are many demands and expectations on the system in response to emerging needs but we have made only incremental changes in our approach to funding, how we staff schools, and how we deliver services to children and youth. Many Nova Scotians are concerned about the impact of these increased demands on the classroom.

With the exception of students and principals, fewer than 30 percent of survey respondents agree that education funding (see Figure 18) is currently being spent on the right programs and services. There is still widespread belief that the system is too top-heavy, with too many resources going to provincial and regional school board structures and too few resources going to schools.

FIGURE 18 • “Funding for education is spent on the right programs and services,” percentage agreement by group (n=14,515)



Discussion

There are two significant pressures on schools: to do more and to do things differently. Schools are expected to continue effectively as centres of learning while also becoming centres of care. As centres of care they are being asked to fulfil roles that were previously provided in the community, or through other departments and agencies of government, such as Health, Justice, and Community Services. This shift in expectations for the role of schools brings into question whether resources (primarily funding and people) are in the right places and whether structures (e.g., regional school boards, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and branches of other government departments) are suited to the contemporary role of schools. If Nova Scotians agree on a more comprehensive role for schools, we will need to sort out how to break down any barriers that currently prevent the government and not-for-profit sectors from adopting an exclusive focus on effectively supporting the needs of children and youth in schools.

The panel believes the province needs to look for ways to improve how the school system is funded and governed. For example, we see evidence of funds that could be saved with less duplication of services and greater openness on the part of government departments and schools boards to make boundaries more permeable to meeting the needs of the school system as a whole. Recognizing that one department of government cannot respond adequately to the full spectrum of services required in our schools, government agencies and partners have turned to interagency collaborations. While interagency collaborations are a positive development, the fact that staffing and budget allocations remain grounded in traditional departmental structures means that the innovations in programs and services they can provide are too susceptible to changes in leadership, funding challenges, and staffing.

Many of the strongest interagency collaborations continue to be built on the goodwill of individuals who devote time and energy to integrating programs or services, but this is not sufficient. What is missing is a fundamental shift in our thinking about the way we organize government resources and services to best respond to the needs of students in a public school system that is designed with the school at the centre.

When the expectations we hold for schools become the focus of our attention, our goal becomes clear. As a panel we believe we need to find new ways to align *all* necessary resources and structures toward achieving key policy and program outcomes for students. The government and its partners need to have courageous conversations to determine what a well-

designed system—including government departments or certain branches within them and school boards—would look like if the focus was on serving students.

Are there new ways of thinking about the system and opportunities for working more efficiently and effectively? Does the province need eight school boards? Can schools of the future become centres of learning *and* care, where students and their families go for education, health, and community services? Are there ways to reduce the sometimes dramatic differences among schools in the province? Can we re-imagine schools and the school day to bring important health and fitness opportunities to students?

The school system we shape today will make a difference to the province we become in the future. The province needs to be clear about the outcomes it expects schools to achieve. It then needs to restructure government structures and shift resources from *all* related sectors to build a system of support around schools, enabling them to effectively support learning and healthy development from the early years through to graduation.

7.1 RECOMMENDATION

Agree on the outcomes we want for children and youth in the province, and reorganize all related funding and services through the partial restructuring of provincial departments (e.g., Community Services, Education and Early Childhood Development, Health and Wellness, Labour and Advanced Education, Justice, Immigration, etc.) into a centrally managed set of programs and services to be delivered in our schools.

In addition to provincial departments, school board structures provide a mechanism to support management of resources and implementation of policy direction at both local and provincial levels. School boards also provide administrative services (procurement, finance, human resource management, information technology, facilities management) and a governance framework to guide the school system. Many sectors are engaged in conversations about the merits of shared service models to consolidate similar functions, where possible, in an effort to reduce administrative costs and maximize the availability of funding to support frontline service delivery—which, in the case of the school system, is the classroom.

Traditional governance structures in other sectors in Nova Scotia are undergoing some level of consolidation. These changes bring the potential benefits of better dissemination of best practice models, promote consistent standards of service delivery and, in some cases, generate reduced operating costs. The school system in Nova Scotia could benefit from a similar exercise, as long as care is taken to ensure that the relationship between schools and the community is preserved through advisory boards or similar structures.

