

From Province House to Home

Members of the review panel on teacher education appointed by the Minister of Education recently released their report and recommendations. Their mandate had the overarching goal of improving the quality of public education in Nova Scotia. In many ways it was to take the pulse of teacher education in the province. To quote the report, its mandate was to review progress in light of the two previous reports (1994 and 2000) and to recommend policy directions on several specific issues.

Recommendation Number 2 on existing enrolments and Recommendation Number 4 dealing with the introduction of compressed delivery options in response to student's needs and Recommendation Number 7 that says there should be an Advisory Council to examine regularly, the balance between the theoretical and applied aspects of the BEd program is where I will focus my comments. In fact all three of these recommendations are inter-related as well as Recommendation 17 which requests that Cape Breton University consider a discontinuation of the arrangement with Memorial University.

In my view it was very unfortunate that an analysis of teacher supply and demand situation in Nova Scotia released its report during the panels review. It impacted the recommendations to the Minister to such an extent that academic freedom and global demand did not receive a balanced perspective. The question of teacher education programs in Nova Scotia, however, is broader than supply and demand. Our province spends millions of dollars each year training trades people. A great many go out west to work. Are we going to shut down our community colleges?

I believe that students in our universities deserve the opportunity to pursue an education in the career they choose. The reality is that they will pursue educational opportunity elsewhere. In 2006, Nova Scotia issued 1029 new teacher certificates. Only 36% of these teachers were educated in Nova Scotia while 254 were educated in the US and a great many of them were from Cape Breton. That was a lost opportunity for their iconology and for their university. It is indeed time for Minister Casey and her government to grant CBU a BEd. program and end their affiliation with Memorial University. Two universities in the state of Maine have actually designed their education programs to meet the qualifications of Nova Scotia teacher certification. In effect we are forcing our students to leave in pursuit of higher education, while short-changing our universities and impacting on the intellectual and economic life of our province.

Supply and demand analysis is limiting for three reasons. We live with a very mobile labour force that participates in a national and global market place. Secondly many factors go into a teacher's decision to retire; as a result figures may not accurately predict the reality in a given year. Also, there are many professions, businesses and now industry who hire BEd graduates who can instruct and create a learning community. There may also be opportunities for individuals to work as curriculum developers or on line instructors with the expanding e-learning environment.

I think a pilot program at CBU that embraces Recommendation Number 3 and offers an integrated 4 or 5 yr. BEd program is a plan that should happen. It is my contention that an elementary teacher does not need 6 yrs. of post secondary university education. Time in the classroom every year over a four year period will help teacher candidates develop a wide range of skills, strategies and professional attributes. In fact a two year education program may not receive the Minister's blessing and the Department of Education will introduce a 16 month program at Acadia, St.FX, Mt. St Vincent and a four year integrated program at CBU.

I would appeal to the Minister to give full consideration to all of the tangible and intangible factors related to delivery of the BEd programs in the province. The panel made some very sound proposals, but Minister Casey needs to recognize that a progressive approach is needed. Don't steer individuals away from the careers they might choose to pursue. In addition, give proper recognition to those institutions and individuals who are building successful delivery models, such as Cape Breton University and its Memorial University program.