DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NOVA SCOTIA INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

YEAR 1 INTERIM REPORT

SUMMARY

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Report Overview and Findings

This report summarizes the findings and recommendations emerging from the first year of a three-year developmental evaluation of the implementation of a new Inclusive Education Policy in Nova Scotia. We base our findings on interviews conducted with 45 key stakeholders in the Nova Scotia education system and analyses of 113 Network School applications. We also consider how the implementation strategy fits with globally recognized change frameworks. The data and findings were analyzed within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) implementation framework for effective change in schools (2020).

We present our report during an unprecedented pandemic that has altered the lives of children, families and those engaged with education systems in Nova Scotia in many ways. These include the physical closing of schools in March of 2020 and the introduction of at-home learning. Because our work in the first year of the developmental evaluation largely preceded the pandemic, the report is confined to capturing pre-pandemic experiences.

We have focused the first year engaging with the developmental evaluation on: a) establishing and working closely with a Design Team to guide the ongoing evaluation planning, b) developing relationships with those knowledgeable about and likely to be affected by the Policy; c) developing a greater understanding of the many moving pieces that comprise the Inclusive Education Policy implementation; d) collecting and analyzing data provided by key informants; e) analyzing Network School applications, and f) providing initial feedback to the EECD based on our findings to date.

The main findings from the first year of our developmental evaluation are described briefly in the table below.

Finding	Description
Shared Vision	There is widespread support for the principles of the Policy.
New Roles & Identities	Newly created support positions have been welcomed. However, some job descriptions are confusing or incomplete, they overlap with existing positions, and expectations related to the new hires are not always communicated clearly.
Changing Roles of Classroom Teachers	An increase in the responsibility of classroom teachers to meet the needs of all students in their classroom has been noted. School and regional staff noted the many collaborative supports that would have to be provided for teachers to be able to take on this role effectively.
Primacy of Tier 1	There is a shared belief about the importance of teaching with Tier 1 practices that are differentiated and universally designed. There are some concerns about how school and regional staff can balance supporting teachers in developing Tier 1 practices while still providing specialized supports for students.

Finding	Description
Need for Professional Learning & Development	A need for professional learning and development has been raised, with a focus on Tier 1 practices for classroom teachers, and ways of collaborating to provide Tier 1 supports.
Clarity of Policy Implementation	The ways in which the Policy is being implemented by EECD and within the regions are not always clearly connected or communicated. There is confusion regarding procedures such as for Teaching Support Teams and Student Planning Teams.
Importance of Collaboration	Inclusive collaboration within the educational system is seen as critical to the successful implementation of the Policy. A belief in building collective efficacy within schools and regions was shared widely.
Emphasis on Student Well-Being	Student Well-Being, including engagement, social-emotional learning and self-regulation, has been the most frequent focus of collaborative inquiry planning. It is not yet sufficiently connected to and integrated with the accompanying policy focus on student achievement.
Scope of Inclusive Education	The Policy has been understood more often in reference to students with special needs than African Nova-Scotian or Mi'kmaq students, those struggling with poverty or those who identify as LGBTQ2+.
Connecting Plans to Student Outcomes	Planned Tier 1 activities have not always been clearly linked to student outcome data in ways that allow for a sense of how and for whom an activity might be having an impact.

Developmental Evaluation – Year 1 Methodology and Data Analysis

The current Inclusive Education Policy (Province of Nova Scotia, 2019), referred to here as the Policy, emerged from the findings and recommendations within the *Students First* report (Njie et al., 2018) and the broader history and context of Nova Scotia education. The Policy was developed by the EECD in consultation with multiple groups. It was released to the public in August of 2019, with implementation in the Fall of 2020. The Policy includes a broad focus on ensuring equity, opening with the statement: "Inclusive education is a commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. All students should feel that they belong in an inclusive school—accepted, safe, and valued—so they can best learn and succeed" (p. 1).