7.2 RECOMMENDATION

Implement comprehensive and effective shared services models, and restructure school boards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to optimize the quality of programs and services to students.

Charting a Course for Change

Nova Scotians surpassed all of our expectations when they chose to share their views about the public school system. Parents, students, teachers, principals, and community members around the province told us they are ready for change. They also told us where this change is needed most. We can try to make these changes with the structures that have existed for many years, or we can imagine the potential that would be realized by a system that truly aligns with a vision for the school system that our province needs and our children deserve.

In its recent analysis of Nova Scotia's economy, the Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy concluded that the status quo was not an option.¹⁴ The panel strongly agrees with the commission's direction and with the wisdom expressed by a respondent who wrote, "We shouldn't just continue doing things because they've always been done that way." The current system is failing our students and the public has sent a strong message that there is an urgent need for change.

The panel strongly believes that the province's approach to change will be equally important to the reforms that it supports. The past 25 years have shown that incremental reforms with too little attention to prioritization and integration are not resulting in the depth of change our school system needs. To effect fundamental shifts in the system, we need a holistic approach that rallies the public sector and all education partners around the goal of aligning resources to the needs of schools. It is a daunting challenge for all Nova Scotians, but with courage, conviction, and a relentless focus on what is best for students, we can make our education system respond to the diverse challenges it faces in 2014 and onward.

The order and timing of reform is critical. There are some foundations to the school system that need to be functioning well before other changes can be introduced successfully. As such, the province may wish to consider that some of the panel's recommendations will require a longer timeline for implementation. A holistic approach to change does not imply that the government overwhelms the system with change. Instead, we are suggesting an integrated action plan be designed around a cross-government commitment to achieving an ambitious set of outcomes for children and youth and an explicit commitment to disrupting the status quo.

The panel's review of the public input and deliberations lead us to identify seven areas for improvement. For ease of presentation, we have discussed each theme separately even though all seven are tightly interconnected. As a framework for change, the panel's 30 recommendations suggest that the province take steps to improve the following:

- the curriculum
- teaching
- transitions
- inclusion
- school climate
- student health and well-being
- the system structure

If the province is truly committed to raising the bar on student achievement, it will move quickly to identify champions of the action plan in a small designated team of leaders with vision, and will realign resources and staff to support implementation. The potential of the government's plan to have an impact on schools will depend in large part on the province taking steps to bring different minds together to design, drive, and regularly report on the impact of change.

With insights gained during the course of our work, the panel believes Nova Scotia can and must do better: our children's futures depend on it. Based on the responses from over 19,000 Nova Scotians, the panel has set a clear direction for the changes required in our education system. Now we join the public in looking forward to a better future for our students.

APPENDIX A • Comparison of Nova Scotia's standing on national and international measures of student achievement

