

The Hidden Reality –
NLTA Pre-Budget
Submission 2023



Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador needs to plan and budget for the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy to address teacher recruitment, retention and general resourcing challenges that are impacting our K-12 public education system. In Budget 2023, decision makers have the opportunity to focus on these three Rs (recruitment, retention and resources) and to embark upon a path that will help us to achieve the long-term social and economic benefits that would come with investment in education.

Why is it vital to act now? The working conditions for teachers ARE the learning conditions for students; this is reality. School is a shared experience. The context in which teachers carry out their professional roles and responsibilities providing instruction, striving to create safe and inclusive environments in which students can learn, grow, and benefit from access to positive role models, relationships and opportunities is the same context in which students spend six or more hours a day each school year. Close to 50% of a student's waking hours, not counting co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, are spent in the classroom. This actuality should be the foundation for all decisions that affect the K-12 public education system in Newfoundland and Labrador. There is no one factor that has a more significant impact on teaching and learning, or more potential to advance public education and the future of our province, than the provision of appropriate, professional human resource levels in our schools.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) hears daily from its members, certified professional teachers in the field, about the impact that teacher shortages and other resource inadequacies are having on students, student programming and the well-being of teachers. As the Association's recent Hidden Reality campaign has highlighted, inadequate school resourcing and the shortages of certified teachers is impacting students:

"My child did not get a mark for two subject areas on their last report card due to lack of a regular teacher. The school has an unfilled position vacant since September, advertised numerous times, so it has been filled day to day by substitutes, when available. ... I know the teachers and other staff are doing everything they can, but teacher shortages have a big impact on programming for kids." – From the parent of a K-6 student

"We currently have two unfilled teacher vacancies in our school, which means about 20% of our staff allocation is vacant, and there is often no substitute available to fill in. These are very trying times for our small staff and this negatively impacts what we can do for students. I fear that the strain of recruitment challenges is going to negatively impact retention in our area, a vicious circle." – From a small school administrator

"Our administrator, and others, have taken to posting about unfilled teaching positions on their social media accounts to try to get the word out. My school has two vacancies and almost no substitutes available. Every day is triage when it comes to programming and student supports. What is government doing to recruit and retain teachers?!"
– From a small school teacher

"I am a seasoned teacher of almost 20 years in a very large school, and I broke down this morning under the sheer weight of it all. I do not know how I - and every other teacher - can be expected to carry on and meet student needs. I cannot imagine how new teachers are managing to cope or will be retained in the profession in such circumstances." – From a junior high teacher

"We are short substitutes every day in our school, plus we have three vacant positions. This is impacting teaching and learning every day, and it's not sustainable." – From a K-6 teacher in an all grade school

“Our school does not have sufficient staff in place. In September we were short five full-time teaching positions, one student assistant, and... we have serious concerns about programming and teacher well-being and workload due to this situation. IRT time for students who need these supports has been reassigned to classroom teaching.” – From a K-6 teacher in an all grade school

“We rarely get time to work in the roles we are officially assigned to. Due to lack of substitute teachers, we are regularly re-deployed to cover for absent classroom teachers. Parents should know this is happening and that the specialized supports we should be providing are often not available.” – From a Reading Specialist and an Instructional Resource Teacher

In public opinion polling conducted by the NLTA in 2021, the number of both parents and the general public that perceived the quality of education in the province had decreased, more than doubled from similar polling in 2019. When asked what measures would have a positive impact on education, the top three answers among parents and the general public were: increasing support for students with special needs; increasing the number of teachers; and, more school counsellors.

These results did not come as a surprise. The NLTA hears repeatedly from teachers that, more and more, their work environments are becoming less conducive to fostering and supporting student achievement and overall well-being. Increasing class sizes, inadequate resourcing of inclusive education, rising incidents of student behaviour problems and violence in schools, and increases in mental health issues are having a negative impact on teaching and learning. The past and ongoing impact of COVID-19, along with substitute teacher shortages and vacant teaching positions, have exacerbated many of these issues. It seems an obvious premise, something that “goes without saying,” that you cannot expect to improve student outcomes by under-resourcing the very processes and structures that are meant to support their learning.

