

Education and the Status of Women in Newfoundland and Labrador

A submission by the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Newfoundland and Labrador

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1. Introduction

The Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women (hereinafter: the Advisory Council) was established in 1980 by the Provincial Government to provide advice on issues affecting women in the province. These can be referred to us by the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, or they can be brought forward by the Advisory Council. Through our diverse community partnerships, we raise awareness of issues of concern to women and have access to information and experiences from the frontline service providers. Two of the strategic issues the Advisory Council is currently working towards are women's economic and social security.

Economic security

Advancing the economic security of women in our province begins with a strong educational background. This would ensure that both girls and boys have the same information and opportunities available to them for selecting a career most suitable to their skills and interests, while keeping in mind the needs of the province's labour market. Education, and having the right skills when graduating are essential for all students to choose the careers for which they are best suited. A strong educational background and adequate work experience are a stepping stone for women into leadership positions.

Women are more likely to suffer from financial insecurity than men.¹ One of the causes of poverty is a lack of skills or education, preventing the person from significant and meaningful employment. Not only are many of the single-parent households in this province are women-headed, but also many of the part-time, minimum-wage jobs are held by women. These jobs provide no security, few opportunities for advancement and no health benefits or pensions. Moreover, as women live longer than men, but have less access to benefits than men, due to women's work history in temporary, part-time and low-paying jobs, there is a high number of single, senior women living in poverty in our province. Furthermore, according to Canadian Women's Foundation, when children are poor, it is usually because their mother is poor. It is also our experience that financial independence makes it easier for women to escape violent relationships, making financial independence of women key to violence reduction.

Social security

Many of the social issues affecting women of the province are closely tied with education. Preventing violence can be achieved through education on issues such as healthy relationships, gender equality, respect and consent, and teaching of these topics needs to begin at an early age. Integrating these into the curriculum at all levels would ensure consistent education and messaging across the province. Schools are also the venue, where it is possible for adults, external to the immediate family of a child, to detect signs of social exclusion, family violence or mental health issues. Early detection of these issues makes intervention for corrective measures more effective.

Why this submission?

In our research, public engagement and awareness-raising activities, the education system of Newfoundland and Labrador is identified as either an underlying issue or a potential solution for issues impacting the economic and social security of women. Furthermore, almost 4,000 of the 5,400 teachers and administrators in Newfoundland and Labrador schools are female, therefore the challenges experienced within the schools are particularly pertinent to women in our province.² This is why the Advisory Council has decided to put forward a submission to the Provincial Government on the general topic of Education and the Status of Women in Newfoundland and Labrador in order to highlight some of the issues that have been brought to our attention.

With this submission, the Advisory Council wishes to bring to the attention of relevant ministers and departments a selection of issues that we feel in need of change in the education system of Newfoundland and Labrador. We welcome the initiative to develop a Premier's Task Force on improving educational outcomes and hope this submission will feed into the topics covered by the Task Force. This submission is created based on input from all Council members and from discussions that the Advisory Council has had with our community partners. Following this introduction, we will first bring forward issues of a general nature and then present our research and views on education and health, education and healthy relationships, the role education plays in developing life skills, inclusive education and social exclusion.

Concrete recommendations will be listed in section 7.

2. Underlying issues

The Advisory Council feels that there is an increasing trend towards parents opposing particular subject matters being taught in schools irrespective of their importance for the social and intellectual development of the student. Where once the educational system and the persons developing the curriculum stood their ground and were deeply founded on their expertise in terms of pedagogy and students' learning needs, there is now a greater tendency towards conceding to the wishes of individual parents. A case in point recently arose in Ontario, where parents who opposed the recent development of the sexual education curriculum may pull their children from class.

We consider it important to emphasize that the teaching professionals in our province are facing a difficult situation in terms of opposition from parents, who are very vocal about the needs of their individual children. It is often those with additional resources and the ability to have their voice heard, who end up with the results they seek, leaving those most at need of support lacking. An example of this is the recent discussion concerning a school's busing choices in Conception Bay South, where a mother managed to ensure an exception was made for her children by protesting vocally in the media.

The role of schools

The Schools Act 1997 assigns a large degree of managerial independence to the province's principals and school councils, except for curriculum and evaluation/monitoring. The curriculum specifies the subjects being taught to students on a daily basis, but the manner of teaching, the treatment of students by each other or by the adults in the school, the scope of acceptable behaviour, and the attitudes and mannerism of people in the schools differ greatly from school to school.

We have been advised of incidents where bullied students have been transferred to another school, which is known for its "more tolerant" environment. This lack of consistency was also evident in the 2012 evaluation of the Safe and Caring Schools Policy³, which concluded that the concrete implementation of the policy in the school district level and individual school level is not consistent throughout the province. The Department of Education has since updated the policy and provided concrete guidelines, or procedural descriptions to the districts and schools, but there is still no data

available on the implementation of these guidelines or whether the schools are following the policy as intended.

The Advisory Council has heard from many stakeholders that there is no sufficient buy-in for the Safe and Caring Schools Policy among the school personnel. As was also mentioned in the 2012 evaluation, the policy in general is considered to be a good and well-functioning idea and there is very little opposition to the contents of the policy. However, the way in which it is implemented (or not implemented) in schools has not had sufficient impact on the everyday lives of students and school personnel. The Advisory Council considers it important that students' and school personnel's experiences with the policy are collected and assessed on a regular basis, in order to gain information on the effectiveness of the policy. One way of doing this would be to include questions on the different areas covered by the policy into the School Climate Survey, which is administered by the Department of Education on an annual basis (see below). It is likewise important to ensure buy-in from the persons working in schools and to consult them on the way in which the policy is implemented.

