



Policy



Paper

Re-Engineering Education

CURING THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC
DEFICIT IN NOVA SCOTIA

By Paul W. Bennett

Halifax, Nova Scotia,

February 2018



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About the Author



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Executive Summary

Re-engineer school governance and invest where it matters

Avis Glaze's Raise the Bar: A Coherent and Responsive Education Administrative System in Nova Scotia is the latest report on Nova Scotia education and delivered a much-needed creative disruption. It sets out to “build a more coherent, better aligned system” that would be responsive to the public and raises fundamental and underlying governance issues that will not go away. Abolishing regional school boards, however, does not solve the problem and seriously risks turning the system over to “educrats” (*The Chronicle Herald*, 2018a). It’s time not only to break the cycle of fractured, conflicted school management, but to fix local education governance.

The Nova Scotia education administrative system simply does not work for students, teachers, parents, or local communities. Elected school boards were fine in theory, but in practice they are constrained and ineffective in policy-making, archaic in their rules and procedures, and mostly unresponsive to legitimate parent and community concerns. That familiar pattern explains why regional boards have already been dissolved in the three neighbouring Atlantic Provinces. Glaze’s report points us in the right direction in proposing administrative streamlining, an independent student assessment agency, and a professional college of educators. Clarifying roles and responsibilities and ending the confusion and distrust will require a dramatic change, but we must also ensure proper democratic accountability.

Released on Jan. 23, 2018, the Glaze report recommended eliminating Nova Scotia’s seven elected English school boards with the promise of “expanded school councils” at some future time. Education Minister Zach Churchill (Nova Scotia, 2018a), endorsed that plan with minor modifications, but it runs the risk of creating a vacuum in local education governance. Retaining all seven school districts compounds the likelihood of further administrative build-up. Reducing the number to four – Halifax and three districts – would have generated more savings that could be invested in the design, development, and implementation of school-level governance.

The best course of action would be to announce a gradually planned transition to a more locally accountable and representative school-community governance model, replacing the boards with autonomous, self-governing school councils (NSDE, 1994a). It would also set a clear direction and allow for the further development at a later stage, of regional co-ordinating bodies to be known as district education development councils.



Reclaiming our schools starts with a multi-step re-engineering plan: establish viable community school governance, reduce the number of school district structures, integrate provincial school operations support services, and reinvest any savings into supporting students and teachers in the classroom. That would set the system right-side up for students, teachers, parents, and communities.

This AIMS policy paper assesses the state of education management and governance, responds to the Glaze report, and shares our research findings. It concludes with a set of recommendations for achieving three principal objectives: establishing a more coherent and responsive model, restoring public accountability and local democracy, and reinvesting any savings where it matters – into improving teaching and learning in the classroom.

This paper is drawn from a larger AIMS research report, “Restructuring Education: Curing the Accountability and Democratic Deficit”, covering the state of school board governance in the four Atlantic Provinces and assessing the prospects for system-wide reform.



Introduction

Creeping centralization and the risks to local democracy

Creeping centralization can be relentless in the P-12 public education system. With regional school boards disappearing, direct links to parents and communities evaporating, and most education decisions subject to Education Department approval (Sheppard, Galway, Brown, and Wiens, 2013), local education governance is on life support in Nova Scotia and throughout the Atlantic region. Consolidation of school districts and board dissolution lie at the heart of the most recent projects of educational restructuring (Galway, 2016a). Governments have embraced district consolidation as the principal instrument of structural reform, often to the exclusion of more readily available options to achieve cost efficiencies, produce more effective schools, and better serve students (Duncombe and Yinger, 2007, 2010). Restructuring proposals are announced promising better governance and cost reductions, but providing little subsequent evidence that the new form of more centralized administrative governance is more efficient and less costly (Howley, Johnson, Petrie, 2011a; Galway, 2016b). Lost in any subsequent discussion is any real research into, or discussion of, the longer-term impact on public accountability for education at the school and community level (Glaze, 2018a; MacKinnon, 2018).

