



SUBMISSION TO THE MINISTER'S PANEL ON EDUCATION

June 6, 2014

Presented To: The Honourable Myra A. Freeman, Chair, Minister's Panel on
Education

Who We Are

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a best-practice, business advocacy organization that continuously strives to make Halifax an even more attractive city in which to live, work, and play. Together, the approximately 1,500 member businesses and their roughly 75, 000 employees, act as a single powerful voice to promote local business interests. The volunteer Board of Directors, and Chamber staff, undertake initiatives on behalf of the Chamber's diverse membership.

With origins dating back to 1750, we are recognized as the first Chamber established in North America. The Halifax Chamber is certified to the ISO 9001:2000 international quality standard, the first and only Chamber in North America to receive this accreditation.

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce offers over 100 events annually, countless numbers of opportunities for exposure through member services, advertising, and sponsorship. It also issues Certificates of Origin for those businesses that export internationally.

2013-2018 STRATEGIC PLAN – ASPIRATIONAL SENTENCE AND GOALS

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is committed to enhancing the prosperity of its members and to realizing Halifax's potential to be among the top 3 highest growth city economies in Canada by 2018.

1. To create a positive business environment to be reflected by being among the top 3 highest growth city economies in Canada by 2018.
2. To increase the skilled workforce by 20% from 2012 to 2018.
3. To accelerate prosperity of Chamber members by providing first class networking events, benefit programs, advocacy to governments, education, information and by making connections.

As part of the 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the Halifax Chamber of Commerce created two Task Forces to provide input on the Plan's implementation. The members of the Task Forces are a diverse group of individuals with significant expertise on key policy issues. The Grow and Nurture the Skilled Workforce Task Force played a significant role in the development of this submission.

Introduction

If you were to ask your average business owner in Nova Scotia about their most pressing issues, education likely would not top the list. Taxes, regulations, economic growth, those are the day-to-day issues that occupy our members' minds. So why pay attention to education? What does it have to do with business? The Now or Never Report did a wonderful job reminding all of us that to succeed as a province we will need to think long-term. Education is the foundation of our collective prosperity and is one of the best long-term investments we can make. If we want to be a more successful province two decades from now, we need to pay close attention to the education decisions we make today.

In many ways, Nova Scotia has a good education system. We have many passionate educators, parents place a high priority on education, and we have one of the highest graduation rates in Canada.¹ It would be easy to look at where we are, shrug our shoulders, and say we are doing a good job.

Yet recent evidence has made it absolutely clear: good is just not good enough anymore.

Nova Scotia's school system is facing two critical problems: demographics and student achievement. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2012 Programme for International Assessment (PISA) demonstrated that Nova Scotia's academic achievement has stagnated or declined in reading, science, and mathematics.² The gap between Nova Scotia students and top performing students in Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia is increasingly worrying. The most glaring example is the difference in mathematics scores between Nova Scotia and Quebec. The 39-point difference represents almost a year's worth of learning, according to the OECD, and is a major cause for concern.³ This does not even take into consideration the even larger gap between Nova Scotia and top-performing countries around the world.

On the demographic side, enrolment in Nova Scotia public schools has been declining and there is no indication that this trend will reverse itself. In the 2002-03 school year, enrolment in Nova Scotia was 150,309. By 2016-17, it is projected to fall to 118,638, a decline of 21% over 15 years.⁴ This continued decline will pose serious challenges for school boards, especially those in rural parts of the province.

Given its tremendous influence over how our children grow and develop, education invokes passionate opinions. While our education system has historically performed well, there is strong evidence that we must do even better. The government must help our schools be more innovative by focusing on the outcomes students achieve rather than the processes teachers use. The curriculum must be enhanced to concentrate on fundamental skills and introducing entrepreneurship. Finally, in the education realm, we need to realize that it is more important to spend our money effectively than to worry about how much we are spending overall. The Minister's Panel on Education (the Panel) has been given the opportunity to lay the foundation for our children's success. It is a chance we cannot afford to miss.

