

Performance Accountability in the Newfoundland School System

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This article discusses educational accountability in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It briefly describes the educational context, the historical perspective on accountability, recent attempts to move toward greater accountability for educational performance, as well as organizational difficulties and implications of implementing accountability programs.

Cet article traite de la responsabilité en éducation dans la province de Terre-Neuve et au Labrador. On y décrit brièvement le contexte éducatif, la notion de responsabilité d'un point de vue historique, les tentatives récentes en vue d'accroître la responsabilité en matière de rendement scolaire, les difficultés organisationnelles associées à la mise en oeuvre de programmes ayant trait à la responsabilité et les répercussions d'une telle orientation.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN K-12 EDUCATION

The demand for performance and accountability in education has never been as high on the public agenda as it is today. The public is no longer willing to accept simply on faith that its large investment in education will translate into the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by a population facing a highly technological and complex world. Parents, students, employers, and nearly everyone else, in society at large, are insisting that hard evidence be made available about the effectiveness and efficiency of the education system, and that this empirical base of information be used for improvement, decision making, and policy development. The public of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador is no exception.

Attempting to respond to the public's demands in this province, the implementation secretariat of the Royal Commission Report *Our Children, Our Future* (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1992a) wrote in the recent action document *Adjusting the Course 2* (Newfoundland Department of Education, 1994a):

The overriding objective in all of our attempts to reform the system is to transform this society from one of persistent under-achievement to one whose achievement ranks with the best in the nation. (p. iii)

Another recent report emphasizing the importance of education while highlighting public concern was the government's strategic economic plan, *Change and Challenge* (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1992b). Of the strategy's public consultation process, it stated:

The public felt that our economic circumstances cannot be improved without a fundamental change of attitude on the part of Government and the people. The public generally perceived education to be the single most important element in facilitating change in attitude, but indicated that they had serious reservations about the ability of the education system, as it is currently structured, to meet the challenges. (p. 25)

The Province will undertake initiatives to ensure that the education and training system is more responsive. . . . [It will establish] measurable objectives against which to evaluate success and prepare an annual report card to track the progress being made towards achieving the province's educational goals. (pp. 25–27)

Tangible evidence of progress toward goals should be expected in education as it is in other public and private enterprises. The focus on educational outcomes, with a parallel emphasis on measurement, is not unlike the principles from which such initiatives as total quality management, quality service, and strategic planning have evolved. Education has been slow to accept what many public and private sector enterprises have long known, that significant improvement cannot take place without measuring outcomes, focusing on standards of performance, and targeting action around the measured outcomes. The internationally celebrated Dr. W. E. Deming, an American the Japanese consider the person who taught them about quality, maintains that in all organizations, measuring performance is the key to success. His research and practical work with organizations in both Japan and the United States have shown that, contrary to what many think, "as quality is increased, costs decrease" (Aguayo, 1991).

BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador has, during most of its educational history, operated a denominational/church-based education system. Under this arrangement, responsibility for education is shared between the provincial government, through the Department of Education, and the major Christian churches, through the Denominational Education Councils. The recent Royal Commission on Education (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1992a), now being implemented, has recommended major changes to the present system of denominational school boards which will reduce the number of boards from 27 to 8 or 10, and make all boards interdenominational.

All matters pertaining to day-to-day operations of schools are administered by the school boards through their district offices. This includes organization and delivery of primary/elementary/secondary education within their districts, employ-

ment of teachers and support staff, establishment of attendance zones, repair and maintenance of school buildings, and arrangement of pupil transportation.

Responsibility for all courses of study (except religion) and the selection and acquisition of suitable texts and support materials for the school system rests with the Department of Education. The department also directs the overall delivery of special education, achievement monitoring, program evaluation, testing, high school certification, the maintenance of provincial-level databases and record systems on the provincial education and training system, and school district financing.