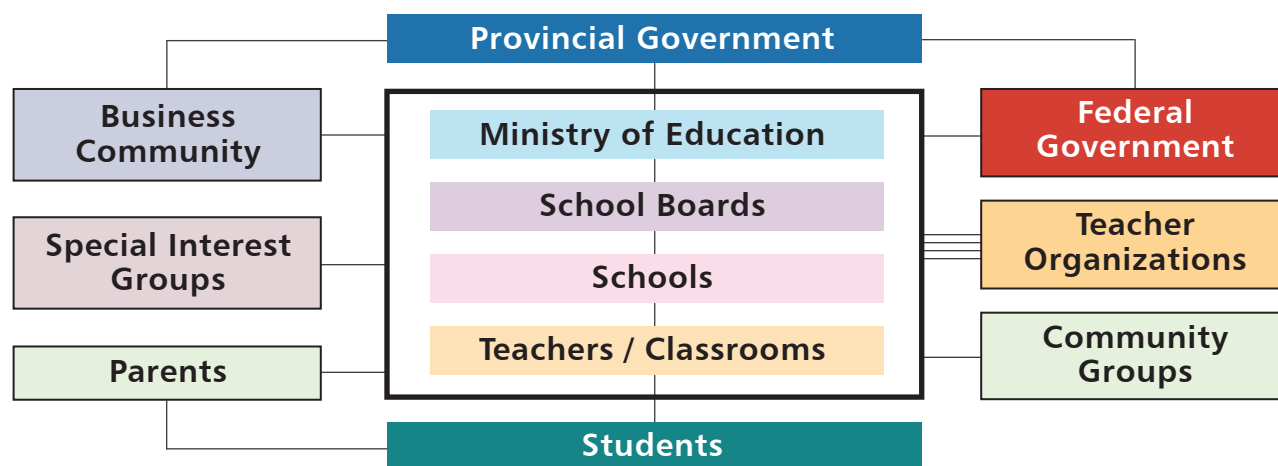
Regional school boards are heading for oblivion in Nova Scotia and have disappeared in the rest of Atlantic Canada. The Stephen McNeil government launched a review in October 2017 and authorized consultant Avis Glaze to undertake the project (NSDECD, 2017). The Glaze report sounded the death knell for elected school boards and ignited public discussion about the threat of bureaucratic dominance in an “era of educrats” (*The Chronicle Herald*, 2018b, Doucette, 2018; Laroche, 2018a).

Today’s school system is an integral part of the modern bureaucratic state and its influence is so pervasive that it’s next to impossible to identify who is in charge of running the schools. Former U.S. education secretary William Bennett gave this shadowy, comfortable education establishment a name – “the blob.” That “blob” was comprised of “people (superintendents, district office staff, and school trustees) in the education system who work outside the classrooms, soaking up resources and resisting reform without contributing to student achievement” (Walker, 1987; Dueck, 2015a). While that term is not used in Canada, political scientist Peter Clancy *et al.*, (2000a) contends that the education sector is dominated by “the core interests”, namely, education’s insiders – senior provincial officials, superintendents, principals, and in-house consultants.



Our bureaucratic education system resembles a fortress. *Globe and Mail* education reporter Jennifer Lewington and York University professor Graham Orpwood (1993) produced the best explanation of how the Ontario school system was akin to “Fortress Education” with a world divided into “insiders” and “outsiders”. That illustration (Figure 1) remains relevant more than 25 years later. Reforming the K-12 education system involves reclaiming it from these interests.

Figure 1: Fortress Education – Structure and Process



Source: “Insiders and Outsiders in Education,” from Jennifer Lewington and Graham Orpwood, *Overdue Assignment: Taking Responsibility for Canada’s Schools* (1993), p. 42.

Sweeping aside elected school boards comes easily when school trustees (known as “school board members” in Nova Scotia) are held in low public esteem and have lost their democratic legitimacy (*The Chronicle Herald*, 2018c). It is also clear that their organized associations have proven mostly ineffective in making the case for local education democracy (Galway, 2016c). Abolishing elected bodies without providing a viable alternative seems to further weaken local democratic control in public education. In Atlantic Canada, New Brunswick, Newfoundland & Labrador, and Prince Edward Island have all gone in that direction and local community interests lack any real voice in the school system (Bennett, 2014a).

Local education governance is on the rocks and the most significant reason is coming into sharper relief. In May of 2016, David MacKinnon, a professor at Acadia University, identified the serious credibility problem confronting elected school boards; he termed it “role ambiguity”. Having adopted and accepted a corporate governance model, the challenge facing Nova Scotia’s remaining elected boards was the disconnect between their current role and the role expected of them as a democratic voice in education. If schools are to reflect “community values”, MacKinnon (2016) concluded, then “community members should exercise some measure of direct control over the process”. That warning sent the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA)

scrambling to patch up the existing model (NSSBA, 2016a, 2017a), but it proved too little too late because the die was cast.

Simmering public unease in the 1990s about the ballooning costs of K-12 education and the boards' lack of public accountability prompted provincial governments across Canada to restructure their own local governance systems. From 1990 to 1997, every province moved to reduce, sometimes dramatically, the number of school district units and to consolidate school management (Fleming, 1997). School board abolition first struck New Brunswick in February 1996 when the Frank McKenna government announced that all boards would be eliminated and trustees removed from office. School district offices in New Brunswick remained essentially intact, with senior superintendents presiding over them. The glaring weakness in local accountability was only partially corrected in 2001 with the restoration of district education councils (DECs), populated by poorly remunerated volunteers serving in elected positions (Bezeau, 2000; Bennett, 2011a). One province at a time, elected regional school boards in Atlantic Canada have dropped by the wayside.

