

# Pre-Budget Public Consultations

Brief Presented to  
the Minister of Finance and  
President of Treasury Board  
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## INVEST IN OUR KIDS



# Introduction

What is it that parents want above all else? It is that their children have a happy, meaningful and healthy life. The NLTA knows through its various surveys and consultations that parents in this province are becoming increasingly concerned with the state of public education. Seventy-eight percent of parents believe that past government budgets have had a significantly negative impact on education (2016). Parents are reporting:

*There are too many students in each class, and this affects the teacher's ability to teach and provide one-on-one attention to the children who are in need of extra help.*

*My son has more students in his class; he struggles with ADHD, and his grades have dropped because of all distractions and less teacher help.*

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the average class size for all classes in the private school setting is less than 20 students. This number is even lower in primary and elementary. Parents with children in private schools recognize the importance of smaller class sizes for their children's success. In this province, the class size caps are 20 in kindergarten, 25 in primary, 28 in elementary, 31 in junior high and there is no cap for high school classrooms. However, these caps are really just soft targets or guidelines – not legislated or contractual obligations – in that the school districts can increase them by 2 if they deem it necessary. Hence, the actual guidelines for class size maximums in this province are: kindergarten – 22; primary – 27; elementary – 30; and junior high – 33. Couple these large class sizes with a model of inclusive education that places children with a wide spectrum of educational needs in the same classroom and it is no wonder that the recent *Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes* concluded:

*...too many students in NL are under achieving, struggling with reading and basic mathematical functions, and are not taking the more academically demanding high school courses they need for success at the post-secondary level; too many students are graduating from high school without sufficient knowledge of career opportunities, post-secondary study options, and fundamental life skills; too many students are dropping out of school and have no realistic way back in; too many students with mental health needs and academic challenges are not receiving the supports and the education they deserve. (p. 3)*

The working conditions for teachers are the learning conditions for students; this is reality. School is a shared experience. The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association hears repeatedly from teachers that changes occurring in their work environment are not conducive to fostering and improving student achievement. Increasing class sizes, inadequate resourcing of inclusive education, rising incidents of student behaviour problems and violence, and increases in mental health issues are having a negative impact on student learning. It seems an obvious premise, something that "goes without saying," that you cannot expect to improve student outcomes by draining resources away from the very processes and structures that are meant to support student learning.

# Education Affects Our Economy

While natural resources have historically been important to our province, Newfoundland and Labrador's true great 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 classes within our education system produce 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 (2014), in his review of 112 studies on class size, 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 (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.*

We can no longer afford to ignore the gap between our resources for primary and secondary education and our province's economic health. Class sizes within our K-12 education system should not be based on short-term budgets – class size decisions need to be based on the evidence from long-term cost-benefit analyses.

We don't save money by assigning "just a few more students" or even "just one more high-needs child" to any given teacher – we're just passing an even bigger cost along to our social and economic systems. The breadth and depth of the benefits that can come from smaller classes can save our province money in many ways, since education level has positive effects on a variety of economic factors.

Jackson, Johnson and Persico found in their 2014 study, *The Effect of School Finance Reforms on the Distribution of Spending, Academic Achievement, and Adult Outcomes*, that:

*... our results indicate that for children from poor families, increasing per-pupil spending by 20 percent for a child's entire K-12 schooling career increases high school completion by 22.9 percentage points, increases the overall number of years of education by 0.928, increases adult earnings by about 24.6 percent, increases annual family income by 52.2 percent, and reduces the incidence of adult poverty by 19.7 percentage points.*

The benefits of smaller class sizes are even greater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Canada, 85% of income assistance (including welfare and other support) is spent on the 34% of Canadians who have not completed high school. The *Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes* has identified a need to retain students in school. The best policy approach to improving student retention is through reduced class sizes. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017), student enrolment in small class sizes from K-3 increases the odds of graduating high school by 80%. Looking at the evidence, it's hard to argue that cuts to education are an effective "cost-saving" measure.

Every time class sizes increase, it limits our education system's ability to maximize the future income or achievements of every child. We can't afford to miss out on the next innovators and entrepreneurs sitting in our classrooms right now.

Despite the extensive evidence of the opinions of researchers, the teaching profession, parents and the general public, Government has, since 2011, embarked upon a course of decreasing teacher allocations over and above what might have resulted from a decline in student enrolment resulting in increasing class sizes. In May 2007, the Teacher Allocation Commission submitted its final report, *Education and Our Future: A Road Map to Innovation and Excellence*, which made 35 recommendations including:

5. *Teachers be allocated to school boards on the basis of the following class size maximums: kindergarten – 18; grades 1-3 – 20, grades 4-6 – 23; grades 7-12 – 25.*
6. *Where it is necessary to combine two or more grades or courses in one class with one teacher, the maximum class size will be: K-3 – 12 students or less; grades 4-12 – 15 students or less.*

