



Policy Paper

Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap

SCHOOLS, INCOME, AND STUDENT SUCCESS

By Paul W. Bennett, Ed.D.

Halifax, Nova Scotia,

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Special Feature:

Interactive Map Series: This AIMS report comes with a series of interactive maps designed and prepared for us by GIS consultant Frank King and accessible through this link:

<https://a-i-m-s.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=cd4a0b39299a40d2b80b28aef50db1b5>.

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About the Author

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Introduction – Closing the Student Achievement Gap

Student performance can be highly varied within school systems. Differences among children and teens from various classes or groups, marked by income, ethnic, or racial disparities, are commonly termed the “achievement gap”. Children of affluence and children of poverty live in different worlds which are strongly influenced by their socio-economic status, usually measured in mean household income (Haycock, 2001a; Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller, 2007). Another factor is where they live, and this is defined by their postal code or place of residence. In places where strict elementary school attendance zones are maintained, your school catchment area can determine the quality of your education. This is what might be called “postal code education” (Mills, 2015a; Bennett, 2018). Where school boundaries are rigidly enforced, particularly in disadvantaged school communities, it becomes the iron law of public education.

School system leaders tend to be reticent about disclosing school-by-school student achievement results. There is a fine line between identifying struggling schools and labelling them. “We identify schools and where they are on the improvement journey,” says Elwin LeRoux, Halifax’s regional director of education. “Yet we are careful not to ‘label’ some schools in ways that may carry negative connotations and influence student attitudes” (LeRoux, 2018a).

School-by-School Comparative Analysis – What Can Be Learned

Comparing and ranking schools on the basis of student test scores is a controversial practice, but it remains one of the few ways we can assess how our school systems are actually performing. Critics of school rankings maintain that they place undue emphasis on academic achievement, focus mostly on literacy and mathematics, and can have a detrimental effect on chronically low-performing schools (Raptis, 2012a; *People for Education*, 2013). Defenders of school comparisons contend that education is a public service and parents have a right to know how their students and schools are performing (Cowley, 2016). Mapping the school results against household family income helps us to see how schools rank in relation to socio-economic factors (Alphonso and Grant, 2013a). Such information is not only quick and easy to understand, but very helpful in ensuring that parents are better informed and more effective advocates for school improvement (Cowley, 2016).



Ranking schools is not an exact science, especially when we are dependent upon publicly accessible provincial and school district data. We must be cognizant of the limitations of such studies, even when the results are presented in a socio-economic context. Test score rankings do not consider how well schools do beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills. Rankings are, however, the one publicly accessible and reasonably reliable means of assessing the quality of education (Alphonso and Grant, 2013b; Pekoskie, 2014a). In this study, comparing schools is the means to a more significant end – school improvement. This research report tackles the biggest challenge of all – finding viable policy responses to foster high achievement while reducing glaring inequities.

No child's future should be determined by their postal code, but there is strong evidence that it matters. Real estate agents are quick to point out "preferred school districts" and new families tend to move onto streets where they feel comfortable (Davis, 2016; Elgart, 2016). School location or postal code is one of the critical factors influencing student success and research confirms that it contributes to inequality in student achievement (Willms, 2003; Brownell *et al.*, 2006; Pekoskie, 2014b; Owens, 2018).

What matters is how a school district identifies and responds to struggling schools. Accepting the socio-economic dictates or ignoring the stark realities is not good enough because it only serves to reinforce ingrained assumptions. It also contributes to lowered academic expectations, and can adversely influence school leadership, student behaviour standards, teacher attitudes, and parent-school relations (Barr and Parrett, 2007). While there are risks in comparing school performance, parents and the public are entitled to know more about how students are performing in relation to socio-economic factors influencing their success (AIMS Map Series, 2018a; Environics, 2018a).

The Case Study – The Halifax Regional School System

The impact of postal code education is ripe for re-examination and Atlantic Canada's largest school system, the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (formerly the Halifax Regional Board of Education) provides a useful lens through which to tackle the whole question. Student achievement results from 2008-2009 to the near present are published in school-by-school community reports (HRBE, 2009; HRCE, 2018a) and provide clear evidence of how schools are performing in Halifax Region, the flagship district in Nova Scotia.

