

Raising the bar? A modest proposal

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When the public or policy community deems an education system to be under achieving, the proposed interventions are often a conglomeration of “fixes,” some of which have potential while others do not. When embarking on a radical, systemic restructure, we expect policy makers to use the best information available to inform their policy decisions. That said, education reform has become a ‘marketplace of ideas’ with policy soothsayers plying their trade in a lucrative international market. Against this backdrop, we want to stress that there is some benefit to advising caution when claims are made to justify significant policy change, particularly where strong evidence based relationships have not been established.

The report *Raise the Bar: A Coherent and Responsive Education Administrative System for Nova Scotia* prepared for the Nova Scotia Minister of Education & Early Childhood Development is an intriguing document that uses PISA and PCAP data to argue for a number of significant changes to Nova Scotia’s education system. These include disbanding School Boards, setting up a College of Teachers that would handle teacher accreditation, discipline, and removing principals and vice-principals from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union because of a perceived conflict of interest. The data collected for the report consisted of a volunteer online survey of approximately 1500 persons that were asked three questions and 91 consultations with individuals and groups (n=500) over roughly 3 weeks at the end of October 2017.

For a report organized around foundational principles of improving student achievement, improving equity and excellence and global citizenship, the overarching emphasis of the Terms of Reference is actually on administration and governance. The claim is made that “[w]hile student performance may not immediately be linked to administration and governance, I strongly believe it is.” (p.14) Implementing a significant policy and changing a governance structure because of a “belief” that it is connected to student achievement on standardized test is not a firm basis for a radical restructuring of Nova Scotia’s education system. In other words, perceived problems that arise from robust evidence (standardized assessment) deserve solutions that are equally based on robust evidence. The implied relationship is that improving administration and governance will improve student achievement. This highlights a major problem with the report, no attempt is made to show how each specific recommendation will improve student achievement.

The report adopts a qualitative design, combining a qualitative survey of three questions with a series of qualitative consultations. The author and her team clearly did their due diligence by conducting over 90 individual and group consultations (of approximately 500 subjects) and receiving a fairly robust questionnaire response rate. Those of us that have conducted similar studies can appreciate the amount of time and resources this design required. But, given the high stakes of the report’s findings, the evidence presented in the

report falls short of establishing how the recommendations will improve student achievement, equity and excellence and their global citizenship. We want to reiterate that this is not necessarily a fault of the author or the resulting report – although in hindsight more caveats may have been prudent. In fact, it is unclear if the author was aware of the gravity that her recommendations held. Again, many of us that work in policy and evaluation are often excited that someone reads our reports and become increasingly excited when at least one of our recommendations is adopted, let alone all 22! Unfortunately, considering the high stakes associated with this report we contend that the robustness of the evidence requires further examination. At the very least the collected evidence should be independently re-analyzed to ensure both the validity and reliability of the recommendations are sound and linked to the evidence collected. In what follows we provide a few initial concerns we have after reading the report.

The survey consisted of 3 questions.

1. What administrative changes should be made to the education system to ensure the focus is on the needs of students?
2. What changes should be made to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?
3. What changes should be made to the administration of school boards?

From what we understand, these open-ended questions were designed to give the participants the opportunity to “raise any issue they wished, as many issues as they wished, and to include as much content on each as they wished” (p.17). While this is a good option for an exploratory study, one issue is that the range of topics covered by the responses can be so large that it is difficult to draw strong conclusions from the responses, a fact acknowledged in the report on p.17. This certainly seems to be the case for Q2 where the most frequent group of responses (Listen more to the experts including teachers, early childhood educators and researchers) accounted for only 18% of the answers. Further, in terms of survey design this style of question is known as a leading or loaded question – which can bias the responses. For example, in the above questions, it is assumed that changes need to be made and we have to assume that 1) the question persuaded some participants that change was necessary; and 2) some respondents did not answer because they felt the system was fine but didn’t have an opportunity to comment. Both situations suggest an obvious bias in any results.

The online survey utilized a volunteer sampling frame that generated 1500 responses. While 1500 responses would reasonably generate a range of perspectives, such a volunteer samples is not generalizable to the entire population. In other words, because of the bias inherent in who tends to volunteer to participate in surveys, in this case those more likely to have strong opinions, they cannot be seen to be representative of the general population’s opinions. This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of demographic data supplied in relation to the survey – we should have an indication of who answered the survey including information such as how many were teachers and principals working in Nova Scotia’s schools, how many were parents, what areas of Nova Scotia the participants live in and

which school boards represent them, what percentage of respondents identified as French-speaking, Mi'kmaq and African and so on so that we can better understand the reach of the survey. The research team might have this information but we were unable to locate it in the report.

A further problem concerns the methods used for analysis of the data and the black box in which it took place. Again, the author is a well-respected educational leader but given the stakes of the findings readers deserve a clearly detailed methods section and technical report outlining in detail how the data were collected and analyzed. For example, it is not clear how 1500 responses, multiplied by three questions with the possibility of multiple answers were coded, collated and organized into themes. Furthermore, it is not clear how the recommendations speak to the particular evidence that was collected through the survey. For example, the evidentiary warrant for the recommendation to abolish school boards seems to rely on two quotes on p.20-21, offset by a quote on p.21 that saw local boards as a stabilizing, non-political force in Nova Scotian education. Most of us would agree that this is not substantial evidence to support such a recommendation. It is possible that more evidence was collected. Unfortunately, based on the report itself, we simply don't know.

The second aspect of data collection was consultations with a wide range of stakeholders in Nova Scotia's education system. There were 91 consultations with individuals and groups (n=500) over roughly 3 weeks at the end of October 2017. Given the short timeframe, this is an impressive achievement by the research team. However, perhaps as a result of the short time available for these consultations, it appears that working teachers and principals were neglected in the consultations. Further, as for the survey above, no evidence is supplied as to how the data collected through consultations was systematically analysed. Similarly, we do not know how the results inform the interpretations leading to the 22 recommendations contained in the report. At the very least, the Appendix 'Administrative & Governance Review Consultation Participants' (pp.63-69) outlines that 187 members and employees of eight school boards and the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA) were consulted in the report, yet we can find no reference to their evidence.

Our concern is that, on studying the report, an exploratory methodology is being employed to make generalized claims with regards to Nova Scotia's education system. We only outline a few concerns above and there are more; however, without a clear methods section and access to resultant data we are left to speculate – ironic given our above critique. That said, with our comments in mind we would modestly propose the following course of action:

1. That the report is understood as an exploratory study providing select perspectives on issues that some educational stakeholders believe the Nova Scotian education system is having.
2. That although the report clearly identifies issues worthy of further research, more evidence should be provided/collected to corroborate the recommendations ensuring that each can be supported by evidence rather than opinion.

3. Given the high-stakes associated with these recommendations, amounting to a massive reform of the educational system, the methods and data should be made public so that an independent stakeholder can reanalyze the data to ensure the findings validity and reliability.

As a final point, it is worth highlighting that when reforming education systems building a shared commitment across multiple stakeholders is critical. There is a common trend of 'policy borrowing' emerging where jurisdictions simply borrow policies from other jurisdictions. This policy borrowing assumes that what works in one context or jurisdiction must work in another. Before importing policy solutions to complex problems, it would be advisable to engage the diverse communities that have a stake in Nova Scotian education and build consensus, informed by a strong evidence base, as to which reforms will be most beneficial. Given the extent of the recommendations, one aspect of building consensus should be to demonstrate exactly how each recommendation will improve student achievement.

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