Dissolving elected the boards does not address the problem of administrative build-up and may inadvertently contribute to further bureaucratization. In Nova Scotia's case, the Glaze report exposed the extent of school board administration in a relatively small system of 390 schools serving some 118,000 students. In the 2016-2017 year, some 956 full-time positions were classified as "administration", representing 10 per cent of the teacher force and 6.7 percent of all school-based board staff (Glaze, 2018b, 10). A CBC News Nova Scotia report by Jack Julian revealed that 38 senior board administrators, scattered over the seven English boards, earned \$4.7 million per year in salaries. While Minister Churchill pledged to protect existing staff complements, maintaining seven units with that number of senior administrators will be difficult to justify when a commitment was also made to re-invest any savings from streamlining into the classroom. The Glaze report was inclined to see more potential for redirecting human resource savings into supporting improvements in the classroom and in school-level governance (Julian, 2018a).



The Nova Scotia school board model – and its deficiencies

Nova Scotia’s regional school board system remained essentially unchanged in its structure and organization for over 20 years. John Savage’s government established the N.S. model – based on structural reforms initiated in 1996 – as a critical piece in its education reform agenda (Clancy et al., 2000b). Guided by former education minister John MacEachern, the *Education Horizons* restructuring plan reduced the number of boards and introduced province-wide school advisory councils (SACs). The Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) was created as a component of municipal amalgamation. Superintendent Don Trider (1999) spearheaded the HRSB amalgamation process, and called it a challenging time where his leadership was exercised in a “turbulent policy environment”. Once the reorganized school boards were up and running, the status quo in terms of structure prevailed for two decades, while waves of restructuring happened in neighbouring Atlantic provinces. Three elected boards were fired, two in 2006 and one in 2012, but the existing school districts were preserved and protected (Bennett, 2011b, 2014b; Glaze, 2018c).

Nova Scotia’s school boards demonstrated some glaring, and some disguised, deficiencies:

1) Governance Philosophy and Practice:

More formal guidelines and policies – patterned after John Carver’s “policy governance” model – gradually supplanted informal and flexible governance practices, effectively neutering the boards. School board members were trained to adopt a corporate governance philosophy that significantly weakened their representative role as the public voice in the school system.

In December 2006, then-education minister Karen Casey fired the HRSB, paving the way for the adoption of a strict Carver policy governance model. Under the supervision of official trustee Howard Windsor, and with the advice of Halifax lawyer Cheryl Hodder, the board was reconstituted with a decision-making model that drew firm lines between board and management and limited the board to a “higher level policy role” (HRSB, 2008). The Education Department’s favourite consultant, James Gunn, seeded that model in other boards, particularly in Halifax, Annapolis Valley, and the South Shore, where he served at various times as acting superintendent (Bennett, 2011c).



2) Size and Scale Problem – Too Big to Be Responsive

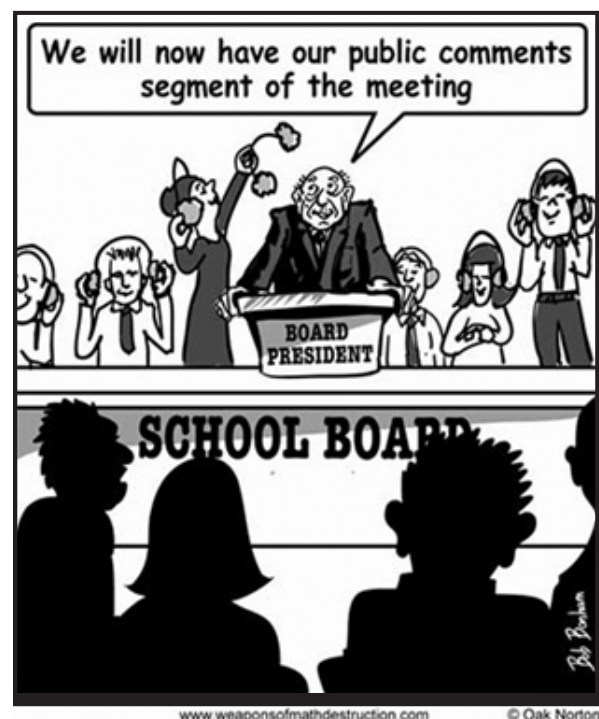
Since then, school district consolidation has resulted in ever-larger boards where decisions are made further away from the schools. Fifteen years ago, Queen’s University education professor T. R. Williams warned that regional school boards were too big to be effective: “Given the present size of boards, the traditional concept of an elected part-time trustee who can fully represent the interests of individual constituents is no longer viable. The current elected district boards are simply too large” (Williams, 2003a).

Super-sized school boards in Atlantic Canada have withered away as exemplars of local education governance everywhere except Nova Scotia. Merging the boards into “huge administrative units” made them “so large and politicized,” as Williams forecast, that they “resort to formulaic approaches to distribute resources.” While regional boards can provide some corporate direction, they proved to be “woefully inadequate as a democratic institution in whose trust resides the development of education of thousands of individual, different learners” (Williams, 2003b). However, a 2009 report on Canadian school boards dismissed Williams’ critique and his appeal to embrace innovative school-based reform plans, including publicly funded, autonomous charter schools (Brown, 2014; Brown and Rushowy, 2015).

