



'Yes, Minister' is a No-No: Why Good Television Makes for Bad Education Policy

Based on a submission to the Minister's consultation process
on increasing the effectiveness of school board governance in Nova Scotia

by Charles Cirtwill
& Bobby O'Keefe



September 2008

Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

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INTRODUCTION

There is a wonderful British sitcom about parliamentary democracy and the inner workings of a government office. The title of it comes from a running joke throughout the episodes where, regardless of what inane, idiotic, simplistic or just plain dumb idea the Minister comes up with, the staff fall all over themselves to be the first to say “Yes, Minister”. It makes for great television. It is less certain it will make for great public policy.

The current attempt to tie not just school boards but now individual school board members to the standards and expectations of the Minister of Education and the Department of Education is a distressing effort to codify the “Yes, Minister” mentality. Worse, the further centralization of control over schools goes against a rich vein of research that says if you want effective schools and engaged communities you give them more power not less.

Certainly, school boards should have rules of order and the ability to censure and control disruptive behaviour. But, that does not translate into a requirement for the Minister, or even the Board, to decide who represents a school or school community. In fact, if we want engaged parents, effective school board members, and accountable schools, the decision of who represents the community in running the school must reside with, and only with, the community served.

The Department’s discussion paper reflects a paternalistic approach to the delivery of public education that places primacy on decorum over debate, central control over collective accountability, and resource efficiency over effectiveness. The current proposals exist in a world where “the best interests of our students are considered in all decisions” instead of being paramount in them!

Nova Scotia should not move backwards in time to a more centralized, less accountable, less engaged public education system. New Zealand, New Orleans and Edmonton Public Schools all offer more effective, more accountable, and more engaged public education options. We can have both better education and better behaviour, but to do that we need to have real local control. We simply need to give our schools over to their communities, and stop saying “Yes, Minister” quite so often.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) has been an active voice on public education in Atlantic Canada, across the country and indeed, around the world, over the past 15 years. We call on that experience to respond to the Nova Scotia Department of Education's proposed legislation to improve governance in the education system as presented in the discussion paper *Increasing the Effectiveness of School Board Governance in Nova Scotia*, (hereafter referred to as the Department's discussion paper).

Over the past two years, two of Nova Scotia's elected school boards have had members removed from their roles for highly publicized internal squabbles. Proposed changes to Nova Scotia's legislation are, according to the Department's discussion paper, intended to "allow a broader range of disciplinary measures to be taken, both by school boards and by the Minister of Education."¹ Many of the recommended changes do just that.

We argue here, however, that this is a limited response, mistaken in principle and ultimately self defeating in direction. Instead of responding to the symptoms, the Department should actually seek to respond to the disease. Further diluting local control and broader system accountability will only deepen and perpetuate the frustration and powerlessness that breeds the type of behaviour which has led to the current proposals. It would be far better to heed the advice of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and others that local control and broader accountability give rise to better schools, more engaged communities and more effective school system governance.

Spare the Rod

"Spare the rod and spoil the child" appears to be the new motto of the Department of Education. Or rather, "we have spared the rod and spoiled our school board members". So, the solution is obvious, more (and bigger) rods in more hands. If we can just beat school board members with enough rods, or preferably just threaten them a little more (and maybe make an example or two), they will learn to behave as we want them to. No one will ask impertinent or impolite questions, no one will misbehave with the cameras and microphones rolling, no-one will break ranks or oppose the decision of the majority.

Not that anyone asks impertinent or impolite questions in the provincial legislature, or the federal House of Commons, or at work, or at home. Not that impertinent and impolite actions and questions frequently lead to important answers. Or that such disruptive behaviour all too often arises from some deeper problem, a sense of powerlessness or a fear of exclusion perhaps?

