

Presentation to Law Amendments Committee--Bill 72
05 March 2018
Rebecca Barker

Please allow me to begin by thanking the members of the Committee for listening to us all today. We believe in this process and your presence here shows me that you do, too.

In the breathless rush to get legislation around a few cherry-picked recommendations of Dr. Glaze's report on our public education system, our government is not actually following her advice to consider the whole report first. And by sidelining the work of the council to improve classroom conditions, and potentially totally ignoring the work of the commission on inclusive education, this government is, unfortunately, losing the trust of many across the province.

Racing Bill 72 through to legislation shows us that last fall's public consultation was only lip service. In no recommendation of the final report is this more glaringly obvious than in the first one: suggesting we dissolve all of Nova Scotia's school boards. In spite of the faith that parents, school advisory councils, and board reps had put into that consultation, and in spite of Dr. Glaze's own praise for the commitment, dedication, and expertise of our school board members, it was all a *fait accompli*: the Nova Scotia Liberal party had already decided to merge school boards into one centralized advisory body¹. Last fall's consultation served as justification to do it.

In a meeting with my MLA last year, who is a member of the governing party, he characterized school boards as an impediment to progress and change. An impediment to progress and change... *for whom?* And what kind of progress does local, democratic representation actually impede... *when you live in a democracy?*

School board representatives earn their seats through free and fair elections. They comprise a local body with REAL decision-making power, ensuring we are represented in matters of public education between provincial elections. They are tasked to frame provincially-established goals in a way that makes sense at a local level... In a way that accurately reflects the diversity and needs of each community's students... In a way that makes best use of local resources so that their students can meet the same educational goals as students in another part of the province.

Like many Nova Scotians, I have volunteered on non-profit boards over the years. What I love about this kind of work--and it is REAL work--is how we enact accountability. It's right there in the phrase we all use: "to hold accountable." On one hand, being accountable means an expectation of transparency. And this can seem scary. And as elected representatives, I think you understand this. Anyone who is elected to govern--be it a small nonprofit, a school board, or an entire province--feels that vulnerability with the expectation of transparency.

¹ From the Chronicle Herald, December 14, 2016 (reported by Heather Desveaux) "At the AGM, the party voted to amalgamate the school boards into one 'with the responsibility to advise government on matters related to public schools and education of importance to parents and the people of Nova Scotia,' states the resolution.

But let's consider how the verb "hold" works here. Holding someone is an expression of care. Holding can be demonstrated by listening. And listening is how we develop trust. And this is how we move forward together. It is something we teach our children every day.

And there are no shortcuts to developing trust. Not if the trust of those you represent actually matters to you. And governance, in any context, is ultimately about trust.

Whatever the imperfections, my school board has earned a certain level of my trust. Why? Because I can actually go to a meeting and watch them! I have access to my representative because she's my neighbour! And I can see the work boards and the decisions they make in publicly-available documents². Some say the idiosyncracies of each board being organized a little differently is problematic. Dr. Glaze offers another perspective: that these differences reflect the character of the community boards represent. And perhaps that's not so problematic, since all boards still have the responsibility of ensuring that all the same educational goals are met.

Locally-responsive paths to meeting the same goals and objectives are basically differentiated learning and inclusivity writ large. Accountability in this process is built in: our elected school boards work in that intersection bridging provincial policy to local need. And unfortunately, over the years, dysfunction has developed... though, as Dr. Glaze points out, this dysfunction the a direct result of provincial governments making cuts and legislating away board authority³!

Legislate our elected school boards away altogether, and you clear cut a path for the ruling party--ANY ruling party (and there will be a time when it's NOT your party!)--to impose whatever they like, however they like it, at a local level. In a manner that is not obliged to consider the diversity of local needs, community, or resources. 'Enhanced' SACs will not have decision-making power. A single African Nova Scotian voice or Mi'kmaq voice 'advising' a minister does not have the community clout of several voices from each of these communities who currently, with their colleagues, directly influence the management of local schools.