3) Resistance to School-Level Democratic Accountability

Since the mid-1990s, with the NSSBA’s support, school boards have successfully beaten back any proposals to significantly restructure Nova Scotia education governance. During the 2006-2007 school year, following the firing of two school boards, Charles Cirtwill, then acting president of AIMS, mounted a determined effort to replace the other boards with “school-based management”. Inspired by the Edmonton Public Schools model and with the support of former superintendent Angus McBeath (2003a), Cirtwill (2007a) seized the opportunity to rid the province of “dysfunctional boards” and to devolve more decision-making authority to principals and local school councils. Pointing to Edmonton and to successful school-based

Figure 2: School Board Accountability: The View from the Public Gallery (Reprinted from Weapons of Math Instruction)



restructuring in New Zealand, he presented his case at a November 2007 premier's symposium on student achievement. "New Zealand has proven in these past 20 years that local school councils can help run schools," Cirtwill wrote, "and Edmonton has proven in these last 30 years that local school control works. Maybe it is time to consider merging the two ideas and, to coin a phrase, SAC our school boards" (Cirtwill, 2007b). That proposal and other representations fell on deaf ears.

4) Introduction of Strict Board Member Discipline Codes

Following the twin firings of the HRSB and the Strait Regional School Board in 2006, senior superintendents, with the department's support, began to enforce stricter codes of conduct for board members and to rein in and effectively muzzle unruly trustees, especially during intense periods of school reviews for closure (Bennett, 2011d, 2013a).

A small piece of legislation, Bill 131, the *School Board Members Duties Clarification Act*, further weakened board accountability. Through an amendment to the *Education Act*, elected trustees, termed "school board members", were required to "respect" regional superintendents and to focus on "achievement for all" without any reference to their vital roles providing community representation and public accountability (Bennett, 2012a). Such changes in policy only contributed to blurring responsibilities and to the mission-critical problem of "role identity confusion" (MacKinnon, 2016).

5) Public Disengagement and Spread of Acclamation Disease

The elected school boards also suffered from an advanced stage of "acclamation disease." In the Annapolis Valley Board, candidates were acclaimed in 12 of the 14 districts during the 2012 municipal election and one vacant seat was filled by subsequent appointment. Across the province, two-thirds of the seats were uncontested and only 155 candidates surfaced to contest 94 school board positions. The problem persisted in October 2016 in spite of an NSSBA campaign to encourage more public participation in school board elections (Bennett, 2012b; Glaze, 2018d).

6) Inability to Address Declining Student Performance

School boards were also incapable of tackling the problem of lagging student performance. Auditor General Michael Pickup, in his December 2014 review of the Yarmouth-based Tri-County Regional School Board (TCRSB), found that board oversight did not stand up under close scrutiny. While investigating record low scores on math and literacy tests, Pickup uncovered serious lapses in "management oversight" and found that the board did not "spend appropriate effort on the fundamental role of educating students." He was very specific in identifying the nub of the problem. "The board does not request or receive information," the report stated, "to know whether



schools are planning or making sufficient progress towards achieving business plan goals, the academic performance of students is meeting expectations and the development needs of teachers and principals are met” (NS AG, 2014a).

The Education Department was also alerted to the problem. “This is the first time,” then-deputy education minister Sandra MacKenzie told CBC News, “where the auditor general has made the connection between the board understanding its role and the management, in terms of supporting board understanding in its role and the management of the overall outcomes for (its) students ...” (CBC News NS, 2014, 2015).

7) Failure to Exercise Effective Oversight over Senior Administration

Auditor General Pickup was most critical of the boards’ lack of oversight in their dealings with their one employee – the superintendent – and his/her senior staff. He found little or no evidence that the TCRSB properly evaluated or held accountable its own superintendent (NS AG, 2014b). The next AG report in November 2015 confirmed that three other “governing boards” were not effectively performing their oversight functions. He turned his attention to whether or not “governing school board members are providing adequate oversight of the delivery of educational services in the schools.” One of his key recommendations was that the boards develop “a more definitive approach to ensuring appropriate oversight” (NS AG, 2015).

In November 2016, the NSSBA governance action plan committee, chaired by Annapolis Valley board member Sue Ritchie, proposed a voluntary compliance “Nova Scotia board governance approach” that would include performance standards, accountability measures, and a board member professional development program (NSSBA, 2016b). However, the resulting September 2017 “accountability templates” proved far too little too late to salvage the boards. Without really changing the prevailing governance philosophy, the NSSBA proposed a set of accountability tools designed to fix the whole problem (NSSBA, 2017).