System Structure

While many education debates begin with what is taught in the classroom, it is imperative that this Panel does not ignore the structure of the education system as a whole. If we want our students to achieve even greater results, we need to be sure that the education system has the right framework to support their growth.

The Nova Scotia School Boards Association made a good point when it argued in its submission to this Panel that “Innovation in education requires a shift in our approach to accountability – from how things are done to what results are achieved.”⁵ We cannot reasonably ask our schools to teach our students to be flexible and innovative if we do not trust the schools to do the same. Increased autonomy can mean anything from more control over discipline and student assessment, to greater flexibility to choose course offerings and textbooks.⁶

It is important to note that, according to the OECD’s research, autonomy alone is not enough to increase performance. It is equally important that governments combine increased autonomy with clear learning objectives for students, information sharing between schools, and/or a collaborative relationship between teachers and principals to manage schools.⁷ Implementing clear learning objectives would mean thinking carefully about how to analyze and enforce those standards. Nevertheless, reaping the rewards of increased autonomy will require a package of policy reforms.

The school system should also consider using student assessment of teachers in their professional evaluation framework. This practice has become common in Canadian universities and it has been shown to have positive results. If used properly as part of ongoing professional development, it can provide valuable feedback on how teachers are reaching their students.⁸ Furthermore, schools systems that embrace this practice tend to have higher levels of equity (the difference between the 90th and 10th percentiles) in their test scores.⁹

Finally, this Review should answer the following questions:

- Is it effective for teachers and principals to be members of the same union?
- Will a school year that features more frequent but shorter breaks reduce burnout and summer learning loss?
- Can the province do more to develop ‘community hubs’ in our middle and secondary schools?

Curriculum

While it is not the Chamber's role to comment on the specifics of Nova Scotia's curriculum, businesses do have a unique perspective on how well that curriculum is preparing students for the rest of their lives. Most of us would not think to argue with our dentist about how they are filling our cavities, but we would have certain expectations about how their work should hold up in everyday life.

Many of our members are concerned that some of our youth are graduating from high school without the necessary writing and mathematics skills needed to thrive in the workforce. Employers understand that hiring someone new requires a certain amount of training, but core writing and math skills are not the kind of subjects businesses are well suited to teach.

The 2012 results of the OECD's PISA tests demonstrated that student performance in Nova Scotia has either stagnated or declined in all subject areas. Particularly worrying are the results for math, where scores have declined from 515 in 2003 to 497 in 2012.¹⁰ Even more concerning is the gap between Nova Scotia students and Quebec, the top performing province. In 2012, Quebec students scored 536, 39 points better than Nova Scotia and roughly equal to a year's worth of education.¹¹ Significant gaps also exist in reading and science scores where Nova Scotia students scored 27 points worse in reading and 28 points worse in science than top-performing British Columbia.¹²

With these results in mind, this Panel needs to take a hard look at Nova Scotia's education curriculum and judge it against the best provinces in Canada and the top countries around the world. We support putting strong emphasis on math and science education in our school system. It is telling that many of us would freely admit to being bad at math, but would never admit to being unable to read. The province needs to guarantee that teachers are teaching subjects they are well qualified to teach. For example, a math specialist should always teach math. Also, the Now or Never Report's suggestion that computer programming become a core competency in middle school is worth examining.¹³

We also encourage this Panel to consider an expanded role for entrepreneurship in Nova Scotia schools. While Nova Scotia has some excellent entrepreneurship initiatives, such as Dalhousie University's Starting Lean Initiative; the provincial government's funding of 'sandboxes' at universities; and the work of the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Education, and Development, and Junior Achievement; we need to embed entrepreneurship even more deeply into our education system.

Putting a greater focus on entrepreneurship does not mean losing our education system's focus on preparing well-rounded citizens. Helping students be more entrepreneurial will have benefits in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. It means empowering our students with the confidence and the skills to take risks and act on their passions; whether that is building a technology start-up; creating a program to help disadvantaged youth; or bringing new ideas to public service delivery. Entrepreneurship means giving students the tools to put their dreams into practice.