The province's school system serves the island of Newfoundland, as well as the large mainland portion of the province, Labrador. Although the province is geographically large, its population is small. Today its population is just over half a million, with a student population below 120,000. In September 1993, there were 7,598 teachers, 492 schools, 27 school boards, 3 private schools, and 1 school for Aboriginal students; the pupil-teacher ratio was 14.8:1 (Newfoundland Department of Education, 1994b).

AUTHORITY FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

To date, the province's legislation governing education has not focused much on accountability for ensuring achievement of educational goals. Here as elsewhere, most legislation emphasizes accountability only to the extent that it requires the system to follow specified practices, regulations, and policies in operational areas.

The new Schools Act and the revised Education Act, which are expected to be passed in the next sitting of the House of Assembly, will specify the Department of Education's right to undertake initiatives in evaluation, research, and information gathering if it wishes. It does not require specific action to ensure accountability for such things as achievement, participation, effectiveness, efficiency, and client satisfaction; it does, however, propose that the province implement a system of school accreditation.

Even though the legislation in the area of performance accountability is weak, over the past few years the Department of Education, through policy decisions, has moved slowly into this area. It has also brought together in one division all activities associated with information gathering and reporting on students, programs, schools, and school systems. This has enabled the department to move more quickly on a number of performance accountability initiatives than might normally have been the case.

ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIVITIES: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Newfoundland has had a system of public examinations for certification purposes since 1893, when the Council of Higher Education was established to conduct

external examinations in provincial schools from grades 6 to 12. Originally these examinations were set and marked in England and certified that students had completed particular stages in their educational development. By 1931, however, responsibility for setting and marking all examinations except grades 11 and 12 had been returned to the province. Grade 12 was dropped in 1933 and was not reinstated until 1984. Also in 1933, Newfoundland became a member of the Common Examining Board of the Maritime Provinces, and responsibility for the examinations became a shared effort of these provinces. The grade 11 examination papers continued to be marked in Nova Scotia, the seat of the Examining Board, until 1969. Today the high school system is non-graded and credit-based, and a selected number of senior high school courses have public/provincial examinations. Full responsibility for the examination system rests with the province.

Until recently, very few students graduated from high school, and there was no expectation that the school system had any responsibility for keeping students in school. It was primarily responsible for assisting those who stayed in school and had a real desire to pursue higher education. The first real interest in keeping the majority of students in school to graduation came in the mid-1970s, after an external phenomenon, the declining birthrate in the province, began to show up as declining enrollments in the schools. The report *Leaving Early* (Newfoundland School Trustees Association, 1984), jointly sponsored by a number of educational agencies, showed serious inadequacies in the school system's ability to address the problems of dropouts and underachievement.

The first attempt to use assessment results for more than certification of individuals was seen in 1975, when the province embarked on a standardized testing program using the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS), a commercial norm-referenced achievement test. This program had three explicitly stated goals: to identify strengths and weaknesses in program areas, to compare achievement across school districts, and to assess achievement relative to a national norm (Newfoundland Department of Education, 1975).

At the time, the program created a great deal of controversy among educators, many of whom felt that the Department of Education had no right to compare student performance in one jurisdiction with that in any other. Educators maintained that each group of students was unique and that comparisons with others were meaningless. The controversy over the CTBS persists, but to a much lesser extent, since the department has begun to work more closely with school districts on performance issues and indicators of achievement. Those districts and schools that have used assessment results consistently over time have shown marked improvement, and almost consistently hold a decided achievement advantage over those that have not, regardless of the achievement measure used. In fact, over the past couple of years some real success stories have occurred when teachers and district personnel have decided to use student achievement results proactively in an effort to improve achievement.