If the discussion paper is to be taken at its face value, the Department has made little effort to learn from the behaviour of recalcitrant board members. The discussion paper makes no effort to explore why such behaviour took place. It does not ask whether there was any root cause of the discontent. It assumes, as many have assumed, that the disruptions were simply malcontents being malcontents and taking

¹ Nova Scotia Department of Education, *Increasing the Effectiveness of School Board Governance in Nova Scotia*, July 2008.

advantage of weak rules of conduct. True or false, that assumption needs to be explored before it is acted upon.

Unless, of course, this is more about control and less about resolution, and that appears to be the case here. If board members fail to toe the line in terms of desired behaviour, first they are censured, then suspended, then expelled. Won't behave in class? Kick them out of class! That will teach them, or not, as generations of expelled students can attest.

Better still, we can then hand pick replacements for them. What an excellent way to ensure a quiet, harmonious class. Of course, as most teachers and students will likely attest, it is often the classroom where the impertinent (and even the occasionally inappropriate) questions get asked where the most is learned. And learning, in case we had all forgotten, is what this is supposed to be about.

The only argument put forward so far in defence of the direct appointment of replacement members (and this is in the media, not the discussion paper) is based on administrative efficiency and cost. How ironic that in a year where we are spending nine million dollars to celebrate democracy we admit to being unwilling to spend fifty thousand to actually have it.

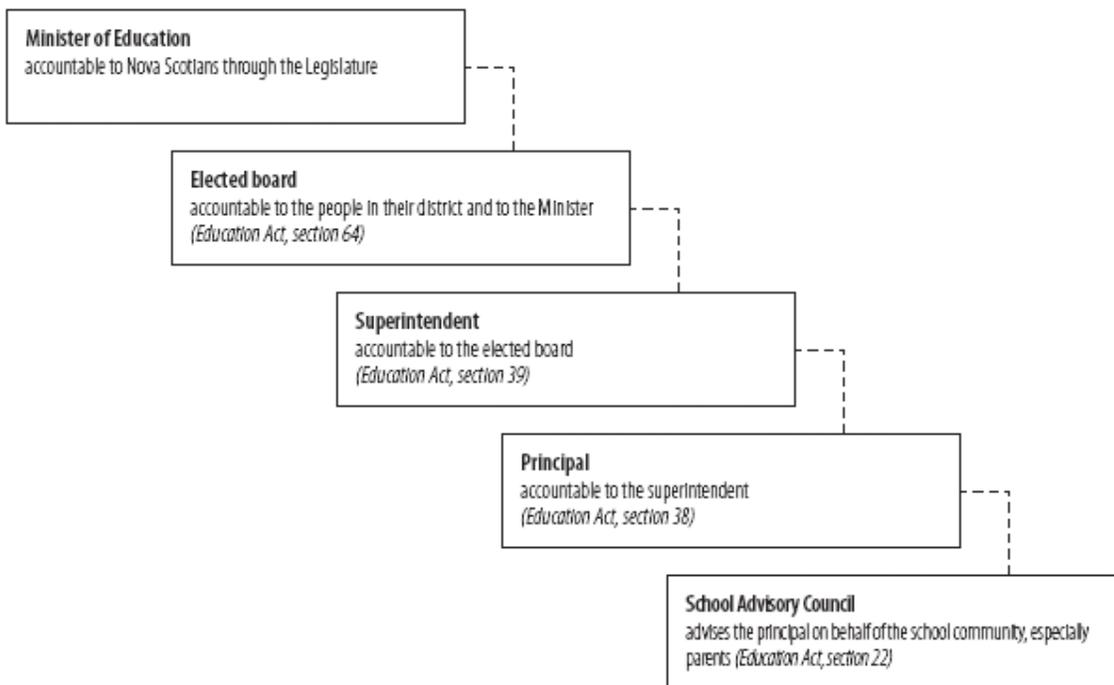
In this section we present two aspects of data that are currently available. First, we present basic demographic and socio-economic data that provide a sense of "what each community looks like." Second, we present statistics related to a number of municipal services.

