

Investing in Educational Success

Submission for the 2015 Pre-Budget Consultation, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador

"The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life."

----Plato

Submitted by Denise Pike

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Overview

The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils (NLFSC) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the 2015 pre-budget process.

NLFSC believes it is critical for the government to continue its prudent management of the province's finances and this trend of economic growth, in order to ensure continued prosperity in the years ahead.

We would like to commend the government for its progress towards eliminating the deficit while making key investments in education. We recognize that government has reinvested significantly in the K-12 education system and made commitments in many areas to improve education in this province

Introduction

About the Newfoundland & Labrador Federation of School Councils

The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils (NLFSC) is the provincial umbrella group for parents, teachers, high school students (where applicable), and community supporters who are committed to enhancing the quality of school programs and improving the levels of student achievement in our schools. NLFSC provides school councils and parent groups with a voice on educational issues and encourages parental involvement at all levels of education.

We also have the fortune of partnering with education, community, and youth-serving organizations across Newfoundland and Labrador and Canada to advance our objectives in supporting students and School Councils.

It is the position of the NLFSC that education is an investment in the future of this province and must remain a priority area. Newfoundland and Labrador can take pride in its public education system. However, we cannot be complacent about what we have been able to achieve.

We believe that a sound fiscal plan is necessary, but there are, of course, important programs and services that require investment – especially in education.

We also understand the provincial budget is complex and fraught with many competing issues and interests. As part of the process of collecting stakeholder input on the government's budgetary policies and priorities, we would like to make you aware of our concerns about education funding and are pleased to offer the following comments and recommendations.

Our 2015 Budget Priorities

Priority 1: Mental Health and Addiction Supports

The issues of students suffering from untreated Mental Health illnesses and addictions are becoming more and more prevalent in our schools.

Mental Health issues and Alcohol and Drug use, among our youth, go hand in hand and are increasing at an alarming rate. Research indicates that youth are not only more likely than adults to engage in risky substance use, but also to experience greater harm from that use. This can negatively impact their health, safety, safety of others, and academic achievement.

Drug abuse education and prevention has never been more important than it is now. Our communities are struggling to keep pace with drugs that have high euphoric effect (and greater risk for addiction), greater affordability, and more accessibility. Drugs that were once considered "hard-core" only a generation ago are no longer taboo.

Parents and School Councils who contact our office say they do not know where to go to get help for depression and addictions – or that help is simply not available. The concerns around Mental Health and addictions, and the lack of supports for our youth has been topping the agenda at our AGM for the past 3 years. Because Mental Health and Addiction concerns are on the rise and because the current level of services cannot adequately respond to the needs of children who are suffering from it,

NLFSC recommends government create a new allocation for Youth, Mental Health and Addiction Counsellors, at a ratio of 1:500 students.

NLFSC recommends government implement an effective and affordable prescription monitoring system for patients, pharmacies and Doctors.

(This monitoring system would provide the necessary security to prevent the continuation of the illegal peddling of prescription drugs).

NLFSC also recommends government implement a Secured Treatment Plan for young people between the ages of 16-18 whose use of alcohol or other drugs is likely to cause significant psychological or physical harm to themselves or physical harm to others.

(This Plan will allow parents or guardians of children under the age of 18, who have addictions, to apply for a protection order for treatment for their child. If the Court agrees with the parents or guardians that drug use is causing harm to their child, the Court will send the child to a protective safe house for up to ten days. This safe house will provide them with treatment and help them manage withdrawal).

Priority 2: Educational Psychologist Allocation

NL schools are confronted with diverse and intense demands by students of a personal nature, which include comprehensive student assessments; drug and alcohol awareness; personal counselling; anti-bullying programs; and mediation.

The current Guidance Counsellor allocation of one per 500 students does not meet the needs of students and is particularly challenging in rural schools. Other supportive resources (educational psychologists, counsellors and other support staff) are needed to address the many complex mental health and addiction issues in schools.

NLFSC recommends government increase the supportive resources such as educational psychologists, counsellors, and other support staff necessary to augment the intervention and assistance necessary to address the emotional and mental health needs of students from Kindergarten to Level III.

Priority 3: Guidance Counsellor Allocation

Our schools are facing an increase of students that are undergoing difficulties such as drug use, addictions and mental health illnesses and quite often it is the school's Guidance Counsellor who they reach out to for help. Unfortunately, the current Guidance Counsellor allocation of one full-time personnel for 500 students, compounded by other responsibilities and workload, does not provide enough time for them to help students who require counselling services.