In late 2018, to guide and support the implementation of the Policy, and to provide greater accountability as recommended in the *Students First* report, the government sought proposals for a developmental evaluation. Our research team bid successfully, and in the spring of 2019, as the Policy was being finalized, our team embarked upon a developmental evaluation of its implementation.
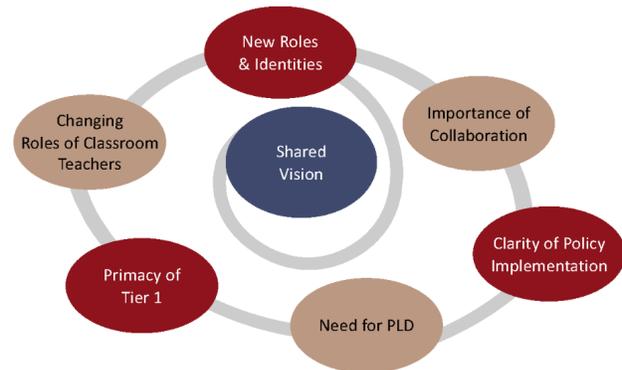
We travelled to Nova Scotia 4 times in the first 8 months of the evaluation, visiting 4 different regions and taking part in multiple advisory groups and internal leadership meetings. We anticipated additional visits in the spring and summer; due to COVID-19 this was not possible and we have instead relied on virtual engagement. Given the pre-implementation phase within which these visits took place, our evaluation efforts focused on: a) developing a deeper sense of the context in which the Policy and its implementation was embedded and b) exploring the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the Policy.

These two goals were facilitated by engaging in information-gathering discussions with 45 key stakeholders with varied roles, including senior leadership within EECD, Regional Executive Directors, regional-level staff, school-based administrators and educators, and leadership of unions, professional associations, universities and community organizations. Additionally, our team analyzed 113 Network School applications submitted by principals and educators across the province to understand current perceptions, priorities and practices related to the Inclusive Education policy.

Key Informant Perceptions

In our analysis of the key stakeholder interviews, 7 themes emerged that reflect the perceptions and experiences of individuals working in various places within the education system in Nova Scotia. Although they are described in linear terms, they are very much intertwined and interrelated in theory and practice. These are captured in the findings on p. 1 and the diagram.

The 7 inter-related themes that emerged from the interviews with key informants reflect significant strengths and capacity within the system. Many of the people we spoke to had extraordinary insight, perspective and experience to contribute to the system change necessary for the Policy to be implemented.

New Roles & Identities

Changing Roles of Classroom Teachers

Shared Vision

Importance of Collaboration

Clarity of Policy Implementation

Primacy of Tier 1

Need for PLD

Participants believed strongly in the vision and main principles in the Policy. They felt it was timely and necessary to support Inclusive Education efforts.

Many participants described changes in their professional roles and responsibilities resulting from the Policy. These changes were generally a result of the new positions added to the system (e.g. Child and Youth Practitioners, Parent Navigators) and how these overlapped with existing roles. The adjustments that some school and regional staff needed to make to their work felt uncomfortable. In general, participants were optimistic about the new positions and how these individuals and their skill sets could and, in some cases, already were benefitting staff, students, parents and community partners.

The Inclusive Education Policy increased classroom teachers' responsibilities for meeting all students' needs. Participants described the shift in mindset and practice that this would necessitate for some teachers and the extra supports that teachers would need to take on this role. According to many participants who were providing specialist supports at the school or regional level (e.g. resource teacher, psychologists), this shift in the Policy changed their roles from focusing mainly on supporting individual students to spending more time supporting teachers.

There was a firm and shared belief among participants, most of whom were regional-level staff, regarding the importance of Tier 1. Participants described the need to bring supports to the classroom and ensure effective classroom practices that were differentiated and universally designed. Many participants believed in the importance of substantial, sustained and specific PLD to support Tier 1 practices and guidelines and procedures that would serve to clarify expectations, with room for local contextual interpretation. Key to this PLD is the collaboration already in place in many regions and schools. Several participants discussed ways in which the Policy prompted more collaboration as they worked alongside other school and regional staff to provide supports to students within the MTSS model. Collaborative PLD and supports were

described as being effective and key to implementing the Policy, particularly if they cut across silos, thus modelling the practices expected within the MTSS model.

In contrast to the Policy's wide-ranging scope, the bulk of the discussions with participants tended to focus on student services and special education needs. This emphasis is likely due to the participant pool, which was heavily weighted towards those who traditionally held roles in these areas and were suggested to us as knowledgeable key informants. A few participants spoke specifically about students who were African Nova Scotian or Mi'kmaq and raised issues of equity and of making connections with families and communities.

Network Schools Applications

In 2019, EECD funded a new initiative, *Network Schools*. Educators were encouraged to create teams that "support professional learning, focusing on strengthening universal practices at Tier 1 within an inclusive education framework" (Network Schools Invitation, p. 1)*.* Teams could consist of educators from one or many schools as well as community and departmental partners. Once established, teams with similar inquiries would then be connected through a network or networks to promote collaboration and receive support from Inclusive Education Leadership Teams. The 113 applications we analyzed included 141 schools representing 39% of public schools in Nova Scotia. The Network School applications provided a unique opportunity for our research team to learn about how educators across the province understood the Policy and envisioned its implementation within their local context.