11. *A hard class size cap be used to determine the teacher allocation for mid-size high schools.*
13. *The teacher allocation to school boards provide 11 Student Resource Teachers per 1000 students. The qualifications for these teachers would be the same as currently exist for the categorical and non-categorical special education teachers.*
16. *At the elementary level, specialists be allocated on the basis of one per 125 students to support the areas of music, physical education, fine arts, French, and literacy and numeracy.*
17. *Specialists be allocated from Grades 7 to Level III at the rate of one per 175 students to support the areas of music, physical education, fine arts, French, CDLI support, and skilled trades/technology.*
19. *Learning Resources specialists be allocated at a level of one per 500 students from Kindergarten to Level III.*
20. *Guidance counsellors be allocated at a level of one per 333 students for Kindergarten to Level III.*
23. *The current ESL model for teacher allocation be revised to base the allocation upon student enrolments in April of the immediately previous school year and that the base number be adjusted to provide a 0.50 teacher unit for every 15 ESL students registered.*
27. *The provincial class size maximums apply to English, French Immersion, and Intensive Core French classes for teacher staffing purposes.*

The Commission also recommended increases to the administrative allocation to provide time for administrators to actually work with students, teachers and parents.

Subsequently, in March 2008, the Provincial Government introduced a new approach to the allocation of teaching resources. This new model referenced maximum class size numbers for Grades K-9 and was described by the Minister of Education at that time as being focused “on need, not numbers ... on programming and teaching needs and maximum class sizes in the K-9 system.” This new Teacher Allocation Model included increased administrative time for schools of all sizes and prescribed the following class size caps: Kindergarten – 20 students; Grades 1-6 – 25 students; Grades 7-9 – 27 students. The model also decreased class sizes for some multi-grade situations and increased allocations for specialist teachers (music, physical education, French, and literacy and numeracy) and learning resource teachers.

While this was a good start at trying to reach the allocation targets recommended by the Commission, it did not last long. Over the past number of years we have seen successive governments raise the size of classrooms as a cost-cutting measure – basically trying to balance the books on the backs of children. Interestingly, when the government instituted the 2008 teacher allocation formula, it mandated that a review of the model be conducted after three years. The Association is convinced that had the required review been conducted, it would have highlighted the negative impact that the 2009 Inclusive Education Initiative was having on class composition. It would have found that the formula was not sufficient

to meet the demands for special education services created by having students with multiple learning needs and challenges grouped in the regular classroom. In his 2016 report the Auditor General noted:

*Despite being directed by Cabinet to evaluate the Teacher Allocation Model three years after it was implemented in 2008-09, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has not completed the assessment and has not reported back to Cabinet.*

Not only did government fail to ensure that the mandated review was completed, it gradually implemented a more intense, resource dependent model of education while simultaneously increasing class sizes and reducing teacher and administrator supports within the system. The introduction of the Inclusive Education Initiative, in which students with special needs were placed in the regular classroom setting without adequate special education supports, has been a major concern for both parents and teachers.

As discussed above, class size is an important issue that has a significant impact on the learning and teaching environment in schools. However, numbers alone are not the answer. Today's schools do not separate students into homogeneous groups – difference and diversity within classrooms is the norm and must be considered equally and alongside the number of pupils present.

In *Class Size and Student Diversity – Two Sides of the Same Coin* (2012), the Canadian Teachers' Federation reported on a national teacher survey and research review on class size and composition. Their findings concluded: class size matters, but so does class composition – in other words, when we talk about class size, we also need to be thinking about the degree of student diversity in those classes. In order to enhance quality and equity in our public schools, they need to be addressed together. Data on average class size can only tell a small part of the story. The degree of student diversity as a proportion of the total class size needs to be taken into account. Teachers' experiences are in line with the research.

Many of the issues related to class composition can be traced to the chronic under-resourcing of the Inclusive Education Initiative, which was launched in 2009. As previously noted, inclusion has been implemented in concert with ongoing reductions to teacher allocations and increases in class size. During this period, the NLTA witnessed a dramatic increase in incidents of violence in classrooms, including violence against teachers. There can be no doubt that the classroom environment and class composition affects teacher effectiveness. In fact, the OECD reported in 2013:

*Certain classroom characteristics can make a teacher's work more challenging. Teaching classes in which a large proportion of students have different achievement levels, special needs or behavioural problems can affect a teacher's self-efficacy and job satisfaction, especially if the teacher is not properly prepared or supported. (TALIS)*

According to the research model used by the OECD, a classroom was considered to be challenging if “more than 10% of students in class are low achievers or more than 10% of students have a behavioural problem.”



## Education Affects Our Health

While spending on mental health services in our province has been rising for years – the mental health needs of our province have been rising even faster. Healthcare providers and resources are stretched to and beyond capacity trying to meet patient demand.

Without a focus on prevention and earlier intervention, we will never catch up. Better access to student supports within our education system produces long-term savings in healthcare. Students spend half their waking hours in school, and at least 1 in 5 experience mental health problems or illness (Physical & Health Education Canada, 2017). Seventy percent of mental illnesses have their onset during childhood or adolescence (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2016).