NLFSC recommends government increase the current Guidance Counsellor allocation from 1:500 to at least 1:300.

Priority 4: Administrative Allocation

The reduction in the allocation for School Administrator time in the 2013 provincial budget resulted in less time for School Administrators to carry out their duties and responsibilities. Important initiatives such as Anti-bullying and Healthy Living programs are further compounding the stress placed upon our Administrators.

For example, it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect a School Administrator to implement the Department of Education's newly revised Safe and Caring Schools policy with less Administrative time than he/she had the year before and effectively carry out these initiatives.

NLFSC recommends government reinstate the Administrative allocation to the level it was before the 2013 provincial budget.

Priority 5: Teacher Allocations

In the 2013 Provincial Budget, 160 teacher positions were cut from our schools. Since then, NLFSC has heard from and spoken with many of our members on how the reduction to the Teacher Allocation, Administrative Allocation, Specialist Allocation and Learning Resource Teacher Allocations is impacting their schools. The message is a very strong one. These cuts will have severe, long-term impacts that will put the students of this province at an extreme disadvantage for years to come. NLFSC still believes that a Needs Based Formula for allocating teaching units as recommended and accepted by government in previous years, but has not been fully implemented, is critical to our schools and students.

A Needs Based formula will address many deficiencies in the education system in the areas of Special Needs/ inclusion, improve classroom size at both the elementary and high school levels and provide full educational programming in our rural schools. This model would take the geography of our province into account and eliminate the need for a set pupil-teacher ratio. We feel it would ensure that students across the province are treated fairly by ensuring they are all offered at least a defined level of education.

Providing these level of programs to every student in Newfoundland and Labrador would likely require an increase in funding to education - but it would be money well spent. Below are two educational areas where a needs-based model would greatly benefit our students.

NLFSC recommends government implement a Needs Based Formula for allocating teaching units in the province.

Priority 6 : Student Support Services and Inclusion Delivery

The Department of Education has adopted an inclusionary model of Special Services delivery. As a result, significant changes are occurring in Special Education which has a direct impact on students, teachers and our classrooms. Special Needs Students who had been pulled out of the regular classroom, to work with a Special Needs Teacher in a small group setting, now have to stay in the classroom. In most cases, the individual support they once received from a Special Needs Teacher no longer exists, putting an increased demand on the classroom teacher. Our Association receives many calls and e-mails from parents expressing concerns about the lack of teachers and student assistants to meet the needs of their child.

On September 12, 2014 the former Minister of Education, Darin King announced the establishment of a joint committee to review the implementation of the inclusive education model in schools. The committee, composed of professional educators; three named by the Department of Education, and three named by the NLTA, will review the current Inclusion Model in NL and try to address the concerns and challenges identified by teachers throughout the province. The intention is to ensure that all students have the best opportunity to succeed.

Budget 2014: Shared Prosperity, Fair Society, Balanced Outlook, provided over \$112 million to support inclusive education in schools. This includes funding for itinerant teachers, student assistants, professional development for teachers, classroom-based teaching resources, and direct supports to students such as alternate format materials and assistive technology.

The NLFSC is fully supportive of the philosophy of inclusion, but the necessary supports and resources must be provided for successful inclusion in the regular classroom. If the philosophy of inclusive education is to work as it was intended, additional teacher resources are required to support special needs children.

To fully support our Special Needs Children and to help them achieve to the best of their ability, NLFSC recommends that government provide 150 additional teaching units to address the needs identified with the implementation of the Inclusion Model.

Priority 7: Numeracy & Literacy Specialists

Unfortunately, many students continue to struggle in the areas of math and reading and are in need extra support.

Government needs to provide more in the way of training and placement of numeracy and literacy specialist teachers at the classroom level, not just at the district office, but within our schools. These school-based specialists would assist the classroom teachers in diagnosing the needs of students who are struggling and provide adequate programs (individual or small group support) to meet their needs. Research has proven that small class size and individual and small group support has yielded tremendous academic successes in the areas of math and reading for students who struggle.

The objective of these school based Numeracy and Literacy Specialists would be to improve the quality of literacy and numeracy teaching within our schools, but more importantly, help our students see themselves as true learners.

NLFSC recommends government allocate greater fiscal resources for Numeracy and Literacy Specialists at the school level.

Priority 8: Federation of School Councils Operational Funding

NLFSC expresses its gratitude for the sustaining grant of \$30,000 that it receives annually from government.

