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Subject: FROM PROVINCE HOUSE TO HOME

On October 18th school board elections will take place across Nova Scotia. The Annapolis Valley Regional School Board that will be part in place for the next four years will have a number of challenges. I believe that an effective school board will be needed in a climate of dramatic change as decisions will be made that will impact the education of our children.

Now that the moratorium has been lifted on school reviews and potential closures I think we need to take a close look at this development. Demographic trends paint a seemingly bleak picture for small schools. Declining school enrolments and school closures have led to a major trend across the country with Ontario leading the way with 192 closures in the past decade. Since school enrolment is the most common basis for funding formulas, small schools receive a smaller funding allocation than larger schools, therefore limiting budgets for staffing, programs and resources. Economics of scale suggest that a logical financial solution is to close small schools when student population drops below a sustainable level.

I would like to offer the perspective that such a practice and public policy may be short-sighted. There is a growing movement of educators and parents who are engaging in a debate over the long term social impacts of small schools on student achievement, social cohesion and civil engagement. If small schools offer the potential for long term benefits, which may offset short term costs we need to examine policy decisions that have been widely advanced.

The birthplace of the small school movement is the Chicago public school system and therefore considerable literature comes from the USA. However, there is currently a revival of the "small school movement" in both the USA and Canada, with the central argument being that the scale of learning environment is important to the overall quality of the learning experience.

This is an educational issue that is universal and I am sure many of you received the benefits of a small school learning. Educators argue that small school cultures promote social equity, smaller academic achievement gaps between socio-economically disadvantaged and affluent students, and a reduction in student dropout rates and higher attendance levels. That last fact alone warrants great merit as 90% of jobs today require some post secondary education and training. Studies show that the small schools are safer schools, there is a greater level of emotional stability and character development. The bottom line in all analysis is that increased student, parent and community satisfaction. It is becoming increasingly clear that small schools provide benefits for students which may justify a larger long term investment than current cost models allow. This raises questions of what to do about small schools: close them, merge them, or keep them. The next school board in the Annapolis Valley and throughout the province will have to engage with these school communities in those tough decisions.

In addition to keeping small schools, small class size must be kept high on the agenda. One study carried out in Edmonton studied the impact of small class size on the achievements of Grade 1 students in ten, small, high poverty, high transient Edmonton public schools. Results revealed that 80% of the students' reading and writing improved, as did their behaviour and attendance. A long term study of mathematics in 34 Alberta high schools showed that Grade 10 students in smaller schools achieved higher levels of success than Grade 10 students in larger schools. These are just a few of the studies that must be considered when the debate begins to rage. One further study in British Columbia revealed that small schools are more successful at integrating new immigrants, meeting special educational needs and providing better life chances for disadvantaged children, in particular at the elementary level.

A compelling argument can be made that funding a completed education is much more cost effective than continually paying for the cost of providing a range of programs for student dropouts. This bears out when completion rates are factored in, since graduation rates in small schools are typically higher. I believe the new Annapolis Valley Regional School Board must take into account all the cost variables in their debates as the ultimate cost to students and rural communities in the Annapolis Valley outweighs the hollow argument of the current funding formula.

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