

Nova Scotia Report

by Jenny White

Greetings from the land of the Blue-nosers (and the bare-arsers if you include Ashley McIsaac), which is the little bit hanging down on the right hand side, almost separated from the ROC (Rest Of Canada) for the benefit of those of you who were lucky (unlucky?) enough to do your social studies in a child-centred, whole-language classroom.

As a trustee (or school board member as we are called here) who is just completing my second term, I thought you might be interested in a little recent history of life in school board land — Nova Scotia style, particularly since we are a little further down the rocky road of amalgamation.

I was elected six years ago to one of the first fully-elected school boards in Nova Scotia. Prior to that, the boards were made up of one-third elected members and two-thirds appointed members. That election also brought an end to "meeting fees", where members were paid a token honorarium plus \$40 for every meeting attended. At present we are paid an annual stipend which varies from \$12,000 in some areas (not ours), to \$1,500 in others (also not ours). Legislation is currently pending to establish a standard stipend across the province. It may be relevant to mention here that we are the only paid trustees in Atlantic Canada.

Nova Scotia began amalgamating school boards in 1995, and the process is now pretty well complete, apart from the final reduction in number of trustees, which will happen after the elections in October of this year. We did have 22 separate boards, which have been reduced to six anglophone boards and one francophone, which covers three or four distinct and geographically-distant pockets of francophone — a nightmare to administer.

After initial amalgamation costs, we await to see what savings will be realized to be "put back in the classroom". By the way, NS school boards do **not** now, and I believe never did, have taxing powers.

Our area, which is now known as the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board, with a student population of 18,000 comprises three former boards, giving us a grand total of 26 school board members! However, if you think that is unwieldy, our neighbouring board, which is made up of six former boards, currently boasts 56 elected board members!! Roll on October and some rationalization!

Educationally, we have been undergoing a period of great upheaval and major funding reductions, similar I am sure to the situation in Ontario. As chairman of our education committee, it has been particularly disappointing to preside over such a period of dismantling of many of the good things that were in place, rather than being able to realize improvements in educational standards as had been my wish. Even fundamentals like keeping libraries open in elementary schools (the library techs were laid off) and providing adequate vocational training for our non-academic students (our technical high school was turned into a community college which now requires a grade 12 certificate) have proved difficult, or impossible to maintain.

My personal goal before running for the board was to encourage the implementation of the International Baccalaureate program into at least one of the high schools in our district. This program was then, and still is, offered at two public and two private schools in NS. I conducted a one-woman crusade, bringing key personnel from other I.B. schools and even from New York to make presentations to the local school board, the NS Dept. of Education, etc. I was, however, a lone voice in the wilderness.

As a board member, I would like to defend our species. I believe that, as with teachers, the vast majority of my colleagues both here and across the country, run for office because of a genuine will to help students and to improve the system. At times, it seems as if we run into a stone wall, especially when we try to persuade the professionals that our perspective **may** have some value. Also, I believe one of the most important aspects of this job is to provide a communication link between the board and the school population by attending local school events, to hear the opinions of principals, teachers and parents, and try to explain to them the mysteries of the board! Some school councils are an inspiration — their dedication and hard work constantly amaze me, likewise their success in raising tens of thousands of dollars from rural communities for the betterment of their students.

In Nova Scotia, volunteer school advisory councils are being actively promoted and within our board approximately 50% of the schools have either already established councils or are in the process of doing so, which is probably fairly typical for the province. The trend here, following amalgamation, is for boards to adopt a more "hands off" style of governance, due, in large part, to the unwieldiness of our new regions. It is a trend which I find hard to accept, especially if it reduces trustees to a group of once-a-month head-nodders.

I'm not sure if this message should encourage, or discourage you in Ontario, but at least it may reassure you that "you are not alone" and, when you decide you have had enough with the problems of education, take a break, and come to Atlantic Canada. We can guarantee you the best lobster in the world!

(Jenny White lives in Kings County, Nova Scotia.)