Overall, it is unsatisfactory that one's educational experience and outcomes currently seem to be dependent entirely on where one happens to attend school. A safe and caring learning environment should not be dependent on the region and town where one lives, the principal or the school council. Such an environment can be guaranteed by implementing a zero tolerance policy on bullying and harassment, by ensuring that the school staff have received enough Professional Development days on issues such as restorative justice and the Bullying Intervention Protocol of the Safe and Caring Schools Policy. The school districts have numerous relevant policies in place aiming to deal with many of the issues that will be mentioned in the upcoming sections of this submission. We do acknowledge the diverse populations of our province, keeping in mind the geographical reality and the different cultural backgrounds and understandings of students in our aboriginal communities. The legacy of residential schools is still a fundamental underlying factor to the way in which the school system and policies function and are received in the aboriginal communities. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure an even level of implementation of these policies as a way to limit the fragmentation of education services and outcomes in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Teacher education

While the principals and school councils have an important role in ensuring safe and caring learning environments for the students of our province, the teachers are the ones to deal with both positive and negative issues emerging inside and outside the classroom. The Advisory Council considers it pertinent to take a closer look at the Bachelor of Education curriculum at the Memorial University. Historically, the majority of B.Ed. graduates from the Memorial University stay and find work in Newfoundland and Labrador⁴, making MUN an important player in ensuring that newly graduated educators are well equipped to deal with the realities of modern schools, in particular in relation to issues beyond the general educational curriculum. Most recently, some advocate groups⁵ have reiterated the need to review the province's sexual education curriculum to include more information on healthy relationships and consent, but it should likewise be ensured that teachers know how to educate their students on these topics.

While the Bachelor of Education programs offer a robust basis of general knowledge to graduating teachers, it is our experience that teachers are often at a loss when it comes to dealing with issues, such as recognizing and dealing with harassment and abuse, the use of restorative approaches, how to recognize bullying and how to discuss healthy relationships and consent, and how to teach diverse groups. Some of these issues are available during Professional Development days, but there appears to be no consistency or continuity amongst teachers with respect to skills they have related to the social aspects of the educational environment. All teachers should have concrete skills in alternative approaches to dealing with conflicts and how to teach diverse groups of students including students with exceptionalities. On the contrary, there are other social aspects, where it might be sufficient to train only a select number of teachers in each school. It is, however, important to have an overview of the skills that individual teachers have, and to ensure that these skills are used in the most positive and effective way in schools. It should be ensured that violence and harassment awareness training is available as teachers' Professional Development days and that schools implement a structured approach to ensuring that a sufficient number of teachers have received this training.

We understand that the Bachelor of Education program curricula are within the scope of MUN's academic independence, but we consider it pertinent for the relevant government Department to enter into a discussion with MUN on the possibility of revising the curriculum in an appropriate

manner. It is possible for the Provincial Government to provide incentives for MUN to carry out such updates, as it is highly likely that the majority of the Bachelor of Education graduates from MUN will be working in the schools administered by the Provincial Government. Several relevant elements are already included in the B.Ed. curriculum and modifications could be made to existing elements by making some of the electives mandatory, or adding to the contents of some already existing courses.

3. Education and health

While economic indicators of our province have improved significantly during the past decade, the physical health of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador seems to be deteriorating. The Provincial Government has acknowledged this and has developed a Primary Health Care Framework for Newfoundland and Labrador 2015-2025.⁶ The Advisory Council supports several aspects of the Framework and would like to reiterate how important education is to improving prevention of, among others, youth obesity, and in promoting healthy lifestyles. Education can play an important role in developing a health literate generation who understands the connection between their overall health and their lifestyle, physical activity and food choices. It is generally known that poor health indicators are related to high health care costs and also contribute to strain on the acute care system of Newfoundland and Labrador. Moreover, as mentioned in the Framework, social and economic conditions shape the health of individuals, and some of the social determinants of health include education and literacy, gender, social exclusion and food insecurity.

There are specific indicators that can be used to monitor the health of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Some of them can be very concretely related to the children and youth of the province and to the educational system, including their obesity rate, physical activity rate, fruit and vegetable consumption, child development outcomes, and indirectly, age adjusted public spending per person.

What does it look like in Newfoundland and Labrador right now?

In 2007, the Provincial Government acknowledged the need to work toward increasing the physical activity of the province's children and youth by announcing funding toward implementing the Active Schools program⁷ in four schools in rural Newfoundland. At that time, the youth obesity rate

was 25%. In 2011, the obesity rate⁸ had already increased to 30.2% and in 2014, 46.6% of the youth were obese or overweight, compared to the Canadian national average of 23.1%.

Interestingly, in Newfoundland and Labrador, children between the ages of 12-19 are just as physically active in their leisure time as Canadian youth on average, with 70.3% of youth reporting being moderately active or active in their leisure time, compared to 70.4% for all Canadians of the same age.⁹ This seems to indicate that the underlying reasons behind obesity and overweight do not lie in the lack of physical activity during leisure time.

One of the important causes of overweight and obesity, apart from physical activity during leisure time, is diet and nutrition. It is well known that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are not eating as much fruit and vegetables as is recommended, with only 25.7% of the population of the province eating fruit or vegetables at least five times a day, compared to 39.5% in Canada.¹⁰ There is a high tendency among Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to eat processed food high in sodium, which is further contributing to an unhealthy diet.

What can be done?