We found that educators generally incorporated the eight guiding principles of the inclusive education policy in designing and implementing their proposed action plans. There was a strong focus on Tier 1 practices and PLD, emphasizing collaborative professionalism and collective efficacy. However, the big story of the applications is about students' social and emotional learning, engagement, and health. The larger umbrella theme of student well-being was at the core of 35% of the applications, with teaching practices next (27%), followed by student achievement (25%) and the classroom environment (10%).
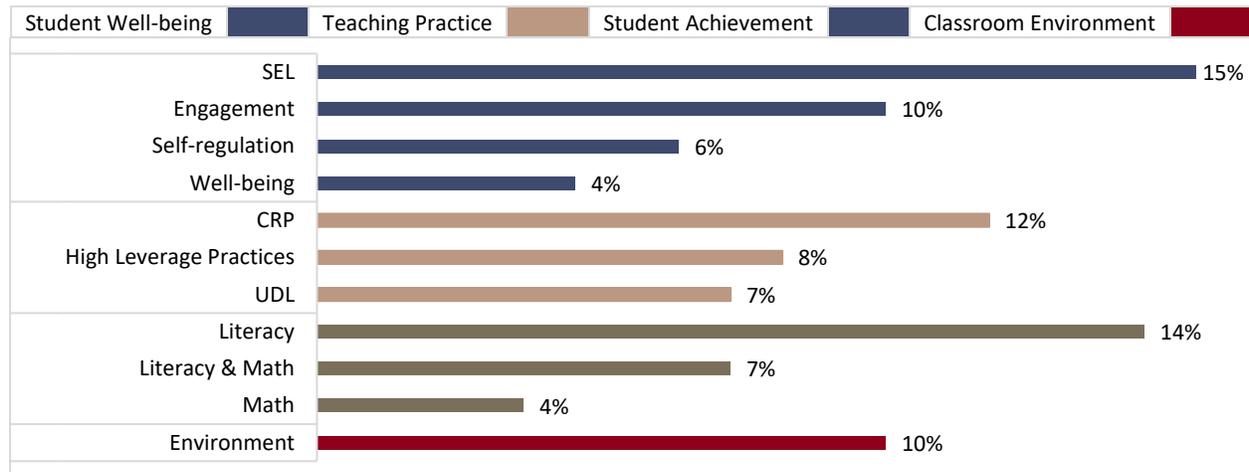
A significant and widespread challenge in the field of student well-being is a tendency to place it in a silo of roles, specialists and planning processes and emphasize it separately from a silo of student learning and achievement. As a result, or perhaps as a cause of this separation, there is often limited attention paid to understanding and ensuring the interconnection of outcomes concerning well-being and achievement (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2018). There is a need to be vigilant about this division occurring in the implementation of the Policy.

We also noted challenges in identifying measurement and outcome data and indicators that would allow school teams and networks to get a sense of whether, why and for whom the intervention activities were impacting. In general, applicants connected the resources they required with the goal of their action plan. There was a less explicit connection between the

desired outcomes and the measurement plan. Overall, the collaborative inquiry projects would benefit from greater clarity and depth related to the theories of change underlying and driving the interventions and their intended impact.

Areas of the Policy that were reflected less often in the applications include student voice, family and community engagement, and partners from the community and other departments. The emphasis on cultural and linguistic identities and knowledge was also observed less often at the Tier 1 level. However, applications reflected broad statements about CRP within interventions related to teaching practices. Many action plans that had a strong focus on supporting ANS or Indigenous students' success included Tier 2 levels of support (e.g., ANS Counsellor, ANS math class, Recreational club for Indigenous students). It is also notable that only one Network School application mentioned the well-being needs of students identifying as LGBTQ2+. Furthermore, student perceptual data were the least cited source of data in the applications. These findings point to the need to pay more attention to student voice in the inclusion process itself and in how the impact of the policy is evaluated in the Network Schools projects.

Policy Implementation Analysis

Our analysis of findings is situated within literature and frameworks based on national and international expertise. In doing so, we recognize the inclusive education reform work being engaged in by Nova Scotians as unique to local, regional and provincial contexts and universal in its reflection of the Policy reform and implementation efforts engaged in worldwide.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) recently released an implementation framework for effective change in schools. The framework details 3 key dimensions of a coherent implementation strategy: smart policy design (vision, capacity and policy tools), inclusive stakeholder engagement (transparency, involvement and communication) and conducive and collaborative context (institutions, resources and complementary policies).

