



A Covenant with our Children Education in New Brunswick

presented by



Next NB/Avenir N-B

It is time for New Brunswickers to talk to each other.

Our province and our region face some challenges, which means both must confront some difficult questions. Just as our nation seeks to redefine its role in the world economically, militarily and diplomatically, so too must New Brunswick's citizens decide for themselves their place in Canada.

Next NB/Avenir N-B will do that through a series of discussion papers it will release between February 2004 and June 2005. These papers will be supported by public forums held throughout New Brunswick and will culminate with a conference in Saint John.

Next NB/Avenir N-B will be a bilingual project to reflect New Brunswick's nature and its distinction as the only officially bilingual province in Canada.

***Next NB/Avenir N-B* is a unique opportunity to explore what New Brunswickers think about themselves, their province and its place in Canada and the world.**

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A Covenant with our Children

Education in New Brunswick

Every year Frederictonians line up along the old Woodstock Road for what has become a springtime tradition. The high school prom, a rite of passage for New Brunswick's teenagers, is done a bit differently here. Graduates from Fredericton High School like to arrive at the front door of the Delta Hotel, if not in style, than at least in a memorable way. And so they come, the girls in their long strapless gowns and the guys in their rented tuxes in antique cars, on tricycles, in horse-drawn buggies, in military vehicles, in the bucket of a front-end loader and in helicopters. This is a relatively new tradition for a high school whose roots reach deep into New Brunswick's history.

Two years after the first wave of Loyalists arrived from the newly-created United States, a group of them petitioned Governor Thomas Carleton in 1785 to create an academy of liberal arts and sciences for the children of these early settlers. Specifically it was for boys from good Anglican families. This academy was one of the first institutions the Loyalists created, evidence that education was foremost in the minds of some of the new immigrants. Classes in what was initially a preparatory school began some time around 1787. The college began offering university-level classes in 1822 and it awarded its first degrees in 1828. Out of these beginnings arose Fredericton High School and the University of New Brunswick, the latter of which rejected its origins as a private college for the elite and instead pledged, in 1859, to provide a practical education to all those who qualified. While UNB slowly took shape up the hill, Fredericton High School expanded rapidly.

By the 1960s, the high school's 2,000-strong student body was spread among three locations and it proudly boasted that it was the largest high school in the Commonwealth. At the same time, a few blocks away, Premier Louis Robichaud was considering the state of education in New Brunswick. His program of Equal Opportunity centralized funding for public schools and raised the quality of education in rural communities. He also reorganized the university system, converting the Collège St-Joseph into the Université de Moncton to create a modern

university for Francophones. He established a second UNB campus in Saint John at the request of community leaders and moved Saint Thomas University to Fredericton from its long-time home in Miramichi.

Since then, each successive provincial government has introduced its own reforms to the education system. Richard Hatfield introduced French immersion, Frank McKenna created a public kindergarten program and now Bernard Lord has placed his emphasis on early literacy. This concentration on education reflects the reality of New Brunswick, a small province that does not have the rich mineral deposits of Canada's north, the hydroelectric power of Quebec or the offshore exploration rights of Newfoundland. There will be no quick fix for New Brunswick. The province has just one thing to bet on – its people. Which means education is the base upon which we must anchor our plan.

If health care is our communal worry then education is our collective desire, our wish to impart knowledge and that far more elusive gift – wisdom – upon those who follow us. As a community we have had many debates about education but they have been limited to the specific problems of the day and the latest trends. What we haven't done is step back and examine how the system interacts with the community and how it contributes to the larger society. If we are to have transformational change in New Brunswick it must start in our classrooms. We must give our children the skills they need to learn, to be nimble of mind and to earn a living. As a community we must set high standards for ourselves and for our children. Standards are the guarantee to each student that we, as a community, will equip them with the information and skills they will need to be good citizens who are able to contribute to the development of our communities in the face of rapid change and shifting values.

Who are we?