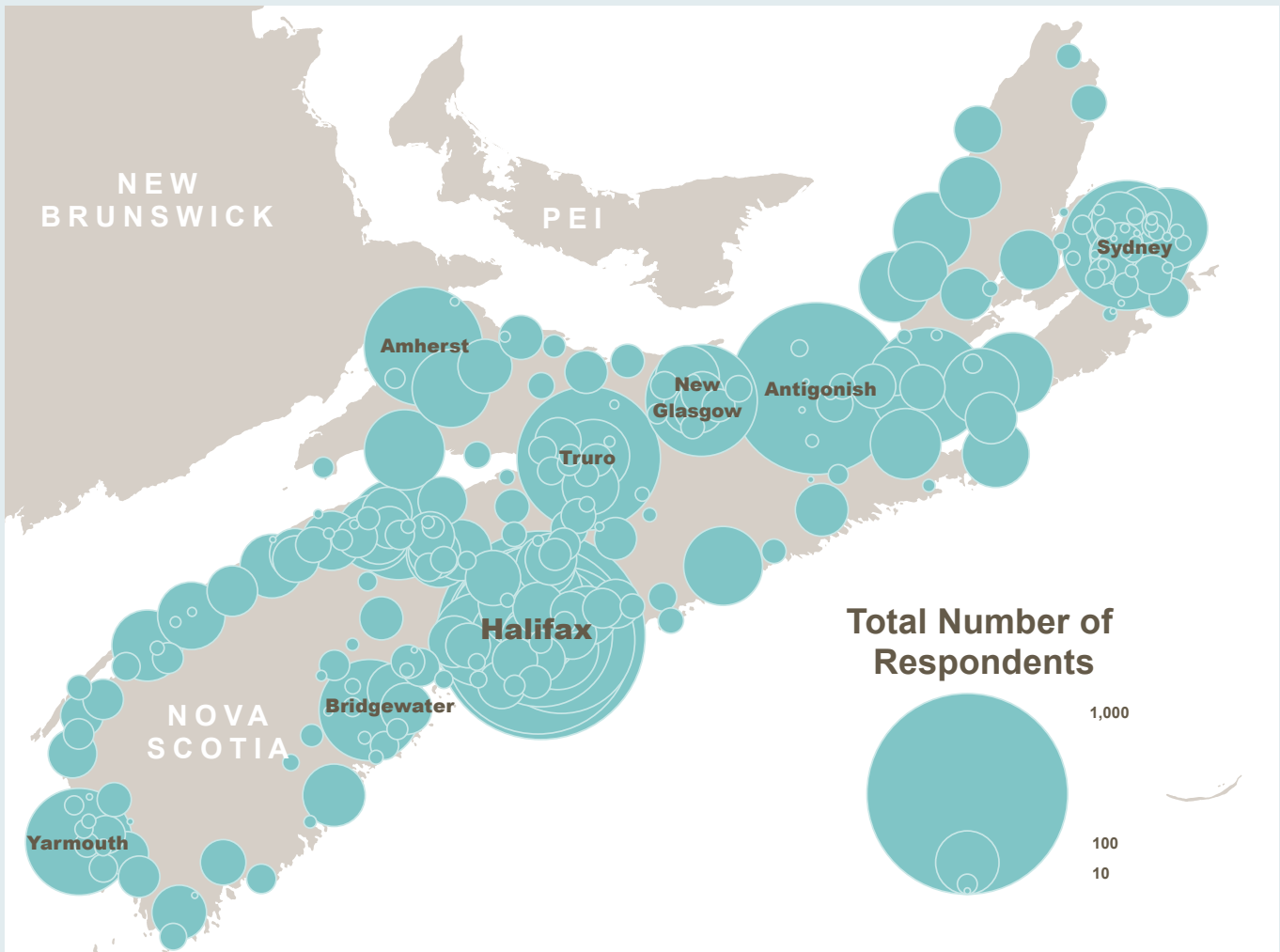
Assessment (target group)	Areas assessed	Average scaled score (500 is the average for the assessment)	Nova Scotia's average score is ...		
			significantly below	similar to	significantly above
Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 (15-year-olds)	Print reading	508	Singapore Japan Korea Finland	Switzerland Germany France Norway	United Kingdom United States Denmark Austria
	Mathematics	497	Singapore Korea Japan Switzerland	Denmark New Zealand France United Kingdom	Norway Italy Russia United States
	Science	516	Singapore Japan Finland Korea	New Zealand Switzerland United Kingdom Slovenia	Austria France Denmark United States
Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) 2013 (Grade 8 students)	Reading	488	Ontario Quebec British Columbia Alberta	Newfoundland PEI Saskatchewan	New Brunswick Manitoba
	Mathematics	488	Quebec Alberta Ontario	PEI British Columbia Saskatchewan Newfoundland New Brunswick	Manitoba
	Science	492	Alberta Ontario British Columbia Newfoundland	PEI Saskatchewan Quebec	New Brunswick Manitoba
Progress for International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011 (Grade 4 students)	Reading	549	Hong Kong Russia Finland Singapore	Denmark Ireland England Netherlands	Sweden Germany Israel New Zealand