ACCOUNTABILITY ACTIVITIES: THE PAST DECADE

In 1986, the Department of Education took a major step toward confronting the issue of poor performance by establishing a new division to deal with student evaluation, program evaluation, statistics, research, and planning. This division brought together, for the first time, all monitoring and information-gathering activities in the department. At the time, the intention was to learn more about how well the system was meeting its goals, but the focus was on gathering information, not accountability. The proposal to cabinet to establish the unit said:

In order to fulfil its mandate the Department must know if programs in existence, new programs, and programs in the planning stages are appropriate to the needs of students and the larger needs of the population in the Province. It must know if the large Provincial investment in program development and implementation is getting an optimal return. It must know if regulations and policies, put in place facilitate the educational process, are making a difference, and, it must know what the alternatives are to existing practices, policies, and programs when they are not working. (Confidential communication, 1986, p. 3)

Although the statement did not indicate that the department would take action to see that schools and school districts improved student learning, this was a major step toward setting the stage for later work. The idea that the education system must be held accountable for learning, that it should ensure student learning, rather than simply provide the opportunity to learn, was still foreign in the province's education and training system.

Despite the 1988 Task Force on Mathematics and Science (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1988), input variables, such as teacher qualifications and class size, were still perceived by the education system as the only major indicators of performance. That measurement and accountability are an essential tool in improving achievement was definitively stated in the report, but it did not translate into firm efforts to improve assessment and accountability for performance. The task force acknowledged that low expectations, encouraged by lack of high-quality assessment, was a greater problem than curriculum deficiency.

Progress toward the goal of higher achievement has not been as rapid as the public would like. Nevertheless, a major achievement-monitoring initiative, with the specific intention of using information for improvement, has begun to show some evidence of success, if not in great achievement strides, certainly in recognition of schools' responsibility for their students' success (Newfoundland Department of Education, 1990).

It was not, however, until the mid-1992 release of the Royal Commission Report, with its unequivocal push for performance and accountability in education, that the need for a greater focus on performance became a central issue in

the Department of Education. By then the public demand for better information and greater accountability had increased dramatically, making it ever more difficult to respond appropriately with the information about the system that was available. Even now the department, because of its resource constraints, is unable to respond adequately to needs in this area, but it is committed to trying to resolve these issues as quickly as possible.

Another major decision influencing accountability came in 1992. After the 1990 decision to unite the Department of Education and the Department of Career Development and Advanced Studies, there was considerable discussion of how to deal with the resulting two divisions (one for post-secondary, one for K-12) dealing with evaluation, research, and planning activities. The two divisions were eventually combined, not only bringing together similar activities but bringing to fruition the concept that learning is a lifelong endeavour and reinforcing the idea that planning should be viewed holistically across the education and training systems.

A number of activities demonstrating the new emphasis on performance and accountability are outlined below.

Educational Indicators System

At present, the most visible activity in the area of accountability is the developmental work on a system of educational indicators being undertaken as part of a cooperative human resource development agreement between the federal and the provincial governments. The Newfoundland and Labrador Educational Indicators System (NLEIS) covers both the school and post-secondary systems. On the K-12 side, NLEIS is basically a mechanism to accelerate development of and bring together a number of indicator measures of the system, as well as to set standards and targets of performance for students and for the education system. It will also actively encourage schools to begin reporting on their own system's performance.

When the provincial system is complete, it will provide an integrated set of indicators manifesting the complexity of the educational enterprise, and provide comprehensive information about the education and training system in Newfoundland and Labrador. Although the outcome measures of student and system performance will be the framework's centrepiece, NLEIS will be more than a set of outcome measures: it will provide information about factors that significantly influence outcomes and help explain how these factors interact to produce the state of the system over time.

Student outcome indicators will include achievement, attainment, participation, attitudes, and behaviour measures; system outcome indicators will include satisfaction and efficiency measures. Input, context, and process indicators will include factors inside and outside the influence of the school that affect learning

and teaching. The measures will emphasize access to learning, student environmental factors, and professional conditions.

Among this project's several goals, one of the most significant is focusing on desired levels of performance and accountability.

Criterion-Referenced Testing

On the recommendation of a number of recent reviews, the Department of Education has decided to develop a criterion-referenced testing program. The Royal Commission recommended that tests be developed for grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. These criterion-referenced tests are to be developed in the core areas of language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and French. Tests have already been developed for grade 3 writing and mathematics and grade 6 mathematics and science; tests for grade 9 mathematics and grade 6 core French are under development; development will begin shortly in three other areas or levels. At the grade 12 level, the existing public examinations will be used for this purpose.