My MLA last year told me to just trust him and his party when Bill 75 was passed and when new, toothless advisory committees were created. He said that these shortcuts were going to make things better, faster. He didn't listen, but he wanted my trust.

But I couldn't give it to him. And neither could most of my riding, as it turned out. His was one of the seven seats the liberals lost last year.

² From the NSSBA response of February 7th, 2018, to the Glaze Report: "School boards have long been calling for action on many of the recommendations that were made by Dr. Glaze and subsequently accepted by government. Criticizing governing school boards for lack of progress in areas under the control of government is a stark example of misplaced blame. Similarly, eliminating the democratically elected local voice as a solution to improvements that were championed by those very voices is inexplicable."

³ Issues Dr. Glaze cites are the amalgamation of school boards years ago (increasing board responsibilities while contributing to communication breakdown across the enlarged regions they serve), and school boards' shrunken autonomy, leaving them weak and ineffective.

Report points:

- uncited statements that claim school boards, broadly, suffer from siloing and a lack of impartiality, and would benefit from stronger alignment with political parties
- that the idiosyncratic ways in which our school boards run is not an issue, just reflective of local community standards⁴
- that the report points out how its own survey questions were so open-ended that they are essentially useless as tools for indicating any trends among respondents, but that the breadth of responses added "texture"⁵.
- that pull quotes from the relatively few respondents suggesting we eliminate boards somehow deserved the same amount of space in the report as *other suggestions that arose far more frequently* in the responses
- that the question of how to improve administration⁶ had such a diversity of answers, *the actual amount of people who suggested dissolving school boards was very, very low, indeed*⁷
- that Glaze expresses discomfort at suggesting we dissolve our school boards, spending three paragraphs praising the dedication and commitment of elected school board reps
- that, in Glaze's opinion, our province is already ahead of the curve *globally* in knowing what we need to do to improve our system, as evidenced by other reports that came before this one
- that the 'enhanced roles' proposed for SACs, as well as CACE and CME, sound an awful lot like what each of these bodies is already empowered to do⁸
- that although four of the seven English-language school boards had a majority of candidates competing for their positions through a democratic election, it's not a healthy enough amount of democratic participation to bother continuing with
- that we should consider how the literature warns us not to rely on structural change to address what are ultimately cultural issues, but that we should radically change the structure anyway

⁴ Incidentally, the lack of unity on how different NS school boards are structured and run not being an issue is the *opposite* of what the Council on Improving Classroom Conditions concluded in their discussion summary from Sept 11-13th, 2017.

⁵ These were the same questions Dr. Glaze put to the Council on Improving Classroom Conditions while meeting with them November 6-8th, 2017, which raises the question of how much weight this council's opinion was to be given in the end, anyway.

⁶ The question was #3 in the survey, "What changes should be made to the administration of school boards?"

⁷ 1500 respondents in the online survey and far fewer than 21% suggesting we eliminate school boards means far fewer than 315 people in Nova Scotia suggested this idea

⁸ I'm basing this on my reading of Sections 20-22 of the Education Act and now CACE and CME each describe their roles in their online information. I will happily stand corrected if anyone closely involved in CACE or CME understands the proposed 'enhancements' here differently. Also, this is not to be confused with Recommendation 16, which generally sounds like a positive step.

On that First Recommendation in the Glaze Report: Notes from a Parent
Rebecca Barker

In her report, *Raise the Bar: A Coherent and Responsive Education Administrative System for Nova Scotia*, Dr. Avis Glaze advises we consider all recommendations she makes carefully as a cohesive whole before implementing them. In the breathless rush to get legislation around accepting these recommendations, the McNeil government seems to have missed the part about careful consideration, which means they've obviously missed the parts about building trust and being accountable, too.

Racing through this process signals the opposite is true: that a six-week consultation with a mandate of deep and substantial change to our educational system was, in the end, only lip service. The poorly-kept secret goal all along¹ seems to have been to mould educational administration into something more corporate, reducing checks and balances that stand between politicians' agendas and my kid's learning experience.