APPENDIX B • Consultation survey questions, Minister's Panel on Education

- 1 Overall, how satisfied are you with the public school system?
- 2 Students receive highly effective teaching in their classes.
- 3 Students are engaged in their learning.
- 4 Students receive helpful feedback about the quality of their schoolwork.
- 5 Teachers today are well prepared to respond to the needs of students.
- 6 Students have the right opportunities to participate in healthy living activities at school.
- 7 Students have the right opportunities to learn with technologies.
- 8 Schools provide the right opportunities for students to connect learning in school with learning in their communities.
- 9 Students are well prepared to move on to the next grade.
- 10 The provincial curriculum is focused on what students need to learn most.
- 11 Students are gaining a strong foundation in mathematics.
- 12 Students are gaining a strong foundation in reading and writing.
- 13 Students are becoming effective problem solvers.
- 14 High school students have the right program options available to them.
- 15 Students get the support they need at school to make informed decisions about their futures.
- 16 Students who want to enter the workforce after they graduate are well prepared to do so.
- 17 Students who want to attend college or university after they graduate are well prepared to do so.
- 18 Special programs and services are meeting the needs of all students.
- 19 The appropriate programs and services are available in schools to help children and youth with mental health issues.

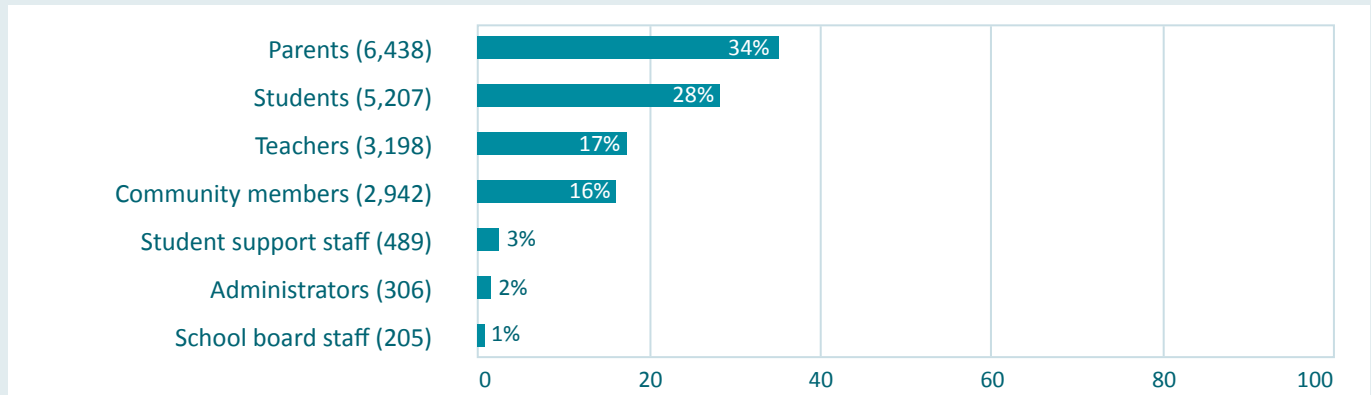
- 20 Students and their families see their cultures reflected in their schools and classrooms.
- 21 Schools and classrooms show a commitment to equity and human rights.
- 22 Parents get the information they need from teachers to support their child's learning.
- 23 Schools develop positive relationships with parents.
- 24 Community organizations and businesses support student success.
- 25 Relationships between students and teachers are respectful.
- 26 Students and staff feel safe in schools.
- 27 Schools are organized to meet the needs of today's students.
- 28 Funding for education is spent on the right programs and services.
- 29 Regional school board staff provide effective supports to schools.
- 30 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development staff provide effective supports to school boards.

