

# TURNING POINT

## INTERIM REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION BACKGROUND

### About the Commission

The Commission was struck on March 24, 2017 as an arms-length body under the provisions of the *Teachers' Professional Agreement and Classroom Improvements (2017) Act*. The Commission is comprised of one representative appointed by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), one representative appointed by the Minister of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD), and an independent chair jointly appointed by the Minister and the Union. The NSTU representative is Adela Njie, the EECD representative is Monica Williams, and the independent Chair is Dr. Sarah Shea.

### Mandate:

The Commission is tasked with reforming inclusive education in the Nova Scotia education system and identifying creative and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced in delivering quality education for all students within an inclusive education model in which teachers feel prepared and supported and children have a sense of belonging and are helped to achieve their full potential.

### Interim Report findings on the current model of inclusive education

The interim report is an introductory document that presents preliminary findings and 15 recommendations relating primarily to information

gathering under the following themes: policy; funding, resource allocation and accountability, teacher training; specialized staff to support inclusive education, interdepartmental and interagency collaboration; classroom composition; program planning process; and student behaviour. The document serves as a starting point, leading into the public consultation phase. Future work of the Commission will concentrate on broad public consultation and research aimed at resolving these problems in a collaborative way and creating a new provincial definition, policy and model for inclusive education.

Since the enactment of the special education policy in the mid-1990s, significant advances have been made in the implementation of inclusive education. Despite recommendations from previous reports on special education and inclusive education, Nova Scotia continues to lack a cohesive and accountable system for implementing inclusive education today.

### Interdepartmental and interagency collaboration

Although Nova Scotia is a small province, it has not had a consistent provincial system for implementing inclusive education, which remains one of the biggest impediments to inclusive education. Interagency collaboration, teacher training, specialized staff and funding are key components of our existing model of inclusive education have not kept pace with changing student needs, resulting in growing gaps between the needs of our students and the capacity of public schools to meet them.

## Student Needs

Between 2004 and 2014, the total student enrolment in Nova Scotia declined by 24,605 students.

However, during the same timespan, the number of Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) rose from 5,943 to 7,084 and increased from 4.1% to 5.9% of the student population, with higher percentages reported among African Nova Scotian and Aboriginal students. The percentage of students on IPPs over the past four years peaked during the 2014-2015 school year at 6.95%, currently measures 6.38%, and varies significantly by school board.

The enrolment-based funding formula does not reflect the changing needs found in Nova Scotia classrooms, nor does it address school board differences in the percentages of students receiving individualized support. Although students with complex needs make up a small proportion of the students on Individual Program Plans (IPPs), the review has found that they require great deal of support at school. Many of the approximately 500 Nova Scotia students with complex needs have several diagnosed areas of challenge. Some additional statistics about today's student population:

- approximately one-quarter of the students with complex needs have autism as their primary diagnosis;
- one-quarter have a secondary diagnosis of severe communication deficits;
- approximately three-quarters of the students with complex needs have severe behavioural challenges; and,
- roughly one-quarter of all students do not meet grade-level expectations in math or literacy.

The growing complexity of student medical needs, and the responsibilities of school boards to meet them, places pressure on school personnel to provide healthcare supports that go well beyond their qualifications and duties as educators.

## Teacher Training and Professional Development

Education graduate survey results indicate that a gap exists between the identified needs of Nova Scotia students and new teachers' level of preparedness

to meet them. Teachers report struggling with the complicated balancing act of trying to teach students with diverse needs while at the same time attending to the learning of the other students in the classroom and have expressed concern over the limited access that students and teachers have to the specialized staff and services that they require (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists). Growing workloads, paperwork, and time demands in increasingly complex classrooms are trends that have been identified in Nova Scotia.

## Recruitment, Retention and Assignment of Specialized Staff

Across the province, there are ongoing challenges with the hiring and retention of specialized staff, including, but not limited to: resource teachers, learning centre teachers, behaviour interventionists, learning disabilities teachers, autism specialists, guidance counsellors, school psychologists and speech-language pathologists.

Of the more than 900 Nova Scotia teachers who currently have Resource in their teaching assignment, many do not hold formal Resource qualifications (e.g., Bachelor of Special Education; Master's degrees in Inclusive Education, Special Education, or Educational Psychology). Approximately one-third have academic backgrounds in English and Social Studies but fewer than one-tenth hold a degree with a minor or major in mathematics, one of the core subjects in which Nova Scotia students most often require Resource intervention. Many Resource positions are split up among teachers, and school boards vary in the proportion of full-time and part-time Resource positions that they assign.

## Next Steps

Beginning in the fall 2017, the Commission will concentrate on broad public consultation, including an enhanced and interactive web portal, research aimed at resolving these problems in a collaborative way and creating a new provincial definition, policy and model for inclusive education. A final report from the Commission with recommendations will be delivered by March 30, 2018.