Accountability versus Governance

The current approach, as recently documented in *Good Governance: October 2008 and Beyond* by Howard Windsor, chair of the Halifax Regional School Board,² shows five "layers" of accountability. At the lowest level, stands the School Advisory Council (SAC), a community group supposed to represent the community's (and particularly parents') interests, which advises the principal of the school. The principal is then accountable to the superintendent of the school's school board, who in turn is accountable to the elected school board. The elected school board is then accountable to two different masters – the Minister of Education on one hand, and the people in their district on the other. Finally, the Minister of Education is accountable to the people of the Province of Nova Scotia through the legislature. See Figure 1.

² Halifax Regional School Board, *Good Governance: October 2008 and Beyond, A Discussion Paper*, August 2008.

Figure 1 – Nova Scotia’s Education Accountability Framework as presented in Good Governance: October 2008 and Beyond



Source: Halifax Regional School Board, *Good Governance: October 2008 and Beyond, A Discussion Paper*, August 2008.

This arrangement would appear to be an attempt to ensure that schools are accountable to the province’s general populace, in addition to the specific community served by an individual school. If that is indeed the case, then it fails on at least two levels in terms of achieving accountability to the school community.

First, the only level of accountability which makes reference to the school *community* is the SAC, which, in the scenario described, has no authority to do anything. This makes its direct accountability to the community members effectively useless.³ The school principal, accountable to the superintendent of schools, is not directly accountable to the SAC itself. A principal pressured by a superintendent (or just personally inclined) to act in a direction contrary to the wishes of the community as expressed through the school advisory council, is totally free to disregard the SAC. In fact, in the case of pressure from the superintendent, a principal is actually incented to disregard the SAC because only the superintendent can reward (or punish) behaviour.

Second, with the amalgamation of the regional school boards that has taken place over the years, most recently in 1996 when 22 district school boards were amalgamated into seven regional school boards and

³ A November 20, 1995 news release from the province’s Department of Education and Culture highlighting changes to the *Education Act* made the “advisory only” nature of the School Advisory Councils quite clear, stating “The amendment to Section 23 makes it clear that school boards retain their responsibilities as employer. School councils are advisory” and “Section 23 clarifies that no power of the school board can be transferred to the school advisory council without agreement of the school board.”

one province-wide board for all Francophone schools across the province, accountability to and representation by the individual communities where schools are located has been compromised. Rather than having a voice at the table to address the concerns of an individual school, representatives elected to school boards now have to represent the issues of several communities and several schools. This has watered down their ability to consider, let alone effectively address, individual school level concerns.

The structure outlined above also fails to deliver accountability to the people of the province via the Minister of Education. This is true even where, as now, the Minister wields considerable direct or indirect influence, and this situation will only get worse under the proposed changes. In effect, the Minister can point to multiple layers of bureaucracy between the Department and the classroom and “lay the blame” for any real or perceived problems at any of those doors. This is true despite the fact that in most instances, none of those entities would truly hold the power to respond unilaterally to the issue at hand.

This systemic mismatch between authority and accountability ensures power remains centralized while accountability remains dispersed. This leaves individuals and communities, even those individuals serving on school boards and SACs, effectively powerless to achieve anything of value for the students they ostensibly serve. It is telling that this powerlessness is not discussed at all in the Department’s discussion paper. The paper is very much focused on treating the symptoms, not the disease, and it assumes all bad behaviour arises from bad intentions.

We do not seek here to assess the veracity of that assertion nor do we propose to defend or condemn individual behaviours. What we argue is that by fixing accountability you will improve governance. Simply fixing governance (which is what is currently being proposed) at best does nothing for accountability and at worst reduces accountability further. This is problematic in light of the evidence that tells us it is accountability, not governance, that is the key to successful schools.

ONE SCHOOL, ONE SCHOOL BOARD

The most direct way of returning school accountability to school communities is by returning it to the school level. The Regional School Board Model attempts to do this by providing for regional voices selected to represent the interests of a region at the school board or district level. Individual community interests, however, tend to lose out to regional interests, or at the very least are compromised to avoid regional conflicts. As seen in the two Nova Scotia school boards where disciplinary actions were needed, regional and interpersonal conflicts will occur in this model.

