

Principals  
in Focus   
NOVEMBER 3-4, 2010

Summary Report

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## 1. Introduction

Principals in Focus 2010, held November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, brought together principals of elementary, junior, and senior high public schools in Nova Scotia, as well as senior school board staff, departmental staff, and other key partners in education. There were 497 attendees at this year's meeting, of which 392 were principals. Principals in Focus 2010 is the sixth principals meeting organized by the Department of Education. The major components of this year's meeting included:

- An address by the Honourable Darrell Dexter, Premier of Nova Scotia and a presentation by the Deputy Minister of Education, Rosalind Penfound.
- A presentation by Carole Olsen, Superintendent Halifax Regional School Board on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner.
- A presentation by Dr. Ben Levin, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto entitled *Improving Outcomes for all Learners*.
- Discussion sessions on the morning presentations – Participants were broken into groups based on elementary, middle/junior high, and senior high principals and asked to discuss four questions in small groups.
- Panel Discussion and Questions from the floor moderated by Costas Halavrezos, CBC Radio host. The panellists were:
  - Dr. Ben Levin, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
  - Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister of Education
  - Alexis Allen, President, Nova Scotia Teacher's Union
  - Darrell Samson, Superintendent, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial
  - Vic Fleury, President, Nova Scotia School Board Association
- A presentation and half day session on the second day by author and respected educator Kim Marshall, entitled *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation: How to Work Smart, Build Collaboration and Close the Achievement Gap*.

## 2. Evaluation Process

Feedback was gathered about the content and administration of Principals in Focus 2010 using the following methods:

- 1. Concurrent Discussion Session:** Participants were broken into four groups based on elementary (2 groups), middle/junior, and senior high principals. The groups were asked to answer four questions related to the presentations by Carol Olsen and Dr. Ben Levin, discuss improvements that could be made to help Nova Scotia schools transition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and develop one question that could be asked during the afternoon panel session. Please see Appendix A for the list of questions that participants developed.
- 2. Panel Discussion Session:** Five panellists, representing a number of education partners, were asked questions developed during the discussion sessions. Participants and principals were also given the opportunity to ask questions of the panel.
- 3. Meeting Evaluation Form:** Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form, which contained questions related to the event program and logistics. Of the 497 participants, 238 filled out the questionnaire, a response rate of 48 percent.

This report summarizes the Principals in Focus meeting based on these three sources of information and feedback.

### 3. Highlights of Participant Feedback

The following six themes were prominent in the feedback received from participants at the meeting:

- The importance of education and early interventions for grades primary to 3.
  - The need for engaging, relevant and current curriculum with fewer required outcomes.
  - The need to increase the use of technology in schools.
  - Supporting principals to be instructional leaders and finding time for teacher professional learning during the day.
  - The need to review and remodel Bachelor of Education programs.
  - The need for government to make education and mental health a priority and provide the appropriate funding.
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- The majority of participants found Carole Olsen's (91 percent) presentation, Dr. Ben Levin's (98 percent) presentation and Kim Marshall's (95 percent) presentation to be excellent or satisfactory.
  - Participants felt that the moderated panel discussion was valuable (84 percent rated it as excellent or satisfactory). The main concerns brought up by the participants centered on budget issues, how the public perceived education in Nova Scotia, and the need to support increased student engagement.
  - All concurrent sessions were well attended and feedback indicated that these sessions covered topics relevant to principals. Suggestions provided for topics in future years included more time to discuss Professional Learning Communities, time management supports, teacher evaluation, student assessment, attendance/engagement, and alternate programs.
  - Some suggestions to improve the Principals in Focus meeting included providing more time for participants to network, as well as providing more time to discuss current initiatives such as budget issues, the BLAC Report Review – Reality Check, and the Provincial Student Information System (InSchool). Some participants suggested that the agenda of the meeting should be created with more input from principals.

## 4. Concurrent Discussion Sessions

Participants were broken into four groups to discuss the two morning presentations given by Carole Olsen and Dr. Ben Levin. The groups were divided based on elementary (2 groups), middle/junior, and senior high principals. A summary of the comments made by the participants is below.

