

Classroom composition issues are unquestionably having a negative impact on teaching and learning conditions in New Brunswick. The problems associated with the matter have become so acute that in the recent round of bargaining between the employer and the Teachers' Federation, both sides agreed that classroom composition was a major issue requiring significant attention. For its part, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association struck an ad hoc committee to study the issue through the lens of inclusionary practices in August 2004. This committee gathered data using focus groups of teachers from across the province to study the depth of the issues, in combination with an on-line survey of members to provide information on the breadth of concerns. The NBTA Board of Directors accepted the results and recommendations in October 2005.

### **Class Composition**

Even the briefest analysis of the data collected led the Committee to conclude the education system in Anglophone New Brunswick has reached a breaking point. Our schools are in crisis.

In the minds of many, classroom composition issues arise from the placement of exceptional learners within "regular" classrooms. While the education of a very high needs child may form a stress point in a classroom, such a situation does not usually form the core of classroom composition concerns. Classrooms reach a state of crisis when many high needs students are placed therein (whether the needs are behavioural, physical, or cognitive); and the resources required to meet those needs are not provided.

Data provided by classroom teachers is disheartening. Analysis of results reported from the on-line survey revealed that 29% of the student population in elementary core (non-immersion) classes was comprised of students on Special Education Plans (SEPs). In middle school core classrooms that population jumped to 38%. The streaming of Anglophone education into immersion and core classes has created untenable environments in many core classrooms. As the

sample teacher comments that follow indicate, for some teachers and students, teaching and learning conditions are deplorable.

*It is a mess! Why parents are not screaming to high heavens on what is occurring in our classrooms is beyond me. This is not working!!*

*Last year I had 21 grade two English. Twenty-one kids, 17 on SEPs, one with Aspergers, six with severe behaviour problems, no TA, and an interventionist for five weeks*

*...many parents who have a somewhat more intimate knowledge of the school system place their children in FI because they see it as a better learning environment where their children can learn in a far less disruptive environment separated from children with serious behaviour problems.*

### **Lack of Resources**

Teachers report that we have children in our schools who have unique, exceptional, educational and behavioural needs, yet are being placed in environments in which these needs cannot possibly be met. The frustration and despair being felt is apparent. The combination of the high concentration of needs in some classes, and the lack of support is overwhelming teachers. Students who have extreme behavioural needs, which may or may not coincide with educational exceptionalities, are destroying the learning environments for their peers. Administrators report spending nearly one third of their time dealing with behavioural issues. Participants report that students who have exceptional educational requirements (including gifted students) are not being well served because teachers cannot meet their needs without significant supports, while those students who fall within the “normal” range are not being well served because teachers must spend so much time with those students who fall outside the range.

*Our class composition is so varied and complex that all students are suffering. The students needing accommodations, modifications and individualized help are not getting all they need while the average students and students with slight learning difficulties suffer and cannot reach their potential because we are attempting to meet needs at too many levels in the classroom.*

*Our most severe behaviour problem is a five year old...perfectly fine intellectually, but I have been kicked, spit at, sworn at, hit, called every name in the book and, you know, I've spent up to an hour restraining the child.*

Despite reporting severely compromised learning environments, teachers firmly believe in the concept of inclusion of children with educational exceptionalities. However, they make it clear the inclusion model currently used, in which inclusion often simply means placement within a regular classroom, does not work. In order for children with exceptionalities to be included, they must be integrated into the social life of the school, and be provided with appropriate educational programming.

Teachers posit that if those children with extremely disruptive behaviours were provided with alternate settings, and if the human and material resources were in place, inclusion could work. In fact, they argue passionately the lack of resources is central to the failure of the current model.

*Are there enough support services in the school? No. Is that what you want to know? **No there are not. No. N-O. No. Big N-O.***

*It's the same with speech therapy. My son's been on the waiting list for four years.*

*We requested a lift last May knowing one would be needed for toileting purposes and we were told there was no money in the budget. We made the request again in June and got the same answer. My teacher assistant suffered a back injury while helping my student with toileting.*

## **Workload**

The third thematic concern recounted by teachers was one of workload.

Teachers are troubled by both the quantity and quality of their workload. In terms of quantity, they describe spending long hours trying to create appropriate materials for their students. With regard to quality, the issue is one of paperwork. The amount of time being spent on Department of Education paperwork is denying our children learning opportunities, and leading to acute frustration levels.

*I don't have the time to spend modifying and accommodating students well and still sleep!*

*It seems that record keeping and the paper trail have taken precedent over teaching and serving students.*

*I became a teacher to teach students, not to spend hours doing paper work...*

## **Recommendations**

In order to address the three thematic areas of concern – class composition, lack of resources, and workload – the Committee offers three broad recommendations for government action. In addition, there are twenty supporting recommendations that are outlined on pages 22 to 25 in the report “A View from the Front Line”.

**A. Government must recognize the system is in crisis and address classroom composition issues immediately.**

**B. Government must provide adequate resources to meet the needs of the children of New Brunswick.**

**C. Government must immediately redefine its expectations of the level of service that can be provided to our children by teachers currently within the education system, given the existing class compositions and resources.**

## **Summary**

In our multi-cultural, knowledge-based society it is imperative that all citizens are able to access information, and subsequently to evaluate and use the information. It is also imperative that we accept diversity. Teachers model and encourage acceptance of all individuals within an inclusive school, and attempt to provide appropriate educational programming to all children regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or educational exceptionality. Teachers in New Brunswick believe in inclusion; that each child needs to be provided with an educational program that will ensure life-long learning to the best of the child's

ability. Sadly, teachers report that such educational programming is not always provided. Despite teachers' best efforts, many children are not being afforded the education they deserve. The high concentration of needs within some classrooms, in combination with a lack of resources to address those needs, has led to the creation of classroom environments that cannot possibly foster learning. These conditions, in combination with unreasonable expectations of what can be supplied by a single classroom teacher, have led some teachers to the brink of despair.

The view from the front line is discouraging, even alarming. Teachers have done all they can as professionals to provide positive learning environments and educational opportunities for the children in their care, yet they know it is not enough. Teachers must be provided with reinforcements in the form of material and human resources in order to address the needs of their students.

The New Brunswick Anglophone education system is in crisis. The government of New Brunswick must refocus our education system. Our education system must have one mission only – to focus on meeting the educational needs of all of our children. Nothing can be more important to the future of New Brunswick than ensuring that every child is provided with an opportunity to be successful.

*It's getting so crazy. We've lost total sight of what this is all about, and it's the students, and they are suffering.*