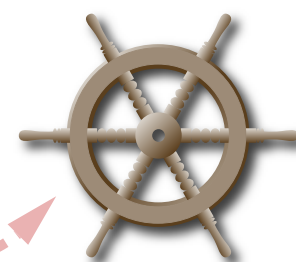


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Partners Working Group: Aligning Teacher Qualifications with Learner Needs

by Debbie McIssac, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Initiatives

In April 2012, the NSTU received an invitation from the Minister of Education to participate in a working group to review and make recommendations regarding the aligning of teacher assignments with teacher educational backgrounds. The initial letter from the Minister described the intention as, “to improve the match between what teachers are asked to teach and their training, background and experience.” This describes the complex factors that make a teacher a good fit for a particular assignment, depending on the circumstances, some combination of academic credentials, training, professional development and experience. The NSTU position, throughout this process, was and continues to support this broad scope of “being qualified” to expand beyond simply “educational background” or “academic background”.

The reality in many of our schools is that teachers face a challenge when expected to teach courses without having as much training, experience, or academic background as they would hope. Many teachers look ahead to this reality and plan their professional development with this in mind. Teachers must continue to have the autonomy to take the initiative to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and training that will meet their needs, and ultimately the needs of the classroom. Although content knowledge is a critical component of effective teaching and is a key factor that affects quality instruction, it cannot be looked at in isolation. Effective teaching is also dependent on good pedagogy. Academic background alone does not equate to improved instruction.

With these points in mind the NSTU joined a diverse group of education partners to review current research, practices and processes and individual school board and Department policies as they relate

to the alignment of teacher professional learning with the needs of the classroom. The mandate of the group was to: make recommendations on ways to improve the alignment of teacher academic background with courses taught; learn about teacher assignment processes in schools; examine the supply of teachers in certain subject areas; and consider how the Nova Scotia Virtual School operates and how distance education can help in ensuring courses are taught by teachers with related, relevant backgrounds. The Partners’ Working Group was also invited to make recommendations on ways to more effectively align teacher professional learning with the needs of students in Nova Scotia’s classrooms.

The Partners’ Working Group attempted to identify the strengths and challenges within the current system and develop recommendations to present to the Minister aimed at strengthening the alignment between teacher academic content background and courses taught.

These recommendations also ensures that teacher preparation and professional learning are designed to meet the needs of students in Nova Scotia’s classrooms and system priorities.

All education partners agreed from the outset that the Partners’ Working Group’s final recommendations would not impact existing provisions in current provincial or regional collective agreements.

Four questions were used to guide the discussion and feedback of the Partners’ Working Group: 1. How does the teaching assignment/hiring/endorsement process impact the alignment between teacher academic content and background and courses taught? 2. What best practices currently exist with regard to the teaching assignment/hiring/endorsement process that support effective alignment? 3. What

challenges exist relative to the assignment/hiring/endorsement process with regard to alignment? 4. What actions can we take to achieve greater alignment?

After several months of meeting and reviewing the research, a final set of ten recommendations was presented to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. The recommendations fall under six inter-related areas that the Partners’ Working Group felt would affect the positive change in creating a stronger alignment between teacher assignments and professional learning with the needs of students in our classrooms.

1. That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development create a forum for education partners to stay informed and to collaborate, as required, to achieve greater alignment of teacher academic backgrounds and assignments of 1) teacher academic backgrounds and assignments and 2) teacher professional learning with the needs of students in Nova Scotia’s classrooms.
2. That the Department use current research and data to set provincial targets and work collaboratively with education partners to develop strategies to improve provincial trends in the alignment between teacher academic content background and courses taught.
3. That the Department examine provincial regulations related to endorsements to identify how current practices can be improved to meet the needs of the Nova Scotian school system.
4. That the Department work with education partners to develop provincial guidelines that ensure fair and equitable hiring practices and address staffing processes (including hiring of new teachers and the assignment of current teachers) to increase alignment between teacher academic background and courses taught.

5. That the Department facilitate the development of a comprehensive framework for professional learning based on best practices in staffing, and support its implementation with principals and school board staff throughout the province.

6. That a series of programs be identified or created to allow teachers to gain additional qualifications in teaching divisions and/or subject areas.

7. That pre-service programs are informed by the most up-to-date information on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

8. That the Department continue to strengthen school-based professional learning that responds to the day-to-day learning needs of teachers and administrators.

9. That the Department work collaboratively with education partners to review the current approach to professional learning to identify priorities that are coordinated with the current needs of students in Nova Scotia’s classrooms.

10. That the Department implement standards of practice for professional learning and use the standards to inform decision making in planning and evaluating professional learning.

The importance of ongoing communication and collaboration among education partners was a major theme during meetings of the Partners’ Working Group. Achieving the recommended actions depends on the extent to which appropriate partners are engaged and the level of ongoing commitment to meeting the needs of students and teachers in our schools.

A full copy of the report and recommendations can be found on the NSTU website (www.nstu.ca) under Communications, and on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development website (www.ednet.ns.ca/document_depot.shtml) under the headline of consultations/reports/teachers).

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