

School Options Committee

Background Comments

A Starting Point

A great number of comments have already been advanced to School Options Committee (SOC) members prior to the start of this process.

These have been, in Pictou, a public meeting (August 16, 2016) and considerable newspaper coverage on the issue and the task of the SOC.

The SOC in its original meeting had considerable discussion in review of this. Going forward it was felt that there should be a summary document to capture the starting point the SOC in this process.

Placing those comments received in order and in context, both historical and current, will give the Board and the community the starting point for the SOC.

Background Paper #1

CCRSB Prospective Options

The CCRSB has presented three (3) options to assist the SOC. Each of those options are to be considered by the SOC.

The Nova Scotia School Review Policy document does not call for this as a requirement of a School Board for a SOC.

The SOC believes that the three options were provided to assist the SOC, as stated by the School Board. It reads in part...."The School Board has developed options for the Pictou Feeder System which optimize the utilization of existing school facilities. Additional options should demonstrate similar improvements to facility utilization". (Terms of Reference, SOC, Page 3).

The assistance places both the SOC and the School Board in a difficult position going forward.

For its part Board staff have obviously considered the above mentioned criteria and could come up with no more than these three (3) options. One can assume that staff would not have advanced them were they not considered to be the best options.

Having done so the Board staff have placed themselves in a defensive position to demonstrate/support their logic. Had there been other options even more logical the SOC is certain that the option(s) would have been included in the document as a courtesy.

To the community at large and to any interested party this assistance represents a bias that staff are unlikely to relinquish in any process.

Even if well intended the School Board staff state a conclusion prior to a consideration. This does not help either the SOC or the community.

The SOC has a diverse membership. Following the guidelines provided by the Province of Nova Scotia and the CCRSB there can be little doubt that as a matter of process many options could be considered without predetermination.

SOC's in the Province are in a difficult position. Prior determination, even as a guide, complicates a process which in and of itself is unsettling.

The community for its part did not receive the options in the manner intended. Many believe, and stated openly (public meeting August 16, 2016) that the issue was already decided by the

Board prior to the establishment of the SOC. The SOC then becomes merely an exercise in using and claiming that a community based group has been consulted.

The School Board need not have been as helpful as they have been. As one parent stated at the public meeting on August 16, 2016 in Pictou..."If you don't trust the process then you don't trust the outcome".

The provision for a fourth (4) option later removed goes to the heart of the trust issue with the community.

There is little point in going over how and under what considerations it was removed. The SOC has to move forward.

The SOC is in agreement at the start of the process to reinstate the fourth option the Board/staff thought better about. This fourth option essentially provides that..."Grades P-12 to be established in a consolidated configuration in Pictou, in an arrangement yet to be determined through research, community input and School Board assistance in consideration of facility utilization".

This addition respects the Provincial legislative requirements that presently apply, community concerns and student/staff experience.

The SOC has had an initial meeting with CCRSB Superintendent Mr. Gary Adams and staff. The SOC is encouraged by what they have heard. There is a joint willingness to do so as complete a review as can be carried out.

The SOC will not only consider all existing options but will hear from community groups who may offer additional ones to the benefit of the students in that community.

Background Paper #2

Considerations

A guideline of the School Information Profile provides that the Board...."addresses the value of the school to students, the Board, and the community". (Nova Scotia School Review Policy, Directive G, Page 8).

In the case of Pictou Academy, Directive G might also have included the Province of Nova Scotia and its citizens.

One has only to consider the stand alone legislation ("Chapter 140, An Act to Amend Chapter 29 of the Acts of 1816. An Act for founding, establishing and maintaining an academy at Pictou, in this Province").

The Legislation was introduced in 1969 by MLA Harvey A. Veniot. It passes through as legislation on its merit. Those merits are of historical, cultural and educational significant for the heritage of Nova Scotia.

Before there was a Canada there was Pictou Academy. Before there was a Province of Nova Scotia there was Pictou Academy.

Prior to Pictou Academy there was no school in the province open to all Nova Scotians regardless of faith and fortune.