*Question 1: What is your reaction to the presentations by Dr. Ben Levin and Carole Olsen? What was one or two of the most important things you heard? What was the most compelling information? What do you disagree with? What are you not sure about?*

The answers to these questions centred on the following areas:

### **Structure of the Public Education System:**

Participants noted the importance of early interventions and that more resources should be put into grades primary to 3 to help students. The importance of literacy and numeracy in the learning process was stressed by many participants. Participants agreed that curriculum has to be engaging, relevant, and current and that differentiated learning is important to help students who are at different levels become more engaged in their learning. It was suggested that the way classrooms are set up is not meeting the needs of students today and different models for different communities and cultures should be explored.

The use of technology to engage more students in the learning process and the challenges with respect to getting technology in the schools were raised as concerns by participants. It was also felt there is a gap between the technology students are using in the real world and what is being used in the schools and that principals and teachers have to adapt their approaches to respond to the interests and needs of the students, who require skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving, in order to be competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Role of the Teacher:**

Participants agreed that there should be more mentoring time at school. Teaching is a profession with best practices and there should be a standard for the profession. Best practices should be defined and teachers should be required to implement those instructional strategies. It was agreed that the teaching practice continues to improve in Nova Scotia and professional development is benefitting students and improving their achievements.

### **Role of the Principal:**

Participants noted that the primary focus of principals should be to provide high quality instructional leadership. Currently, a great deal of time in a principal's day is devoted to administrative/managerial tasks, such as occupational health and safety issues, fire regulations, and school maintenance. Participants agreed that these expectations and duties take away from the principal's role as the instructional leader and that more supports and resources need to be in place to allow principals to act as instructional leaders. Suggestions include focusing on improving student success by motivating teachers, as well as building relationships with students, parents, and the community.

**Role of the School Boards/Department:**

Participants felt that the department needs to have one direction and one set of goals, which would be embraced by all boards. Participants also commented that there is a need to update the Bachelor of Education programs at universities to put a greater emphasis on areas like classroom management skills.

*Question 2: What would it take to create real improvement in Nova Scotia? What needs to happen and how do we do it? What are your best three ideas?*

The answers to the questions centred on the following areas:

**Structure of the Public Education System:**

Participants felt to create real improvement in education it is crucial to engage students, increase parental involvement, and increase the expectations for student achievement. Participants also felt the curriculum needs to be condensed and streamlined and the core competencies defined. The curriculum should have realistic outcomes that allow teachers to check for depth of understanding. The outcomes need to be aligned with the developmental stages of the child. Students should be required to meet a standard before they move on rather than move by grade level. Participants recommended the high school requirements be reviewed to better represent the diverse needs of students. It was also suggested that the department expand apprenticeship and skills programs to junior high, to help engage students who are not succeeding in the regular school program.

Participants discussed how the Nova Scotia public school system can create 21<sup>st</sup> century learners and realize the power of technology for information and idea sharing, collaboration, motivation, and communication. It was suggested that changes be made to school policies to increase the use of technology in schools.

Participants commented that there is also a need to restructure the school calendar year to accommodate authentic professional learning communities and that instructional leadership should be a priority of principals. Participants felt that the role of the principal needs to change from manager to instructional leader and the expectations and duties of the principal need to shift to facilitate this change.

**Role of the Teacher:**

Participants commented that Bachelor of Education programs need to be reviewed and remodelled to prepare teachers with the skill sets that address current practices in schools. For example, student teachers need less theory and more practical learning. Participants agreed that government needs to ensure that the best, most competent teachers are being hired and that they are put in the appropriate positions. This means that schools need to be more involved in hiring practices.

**Role of the School Boards/Department:**

Government needs to make health education and mental health in schools a priority. Student mental health issues are putting too much pressure on staff. Participants stated that there should be a partnership between the Departments of Health, Justice, and Education as well as outside agencies, to address the significant social concerns and issues that arise in the schools. The

Department of Education needs to have a solid vision for the future and boards must develop a common strategic plan for the province.

*Question 3: Where are one or two real obstacles that you think are going to get in the way while we're moving forward?*

Responses were centered on funding issues, lack of technology, curriculum issues, the public perception of education, and the issue of time in the school day. Responses also mentioned that the system needs to meet students at their skill level with technology.

Schools have become centres of care for students with special needs. Supports are needed to ensure students receive the services and programs they require.