As youth obesity and overweight do not seem to be connected with physical activity levels during leisure time, it seems that there is a need to rethink in an innovative way to incorporate physical activity and healthy nutrition into the school day. The Advisory Council recommends the Provincial Government consider three specific areas of physical health within the educational system of the province:

- Food available at schools
- Structuring the school spaces in such a way that they encourage physical activity
- Increasing physical activity during the school day

Below, we have collected ideas on how these types of changes could be modelled.

Food available at schools

In Newfoundland and Labrador the amount and type of food consumed by students is usually the responsibility of the child's parents or caregivers. Some schools have opted for either school breakfast or school lunch programs, which are usually paid partly by the parents and partly by

sponsors. It is also mentioned in the (former) Eastern School District's still applicable nutrition policy that "[s]chools can play a significant role by ensuring an environment that supports healthy eating. Improving the quality of students' dietary intake is important since meals and snacks consumed at school make a major contribution to their total daily consumption of food and nutrients."¹¹

The School Lunch Program of Newfoundland and Labrador has operated since 1989 with the aim of providing a hot, nutritious lunch to the province's children and youth, regardless of individual family circumstances.¹² In addition to contributing to a healthier diet for many of the students, the School Lunch Program is functioning in a way that is non-stigmatizing, as students do not know who has paid for their meal and who has not. A meal is available to anyone who has subscribed to receiving one. In 2014-15, the aim of the program was to serve close to 500,000 meals in 21 schools (out of the province's total of 262 schools). The Advisory Council recommend the Provincial Government evaluate the costs and benefits of programs such as the School Lunch Program and consider the possibility of ensuring the availability of non-stigmatizing and healthy lunch being provided at all the schools of the province in the future.

The Kids Eat Smart program, which organizes breakfast clubs in 85% of the province's school system, served 22,000 meals every school day in school year 2013-2014. The program, which was evaluated in 2013, seems to be highly successful in achieving the intended outcomes, including providing students with access to healthy food, contributing to improved awareness among students of healthy eating, contributing to improved educational outcomes in terms of students' educational attendance, academic performance and effort.¹³ Some of the older students are also invited to assist volunteers at the breakfast clubs, giving some students their first introduction to a volunteering experience and how they can contribute to their community. The school breakfast programs, being inclusive, low-threshold social spaces, could also be utilized as a location where, for example, a public health nurse could be present to talk to students who have questions, or where students could provide information to each other in a peer-to-peer counselling type setting.

In British Columbia, the BC School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program (BCSFVNP) has been providing fresh fruit and vegetables to the province's schools since 2005. The funding is provided by

the BC Ministry of Health to the BC Agriculture in the Classroom foundation, which, with the help of volunteers and supportive produce partners, provide fresh fruit and vegetable snacks every other week, thirteen times in the school year, to over half a million students.

The program was evaluated in 2012-2013 and the evaluation found that “acceptability of and willingness to try vegetables and fruit increased significantly in students starting the BCSFVNP in September 2012.” This finding was more pronounced among elementary school students than secondary school students, whose acceptance of fruit and vegetables was more influenced by their perceptions of whether their peers accepted vegetables and fruit.¹⁴ Furthermore, the program had an impact on vegetables and fruits tried at home for elementary school students, but not for secondary school students.

Introducing a similar initiative in primary/elementary schools of Newfoundland and Labrador would be an excellent way for younger school-aged children to become knowledgeable about fruits and vegetables, and provided that local producers were used to provide the vegetables, would raise awareness about the produce available in Newfoundland and Labrador. It would also be economically beneficial to participating local businesses.

Similar initiatives do already exist in the province, namely the Farm to School Salad Bar, which was launched at St. Bonaventure’s College in St. John’s in spring 2015. The self-serve, all-you-can-eat salad bar allows students to pick from a variety of vegetables and fruits, with as much as possible sourced locally, according to the season.¹⁵ There are also some schools in the province that use a part of their outdoor education time to visit gardens and farms, to look at and educate the children on how to grow healthy food locally. These initiatives are an excellent way of making children aware of the different types of fresh food available and its benefits.

Rethinking the ways in which school spaces are structured

Most schools in our province are structured in such a way that they are associated with sedentary lifestyle, where children sit by their desks much of the day. However, research shows that sitting too much causes disease and orthopedic dysfunction, and impedes children’s ability to learn.¹⁶

There are different ways in which school spaces can be structured to reduce the hours students spend sitting down. For example, in the US some schools have introduced standing desks for children, instead of the traditional desks with chairs. The thinking behind this is that students at standing desks burn between 15% to 25% more calories during the school day than the ones who remained sitting, with an even bigger impact among obese students, whose calorie use increases by up to 25%-35%. Small movements at standing desks, such as fidgeting, have a large impact on calorie expenditure and it has even been shown that students in standing classrooms are more engaged.¹⁷

Another way to rethink the school space is to think about learning landscapes rather than the traditional desks and chairs, or even concrete classrooms. By restructuring school spaces in this way, the students are encouraged to move more during the school day, they might be sitting down, but not always in the same position, and they might be sitting, standing or lying down on the floor.

