

For Immediate Release
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NLTA MEDIA STATEMENT

RE: REPORT ON THE PREMIER'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY TEAM

Introduction

I would like to thank all of you for coming today. I will be available over the next week if any of you would like to have more detailed conversations regarding the Report of the Premier's Economic Recovery Team as it relates to the future of the public education system in Newfoundland and Labrador.

It is important for Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans to understand that the NLTA has two legislated responsibilities in this province under the *Teachers' Association Act*.

The first is as the bargaining agent for teachers, school administrators, teaching and learning assistants, program specialists, school counsellors and psychologists, and speech-language pathologists – all of the professionals in our schools who work directly with students. This representation provides us with a unique and detailed understanding of the public education system. In this capacity, I will say clearly that the NLTA and its members will respect collective agreements that they negotiated and gave concessions to achieve. The NLTA and its members will respect the pension reform agreement that they negotiated and gave concessions to achieve. **I want to be absolutely clear on this – the NLTA will fight any attempt by government to legislate changes to these agreements or to remove any member from this Association.**

The NLTA's second role is as the professional association for educators. In this role, we have the important, legislated right and responsibility to advise government and the public on practical issues in education.

The Report of the Premier's Economic Recovery Team, authored by Dame Moya Greene, was, as you all know, just released yesterday. I have had an initial review of the report itself, which I will be studying more closely over the coming days. The document is extensive, and touches on a broad scope of issues and areas of our provincial society and economy. In the time we have today, I will focus on the matters of most significant concern to the NLTA and our public K-12 education system. Following that, I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

1. Demographic Realities

In her media comments yesterday, Dame Greene stated that Newfoundland and Labrador has the lowest student/teacher ratio in the country. This statement, left hanging out there on its own, without reference to the unique context of our demographic realities, is not useful and is misleading at best. The report opines that our small student population should be an "advantage", without explanation or acknowledgement of our provincial demography, other than to reference three small coastal schools, two of which have been closed as noted in the small print of the footnotes. It is critical to consider the impact of population density, and overall geographic size as numbers alone do not tell the full story.

According to Statistics Canada data, Newfoundland and Labrador has the lowest population density among our closest comparators, the Atlantic Provinces, with 1.4 persons per square kilometre. In comparison, PEI has a population density of 24.7, Nova Scotia is 17.4, and New Brunswick is at 10.5 persons per square kilometre. There is no comparison. The cost of providing services in a province in which it can take three full days, if the weather holds, to travel between the furthest flung communities, will not be the same as it is for our geographically smaller, more densely populated neighbours.

Given this reality, in order for Newfoundland and Labrador schools to truly “level up”, as Dame Greene puts it, is essentially to say that there will be no public education offered to children in rural areas of the province. The only solution proposed in the report is to pay families to be separated from their children for the duration of each school year. There is no talk of rural renewal or the many contributions that our rural communities make to the provincial economy.

Interestingly as well, the report references the need to increase provincial immigration numbers, and cites public policies that encourage immigration as important in attracting and retaining new and skilled immigrants. Should we assume that this is a strategy for urban areas only? **Gutting, or “leveling”, the public education system in rural Newfoundland and Labrador seems completely opposed to the goal of encouraging and supporting new immigrants and their school-aged children to settle anywhere other than in larger centres.**

2. The K-12 Education System

“The Big Reset” report is critical of the provincial public K-12 education system, its teachers, the curriculum, and government’s ongoing implementation of recommendations made in 2017 by the Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes. Yet, there was nobody on the Premier’s Economic Recovery Team, including Dame Greene, with extensive background, experience or expertise in public education. By way of consultation, the NLTA, the association representing professional educators in this province, was afforded one meeting with Dame Greene for less than an hour in late November of 2020.

The report calls for increased supports for students with disabilities, mental health issues, and those at risk of dropping out of school, while at the same time criticizing the recent resources added to the system to implement the 2017 recommendations of the Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, many of which overlap with needs identified by Dame Greene.

On what basis was it determined that grade 12 has become a “slack year for many students”? There is no footnoted, or any, source cited for this assertion.

Who are the “experts” that have indicated K-6 teachers trained in this province are not able to teach reading and math? That is what they do, every day. **Graduates from the MUN Faculty of Education are highly sought after and aggressively recruited by school boards and education authorities from across the country and around the world.** With respect to technology, during the pandemic, current teachers, graduates of Memorial University, have led the way, volunteering their time and talents in offering leadership and professional learning to their colleagues on the use and integration of technology in teaching and learning.

Dame Greene cites no support for the recommendation that school administrators should not be members of the NLTA. Neither does she explain how this move would positively impact the province’s fiscal situation. The recent report of the Premier’s Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, *Now is the Time*, made no such conclusions, despite being focussed exclusively on public K-12 education in this province. The collegial model of school leadership is entirely consistent with the primary role of school principals as instructional leaders, pursuant to the *Schools Act, 1997*. Principals and vice principals are, in effect and appropriately, the lead teachers in their schools – they are required to be certified as teachers, and are teachers first. Most vice principals and a number of principals in Newfoundland and Labrador also have teaching responsibilities. Schools are unique and dynamic workplaces and, while no system is perfect, our current context promotes unity in the profession while allowing for role clarity. This balance promotes collegiality, and remains effective in Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, as well as Newfoundland and Labrador. In other jurisdictions where school administrators have been removed from a common professional organization for teachers, much time, energy and effort has been redirected to dealing with union issues or other hierarchical conflicts. Recommendations to reduce administrative supports at the school district level would further erode time available for instructional leadership at the school level.