Participants agreed that in order for change to be effective, everyone needs to be on board, including teachers, students, parents, other partners/agencies, the school boards, and the department.

Participants felt that the current school calendar does not support job-embedded teacher professional development and it is difficult to create time for collaboration. There is also not enough time to effectively address the challenges in the classroom, such as Individualized Program Plans (IPPs), high needs students, behaviour challenges, high achieving students, and the number of outcomes. Participants felt that there are too many curriculum outcomes, especially for elementary level math and that there are not enough early interventions for grades primary to 3 students. Participants commented that teacher morale is decreasing as they are being overwhelmed and that more supports are needed, especially for new teachers, to allow for an increase in professional development and time for teachers to meet and collaborate.

## 5. Panel Discussion & Questions

The afternoon of the first day of the meeting included a panel discussion. The panellists were Dr. Ben Levin, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; Rosalind Penfound, Deputy Minister of Education; Alexis Allen, President, Nova Scotia Teachers Union; Darrell Samson, Superintendent, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial; and Vic Fleury, President, Nova Scotia School Boards Association. Panellists were asked questions developed during the concurrent discussion sessions earlier in the day.

## 6. Meeting Evaluation

Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to evaluate their views of Principals in Focus 2010. The response rate was 48 percent, with 238 of the 497 participants filling out the questionnaire. The following table summarizes participant responses.

**Table 1: Responses to Questionnaire**

Questions	Excellent		Satisfactory		Needs Improvement	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. The information provided in the presentation by Carole Olsen	60	27%	143	64%	22	9%
2. The information provided in the presentation by Dr. Ben Levin	131	57%	93	41%	4	2%
3. The value of the moderated Panel Discussion	62	28%	124	56%	36	16%
4. The usefulness of discussion during the Concurrent Sessions you attended	108	49%	93	42%	19	9%
5. The length of time allocated for the Concurrent Sessions	71	32%	127	57%	25	11%
6. The keynote presentation by Kim Marshall	148	66%	64	29%	11	5%
7. The opportunity to fully participate throughout the two days	128	57%	85	38%	12	5%
8. The opportunity to network with other principals during the two days	141	62%	75	33%	12	5%
9. The meeting facilities	205	88%	25	11%	2	1%
10. Rate the usefulness of the reception	54	30%	91	49%	39	21%
11. Rate the overall quality of the food	189	81%	42	18%	2	1%
12. Meeting's overall organization	187	80%	45	19%	1	1%
13. Hotel accommodations (if applicable), please answer based on the hotel you stayed at:						
Delta Barrington	32	74%	11	26%	0	0%
Delta Halifax	9	75%	3	25%	0	0%
Halifax Marriot Harbourfront Hotel	96	91%	9	9%	0	0%

## Responses to Open Ended Questions

*Question 14: Were there any topics you would have been interested in, or other important issues that were not covered over the two days? (106 responses)*

Most commonly participants raised the issue of having more time to spend discussing current issues and initiatives, such as budget issues, recent reports from the department such as *Reality Check*, and issues related to the implementation of the Provincial Student Information System (InSchool). Other topics mentioned include:

- More time to discuss the enhancement of Professional Learning Communities.
- Supports for principals, specifically support to address time management and the administrative burden.
- Topics related to teacher evaluation.
- Topics related to student assessment issues.
- Topics related to student attendance.
- Include speakers who directly address issues related to the Nova Scotian education system.
- More discussion around topics related to alternate flexible programs, vocational connections, and interventions with youth.
- Topics relating to B.Ed. programs preparing future teachers.

*Question 15: Do you have any suggestions to improve the Principals in Focus Meeting? (145 responses)*

Most participants were pleased with the event and/or said they had no suggestions for improvement. A few participants made the following suggestions:

- More time for networking and discussion among participants.
- Participants raised points about the structure of the event, such as the adoption of a Thursday-Friday format, shortening the first and second day, and that hotel accommodations for the second and third nights be offered to every participant who is required to travel to the meeting.
- Include speakers who directly address issues related to the Nova Scotian education system.
- More time to discuss current initiatives.
- Some participants suggested changes to the panel composition and delivery. Suggestions included having more principals on the panel, as well as changes to the format where every panellist needs to comment.
- Some participants suggested that the agenda for Principals in Focus should be created with more input from principals.

