

news



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N O V A S C O T I A T E A C H E R S U N I O N

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Op-Ed: PACE minutes lacking in detail

On November 4 and 5, the Provincial Advisory Council on Education (PACE) held its first meeting over two days. The government has made it clear that PACE is its replacement for now dissolved elected school boards, which were large shoes to fill. Yesterday, the Department of Education released a minimalist two-page summary of what transpired. Given PACE's new, central role in public school governance, these meeting minutes are exceedingly short. Unless the meeting was filled with long periods of awkward silence, it's safe to assume most of what was discussed has been withheld from the public.

The minutes reflect that there was no planned or meaningful discussion regarding actual issues facing teachers, students and classrooms. They contain no mention of the implementation of the inclusive education report; no mention of what's being done to recruit and retain more teachers to address the province wide substitute shortage; and no mention of the various impacts stemming from the rushed implementation of the pre-primary program.

There is a brief mention of the bussing crisis at the end of the document, which Minister Churchill had promised would be the "first order of business" for PACE. Unfortunately, if you were hoping for a solution to the transportation problems that have plagued families in HRM for the past two months, you'll have to wait. The group decided to defer any discussion on bussing to a future meeting. When and where the promised public consultations with parents on this issue will occur remains a mystery and frustration for any family still fighting with bussing dysfunction months into the school year.

So what did the first meeting of PACE accomplish? From what's provided in the minutes, not much. If anything, it appears its members were told definitively by the Deputy Minister just how limited in scope their mandate and influence will be. There was also some general discussion about the terms of reference and some guidelines for future meetings.

I also couldn't help but notice this explicit directive given to the members of PACE which was listed in the minutes: "If contacted by families with questions about their children, families should be encouraged to contact the child's teacher or principal." Clearly this contradicts what the government promised when it rushed Bill 72 through the legislature last February. At the time the Premier was very clear, if parents had concerns under the new system, they could "just go directly to the department."

As for future PACE meetings, they will all be held in private. The minister is justifying this decision based on the grounds that PACE is "a group of private citizens giving advice."

That's not entirely true since technically the members of PACE are political appointees. While I applaud the members of PACE for their commitment to working with government on education issues, it doesn't negate the fact that parents deserve 100% transparency when discussions are being held that could impact their children. Decisions involving public education are in the public interest and represent a considerable percentage of the provincial budget. Members of the public deserve the same or improved access to the process they once had under the governance of elected school boards, full stop.

Only time will tell if PACE turns out to be an effective advisory group, but if the minutes from the first meeting are any indication, it appears that the government intends to limit any actual influence the group can have on its decision making process and sweeping power over public schools.

- Paul Wozney, NSTU President

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