

# Principals in Focus ☺☺

**APRIL 16, 19, & 20, 2012**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

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## 1.0 Introduction

Principals in Focus (PIF) 2012 brought together principals from Nova Scotia's elementary, junior high, and senior high public schools, as well as senior school board staff, Department of Education staff, and other key partners. Approximately 460 participants attended the regional meetings, held in Wolfville, Port Hawkesbury, and Truro on April 16, 19, and 20, respectively.

2012 marked the seventh year of the PIF meetings organized by the Department of Education, and the second PIF meeting to follow the regional format. Prior to 2009, principals from across the province were brought together in Halifax for two days of meetings, generally held in the spring. In 2009, the PIF meetings changed format to a series of one day sessions held in multiple regions across the province. Based on feedback from principals during the 2009 PIF meeting, the decision was made to hold larger, two day provincial meetings and smaller, one day regional meetings on alternating years. As a result, Principals in Focus 2010 was a two day provincial meeting held in Halifax, and Principals in Focus 2012 followed the one day, regional meeting format.

The major components of this year's meeting included:

1. **Deputy Minister's Presentation** – The presentation provided information on the current realities facing the Nova Scotia education system, such as declining enrolment and funding reductions. The presentation also provided an overview of the *Kids & Learning First* plan for education. The Deputy Minister summarized a number of the actions currently underway and also touched on planned future initiatives. She noted that input from principals and teachers will be vital to shaping and implementing these actions.
2. **Professional Learning Communities video** – Participants were shown a video highlighting a number of successful Professional Learning Communities in Nova Scotia schools. The video featured interviews with principals and teachers, in which they described the benefits, challenges, and lessons learned in developing and fostering collaborative learning environments in their schools.
3. **Concurrent Sessions** – Participants had the opportunity to participate in two concurrent sessions during the afternoon of Principals in Focus. More detail on these concurrent sessions is provided in section 5.0.

## 2.0 Evaluation Process

Participants were provided with a number of opportunities to provide feedback on the content and logistics of Principals in Focus 2012. Opportunities for providing and gathering feedback included:

1. **Table Talk** – Following the Deputy Minister's presentation, participants had an opportunity to participate in small group discussions at their tables. These sessions allowed participants to share ideas, network with one another, and develop focused questions for the Town Hall session. Three guiding questions were provided to help guide these conversations (please see Appendix 1).

2. **Town Hall** – The Town Hall was moderated by Tony Stewart, Executive Co-Director, Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium. The session provided participants with the opportunity to ask questions directly to the Deputy Minister and other Department of Education senior staff.
3. **Principals in Focus Evaluation Form** – Participants were asked to provide feedback on the meeting by completing an evaluation form. The evaluation form consisted of questions related to the meeting agenda and logistics. It also allowed participants to provide feedback on any topics they felt should have been covered in more detail during the meeting. In total, 136 participants (29%) completed evaluation forms (please see Appendix 2 for a copy of the evaluation form).

### 3.0 Highlights of Participant Feedback

Participants found the Deputy Minister’s presentation to be either excellent (32%) or satisfactory (62%). Similarly, participants found the Town Hall session to be either excellent (26%) or satisfactory (61%). The most common criticism was that the session was too short; participants said that more time should be allocated for the Town Hall session in the future.

The concurrent sessions at each location were well attended, and feedback gathered through the evaluation form indicates that participants found the sessions they attended to be either excellent or satisfactory.

The majority of participants felt that having the Principals in Focus meetings in the spring was more convenient than the fall. A number of participants suggested either holding the meetings in Halifax or alternating between provincial meetings in Halifax and regional meetings from year to year.

### 4.0 Concurrent Session Descriptions

Four concurrent sessions were offered during the afternoon of the meetings:

1. The Way Forward for School Improvement: From Accreditation to Learning Communities
2. Emerging Professional Learning Communities
3. Becoming an Effective Instructional Leader
4. Nova Scotia Virtual School

The four sessions were offered twice at each meeting, allowing participants to attend their choice of two concurrent sessions.

#### 4.1 The Way Forward for School Improvement: From Accreditation to Learning Communities

The presentation focused on the evolution of the school accreditation and school improvement process in Nova Scotia. The concurrent session was led by Lawrence Ryan, Consultant, and Everett MacPherson, Supervisor of School Support Services, Annapolis Valley Regional School Board. The presentation highlighted changes to reduce paperwork and reporting requirements associated with the accreditation

process. It further outlined the goal of moving toward a culture of continual school improvement through fluid and dynamic learning community practices.