We can no longer ignore the gap between students' needs and our education system's resources. Guidance counsellors, educational psychologists, instructional resource teachers, student assistants, speech-language pathologists, behaviour management specialists, 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 – 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 level is a major factor for determining/predicting mental health.

As indicated above, the NLTA has witnessed a dramatic increase in instances of violence in the classroom. The NLTA has provided teachers an opportunity to report, for research purposes, incidents of violence they experience in the workplace. As of December 2017, the Association has received 87 reports submitted by teachers involving incidents of physical aggression by students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. This is violence by students directed at teachers. The NLTA believes the reporting of these situations to be suppressed by a fear that teachers will be blamed for the student behaviour. Teachers have sustained injuries and some have missed work as a result, experiencing significant reductions in income from having to access workers' compensation benefits during their absence.

Some of the experiences teachers have reported include:

- being punched, kicked and slapped;
- being pinched, scratched and bitten, often breaking the skin and causing bleeding;
- being grabbed and pushed, having their hair pulled;
- being threatened with scissors and stabbed with a pencil;
- having heavy objects (large books, desks, a microwave oven) thrown at them;
- being thrown/pushed against a concrete wall (teacher sustained a concussion);
- being injured while attempting to restrain a violent student;
- experiencing verbal and physical threats of harm.

In some instances the result has been serious injuries including concussions and broken bones. The NLTA reiterates that the working environment for teachers cannot be separated from the learning conditions for children.

Teacher stress and burnout are on the rise. Over the past three school years, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) statistics indicate an increase in the number of teachers accessing counselling supports – from 7.7% of the total teacher population in 2013-14 to 10% in 2015-16. Teachers' reasons for contacting EAP are also telling – personal/work stress and emotional/mental health have also increased as a presenting issue over the same period of time. Personal/work stress accounted for 47.1% of EAP cases in 2013-14 and increased to 51% in 2015-16.

Mental Health continues to be the top diagnostic category for teachers in receipt of Long Term Disability Insurance. Approximately 40% of our teachers who are off for extended periods and who are receiving LTD are off because of mental health issues. The average age of these teachers is 42. These are experienced teachers who can no longer function in the workplace with the stressors they find themselves dealing with each and every day.

Looking at the evidence, it's hard to argue that cuts to education are a "cost-saving" measure. A 2011 report from the Canadian Policy Network highlights the need for a broader approach to our growing mental health concerns:

*...one of the unique challenges with ROI studies in mental health promotion/illness prevention is that, to a large extent, the returns (economic or otherwise) typically show up in a sector other than the one in which the initial investments are made.*

Every reduction in essential student supports, such as guidance counsellors and student assistants, also reduces the likelihood of prevention and/or early intervention for every child.

Investing in education saves money in healthcare. Creating classrooms that promote better health for every student creates a big pay-off, for every single one of us.



# Conclusion

Unlike others in society, children have no real voice. It is our responsibility to look after our children. They are the foundation of our future. We can't continue to apply quick solutions to our current economic situation which adversely affect the future of our children and will ultimately determine the future of our province.

Changing social structures, illicit drug use, mental health concerns, and the increasing prevalence and complexity of student needs – an increasing number of students identified as requiring special supports, an increasing number of students with behavioral issues, and the complexity of needs that exist in our classrooms today could not have been imagined 10 or 15 years ago – are all facts that parents, teachers and politicians today agree upon.

Do we think increasing class sizes has helped us deal with the many issues noted above?

Do we think that the education of our children and youth is too important not to be the top priority for our province?

What is the vision for our schools? Do we want schools where students thrive as individuals, are unique and capable of expressing themselves? Overcrowded classes with too many students with special needs are not environments in which students thrive, or where teachers are able to support their learning, their character development, their social emotional learning, and their dreams.

Do we want schools where our newcomers to Canada feel welcome, and which motivate them to stay and establish homes in our communities? Our schools should be places where newcomers find the supports they need and where families share their Newfoundland and Labrador experiences widely, and where the province establishes itself as the best place to immigrate and start a new future.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association believes that it has provided sufficient evidence to support, on academic, economic and health care grounds, a reversal of past cuts to education. We call upon government to implement the 2007 recommendations from the Teacher Allocation Commission. The NLTA understands that the government is currently reviewing the educational system as a result of the report of the *Premier's Task Force on Educational Outcomes*. The NLTA had requested that government include in the Panel's mandate a review of the current teacher allocation model. This request was refused, and as such no review was completed. This is despite a 2008 Cabinet directive that a review of the allocation model be conducted no later than 2011.

We are asking government to step up and invest in our kids and the future prosperity of the province.

1. Reduce class sizes.
2. Set standards for class composition – so that all students in our classroom can be supported in maximizing their potential in their own unique ways, in safe and caring learning environments.
3. Provide special supports to enable students with special needs and mental health issues to access the same opportunities as their peers.

Our schools should not just be good enough, they should be outstanding, excellent and supportive places where all students thrive.