Unfortunately, due to cost cutting measures in the 2013 Provincial Budget our sustaining grant was cut by \$5,000 leaving us with \$25,000 to run our organization. However, it is important to

note that following the 2013-14 budgets NLFSC received \$5,000 from the Department of Education to assist with our AGM costs. This funding allowed us to assist some School Councils with the cost of travel and accommodations.

In addition to this our sustaining grant, we are fortunate to have the in-kind support of various other stakeholder agencies. We are able to fulfill our mandate to the best of our ability with the help of these stakeholders through the provision of services free of charge which includes our office space, printing, and bulk mailing. We are also occasionally supported through the provision of one time, in kind services such as speakers for our Annual General Meeting and Conference. However, without the support and assistance of these stakeholders we would not be able to maintain the level of service we now are able to provide with the direct financial assistance that we receive from government.

Since 1999, there have been seven resolutions passed at the Annual General Meetings of the NLFSC regarding financial support from the Department of Education for School Councils. Acting on these resolutions the Executive of NLFSC has had several discussions with the Minister of Education and Department officials over the past ten years.

In 1999-2000, NLFSC received a grant of \$40,000; however, a year later it was reduced to \$30,000. Despite repeated requests for the past numbers years we have not received an increase in the grant to account for the rising costs of goods and services (inflation) or the additional needs of School Councils and communities.

NLFSC requests an increase of \$20,000 in the sustaining grant from government to make the yearly grant \$50,000. This would put our funding more in line with those received by other non-profit groups, help us to cover some of the increasing costs, and to try to maintain our current level of activity in supporting the enhancement of education of our children.

Application of Extra Funding

In compliance with the objectives of our Federation, we want to ensure the continued development of policies, practices and activities that will enhance the quality of school programs, the learning environment, and the level of student achievement in our schools.

NLFSC would like to renew our membership with The Canadian Home and School Association, increase our support to School Councils and strengthen our goal of encouraging positive parental involvement in education.

Conclusion

NLFSC commends the current government for its prudent fiscal plan and progress to date. We recognize that there have been many important initiatives to improve the quality of life for all and to create an even more prosperous province.

The elimination of school fees in 2006-07 marked a milestone in education by assisting every family in the province with the financial burden often associated with the return to school. The ongoing distribution of free textbooks to all students has also greatly benefited families. NLFSC also recognizes the current government for investing millions of dollars in new school construction, extensions, redevelopments, renovations, and repairs and maintenance. - and for their commitment to early childhood learning including the implementation of Full-Day Kindergarten in September 2016.

In compliance with the objectives of our Federation, we want to continue to ensure the development of policies, practices, and activities that will enhance the quality of school programs, the learning environment, and the level of student achievement in our schools.

If we truly believe that all students deserve equitable access to quality programs and services, regardless of where they live and where they attend school, then the government of Newfoundland and Labrador must continue to invest in education.

NLFSC believes in the future of this province. We believe our children can achieve for Newfoundland and Labrador what generations before could not---- But it all hinges on **making education a priority, creating safe and caring learning environment, and adequately resourcing the system** - thus providing them with a quality education!

Recommendations

- ✓ NLFSC recommends government create a new allocation for Youth, Mental Health and Addiction Counsellors, at a ratio of 1:500 students.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government implement an effective and affordable prescription monitoring system for patients, pharmacies, and Doctors.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government implement a Secured Treatment Plan for young people between the ages of 16-18 whose use of alcohol or other drugs is likely to cause significant psychological or physical harm to themselves or physical harm to others.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government increase the supportive resources such as educational psychologists, counsellors, and other support staff necessary to augment the intervention and assistance necessary to address the emotional and mental health needs of students from Kindergarten to Level III.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government increase the current Guidance Counsellor allocation from 1:500 to at least 1:300.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government reinstate the Administrative allocation to the level it was before the 2013 provincial budget.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government implement a Needs Based Formula for allocating teaching units in the province.
- ✓ To fully support our Special Needs Children and to help them achieve to the best of their ability, NLFSC recommends government provide 150 additional teaching to address the needs identified with the implementation of the Inclusion Model.
- ✓ NLFSC recommends government allocate greater fiscal resources for Numeracy and Literacy Specialists at the school level.
- ✓ NLFSC requests an increase of \$20,000 in the sustaining grant from government to make the yearly grant \$50,000. This would put our funding more in line with those received by other non-profit groups, help us to cover some of the increasing costs, and to try to maintain our current level of activity in supporting the enhancement of education of our children.