In contrast to this regional thinking, New Zealand takes a community based approach to ensure maximum community representation for schools while virtually eliminating potentially contentious regional interests. New Zealand does this simply by having a one school, one school board design, where every single school has its own school board/council, which is not only accountable to the community it represents, but also given sufficient decision-making authority to engage its members and ensure community interests are represented at each school.

While this model provides for greater accountability and responsibility, perhaps the key component of the model is the added authority for SACs, as well as added authority and autonomy for school principals. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as reported upon the release of the results of the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in December of 2007, a “feature that the best performers in PISA share is that they have devolved responsibility to the frontline. PISA suggests that countries giving more responsibility to schools tend to perform better. Giving schools more autonomy in formulating the budget, and letting them decide on allocations within the school tends to go hand in hand with better performance. This remains true even after accounting for socio-economic background and other school and system level factors.”⁴

Additional support for such an arrangement comes from UCLA professor William Ouchi’s book, *Making Schools Work*. In it, he identifies seven keys for school system success. Two of those keys relate directly to autonomy – every school controls its own budget and everyone delegates authority to those below.⁵

The one school, one school board model provides the autonomous school, and the autonomous school principal, with the community resources and support required to make the best education programming decisions for the school community. It also provides a community based accountability arrangement where everyone, rather than just the Department of Education, is ultimately accountable for the success of a school and the quality of education its students receive – which is another of William Ouchi’s keys for success, that *everyone* is accountable for student performance and for budgets.

The autonomous schools model can take many forms. Ouchi, for instance, focuses on the Edmonton Public Schools model. This model will be discussed in detail below. Another approach is that of Charter Schools. Charter schools are publicly funded but privately managed schools that typically have a board of trustees which provides a similar governance arrangement to a school board. New Orleans’ recent success in turning its school system around has relied heavily on the use of charter schools in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Of the 80 schools currently operating in the city (down from 125 before Katrina, more

⁴ Speech by Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General Tokyo, Japan Press Club, 04 December 2007

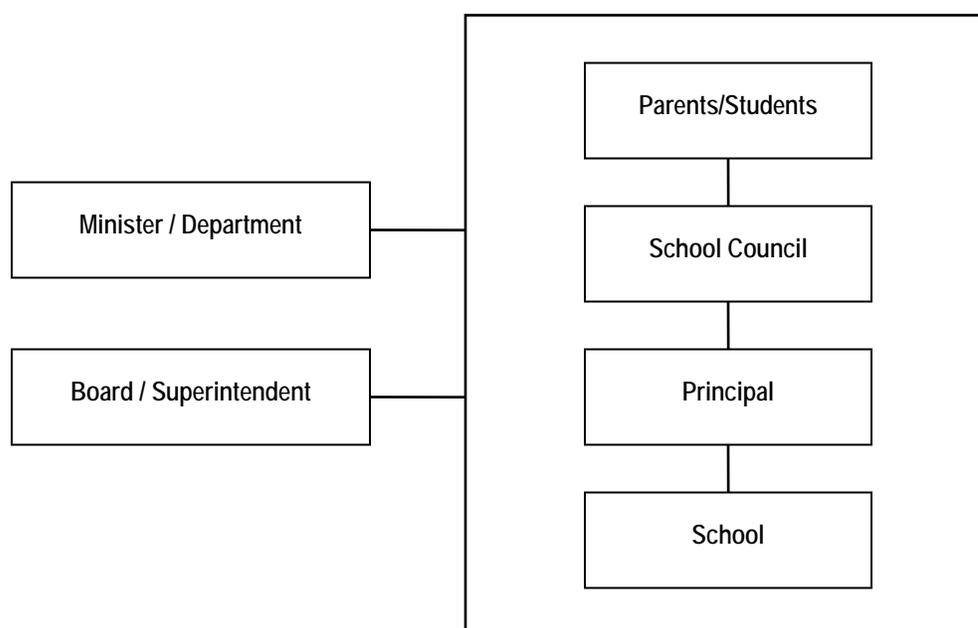
⁵ Ouchi, William G., *Making Schools Work*, 2003 New York: Simon & Schuster.