As part of the concurrent sessions, participants were asked to work in small groups to identify goals for the future of accreditation, ways to support data collection without creating a burden on teachers and administrators, and ways to strengthen the link to continuous school improvement. Participants were then asked to report out on their discussions and share their ideas with the larger group.

#### **4.2 Emerging Professional Learning Communities**

The concurrent session was led by principals and teachers from across Nova Scotia. Different presenters led the session at the three Principals in Focus meeting locations. The presenters were:

- Diane Racette, Principal, Centre scolaire de la Rive-Sud (April 16, 2012 – Wolfville)
- Shawn Marsh, Principal, O'Connell Drive Elementary School (April 16, 2012 – Wolfville)
- Gerard Ryan, Principal, Dr. John High Gillis Regional High School (April 19, 2012 – Port Hawkesbury)
- Pam MacGillivray, Math Team Facilitator, Trenton Middle School (April 19, 2012 – Port Hawkesbury)
- Mark Fortune, Principal, Scotsburn Elementary (April 20, 2012 – Truro)
- Linda Murray, Teacher, Scotsburn Elementary (April 20, 2012 – Truro)
- Cindy Graham, Teacher, Scotsburn Elementary (April 20, 2012 – Truro)

Presenters shared effective strategies for developing and supporting Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that have been working well in their schools. Participants worked in small groups to discuss the challenges and/or barriers that affect PLCs. They then participated in full group discussions on ways to overcome those challenges and how principals can further support collaborative learning.

#### **4.3 Becoming an Effective Instructional Leader**

The concurrent session was broken into two short presentations. Each presentation was followed by a question and answer period, in which participants could learn more about principal learning networks and the Nova Scotia instructional leadership program.

The first presentation focused on how participating in a principal learning network helps to support principals in their role as instructional leaders. Presenters described how learning networks are established, what the expectations are, and what stumbling blocks they might expect to encounter. The presenters spoke to their own experiences in establishing and working in a principal learning network in the South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB). The presenters were:

- Craig Pottie, Principal, Bayview Community School
- Darren Haley, Principal, Hebbville Academy
- Jeff DeWolfe, Co-ordinator of Student Development-Student Services, SSRSB

The second presentation highlighted how the Nova Scotia Instructional Leadership Academy (NSILA) directly supports principals and vice-principals in their role as instructional leaders. Sue LeBel, Program Coordinator, NSILA, led the presentation. She also asked principals participating in the instructional leadership program to speak to their experiences with the program.

#### **4.4 Nova Scotia Virtual School**

The concurrent session was led by Sue Taylor-Foley, Director, Learning Resources and Technology. It provided participants the opportunity to learn more about the Nova Scotia Virtual School (NSVS), which provides online learning opportunities and resources for students and educators. The presentation focused on the structure of the NSVS and the benefits for students and educators in Nova Scotia. As part of the presentation, participants were connected with Department staff in Halifax through the NSVS virtual, online interface. This helped to illustrate how the program could be used effectively not only for student learning, but also for connecting teachers from across the province so that they can work together and share ideas.

### **5.0 Town Hall**

The Town Hall was similar to the Accountability Session from previous Principals in Focus meetings. During the Town Hall, participants were invited to ask questions directly to a panel of senior Department of Education staff. The Town Hall was moderated by Tony Stewart, Executive Co-Director, Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium. The panel included:

- Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister
- Alan Lowe, Senior Advisor, School Board Relations
- Jacqueline LeVert, Executive Director, Acadian and French Language Services
- Ann Blackwood, Executive Director, English Program Services
- Jim Rice, Director, Evaluation Services
- Don Glover, Director, Student Services

While the questions and concerns brought forward by participants varied from session to session, some common issues were raised.

#### **5.1 Common Concerns**

- 5.1.1 *Mathematics Curriculum:*** Participants at a number of locations asked about plans with respect to the implementation of, and support for, the new mathematics curriculum. Participants wanted to ensure that teachers have the time and supports they need to successfully adopt the curriculum.
- 5.1.2 *Meeting the non-academic needs of students:*** Participants expressed concern related to the wide variety of non-academic needs that students bring to the classroom, such as mental health issues, drug use and addiction, and special needs such as autism spectrum disorder. Participants noted that these non-academic needs have a major impact on classroom composition, which creates additional challenges for teachers.
- 5.1.3 *Changes to Assessments:*** A number of participants had questions with respect to the planned changes to the *Program of Learning Assessment for Nova Scotia (PLANS)*. Participants were interested in how changes to assessments might affect curriculum and/or course offerings. Jim Rice pointed out that Evaluation Services works closely with English Programs Services and other divisions in the Department of Education to ensure that all assessments and examinations align with the curriculum and course offerings at each grade level.