King's College in Windsor (1789) offered advanced education at what is now referred to as high school level. King's College however accepted only members of the Church of England leaving out some 80% of Nova Scotians.

Before Pictou Academy Nova Scotians who sought years of advanced learning and were not Church of England did so in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Pictou Academy is the first non-sectarian school founded in the Nova Scotia. Admission requirements are academic merit and not faith. Pictou Academy is the birthplace of an education system that today Nova Scotians take for granted by at the time is unprecedented and in many quarters revolutionary and unwelcome. This breach includes the admission of women by merit under the same standards.

What flows from Pictou Academy, from its start, are graduates that break ground and shape a system of education and access still in use today in Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia's first Superintendent of Education, John William Dawson, uses his own foundation at Pictou Academy as a template for Provincial curriculum development and standards.

The move to non-sectarian education in Nova Scotia is not without sectarian detractors, many of whom had allies in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

Pictou Academy however survived largely because Nova Scotia legislators began to realize the value of a liberal, universally available education for all its children. At some point there is a recognition that Nova Scotia needs more Pictou Academy's not fewer.

The battle over non-sectarian education in Nova Scotia was not short lived and was largely fought out in the Provincial legislature. Pictou Academy if unfunded would close the books, so to speak, on the issue for some time into the future.

The battle had implications for the Nova Scotia Legislature itself. One newspaper article of the time states...."It was largely the battle over the existence of Pictou Academy more than any other question that led to responsible government in Nova Scotia (Cradle of Knowledge, p.51. Monica Graham).

Pictou Academy and the Nova Scotia Legislature becomes at first reluctant but eventually willing partners in the evolving nature of education provided to Nova Scotia children.

The Legislation introduced Harvey A. Veniot and which was passed by the Nova Scotia Legislature in 1969 is Provincial recognition of a partner and past both share and a future made better for Nova Scotia children by that partnership.

For their owners in Nova Scotia every large boat would be unique and treasured. There is however only one Bluenose. That treasure belongs to all Nova Scotians.

For their communities schools in Nova Scotia are unique and treasured. Each has a history important to the development of that community. There is, however, only one Pictou Academy. That treasure belongs to all Nova Scotians.

The SOC's characterization of the legislation protecting Pictou Academy as a "statutory impediment". The Legislation is rather a statutory recognition.

The SOC does not accept an assessment that placed in historical context, it was a Private Members Bill supported by the majority Government of the day. Shortly before an impending provincial election, with no substantive debate in the House of Assembly".

The debate on Pictou Academy in the Nova Scotia Legislature took place some two hundred (200) years ago.

Place Pictou Academy in its proper “historical context” is the very reason for the unique legislative recognition and protection.

The Legislature understood the significance of Pictou Academy, its role and its history with the legislative body in advancing out present day system of education.

Legislators break each day of sitting at noon to the sound of cannons from the Fortress at Citadel Hill. Placing that in historical context the Fortress would likely have succeeded with similar protective legislation without substantive debate in the House of Assembly.

Indeed on a National level few have been recognized by the National Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a historic site. Pictou Academy has that recognition and it was granted in 1937.

The Legislators need not look any further than Dalhousie University to appreciate Pictou Academy. Each year Dalhousie celebrates “Munro” day as a holiday. It is in recognition of George Munro whose benevolence (\$300,000) kept Dalhousie financially afloat as it struggled to establish itself. Without that assistance its existence might have been short lived. Dalhousie recognizes that with its annual tribute to Mr. Munro.

Mr. George Munro is a Pictou Academy graduate (1845). Mr. Munro saw Dalhousie as a natural extension of Pictou Academy. His son attended the university and his contributions helped to also establish Dalhousie Law School.

We can assume that the Nova Scotia Legislature provided recognition/protection to Pictou Academy for substantive and historical reasons. To characterize it as a slight of hand is to trivialize a history that made it possible, simply put Pictou Academy deserved it.

The value of the school goes beyond Pictou. Pictou Academy is what Nova Scotians have come to accept as the foundation educational facility for our present day schools.

Pictou Academy is a source of pride to the Province as well as the community. That historical context will never change.