Smart Policy Design

The province has adopted a bold, strong vision within the Policy, which reflects interwoven goals of inclusion and equity and an underlying basis of social justice and human rights. This vision allows for a strong foundation to support the work of implementation. The Policy contains aspects of the necessary reconstruction of schooling, beyond the historical discussions of mainstreaming and a narrow focus on placement. The theory of change underlying the implementation, which brings the vision to practical reality, is not yet explicit. As part of the developmental evaluation and the ongoing implementation efforts of partners across the province, the theory of change will continue to be co-developed over time.

We saw evidence of enormous capacity and particularly human and decisional capital in our first year. Many examples of close partnerships between regions, the universities offering B.Ed. and graduate programs, and the EECD, including the Inter-University Research Network, were

described to us. Many participants described individual capacity-building – becoming more skilled through attending a workshop or completing a series of modules. The Policy has also prompted reflection and some uncertainty among the participants we spoke to about the shift to capacity-building that includes, surrounds and supports the classroom teacher, where social capital is emphasized, and collaborative professionalism is paramount. The school-based Teaching Support Team is an example of a capacity-building structure embedded in the Policy that can build collaborative professionalism among educators. The collaborative inquiry projects supported through the Network Schools reflect another possible vehicle for building capacity among educators and developing collaborative professionalism. As the implementation plan for the Policy continues to develop, teams should consider ways in which the tenets of collaborative professionalism can inform their planning, including the development of mindsets and skillsets required to collaborate effectively with depth and focus.

In terms of policy tools, multiple levers were, and continue to be, put in place to achieve the Policy goals. These ranged from PLD for teachers, specialists and leaders, collaborative inquiry opportunities such as the Network Schools, resources and guides, and the Pyramid Model in pre-primary. Our identification of policy tools is challenged by the all-encompassing nature of the inclusive education policy. We have heard many times in our first year that inclusive education 'is the work' and that it needs to be reflected in any and all initiatives, meetings, PLD, etc. This infusion is a policy tool unto itself – weaving and repeating key messaging related to the Policy to build coherence and convey a sense of importance. It will be important moving forward to have a clear sense of the Policy tools drawn upon implicitly as well as explicitly in order to identify effective levers of implementation. This will allow for assessment by, of and with the system to determine if the objectives of the Policy have been met and where ongoing efforts should be focused. Being able to point to a policy tool and have concrete ideas about indicators that would reflect impact is important.

Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement

Our findings show evidence of inclusive stakeholder engagement, which consists of communication, involvement and transparency. In our discussions and interviews with school and regional staff and system leaders, we heard many examples of how they had been closely or peripherally involved in the development of the Policy. Our early discussions with educators and principals in regions suggest that the communication and engagement strategy lands clearly with some but less so with others. The spread and deeper level uptake of the messages will require ongoing efforts in this area. This engagement would also benefit from considering how individuals occupying different roles come together to ensure silos are not perpetuated - for example, program staff, student services staff, equity staff etc. The third element, transparency, will also benefit from developing a sharper focus during implementation. At some levels, particularly regional ones, clear role definitions, a sense of purpose and a shared understanding of responsibilities were evident. At the same time, many participants raised concerns regarding accountability, and about needing a concrete sense of what was expected of system leaders, principals and teachers in September 2020.

Conducive Context

The final aspect of the OECD framework is **a conducive context.** Part of the context relates to institutions, which include teaching standards and collective bargaining agreements and the level of trust between, for example, teacher unions and the government. Our findings reflect an understanding among many leaders of the need to achieve coherence between the Policy, the teaching standards and the new teacher performance appraisal. This work is in progress and will be key to the Policy implementation. A conducive context also ensures coherence among policies and other initiatives. Efforts to ensure coherence between the Policy and new initiatives such as the assessment policy and the Grade 7 and 8 curriculum renewal were described by system leaders. However, while the Inclusive Education Policy comes into effect in September 2020, the Special Education Policy also continues to be in effect until a new policy and/or guidelines are completed. This work was delayed due to the work around the pandemic but is expected to be completed this school year.

Some were confused about the coexistence of these two policies and processes, whether or not the Inclusive Education Policy and the MTSS model would replace the former policy and process, and if so, what timelines were anticipated for this. Clarity for educators, system leaders and parents should be a priority as the Policy implementation moves forward.

In the Network Schools applications, we noted that the focus on building Tier 1 practices based on the needs of African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaq students and those students identifying as LGBTQ2+ was limited. In part, this may reflect the persistent association between Inclusive Education and student services or students with special educational needs seen in Nova Scotia data and systems internationally. Coherence between the Inclusive Education Policy and related frameworks and policies (e.g. Racial Equity Policy, Achievement Gap Initiative) is critical in communications strategies and PLD opportunities. Our analyses of the Network Schools applications and the proposed collaborative inquiries also revealed a frequent separation of well-being and achievement as priorities, policies and practices. Considerable work also needs to be done to integrate and interrelate these respective emphases.

