



Council of Canadians
St. John's Chapter

March 20, 2017

To: the Minister of Education, Mr. Dale Kirby
Members of the Task Force on Education,

On February 28th, on behalf of two civil society groups, Democracy Alert and the local chapter of the Council of Canadians, I presented to the Task Force at Queen Elizabeth High School. I'd like to respond to your invitation to participants to provide a more detailed written submission

Our groups' focus is the high school curriculum and high school culture, but our particular concern in this submission is with citizenship education. This matter impacts on all the Task Force's priorities, but it is unacknowledged in your mandate. We treat its importance in three sections below

- Curriculum
- School culture
- Nova Scotia's solution

Educating for Life: the Senior High Social Studies Curriculum

All courses relating to political analysis and democracy were removed from the NL curriculum in the late 1990s. The consequences came home to roost in the 2011 federal election when only 29.5% of our province's young people under 25 voted. In 2015 the turn-out was better, but this was a consequence of an unusually energetic, non-partisan, campaign focused on first-time voters.

Voting is the most basic index or barometer of a longer-term engagement with democracy. A 29.5% voter turnout suggests that this engagement is in deep trouble. Our two groups have argued that the best place to address this democratic deficit is in the school system.

The Department of Education has gone a considerable way to acknowledging this point. In Level 1 it has committed to introducing a single credit democracy course and a single credit economy course which will include a political component. In both Levels 2 and 3 there will be new social studies courses which also have a sizable political education component. The plan is to make at least three of these new courses compulsory to graduate. This is an important requirement given

the tendency of students over the years to opt for the easiest social studies courses. We appreciate the thought and energy that the Department of Education has put into the process.

It is the perspective of the Faculty of Education that now concerns us. Nowhere in its summary recommendations of their 2016 report on the status of education, *Better Together*, do its authors indicate a concern to innovate the training of teachers so they might guide and support students in developing into mature decision-makers through voting and other forms of democratic association. Civic education was noticeably absent in the report's 32 recommendations.

Educating for Political Awareness: What is lacking in the school curriculum, and why?

In her book *Undoing the Demos*, Berkeley University's Wendy Brown makes a point well-taken by educators. The long-standing concept of democratic citizenry has been undermined in the last forty years by the diminution of opportunities to talk in a considered way about how politics and economics are connected by values and by collective and personal decisions that have ethical components.

Values and ethics are – or should be -- at the core of the social studies curriculum. When students are equipped with a fuller understanding of political, economic, and historical components of citizenship they will assume more responsibility for what they should be seeing as their own futures. Ignorance of these issues makes our young people vulnerable to “false news”: the education system should not be complicit.

How has the importance of civic engagement been minimized?

- Nowhere, in the social studies curriculum of the last 20 years, have there been opportunities to discuss and analyze economic power. Courses entitled Consumer Affairs, Career Education and Enterprise Education did not deliver an economic education, and the simplistic “Canadian Economy” has also fallen short. All of these courses, which prioritize individualism and individual effort, educate students to be components *in* an economy rather than fully participating, knowledgeable members *of* the democratic society that is entwined with that economy. There's a “disconnect” here.
- It is easy, perhaps too easy, to argue that improving the math and science skills of *all* students will give Canada a competitive edge in the global economy. But this logic privileges mechanical over holistic thinking. Is it worth it? The reality is that the great majority of today's students will never need more than Grade 8 or Grade 9 algebra for the kinds of jobs that the Canadian economy will provide.

- An outcomes-based education model is still used here ten years after Australia's teachers convinced policy-makers of the errors of a system that stressed excessive amounts of information. Like the Australian teachers, we believe that time-consuming outcomes based routines are squeezing out the practice of discussion and debate, to the detriment of critical thinking.

The Missing Ingredient - School Culture

Our two groups believe that one of the most effective ways of improving schooling is through reinvigorating and reinforcing the concept of school as community.

The Finns have understood better than anyone the importance of focusing on community. Finnish educators place little value on our assessment and achievement models and yet their students manage to outperform us on international testing.