At Albermarle County Public Schools in Virginia, US, the classrooms have been remodelled in such a way that they provide flexible learning spaces, rather than desks and chairs. The classrooms have at least three kinds of seating. They use flexible bookshelves that can be moved to create smaller spaces and instead of individual workspaces, they use large round or rectangular tables, or put four desks together to form a more collaborative space. The students are allowed to sit, stand or lie where they want to, as long as they are safely in the classroom. The classrooms have sofas, chairs, bunk beds and canoes, and what is seen is that students' grades have improved, the students seem happier and more engaged, and the students are participating more and having more invigorating conversations.¹⁸ In many countries, including Finland, new school buildings are designed in a way which enables flexible creation of learning spaces, and which combine the need for teaching, recess, learning and playing. We would like to draw your attention to the following video clips presenting two different schools in the US and Finland and their take on flexible learning spaces:

Albermarle County Public Schools flexible learning spaces

<http://www.edutopia.org/practice/flexible-classrooms-providing-learning-environment-kids-need>

Ritaharju School in Oulu, Finland – flexible learning and the use of technology

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5gYpgjZz1I>

Academic research is also beginning to show the impacts of clever classrooms on the students' educational performance and satisfaction. A study published by the University of Salford in Manchester, UK, found clear evidence proving that “well-designed primary schools boost children's academic performance in reading, writing and maths. Differences in the physical characteristics of classrooms explain 16% of the variation in learning progress over a year for the 3766 pupils included in the study.”¹⁹ The different aspects of their study, including naturalness, individualisation and the level of stimulation of the school built environment are presented in the figure below.

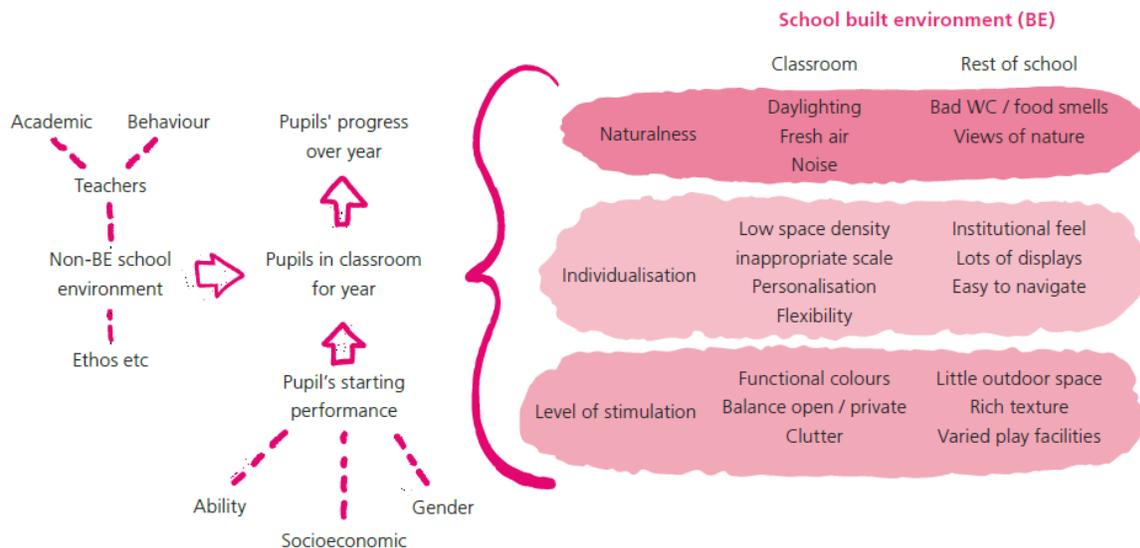


Figure 1: Barrett et. al 2015 - Stimulation, Individualisation and Naturalness of environments

Looking at the schools of the province, the school buildings are in general not colourful, inviting, open and light spaces, with direct access to daylight, fresh air, varied play facilities or views of nature. Research shows that “Colour is believed to be the most important visual experience to human beings. [...] Colour can be very effective in learning and educational setting, marketing, communication, or even sport.”²⁰ The Advisory Council feels that there is room for improvement in

terms of the learning environments provided to the students of this province – both in terms of reducing their sedentary lifestyles as a way to fight overweight and obesity, but also because of the strongly proven improvements in academic progress in students, who have access to flexible and stimulating working environments.

Increasing physical activity during the school day

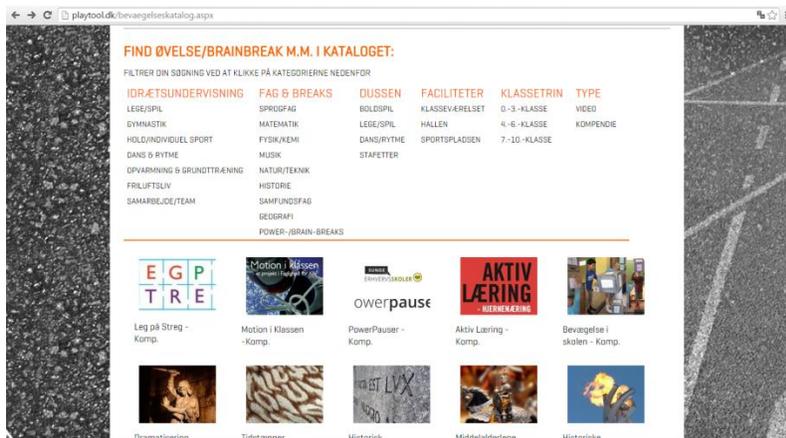
In 2007, the Provincial Government invested \$2.4 million in new physical education equipment in schools across the province as a part of the Active Schools program. In October 2015, the Government announced the expansion of this program, as well as the Participation Nation programming, with additional \$500,000 budgeted to support increased physical activity programming for school aged children. According to the Government, “the Active Schools program provides students with the opportunity to learn through curriculum-based activities that incorporate physical activity in the classroom. Participating schools will be provided with resources, equipment and teacher training.”²¹ The Active Schools program seems to be an excellent initiative, if it is working as it is intended. However, when conducting research for this submission, the Advisory Council was unable to find any sources assessing its effectiveness. It would be highly relevant to evaluate the program’s impacts to ensure that any positive experiences can be duplicated and the program made available to all the schools in the province, if found effective.