The HRCE (2018b) enrolls 47,770 students in 135 schools. Former superintendent Carole Olsen introduced the existing accountability system in 2008-2009 along with a new "Good Schools to Great Schools" mission that set a far more specific



goal: “Every student will learn; every school will improve” within five years (HRSB Superintendent’s Report, 2009a). Following the release of board-wide data, the HRSB produced school-by-school accountability reports, and made them available to the school advisory councils (SACs), and to all parents in each school (CBC News NS, 2009). School-by-school reporting was critical to that whole project. “Knowing how each school is doing is the first important step in making sure resources and support reach the schools – and the students – that need them the most,” Olsen declared (HRSB Superintendent’s Report, 2009b).

The school year 2008-2009 provided the benchmark, not only for the board, but for this research report taking stock of student achievement and school-by-school performance over the past decade. The first set of student results in the two core competencies, reading and math, demonstrated that HRSB student scores were comparable to other Canadian school systems, but there was room for improvement. In Grade 2 reading, the system-wide target was that 77 percent of all students would meet established board standards. Only 25 out of some 91 schools (27.5 percent) met or exceeded the established target. While Grade 2 and Grade 5 mathematics students performed better, problems surfaced at the Grade 8 level where two out of three schools (67.5 percent) failed to meet the HRSB standard, struggling with measurement, whole number operations, and problem-solving (HRSB Superintendent’s Report, 2009c, 4-7).

Schools in the Halifax system may have exceeded initial public expectations, but by the 2013 target year the vast majority of struggling schools fell far short of moving from good schools to great schools (HRSB Superintendent’s Report, 2011). Switching to system-wide data reporting in 2011 made it next to impossible to properly assess improvement. In September 2012, Olsen was appointed deputy minister of education for Nova Scotia and Elwin LeRoux, a 24-year board veteran, succeeded her (Arnenburg, 2012; *Cape Breton Post*, 2013). The robust HRSB commitment to school-by-school improvement and demonstrably improved standards in reading and mathematics faltered. The school community reports, appended routinely as PDFs to school websites, attracted little attention (HRCE, 2018c).

The “Good Schools to Great Schools” initiative had failed to work miracles. A May 2014 report to the board put it bluntly: “A large achievement gap exists between overall board results and those students who live in poverty.” Twenty of the board’s 84 elementary schools were identified as struggling and designated as “priority schools” requiring more attention, enhanced resources, and extra support programs to close the student achievement gap (HRSB Report, November 2016; Tomie, 2018).

The focus changed when the 2017-2018 provincial results in Grade 6 math and literacy revealed that struggling students not only lived in poverty, but came disproportionately from marginalized communities (HRSB Report, March 2018).



Students of African descent were identified as underperforming, particularly in Grade 6 mathematics, where scores dropped two percent, leaving less than half (49 percent) meeting provincial standards. A school improvement project focused on lower socio-economic schools evolved into one addressing differences along ethno-racial lines. A whole new initiative driven by what was known as “culturally responsive” teaching and learning superseded school-by-school improvement (HRSB Board Report, 2017).

Comparing school-by-school performance over the past decade runs smack up against socio-economic inequalities and the reality of “postal code education”, raises critical questions, and yields some startling results. Raising achievement levels while reducing glaring inequities is the biggest challenge of all and one worthy of our attention in this study.



High-Performing Schools – Weighing the Advantages

Tall poppies and undernourished plants stand out in the garden. The same is true for high-performing schools and struggling ones – and the HRCE system is no exception. Prying that information away from school authorities can be a formidable challenge, even through the time-consuming, formal freedom-of-information access process. Senior district staff publish individual school results, but studiously avoid comparing schools, claiming that it is “unfair and misleading” to compare them based only on academic achievement scores (Raptis, 2012b; LeRoux, 2018b). Active and engaged parents are quick to find student and school performance data posted on websites and shared among educators. They also know that the established benchmark is the percentage of students “meeting expectation”, usually defined as the established board or provincial standard of competence (Nova Scotia PLANS, 2015-2016).