For a province its size, New Brunswick has a lot of schools. There are 336 public schools, 28 independent (or private) schools, 17 alternative learning centres and eight First Nations schools for students in kindergarten to grade 12. For post-secondary students there are 11 New Brunswick Community College sites, four publicly funded universities, two private religion-based universities and one Bible college. The vast majority – 118,900 students – is in New Brunswick's public

school system. Of those students, 61,600 were enrolled in an English language school in 2003/04, 35,000 attended a French language school and 22,000 children studied under the French Immersion program. Approximately 7,500 teachers teach all these students and an additional 4,200 people provide support services as school secretaries, bus drivers, custodians and teacher assistants. Another 1,000 children attend private school.

An increasing number of people are continuing their studies at post-secondary institutions. About 25,000 people attended one of New Brunswick's four public universities in 2003/04, up from 22,000 in 1999/00. Of those, just over 50 per cent were enrolled at University of New Brunswick and another 26 per cent attended the Université de Moncton. St. Thomas University and Mount Allison University accounted for 12 per cent and 10 per cent respectively. New Brunswick's community college system welcomed approximately 6,000 students to its regular, full-time programs while an additional 18,000 people enrolled in non-regular programs.

Maintaining and improving upon this system costs a lot of money and education is second only to health care in the provincial budget. In 2004/05, the provincial government will spend \$804.7-million on the public education system. An additional \$185-million will go to publicly funded universities and \$61.5-million for community colleges. That's just over one billion dollars for the education of New Brunswick's people. What do we get for the investment? Certainly a greater proportion of our population is educated than it was a generation ago.

According to Statistics Canada, 72 per cent of New Brunswickers 25 years of age or older can, at a minimum, claim to be high school graduates. That's up from just 56 per cent in 1990. However New Brunswickers weren't the only Canadians hitting the books over the past decade. The national average for those with at least a high school diploma is 77.5 per cent and provinces comparable in size to New Brunswick, such as Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, hover around 74 per cent. Across the border in Maine and Vermont, the average in 2002 was 87 per cent.

In an environment where technology is so pervasive – in the computers we use at work, in the debit cards we take to the grocery store and in the remote controls that power stereos, DVDs and televisions – our definition of a basic education is changing. Technology is the great connector, plugging us in to

the person in the next cubicle as quickly as it links us to a contact in Hong Kong. But for all its wonder, the global village is an isolating place if you can't decipher the signposts. Which is why this new world exclusively belongs to neither the computer scientists nor the writers. Rather it will belong to the polymaths; those among us who love to learn.

In this world, we need more New Brunswick students and their parents to view high school graduation as a transition from one level of learning to another rather than the completion of their education. Right now New Brunswick has a dismal record when it comes to post-secondary education. In 2003, 13 per cent of people over the age of 25 had a bachelor's degree, the second lowest provincial average. The Canadian average is around 20 per cent. Maine is similar to New Brunswick, a small jurisdiction with a resource-based economy but that doesn't seem to prevent its citizens from seeking higher education where 24 per cent of its citizens have a university degree. The discrepancy between New Brunswick and similar sized provinces and states cannot be explained as a simple case of economics or the high cost of education. The rest of the Maritimes and the Northeastern United States also have boom-and-bust economies and limited opportunities for young people. Something else sets New Brunswick apart, something in our communal psyche that makes us hesitant to demand academic excellence.

- What is your definition of public education?
- What levels of education have you and other members of your family achieved?
- In your family, what generation was the first to receive a post-secondary degree or diploma?
- What do you want for the children in your family?

Where does it start?

New Brunswick's education system must be built around three tenets: opportunities, expectations and accountability. Everyone in New Brunswick should be able to learn. More specifically we must agree that all children have the right to learn to their fullest abilities. At the heart of learning there must be a challenge, a push to encourage that student to reach beyond the talents they think they have and instead discover that they can achieve more than they might have thought.

For 20 years the prevailing philosophy in education has been one of inclusion, of ensuring that all students learn in the least restrictive environment. This is a term borne from American legal precedent that means children with physical, mental, emotional or learning disabilities should be able to attend regular classes, supported by aides and specialists. There is nothing wrong with that because children need to interact with other children. If one is in a wheelchair and another one can't sit still, so be it, that is life and that is what we are preparing our children for. However, we have allowed this ideal of the least restrictive environment to become pre-eminent in the way we approach education. It has given us a system that tries to fit all children, regardless of their abilities, into one way of learning. We need a companion ideal, one that gives children a classroom that not only welcomes all but also provides learning for all.