than half of which were failing to meet ‘No Child Left Behind’ standards), about half are operating as charter schools. The flexibility provided by the autonomy given to charter schools helped to meet the needs of the community faster than the traditional public system could.⁶

This autonomous arrangement does not mean that Departments of Education have no role in keeping schools accountable to the province as a whole. Education Forum, a New Zealand Education Policy Forum that provided a roadmap for autonomous schools in its October 2003 publication *A New Deal: Making Education Work for all New Zealanders*, suggests that “schools should be free to determine their own curriculum, subject to a minimal core.”⁷ Here is where the department can ensure that the education system remains fully accountable to provincial interests. By carefully selecting the minimum curriculum standards on the most important components for the province as a whole – likely to include basic literacy, numeracy, and computing – it forces schools to find a way to meet those minimum standards. However, instead of mandating a single solution or short list of options to meet those standards, it leaves it to the individual schools and their communities to find the means with which to meet those standards.

So what exactly does this structure look like? It focuses on the relationships between the schools and the people they serve (students, parents and the broader community) rather than the relationship between schools and the government. Figure 2 shows an alternative to the existing structure shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2 – Recommended Structure for a Parent/Student/School focused Education Accountability Framework



In this model, parents and students play an active role in the accountability structure through the School Council. The School Council also has representatives from faculty and the community, which provides

⁶ Gilbert, Sarah Jane, *Reforming New Orleans Schools After Katrina: Q & A with Stacey M. Chlidress*, Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, July 14, 2008.

⁷ Education Forum, *A New Deal: Making Education Work for all New Zealanders*, October 2003.

those groups with an additional more direct accountability role within the structure. The key to this structure is giving the School Council sufficient authority and responsibility instead of playing only an advisory role.

The Minister and Department of Education, meanwhile, have three key functions to serve in this model. First, they serve in an advisory and support capacity to the School Council and school. Second, the department sets the core standards for all schools in the province. Finally, the department collects, analyses, and releases school performance information.

In this model, the role of the elected school board becomes optional. New Zealand has eliminated regional school boards altogether, instead only using a central department to act in a support role for their School Councils. Edmonton Public Schools, however, still have a Superintendent and elected board in place, but the board acts in an advisory role similar to the recommended approach described above for the department. In this way, an individual school board could adopt a similar accountability framework within the provincial model should the province choose to maintain the status quo.

Building on our own experience

Nova Scotia already flirted with adopting such an autonomous and decentralized system several years ago. At the 2nd National Consultation on Education, themed *Education Initiatives in Canada, 1996: A report from the provinces and territories* hosted by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), Nova Scotia discussed its strategic plan for the future of education in the province. Part of the presentation on that plan included the following:

“Education restructuring. Historically in the public school system, most decision-making authority has been centralized in school boards and the department. It was felt that this centralized structure hindered parents, students, communities, and teachers from having an effective voice in decisions in their schools. On June 29, 1994, a discussion paper was released entitled *Restructuring Nova Scotia's Education System*, to address the aforementioned issues. Following public consultations, government decisions regarding the roles and responsibilities of all partners in the education system, the establishment of school advisory councils, and the amalgamation of school boards were announced in June 1995 in the report *Expanding Horizons*.

New Education Act. Legislative support was required for many of the education reforms introduced as a result of the education restructuring process, including amalgamating school boards, defining and clarifying roles and responsibilities, and introducing school councils. This provided the department with the opportunity to combine and revise the existing *Education and School Board Acts* into a new *Education Act* that would increase the focus of education on students in the classroom.”⁸

When legislative changes were made, however, the legislation was amended from its original form to clarify and ensure that school advisory councils were advisory only and that school boards would retain all of their original authority and responsibility.⁹

⁸ <http://www.cmec.ca/nce/ns96e1.htm>

⁹ See note 5. The November 20, 1995 press release specifically states that the “sections referenced are located in the amended version of the bill, not the original bill.”