The Advisory Council acknowledges the efforts of the Provincial Government in this regard and would also like to point out other programs, such as ParticipACTION and Getting’ Outside School Challenge, as ways to increase students’ physical activity during the school day. Some schools have good experiences of organizing sports activities during school, in particular during the long recess, when children are encouraged to play and run.

However, if the Provincial Government is interested in rethinking and restructuring the school environment and school day in an innovative way which would create a more physically active, flexible and inspiring school day, it might be relevant to consider restructuring the school day even further, in the direction that the Active Schools program is going. This type of a restructuring took place in Denmark in 2014²², when the Danish Government introduced a reform of the public schools and made it compulsory for all pupils to engage in physical activity for an average of 45

minutes each school day, including the existing physical education classes. The restructuring of the school day was accompanied with different types of resources for teachers, to help them plan and include the physical activities in their teaching.

One example of such resources is a catalogue developed by the Municipality of Aalborg in Denmark.²³ The examples can be filtered based on the following categories: Physical education; other subjects and breaks; after school-club; facilities; grades; types of guides (video or textbook).



Picture 1: Example of the exercise and brain break catalogue developed by the Municipality of Aalborg in Denmark

Another such catalogue has been developed by the organization “Physical education in Danish Schools”, whose program *Make the School Move* contains plentiful information and ideas for teachers and other stakeholders.²⁴ Many examples are supported by videos that are available online. The examples can be filtered into grade, subject, with/without movie.



Picture 2: Extract of the exercise catalogue *Make the School Move*

The Finnish Government has included a similar reform in their 2015 government program, where each pupil in Finnish public schools will have one hour of exercise per day at school from 2016

onwards. This is part of the program Finnish Schools on the Move, which is being evaluated by academic researchers as an on-going evaluation during its implementation.²⁵

The Advisory Council also considers it relevant for the province's schools to consider the ways in which school spaces are used outside of school hours. In order to develop a school culture that embraces the community in which the school is located, it is worth considering whether the schools could be used more actively by the community outside of regular school hours. Could other public services, such as libraries, be located within the school premises as a way to emphasize the community feeling? It is our view that schools, which are not open to the children's parents and families lack community feeling. Schools, which are buildings paid for with public money, could be put to use as central points of activity, making the best use of taxpayers' money while also increasing the feeling of community.

Mental health

In practice, there is still a strong stigma in Newfoundland and Labrador concerning mental illnesses and seeking help, even though statistically, the population of Newfoundland and Labrador seems to be doing better than an average Canadian in terms of mental health. This is also a challenge in relation to the province's education system, because childhood mental health disorders are commonly associated with poor education outcomes, poor economic outcomes and adult mental health disorders, among others.²⁶ In 2015, the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association expressed their strong concerns about the increasing mental health issues in schools, combined with a very low guidance counsellor to student ratio, which is reported to be 1:500. A guidance counsellor mentioned that "We're there at key phases of development and we have an understanding of how we can support and empower kids. It's very disheartening when you know you have the skills, and if you just had the time maybe you could have prevented many of these crises from happening,"²⁷

Likewise, once a student does get to see a guidance counsellor and the counsellor considers it necessary for the student to obtain professional help of a psychologist or a psychiatrist, the waiting times can be very long. This is particularly concerning because many mental illnesses - some sources say between 50% and 70% - have their onset before the age of 18. This means that mental illnesses

can potentially play a large role in a child's development, their performance in school and relationships inside and outside the school.²⁸

If teachers suspect mental illnesses among their students, there should be a way for the student to see a guidance counsellor or another professional immediately, as the sooner you begin treating an illness, the more effective the treatments will be.

There is also a growing prevalence of anxiety disorders among school-aged children, with prevalence rates assessed to be at 10-20%. Anxiety disorders cause interference in a child's day to day functioning and cause concerns for a child, such as worries about injury or natural events, or worries about school performance, social competence and health issues. While there are many factors that contribute to anxiety amongst children, we have a responsibility to lessen those influences where possible. Positive reframing and modeling effective coping are some of the helpful strategies for anxious children²⁹, but what we are finding instead is the implementation of mandated lockdown drills throughout schools in the province despite the lack of data to support the effectiveness of such practises or the effects they may have on children's mental development.³⁰

While it is relevant for school staff to be aware of correct procedures in case of danger, practising these with, in particular, the youngest students in Grades K-6 can, in our opinion, lead to unnecessary increase in sources of anxiety among young children. Resources spent performing drills and administering these policies would be better spent on violence prevention including anti-bullying practises thereby emphasizing proactive rather than reactive measures.

It is important that we try to find a better balance between ensuring the safety of our children while making them feel confident and secure in a school that is open and welcoming.

4. Education and healthy relationships

Our schools need to focus attention at every level, in an age-appropriate manner, on healthy relationships, sexual health, the meaning of consent, sexual assault/harassment, and internet/online safety. The prevalence of sexual assault, cyber-bullying and "sexting" and the consequences of all these are well documented and they are a rapidly developing concern among our youth.

The Safe and Caring Schools Initiative, which aims to “promote safe and caring learning environments and to be pro-active/preventative in addressing violence issues”³¹, was updated in 2013 following an evaluation of the original 2006 policy. The Initiative provides guidance to educational stakeholders on how to develop and maintain a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment, but ten years into implementation our schools continue to battle with issues of bullying and harassment.