There is always room for improvement and the public education system should be responsive to evolving labour force demands. However, to say that K-12 education in this province does not provide students with a strong educational foundation is a gross exaggeration and over-simplification of the issues. OECD assessments are the only

source cited in support of this assertion, yet respected national and international authorities in public education, such as Education International and the Canadian Teachers' Federation, have consistently critiqued reliance on such measures as the sole indicator of an education system's effectiveness. Dame Greene said herself that our young people are leaving the province. **Our students compete successfully for post-secondary and employment opportunities outside of Newfoundland and Labrador.** They leave well-prepared and well-educated, sought after in other parts of Canada.

The report demonstrates a disturbing lack of understanding of and appreciation for the reality of teachers' workdays. Five hours is merely the minimum legislated daily instructional time. There is no guaranteed preparation time during the work day for teachers in this province. I would welcome Dame Greene to follow the footsteps of just one teacher in our K-12 system and tell me how many hours they work in a day – preparing for class and evaluating assessments; delivering instruction; writing reports; supervising students before class, during recess and lunch breaks, and following dismissal; making contact with families; attending after school meetings with parents and colleagues; volunteering their time for extracurricular activities, including sports, music, drama, and student leadership programs. I could go on and indeed, this entire issue has been well researched over time. The 2004 study conducted by one of the most respected educators this province has ever produced, the late Dr. David Dibbon, former teacher, principal and Dean of the MUN Faculty of Education, found that the work done by teachers outside of the legislated work day is considerable. **Dr. Dibbon's research concluded that teachers work on average 46.67 hours per week to perform required professional duties, and that this increases to more than 52 hours per week if you include the voluntary activities that add so much to our schools and contribute to the overall social and emotional health of students.** The suggestion that extending official school operational hours will somehow create more time for professional learning and collaboration is ill-informed and insulting. To suggest that teachers engage in five hours of instruction per day without investing additional time in planning and preparation is naïve.

3. Public Service Pensions

As noted in the report, provincial pension plans recently underwent significant and successful reform. This was not a one-sided process, and teachers made considerable sacrifices, in terms of retirement benefits and pension contributions, to achieve this result. In 2015, under the sole administration of government, the funding ratio of the Teachers' Pension Plan was 62.7%, and the plan was projected to be exhausted within 30 years, placing retirement income for all teachers at risk. Not a glowing example of good management. **As a result of pension reform and the 2016 Joint Sponsorship Agreement between government and the NLTA, along with the strategic investment plan that has been implemented by the Teachers' Pension Plan Corporation, the funded status of the TPP fund has grown to 114%, with an 86% probability of remaining fully funded in 20 years.** An excellent example of working together to solve a problem.

Dame Greene's recommendations would have a destabilizing impact and would work against growing our economy. As a population ages, pensions become more important to the economy as a stabilizer. Solid jobs with retirement benefits, to which employees make equal contributions, attract young professionals. Newfoundland and Labrador is already facing difficulties recruiting teachers and other educational professionals in many parts of the province. Eliminating defined benefit pension plans would serve only to weaken our competitiveness and drive more young professionals towards opportunities elsewhere.

4. General Remarks

The NLTA recognizes the serious financial realities that are facing this province. To effectively respond to this fiscal reality, one thing government must do is to finally begin treating public education as an investment and not only an expense. Investments in quality, well resourced, publicly funded education are, in effect, investments in our economy that can have a significant and sustained positive impact over time if Government is prepared to make a long-term commitment. Research from various agencies, including a recent study by the Conference Board of Canada, shows that investments in improving public education generate positive economic results, including reductions in crime and poverty, gains in productivity, and decreased costs in health care, social assistance and the criminal justice system.

I am deeply concerned by the content and lack of vision in *The Big Reset* report. It is beyond disappointing. The recommendations for public education will devastate communities, especially in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, and send the wrong message to young people, families and immigrants. Now is not the time for austerity, but for a proactive vision and plan for the future, a future that includes strong public services and good jobs that will attract and retain professionals and their families.

The disrespect for the public sector and negotiations is appalling. The NLTA is always willing to engage in good faith discussions with government; however, Dame Greene's blatant call for a legislated approach to settling labour relations matters is an unwarranted attack on constitutionally protected collective bargaining rights. **I will say again that the NLTA and its members will respect collective agreements that they negotiated and gave concessions to achieve. The NLTA and its members will respect the pension reform agreement that they negotiated and gave concessions to achieve. And to be clear, we will fight any attempt by government to legislate changes to these agreements.**

We will continue to review and assess this report in the coming days and weeks and will no doubt have more to say as we move forward and prepare for the consultation process referenced yesterday by Minister Coady.

Thank you.

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