New Brunswick has perfected the notion of the least restrictive environment. Now we must prove we can give students the most productive learning environment too. But if a child is to accept that challenge they must have someone encouraging them to make the effort. The lucky ones have their parents. We know from international studies, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that the students who did the best on those tests were the ones whose parents were involved in their education. The 2000 test results, which ranked the performance of 250,000 students from 32 countries, placed Canada second overall but New Brunswick placed last of all the provinces in reading, math and science. However the students who had parents that supported them and who read to them performed better than those students who attended school with little parental guidance. If New Brunswick's children are to succeed, parents must be there to help them with their homework, ask them about their school day and read aloud to them from an early age. This is a parent's responsibility to their child and to the school system that seeks to educate them.

Consider that although New Brunswick can boast one of the highest high school graduation rates in Canada - 84 per cent - only about 30 per cent of New Brunswickers go on to post-secondary education. Where did all the students go? Perhaps we haven't adequately met their challenge, the challenge to push them further than they think they can go.

- How should classrooms be organized?
- If you are a parent, how many hours a week do you spend on your child's education?

- What should be the relationship between parents' and their children's school?
- What do you want your local school to accomplish?

How do we get there?

By changing the way we teach. We must embrace the movement towards standards-based assessment, increased accountability and greater social inclusion. Standards-based testing is about more than making every student in New Brunswick write the same test on the same day. The tests our students need are the ones a teacher administers on a regular basis, and which, depending on the results, lead to action, whether it is remedial work for the children who are falling behind, extra lessons for those barreling ahead or a note of encouragement to those who are chugging up the middle. Standards are the great equalizer in a classroom. It is the teacher's guarantee to each student that they will teach them the curriculum by the end of the school year regardless of their family's net worth, their language, their disabilities or their personality. Regular testing lets teachers know if they are fulfilling that guarantee. A test is a check-up for both the teacher and the student. It is a message a teacher gives to a child - 'Tell me what you know today so I know what to teach you tomorrow.' Setting those standards is at the heart of that shared understanding of education: that every child has the right to an equal opportunity in the classroom.

There are two groups to which we must be particularly cognizant: First Nations children and young boys. Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) people look to the education system for the same things the rest of us do: they know it can harness the intellectual potential of an individual and it can also pass on the communal values and culture to the next generation. However the higher drop-out rates of Aboriginal children and their lower than average level of education suggests the New Brunswick school system hasn't lived up to the promise of equal opportunity for its Aboriginal students. In all but a few schools, such as Devon Middle School in Fredericton and Bonar Law Memorial School in Rexton, Aboriginal students do not see their culture, history or values reflected in the curriculum nor are special efforts made to make them or their parents feel that they are an integral part of the school community. There have been small improvements – some schools now offer instruction in Aboriginal languages and there is a high school level elective

course in Mi'kmaq and Maliseet studies – but significant problems remain.

For the Mi'kmaq and the Wolastoqiyik, education is a particularly sensitive issue. The legacy of residential schools still resonates here. Some of New Brunswick's aboriginal children were sent to Shubenacadie in Nova Scotia and it wasn't until the early 1950s that the government began to integrate all Aboriginal children into the provincial school system. Today, approximately 1,500 Aboriginal children attend provincial schools. An additional 785 children attend First Nations-administered schools located in Burnt Church, St. Mary's, Eel Ground, Big Cove, Tobique, Red Bank and Kingsclear but none provide high school. When Aboriginal children leave their community schools for the public system they leave behind smaller classes, a comfortable teaching environment and an emphasis on Aboriginal culture for a larger school, in a different community that doesn't emphasize Aboriginal life. There is an added dimension to Aboriginal education: the belief within the Aboriginal community that education is intricately tied to self-determination.

As the federal and provincial governments continue to discuss a new relationship with Canada's First Nations, the Mi'kmaq and the Wolastoqiyik will continue to demand control of their children's education. Just as the wider New Brunswick community looks to its young people for its next generation of leaders so too do the Mi'kmaq and the Wolastoqiyik want to produce Aboriginal leaders, citizens knowledgeable in the language and culture of their people. If they cannot find that in the provincial system they will demand to do it themselves. Aboriginal children aren't the only ones who don't always see themselves reflected in their classrooms.

