

Delivered via facsimile (902) 424-0680, original to follow by mail.

11 March, 2005

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Minister

Nova Scotia Department of Education

P.O. Box 578

2021 Brunswick Street

Halifax, NS B3J 2S9

Dear Minister,

RE: Open letter to the Nova Scotia Minister of Education in response to public comments published on March 11, 2005

We read with grave concern the quotations attributed to you in the article on page B7 of today's issue of the Chronicle Herald. The fact that a senior member of government would comment on a piece of complex research without apparently having read it or been properly briefed first is a serious concern to us and has resulted in misleading information being supplied to the people of Nova Scotia.

First, you suggest that we use "10-year-old" data in our latest high school report card. This is incorrect. As the report clearly states, it is based on the performance of our high schools for the school years 2000-2001 through 2002-2003.

Second, the implication that the report card's methodology is flawed because the data is "wanting" is an erroneous statement that we have discussed many times with your department. We use all the outcome data provided by your department, and we add further data from other sources, such as the region's universities and colleges. If we are to take the department's claim seriously that they give us all the available data, then our Report Card is a more complete picture of what happens in our schools than the department itself possesses. If, in fact, the department has other data they have been withholding, we look forward to receiving it to give Nova Scotians an even more faithful portrait of their schools.

Third, you are quoted as having "very serious questions about the methodology." Such a comment is vague, unhelpful and unsubstantiated. In fact, similar comments were made in response to our first report card and on April 4, 2003 we publicly called on the minister of the day to either

substantiate or withdraw those statements. No substantiation was forthcoming, so it is regrettable that you have elected to repeat these statements. We say now as we said then: we invite you either to withdraw, or to substantiate, the statements made.

We would note that your department and the other three departments of education in the region commissioned a study by Dr. Robert Crocker to analyse our high school report card. That report entitled “Analysis of Grading our Future” was released in 2003 by the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation. In it, your own expert confirmed that our methodology was “commonly applied in prediction studies and is statistically valid for the purpose at hand”. Additionally, he repeated our criticism of the paucity of data available and called on the provinces to expand the number and accessibility of publicly available indicators of school performance.

The conclusions in Dr. Crocker’s study came as no surprise to us as our methodology had been thoroughly peer reviewed before publication in adherence to AIMS’ strict internal quality controls and was characterized as “innovative and insightful” by a series of independent experts. According to Dr. Mark Holmes, one of Canada’s leading experts on school accountability, our report card “makes the best use possible of the available data”.

Fourth, you are quoted as saying that it is “unreasonable to compare small schools to large schools”. As our report makes clear, we explicitly control for this and other differences among schools before calculating their grades. The size of the school, its ratio of students to educators, and the nature of the community it serves are all used to predict an expected level of performance. The effectiveness of this approach has no better proof than the fact that small and large schools are scattered throughout the rankings across the region – measurable success is possible regardless of the size of the school which you attend.

Fifth and finally, you suggest schools have “bounced around” in the rankings. You then say this demonstrates a “lack of consistency” in the report card. In this year’s report card 83% of Nova Scotia schools are within one grade level of where they were last year. In our second report card that number was 94%. For the two schools you specifically referred to, neither went up or down by more than 2 grade points and both have consistently performed at the B+ level, a fact easily discovered by referring to the comparative overall grade provided rather than just the numerical ranking.

This grade consistency has been achieved despite the inclusion each year of new measures we have been able to secure in an effort to deliver as complete a picture as possible about individual school performance. This consistency is one more validation of the soundness of our methodology and demonstrates the significant value our approach can deliver if only the level and value of data produced by your department can be improved.

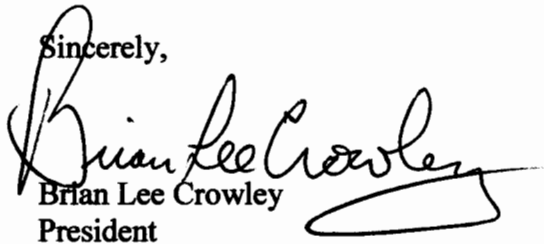
The release of good quality data about schools by departments of education is not uncharted territory; both New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador, to name just two, make a great deal of information available about their schools in readily accessible, easily comparable public documents. In fact, Nova Scotia has done the same with the elementary literacy results, proving that this level of reporting is possible in this province. We have requested a similar breakdown of the results of the new province-wide assessments in junior high mathematics. We are still

waiting. Because of that, the people of Nova Scotia, unlike those in Newfoundland and New Brunswick, have no publicly available, universally comparable indicator of the performance of their middle schools. Therefore, that control variable was not used for this province for this report card.

In response to our very first report card, your department issued a media release that said, "The Department of Education does not have school-by-school results. It will start to provide this level of information next year" (March 6, 2003 10:08 am). Over two years later, the people of Nova Scotia are still waiting for this information. We at AIMS have kept our promises with respect to fair, objective and documented analysis of school performance in Nova Scotia and we will be able to do more when you honour your commitment to the province's parents, students and taxpayers.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Nova Scotia Department of Education to make the best possible set of educational indicators available to the people of Nova Scotia in order to improve the quality of our children's education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Lee Crowley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Brian Lee Crowley
President