The primary purpose of these assessments will be to evaluate the effectiveness of program implementation, and to evaluate the school system's performance. Although the results can be used for individual diagnostic purposes, results will not be used for promotion or certification at grades 3, 6, and 9. At the grade 12 level, the results of provincial public examinations will serve both certification and system evaluation.

An accountability plan will be put in place to help ensure that educators understand how to interpret test results, as well as to ensure that results are used to improve student achievement in the school system.

School Profile System

The recently completed school profile system was developed to help decision makers in the department and the school system better understand individual schools and to provide schools with a template for reporting their performance to their community. The full development of the profile system has been accelerated by the indicators funding, even though the project was initiated by the department some time previously. The system is very easy to use, even by novices to computer technology, and is updated electronically on the network as information becomes available. The database includes demographic information on numbers of students, teachers, grades, and so on in various combinations; achievement information from the public examinations, the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills, the criterion-referenced tests, and any other testing information available at the school level; attitude information on what students think of the quality of their school lives; and any other miscellaneous information that might inform decision making.

This information is now being made available to schools and to selected users in the department. All data are aggregated at the school and district levels so individual students or teachers cannot be identified. The primary use of these data is to support schools working on their own improvement and accountability systems, and for those involved in school indicator system pilots.

Student Level/School Operations Database System

The department is now in the final stages of establishing a student-level database for the school system. This system, known as the School Operations/Student Profile system, has been developed from the bottom up and is led jointly by the department's divisions of evaluation, research and planning, and information technology. Development was done carefully to ensure that all those using the system would have their student information needs met. Data will, for the most part, be entered into the system at the school level, though some will be provided to schools from the department's central databases. The district and department will upload from schools, or download to schools, as necessary to meet information requirements. This project has been made possible by a government-wide emphasis on introducing computer technology into the workplace and schools.

This large database system will allow tracking of students, more accurate measures of participation and attrition, and better and more comprehensive information on the education system generally. It will provide schools, districts, and the Department of Education with a valuable planning device.

Curriculum Standards and Graduation Outcomes Project

For quality assessment to take place, and for meaningful judgments to be made about whether appropriate standards are being met, clearly stated curriculum objectives and learning outcomes are necessary. Since the province's curriculum did not have specifically stated, measurable learning outcomes in most areas (high school mathematics and science being notable exceptions), the Royal Commission implementation secretariat has established a number of curriculum restructuring committees to undertake this task at the primary, elementary, junior high, and high school levels. These committees are made up of departmental staff in curriculum and assessment and of educators from the school system. The primary and elementary committees will complete their initial work in late 1994, whereas the junior high and high school committees have been given more time to conduct a review of the programs at these levels.

The Royal Commission implementation secretariat has put considerable effort into developing student learning outcomes based on the province's curriculum. Completion of the committee work will allow those in the performance and accountability area to move quickly into developing assessment and achievement standards, and, of course, into assessing student performance.

Changes to the Public Examinations

To make public examinations more indicative of the full range of measurable objectives, the department is developing item banks in each area tested. A standards-setting procedure for marking the examinations has also been piloted; it is hoped this will virtually eliminate the “eyeball scaling” currently done after the examinations are marked. With implementation of the Royal Commission Report’s recommendations, a number of other suggestions are being made which will significantly change what is tested. The intention is to have, where applicable, examinations cover all levels of the high school program in the subject area, not just the top-level course. These changes will help establish standards and benchmarks, making it possible to judge performance over time and in relation to course objectives without having these contaminated by extraneous factors that now result in major variations from year to year.

REPORTING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Comprehensive and project-specific reports are written on all assessment and data-gathering activities of the department, and a major statistical report including all significant demographic information on the system is published annually.

