

# PREMIER'S FORUM

ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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## Summary Report



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## **Executive Summary**

On November 3, 2007 the Premier's Forum on Student Achievement brought together education partners from across the province to discuss key issues facing the Nova Scotia education system. The Forum focussed on issues related to student achievement, including identifying what we can do differently to help our students excel, how we can increase student engagement and motivation, supporting a culture of excellence within our education system, and what we could do more, or less, of so that our students can be successful in the global marketplace - for their personal success and to the economic productivity of this province.

Participants included a broad spectrum of key partners in the Nova Scotia education system, including representatives from school advisory councils, school board members, teachers and principals, school board staff, students, the post secondary education sector, representatives from arts and business communities, elected representatives of the Legislature, and representatives from partner organizations such as the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, French first language organizations, African-Canadian organizations, and Mi'kmaq organizations, among others.

This paper summarizes input received from participants during the Premier's Forum, including comments recorded during breakout group sessions, general feedback provided by participants, and participant responses to a series of questions posed by the Deputy Minister on key issues facing the education system. Highlights from the keynote address and panel presentations are also provided.

To guide discussion during the breakout sessions, four broad thematic areas were developed: Excellence and Student Achievement; Governance and Community Involvement; Relevance and Student Engagement; and, Innovation and Opportunity. In addition to these four thematic areas, one breakout group focussed on the overall Forum theme of student achievement and striving for excellence to support students in becoming active, healthy, engaged citizens.

Several common areas of focus were identified by participants throughout the event, including participant input provided during the breakout group sessions, through responses to the plenary session questions and through general participant feedback. Participants repeatedly recommended that the Nova Scotia education system increase its focus on:

- Early intervention and programming for young children
- Involving families in schools
- Student engagement
- More support for what is already working
- More time and resources for teachers and principals
- Better balance of school services and programs across the province and across school levels
- Increased collaboration with partners

## INTRODUCTION

On November 3, 2007 the Premier's Forum on Student Achievement brought together education partners from across the province to discuss key issues facing the Nova Scotia education system. The Forum focussed on issues related to student achievement, including identifying what we can do differently to help our students excel, how we can increase student engagement and motivation, supporting a culture of excellence within our education system, and what we could do more, or less, of so that our students can be successful in the global marketplace - for their personal success and to the economic productivity of this province.

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This one-day Forum focussed on student achievement, and more specifically, what needs to be put in place to improve student achievement in Nova Scotia.

The Premier of Nova Scotia, the Honourable Rodney MacDonald, opened the event and welcomed participants. In his opening remarks, he stressed the importance of instruction in creating and supporting a culture of achievement and lifelong learning. He emphasized that the quality of an education system depends on the quality of its teachers, and that it is crucial that we invest in supporting our teachers so that they develop into effective instructors and that we put targeted support in place to ensure that every child benefits from that excellent instruction.

During his review of the format for the day the Deputy Minister of Education posed four questions to the Forum on key issues facing the education system:

- What do we need to do differently to help our students excel?
- How do we make sure students are engaged and motivated?
- Is there a culture of excellence in our schools now or do we need to set higher expectations for our students and for ourselves?
- What do we need to do more of, and less of, so that our students can be successful in the global marketplace - for their personal success and to the economic productivity of this province.

To guide discussion during the breakout sessions, four broad thematic areas were developed, with a view to building on the positive changes that have already been made in the Nova Scotia education system. The themes were:

- Theme 1: Excellence and Student Achievement
- Theme 2: Governance and Community Involvement
- Theme 3: Relevance and Student Engagement
- Theme 4: Innovation and Opportunity

In addition to these four thematic areas, one breakout group focussed on the overall Forum theme of student achievement and striving for excellence to support students in becoming active, healthy, engaged citizens.

There were several methods used to capture participant input and discussion:

- feedback sheets completed during breakout group sessions
- recorders' notes from breakout group session discussion
- responses to plenary session questions
- participant feedback forms available to all participants

This report provides a summary of the comments and suggestions received.

## CONSULTATION PROCESS

Approximately 350 education partners and Department of Education staff attended the Premier's Forum on November 3, 2007 at Citadel High School, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Participants included representatives from a broad spectrum of education stakeholders, including:

- school advisory councils
- school board members
- teachers, principals and students
- school board staff
- post-secondary education institutions
- key partner organizations
- business and arts communities
- elected officials and caucus office representatives

Participants were welcomed by Carole Olsen, Superintendent, Halifax Regional School Board. Opening remarks were made by the Honourable Rodney MacDonald, Premier of Nova Scotia. Dennis Cochrane, Deputy Minister of Education provided a review of the goals for the day.