This retrenchment was a mistake. Over the past six years we have had numerous meetings with school faculties and wider school communities to discuss the results of the AIMS Annual Report Card for Atlantic Canadian High Schools. One of the major problems we hear expressed is the inability to choose locally the courses offered to students. Given that options for individual courses are outside of their control, the only educational options schools can provide to suit the circumstances of their communities are minor tweaks within the classroom. Since a single classroom is likely to have students with a variety of educational needs, teachers are highly limited in what they can do to suit the needs of those students.

Accountable for what?

Traditionally government accountability has focused on financial accountability, ensuring that dollars spent equal dollars taken in, with little in the way of meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of those expenditures. That form of accountability has certainly extended to the education realm, at both the Department and school board levels. Until the current decade, very little in the way of education performance data was made available to the public. Province-wide assessment results were first made public in the first Minister's Report to Parents which was not released until 2002. The province did not commit to collecting or releasing any school level information until March of 2003.¹⁰ School level results did not appear until the fourth annual Minister's Report released in April 2005, and even then only included the elementary literacy assessment results. School level elementary numeracy results were promised in April of 2007¹¹ (though have yet to appear publicly). It was not until 2008 that Nova Scotia's Department of Education finally announced that it would begin to make all assessment results available at the school level when it promised school level reporting of all high school provincial level exams.¹² Before that announcement, high school assessment results were only made public at the school board level.

While representing a concrete example of the continued role for a central education department in an autonomous school structure, this level of reporting is critical regardless of which authority and accountability structure you have in place. As the OECD report on PISA results tells us: "PISA shows that schools posting results publicly tend to perform better (even after accounting for all other school and socio-economic factors). This effect is strong across many countries. This suggests that external monitoring of standards, rather than relying mostly on schools and teachers to uphold them, can make a real difference to results."¹³

Ultimate accountability – Real choice

Holding elected officials accountable for their actions through codes of conduct and other democratic processes should not be ignored. Matching authority and accountability and moving both to the local level, however, as discussed above, offer far more accountability bang for our governance buck. Yet, we would be remiss if we did not note that governance and accountability have finite limits when discussing monopoly supply of a mandatory activity.

¹⁰ A March 6, 2003 press release titled *Province Concerned About AIMS Report on High Schools*, stated "The Department of Education does not have school-by-school results. It will start to provide this level of information next year."

¹¹ Jones, Lindsay, *Gov't tries to make math scores add up*, Halifax Daily News, July 6, 2007.

¹² Shiers, Kelly, *Minister to release literacy, math results*, The Chronicle Herald, April 5, 2008.

¹³ Ibid, note 4.

Direct accountability at the school level can only be achieved through the provision of choice within the education system. That is, if parents and students are not satisfied with the education offered at their “neighbourhood” government school, they then have the option of attending another school without having to bear additional costs, whether it is another government school, a charter school, or even a private school.¹⁴ This does not mean, as other provinces in Canada and other countries around the world have abundantly demonstrated, abandoning “public education” or even “government schools”¹⁵. William Ouchi and the OECD again provide the evidence for this.

Ouchi’s examination of the best performing schools in North America yielded choice as its seventh key for school success – “Families have real choices among a variety of unique schools.”¹⁶ Additionally the OECD analyses of PISA results in 2006 found that in “countries with both above average student performance in science and below-average impact of socio-economic background on student performance, 80% of 15-year-olds are in schools which reported competing with one or more schools in the area for students.”¹⁷ It should be noted that one of the countries cited in this OECD example is Canada, but we should also note that the ONLY region of Canada where this statement does not apply is here in Atlantic Canada.