School Climate Survey

The School Climate Survey was piloted in 2012 by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for Grades 2, 5 and 7-12, as well as for parents and teachers. It surveys the students on issues such as student satisfaction, learning opportunities, safety, bullying and harassment, and alcohol and drugs. The School Climate Survey provides an excellent overview of the climate in the schools of our province.³² It is of significant concern that the survey shows that bullying and harassment are still strongly prevalent in our schools. Looking at the responses of surveyed Grade 9 students, it can be seen that:

- 20% of grade 9 students (22% of male) have been bullied or harassed physically in the last month.
- 34% of grade 9 students (39% of female) have been bullied or harassed verbally in the last month.
- 30% of grade 9 students (38% of female) have been bullied or harassed indirectly in the last month.
- 16% of grade 9 students (19% of female) have been sexually harassed in the last month.
- 17% of grade 9 students (21% of female) have been bullied or harassed electronically in the last month.

Unfortunately, the survey has been structured in such a way that comparison between 2013-14 and 2014-2015 results is not possible, making it difficult to see whether improvements have been made in this regard since the update of the Safe and Caring Schools Initiative in 2013.

Moreover, the questions in the School Climate Survey do not allow for an analysis of underlying reasons and explanations to issues identified, as data is not provided on the students’ background or family situation. The well-formulated questions of the School Climate Survey could be further supported by background questions on the students’ perceived health, eating habits etc., to similarly

provide an overview of additional health indicators, such as obesity rate, physical activity rate and healthy food consumption.

The survey results could be used more actively by the schools, parents and decision-makers to direct activities and policies to where issues are concretely identified. For example, a student council or similar student body could analyze the results of their specific school and propose different ways in which the school climate could be improved in the future.

Finland has carried out a School Health Promotion (SHP) study since 1996, monitoring the health and well-being of Finnish 14–20-year-old adolescents. The aim of the SHP study is to strengthen the planning and evaluation of health promotion activities at school, municipal and national levels. While it covers questions relating to the school climate much like the NL School Climate Survey, it also covers a wide array of background questions and issues related to the students' home situation. As the study reaches 80% of the age group in comprehensive schools and 70% in upper secondary schools and has been carried out since mid-90s, it provides an excellent source of data for analysis and policy making.³³

Making use of restorative approaches to conflicts

The Advisory Council recommends the schools of Newfoundland and Labrador make active use of restorative approaches in building healthy relationships; both preventing conflicts from happening in school environments and solving conflicts which have happened. Restorative approaches are also embedded in the Safe and Caring Schools Policy, with a goal to “Encourage pro-active and preventive endeavors as well as remedial and restorative approaches when problems do occur.” The schools in our province where restorative approaches have been implemented have highly positive experiences. It is our recommendation that all schools train staff in Restorative Justice. This type of training is available through the Relationships First: Restorative Justice in Education Consortium NL, which the Advisory Council supports.

Incorporating healthy relationships, consent, and dating and sexual violence into the school curriculum

In addition to using restorative approaches in schools, the Advisory Council considers it important to ensure that all the students in Newfoundland and Labrador have been educated in healthy

relationships, consent, and dating and sexual violence as a way to increase awareness and prevent violence. The Advisory Council recognizes the absolutely pivotal role our education system has the power to play in education in these areas. Early education is a powerful tool in prevention, and this opportunity should be seized. Early education and prevention will have an immeasurably positive impact on everyone in the province, and significantly so on women, who statistically are at a much higher risk of sexual violence. Moreover, the health authorities are warning that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are on the rise in Newfoundland and Labrador with the numbers of syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia on the rise.³⁴ This shows an increasing need to ensure students are well-informed about the risks, how they can become infected and what to do if they suspect they have been infected with an STI.

5. The role education plays in developing life skills

During a recent consultation by the Panel on the Status of Public Education in Newfoundland and Labrador by the Newfoundland Labrador Teachers' Association, the Faculty of Education, Memorial University and the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, several views were heard from employers of the province concerning the lack of life skills in recent graduates. These concerns are related to very specific topics that are currently not taught sufficiently at schools, and the lack of general life skills. Below, we will discuss some of these issues in more detail.

Topics related to life skills but not sufficiently covered

The Advisory Council is of the opinion that even though parents have a clear responsibility in teaching their children concrete life skills, there are also fundamental skills that the province should include in the curriculum to ensure equal opportunity for all students. These include financial literacy, how to job search, write resumes, and how to decide what type of career is most suitable for you. What the province's employers are currently seeing are students who do not always know, how to write job applications, present themselves at interviews, or how to handle their personal finances. These are all skills, which everyone needs in order to live independently and to be able to provide for him/herself, and for any dependants. By not supplying students with these skills through the school system, educating the children will be left to parents, some of whom are better equipped to

provide the information than others. The children who do not receive the relevant information from their parents will be further marginalized, continuing the cycle of poverty.

These issues are to some extent related to the Essential Graduation Learnings (EGLs) of the curriculum design currently used in Newfoundland and Labrador (The Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Learning in Schools 1997), where the EGLs currently cover issues such as citizenship, communication, problem solving and personal development. This is also specified in the current curriculum, where EGLs are described as follows: “EGLs describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes expected of all students who graduate high school. Achievement of the EGLs will prepare students to continue to learn throughout their lives. EGLs describe expectations not in terms of individual subject areas but in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes developed throughout the curriculum as a whole. They confirm that students need to make connections and develop abilities across subject areas if they are to be ready to meet the shifting and ongoing demands of life, work and study.”³⁵ It should be ensured that financial literacy and ability to plan and manage your career are included within these EGLs. Furthermore, there should be a stronger focus on educating students about the environment, climate change, recycling and how to be environmentally conscious. The Newfoundland and Labrador Environmental Educators has collected a great source of programs for different topics and grade levels on how environmental teaching can be incorporated into the schools.³⁶