*Question 16: If the Principals in Focus meeting is held in the future, what concurrent session topics would you like to see offered? (109 responses)*

Respondents most commonly identified supports for principals, specifically supports to address time management and the administrative burden as a concurrent session topic. Additional topics mentioned include the following:

- Enhancements to Professional Learning Communities.
- Student assessments.
- Teacher evaluation and supervision.
- Consolidation/elimination of curriculum outcomes.
- Best practices in instruction, assessment, leadership, and change.
- Dealing with difficult teachers, staff, and/or parents.
- School climate and culture.
- Social justice, education law, and community health.
- More opportunity for networking.
- Supports for children with special needs.
- The use of technology for instruction.

*Question 17: The “accountability session” was removed and replaced with a moderated discussion panel. Do you feel that this new format was more or less effective? (152 responses)*

- Over half of respondents (59 percent) said they found the moderated discussion panel to be more effective than the accountability sessions used in previous meetings.
- Thirty percent of respondents found the discussion panel to be less effective and 6 percent said they found the panel to be equally effective as the accountability sessions.
- Six percent said they did not attend the accountability sessions in previous years.

*Question 18: Please note any additional comments, recommendations or commendations. (136 responses)*

There were many positive comments about the overall event and venue. Many participants felt that the meeting was well organized and that the discussions and presentations were productive and informative. However, some participants expressed a desire to have more nutritional food choices during the breaks.

Some participants felt that Kim Marshall’s presentation was too long, but most participants agreed that the topics were pertinent.

## 7. Concluding Comments

Again this year, feedback from participants of Principals in Focus was positive. Overall, participants' feedback indicated that Principals in Focus is an important avenue for communication with the department and with other principals. The meeting provides a good opportunity to network and learn from others' experiences, share concerns directly with the department, build knowledge and skills, as well as learn about the department and government's strategic direction and programming.

Participants had the opportunity to share challenges they were facing and identify ways in which the department could provide more support. Finding ways to support principals to be instructional leaders, the importance of early intervention in the schools, the issues around funding for schools, the need to increase the use of technology in the classrooms, and finding time for professional learning and collaboration during the day were some of the key issues identified at this year's meeting.

## Appendix A: Concurrent Discussion Session Questions

The last question that participants were asked to answer in the concurrent discussion session was: What is one really tough question that your group would like to bring back to the plenary panel? The following questions were given by the participants in response to that question:

1. For a number of years now we've been told to do a "few things well" and we've asked for fewer outcomes – when will this happen?
2. How can we put structure in place to provide teachers with the opportunity to learn and practice their craft?
3. Could you please breakdown the Nova Scotia Education budget – Remove the cost that does not directly impact students
4. How do we revamp the current educational system in an efficient manner to ensure that we are creating well educated students? How do we change the status quo?
5. Find out from the Premier what he means by "our greatest resource is our children," "committed to world class education system" – How does this fit with the financial plan for Nova Scotia?
6. SchoolsPlus – continue to act as center of care and funded accordingly – what are the panel's thoughts on curriculum – where are we with our Math?
7. Is middle level change a priority in Nova Scotia, if so where are we at with this?
8. How can we make parents more accountable for their children's education?
9. How do we find time to be true instructional leaders when our time is taken up with so many tasks?
10. What are the real goals and priorities of the Department of Education? How are you going to blend all the Boards and department's vision into one?
11. How can we support the students' potential for learning when we have so many external issues that impact their ability to learn such as mental health issues, poverty, crime, etc.?
12. If a paradigm shift in the education system is truly the best way to meet the changing needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, are you as educational leaders in the province, willing to put political partisanship aside and hear the experts in the field and follow through with their suggestions?
13. We agree with increasing student engagement, but how do we deal with the curriculum content overload with present inadequate funding.
14. How will the Department of Education and school boards change to become models for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners?
15. Has there been any data collected on the four year olds to support the decision that was made two years ago.
16. Why are so many decisions being based on one assessment – provincial?
17. When will all government agencies start working together to meet the needs of the whole community and considering our fiscal reality and higher expectations how do schools prioritize
18. Why is the Public School Program and grad requirements still driven by an industrial model instead of an information technology model?
19. As educators we know that students learn in different ways, at different paces, in different time frames and are passionate about different things. So the question is, Why do we have 13 compulsory credits with all the same outcomes for every child to graduate