The lack of publicly funded educational choice options in Nova Scotia is readily identifiable.¹⁸ The charter school movement is essentially dead. There is limited support for home schoolers (and no financial support). There is no generally available provision for even partial funding of private school tuition. Even among government schools, there is little or no openness to the geographic boundaries. While applications to attend “out of boundary” or non-neighbourhood schools are possible in Nova Scotia, the onus remains on the parent and student to demonstrate why the exception should be made and there is little onus on the school board to demonstrate reasonable (or even unreasonable) grounds for rejecting such applications. In one instance, a school board denied a family permission to switch schools despite a child being bullied and taunted with death threats from fellow students. A board spokesperson said bluntly “it is up to principals, not parents, to determine when bullying has reached the point that a student needs to be transferred to another school.”¹⁹ This is hardly a demonstration of accountability to the student and parents in question.

¹⁴ It should be noted that in most jurisdictions full private tuition is not covered. As a general rule parents receive a percentage of the per pupil amount given to government schools. Any tuition fee above that would be the responsibility of parents and students.

¹⁵ It is important to recognize the considerable difference between the **end** of public education and the **means** that is a government school. Public education is education funded by the taxpayer and freely available to the general public. Government schools, on the other hand, are simply schools owned and operated by the government and staffed by public servants. A government school is not the only form of “public education” and so to refer to “government schools” as “public schools” implies an exclusivity that does not exist. “Public schools” and “public education” can be found in many different forms: charter schools, fully or partially publicly funded private schools (both profit and not-for-profit), even home schooling.

¹⁶ Ouchi, *Ibid.*

¹⁷ OECD, *PISA 2006 Science Competencies for tomorrow’s World*, OECD 2007, page 236

¹⁸ See, for example, Hepburn, Claudia and Robert Van Belle, “The Canadian Education Freedom Index”, Vancouver, Fraser Institute, 2003

¹⁹ MacMillian, Jennifer, *Mom upset her daughter in same class as her bullies*, The Chronicle Herald, Halifax, January 5, 2007.

HOW DO YOU GET THERE?

So, based on the available research, the model of an effective school system includes: choice, school level autonomy and public accountability through full and frank reporting of school level results. So the question remains, how do you get there?

Ouchi's book examines several models that work well to determine his seven keys to success. None demonstrate the autonomous model better than Edmonton Public Schools. The Edmonton Model provides each individual school the autonomy to craft its programs to best suit the needs of the community by delegating the authority for budget decisions to the school level as much as possible. Approximately 92 cents of every dollar spent in Edmonton Public is controlled at the school level.

In the Edmonton Model, as well as in the New Zealand Model mentioned earlier, student and parents are able to take advantage of choice within the system. Students are able to attend any school they choose. In this manner, students and parents can choose from a variety of options offered by schools.

Edmonton's student performance based on its approach speaks for itself. From 2000 to 2006, three year high school completion rates improved from 51 percent to 68 percent, and five year completion rates improved to 71 percent, up from 64 percent. An analysis of reading results improvement over a three year period for students from one grade to the next saw the percentage of students reading at or above grade level improve from the mid-70s in Grade 2 to 100 percent by Grade 4, and from the mid-70s in Grade 1 to the mid-90s by Grade 3.²⁰

How do you get to a system like Edmonton's from a system like the one on the ground in Nova Scotia today? Let's consider the example of the Edmonton Public Schools.

The "Edmonton Model" has five key features:

- **Open public reporting of results** – Student and school performance data along with student and community demographic profiles and selected other relevant information (often including, but not limited to, satisfaction surveys of parents, staff and students) are collected and reported both publicly and internally. The level of public disclosure is adjusted to reflect freedom of information and protection of privacy considerations. Internal disclosure is targeted at delivering the most useful level summary for each individual recipient based on their requirements and responsibilities within the system.
- **School Choice** – Parents and children are free to choose any government school in the board district (the traditional neighbourhood boundaries are removed) as well as having a broad selection of other fully or partially funded education choices including home schooling, charter schools, private for profit, and private not-for-profit schools.