With few exceptions, students attending elementary schools in Halifax’s most affluent districts outperform all others in achievement. Our study confirmed this common assumption by comparing student test scores in HRSB’s benchmark year, 2008-2009, with those in 2015-2016, eight years later (HRSB School Reports, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016).

Three of the top five performing Halifax elementary schools – Sir Charles Tupper, LeMarchant-St. Thomas, and Inglis Street – are located in the city’s affluent South End, all close to the downtown campuses of two universities, Dalhousie and Saint Mary’s. In all three schools, over 92 percent of all students in Grades 3 to 6 met or exceeded established standards in reading and mathematics (Tables 1 and 2).

LeMarchant-St. Thomas is essentially a magnet school, offering French immersion programming attractive to upwardly mobile, university-educated parents. It competes with three of Nova Scotia’s best-known independent private schools, Halifax Grammar School, Sacred Heart School /Fountain Academy, and Armbrae Academy, all located in neighbourhoods populated by highly paid professionals in the health care and university sectors (Bennett, 2009; Environics, 2018b).

The top 10 schools out of 95 elementary school programs, ranked on the reading and math scores of their students, were located in the South End, two Dartmouth suburbs (Colby Village and Portland Estates), northern exurbs, (Waverley and Fall River), and in old Dartmouth (Crichton Park and Hawthorn). Two other schools where students perform exceedingly well are in the city’s western outer suburbs – Shatford Memorial in Hubbards and Kingswood in Hammonds Plains (mathematics). Students are attracted to the tiny primary-to-Grade 6 Hubbards School of 80 students by the



opportunity to qualify for Shatford Memorial Trust scholarships, averaging \$275,000 a year, which are awarded to graduates upon entrance to university or college. Schools in Bedford, a fast-growing suburb popular with young families and with pockets of high-income enclaves, finished just outside the top 10 in Grades 3 to 6 reading. Crowded schools, larger classes, and long bus rides may well explain the lower than anticipated student test scores.

**Table 1: High-Achievement Elementary Schools – Reading
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016**

Name of School (Rank)	Reading Grade 3 2008-09	Reading Grade 6 2008-09	Reading Grade 3 2015-16	Reading Grade 6 2015-16	Total Score (400)	Average Meeting Standard
LeMarchant-St. Thomas (1)	100	94	89	92	375	93.8
Colby Village (2 Tie)	100	97	79	92	368	92.0
Sir Charles Tupper (2 Tie)	97	94	83	94	368	92.0
Inglis Street (3)	100	100	77	88	365	91.3
Waverley Memorial (4)	100	96	82	86	364	91.0
Portland Estates (5)	91	94	84	89	358	89.5
Shatford Memorial (6)	100	100	75	82	357	89.3
Bel Ayr Elementary (7)	95	94	80	87	356	89.0
Crichton Park (8 Tie)	82	97	80	95	354	88.5
St. Stephen's (8 Tie)	90	85	77	100	354+	88.5
Ash Lee Jefferson (9)	89	93	84	86	352	88.0
Hawthorn (10 Tie)	87	100	77	85	349	87.3
Smokey Drive (10 Tie)	87	98	76	NR	261 (3)	87.0
Basinview Drive (11 Tie)	89	100	68	81	347	86.8
Bedford South (11 Tie)	93	96	79	79	347	86.8