The NLTA has been an active participant in recent and past reviews of public K-12 education and other provincial public services and government functions, taking advantage of all opportunities to engage with those who led the Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, the Premier’s Economic Recovery Team, the Health Accord NL Task Force, and the Teacher Allocation Review Committee. It is important to reiterate some of the points the Association has outlined and continues to highlight. The theme of our messaging has been consistent throughout: a well-resourced public education system will support overall social and economic improvements for the province and should be seen as an investment.

Education and Our Health

While health care spending in our province has been rising for years, available services have not kept pace with demand, particularly with respect to needs for mental health treatment and supports. The February 2022 report of the Health Accord NL found that, in this province:

We have the highest rate of children and youth with complex health care needs, 53% higher than the national average. Our province has one of the highest prevalence rates of children and youth in alternate care, and these children and youth are among the most vulnerable groups in our society. ... Many children in this group have developmental trauma, complex mental health issues, learning and academic challenges, and significant medical diagnoses.

The report goes on to identify mental health as a concern that arose consistently throughout the Accord’s public engagement initiatives, including a special symposium with high school students. It was further noted that the suicide rate for the province “has tripled since the 1980s and is among the highest in

Canada.” Without a focus on prevention and earlier intervention, we will never catch up. Better access to student supports within our education system can produce long-term savings in healthcare.

We can no longer ignore the gap between students’ needs and our education system’s resources. School counsellors, educational psychologists, instructional resource teachers, teaching and learning assistants, student assistants, speech language pathologists, behaviour management specialists, safe and inclusive schools itinerants, teachers with specialized skills to support students with hearing and visual impairment, and program specialists – these are vital student supports, not optional luxuries. When these services are lacking in our classrooms and schools, we aren’t saving money in the long term – we are in effect passing an even bigger cost along to our over-burdened healthcare and social assistance systems.

Even educational resources that do not directly target mental health problems and illnesses can save our healthcare system money, since education is a major factor for determining/predicting future health. Education is an accepted determinant of other socio-economic outcomes. Indeed, the recent report of the Health Accord NL identifies the importance of education:

People with higher education tend to be healthier than those with lower educational attainment. The level of education is highly linked with other SDH such as the level of income, employment security, and working conditions.

Given the struggle to meet student needs with current resourcing levels, it should come as no surprise that the level of stress, burnout and compassion fatigue among teachers remains high. Over the past three school years, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) statistics indicate a steady increase in the number of teachers accessing counselling supports – from 8.8% of the total teacher population in 2019-20 to 14.69% in 2021-22. Teachers’ reasons for contacting EAP are also telling – emotional/mental health and personal stress and coping have increased as a presenting issue, accounting for 74.38% of EAP cases during the 2021-22 school year, compared to 51% of EAP cases in 2015-16.

In 2022, the NLTA conducted research on the mental health and well being of our members. Through a membership survey and a series of focus groups, we asked about member stress levels. When asked to rate the level of stress they experienced during the school year on a scale from 1 (not at all stressed) to 10 (extremely stressed), the average reported number was 9. One participant stated that it was the worst year for teaching since they started 20 years ago. Although some teachers indicated that their level of stress fluctuated throughout the school year, it was very clear that the majority of teachers are experiencing a heightened level of stress. Lack of support, behavioural needs of students, and increased workload and demands on professional time ranked highly among the identified causes of increased stress. These findings reinforce the point made above, that the conditions in which teachers are expected to carry out their professional responsibilities are the same as those in which students are expected to learn and grow.

Education and Our Economy

While natural resources have historically been and remain important to our province, Newfoundland and Labrador’s greatest resource is its people. Education has always affected our economy, but it’s more important than ever in the current information age. Without a focus on innovation and increased skills, we cannot diversify our economy. We need to invest in education. Smaller class sizes in our public K-12 education system support more effective teaching and learning and would be an investment towards long term economic gains.

In *Does Class Size Matter?* (2014), Dr. Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of the National Education Policy Center of the University of Colorado, states that “‘common-sense’ is validated by research demonstrating that class size does matter and is ‘an important determinant of student outcomes.’” The study found that

teachers are able to be more effective with small class sizes and that the resulting benefit to students is not limited to their performance in school, but will continue to be an advantage over their entire lifetime. The author's recommendations include:

Money saved today by increasing class sizes will be offset by more substantial social and educational costs in the future. The payoff from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.

Dr. David Zyngier, Senior Lecturer in Curriculum and Pedagogy at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, in his review of 112 studies on class size (2014), has concluded that while lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost-effective policy overall. Zyngier concluded that:

Findings suggest that smaller class sizes in the first four years of school can have an important and lasting impact on student achievement, especially for children from culturally, linguistically and economically disenfranchised communities.

