

Expanding Their Universe, Reshaping The Future

A Report on the Impact of School Fees and Fundraising On Social Inclusion



Community Services Council
Newfoundland and Labrador

November 2003

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bridge-builder *partner* advocate

strategist resource leader supporter

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In partnership with
MacMorran Community Centre

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FOREWORD

School fees and charges for various school-related activities are the subject of considerable discussion. Generally the discussion focuses on the appropriateness of levying expenses in a public school system that is intended to be universal, and on the financial burden this places on some families. Parents face a range of expenses from administrative charges to costs for participation of their children in specific activities. In addition, many fundraising events are organized to raise money. School is meant to be a place where all children are equal and fully integrated. However, the levying of school fees and charges may set up barriers to integration and create inequities among students in the school system. The potential impact of these financial impositions on children and youth whose families have limited financial resources has not been well considered.

The Community Services Council and its partner, the MacMorran Community Centre, were curious to know if the demand for payments affected students, and if so, how. Were some children barred from certain activities because their families did not pay the fees or could not meet the frequent requests for payments and contributions to fundraising activities? We heard that children were sometimes left out of school activities and were made to feel uncomfortable and excluded. How widespread were these concerns and what remedies do schools take? What was the risk of hurt resulting from the insensitive or thoughtless behaviour of other children and adults?

In 2002 we embarked on a study within the Avalon East School District to explore these issues. We have learned that school fees, charges for specific activities and events, and some fundraising activities do indeed contribute to some children and youth feeling marginalized and excluded. While the purpose of charging fees may be rational from the perspective of a cash-strapped school system, the unintended impact of excluding some children from certain activities and making others feel uncomfortable is simply not acceptable. The solution is not the reduction of enriching activities, however. The solution has to be found in other ways. The Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador calls on all concerned to find ways to ensure that all children are valued and included in all activities without being singled out or experiencing social exclusion.

I wish to express thanks to the Avalon East School District for permitting this project to be undertaken and for so graciously enabling the completion of the research. Our work benefited immeasurably from the support and wisdom of Dr. Cyril Coombs, a man of considerable thoughtfulness. On behalf of the research team, I would like especially to thank all the administrators, teachers, parents and students who participated in discussion groups or completed survey questionnaires.

Penelope M. Rowe
Community Services Council Newfoundland and Labrador

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was made possible by the support and involvement of many committed volunteers as well as CSC staff and employees of the Avalon East School District. The researchers would like to thank all those who devoted their time and interest to this endeavour. We are especially grateful to the Avalon East School District and Mr. Bert Tulk, Assistant Director of Programs, for approving this research. A special thank-you goes out to and all the administrators, parents, teachers, students and key informants who agreed to take part in this project.

The Researcher would also like to thank the following people for their help: Louise Woodfine, Fran Locke, Melanie Thomas, Kelly-Anne McCrindle Kenny Curlew, and Carol Brice-Bennett.

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<p>This report is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Cyril Coombs, a devoted educator who died in January 2003. Dr. Coombs was an enthusiastic supporter of this project. Without his assistance and encouragement, this research could not have happened.</p>
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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of Clarica or of the Research Sub-Committee.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

There are many inhibiting, sometimes subtle, factors that create distinctions amongst children and youth during their school years. The environment in which a child moves and lives has enormous impact on the child's potential to learn, to be a full participant and to develop to an optimal level. The more restricted a child's life is, for whatever reasons, the more limited his or her view of the future will likely be and thus, the more limited her or his personal ambitions and life choices may be.

In 2001, the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC) received funding from Clarica for a project entitled *Expanding Their Universe, Reshaping The Future*, of which this research is a component. The project proposed to explore and address some of the barriers leading to exclusion in school and community activities; to enhance universal access for children to developmental opportunities; and to expand personal development activities for youth and their families.

The first objective of the project was to define how some children may be excluded from various school and extracurricular activities and to examine the impact of school charges and fundraising on school-age children and their families from the perspective of social exclusion. It is the methodology, results and recommendations from this portion of the *Expanding* project that is outlined in the current report.