Democracy Alert and the NL Council of Canadians understand that we cannot embrace the Finnish model. It's just too different. However there are small, incremental, steps that can be taken to strengthen community in school culture.

For example, Democracy Alert has developed a resource that uses school announcements at the high school level to strengthen the concept of the school as a community, while at the same time promoting awareness of societal issues across a variety of themes. You can [listen to an example](#) of how our idea might play out, and view our draft [resource package](#) on Democracy Alert's website.

Our point in alluding to the above is that there are sometimes very simple, easy-to-implement concepts that can be built into our existing school system. In 2015 we took these ideas and others to both the NLTA and the School Board. Discussions were cordial. However, unlike our curriculum initiatives with the Department of Education, the take-up has been slower.

But, might the timing be right now to explore ways of strengthening school culture? Do not the notions of school culture and civic engagement go hand in hand?

Nova Scotia's Solution

Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education 2015 is in circulation as a possible model to follow. There may be some merits in it. We particularly liked the initiative that came from a minority group (Conseil Scolaire Acadien) that would see schools opened up for community use.

However, were the provisions of the Nova Scotia plan to be adopted wholesale, we think education in Newfoundland and Labrador would suffer.

Metrics would count for more and more, and within those metrics real learning would be stifled

with the emphasis falling on the assessment of mathematics and literacy skills, in particular. This would soon impoverish the curriculum, and inhibit innovative classroom practice.

The greater emphasis on IPPs and other tools to address problems related to inclusive education will put constraints on already limited resources.

Curriculum developments favouring competitive and individualistic aspirations would continue to dwarf the importance of community responsibilities and working together to address societal problems. In a report that made multiple references to mathematical skills and strengthening business related courses and connections, we noted that there was only one brief reference to the implementation of a course in 21st century citizenship at the grade 10 level. It surely does not bode well for a caring society that this course seems to have been tagged on as an afterthought.

Conclusions

There are no easy solutions to the educational challenges our province faces, but we would be remiss if we did not say something about inclusive education, since it has dominated presentations to the Task Force and to the earlier NLTA, Faculty of Education consultation process. One concern is that already exhausted teachers and administrators will be asked to do a better job of addressing the individual needs of students. Band aid solutions will be applied where the need is deemed greatest. This hasn't worked in Nova Scotia and it won't work in our province!

Our second concern is that the overwhelming challenges of delivering inclusive education effectively and compassionately will take precedence over responding to some other alarming trends that are emerging in our society – trends that need to be addressed.

The 21st century has, so far, been characterized by increasing inequality and lower voter participation – both indicators of decreasing democratic participation. However, perhaps even more alarming, the 2016 [Foa and Mounk report](#) on world values points to a substantial growth in the appeal of extremist political solutions, particularly among young people.

In the fall of 2016, the European Parliament initiated [Teaching Common Values](#), a project with the aim of developing an overview and comparison of various national approaches to the teaching of democracy and tolerance. This reinforces the priorities set by the 2016 [European Commission report](#). Clearly, the Europeans are concerned about recent trends. We should be too.

We would urge the task force to say “no” to planning along the lines of Nova Scotia’s business oriented mode and to find something more attuned to the collective culture of our province. More specifically, we believe that Memorial University’s Faculty of Education, the School Boards, the Department of Education, the NLTA, and key teachers and principals, should work cooperatively with the aim of developing strategies for strengthening the concept of community in school

culture. We believe this could be one of the most effective, and one of the most motivating ways of tackling the growing problems our education system faces.

With respect to curriculum, our groups believe it is absolutely essential to reserve and protect space in the school system for discussion and debate on what kind of society and what kind of government we value.

We recognize that the challenges that the Task Force faces in furthering a meaningful and productive direction for our education system are substantial, but we trust our words will not go unheeded.

Marilyn Reid

For

Democracy Alert NL (democracyalertnl.weebly.com)

The Council of Canadians (St. John's chapter)

Cc Deputy Minister Bob Gardiner
Jim Dinn, NLTA President

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