**Table 2: High-Achievement Elementary Schools – Mathematics
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016**

Name of School (Rank)	Math Grade 3 2008-09	Math Grade 5 2008-09	Math Grade 4 2015-16	Math Grade 6 2015-16	Total Score (400)	Average Meeting Standard
Sir Charles Tupper (1)	97	100	94	98	389	97.3
Inglis Street (2)	93	100	91	96	380	95.0
LeMarchant-St. Thomas (3)	97	100	94	86	377	94.3
Portland Estates (4)	86	98	96	93	373	93.3
Kingswood Elementary (5)	90	94	88	85	357	89.2
Bedford South (6)	85	98	83	89	355	88.8
Colby Village (7)	76	100	89	88	353	88.3
Basinview Drive (8 Tie)	94	85	88	82	349	87.3
Crichton Park (8 Tie)	84	90	83	92	349	87.3
Ash Lee Jefferson (9)	86	95	83	81	345	86.3
Waverley Memorial (10)	76	88	87	90	341+	85.3
Bel Ayr Elementary (11)	94	100	55	90	339 -	84.8
Smokey Drive (12)	71	93	89	NR	253 (3)	84.3

Applying postal code analysis to assess the composition of Halifax’s top-performing elementary schools confirms popular preconceptions. Boring deeper using Environics Analytics PRISM5 software, the city’s highest achievement schools prove to reflect fairly accurately their urban lifestyle segmentation profiles based upon postal code location (Environics, 2014; Mills, 2015b). Students attending the top 10 schools come mostly from higher income segments dubbed “suburban success” (i.e., Halifax Central JHS and Inglis Street Elementary). These segments are predominantly composed of the established professional class with 2016 average household incomes of \$193,000 and include the exurban wonderland (Colby Village and Kingswood), composed of prosperous professional families with incomes in the \$140,000 range. Two schools in modest, middle-income rural communities – Shatford Memorial and Waverley Memorial, outside the Peninsula in postal districts averaging household incomes of \$84,000 and \$64,000 – bucked the trend. This suggests that other factors, including school climate, program excellence, or teacher quality were at play in those school communities (Environics, 2018c; AIMS Map Series, 2018b).





Figure 1:
High Performing Schools, City of Halifax, 2008-09 to 2015-16.
 A screen shot taken from the interactive AIMS map showing the location of top performing elementary schools in relation to main household income data. Student performance was highest in school attendance zones where mean household income exceeded the Statistics Canada 2018 benchmark of \$85,331. You can access the results for individual schools by clicking on the school in the online interactive version. Shown here are the results for Inglis Street Elementary, ranked second in Mathematics. Visit [AIMS.ca/PostalCodeEducation](https://aims.ca/PostalCodeEducation) for the full interactive version.



Figure 2:
High Priority Schools, Halifax and Region, 2008-09 and 2015-16.
 A screen shot taken from the interactive AIMS map showing the location of struggling elementary schools in relation to main household income data. Student performance was lowest in school attendance zones where mean household income fell below the Statistics Canada 2018 benchmark of \$57,936. You can access the results for individual schools by clicking on the school in the online interactive version. Visit [AIMS.ca/PostalCodeEducation](https://aims.ca/PostalCodeEducation) for the full interactive version.



Struggling Schools – High Priorities for Action

In 2014 LeRoux and senior staff identified 20 of the HRCE’s 95 elementary schools (21.5 percent) as priority schools where students “consistently perform below provincial standards” in literacy and mathematics. The 10 lowest performing schools, comparing 2008-2009 and 2015-2016 student results, confirm the HRSB’s 2014 study findings that the struggling elementary schools tend to be located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in identifiable low-income pockets of Halifax Region.

The most acute high-priority schools are located in North End Halifax (Joseph Howe), North Preston (Nelson Whynder), Lake Echo/East Preston (Bell Park Centre), Dartmouth North (Harbour View), Spryfield (Chebucto Heights), and Dartmouth/Woodside (Dartmouth South Academy). Students attending schools in these zones score below 50 percent of the provincial standard in mathematics and less than 60 percent in reading (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: High-Priority Elementary Schools – Reading
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016