8) Rigid and Inflexible Responses to School Closures and Hub School Renewal Plans

One responsibility the Education Department entrusted to the regional boards was the closing of small schools. From 2006 onward, the elected boards occupied the frontlines in successive waves of school consolidation, pitting their members against communities throughout rural and small-town Nova Scotia (Bennett, 2011e, 2013b). A 2013 provincial school review committee headed by retired civil servant Bob Fowler assessed the boards’ role in managing the review-for-closure process from 2008 to 2013, involving 77 schools and resulting in 26 school closures. His committee heard



plenty of public criticism of how boards conducted reviews and recommended that they be more open to the “hub school approach where it enhances the goals of the public school program, supports the community, and enriches the educational experience” (NS Fowler, 2013).

The eventual hub school guidelines, developed entirely by provincial and regional staff, imposed strict criteria and requirements, making it next to impossible for local parent groups to secure approval for innovative proposals to repurpose their community schools. In the case of Chignecto-Central Regional School Board, the superintendent and staff imposed requirements that constantly thwarted hub school proposals for three elementary schools, River John, Maitland, and Wentworth (Bennett, 2013; Corbett and Helmer, 2015). When the Cape Breton Victoria Regional School Board rejected the George D. Lewis Hub School Society plan in 2017, the parent group called for the entire board’s resignation (CBCNS, 2017). Closing schools and shooting down hub school plans burned bridges and alienated parents in a dozen or more communities.

Regional boards have grown more distant and disconnected from local communities. School boards consolidated and retrenched, and superintendents gradually expanded their authority over not only elected boards, but the whole P-12 school system. Closing schools has led to bigger elementary and secondary school plants and administrators now routinely refer to their schools as “buildings” (Bennett, 2015a). In the 2014 report, *Disrupting the Status Quo*, the Myra Freeman commission found that half of Nova Scotians were dissatisfied with school system performance and saw the potential for improved governance with “less duplication of services” and “more openness” to working across boundaries inside and outside the system. The NSSBA and its member boards operated in a peculiar educational bubble – when the decision to dissolve all seven boards was announced, it hit the NSSBA’s leading members and most board chairs like a bolt out of the blue (Laroche, 2018b).



Restoring public accountability – A community-based model of local governance

Abolishing school boards is not without risk, and fears that it will lead to a further diminution of public accountability are legitimate. Local education governance has not fared well in any system driven by administrative systems thinking. Over the past two decades, the modernist outlook that “bigger is better” and “systems management is good” have remained in the ascendancy (Gregg, 2001; Reddyk, 2003; Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2007; Kirk, 2008; Ontario, 2008, 2009; ASBA, 2013; Corbett, 2014). Throughout Atlantic Canada, provincial restructuring initiatives aimed at achieving cost efficiencies have been delegated to education bureaucrats and system administrators to implement, usually with the tacit support of the private business sector (Ungerleider and Levin, 2007). Such public policy approaches are based upon a public sector corporate model that has few if any cost advantages and is unresponsive to “the practicalities of schooling or the quality of working and learning conditions of students and teachers” (Mulcahy, 1999; Sattler, 2012; Barter, 2014). Expanding school district size contributes to administrative build-up, generating hard-to-manage bureaucracies that compromise the school district’s capacity to connect with schools and communities (Raham, 1998; Williams, 2003c; Lessard and Brassard, 2005a).

Avis Glaze clearly saw the confused roles in the existing governance model and the erosion of school board legitimacy as she reviewed Nova Scotia’s system in late 2017. She recommended the elimination of the seven English school boards and a reorganization of the system, based upon seven regional offices and the promise of a province-wide federation of “enhanced school advisory councils” (Glaze, 2018e).

The Glaze report represented a major step forward in confronting the boards’ dysfunction and ineffectiveness. It also sparked a predictable reaction as the provincial school board association dug in its heels and vigorously defended its political turf. Abolishing the seven boards without being more specific about the alternative form of local education governance contributed to the firestorm of immediate opposition from the aggrieved school board members and their newfound allies (Doucette, 2013).

The boards and the administration are supposed to perform different functions. Lumping them together is no real substitute for reinventing education governance, reducing board bureaucracy, and revitalizing school-level democratic accountability (Bennett, 2017). Simply appointing a provincial advisory board that is more diverse and inclusive (Gaskell, 2001) might help to promote openness, but will do little to instill local community ownership of the schools.



A better plan for structural education reform

This AIMS policy paper recommends that the province start by rebuilding school-level democratic governance, then phasing out the regional school boards. Reversing the order is the best way to achieve the ultimate objective of a more coherent, integrated system with enhanced local democratic accountability for improved student learning and achievement.

1) Go Back to the Future – Rebuild School-Level Governance

The case for replacing the regional boards with more responsive school-based governance and management has never been clearer. Provincial education authorities do not have to reinvent the wheel because 23 years ago, the province prepared the groundwork and tackled restructuring the system in serious fashion. That reform initiative generated two policy papers, *Restructuring Nova Scotia’s Education System* (1994) and *Education Horizons* (1995), and produced innovative plans that were never properly implemented in the P-12 school system. The intent of that initiative remains relevant today because it called for a “more responsive, accessible, client-oriented, and effective” model that “involves the community in decision-making.”