Career education

While different kinds of guides exist in the province on students’ career options, it is important to emphasize the importance of face-to-face counselling and of hearing and seeing concrete examples of people having chosen a specific career. Ensuring that guidance counsellors and career education teachers have the most up-to-date information on the labour demand and the characteristics of the Newfoundland and Labrador labour market is key to helping pupils and students make the right career choices for their future. Career counselling should also be increasingly gender neutral in such a way that each student receives guidance based on their interests and abilities. Gender stereotyping in career counselling is limiting and fails to thoroughly consider the skills and interests of an individual, regardless of their gender. Career education is offered at the schools of Newfoundland and Labrador for Grades 9-12,³⁷ and two credits in career education are required for students to

graduate high school. However, the Advisory Council's experience is even though the curriculum description of the career education courses seems to cover several relevant issues, the outcomes are not sufficiently positive.

Likewise, ensuring adequate career exposure to students as part of the curriculum (or even as an extra-curricular activity organized with the help of the career counsellors) could broaden the students' perspectives on future options and contribute towards informed decisions. In addition to career fairs in high schools, this could be done through job shadowing programs for students or through engaging people in the workforce to mentor students.

It is essential that the career education courses receive the attention they need both from the teachers and the students, which is why their content and required outcomes should be assessed for adequacy and sufficient coverage. It would be prudent to collaborate with prospective employers to ensure that the information the students receive covers the needs and requests of their potential future employers. As mentioned above, the current guidance counsellor/student ratio in Newfoundland and Labrador makes it difficult for guidance counsellors to dedicate the time they need to supporting students with difficulties or mental health issues. This is why it is recommended guidance counsellors should not teach career education courses in order to focus on the mental health and social work. Instead, dedicated career education teachers should ensure full coverage of career education needs of the students.

Increased focus on absenteeism

The Advisory Council is concerned about the high levels of absenteeism in the public schools of Newfoundland and Labrador. Statistics from the Department of Education show that in 2012-13, on any given day, more than 6,000 of the province's 65,000 pupils were absent from school, with more than 2,800 providing no reason for their absence. These children are at high risk of exclusion from society at large, as research shows that "[...] truancy and chronic absenteeism can be precursors to school drop-out, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency."³⁸ Stakeholders' awareness should be increased of the risks and challenges related to absenteeism and possible solutions to remedy the situation. It is important to understand the characteristics of chronically absent students before proposing concrete interventions. Only upon finding reasons behind

absenteeism is it possible to propose solutions and interventions. Examples of such interventions include ensuring the presence of a social worker at schools throughout the province as a way to ensure qualified support is available and positive reinforcement for attendance or recognizing classes with least absenteeism.

It can also be relevant to look at the consequences of non-attendance, as currently the follow-through with parents is ineffective in changing behaviour or reducing absenteeism. While chronic absenteeism is sometimes related to the student's family situation, there are also cases where the parents are trying their best, but are at a loss with what to do with a child who might be simultaneously struggling with issues of substance abuse or mental health. A strong and functional network of guidance counsellors and social workers, together with quick access to mental health services, where needed, would be an excellent beginning to find a solution toward reducing absenteeism. It might be relevant for schools to have access to rotating "health care teams" of physicians, psychologists, social workers and nurses, who would be present on a regular basis and connected to a limited number of specific schools.

Deadlines and consequences

As a way to prepare students for life outside of the school, respect for deadlines, dealing with conflicts and related consequences should be emphasized in schools. It is not acceptable that students, who do not complete their assignments face no consequences in terms of lower grades or failing classes. These types of general life skills are an essential part of a child's education and children should be supplied with them during the formative years of primary and secondary education. Children learn from their successes and their disappointments, and both of these supply them with relevant life skills and lessons of ambition, success and failure.

The Advisory Council does not intend to provide any concrete recommendations in terms of the controversial issue of holding back children who do not pass their exams and reach the academic results they should at the end of a school year.³⁹ However, the undeniable issue is that many students who graduate from the high schools of the province lack the relevant academic qualifications as they have been "pushed through" the educational system, even though their academic level is not up to the standard required at their age. This means that the current system is not working as it should.

While academic research seems to point more toward the conclusion that holding students back is harmful to their development, there seems to be a consensus that if a student is not at the academic level required for a specific grade, relevant supports, such as additional lessons, teaching aides or affordable tutoring are necessary to ensure that the student catches up with his/her peers and is able to graduate with the same skill level. Pushing a student through school without him/her having the skills required to graduate is neither beneficial for him/her nor the society, as this person will very likely face difficulties in applying for post-secondary education or jobs.

Dress codes

Finally, the Advisory Council has been contacted on a number of occasions concerning schools' dress codes. These contacts have often been related to dress codes that have not been gender neutral. We consider it important for schools to ensure that *if* schools feel the need to have a dress code, this dress code should be consistent and applied equally across the schools of the province. We suggest both students and school personnel be involved in developing the dress code in order to ensure agreement and buy in from everyone.

6. Inclusive education

The Safe and Caring Schools Policy states that the schools of the province will promote acceptance and inclusion of all individuals, and schools are to ensure that their classroom and school-based policies are inclusive. Inclusion ensures equal learning opportunities for all children, but it also requires additional resources from teachers in terms of individualizing instruction implementation in the classroom, depending on the composition of the class. The Advisory Council welcomes inclusive educational practices and the availability of education for all individuals, regardless of their economic status, national or ethnic origin, religion, culture, body image, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age or ability. However, adequate supports should be available in the classroom to ensure that teachers' attention is directed at teaching and ensuring that all students in the classroom receive similar levels of attention. The concrete needs of students with exceptionalities cannot be met without sufficient help of teaching assistants or similar supports. Issues can arise, for example, when public schools might not be able "to provide the specialized education required for children with autism, especially those with the most severe language and behavior disorders. It is unrealistic to expect that regular education teachers will always have the specific training required for this

population, be aware of the latest research, or be able to readily adapt the school's curriculum. In addition, children with special needs are sometimes assigned one-to-one aides who have little training or experience in autism or other developmental disabilities.”⁴⁰ This is why it is essential that when inclusive education is the norm, it has to be balanced with the right kinds of supports, including well-trained teaching aides.

