

Curriculum Corner



*by Marc Breagh
Curriculum Committee Chair*

The Curriculum Committee met for the second of three meetings for this school year on February 20. On the agenda was a discussion of the Honourable Karen Casey's Action Plan, The 3 Rs: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild – Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education (January 2015).

Here is an overview of key changes from The 3 Rs, a plan predicated on "...making fundamental changes in four key areas," i.e. the four pillars. Some of these changes were welcome by Curriculum Committee members

while others garnered additional questions or concerns.

Pillar One: A modern education system

The Committee was intrigued by the minister's call for systemic changes occurring across the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with promises to become more "student-centered, efficient, flexible, sustainable, and integrated with other government agencies." This sounds like a positive development if it leads to improved delivery of the Public School Program.

Another suggestion from Pillar 1 was the creation of the Minister's Forum for Teaching Excellence. The Minister's Forum will "provide teachers with support, opportunities for networking, and teacher-requested professional development." How will the professional development opportunities currently available to teachers through the NSTU be impacted by the Minister's Forum?

The creation of a Business-Education Council is announced in the Action Plan. The Curriculum Committee is optimistic that this might enhance work opportunities and co-op placements for students. It is concerned, however, about the potential for non-educators to make decisions about what students should be learning. Pedagogy and developmental knowledge of students is the teacher's expertise, and teacher input is essential in these areas.

Pillar Two: An innovative curriculum

The Committee was pleased to see an increased focus on teaching literacy and math in the foundational early years. It was felt that teachers would be supportive of provisions for more learning time in these important areas.

Other positives in this pillar include: more hands-on learning opportunities to engage students as well as providing access to modern technology to support teaching and learning. Also, incorporating career education for Grades 4 to 12 is an exciting possibility for our students to learn and explore the world of careers.

There were, admittedly, some reservations from Curriculum Committee members around the possibility of "a streamlined, coordinated, and innovative curriculum" occurring by the projected date of September 2015. A large and ambitious undertaking like this requires extensive teacher consultation, professional development, as well as continued support. The Committee hopes teachers' professional needs are met during this transition to the new curriculum.

A reduction in provincial assessment and standardized testing is a step in the right direction with Grade 3 and Grade 8 literacy and math assessments as well as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) all being eliminated. The provincial literacy and math assessments are being replaced by teacher-generated common assessment tools. How will teachers be supported in the creation and use of these assessment tools?

Also, at the secondary level, Math 11 will become a two-credit course. How will this affect other course selection choices? This additional credit opens the possibility to limit the opportunities for students to engage in other academic subjects.

Pillar Three: Inclusive school environments

A new School Code of Conduct was announced in the Minister's Action Plan. Teachers are increasingly facing more challenging student behaviours in classrooms. It is a step forward for everyone concerned about public education to have clear guidelines from the Department in this area. This ensures our students and staff will live and work in safer and healthier learning environments.

Pillar Four: Excellence in teaching and learning

The creation of a "robust system" for teacher performance appraisal generated questions by the Committee. What does the word robust indicate about the nature of this performance appraisal system?

Hopefully teacher voice and input, through the NSTU and its members, will be seen as essential in order to move forward in all elements of the Action Plan. Without the pedagogical and developmental expertise of those who work in the classroom, any endeavour to improve public education will fall short.

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