

Response to the Review of Teacher Education Report

Nova Scotia Teachers Union
February 12, 2008

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union appreciates the opportunity it had to meet with the Review Committee and provide input into the Committee's deliberations and this current opportunity to address the report of the Committee.

Quality of Teacher Preparation

The Report addresses the issue of the quality of teacher preparation. It states:¹

Of particular note were the recurring comments about the inadequate skill development in terms of classroom management, program planning for students with special needs, differentiated instruction, diversity, conflict resolution, and year-long program planning.

While this view has some real validity, it must also be recognized that the skills identified above cannot be created or developed completely apart from the full responsibility for a class and curriculum delivery. There may be significantly more that can be done to assist new teachers with these tasks, but it is simplistic to believe that more than a few will arrive in their first assignment with any of these skills fully honed.

The Committee also identified in the same section that there appears to be a “significant discordance between the programming areas that are viewed to be most important by the leaders in the public school system contrasted with the university faculty.”² Enhancing the communication channels among the partners in this process is essential to resolve this dissonance, real or perceived. We will address this further when discussing the proposed Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Education.

Teacher Supply and Demand

The Report's adoption of the current teacher supply and demand as the primary lens through which it examines teacher education in Nova Scotia is particularly unfortunate. The Shapiro Report and the post-Shapiro report emphasised the same supply and demand issues and established enrolment corridors for teacher education institutions in Nova Scotia. The real world has demonstrated that both these reports were fundamentally wrong and the current Report is simply repeating their errors.

The central error in the Shapiro and post-Shapiro reports is the belief that by restricting the enrolment in teacher education programs in Nova Scotia the number of teachers certified in Nova Scotia will be limited to the number required and that students seeking an education degree will select alternate career paths if the opportunity to pursue that path within Nova Scotia is closed. This is clearly not the case. Instead, students have left the province in droves. More teachers are certified to teach in Nova Scotia who received their teacher education outside the province than those who receive their bachelor of education degree from Acadia, Mount Saint Vincent, Saint Francis Xavier and Université St. Anne combined. The restriction of enrolment corridors did not work.

¹ Report and Recommendations of the Review Panel on Teacher Education in Nova Scotia, December 2007, page 13

² Ibid. p. 13

As noted elsewhere³ there are very significant shortages of teachers in many other jurisdictions, ranging from elsewhere in Canada to many places in the United States to opportunities around the world. Globally there is a drastic shortage of teachers to which the oversupply in Nova Scotia makes only a small impact, but which due to the quality of the teacher education received, offers many possibilities for Nova Scotia graduates.

Selection of Candidates for the Program

The Report's comments concerning the selection of candidates for Bachelor of Education programs further support the conclusion that the limitations placed on our own institutions not only have failed to limit the number of teachers who are certified annually, but have also left the admission standards in an ad hoc and haphazard state, not responsible to Nova Scotia universities, the Department of Education or the Certification Office.

Student Practicum

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union strongly supports the comments made in the report concerning the need for greater communication and collaboration between the universities and the province's school boards with respect to the practicum component of teacher education. The Education Act, Section 31⁴ explicitly imposes a clear responsibility on both school boards and teachers to facilitate the B. Ed. practicum for approved programs. We believe there needs to be a significantly greater liaison, not only between the universities and the regional school boards and between the universities and the schools, but also between the universities and the cooperating teachers. As the challenges of the classroom have expanded, it has become increasingly important for cooperating teachers to gain additional guidance in their role in the preparation of pre-service teachers. It is no longer sufficient for the cooperating teacher to rely on his or her experience alone as adequate preparation for this role.

Recommendations

Consultative, Advisory Mechanism

The report recommends the creation of a new consultative body, the Minister's Advisory Council on Teacher Education. The NSTU strongly supports the involvement of the school boards, Mi'kmaq educators, and African Canadian educators in an advisory capacity with respect to teacher education. These voices do not currently have an effective mechanism to provide their perspectives to the Minister. The absence of these voices significantly restricts the breadth of input available to the Minister. At present, the concerns from these constituencies are only available in an *ad hoc* manner and not through a consistent and on-going forum that would solicit more systematic and considered input.

There is a concern, however, that the proposed body would not only duplicate the work of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification, but the two advisory committees might work at cross purposes and provide contradictory advice. The membership of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification consists of the parties who have specific and

³ Donnelly, Mary-Lou, *Missing: the purpose of higher education*, Chronicle Herald January 20 and Cape Breton Post January 26,

⁴ Government of Nova Scotia, *The Education Act and Regulations under the Education Act*, Consolidated September 2002, p. 18

formal responsibility for teacher certification, the Department of Education Certification office, representatives from the teacher education universities in the province and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union⁵. It is not appropriate that other groups engage, other than in an information provider role, in the decisions of the MACTC. It is also inadvisable for those responsible for providing the Minister with advice concerning teacher certification be excluded from those discussions, such as those that would take place in the proposed MACTE, that have a direct bearing on teacher certification.