20. What should be our shared vision for student outcomes and how do we stay the course?
21. Why is Powerschool not ready and why did the province require us (school) to implement this new Student Information System rather than work through the glitches for a year and then have us brought on board when it is working
22. How will the system (government, boards) bring any real change without disrupting the school system?
23. How do we utilize the 195 day school year to effectively address teacher needs for Professional Learning Communities?
24. The government is warning of projected cuts to funding to education, how can they be justified? We have heard how important the role of the teacher and principal to learning – how are we going to protect what really matters in schools.
25. What changes are we going to see at a government level to support what we do each and every day at schools on every level of child development (social well being; food requirements; safety, clothing, and learning needs)?
26. We are proud of our successes and commitment to student learning. How can we maintain our focus and continue to move forward in the era of back to balance? (We are hoping for more than replying with “doing more with less”)
27. Will the boards be required to collaborate with their principals to make decisions regarding budget cuts?
28. With significant reductions in educational funding pending, at what point will the government reconsider priorities such as provincial assessments versus maintaining teachers in the classroom? How much do the assessments at grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 cost?
29. When we are talking about restructuring and creating a new model or way of doing things, are we talking about a complete restructuring at the provincial and Board level to ensure the support and resources are being used to meet the needs of students and services are more readily accessible?
30. Do we need school boards?
31. A lot of the things that end up on our plates are the result of provincial boards reacting to small minority of complaints from parents? How do we stop this (i.e. lunch programs, storm closures, decisions around suspensions/discipline)?
32. How do we truly differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all of our students with the resources we have, or less?
33. How do we deal with recommendations from outside agencies/psychologists we know we can not follow through on?
34. How do you plan to address the disconnect between “accountability” and innovation including all the paper-work, lack of technological resources and other services needed to bring us into this century?
35. Why are we stuck with a structure of grades when we know that each child learns at a different pace and differently?
36. Does the Nova Scotia public still believe in the quality of our education system? What proof is there?
37. How do we address the inequalities that exist in our schools?
38. What can we do to prevent teacher burn-out or administrative burn-out and still feel good about what we are doing and accomplishing?
39. Regarding professional responsibilities as we embrace change, what is the Nova Scotia Teacher’s Union’s perspective on having consistent standards of practice for instruction

and assessment, on working with student assessment data to improve achievement while working in Professional Learning Communities?

40. In the tough financial times ahead should it be a priority to protect the coaching/mentoring model which improved teacher classroom practice?
41. If we know that approximately 70% of the students that don't meet expectations by the end of grade 3 will not graduate from high school, what specific plan does the Department of Education have to provide support to early elementary education so that we have fewer students that don't meet?
42. If large-scale standardized testing is meant to collect information and inform our practice to improve student achievement, why are results publicized? If they are going to be publicized, also publicize a plan of support and what resources are going to be provided.
43. What can be done with incompetent teachers when support, mentorship, etc. have not resulted in a change in their teaching practices?
44. Children who arrive at school with a language deficit are marginalized prior to beginning grade primary. What systemic supports are, or can be, put in place to identify and support pre-school children who are experiencing delays in language development?

## Appendix B: Evaluation Form

Next to each statement, please mark your response using the scale provided.

	Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
1. The information provided in the presentation by Carole Olsen	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The information provided in the presentation by Dr. Ben Levin	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The value of the moderated Panel Discussion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The usefulness of discussion during the Concurrent Sessions you attended.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The length of time allocated for the Concurrent Sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The keynote presentation by Kim Marshall, Author of <i>Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. The opportunity to fully participate throughout the two days	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. The opportunity to network with other principals during the two days	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. The meeting facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Rate the usefulness of the reception	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Rate the overall quality of the food	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. The meeting's overall organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Hotel accommodations (if applicable), please answer based on the hotel you stayed at:			
Delta Barrington	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delta Halifax	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Halifax Marriott Harbourfront Hotel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14. Were there any topics you would have been interested in, or other important issues that were not covered over the two days?

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

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16. If the Principals in Focus meeting is held in the future, what concurrent session topics would you like to see offered?

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17. The “accountability session” was removed and replaced with a moderated discussion panel. Do you feel that this new format was more or less effective?

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

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