

FROM PROVINCE HOUSE TO HOME

June 9, 2008

One of the real debates that should have taken place in the spring sitting of the Nova Scotia Legislature was the level of funding for the 2008-2009 school year. The nearly \$1 billion committed to public schools in the budget meant a 4.9% increase and when that was presented in a global manner it seemed reasonable and sufficient. However, one day after the budget was passed, school boards received their "profile sheets" which provided detailed information. The funding formula would leave school boards with insufficient dollars and cuts have already been made to their budgets for the coming year. Once again our province is last or second last in per pupil funding in Canada.

It is very upsetting that the Minister of Education did not deliver the detailed funding picture during estimates on the budget. There was simply no way of knowing the impact until superintendents and school boards informed the opposition about the insufficient funding levels. There was every indication in early discussions with the Department of Education that percentage increases would at least match the current year. Matching the current level of funding public education was anticipated but not desirable as the Nova Scotia School Boards Association has been asking government for a five-year action plan that included \$30 million more annually to match New Brunswick, which has the highest level of funding in Atlantic Canada. With no new funding, schools across the province will experience "the treadmill syndrome",

and in my view, staying in place is not an option. Some boards will feel the effects more, such as the Tri County board which has cut 42 jobs. With a shortfall of \$3.3 million, the cuts translate to 24 teaching positions. When school support staff such as school psychologists, math and literacy mentors, and technology consultants' positions is cut, children's needs will not be met. Last year the Tri County Board was short 30 teacher assistants and there will be less support to assist teachers in the classroom next year. This is exactly what happens, the accumulative effect can lead to a disastrous situation. This year is extremely challenging for all boards, detrimental to some boards, but without substantial additional funding for 2009-2010, it's really going to mean teacher cuts province-wide. Perhaps it will mean the school week is reduced to four days; after all, ER's close when doctors are not available. Looking ahead to where heating costs are going, it may not be unrealistic to close schools for the month of January. After school board elections in October, there will be some tough decision-making for new members.

In a letter to the Premier and the Minister of Education I am urging the government to reconsider 2008-2009 funding to all school boards. Few provinces, states or jurisdictions around the world have made sustainable economic progress without investment in public education. A .68 increase for the Strait Board and a 1.49 percent for the Annapolis Valley School Board when a 3.5 % was a basic requirement is not a true investment. This means that school boards will in fact have a reduced level of services for the coming school year rather than have the ability to advance strong initiatives. Programs like Options and Opportunities (vocational oriented courses), the International Baccalaureate and Literacy and Math interventions will not be further advanced.

There are three key factors that are making things particularly difficult; moving the school entry date from September 30th to December 31st, the class cap on Grade Four and the one that you and I are not looking forward to...fuel costs for our home and transportation. The superintendent of schools for the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board, Dr. Norman Dray, is projecting an additional \$500,000.00 to heat its 40 schools. In my letter to the Premier and Minister of Education, I have asked for a fuel escalator clause be added to the funding formula and implemented immediately.

Most Nova Scotians are aware that student achievement levels, especially Math, are not at the desirable target, special education needs are unmet in too many cases and the Nunn report stated a variety of interventions are needed to deal with severe behavioural problems in the Junior High years. While the core curriculum must always be given its needed resources, the classroom and school community have an expanded role in today's society. We have moved from an era when dress code violations and speaking without raising your hand were the disciplinary problems to dealing with drug abuse, suicide, rape and assault. Students are included in public education that were historically institutionalized. Medications are administered at schools on a daily basis. Disabilities (once missed) are now diagnosed and their program needs are costly. 30% of our children come to school from single parent families. Children with profound mental and physical disabilities remain in school until they are 21. It is good news that more students complete high school because it is a minimum requirement for 80 to 90% of all jobs in 2008, but these are costly additions.

While no child left behind in our education system is a catchy phrase it must become the reality. We have a proud history of public education in Nova Scotia. The present needs of the system must be immediately addressed by adequate funding. The greatest gift that government can give its children is a solid education.