

The Silence of Teachers

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Introduction

Community schools have been under siege in Newfoundland and Labrador for almost fifty years. In the name of reform, there has been a consistent and persistent effort to "reform" these valuable social and educational resources out of existence. Fueled by a false belief that bigger must be better and mistakenly convinced that smaller schools were holding back educational progress, hundreds of these community assets have been eliminated. Today, we have more children, even the youngest ones, travelling longer distances, for increasing amounts of time, in pursuit of a purported improved educational opportunity.

The first Royal Commission on Education headed by Dr. Phil Warren in the mid 1960's initiated school consolidations. Dr. Warren concluded that the large number of small schools and multi-grade classrooms in the province were a major impediment to educational progress. Children could not learn as well in such educational settings, claimed the Commission.

In the *Report of the Royal Commission on Education and Youth (1967/1968)* Warren recommended a dramatic program of closure and consolidation. As a result hundreds of small rural schools were closed. There were major problems with education and schooling in the province at that time. The challenges, however, were more rooted in economic disparities, poor teacher training, inadequate resources and an archaic denominational system than the scale of schooling

Unfortunately, the Royal Commission stigmatized small schools and multi-grade classrooms as the problem. Once that seed was planted, it became the conventional wisdom that dominated rural educational reform. The true worth of community schools was lost to our educational leaders. It was not lost for parents, children and teachers who experienced that value every day.

The Consolidation Wars

Ever since that first Royal Commission, at various times, the province and/or the districts initiate another round of closures and consolidations. These initiatives are usually accompanied by reports (*Our Children Our Future, 1992; Structuring the Education System: A Public Consultation Paper for Educational Change in Newfoundland and Labrador 1996*) that perpetuate the myths and conventional wisdom related to small community schools. The narrative is always the same: bigger is better, closure and consolidation will save money and improve education, if parents really care about their children they will agree to close their local school and bus their children to a distant one.

The Silence of the Teachers

Unfortunately, a very important voice was missing from the public discourse: teachers. No current teacher or administrator participated in any of the public meetings. None wrote letters to the paper or called in to open line shows or made comments on social media such as Face book. Even teachers who were parents with children in the schools affected were silent. This absence of their voice really concerned me on a personal and professional level.

This was most unfortunate because teachers, in my view, have essential professional knowledge and understanding of the value of small schools and their role in the sustainability of rural communities. Who better understands the value of educating children close to home? Who better appreciates the deleterious effects of bussing on children's health, safety and achievement? Who better understands the disappointment felt by students when denied the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities? Who better understands the supportive and nurturing atmosphere of small schools especially for at-risk children? This unique professional knowledge should be part of the decision making process.

Were teachers denied permission to speak on these issues? Were they not allowed to participate in this important public discourse? Why? Was their professional knowledge a threat? Perhaps they were intimidated into silence by events several years ago when two teachers dared speak critically and publically about educational matters? Were they then taught a lesson?

The last time I checked Canada was still a democracy and one of the principles of that democracy is the freedom to speak freely on important public matters. When important voices are silenced we are all losers because we are denied the insight and understanding of those who live and work in our community schools. As one of my colleagues is fond of saying, "To silence teachers is silence the moral conscience of education." I have to wonder as well what lessons in democracy and freedom are we teaching our children if teachers feel they must be silent.