Name of School (Rank)	Reading Grade 3 2008-09	Reading Grade 6 2008-09	Reading Grade 3 2015-16	Reading Grade 6 2015-16	Total Score (Trend)	Average Meeting Standard
Joseph Howe (1)	35	43	20	45	143-	35.8
Nelson Whynder (2)	50	100	11	NR	161 (3) -	53.6
Bell Park Centre (3)	54	75	33	62	224-	56.0
Harbour View (4)	83	48	37	58	226 -	56.5
Dartmouth South* (5)	66	81	52	35	234 -	58.5
John MacNeil (6)	53	67	50	71	241	60.2
Chebucto Heights (7)	69	89	22	63	243 -	60.8
George Bissett (8)	50	77	69	53	249	62.3
Rockingstone Heights (9)	67	80	41	64	252-	63.0
St. Joseph’s-A. MacKay (10)	75	91	18	73	257 -	64.3
Bicentennial School (10)	55	86	43	73	257	64.3
William King (11)	64	88	65	63	273	68.3
Colonel John Stuart (12 Tie)	59	80	68	70	277-	69.3
Sycamore Lane (12 Tie)	69	76	65	NR	210 (3)	70.0



**Table 4: High-Priority Elementary Schools – Mathematics
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016**

Name of School (Rank)	Math Grade 3 2008-09	Math Grade 6 2008-09	Math Grade 4 2015-16	Math Grade 6 2015-16	Total Score (Trend)	Average Meeting Standard
Nelson Whynder (1)	43	62	17	NR	122 (3) -	40.6
Joseph Howe (2)	0	78	38	18	134 -	44.6
Harbour View (3)	53	83	38	12	186 -	46.5
Bicentennial School (4)	46	62	44	47	199-	49.8
Chebucto Heights (5)	33	85	39	46	203-	50.8
Bell Park Centre (6)	53	56	50	45	204-	51.0
Central Spryfield (7)	43	78	56	35	212-	53.0
Dartmouth South* (8 Tie)	27	65	85	45	222	55.5
Rockingstone Heights (8 T)	73	58	53	38	222-	55.5
George Bissett (9)	62	65	68	52	247	61.8
Colonel John Stuart (10)	46	70	90	50	256	64.0
Admiral Westphal (11)	73	92	63	29	257-	64.3
Duc d’Anville (12)	81	70	52	60	263-	65.8

Most of the struggling schools were located in urban, mostly rental-housing postal code districts or in aging suburbs exemplifying the “suburbanization” of poverty (Klenavic, 2013). Community development advocates describe Harbour View, a North Dartmouth School, as “the Priority School of all Priority Schools.” Over 85 percent of the dwelling units in the census tract where Harbour View is located, for example, consist of low-rental private market housing, much of it built since the 1970s. Student misbehaviour regularly disrupts learning at Harbour View and, according to one service provider, “the HRSB Caring Schools program doesn’t work in such schools.” In the North End district where Joseph Howe School is located, the average household income was \$44,190, indicating that families are mostly drawn from the lowest two income groups (Environics, 2018d). On the suburban fringe, off the Halifax Peninsula, the low-performing schools tend to be situated in lower income school attendance areas like Spryfield, Woodside, and Preston (AIMS Map Series, 2018c).

“Breaking the cycle of poverty has to be at the center of the agenda,” says Betty Watson-Borg, project leader at Between the Bridges, a Dartmouth North community development initiative. “Student success is one of the cornerstones, but it won’t happen without the collective impact of everyone working together.”



Most Improved Schools – Lighting the Way

School improvement in metropolitan school systems can be a herculean challenge – and it has defeated wave after wave of reform initiatives. School leadership, teacher effectiveness, and program excellence can make a difference, but so can demographic shifts affecting the school’s student composition.

Olsen’s “Good Schools to Great Schools” initiative attempted to raise achievement standards. Its successor, the Priority Schools project, targets 20 schools falling short of provincial standards and provides enhanced learning supports aimed at closing the achievement gap. The greatest gains in student achievement, based upon our analysis, were not registered by schools targeted for classroom learning supports, but rather by schools benefiting from either accelerated academic programs or community-based student support programs. Shifts in the socio-economic composition of attendance area neighbourhoods were also significant contributors to improved student test scores (Prouse et al., 2014a).