Finally, we consider resource allocations. Many new positions have been funded, including Child and Youth Care Practitioners and Parent Navigators. A few individuals at the regional level gave examples of how the role descriptions for new positions were purposefully developed to fit within the MTSS model and in relation to the Policy broadly. Other positions had been added to the available resources within systems (e.g. psychologists) and although they were seen as providing necessary supports for teachers and students, their work was not always reflective of the Policy principles.

The 2019-2020 school year was dramatically interrupted by the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent closing of schools in mid-March 2020, with distance learning taking place between early April and early June. Implementation of the Policy in its entirety was scheduled for September 2020 when first released in August of 2019. The activities taking place so far comprise efforts to prepare the system for this implementation. Many stakeholders involved in our developmental evaluation suggested changes in timing of the Policy. Some supporting a

more staggered approach with certain elements put in place over months or even years as the system shifts and develops capacity. The time allowed for the Policy to be fully implemented in this and all contexts should be considered with particular care.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis and findings, we have seven recommendations for the shape and direction of the implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy. We recognize that some of these may not be immediately possible or may need to be planned within the uniquely complex nature of teaching, learning and leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1) Articulate and elaborate specific high impact practices of collaborative professionalism
We recommend the continued use and spread of practices that promote collaborative professionalism, including collaborative inquiry projects, lesson and book studies, and data walls. We also recommend building on the existing coaching model to situate individuals with particular expertise in inclusive approaches to support the work of teachers and school staff in implementing the policy. Implementation plans need to reflect a significant focus on the ways in which collaborative professionalism can be developed, deepened, and sustained
2) Develop a specific network design for circulating professional knowledge and practice
Once the Network Schools have circulated their collaborative inquiries, the next step will be to connect them for mutual learning and support in the promised and planned networks. An explicit design should be developed or selected that supports purposeful, planned collaboration, including leadership considerations.
3) Create an inclusive steering group to reduce the risk of silo-like processes of policy implementation planning
The need for shared ownership of the Policy and coherence across initiatives, policies and programs was raised numerous times by participants. Ongoing implementation should be planned, monitored and revised by a collaborative steering group (the guiding coalition) with representation across key areas and levels within EECD. This group should include representation from Programs (Literacy/Numeracy), Innovations (Technology), Student Services and Equity, African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq Services, the LGBTQ2 community, representation of working class and high poverty constituencies, and other key areas, as well as the evaluation team. A small task-force of no more than half a dozen members, from different positions within systems, should be created within this group to allow for expedient, focused advancement of implementation.
4) Create a student review and reference group to provide feedback regarding experiences of policy impact.
Collaborating *with* students and not only *for* students is a key component of collaborative professionalism. It is also essential in designing a fully inclusive policy development and implementation process. A well-facilitated and widely represented student reference group will enable those responsible for implementing the Policy to become more aware of how the Policy is or is not having an impact at the school and classroom level and to be able to monitor and manage progress over time.
5) Further develop and articulate the theory of change
Numerous theories of change are explicitly and implicitly guiding the work of the implementation. A theory of change should be co-developed and clearly communicated through a compelling and consistent narrative to ensure clear direction and monitoring of the implementation over the coming years.

6) Publish the developmental evaluation reports along with EECD responses
We recommend that our evaluation feedback and reports be made public along with a response from EECD outlining the ways in which the recommendations are already or will be reflected in the ongoing policy implementation planning, in the short- and long-term. The response can also include any recommendations not accepted or not accepted presently – for reasons such as resource priorities or the COVID-19 pandemic.
7) Consider using the Inclusive Education policy to guide the province's education response to COVID-19
Planning for the 2020/2021 school year and beyond is necessarily heavily focused on processes and procedures that will allow students to be able to access their education within public health guidelines. At the same time, issues of inclusion and equity have not diminished in their urgency; many in fact have been magnified. Many examples of ways in which EECD has addressed equity concerns have emerged in the COVID-19 response. These efforts should continue in exploring ways in which the Policy can inform planning in terms of student and family access to learning, student inclusion, well-being and voice, the reflection of UDL and CRP principles in both virtual and in-school offerings, and a range of service provisions based on student need within an MTSS framework. For educators, opportunities to collaborate in meaningful and productive ways to develop and share ways of responding to their own as well as student and family needs within COVID-19 restrictions are essential.

With these recommendations helping to guide the ongoing work of the implementation, we can begin to map the ways in which the vision of inclusive education will result in inclusive practices across the system.