A keynote address was given by Dr. Doug Willms, Chair in Human Development, Faculty of Education, at the University of New Brunswick and Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy. The presentation was followed by a panel presentation, "Essential factors for Our Competitiveness Tomorrow" introduced by the Honourable Karen Casey, Minister of Education. Panelists were: Mr. Rob Sobey, Ms. Cheryl Hodder, Ms. Kathleen Guy, and Ms. Sheree Fitch. The panel session was moderated by Nancy Pynch-Worthylake, Superintendent of the South Shore Regional School Board.

Following lunch, thirteen concurrent breakout sessions were led by facilitators, one of which was held in French and one of which was offered as a bilingual session. Feedback from these discussions was captured by notes taken by recorders and participant feedback sheets completed by session participants.

Due to weather constraints, a planned plenary session to present key discussion points from all breakout session groups was not held.

The Forum concluded with a plenary session led by the Deputy Minister, in which participants were asked to respond to a series of questions using personal response pad technology, provided by eInstruction Canada. Responses were compiled in real time and displayed on an overhead screen.

The Deputy Minister noted that this technology provides an exciting way to receive feedback and reaction from participants on specific issues in the education sector. He noted that other avenues used during the event to seek participant input provided a more fulsome representation of the views of participants in relation to the concepts raised. Although the results for this exercise gave a high-level snapshot of what participants in the exercise felt were the highest priorities in certain areas, the results will not be used in the same way as the recorded breakout sessions. Details on the results of the exercise are presented later in this report.

## WHAT WE HEARD

### Speakers

#### Keynote Address

Following introductory remarks by the Honourable Rodney MacDonald, Premier of Nova Scotia, a keynote address was given by Dr. Doug Willms, Chair in Human Development, Faculty of Education, at the University of New Brunswick and Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy. Using data from a recent international student assessment (the Program for International Student Assessment), Dr. Willms discussed key factors which impact student achievement and particularly student literacy. Although Canada placed in the top performing countries with respect to literacy on this international assessment, and we have much of which to be justifiably proud, he indicated that more needs to be done to support students who are not meeting expectations, and to address variations in performance between schools.

Dr. Willms spoke about the impact of early childhood experience and learning on later academic achievement. He underlined the criticality of focusing literacy support and intervention in the early years, and particularly in the first three years of formal education.

Student engagement in high school was another key point raised by Dr. Willms as an important area of focus in ensuring student success and achievement.

#### Panelists

Following the presentation by Dr. Willms, participants heard from four panelists: Mr. Rob Sobey, Ms. Kathleen Guy, Ms. Cheryl Hodder, and Ms. Sheree Fitch. Each panelist spoke for ten minutes on essential factors in the education system to ensure our competitive future and the success of our young people.

Mr. Sobey, Chairman of the Nova Scotia Community College and CEO of Lawtons Drug Stores Ltd., discussed the importance of skill development, in relation to changing labour market demands. He emphasized the importance of math as a critical skill that must be developed during a student's formal education. As Nova Scotia faces a potential skilled labour shortage, he noted that it is crucial that the public and post-secondary education systems work together to foster

innovation, create inventive partnerships, and embrace new ideas. He concluded by emphasizing that the public education system must provide clear accountability for learning outcomes, and ensure everyone understands the urgency of the labour situation which Nova Scotia is facing.

Ms. Kathleen Guy, from the Council for Early Childhood Development, spoke about the importance of early childhood education and a child's early environment. She discussed a strategy used in Washington State to provide resources to support early learning, "Thrive by Five", a public private partnership. She underlined the importance of looking at the early learning programs and strategies in place in top-performing countries in terms of student achievement. She discussed strategies in place in Finland, one of the top performing countries on international student assessments, to provide supports for early learning services to ensure that all families are able to access these services.

Ms. Cheryl Hodder, Chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce Education Committee, spoke about the importance of developing a unified vision for education, with links to economic development and social prosperity. Although there are many reasons to be proud of our education system, she noted that members of the business community have indicated that they would like to see students better prepared to move into the labour force following graduation. Ms. Hodder discussed the importance of fostering connectivity between the education system and employers. She also noted the importance of maintaining a focus on literacy and numeracy as critical skills, and the key role that communities can play. The importance of strong leadership with respect to the governance of the Nova Scotia education system was also underlined as a critical factor in ensuring student success. Ms. Hodder closed by noting that achievement should not solely be a reflection of test results, but that employers would like to see graduates with intellectual curiosity, an interest in citizenship and volunteerism, appreciation for the arts and a respect for diversity.