Biggest Gain in Achievement – St. Stephen’s Elementary School

The most improved Halifax elementary school from 2008-2009 to 2015-2016, based upon student scores, was St. Stephen’s Elementary, a small P-6 school with a stable enrolment of 200 students located in the Halifax North End. In 2008-2009, 85 percent of St. Stephen’s Grade 6 students met reading expectations; six years later, everyone in the class made the grade. In the case of Grade 6 mathematics, St. Stephen’s student scores rose from 69 percent to 89 percent, a 20-percentage point gain.

A combination of factors drives student success at St. Stephen’s – school climate, teaching, and class composition. Demographic shifts and gentrification since 2005 have turned the neighbourhood into a preferred school attendance area for younger urban professionals with average household incomes hovering around \$120,000. It is a prime example of the impact gentrification is having on the North End of the Halifax Peninsula (Ley, 1985; Prouse *et al.*, 2014b). The arrival of upwardly mobile residents has displaced older, lower income individuals. The changes in social class composition accompanying gentrification also help explain improved scores at Highland Park JHS.

In addition to St. Stephen’s, a half-dozen or more Halifax elementary schools show marked improvement in mathematics and reading (Table 5). In Grades 3 to 6 mathematics, the most improved schools were: Waverley Memorial (Waverley), Shatford Memorial (Hubbards), and Crichton Park (Old Dartmouth). Smokey Drive Elementary – a newer P-5 Lower Sackville school with 250 students – has produced better results in Grade 4 mathematics, judging from recent scores. Aside from St. Stephen’s, the most improved in Grades 3 to 6 reading were Dutch Settlement



(Rural HRM) and St. Catherine’s (early French immersion, Halifax West). Students at Dartmouth’s Crichton Park School achieved sound results in both mathematics and reading.

**Table 5: Most Improved Elementary Schools, Mathematics and Reading
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016**

Name of School (Rank)	Math Grade 3 2008-09	Math Grade 6 2008-09	Math Grade 4 2015-16	Math Grade 6 2015-16	Shift in Total Score	Trend Grade 6/ Overall
Waverley Memorial	76	88	87	90	164/177	+2/+13
Shatford Memorial	67	NR	100	73	134/173	NR/+39
Crichton Park	84	90	83	92	174/175	+2/+1
St. Stephen’s Elementary	93	69	67	89	162/156	+20/-6
Smokey Drive	71	93	89	NA	169/NA	+ NR

Name of School (Rank)	Reading Grade 3 2008-09	Reading Grade 6 2008-09	Reading Grade 3 2015-16	Reading Grade 6 2015-16	Shift in Total Score	Trend Grade 6/ Overall
St. Stephen’s Elementary	90	85	79	100	175/ 179	+15/ + 4
Dutch Settlement	64	67	82	57	131/139	-10/ + 8
Crichton Park	82	97	80	95	179/175	-2/-4
Sir Charles Tupper	97	94	83	94	191/177	Even/-14
St. Catherine’s	69	89	89	76	158/ 165	-13/ +7

Bright Spots in Higher Grades

Nine of Halifax Region’s 36 junior high-level programs are trending toward improvement in either reading or mathematics (Table 6). One South End school underperforming in 2008-2009 was Gorsebrook JHS (Halifax South End). Since then, student achievement levels have rebounded in both Grade 8 mathematics (+12) and Grade 8 reading (+2).

From 2008-2009 to 2015-2016, Grade 8 reading scores at Oxford School rose dramatically from a low of 54 percent meeting the standard to 76 percent eight years later, a gain of 22 percentage points. In the Halifax North End, reading scores also rose 16 points at Highland Park JHS, located not far from its fast-improving feeder school, St. Stephen’s. Grade 8 students at A. J. Smeltzer (Lower Sackville) and Gorsebrook JHS registered less dramatic improvements.