Expenditure

Unfortunately, education discussions in Nova Scotia cannot be divorced from the provincial government's fiscal challenges. Nova Scotia is facing a persistent structural deficit, high tax rates, and slow economic growth. Given these constraints, it is unreasonable to expect that there will be a significant amount of new education spending available to fund reforms to the system.

That does not mean that all hope is lost, only that we have to be creative and results-focused. Provinces that perform much better than Nova Scotia on PISA, such as British Columbia and Quebec, spend less per student.¹⁴ Furthermore, Nova Scotia's expenditures are above the OECD average, a point at which the OECD suggests that it matters more what money is spent on, rather than how much is spent.¹⁵ Our concern at this point needs to be on emulating the best practices of successful jurisdictions rather than on our aggregate level of education spending.

In terms of staff salaries, evidence suggests that Nova Scotia is competitive with the rest of Canada. Teachers' salaries in top performing provinces such as Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia are generally below or comparable to Nova Scotia.¹⁶ While this suggests that current salaries are high enough to attract qualified people to the profession, we would support a system that tied a percentage of pay to performance. Such a system would have to be rigorously analyzed since, as we know from experience, what gets measured gets done. We also strongly suggest reviewing current professional development practices to make sure that they are as effective as possible.

In 2014-15, the provincial government is projecting that there will be 3,833 certified teachers looking for full-time work and only 327 new full-time teaching jobs. A newly certified teacher in Nova Scotia will have an 8.5% chance of getting a regular teaching position that year.¹⁷ This clearly shows that the demand to enter the teaching profession at current salaries is high. Furthermore, this large pool of aspiring educators provides the school system with an opportunity to reform its hiring and certification practices to guarantee that the best possible teachers are selected.

Finally, while Nova Scotia scores well on equity, there is still an unacceptably large difference in performance between students from low-income and high-income families.¹⁸ Ensuring that schools in economically disadvantaged areas have access to the same level of infrastructure, staff, and financial resources as schools in more prosperous areas is important for improving the overall level of performance and equity in the school system.¹⁹

Nova Scotia's fiscal situation will make it that much more difficult to build a better education system. The silver lining however, is that we will have to move from our default position of just throwing more money at the problem. As our experience with the health care system has shown us, putting more money into the same system is unlikely to give us better results. Instead, this Panel will have to make sure that the funds we do have are spent in the most cost-effective and innovative manner possible.

Recommendations

A competitive business environment is about more than tax rates. Without a top-quality education system, our members would find it difficult to grow and thrive. If we did not have enough skilled workers, we would struggle to attract new companies to the region. If you think long-term, it is clear that improving our education system is closely related with creating a more successful province. Given the importance of this task, we will be watching the outcomes of this Review closely. Overall, we are looking for this Panel to:

- **System Structure**
 - Encourage innovation by providing schools and teachers with more freedom to decide how they will teach their students.
 - Expand avenues for information sharing and collaboration in and between schools, as well as setting clear guidelines for what students are expected to achieve.
 - Allow students to provide feedback on their teachers and use it as part of the professional development process as has become common in universities.
- **Curriculum**
 - Enhance the curriculum to provide a strong focus on fundamental skills in math and science.
 - Introduce entrepreneurship education to help students become adaptable and innovative.
- **Expenditure**
 - Focus on ensuring that our existing education funds are being spent in an effective and innovative manner.
 - Reduce the achievement gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds by ensuring that all schools have an equitable number of staff, infrastructure, and financial resources.
 - Review hiring and certification practices to make sure that the best teachers available make it into the school system.

In the end, we need an education system that places continuous improvement at its core. The last comprehensive review of P-12 education was 25 years ago, a time when VHS' and walkman's were still popular. We need a system that can keep up with change, not respond to it decades after the fact. As a province, we need to approach this Review as the just the beginning. Building a stronger education system will not be an easy or quick endeavor, but it is one that the business community feels is fundamentally important to our province's future.

References

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- ³ <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf> (page 12)
- ⁴ <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=4770037&tabMode=dataTable&srchLan=-1&p1=-1&p2=9>
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- ⁸ <http://www.stlhe.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Student-Evaluation-of-Teaching1.pdf>
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- ¹⁵ <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-IV.pdf> (page 40)
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