The NSTU therefore recommends that there be only one advisory body and that the core function of advice concerning teacher certification should be the responsibility of only those parties currently represented on the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification. However, the input from those partners identified in the report is not only important, it is essential to enable the Minister and her government to propose procedures, regulations, funding and potentially legislation related to teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, and teacher certification.

We believe the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification (or renamed the MACTE) should have two operating formats. Half of its meetings should continue the format and composition of the MACTC and the other half of its meetings should involve and engage the broader set of partners and expand the range of topics and issues to include advice on any aspect of teacher education as outlined in the Report. The core members of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Teacher Certification would be the core members of this newly constituted committee.

Enrolment Corridors

As stated earlier, the NSTU believes the enrolment corridors have not proven to be an effective management approach to the number of teachers in Nova Scotia. The recommendations #2 and #3 will have no real impact on the number of teachers certified annually in the province. Instead, Nova Scotians will continue to seek bachelor of education programs in other jurisdictions.

Flexible Delivery of the 60 Credit-Hour B. Ed. Program

The NSTU is pleased the Review Committee maintained support for the 60 credit hour bachelor of education program.

The NSTU supports recommendation #4, but also recognizes the expertise of the university faculty in our bachelor of education programs. These universities have not maintained their two-year program format because of tradition or aversion to change. Rather they are committed to delivering the most effective program for pre-service teachers. This is another area in which the expanded communications forum would prove helpful. All partners would have an opportunity to express their perspectives concerning the delivery model of the B. Ed. program and equally importantly, all partners would hear the alternative perspectives and their rationale.

Five-Year Integrated Program Offering

While we generally support the recommendations that Université Sainte-Anne and Acadia University review their five-year integrated programs, we do so from the perspective that it is

⁵ The formal relationship of the Certification office and of the universities may be more obvious than the formal relationship to certification of the NSTU. Article 15 of the Teachers' Provincial Agreement stipulates that "Restructuring of the classifications of Teachers' Certificates, Vocational Teachers' Certificates or Permits, shall not occur unless the restructuring is mutually agreeable to the Union and the Employer."

always useful to review and evaluate current practice to ensure it continues to meet student and system needs in the context of changing circumstances. We do not, however, understand the rationale of the Review Committee behind the recommendation to suspend admission to the integrated B.Sc./B.Ed. program at Acadia. Using the Review Committee's own filter of supply and demand, one of the areas of need is for teachers of mathematics and it appears that Acadia has recognized this need and is responding appropriately. Further elaboration would have been helpful. We also note that the certification requirements for the ITC are a 90 credit hour bachelor's degree and a 60 credit hour education degree. This equates to five years of study and we therefore do not see any apparent contradiction between Acadia's implementation of integrated programs and their leadership in implementing the two-year, 60 credit hour education degree.

We also view the provision of five-year integrated programs to be consistent with the goal of providing more flexible delivery of the bachelor of education program. Flexibility is more than just flexibility with respect to the number of consecutive months during which students are actively engaged in on-campus study. It includes a much broader conceptual approach which includes unconventional and innovative thinking about teaching, learning and the public school systems of Nova Scotia and beyond.

Balance Between Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Teacher Preparation

Many of us recognize the frustrations implicit in the discussion of the balance between theoretical and applied aspects of teacher preparation. We recall sitting in classes on the history of education or the philosophy of education and wondering how this was going to transform us into teachers. Unfortunately the answer to that question was not something that was immediate, but something that took the experience of the classroom, often years of such experience, to realize. The division between these two aspects is not clear, precise or exclusive. There are many aspects to teacher education that lie in both arenas.

There are also many practical aspects to teaching, such as classroom management, that cannot be delivered as a packaged skill set to be taught, learned and completed. Classroom management is inherently dynamic. Pre-service teachers need the toolkit that will enable them to adapt, modify, transform and create their own management style and delivery.

The other practical or applied aspects of teaching are similarly tied to the individual teacher and to development and refinement in the real world of the classroom.

Including this dialectical tension within the mandate of the consultative and advisory body will serve to promote communication between the classrooms of newly hired teachers and the university programs. We caution, however, that this is not a simple dichotomy and is not amenable to a final resolution.

The Practicum

The Review Committee has addressed one of the most difficult aspects of teacher education in the discussion of the practicum. The NSTU supports the recommendation for the establishment of a task force involving the boards and the universities to review practicum-related concerns and develop recommendations. We note, however, that the practicum directly affects the workload of teachers and the task force should include representation from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union.