**Table 6: Most Improved Junior High Schools, Mathematics and Reading
Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2008-2009 and 2015-2016**

Name of School	Math Grade 8 2008-09	Math Grade 8 2015-16	Total Score	Average Meeting Standard	Trend
Herring Cove JHS	66	84	150	75.0	+18
Gorsebrook JHS	75	87	162	81.0	+12
Eric Graves Memorial JHS	75	81	156	78.0	+6
Oyster Pond Academy	65	67	132	66.0	+2
Eastern Passage Centre	56	57	113	56.5	+1

Name of School	Reading Grade 8 2008-09	Reading Grade 8 2015-16	Total Score	Average Meeting Standard	Trend
Oxford School	54	76	130	65.0	+22
Highland Park JHS	62	78	140	70.0	+16
A. J. Smeltzer JHS	57	64	121	60.5	+7
Gorsebrook JHS	83	85	168	84.0	+2



Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap – Some Viable Policy Options

The goal of transforming “Good Schools into Great Schools” set the strategic direction and drove resource allocation, primarily into raising achievement standards and closing the gap for students in more disadvantaged school communities. The stated vision was crystal clear: “By 2013, every school in the Halifax Regional School Board will demonstrate improvement in student learning. Every student can learn. Every student will learn” (HRSB Superintendent’s Report, 2008d). A comparative analysis of changes in student achievement, school-by-school, starting in that 2008-2009 benchmark year and extending to the end of 2015-2016 demonstrates that not only did the HRSB fall short of its overarching strategic goal, but dozens of elementary schools continued to falter in achievement. Educational inequalities also remained resistant to school improvement initiatives (HRSB Report, 2014).

The school district’s response to the stubborn problem of student underperformance was consistent with the conventional approach – providing targeted learning supports and more resources to address the achievement gap and working toward alleviating the inequalities. The unstated assumption prioritized rectifying deficits rather than raising standards across the board. Grade inflation and rising high school graduation rates would take care of concerns about lagging achievement at higher grade levels (HRBE, 2008-2009; HRSB, 2015-2016).

The Gap – From the Outside Looking In

Halifax school improvement efforts look different when viewed from outside the system. Mark Fraser, former chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, worked on the city’s Poverty Reduction project and came away with the distinct impression that the HRSB leadership was “treading water”. “Getting on top of operational issues was taking priority over tackling longer-term issues related to charting the way forward,” Fraser says. His successor, Cynthia Dorrington of Vale and Associates, is concerned about students being left behind. “From an employer’s perspective,” she says, “we continue to have concerns about the levels of literacy and numeracy.”

Community service agencies see first-hand what’s going on in and around the schools, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Alison O’Handley, executive director of Dartmouth Learning Network, Darren Hirtle, HRM community developer in North Dartmouth, and Betty Watson-Borg all express similar concerns



Problems can go unattended to because of the impregnable silos separating schools from community-based services. Promising after-school tutoring programs end up shoe-horned into regular school hours. Investing so heavily in staff training and resources is problematic in schools with too much staff turnover. Transient school populations make teaching a challenge and aggravate the turnover problem prevalent among teachers in struggling schools (Arnold, 2018; O’Handley, 2018; Watson-Borg, 2018).

Three Possible Turnaround Strategies

Confronted with sliding educational standards and stark achievement gaps, provincial and district education authorities tend to adopt one of three strategies. They are:

1. The Student Challenge Model

Challenging students starts at the top and requires a collective effort. Striving for excellence raises everyone’s boat in the school system. It requires a laser-like focus on improving school climate, setting higher curriculum expectations, providing the foundational skills, ensuring teacher effectiveness, and better preparing students for post-graduate programs. Collective efficacy is achieved when principals and teachers firmly believe and have confidence in their capacity to advance achievement at all levels (Donohoo, 2017). The HRSB “Good Schools to Great Schools” initiative and offering the IB Diploma Program (Nova Scotia, IB, 2018) province-wide are two prime examples.

2. The Learning Supports Model

Achieving educational equity is the priority and that means recognizing and successfully addressing learning deficits and systemic inequities. School leadership is charged with developing a support model to improve achievement by closing the gaps in literacy and mathematics. School support teams bring together system resources to tackle the deficits, using specialized support personnel such as literacy coaches and math mentors (Adelman and Taylor, 2006). This conventional strategy is best exemplified in the HRSB “Priority Schools” initiative which now focuses on training educators to be more “culturally responsive” in their teaching practice (McLeod, 2015).

