

Success of all Students Central in Inclusive Education Report

NEWS RELEASE

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Halifax (March 26, 2018) – Parents, teachers and students can look forward to a renewed focus on the success of all students if recommendations from the final report of the Commission on Inclusive Education are accepted by government and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU).

The report calls for a new model of inclusive education starting with targeted funding, greater access to specialists, and better supports to address the success of all Nova Scotia students. Titled "*Students First, Inclusive Education that Supports Teaching, Learning and the Success of all Students*", the report is the culmination of a year of research and engagement with more than 5,000 Nova Scotians.

"We made a commitment that we would not look backward to past practices or stand still within existing limitations, but instead work toward a new model of inclusive education that meets the needs of all students in a feasible and sustainable way," says Dr. Sarah Shea, the commission's independent chair. "That is exactly what we have done by presenting a model of inclusive education that is focused on student needs and committed to student success – their learning, development and well-being."

The commission outlined a five-year strategic plan, with priorities for changes in September 2018 including more psychologists; behaviour support teachers; regional health nurses; alternative program options; intensive treatment programs; teacher education; behaviour intervention; faster access to student assessments; and support for complex classrooms.

The new model is grounded in a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that addresses students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioural needs

in an integrated way. The three tiers form a flexible, interconnected and concurrent continuum of academic, behavioural, and social-emotional-health supports at three levels: classroom, small group and individual.

"The main message of our report is that, despite the best efforts of students, parents and teachers, too many Nova Scotian students are not reaching their full potential and the public-school system is under considerable strain. This must change. We are recommending an immediate infusion of additional funding and supports this September to assist the students who are in the system now and cannot wait for long-term change. We are also recommending gradual increases in funding, specialists and supports over the next five years to build the capacity of the system to fully meet the needs of all students", says Monica Williams, the commission's government appointee. "These added supports, combined with the collaboration and assistance of other government departments, will enable Nova Scotia public schools to provide inclusive education that is second to none."

The vast majority of students will experience school success in the classroom through the core curriculum and core instruction. Some will require additional educational programs, services, interventions, and settings in small groups or on a one-to-one basis at various points in their schooling to meet their identified strengths and needs.

Throughout the consultations, teachers, parents and students were unanimous in their priorities for a new model of inclusive education - behaviour, mental health, literacy, mathematics, and life skills.

"We heard about students who waited years for assessments, who couldn't see a speech language pathologist when it was clearly needed, who were eligible for the severe learning disabilities program but unable to receive the service," says Adela Njie, the NSTU appointee to the commission. "We have recommended new staffing ratios for specialists that have been determined based on extensive feedback about current needs combined with what we anticipate will be required to support the new model."

The commission recommends moving from enrolment-based funding to a needs-based funding model over the next few years. The early priorities for new, targeted funding are key support staff and specialists, including behaviour support teachers, learning support teachers, school psychologists, autism specialists, speech-language pathologists, guidance counsellors, assistive technology specialists, and regional school health nurses.

"In order for the new model to work effectively, teachers need more time to teach and administrators need more time to spend with teachers. One of the benefits of the new model is the collaborative problem-solving process that is used to address learning challenges as soon as they appear," says Williams. "This four-step collaborative approach serves as the basis for a streamlined program planning process in which parents are full partners and replaces the current eight-step program planning process."

Based on feedback from the consultations, the commission also identified parent and school collaboration as an area for focused improvement and is recommending a number of steps to create strong home and school relationships, including, giving teachers more time to collaborate with parents, and adding transition specialist/parent support positions to improve the support to parents in navigating the inclusive education system, collaborating as members of the school team, and planning for transitions.

"Teachers, teacher assistants and administrators all expressed concerns about feeling ill-prepared to meet the demands and challenges of inclusive education," says NJie. "We are recommending revamping existing teacher preparation and professional development programs so teachers can successfully meet diverse student needs. Creating new preparation and professional development programs in inclusive education for teachers, administrators, and teacher assistants would address these concerns."

Nova Scotians consistently identified the need for major policy changes in inclusive education. They emphasized the importance of accountability, examining and clearly defining the purpose of inclusive education, and honoring the voices of the disability community. They want systemic and accountable policy change that results in improved educational outcomes for all students, which includes the need for a number of new strategies focused on mental health, autism, behaviour and others.

To steward this significant degree of change, and provide accountability, the commission is recommending the creation of the Nova Scotia Institute of Inclusive Education (NSIIE), an arm's length body accountable to the public. Its mandate will include establishing benchmarks, outcome measures, and the process for measurement to assess how well inclusive education is working in the province for students, educators, administrators, parents, and the public.

"It will take time, action, and the commitment of everyone involved to break with the past and work toward a better future for our students," says Shea. "Successful implementation begins with the end in mind. Our vision is to move from a fragmented and under-resourced education system that does not meet the needs of all students to a unified and well-resourced education system that supports teaching, learning, and the success of all students."