

Thoughts on the Education Reform Act to the Law Amendments Committee

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Elected school boards provide a voice to local issues in a non-partisan and transparent way. The work of the elected Board forms part of the public record, meetings are public. Public Boards are being replaced with an appointed Advisory Council, and School Advisory Councils.

Let's start with the Provincial Advisory Council. I have read the section of the proposed legislation on Provincial Advisory Council on Education or PACE. Elected School Boards make decisions based on local factors. Make decisions. The PACE is there to provide advice on issues to the Minister. The PACE has no real power, except that it can provide advice to the Minister. Decisions are currently made at the local level, in public. How will the public be able to influence these decisions in the future? Currently, school boards are accountable to our constituents, and the Minister. Over the 18 months I have been a School Board Member, our Board has met with the former Minister once. We have had two meetings with the current Minister cancelled. How do we know if the PACE will be able to get direction or time with the Minister?

Next. School Advisory Councils. Volunteers who take time out of their busy lives to make their schools better. Enhancing SACs, seems good on paper, but I have reservations. Many of these volunteer positions are hard to fill. I have heard of SACs with one member or that do not meet regularly or at all. I am concerned that SACs are not equipped in many cases to provide the local voice Dr Glaze was hoping for.

The number of SACs, even if some turn into regional SACs due to lack of participation from volunteers, could represent greater than 300 micro boards under this new model. And who are they supposed to bring their local concerns to? The new Provincial Advisory Council? The Superintendents? The Minister?

In addition, SACs are not all active or functional now. I worry that SACs with stronger voices will be able to influence where resources are distributed while others get left behind. I worry

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resources will not be provided based on need, but on the loudest voice or the squeakiest wheel.

Boards have local representation of the African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities. How are their issues going to be heard going forward? How will localized issues in these communities be captured in SACs or a Provincial Council? One member of a provincial advisory committee and a director within the Department is simply not going to be enough to ensure that local issues for these communities are considered. And remember, currently these voices are part of the decision making framework of the School Boards, now they will only be an advisor.

Let's take a contentious issue. School Closures. School Closures are currently assessed at the Board level. There are examples where schools have remained open based on community voice being heard. With over 300 SACs, vying for attention, how will local voices get heard? How much will partisan politics influence where new schools and infrastructure are distributed and where schools are closed?

As I have met with MLAs about the dissolution of School Boards, I have heard that not all School Board members are "good". Neither are all MLAs. Neither are all councilors. That is why there is an election every 4 years. I also hear the question about what qualifies us to be making decision on education. Isn't that the point of elected officials, that they represent the people? MLAs are not experts on running the Province when they run for office. Many are not experts in their portfolios as cabinet ministers. City Councilors are not experts on city finances. Most School Board members have experience with the School system whether as a past educator or as a parent of a child in the system.

I agree that the system needs changes. When this review was announced my hope was that it would provide an improved channel to navigate school, School Board, the Department and the Minister, including enhanced communication and collaboration. I knew that could include the amalgamation of school boards or major changes to current processes. In the last two years, recognizing that change was needed, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association has been developing a Governance framework, with the backing of the Department. It was released last

month. Why could we not have been given the chance to implement the governance structure before a decision was made to eliminate our locally elected voices?

And why the rush? The Inclusion Commission Report is coming out in March. Why not consult with all stakeholders and develop a plan to ensure that all Nova Scotia issues are included, instead of a made in Ontario solution that doesn't fit Nova Scotia students.

I am still going to continue fighting for our kids. Whether I am a school board member or not. Unfortunately, I predict that these changes are going to make all of our jobs harder, our job being to ensure our kids get the best education possible.