2) Decentralize Education Decision-Making

The Glaze report has opened the door to looking at decentralizing the entire education system and transferring more decision-making authority to school governing councils. Building upon reconstruction projects in Edmonton Public Schools, New Zealand, Australia, and four American states (Arizona, Kentucky, Illinois, and Washington), Nova Scotia could lead the way by embracing ‘site-based management’ (SBM) and engineering “a major decentralization of decision-making from the school district to the school site” (Caldwell, 2005; Boyd, 2008; Ouchi, 2008; Bennett, 2015b). Newer research from the World Bank demonstrates that decentralized, school-based decision-making can work under the right conditions and with pro-active leadership by principals and engaged parents (Barrera Osorio, Patrinos, Fasih, and Santibanez, 2009; Bruns, Filmer, and Patrinos, 2011).

3) Clear Away the Existing School Advisory Councils

Successful governance reform means clearing away the feeble and compliant School Advisory Councils (SACs). Since their creation in 1996, the SACs have floundered, most functioning under the thumb of principals and some competing with holdover home and school groups for legitimacy and recognition (Cirtwill, 2007c). You will look in vain on school websites for the names and contact information for anyone on the councils. If you inquire about it, you are immediately referred to the principal’s office

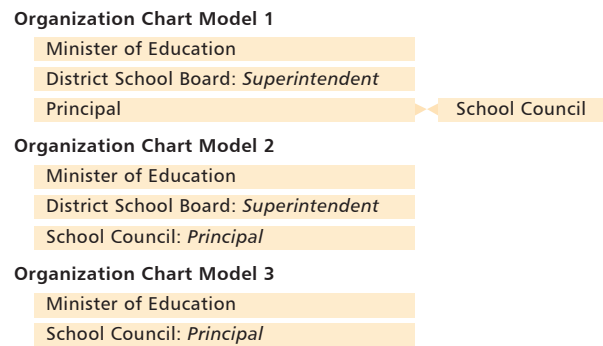


and usually redirected elsewhere. Where they are functioning, the school groups, like those in Ontario, spend more time organizing events and raising funds than helping shape school-level or board policies.

4) Establish Robust School-Community Governing Councils

Moving to autonomous, self-governing school councils would directly address the vacuum left by the boards' dissolution. The system would benefit greatly from moving the axis of local decision-making closer to those affected – students, teachers, parents, and communities. (Figure 3 – Model 3). Much more authority and responsibility would also be transferred from districts to the school level and vested in school councils.

Figure 3: Structural Reform Models
– from Restructuring the Education System, 1994 (NSDE)



5) Expand School Council Governance Responsibilities

School governing councils (SGCs) would supersede elected regional boards. Under a fully evolved model, the SGCs' authority would encompass decisions in a wider range of specified areas, including setting priorities, developing a school budget and improvement plans, making recommendations on the hiring and dismissal of principals, appointing principals and staff, and producing community accountability reports. Such a transformation requires clarity of purpose and plenty of resource support as principals and school councils take on new roles. Many jurisdictions have limited the role of governing councils in personnel matters, specifying only that councils review proposed principal appointments. Whatever the scope of the mandate, special care must be taken in the implementation stage to prevent principals from co-opting and dominating the new school-level bodies, as happened with the SACs.

Respect and Follow Governing Party Policy

Judging from its April 2016 policy resolution, the provincial Liberal Party favoured establishing one English-language school board and some form of school-level governance. That resolution also recommended studying and implementing "other mechanisms to ensure that parents find avenues to have their voices heard within the management of their local school". Potential savings from eliminating school board structures were to be used to "put more funding into the front line of teaching and learning for the youth of Nova Scotia". The resolution proposed restructuring after abolishing board structures. While Casey brushed aside the resolution, (CKBW News, 2016; NSLP AGM, 2016), it proved to be a fairly accurate prophecy.