Canadian children's author, poet and educator, Ms. Sheree Fitch, spoke about the importance of arts education to essential learning outcomes. Although the impact of arts education may not be directly measurable, she stressed the critical role that it plays in underpinning and supporting student achievement in all other curriculum areas. The importance of a balanced education in preparing students to become active, compassionate, engaged citizens was a key point noted by Ms. Fitch.



## **Participants**

### Breakout Sessions

Forum participants were divided randomly into facilitated discussion groups. Each group discussed key questions within each of the four thematic areas:

- Excellence and student achievement
- Governance and community involvement
- Relevance and student engagement
- Innovation and opportunity

One larger breakout group discussed key issues related to the broader goal of student achievement and striving for excellence to support our students in becoming active, healthy, engaged citizens.

Participants were also given an opportunity to provide further feedback on the themes noted above using a participant feedback form.

Several recurring areas emerged during the discussions on which participants encouraged the provincial government to focus to improve student achievement. These core ideas and areas of concern are described below.

#### *Early intervention and programming for young children*

Many participants noted the importance of services and programs for young children and that these programs can lead to success in later years of school. Participants recommended outreach to parents and children before children enter school, with suggestions including parenting classes, bringing pre-school children and their families into schools, and developing a universally accessible pre-primary program.

Participants also discussed programs for elementary-aged children including: screening of children in early elementary to identify and address problems; guidance services in elementary school; active, healthy living programs; and early supports and services for literacy and numeracy.

#### *Involve families in schools*

Participants commented that schools must focus on involving parents at all levels. Parent involvement in the school has been shown to positively impact student achievement. Participants discussed involving parents of young children to assist with early intervention, to provide parents with the tools to prepare their child for school each day and to allow parents to feel included in the school community. For parents of junior and senior high school students, participants discussed the importance of providing support regarding parenting issues, intervention for children who are exhibiting high-risk behaviour, and for career planning.

Ideas brought forward to involve families in the school included: welcome letters and books for parents of new children to the school; events for families at the school such as barbecues or movie nights; more opportunities for parents and teachers to interact; and, more support and assistance for parents of junior and senior high school students.

#### *Student engagement*

Participants noted that there is a need to develop more programs that engage a diverse range of students. Many of the breakout session groups discussed trades-based courses as a means to engage students who are not thriving in more academically oriented approaches to learning. Other ideas brought forward included alternative schools, and varied school hours for senior high school. Participants also discussed how engaging families in the schools could help increase student engagement within the school community and with the curriculum.

It has been shown that active healthy living impacts student engagement and achievement. Many participants felt that the health and wellness of students should be a top priority. Some suggestions to address student health and wellness included: making a breakfast program available in all schools; offering life skills courses in all schools that teach cooking, nutrition and budgeting; and, qualified guidance counsellors for both junior and senior high school. Participants also noted that guidance counsellors need more labour market information and links to the business community so that they can better assist students in career preparation and in transitions to the labour force.

#### *More support for what is already working*

Many participants commented that it is crucial to focus energy and resources on elements of the education system that are already working. Programs such as Options and Opportunities, trades-based courses and the International Baccalaureate Program are working well and resources might be best allocated to expanding those programs.

#### *More time and resources for teachers and principals*

Participants felt strongly that teachers require more time during the school day. They felt that teachers time may be overextended with a wide variety of responsibilities. They indicated that teachers require more time for collaboration, to ensure consistent approaches to school-based student assessments, to develop curriculum adaptations and Individual Program Plans, to plan lessons for the whole class, as well as to develop strategies to teach to students' strengths and needs.

Numerous participants recommended the development of a formal mentorship program for new teachers to support and foster the transfer of skills and knowledge. Increased opportunities for teacher professional development through support for the development of professional learning communities was also mentioned.

Participants noted that principals need time to be educational leaders as well as for collaborative endeavors and professional development. Principals currently are required to spend too much time performing administrative tasks.

*Better balance of school services and programs across the province and across school levels*

Participants noted that school communities are diverse and do not all need the same level or kind of supports. Some participants underlined the importance of using data to determine school support services needs. Concern was expressed that hands-on and co-operative programs have not been offered in some rural areas where they may be needed. In addition, some participants recommended that programs which have shown significant success, such as Options and Opportunities which is offered to grade 10 and 11 students, should be made available at the junior high level.

*Increased Collaboration with partners*

Participants in many groups discussed how collaboration between parents, teachers, students, community organizations, business and government is important for the success of the province's education system. All members of the community need to feel part of the education system and be accountable for education.