5.1.4 *Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)*: Participants were supportive of PLCs and wanted to know about the status of supporting them with job embedded time for teacher collaboration. Adding time to the current school day and/or year creates a number of challenges with respect to scheduling and the Teacher Professional Agreement, which are currently being investigated by the Department of Education and its partners, including the NSTU.

5.1.5 *Supports for Principals*: Participants expressed desire for more autonomy and would like to feel more trusted to know what is best for their school, teachers, and students.

## 5.2 Regional Session Highlights

### 5.2.1 Wolfville Session

- *Succeeding in Reading*: Participants expressed concern that additional funding was not being made available for the expansion of the *Succeeding in Reading* framework in grade 2 in 2012-13 and grade 3 in 2013-14.
- *Grade 9 and High School Review*: Participants were supportive of the move toward a grades 9-12 high school model as it provided grade 9 students with greater access to laboratories and other resources that are traditionally in the high school setting. Participants asked if grade 9 would become semestered.
- *Importance of Technology Education*: Participants agreed that the Skilled Trades courses were important, but also that more funding and support is needed for Technology Education programs. Participants argued that jobs in the technological sectors will be just as important as those in the skilled trades.
- *Attendance and Student Engagement*: Participants noted that attendance continues to be an issue. Improving student engagement through programs and initiatives such as inquiry based learning and restorative justice, has had a positive impact on attendance. Participants felt that one of the most effective motivators to encourage attendance is exam exemptions.

### 5.2.2 Port Hawkesbury Session

- *Small schools and Course Offerings*: Participants explained that they struggle to offer a full range of course offerings to their students, especially in smaller schools. The Deputy Minister explained that recent changes to the funding allocation model provide funding support to address the needs of small and isolated schools.
- *Declining Enrolment and Reduced Funding*: Participants acknowledged that enrolment is declining and the province is facing a difficult fiscal situation; however, they stressed the importance of continuing to properly fund education, including the need to increase funding over the current levels.
- *Supports for New Initiatives*: Participants expressed some frustration with the lack of supports and professional development with respect to new initiatives. They explained that teachers are expected to adapt to and adopt new initiatives at an incredibly quick rate,

often with little to no training. Participants wanted to ensure that professional development and training would be provided for upcoming initiatives, such as the new mathematics curriculum and future components of iNSchool.

### 5.2.3 Truro Session

- *Staff Reductions:* Concern was raised by participants with respect to recent staff reductions, particularly for school librarians. School boards have been asked to make difficult decisions with respect to funding and staffing. The Deputy Minister explained that Department of Education is in a similar situation and is required to reduce staff by 10%, which will be done as much as possible through attrition and retirements.
- *African Nova Scotian Students on Individual Program Plans (IPPs):* Participants raised concerns that it seems like a greater percentage of African Nova Scotian students are on IPPs. This concern has been brought to the Department of Education by a number of partner organizations including the Black Educators Association and the Council on African Canadian Education. The Deputy Minister explained that iNSchool, the student information system, will help to gather more accurate information on particular groups of students on IPPs. This will help the Department and its partners determine why a particular group may be more heavily represented on IPPs.
- *Skilled Trades:* Participants noted that Skilled Trades programs have been highly successful, but that it can be challenging to find qualified tradespersons who are also qualified teachers. This concern has been brought forward by the NSTU. Ann Blackwood noted that the department is working with the NSTU on a number of solutions including the recognition of prior learning for teachers with a background in the skilled trades, as well as opportunities for teachers and certified tradespersons to team-teach.
- *Communicating Successes:* Some participants felt that the Department, school boards, schools, and educators need to do a better job communicating to parents and the public with respect to the success Nova Scotia students are having in school.

## 6.0 Table Talk

As part of the Table Talk session, participants were encouraged to discuss three guiding questions with the people at their tables. Participants were also encouraged to write down the areas where their table reached consensus on the Table Talk forms. These forms were collected at the end of the meeting. The three guiding questions were:

1. *If you could pick two things that would have the most impact for creating positive change at the school level, what would they be?*
2. *What are your most pressing concerns as a principal? What are your recommendations for addressing these concerns?*
3. *What are our greatest opportunities for innovation in the education system right now?*

Several common themes arose in response to each of the three questions. For example, a number of participants agreed that establishing effective PLCs would have a positive impact on teaching practice and student learning. Many participants also identified the lack of time to get teachers together for in small groups for collaborative learning as a concern.