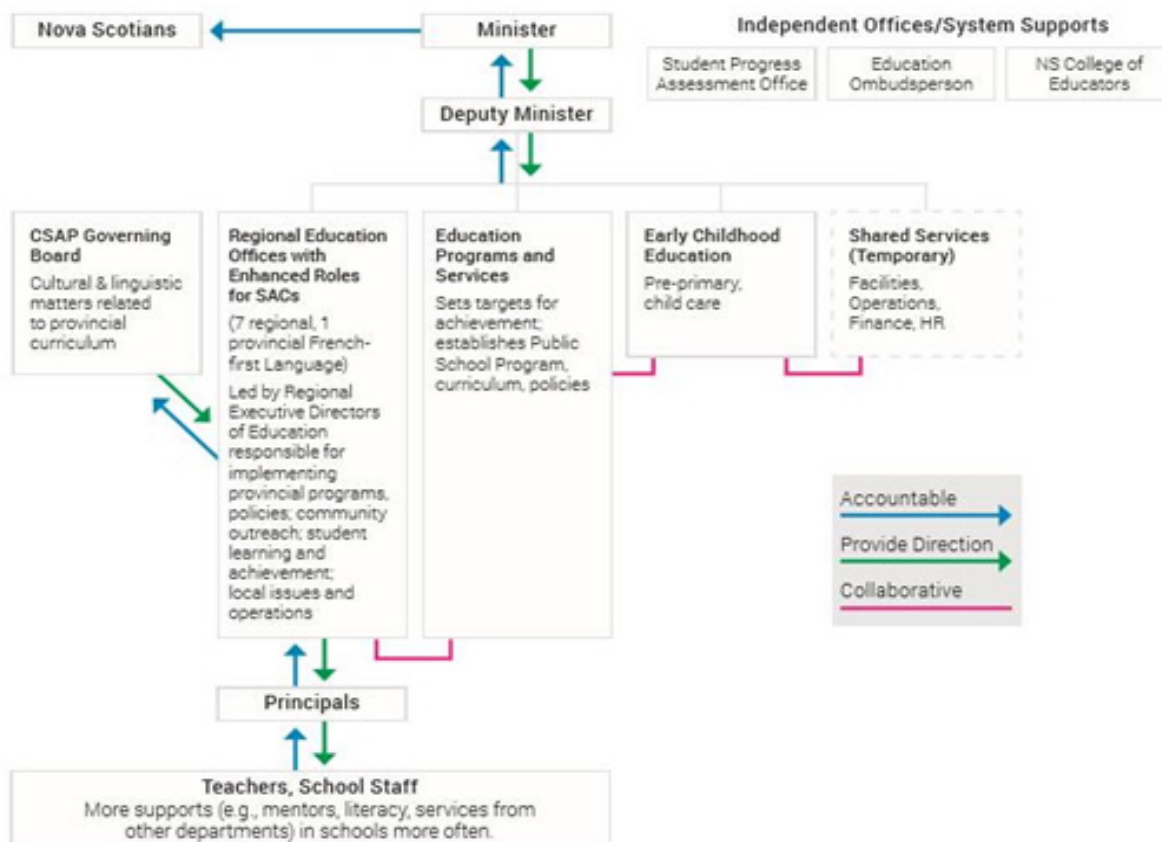
Summary and Recommendations

– An agenda for education system reform

Education is, first and foremost, a public service with complex, diverse operations that would greatly benefit from being more flexible and responsive as well as responsible to students, teachers, parents and communities. Decentralizing governance can provide governments with an effective means of improving student outcomes, streamlining administration, and increasing community ownership over schools (LaRocque and Boyer 2007). That is what Nova Scotia needs as a counterweight to the centralization of education administration implicit in Dr. Avis Glaze’s Raise the Bar plan for P-12 public education.

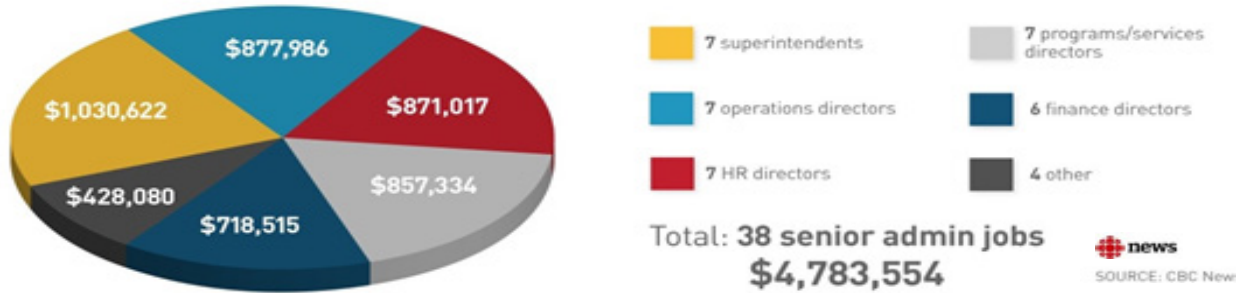
The proposed Glaze reorganization plan – the regional director model – clarifies who is in charge, eliminates elected boards, preserves eight district administrative units, and vests more authority and responsibility in newly appointed regional directors of education. It retains the seven English administrative units and relies upon regional directors to run district offices, reporting directly to the deputy minister in Halifax. It may clarify territorial imperatives and help to achieve a “laser focus on student learning and achievement,” but the plan is weak when it comes to consolidating

Figure 5: The Glaze Model – Regional Director Model of Education.



administrative offices, providing school-level accountability, and safeguarding local education democracy (*The Chronicle Herald*, 2018d; Nova Scotia, 2018b). The Glaze model, as adopted and modified by the education minister, includes a commitment to establish a provincial advisory council on education (Nova Scotia, 2018c).