William J. Mathis in *The Effectiveness of Class Size Reduction* (2016) concurred with this research finding that:

The payoff from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children. Conversely, increases in class size are likely to be especially harmful to these populations – who are already more likely to be subjected to large classes. While lowering class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost effective policy overall particularly for disadvantaged students. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will likely result in additional substantial social and educational costs in the future.

Other research studies have indicated that there is not only a sound academic argument for reducing class sizes but a strong health and economic one as well. In their study, *Health and Economic Benefits of Reducing the Number of Students per Classroom in US Primary Schools* (2007), Peter Muennig and Steven H. Woolf found that:

From a societal perspective (incorporating earnings and health outcomes), class-size reductions would generate a net cost savings of approximately \$168 000 and a net gain of 1.7 quality-adjusted life-years for each high school graduate produced by small classes. When targeted to low-income students, the estimated savings would increase to \$196 000 per additional graduate. From a governmental perspective (incorporating public expenditures and revenues), the results of reducing class sizes ranged from savings in costs to an additional cost of \$15 000 per quality-adjusted life-year gained.

These conclusions are echoed in the key findings of the 2019 Conference Board of Canada report, *The Economic Case for Investing in Education*. While this research was Ontario based, the findings are relevant to Newfoundland and Labrador, including that:

Each dollar of public education spending generates \$1.30 in total economic impacts to Ontario. At the same time, the inverse holds true for each dollar taken from public education. Public education can generate social benefits, such as a healthier population, a higher standard of living, and a reduction in crime. That lessens demand for Ontario's social assistance, public health care, and criminal justice services.

We can no longer afford to ignore the gap between our resources for primary and secondary education and our province's social and economic health.

Supporting Newcomers

Immigration to Newfoundland and Labrador has increased significantly in recent years. This is a positive development, but if we want to be more than a stop-over location and retain newcomers to the province, we need to ensure they have the supports needed to integrate and make a new home in our province as full and active participants and contributors to society. For many, one of the most important priorities is to see their children safe, happy, settled and successful in school, especially when they may not be able to seek support from the type of broader community of people of similar origins that would be accessible in more populous jurisdictions.

While government has publicly highlighted its efforts to attract and support newcomers, including resources for the K-12 system, the NLTA hears regularly from members who do not see evidence of this on the ground and are struggling to meet the related increase in student needs. This account from several teachers at a metro area school is similar to the reports we are hearing regularly:

Recent media reporting on school supports for newcomers to our province caused us great concern and is not consistent with our professional experiences in the field, trying to meet the significant needs many of the children have. Some additional teaching units for EAL have been added, but it is not enough. In addition to language acquisition, these students often require supports for trauma and acclimatizing to a new culture. Some have never been to school and come to us daily without food for lunch or appropriate clothing for the weather. It is heartbreaking.

Inadequate resourcing of schools is counterproductive to the province's efforts to retain more of the newcomers who are arriving in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Closing Comments

Teacher shortages are a national and international issue, so this province needs to be competitive in the reality of that context. Newfoundland and Labrador cannot expect to retain and recruit the professionals required to meet student needs in our K-12 public education system without taking immediate steps to improve working conditions and supports for the teachers we have and make teaching in this province an attractive career choice.

There is no one, easy fix to this complex situation. The NLTA has brought forward ideas and suggestions and is eager to work with other stakeholders moving forward. An excellent starting point would be to see a much earlier announcement of teacher allocations to the school districts – we need to separate the timing of teacher allocation decisions from the annual provincial budget cycle so that the annual staffing process for the K-12 system can start earlier. We think all stakeholders can agree that this would have a positive impact on recruitment for attracting new teachers, and on retention for those already in the system who need/want to move around within NL or may be seeking a professional change. This move could set the foundation for and strengthen the effectiveness of other incentives needed to improve retention and recruitment, including competitive compensation packages, housing and travel assistance, etc.

The impact of teacher recruitment and retention challenges and general under-resourcing is the hidden reality in the NL public education system. Students get on the bus to school in the morning and come home again in the afternoon. Teachers know the reality, they see the needs that cannot be met, the programming and supports that cannot be provided. Investment in education is needed now in order to foster long term social and economic gains for Newfoundland and Labrador.