3. The Community Reconstruction Model

More radical community-based strategies are in order when conventional learning support strategies fall short. Struggling schools are identified, with most situated in postal code districts populated by impoverished families and children. Turning around such schools requires a total reclamation effort engaging not only the principal and teachers, but parents, community groups, and social service agencies (Bennett, 2014).



The best-known example of the educational reconstruction model is Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, an urban, school-centered, community renewal project which included self-governing Success Academies (Tough, 2009; Mathews, 2009). The highly acclaimed Pathways to Education Program, initiated in Toronto’s Regent Park, provides community-based after-school programming in zones with the highest high school dropout rates (Chebucto Community Connections, 2018; Mackenzie, 2018).



Figure 3:
Spryfield School Attendance Zone, Pathways to Education Halifax, 2018.

A map showing the Spryfield area schools in the identified attendance zone where the high school dropout rate exceeded 50 percent in 2011. Since the advent of Pathways to Education graduation rates have risen and so have student scores in Mathematics at J.L. Ilsley High School and local junior highs. Visit [AIMS.ca/PostalCodeEducation](https://www.aims.ca/PostalCodeEducation) for the school-by-school student performance results.



Key Recommendations

Accepting the dictates of postal code education will never be good enough for Halifax schools. Here are a few recommendations to both raise student achievement and address the stubborn inequities:

1: Full Disclosure of Student Performance Data, School-by-School

The public has a right to know how its schools are performing. Recognize that informed parents can be allies in school improvement.

2: Raise Student Achievement Standards

Growing student achievement should be a higher priority system-wide, and that likely means abandoning the current focus on social promotion and raising graduation rates. A few steps in that direction would include:

- Completely revamping the early reading and mathematics programs by running control trials and introducing evidence-based alternatives such as Halifax Learning’s “Spell Read” and John Mighton’s JUMP Math;
- Reviewing all Grade 7 to 9 students on Individual Learning Programs (IPPs) and ensure that they are properly placed to achieve student success;
- Developing a student rewards program recognizing excellence, and student and school improvement;
- Phasing out current student evaluation policies that undermine academic standards and inadvertently weaken students’ work ethic, perseverance, and determination to succeed.

3: Establish Education Reconstruction Zones

Identify struggling elementary schools in dire need of improvement and declare their attendance zones to be priority neighbourhoods for educational renewal. Expand the learning supports model to make it part of a broader, community-wide project. Engage active parents and local community groups, and mobilize local enterprises and community services to address the educational inequities. In short, turn priority schools into priority neighbourhoods (USDE, 2018)

4: Develop a School District Version of Pathways to Education

By all accounts, Pathways to Education Spryfield has succeeded in dramatically raising graduation rates in one of Halifax’s most disadvantaged communities.



Instead of waiting for the Toronto-based organization to approve another site, initiate plans to develop community-based programs in the Dartmouth North, the Halifax North End, North Preston, and Woodside. Set a target of raising student grades and reducing the dropout rate in those communities.

5: Embrace a Two-Track Strategy – Educational Excellence and Equity

Develop a much broader, more comprehensive plan to advance educational excellence and equity together, rather than focusing almost exclusively on raising the achievement levels of those schools consistently performing below provincial standards. Improving schools involves raising the bar as well as ministering to the needs of those falling between the cracks.

Children and parents living in poverty and surveyed in 2001 by the U.S.-based Education Trust put it best: “What hurts us more is that you teach us less.” We have to guard against lowering our expectations for disadvantaged students. What is not acceptable, in American researcher Kati Haycock’s words, is to “take students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in school” (Haycock, 2001b).

LeRoux is an optimist by nature and sounds undaunted by the everyday challenges facing the system. Surveying the legacy of the “Good Schools to Great Schools” initiative, he remains determined to stay the course and press on with a more “differentiated approach” tailored to the unique needs of schools across the spectrum. “All of our schools are still expected to improve,” he says, “but they start from different places.” Accepting the dictates of socio-economic factors will never be good enough when there is a better way forward.



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