There were a number of common themes and concerns that were brought up in all three meeting locations:

- Provide more time for PLCs and collaborative learning opportunities in the school day.
- Help reduce and/or eliminate funding reductions.
- Reduce the number of new initiatives being introduced and implement a strategy to support teachers during the implementation of new initiatives.
- Provide more interventions for grade primary-3 students.
- Provide more supports and interventions to help teachers and principals deal with mental health issues and concerns.
- Continue to explore ways to better integrate technology into the curriculum and classroom, and continue to expand the Nova Scotia Virtual School.
- Continue to support small and isolated schools.

While a number of these themes were addressed in response to all three questions on the Table Talk forms, some were brought up as responses to certain questions more than others.

#### **6.1 If you could pick two things that would have the most impact for creating positive change at the school level, what would they be?**

Participants agreed that collaborative learning is beneficial to both teachers and students. They felt that in addition to finding time for teachers to work in together as part of PLCs, peer coaching and mentoring lead to improvements in student achievement and teaching practice.

Participants felt that teachers need additional supports and resources. A number of participants identified the need for more staffing and/or smaller, more manageable class sizes to help teachers focus more closely on a fewer number of students.

Participants noted that students bring a wide range of social and medical challenges to the classroom. Participants felt that early testing and intervention, as well as successful programs like SchoolsPlus have had a positive impact on addressing some of the non-educational challenges that teachers face day-to-day.

#### **6.2 What are your most pressing concerns as a principal? What are your recommendations for addressing these concerns?**

Participants agreed that too much of the principal's time is devoted to administrative tasks. They felt reducing the administrative burden would free up the principal's time to focus on instructional leadership within the school. Participants also felt that there are opportunities to streamline the accreditation process to reduce the administrative tasks that principals and teachers are required to complete.

Participants identified the need to better address the wide variety of mental health and social issues that affect students. Participants suggested increasing the number of guidance counselors and building on successful programs like SchoolsPlus.

Participants were concerned that funding reductions would have a negative impact on the ability of teachers and principals to meet the diverse needs of their students.

### **6.3 What are our greatest opportunities for innovation in the education system right now?**

A number of participants agreed that integrating technology into the curriculum is crucial for student learning. Participants were also supportive of online learning opportunities and the Nova Scotia Virtual School.

Some participants felt that hands on learning opportunities and skill trades courses have the greatest opportunity to benefit students. Participants also mentioned a number of specific programs that have been successful promoting student success, including the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program and O<sub>2</sub>: Options and Opportunities.

## **7.0 Participant Feedback Form**

Participants were asked to provide their feedback on Principals in Focus 2012 by completing a short evaluation form. In total, 136 forms were submitted by participants during the three regional meetings.

### **7.1 Evaluation Form Questions**

The total number of respondents for each question is noted in Table 1, which provides a summary of these responses. Percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents who chose to answer each question.

TABLE 1 – FEEDBACK FORM RESPONSES				
Evaluation Form Questions	Total number of respondents	Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
		%	%	%
1. Presentation by the Deputy Minister	130	32	62	6
2. The value of the Town Hall with the Deputy Minister	127	26	61	13
3. The usefulness of the Concurrent Sessions you attended				
The Way Forward for School Improvements	97	61	38	1
Emerging Professional Learning Communities	70	34	56	10
Becoming an Effective Instructional Leader	43	51	47	2
Nova Scotia Virtual School	31	55	32	13
4. The length of time allocated for the Concurrent Sessions	116	35	61	4
5. The usefulness of discussion during the Table Talk session	125	47	48	5
6. The opportunity to network with other principals	124	65	28	7
7. The opportunity for feedback and idea sharing	121	49	45	6
8. The meeting's overall organization	118	51	43	6

Almost all respondents who chose to complete the evaluation form felt that the presentation by the Deputy Minister was either excellent (32%) or satisfactory (62%). A quarter (26%) thought the Town Hall was excellent, while more than two thirds (61%) of the respondents felt it was satisfactory. The majority of respondents enjoyed the concurrent sessions they attended. Respondents felt that the length of the concurrent sessions was appropriate (35% excellent and 61% satisfactory). In total, 47% of respondents felt that the Table Talk session discussion were excellent and 48% found the Table Talk session to be satisfactory.

Participants were pleased with the time provided to them for networking, and 49% indicated that they found the opportunity to provide feedback and share their ideas to be excellent. Of respondents who completed the evaluation form, 51% indicated that the overall meeting organization was excellent, and an additional 43% felt that it was satisfactory.