Teacher Induction Programs

Further to the discussion above concerning the necessity to be immersed in the teaching and learning environment with responsibility for his or her own class or classroom in order to consolidate much of the applied lessons of teacher education, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union strongly endorses the call for enhancements to a teacher induction program. The NSTU has been working for over a decade to provide this type of program to early-career teachers. One of the key limitations has been the ad hoc nature of this program and the relative scarcity of resources. We welcome efforts to enhance this program, but this “wheel” does not have to be reinvented. The recommendation that school boards should develop a teacher induction program does not recognize the NSTU efforts in this area and may again be re-developing something that is already viable. However, we do support an expanded forum in which to discuss ways to improve the experience of early career teachers and the recommendation to increase the resources available to them through the TIP.

Nova Scotian Universities Having Teacher Education Arrangements with Universities outside the Province

Recommendations 10 through 17 must be viewed from the perspective of the earlier discussion of the flawed filter of teacher supply and demand through which teacher education has been analysed in this report. If we retain in Nova Scotia students who wish to pursue a teacher education program, these recommendations cease to be priority items. Keeping these students at Nova Scotia universities avoids the unpleasant process of having the province discriminate against its own youth as they seek to advance their education. Restricting practicum placements for pre-service teachers from Nova Scotia institutions might sound reasonable if Nova Scotia were seeking to restrict immigration. The reality is that such a restriction would preclude Nova Scotia youth from completing their education in their own province.

Similarly, the rejection of the Cape Breton University bachelor of education proposal is based on the flawed belief that this will lead to a reduction in the number of people seeking teacher education programs. The only impact this will have is to continue to encourage Nova Scotia youth to seek their education outside their province.

More Rigorous Selection Criteria and Admission Standards

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union does not believe there is a credible standardized assessment procedure that will provide any improvement in the determination of who should and should not be granted certification in Nova Scotia. There are procedures that should be discussed and implemented by universities that will provide additional and in some cases more effective assessment of a pre-service teacher’s practice within the classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher. This again underscores the importance of enhancing the support provided to cooperating teachers. However, to suggest there is a meaningful *exam* that can assess the competence of an individual to become a teacher is fanciful at best. Many individuals have commented that teaching is a significant blend of both science and craft. The universities currently engage a rigorous and multifaceted admittance process to determine as best they can those individuals most likely to become good teachers. Throughout their two years these individuals are assessed in their own classrooms and in their practicum classrooms through a broad set of criteria. This process should be continually under review with the aim to support and enhance these assessments. A single summative assessment that exists outside this rich

assessment framework is contrary to the current research on assessment. The NSTU is opposed to the development of this type of instrument as part of the certification process.

Labour Market Outcomes of Teacher Education Graduates

Finally, the NSTU has been actively informing B. Ed. students about the labour market conditions in Nova Scotia for decades. We have increased the information about the prospects for employment in Nova Scotia to pre-service teachers as our relationship with the teacher education institutions has matured and expanded. We do support the recommendation that all partners must work together to provide high school students, undergraduate students and pre-service teachers with a realistic understanding of the opportunities for employment as teachers in the province and, even more specifically, in various regions of the province.

The Role of Teachers' Professional Organization

We are disappointed that the Review Committee did not make reference to the importance of including information about teachers' professional organization within teacher education. The Nova Scotia Teachers Union has developed a pilot program with St. Francis Xavier University that integrates knowledge of and the cumulative, derived learning from teachers' professional organization, the NSTU. The pilot has since expanded into unique relationships with each of the teacher education universities in the province. Teachers who had the advantage of this component of their pre-service education consistently indicate it provided an extremely important component of their education.

Summary

We have provided a detailed response to the recommendations of the Review Committee. Our overall reaction can be summarized through two general statements. The first is that the Nova Scotia Teachers Union applauds the Review Committee for the consultative approach it took in the preparation of the Report and for the consultative character contained throughout the recommendations. The Review Committee recognized that teacher education and student education is a partnership and that in order to function efficiently and optimally all of the partners involved must engage with each other in open, frank and productive dialogue. This approach will produce a "problem solving" environment that will ultimately resolve the conflicts and disagreements that other aspects of the Report may engender.

Our second general comment is that there is much more to higher education than the supply and demand parameters of any professional group. The recommendations calling for restrictions on teacher education and an adherence to the Shapiro and post-Shapiro reports will fail and continue to drive Nova Scotia youth to universities outside the province, most of whom would prefer to remain in Nova Scotia for their education. Teacher supply and demand information is important for the Department of Education, school boards and individuals to consider as part of their long range planning. However, it is not the only basis upon which individuals choose either career paths or further education. Nova Scotia needs to focus on enabling its citizens to explore the full breadth of higher education rather than impose additional barriers on them. We note that the University of Maine has realized Nova Scotia students provide an economic advantage to the institution. That advantage would better serve Nova Scotia if it remained at home.

The Nova Scotia Teachers Union wishes to express its appreciation for the opportunity to provide its response to the Report and Recommendations of the Review Panel on Teacher Education in Nova Scotia.