APPENDIX C • Map of survey respondents

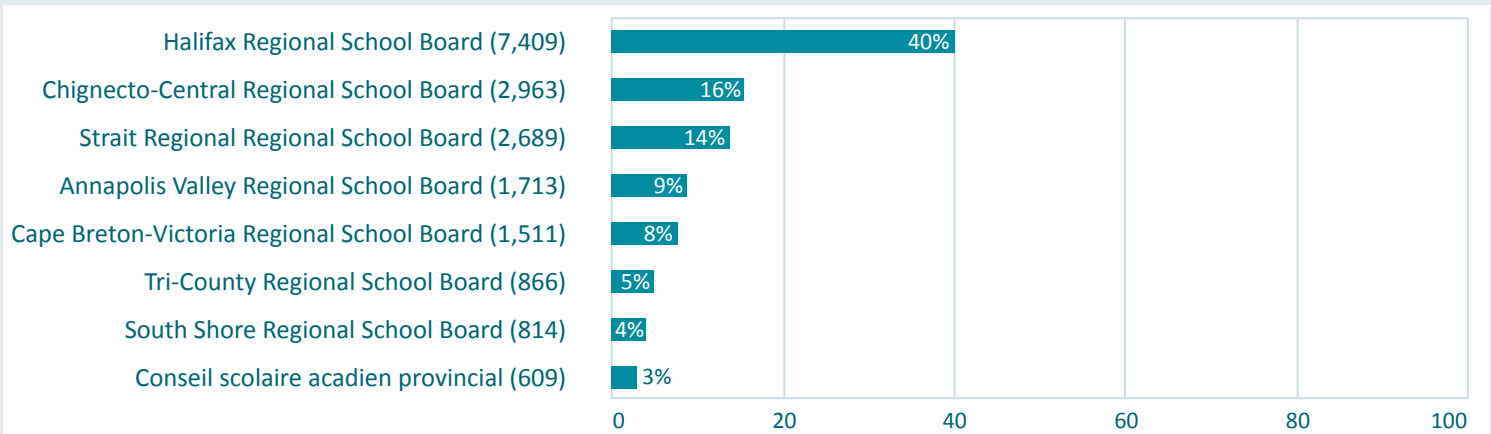


APPENDIX D • Survey demographics

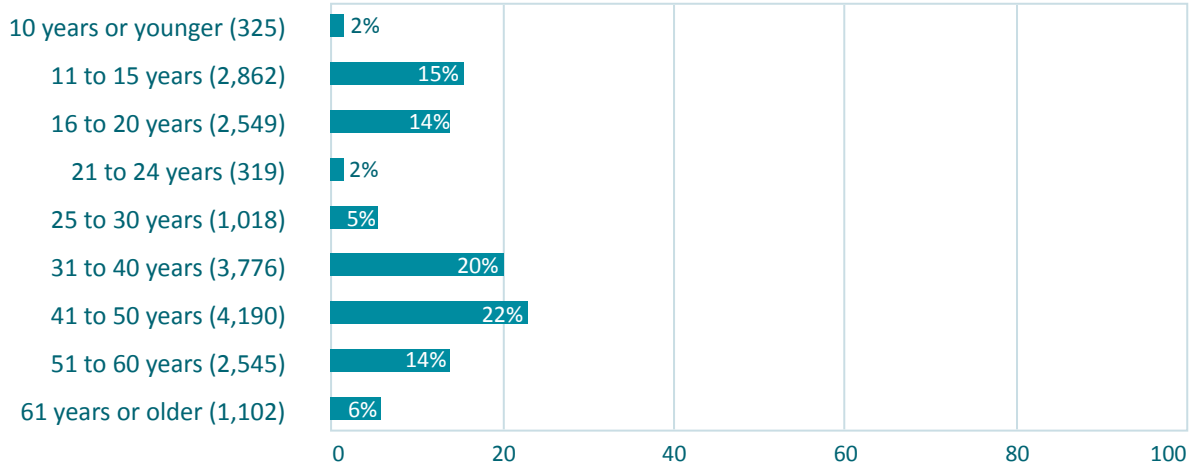
DEMOGRAPHIC 1 • Responses by group (n=18,785)