Figure 4: School Board Administration Costs, Nova Scotia 2017 (CBC News Nova Scotia)



A better strategy for re-engineering education governance

Dissolving the seven English school boards will create a vacuum, likely to be filled by education administration. Concerned parents, school council volunteers, and small-school campaigners have plenty of recent experience being managed and ignored by regional superintendents and senior staff. In the case of school closures, parents in River John, Maitland, and Wentworth encountered district administration who created inflexible hub school criteria and thwarted community school advocates at every turn (Bennett 2013). Without structural guarantees of local school-level governance, little is likely to change under the new education order. Any new system will have to include viable, empowered, and responsible school-based management and governance (NSDE, 1994b; McBeath, 2003b; Bennett, 2016).

The Glaze report identified the extent of school board administrative build-up that needs addressing. Dissolving the boards and keeping all seven district administrative offices needs to be reconsidered. An administrative super-structure of 38 senior administrators earning \$4.7 million a year (Julian, 2018b) can no longer be justified on a per-student cost basis when so many other needs are unmet. Reducing the number of district offices to four, Halifax and three other regional offices, makes better sense and generates far more revenue than will actually be needed to design, develop, and build a robust school-level governance system. It would also provide more of an incentive to achieve greater cost efficiencies through the proven strategy of joint consortia for shared services, including financial services, transportation, purchasing, networked learning, and community services (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie, 2011b; Bennett and Gillis, 2015).

The best approach would be to replace the regional school boards with a school-community-based governance model first advanced in a 1994 Nova Scotia paper, Restructuring the System (NSDE, 1994c) and borrowing elements from the Edmonton Public Schools and New Zealand. The fundamental test of any initiative would be its efficacy in building from the school level up, not the top down. Reversing the flow of policy inputs will not happen unless and until a model is developed that allows for regular, formalized binary interaction between the schools and provincial education authorities (Dueck, 2015b).

A hybrid school-community-based model has many advantages over simply abolishing boards and substituting a provincial advisory council. Eliminating school boards without a suitable replacement, as happened in Prince Edward Island, results in a net loss in public accountability and visible popular resistance to any and all initiatives



from the centralized authority (Bennett and Helmer 2017). Embracing a broader school-community development approach would be far better than bureaucratic centralization or the current mish-mash of school governance models. School-based management and governance (Neal, 1991a; Lessard and Brassard, 2005b) combined with district education councils populated by trustees and municipal appointees from the community and business, is the best hope for salvaging local democratic control and creating more effective schools.

The proposed model would have two tiers – the department and SGCs implemented across all 390 P-12 public schools. The SGCs would be composed of 10 to 12 members, elected at the school level, with seven seats reserved for parents, two for community members, one for a local employer, and two staff, including the principal. One member would be selected as a trustee to represent the school on external provincial and regional governance bodies, such as the proposed district education development council.

School-based management would be implemented at each school and vested in the new SGCs, while former SACs would be dissolved. The new bodies would have expanded authority in ten mission-critical areas, including setting school priorities, developing a school budget and improvement plans, making recommendations on the hiring and dismissing of principals, appointing principals and staff, and producing community accountability reports.

At a later stage, co-ordination of local education governance could be assigned to a district education development council of regional trustees drawn from those elected at the school level. A majority of school trustees would be elected at the school-level and have clear lines of accountability in the system. The province and district would be wise to also appoint citizens representing broader community interests such as local municipalities, chambers of commerce, and the university/college sector. Successfully restructuring an educational system takes time and requires a longer-term school administration and community schools development strategy. Implementing such a plan may well take three to five years to establish a model that is effective and sustainable (Neal, 1991b; Bennett, 2018).



Key recommendations for implementation of school-community governance

A more effective, accountable and responsive education governance model would reverse the order of the Nova Scotia government's proposed restructuring plan roll out and embrace the following structural changes:

First Stage – for Immediate Implementation

- Replace elected regional school boards with a re-engineered school-based governance and management system;
- Reduce English school district administration in Nova Scotia to four administrative units, serving Halifax Regional Municipality, Cape Breton, Central Chignecto, and Annapolis/Southwest regions;
- Establish joint district consortia for the sharing of services, including financial, facilities, transportation, and purchasing services;

Second Stage – Developmental Phase

- Develop and implement district education development councils, composed of a majority of regional trustees, representing elected SGCs, and including appointed members from municipalities, local business, and universities/colleges;
- Reinvest cost savings into school-community development and designated education improvement zones to address inequities at the school-community level.

Getting it right means restructuring the system in a coherent fashion in distinct stages: establish viable community school governance, reduce the number of school district structures, integrate province-wide student support services, and reinvest any savings into either robust school-level governance or supporting students and teachers in the classroom. That is the best way forward for students, teachers, parents and local communities.



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