Early in the report, Glaze identifies a pair of major challenges faced by our school boards, and implies these challenges are main reasons for board dysfunction. What are these challenges? Number 1: the amalgamation of school boards years ago increased board responsibilities while contributing to communication breakdown across the enlarged regions they serve. And number 2: school boards' autonomy has shrunk, leaving boards weak and ineffective. Wow, our school boards sound terrible.

How did these challenges come about in the first place? According to the Glaze Report, they were the result of government directives, cuts, and changes over the years. You read correctly: the report outlines a situation where *the provincial government is the chief cause of school boards' structural and functional woes*, and then proposes to let the government finish the job of obliterating the boards, eliminating the democratic accountability embedded in them in the process.

If you're thinking, "there must be a stronger rationale for recommending we do away with our school boards than just this," I'm sorry to report that the logic just keeps breaking down from there. Among other weirdnesses, I found:

- uncited statements that claim school boards, broadly, suffer from siloing and a lack of impartiality, and would benefit from stronger alignment with political parties
- that the idiosyncratic ways in which our school boards run is not an issue, just reflective of local community standards²

¹ My former MLA (a Liberal who was voted out last election) told me a year ago that the government already felt that school boards were "in the way" of the kind of educational change the government wanted to bring.

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- that Glaze expresses discomfort at suggesting we dissolve our school boards, spending three paragraphs praising the dedication and commitment of elected school board reps
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- that the ‘enhanced roles’ proposed for SACs, as well as CACE and CME, sound an awful lot like what each of these bodies is already empowered to do⁶
- that although four of the seven English-language school boards had a majority of candidates competing for their positions through a democratic election, it’s not a healthy enough amount of democratic participation to bother continuing with
- that we should consider how the literature warns us not to rely on structural change to address what are ultimately cultural issues, but that we should radically change the structure anyway

I do not understand why alternatives suggesting fixes to our school boards are not explored. Glaze cites transparency and strong grass roots input as supporting principles--principles I am behind 100%. The report acknowledges our elected board reps as exceptionally dedicated and committed--even when they are elected by acclamation. Survey respondents, according to Glaze’s analysis, favoured changes within the school board structure *far more often* than they advocated wiping out school boards altogether. Several times this report asserts government shares the blame in the dysfunction and opacity that’s plagued our system. How on earth do these facts and principles drive the recommendation that school boards be eliminated?

The proposed solution leaves Nova Scotians with fewer mechanism for input and influence. And suggesting that SACs, CACE, and CME will have vaguely ‘enhanced’ roles does not necessarily

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ensure any of them will have any power beyond advising and recommending things that the government has no obligation to follow.

For example, one SAC enhancement is the vague-sounding "accountability sessions" with Regional Executive Directors, though there's no indication of which way the accountability is expected to flow. Another enhancement is having an annual meeting with the Minister of Education--which is something pretty much any interest group can already do with enough badgering, and is something I know for a fact my elected school board representative was already doing on the regular.

Compare these enhancements to the power SACs currently have, as outlined in the Education Act: all the same stuff found in the so-called 'enhancements,' *plus representation on school board selection committees for principals*. With school boards gone and principals removed from the union, how will principals be chosen in the future? And what will the nature of their relationship be to the SAC vs to the Regional Executive Directors? Far too many questions are unanswered here for us to proceed with confidence.

According to the Education Act, it's the Minister who determines the initial composition of the SACs, anyhow, so in the new configuration, it's not unfathomable to imagine SAC composition including industry and business interests in the future. Such input is already being proposed as important to the new "College of Educators"⁷.

A few of the recommendations in the report sound reasonable or even helpful. An ombudsman? Sure. Any cost savings going to the classroom? That should go without saying. Executive Director positions for African Nova Scotian Achievement and Mi'kmaw Education? If those roles have real influence built in, absolutely. But eliminating school boards is dangerous in light of the alternative being proposed. It erases democratically-elected groups with decision-making power who serve the people, and replaces them with a middle man hired by and reporting to the ruling political party of the day.

This is not representative of your constituents. This does not indicate progress. Please do not pass Bill 72.

⁷ See recommendation 7 in the Glaze Report.