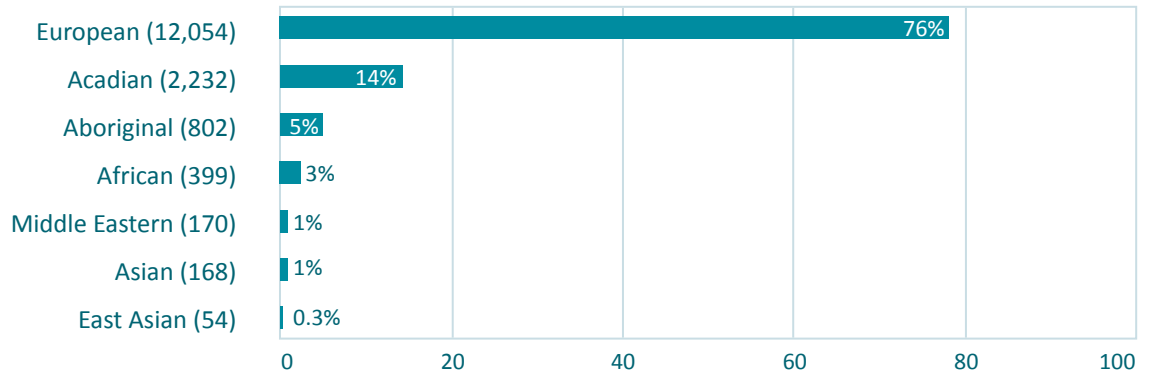
DEMOGRAPHIC 2 • Responses by School Board (n= 18,574)



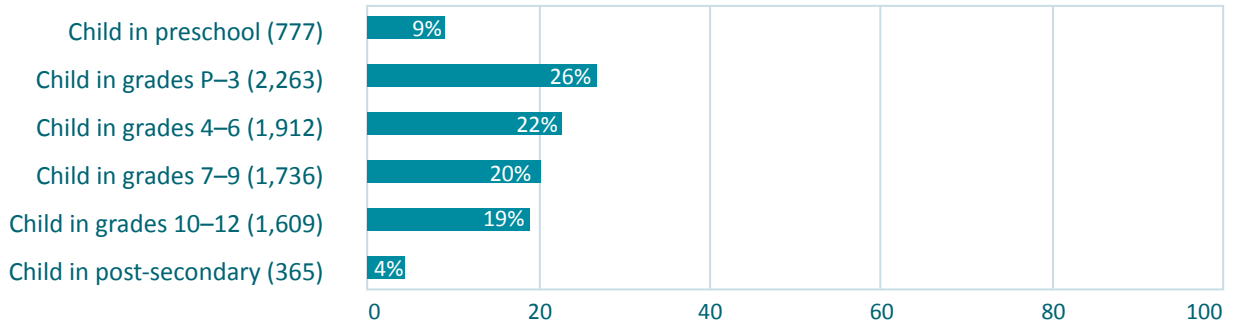
DEMOGRAPHIC 3 • Responses by age of respondent (n=18,686)



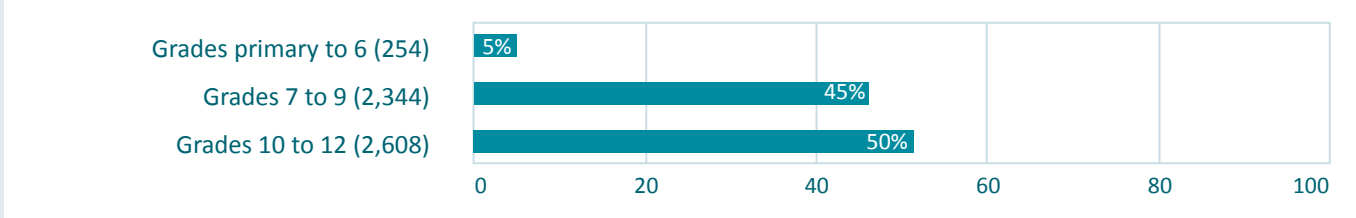
DEMOGRAPHIC 4 • Responses by ethnicity or ancestry of respondent (n=15,879)