Boys have also lost their way in the New Brunswick education system. As a group they routinely score lower than the girls in their grade, particularly in reading. In 2000, 80 per cent of girls in Grade 8 passed the standardized test compared to 71 per cent of boys. Province-wide tests of reading ability found that 79 per cent of Grade 8 girls and 67 per cent of boys scored well, a difference that was noted in the international PISA tests, which concluded that New Brunswick displayed the greatest gap between genders of any Canadian province. Why is this happening? Have we failed to offer boys an equal opportunity to learn? At the very least, we haven't given them male role models in their classrooms. Men are a minority in New Brunswick schools. Only 25 per cent of the province's teachers are men and

few of them are found in the early grades, when literacy education is most critical. The curriculum must also be critiqued, to determine if it holds any interest for boys. No one likes to read a boring story and to create a culture of learning in our classrooms we must nurture and encourage our children's natural interests.

- What is an appropriate level of testing?
- What are the basic standards required to improve New Brunswick's overall academic performance?
- What should be done to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal students?
- How can we increase the literacy level of boys?
- What is the responsibility of the wider community towards its area schools?

What do we want?

An education system where everyone accepts their responsibility for its success. Accountability and transparency must be at the forefront of any reforms to the public school system. Under the Quality Learning Agenda, the Education department will publish an achievement standards report that will track, among other things: the number of high school graduates; achievement levels in math, science, language arts and adult literacy; second language achievement levels; participation in third language classes; achievement levels in boys; post-secondary participation; and, public satisfaction with the quality of education.

Beyond all this monitoring we need to change the way we run our schools. Principals and vice-principals should be removed from the collective bargaining unit of the New Brunswick Teachers' Union. It makes no sense to have managers in the same union as their employees. Administrators and teachers should be given greater latitude to organize their schools in a way that marries provincial guidelines with local expectations but that increased autonomy must be linked to greater accountability.

Educators should also have to answer for poor results. It isn't enough to want to see improvements in our children's academic scores; we must demand it. We should also strive for excellence in our teachers, which means a reinvestment in teacher training. They are the heart of the education system and New Brunswick's Bachelor of Education programs must ensure teachers are

properly prepared for a modern classroom and they continue to receive support to enhance their skills. The individual voices of teachers must be welcomed into this conversation about education. Charged with teaching our children to think and express their own thoughts, teachers are discouraged by the Department of Education from doing so themselves. In 2002, Elena Scraba, a consultant hired to compare the New Brunswick and Alberta Anglophone education systems concluded that “the current climate in New Brunswick’s education system is one of mistrust and repression.” Education reform is too important to allow the voices of teachers to be barred from the conversation. That discussion must include an open dialogue about French immersion.

Last year 26 per cent of English language children took French immersion. The program is a well-established part of the New Brunswick school system, which is why we must strive to make it better, to ensure that it is truly available to all children and that it serves their needs. If we have not crafted a French immersion program that is accessible to all students then we are failing New Brunswick’s children. We are also failing to nurture a prime asset. New Brunswick is Canada’s only officially bilingual province. According to the 2001 Canadian census, 34 per cent of New Brunswickers spoke both languages, a figure second only to Quebec. The federal government has pledged to double, within 10 years, the number of bilingual high school graduates and the New Brunswick government has set its own targets, stating it wants 70 per cent of all high school graduates to be bilingual by 2012. We need to make French immersion work, which is why we must start asking questions.

- What is your responsibility to New Brunswick’s education system?
- What is expected of teachers?
- Should we hold principals and teachers accountable for their students’ achievements?
- How do we measure outcomes in French immersion?

Why?

Because we have a promise to keep. Children enter this world with an innate desire to learn but while that baby may want to walk, they usually need an adult to stand a few steps in front of them to urge them on. So it is with education. We must encourage our children to always take that next step, to embrace

the challenge inherent in the pursuit of knowledge. We do not have to look far for examples. The Mi'kmaq and the Wolastoqiyik have long understood the importance of communal wisdom, the Loyalists made education a priority as they set about to design a province and the Acadians recognized that education can shape the evolution of a culture. For too long we have ignored those lessons. It is time to change the way we teach and interact in New Brunswick's schools. It is time to renew our covenant with New Brunswick's children. We will educate them. They will learn. And together we will transform New Brunswick.