Increasingly, schools are required to respond to student needs beyond the academic sphere, including health and social issues. Participants felt that inter-agency collaboration as well as more parent involvement in the schools is critical to ensuring that the many areas in which students often need support are addressed. It was suggested that the Department of Education look at increasing its partnerships with the Departments of Justice, Community Services and Health with respect to school programming.

A few of the breakout session groups discussed the idea of bringing members of the community into schools. For example, they suggested finding ways for businesses to participate in the classroom and having an artist in residence available in all schools that wish to offer the program.

Plenary Session Questions

Participants were invited to respond to a series of questions on key issues facing the Nova Scotia education system, using Personal Response Pad technology provided by eInstruction Canada. The Deputy Minister of Education posed several questions and a set of possible responses using this technology, with a view to receiving participant input on and reaction to various issues and ideas raised by speakers and during the breakout group sessions. The Deputy Minister noted that these issues are complex, and that this opinion poll does not replace thoughtful discussion or a substantive consultation process.

Participant responses were particularly strong in some areas, including:

- strong support for delivery of early childhood education through an in-school pre-primary program
- endorsement of making better use of the time we have in the school day to support student achievement
- keeping provincial examinations at or below 30% of a student's final course mark
- recommending that a review of the current school board structure be undertaken
- focusing on more opportunities for student challenge and enrichment, as a way to instill a strong work ethic in our students
- strong endorsement for events like the Premier's Forum as an effective mechanism to engage partners

The Deputy Minister concluded the plenary session by asking participants to indicate which of the following areas they would like the provincial government to focus on with a view to improving student achievement. Participants ranked the areas in the following order:

<u>Area of focus</u>	<u>Percent responses</u>
Early childhood education	27%
Ensure viable, relevant curriculum	27%
Greater parent/student engagement	26%
More Arts education	8%
Enhanced French language opportunities	6%
More co-operative education	5%

### General Feedback

Overall feedback about the Forum was positive. Participants were pleased to have the opportunity to be involved in a consultation on future directions for the education system and many requested the opportunity for further consultations.

*"I think that regular meetings between the Department and the SACs would be a good idea."*

A participant feedback form was available to all participants to complete. Thirty-five Forum participants completed the feedback form. Most of the comments received from the forms are represented in the previous sections. Additional comments and ideas provided through the feedback forms are outlined below. This feedback included comments about the Forum, the provincial education system and other mechanisms to hear from education partners.

The strongest message from the feedback forms was that more time was needed at the Forum for participant discussion. Some participants said they would have liked to have taken time from the presentations to allow for more time for discussion amongst participants. However, participants also commented that the keynote and panel presentations were interesting and contained valuable information. A couple of participants commented that they would have liked to have seen a broader range of ethnic and cultural diversity represented.

*“Presentations by the Premier, Doug Willms and the panel were thought provoking and created an environment where creative thought regarding the future of education was to follow.”*

A few participants felt that the Department of Education needs to increase promotion of the benefits of bilingual education and French first language schools. Other comments with respect to the education system included a perception that curriculum change is fast-paced, a desire to see more language opportunities other than French, and that respect for diversity needs to be incorporated into all schools.

In response to the last question in the feedback form that asked about other mechanisms to gather input from partners on key issues facing the education system, participants suggested the following:

- Regular gatherings like the Forum to report progress and gather feedback.
- Province-wide or regional SAC meetings to share ideas and provide suggestions for the Department of Education and other relevant organizations.
- Gather input from students through a forum or the “Tell Them From Me” survey.
- Use the internet to get feedback.
- Regional sessions across the province for each board.
- Focus groups for key partners such as parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff, businesses, universities and community colleges.

## **MOVING FORWARD: AREAS OF FOCUS FOR NOVA SCOTIA EDUCATION**

Through the various avenues for participant input and discussion provided during the event, several recurring suggestions were identified. The following key areas were identified by participants as critical to supporting student achievement:

- Early intervention and programming for young children
- Involving families in schools
- Student engagement
- More support for what is already working
- More time and resources for teachers and principals
- Better balance of school services and programs across the province and across school levels
- Increased collaboration with partners

Participant input and suggestions have been documented and will be considered as the Province moves forward with identifying the strategic direction for the Nova Scotia education system.

The desire for collaboration and consultation amongst all education partners that was evident signals the energy and optimism for education in Nova Scotia. By working together, we can work towards our goal of providing students with the best preparation possible in becoming active, healthy, engaged citizens.