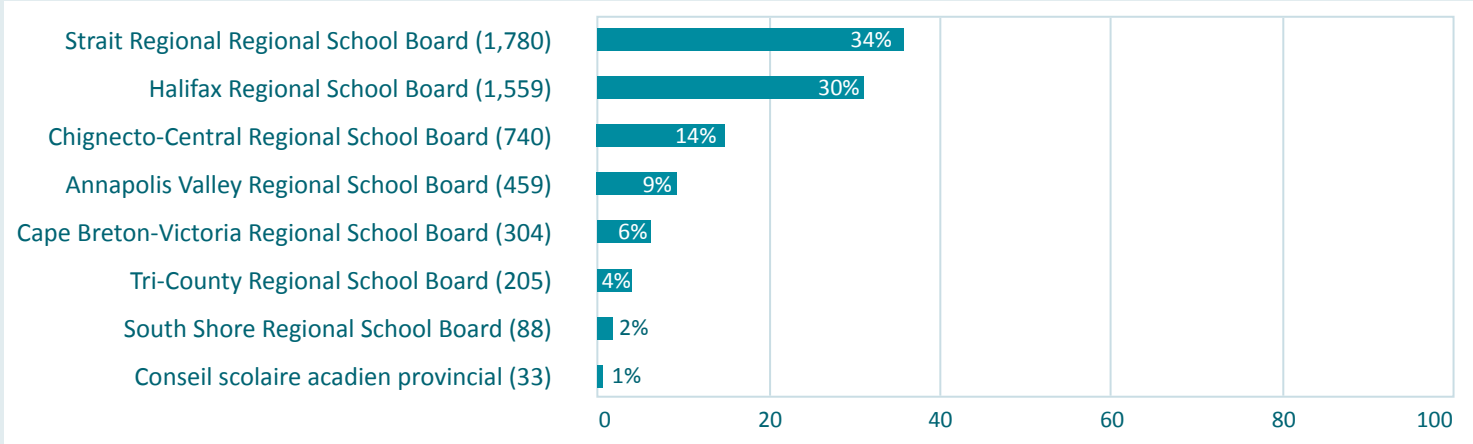
DEMOGRAPHIC 5 • Parent responses by age of child (n=8,662)



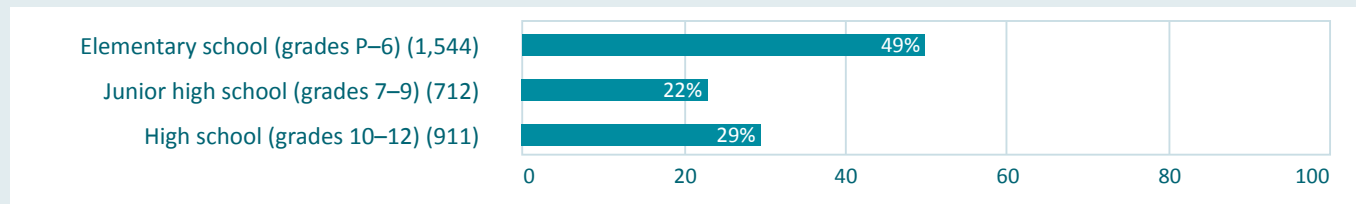
DEMOGRAPHIC 6 • Student responses by grade (n=5,206)



DEMOGRAPHIC 7 • Student responses by school board (n=5,168)



DEMOGRAPHIC 8 • Teacher responses by grade taught (n=3,167)



APPENDIX E • Organizations and individuals who submitted a report to the Minister's Panel on Education

- 1 Alliance for Healthy Eating and Physical Activity
- 2 Atlantic Publishers Marketing Association
- 3 Autism Nova Scotia
- 4 Black Educators Association
- 5 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- 6 Cape Breton Down Syndrome Society
- 7 Cape Breton Partnership
- 8 Centre for Entrepreneurship Education and Development (CEED)
- 9 The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq
- 10 Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia
- 11 Corporate Research Associates
- 12 Council of Regional Librarians (CORL)
- 13 Council on Mi'kmaq Education
- 14 Creative Nova Scotia Leadership Council
- 15 Dartmouth Learning Network
- 16 Department of Health and Wellness (Active Living Branch)
- 17 Department of Health and Wellness (Education and Health Branch)
- 18 Disabled Persons Commission
- 19 Doctors Nova Scotia
- 20 Ecology Action Centre
- 21 Fabian-Fine, Ruth
- 22 Frontier College
- 23 Government of Nova Scotia, Finance and Treasury Board
- 24 Government of Nova Scotia, Office of Planning and Priorities
- 25 Graham-Migel, Janice
- 26 Halifax Chamber of Commerce