Of the many reports, the Profile series gets the most external publicity. These annual educational indicators reports, first published in 1991 (based on performance of the 1990 school year), have improved greatly over the past four years. *Profile '93* is the most comprehensive to date, and provides a key resource for those wishing to better understand the school system (Newfoundland Department of Education, 1994c). The major sections in the document are: *participation* (details the general participation of various age cohorts, participation in various programs, and participation by rural/urban, gender, etc.); *achievement* (outlines achievement in a number of basic skills areas, as well as achievement on public examinations); *attitudes and opinion* (reports how students feel about schooling, and how the public feels about various educational issues); and *financial* (reports on expenditures in various categories, and the extent of the financing effort as a percentage of the GDP and income).

The next major initiative in reporting will be at the school and district levels, with an attempt to have schools and districts report to their constituents and clients on achievement over time, compared to others, and in comparison to targets set by the school and by the province.

CHALLENGES IN ORGANIZING FOR PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

An interesting challenge facing the department is how to come to grips organizationally with the whole area of performance and accountability. Because of the

current profile of this particular area, it has become highly politicized, not only in this province but elsewhere. This has caused some difficulties in maintaining constancy in the organizational and reporting structures within which the many programs operate. Newfoundland and Labrador has, however, made a commitment to maintain in one division those functions that provide information on the extent to which educational goals are being met, and those that provide the demographic and contextual information necessary to understand performance and accountability.

The structure of the Division of Evaluation, Research, and Planning, although it has changed somewhat over the years, has for the most part remained organized around four major functions: student evaluation and testing, program and system evaluation, research and statistics, and policy and planning.

In addition to the organizational and reporting challenges, other concerns and issues have arisen over the past few years, some of which have been addressed and some of which have not. One issue still plaguing the department is how to ensure that information from the evaluation, research, and planning areas can be made most accessible to and usable by the Department of Education and the school system, as well as the public and others. This is a largely a communication problem and could perhaps be solved by an improved policy for communicating information from reports, research studies, and planning documents to the various stakeholders, and for receiving feedback on how to serve ongoing information needs of both the department and the public.

Another major concern is the level of technical and professional expertise involved in conducting the accountability work, and how to recruit people with the kinds of combined technical and professional expertise necessary to do the job properly. Recruitment has proven to be a major challenge, here as in other provinces, perhaps indicating a need for incentives and/or reclassification so that staff who have the required knowledge, skills, and aptitudes can be attracted and retained.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A system can neither improve significantly, nor be held accountable for the quality of its performance, unless it has valid and reliable information on which to base decisions for action. Yet, in the education system, collecting and using performance information for accountability have long been neglected at the provincial level. To some extent, this might be attributed to the fact that acquiring data on performance is complex, time consuming, and costly, and that the system fears being held up to public scrutiny.

Whatever the cause, there is inadequate credible educational performance information available beyond the classroom level, and a parallel lack of understanding of what the information means and how to use it when it is available. A double-barrelled action plan is necessary. On the one hand, a commitment

must be made to collect quality information; on the other, a commitment must be made to work with users so they have the tools to make a difference. Those who can make a difference include educational decision makers at the ministry/department, school board, and school levels, and classroom teachers, as well as parents and others who have a vested interest in improving education.

Operationalizing a commitment to performance and accountability means taking concurrent action on several fronts. It means making a fiscal commitment to ensure that good information is available in all important performance areas; it means making sure that the education system fully understands the advantages, the complexities, and the limitations of assessment and other information; it means conducting ongoing consultation with people in the system about how to gather better information and how to use it for improvement; it means giving the responsibility for finding solutions to those who know the problems best, educators at the school level; it means decentralizing decision making about professional development needs; and it means holding the system accountable for results, not for following rules and jumping through regulatory hoops.

In spite of the widespread criticism of measuring educational performance within the educational community itself, private sector involvement in assessment is booming. If educators do not agree to hold their doors open for public scrutiny and to become involved in the accountability efforts, assessment will be done from the outside by those with little understanding of the complexity involved in educating society's youth.

Education is a large, complicated enterprise, with a budget, even in a small province, similar to that of a very large corporation. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the education budget accounts for approximately one quarter of the provincial budget. With this level of investment, the public has a right to know the quality of the service it is receiving and the education system has a responsibility to provide information the public can understand.

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