7. Social exclusion

Whereas the Newfoundland and Labrador public school system is free of charge and open (and obligatory) to the children residing in the province, there are still some issues contributing to an increased social exclusion among the students. Above, we have mentioned the school lunch and breakfast programs, which aim to bridge the gap between children who are regularly provided with healthy meals and those with less resources. Another issue that can cause additional social exclusion among students is related to additional costs of activities, such as excursions and physical education activities, including skiing trips or skating. Those without means to participate are often those who are most in need of the activity, further emphasizing the divide. It should be ensured that even students who might not have the financial means to participate in activities taking place within the school, even though they might be classified as extra-curricular activities, have the chance to participate. We acknowledge that the NL English School District has a policy in place stating the same, and encouraging school administrators to reduce barriers to participation and making every effort to assist students with limited financial means.⁴¹

In addition to the above, schools are increasingly carrying out fundraising for various causes, often to support the purchasing of special equipment, such as tablet computers. The funds requested from parents, even though they might feel insignificant to some parents, can be too much for parents with less financial means. If fundraising is necessary for schools, it should be done in such a way as not to reveal who has contributed and who has not.

Similarly, school supplies are some of the only concrete costs that parents have for enrolling their children in public schools. An excellent way of minimizing these costs would be for the school district to purchase school supplies in bulk, making sure all students have access to the same types of simple and affordable school supplies at bulk price.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this submission has been to provide the Provincial Government with an insight into issues that have been brought to the attention of the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women concerning the education system of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Advisory Council members are located in all corners of the province, bringing in their experiences and views collected through their engagement in their communities and workplaces. Furthermore, the Advisory Council staff meet with a varied group of stakeholders on a regular basis and participate in committees covering issues such as entrepreneurship, women in trades, sexual assault, restorative practices, human rights, access to justice and sexual exploitation.

We hope this submission will feed into the Provincial Government's work to review the province's education system with the aim to restructure and improve it. We consider it essential that the improvement of women's economic and social security in our province begins where the general attitudes of children can be affected in the most positive way – in the public schools of Newfoundland and Labrador. Kindly find below a list of recommendations based on the discussions above.

Recommendations

Underlying issues

1. Ensure the same level of implementation of Safe and Caring Schools policy through continuous monitoring.
2. Ensure each school has sufficient number of staff who have been trained in violence and harassment awareness, restorative justice and the use of Bullying Intervention Protocol.
3. Review and assess the need to revise the curriculum for Bachelor of Education at MUN to ensure graduating teachers are well equipped to teach diverse groups, recognize and deal with bullying and harassment, discuss healthy relationships and consent.

Education and health

4. Explore possibility to introduce fruits and vegetables to all schools of the province.
5. Ensure all school children have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch, also those who cannot afford it. Explore the possibility for the Provincial Government to top up the costs for those who cannot pay for the lunch themselves.

6. Consider using the school breakfast programs as inclusive, low-threshold social spaces, where information can be sought and provided by, among others, public health nurses or students in a peer-to-peer manner.
7. Diversify the ways in which school spaces are structured. Encourage flexibility among teachers to redesign their classrooms.
8. When designing new schools, think open and accessible. When renovating old schools, bring more colour and openness to school buildings.
9. Incorporate more physical activity into school day with active recess and physical activity during teaching.
10. Evaluate the Active Schools program to ensure effectiveness and ability to duplicate positive findings.
11. Consider how to let community use school spaces more actively outside of regular school hours. Consider how to develop a more open school by, for example, allowing parents into classrooms.
12. Shorten waiting times to psychologists and psychiatrists.
13. Increase number of guidance counsellors.
14. Ensure each school has a social worker on staff.

Education and healthy relationships

15. Use the School Climate Survey to identify which schools are in need of specific interventions. Include additional questions to the survey analyzing the background data and family situations of the students, and ensure the questions are formulated in such a way as to enable comparisons to capture positive and negative change.
16. Encourage student councils or other similar student bodies to analyze the School Climate Survey results and propose actions to mitigate challenges emerging from the findings.
17. Incorporate healthy relationships, consent, dating and sexual violence into school curriculum. Raise additional awareness of STIs, risks and treatments.

The role education plays in developing life skills

18. Ensure high school graduates have sufficient skills in financial literacy and ability to plan and manage their career.
19. Ensure career exposure through visits, fairs and mentoring.
20. Improve the outcomes of the obligatory career education and review the curriculum in collaboration with employers.
21. Free guidance counsellors' time to work with students on mental health etc. by hiring career education teachers.
22. Increase stakeholder focus on absenteeism and the risks, challenges and potential solutions.
23. Consider consequences for non-attendance.
24. Ensure supports to those not meeting academic requirements to reach the level required.

Social exclusion

25. Ensure students without financial means have the possibility to participate in extra-curricular activities.

26. Minimize costs for school supplies by buying bulk and enabling parents to purchase supplies for cost-price.

Inclusive education

27. Ensure availability of supports to students with exceptionalities.

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- ⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 105-0501, year 2014.
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