- 27 Inter-University Committee on Teacher Education (ICTE)
- 28 KidsCode Jeunesse
- 29 Kutcher, Stan
- 30 McDonald, Michael (Chief Justice)
- 31 Maritime Heart Center
- 32 Nourish Nova Scotia
- 33 Nova Scotia Persons with Disabilities
- 34 Nova Scotia Securities Commission
- 35 Nova Scotia Teachers Union
- 36 Nova Scotia Youth Civic Literacy Report
- 37 Nova Scotia School Counsellors Association
- 38 Nova Scotia Government Employees Union (NSGEU)
- 39 Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA)
- 40 Progress Centre for Early Intervention
- 41 Restorative Justice Approach
- 42 Social Cultural Recreational Inclusion Society (SCRI)
- 43 Special Education Programs and Services Committee (SEPS)
- 44 SpellRead
- 45 St. Francis Xavier Faculty of Education
- 46 Wentworth School Sustainability Association

ENDNOTES

Education in Nova Scotia—Then and Now

- 1 A biography of each panel member is available online at ednet.ns.ca/FeaturedContentSlider/pdf/Bios.pdf.
- 2 Education and Early Childhood Development. February 2014. *Minister Names Education Review Panel*
novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20140219001
- 3 McCain, M. and Mustard, F. 1999. *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study, Final Report*. Ontario: Children's Secretariat.
- 4 Black Learners Advisory Committee. 1994. *BLAC Report on Education: Redressing Inequity— Empowering Black Learners*. NS: BLAC.
acs.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/BLAC%20Report%20on%20Education%20Vol%201-3.pdf
- 5 EnidLee Consultants. 2009. *Reality Check: A review of key program areas in the BLAC Report for their effectiveness in enhancing the educational opportunities and achievement of African Nova Scotian learners*.
acs.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/REALITY_CHECK_FINAL_REPORT_FOR_WEB.pdf
- 6 Nova Scotia Department of Education. 2008. *Increasing the Effectiveness of Service Delivery to Mi'kmaw Learners*. NS: Queen's Printer.

The Public Consultation Process

- 7 All voice messages received were later transcribed and included along with e-mails as part of the panel's analysis of public input.

Theme 2 • Making high-quality teaching the norm in every classroom

- 8 Partner's Working Group, Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2013. *Aligning Teacher Qualifications with the Learning Needs of Nova Scotian Students: Report and Recommendations*, page 4.
ednet.ns.ca/files/reports/Aug_2013_Aligning_Teacher_Qualifications_WEB.pdf
- 9 Nova Scotia Governor in Council Education Act Regulations, Section 10(A).
novascotia.ca/just/regulations/regs/edgic.htm

Theme 3 • Prepare today's students for tomorrow's opportunities

- 10 In the 2008–09 school year, students who turned five by the end of December were able to enrol in grade Primary. Previously, only students who had turned five by the first day of school in September were eligible to enrol.

Theme 4 • Ensure that inclusion is working—for everyone

- 11 Department of Education and Early Childhood Education (2008). *Special Education Policy*, page 5.
studentservices.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/speceng.pdf

Theme 5 • Create a positive climate for learning

- 12 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. 2014. *Provincial Report Card Review Committee: Results Overview and Action Plan Summary*
ednet.ns.ca/files/reports/Report-Card-Survey-Action-Plan-Summary.pdf

Theme 6 • Collaborate for improved student health and well-being

- 13 The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend 60 minutes per day in moderate-to-vigorous-intensity activity for children (5–11) and youth (12–17). Guidelines are available through ParticipACTION participaction.com.

Charting a Course for Change

- 14 Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy (February 2014). *Now or Never: An Urgent Call to Action for Nova Scotians*.
oneNS.ca