## 7.2 Responses to Open Ended Questions

### ***Question 9: Were there any topics you would have been interested in, or other important issues that were not covered?***

Participants identified a number of topics and issues that they would like to see covered in more detail. While some of these topics were addressed during Principals in Focus 2012, participants indicated that more time could have been allocated for further discussion and/or information sharing. Topics of interest to participants included:

- Legal issues related to schools and/or principals
- Student mental health issues
- Bullying/Cyberbullying
- Literacy improvement
- Workload issues
- iNSchool
- Information on new and upcoming provincial initiatives
- Changes to provincial evaluations and assessments
- Issues related to small and isolated schools
- Integrating technology into the curriculum and classroom
- Student self-assessment
- Budget updates
- Finding time for PLCs
- Issues related to student engagement and attendance
- Innovative ways to manage schools in time of financial reductions

### ***Question 10: What are your thoughts on the time of the year and location of the meetings? Do you have any suggestions for alternative times (Fall versus Spring?) and/or locations?***

72 respondents chose to answer this question: 69% indicated that they prefer meeting in spring and 31% prefer meeting in the fall.

### ***Question 11: Do you have any suggestions to improve the Principals in Focus Meeting?***

A number of participants recommended that the Principals in Focus meetings either take place in Halifax or that the meetings alternate between provincial meetings in Halifax and regional meetings. Other recommendations to improve the meetings included:

- Providing more time for Table Talk and provide participants with the Table Talk questions prior to the meeting
- Providing more time for networking
- Providing more opportunities to learn about new and upcoming initiatives
- Allocating more time in the agenda for the Town Hall session
- Inviting the Minister to attend the meetings
- Providing more concurrent sessions options and surveying participants prior to the meeting to help determine concurrent sessions that are of the greatest interest to participants

**Question 12: Are there any Concurrent Session topics that you would like to see offered in the future?**

Participants identified a number of current session topics that they would like to see offered at future Principals in Focus meetings. Topics included:

- Improving and supporting literacy
- Supporting best practices in teaching
- Early interventions for students and supports for mental health issues
- Supporting principals balance their time and duties
- Supporting small and isolated schools
- Changes to provincial assessments and examinations
- Student engagement and attendance
- School safety and addressing student behavioural issues
- Addressing drugs and violence in schools
- Liability/legal issues effecting schools and/or principals
- Information on SchoolsPlus
- Information on iNSchool

**Question 13: Please note any additional comments, recommendations, or commendations:**

- Some participants noted that they felt that it was difficult to share their honest opinions with school board staff present at the meetings.
- Some participants felt that the meeting would be better by having shorter breaks, a later start, and/or ending earlier to allow participants to get on the road.
- A few participants noted that Principals in Focus may be an unnecessary expense during difficult financial times.

## 8.0 Conclusion

Although only 29% of participants chose to complete the evaluation form, the overall feedback received from participants was positive. Those participants who did complete the form said that Principals in Focus is an important avenue for maintaining ongoing communication between principals, schools boards, the Department of Education, and other partners in education. The meeting provided participants with an opportunity to network with their colleagues, learn about new and upcoming initiatives, and provide department senior staff with their input.

Participants had the opportunity to share some of the challenges they were facing, but also to share their successes and identify positive things happening in their schools and boards. This included sharing information about leadership and learning opportunities for principals, working together to identify ways to support the growth of collaborative learning environments in Nova Scotia, and providing input into how systems can be streamlined to reduce the administrative burden on principals and teachers, allowing them to focus their energy on student learning.

**Appendix 1 – Table Talk Form**  
**TABLE TALK GUIDING QUESTIONS**

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**1. If you could pick two things that would have the most impact for creating positive change at the school level, what would they be?**

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**2. What are your most pressing concerns as a principal? What are your recommendations for addressing these concerns?**

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**3. What are our greatest opportunities for innovation in the education system right now?**

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## Appendix 2 – Evaluation Form

### Participant Evaluation

Please mark your response using the scale provided.

	Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
1. Presentation provided by the Deputy Minister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The value of the Town Hall with the Deputy Minister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The usefulness of the Concurrent Sessions you attended:			
• The Way Forward for School Improvements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Emerging Professional Learning Communities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Becoming an Effective Instructional Leader	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• Nova Scotia Virtual School	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The length of time allocated for the Concurrent Sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The usefulness of discussion during the Table Talk session	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The opportunity to network with other principals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. The opportunity for feedback and idea sharing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. The meeting's overall organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Were there any topics you would have been interested in, or other important issues that were not covered?

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10. What are your thoughts on the time of the year and location of the meetings? Do you have any suggestions for alternative times (Fall versus Spring?) and/or locations?

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11. Do you have any suggestions to improve the Principals in Focus Meeting?

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12. Are there any Concurrent Session topics that you would like to see offered in the future?

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13. Please note any additional comments, recommendations, or commendations:

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