²⁰ http://www.focusonresults.net/results/ourresults_edmonton.html

- **Site-Based Management** – A significant portion of the board’s budget is allocated to schools, typically through weighted student funding, and the schools have significant control over their own budgets and the programmes they offer. The central administration does not disappear, but its role changes from holding key decision making authority over budgets and programmes to establishing standards, monitoring performance, and providing support services to schools.
- **Weighted Student Funding (WSF)** – Students are allocated an amount of educational funding based on their need and this funding follows them to the school they attend. Every student receives a base amount that is then topped up for extra needs such as disabilities or any other characteristic that would require extra resources to achieve comparable levels of performance.
- **Individually Targeted Professional Development** – Available data are used to target individual level interventions and training at all levels of the system from the superintendent to individual teachers and support staff. The intended interventions should normally be substantiated by applied research demonstrating proven effectiveness.

All five of these features did not arise together, nor were they achieved system wide in one fell swoop. In putting this model into place there were essentially three groups of changes.

First, the Province of Alberta made a series of changes including: setting and reporting on a series of provincial assessments; introducing expanded public education delivery options (including expanded support for home schoolers, support for charter schools, and partial financial support for private school tuition); and, encouraging choice among government schools by tying funding directly to the students.

In the second step, Edmonton Public Schools took the Alberta wide reforms one step further by implementing full choice among government schools and reporting on performance on a school by school basis. They also tested site based management through a seven-school pilot that involved not one dollar in extra spending by those schools. This pilot quickly led to improvements in both performance and satisfaction and was rapidly expanded to include the entire school board.

In the third group of reforms, the new environment of excellence for all, choice, openness and innovation allowed more effective responses to the varied needs of individual students, teachers and administrators. These responses included the implementation of weighted student funding and individually evidence based and targeted professional development. At the same time, of course, the lessons learned through the pilot and the system wide implementation led to refinements and adjustments across the system.

This incremental approach involving both a provincial “climate change” and a local pilot is a promising example on several fronts:

- it serves to match words with immediate and important action,
- it sets a provincial tone focused on individual student success, innovation and immediate accountability to parents,
- it allows for evidence based adjustment in the status quo and incremental change based on lessons learned,
- it meets the demands of both those seeking change and those wishing to maintain the status quo by placing the responsibility squarely in their hands to demonstrate that their approach to education works,
- it places the ultimate decision about what works and what doesn’t in the hands of students and parents, instead of the Minister or the department.

CONCLUSION

Make everyone accountable

The legislation changes outlined in the Department’s discussion paper are a simplistic approach to disciplinary issues that are only symptoms of a broader accountability problem within our education system. The current school board system maintains an approach that presumes the Department of Education knows what is best for every Nova Scotia community, or that regional school boards know what is best for every one of their community schools. The one school, one school board approach highlighted by the New Zealand Model fixes this issue by making school boards accountable to the individual school communities they serve, rather than compromising to larger regional concerns.

Additionally, the autonomous approach highlighted by the OECD and outlined in brief above is unique in that it prescribes an “if it’s broke, let them fix it” mentality where schools and school communities are empowered with the authority to find the model of education that works best for their children. It does not mean that the Department has no role. Indeed, the Department has a central role in a more autonomous system. It sets minimum objectives, tracks and reports on results and supports in a flexible way the choices made by the local communities.

Such a change in approach will address the broader problems in the education system rather than the symptomatic disciplinary issues that the recommendations in the Department’s discussion paper address. The approach also means less concern about the impact on the department, the school boards and even on the schools, and more concern about the benefits for the children.

Full choice among a broad mix of autonomous schools with clear and accessible reporting puts our children first and takes maintenance of the current system off the priority list altogether. The Edmonton Model, combined with the broader New Zealand board governance approach, provides a proven, accountable, ready to use system that places student interests ahead of the interests of the system.

Nova Scotia was almost there once, but chose to retain the status quo. Let’s learn from our history lest we be doomed to repeat it.



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