

REINVENTING OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM:

Why a Business Voice is Critical to Improving Public Education

By Paul W. Bennett

The educational world is a strange place with its own tribal conventions, familiar rituals, ingrained behaviours, and unique lexicon. Within the K-12 school system, educational reform evolves in waves where “quick fixes” and “fads” are fashionable and yesterday’s failed innovations can return, often recycled in new guises.

Today’s business leaders --like most citizens--also find themselves on the outside looking in and puzzled by why our provincial school systems are so top down, bureaucratic, distant and seemingly impervious to change.

Provincial education authorities, pressed by concerned parents, business councils and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS), have embraced standardized testing in the drive to improve literacy and numeracy, fundamentals deemed essential for success in the so-called “21st century knowledge-based economy.”

Student testing and accountability may be widely accepted by the informed public, but they are far from secure. Provincial teachers’ unions remain unconvinced and continue to resist standardized testing and to propose all kinds of “softer” alternatives, including “assessment for learning,” “school accreditation,” and broadening testing to include “social and emotional learning.”

A change in focus and strategy is in order if the business voice is to be heard and heeded in the education sector. Our public school system is simply not good enough. Penetrating the honey-coated sheen of edu-babble and getting at the real underlying issues requires some clear-headed independent analysis. Actually tackling them will require major surgery rather than mere

tinkering--educational restructuring and curriculum reform from the schools up rather than the top down.

Reinventing public education may be a tall order, but it has to start somewhere – so let's begin by addressing the five biggest issues, in coordinated fashion, with a few lighthouse projects to show the way and broaden support for a rebuild of the entire K-12 public school system.

1. Community Development – Community Hub Enterprise Schools

Demographic gravity and declining enrollment have a way of hollowing out small communities making it increasingly difficult to attract and retain young adults, families and children. Community hub schools are a part of the ultimate school-centred community development plan for the future. While they emerged out of the local battles over school closures in small town and rural communities, hub schools are sparking local entrepreneurship and ingenuity. Local community activists at Digby Neck Consolidated School, for example, have created a Community Cooperative, developed a viable business plan, and are repurposing vacant spaces in the existing elementary school.

Community-minded businesses are also beginning to come forward. Chapman's Ice Cream is repurposing the school in its home town of Markdale, Ontario, and, in our own backyard, Louisbourg Seafoods has stepped up in Cape Breton to support the "Gateway to Opportunities" Hub School project. Fostering local initiative and supporting social enterprises are not echoes of the past but the wave of the not-to-distant future. It's time for our business leaders to get on board with this movement.

2. Sound Education Policy - Research-Informed Practice

Since the 1990s, education management has mastered the rhetoric and language of “outcomes” and “accountability” with, sad to say, little to show for it. They tend to embrace broad, philosophical concepts like “21st century learning,” champion investing in “inputs,” and mimic initiatives promoted by Pearson Learning, Microsoft and other international learning corporations. Yet the OECD’s Education Office still reports that only one out of ten education initiatives is ever properly assessed for its effectiveness in improving student learning.

Growing numbers of serious education researchers, including practicing teachers, are looking for evidence of “why it works” before jumping on the latest educational bandwagon. Current fashionable teaching practices such as “discovery math,” and “personalized learning” simply do not pass the research-litmus test. Introducing coding in elementary schools is being seriously questioned because so few teachers in the early grades have any background or training in mathematics or computer science.

3. Education Governance – School Community Councils

Elected school boards are slowly dying, mostly because of structural deficiencies and restricted mandates rather than self-inflicted problems. Over the past two decades New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, and P.E.I. have cast aside elected regional boards and reverted to centralized, bureaucratic system management with pathetically weak advisory councils. Nova Scotia’s eight elected boards, seven English and one Acadian, are now on notice and facing an upcoming provincial review. Simply eliminating elected bodies can have worse consequences, as has happened in Prince Edward Island.

Public confidence is already badly shaken, but it is not too late to change direction. Community-School Governance deserves a chance and would be far better than the current mish-

mash of school governance models. School-based management and governance 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 in public education.

4. Curriculum Reform – Effective Teaching and Sound Fundamentals

Focusing on the “downstream” output (i.e., the declining quality and competencies of high school graduates) is perfectly understandable, but doesn’t get at the nub of the problem. Improving the quality of teaching is critical to improving the acquisition of fundamental skills among students and turning around student achievement at higher levels. Resist any initiative to remove standardized testing or to “broaden the scope” of assessment to include “social and emotional learning” until it passes the legitimacy test.

On provincial advisory panels and in official submissions, be attuned to “fuzzy logic” and honey-dipped “invest in education” initiatives that do not include significant reform in mathematics curriculum and early reading instruction. “Whole language” reading methods and “discovery math” curricula have produced the very graduates that present problems for you as employers in the workplace.

5. Graduation Standards – Preparedness for College and the Workplace

Universities and colleges are major public policy players in the Atlantic region and exercise an inordinate influence. So much of the focus is on raising graduation rates to fill admissions spaces that the preparedness of the current crop of graduates is not seen as a policy priority.

A recent Nova Scotia Transition Task Force report, [From School to Success: Clearing the Path](#), released June 21, 2016, was well-intended, but missed the most critical piece — ensuring that our high school graduates are well-prepared for university, college, and the workplace. Nor was any attention paid to the need to realign high schools to better prepare students for the vocations rather than a succession of service industry McJobs

High school graduation rates soar above 85%, but only four in 10 university students complete their degree within four years. Thirty per cent never complete their university studies at all. At the community college level, 32 per cent don't come back after their first year of study. While it is true that dropouts face bleaker job prospects, the Task Force compounded our problem by recommending making it *easier to graduate* and investing more in existing school-to-workplace bridge programs.

Sources of Hope and Optimism

Leading educators and business advocates know that our provincial school systems are in need of improvement. A strong, independent and engaged business voice is needed, as never before, to help turn the K-12 school system in the right direction. It's time to test the water and join us in that project.

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