Permission was sought and approval granted to conduct the research within the Avalon East School District (AESD). The AESD was very cooperative and placed a representative on the Research Advisory Committee. Using four research tools (a literature review, key informant interviews, discussion groups and survey questionnaires) and working with the support of an advisory committee, researchers examined the impact of school charges and fundraising, showing how families are being financially burdened and how some children are being excluded from activities such as special food days, graduation ceremonies, and field trips.

This research project is intended to be a snapshot of the effects of school charges and fundraising in one school district in Newfoundland and Labrador. Due to the financial limitations of this project it was not possible to carry out research on a provincial scale. The data and conclusions are not meant to be indicative of the provincial experience, although this data may very well be transferable.

Key Findings

School charges and fundraising are widespread in the AESD

- The vast majority of schools participating in the research charge parents for items such as agendas (used for recording homework, assignments and general scheduling needs of students), accident insurance, curriculum supplies (including consumable

workbooks), musical instruments, novels and lab supplies, as well as rentals/deposits on items such as lockers, locks, musical instruments, novels and textbooks. Fundraising is also widespread, with almost all research participants stating that this occurs in their schools.

Perceived effect of school charges on students

- Administrators, parents, teachers and students all reported occasions when students are excluded from school activities due to limited financial resources. A majority of teachers, parents and students stated that inability to pay school charges has a negative impact on students whose parents cannot pay these costs.
- Almost one half of all students surveyed feel that students sometimes avoid going to school or cut classes because they cannot afford the cost of participating in scheduled events. Students were asked how they think their counterparts feel when they do not have the money to pay for fee-based activities or materials. The vast majority responded that they feel upset, ashamed, alienated or otherwise negatively affected.
- Students were also asked how they themselves feel when they have to bring home requests for payment of school charges. Over a quarter said they didn't like it or felt uncomfortable. Many stated that they feel badly bringing requests for money home to their parents.

Perceived effect of school charges on families

- The research suggests that some families really struggle to pay for school charges and costs. The overwhelming majority of teachers and parents (84% and 95%) feel that this is the case.
- Over half of all parents stated that they personally find it a financial hardship to pay school charges and costs. When asked to explain, almost one-third said that these costs were more than they could afford and many said they experience financial difficulties at the beginning of the school year.

Perceived effect of school charges and costs on school staff

- This has an impact on teachers as well. Ninety-two percent of the teachers surveyed stated that they subsidize students who do not have money for field trips, school supplies or other school costs. Many said they purchase materials required for teaching. Almost half felt that collecting school charges and fees is a source of extra stress and work for them.

Variations exist among schools in promoting social inclusion

- Although this study was not permitted to identify schools participating in the research, our data indicates that variations do exist among schools in promoting social inclusion.

- For example, some schools –
 - provide students with books and supplies if they have not paid for these items;
 - limit expenses at school leaving ceremonies; and /or
 - subsidize students who cannot afford field trips.

Issues around fundraising

- Almost one third of administrators stated that without fundraising, they would not be able to offer the curriculum activities, or “extras,” they do now.
- Small schools, those located in the inner city or in lower socio-economic areas were singled out as having the greatest difficulty raising funds.
- Concerns were also raised that some schools would fall further behind their more prosperous counterparts. Some respondents suggested that students who attend schools in wealthier areas benefit from a better-financed education system as they have a more affluent fundraising base and tend to receive more individual and corporate donations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Fees for school supplies, books and activities, and other school related costs have become the norm. These charges create financial hardship for some families and contribute to the social exclusion of children within the school system. There is also a growing divide among schools, with some struggling to pay for bare necessities while others offer an enriched educational experience. Based on the research findings, a set of recommendations is being proposed that, if implemented, would help counteract some of the disparities among schools and among students.

- 1. Increase funding to schools**
- 2. Standardize and advertise payment plans**
- 3. Establish a school fund to subsidize student expenses**
- 4. Exercise discretion when subsidizing families in need**
- 5. Create sensitivity and awareness of social exclusion and inclusion**
- 6. Limit graduation and school leaving expenses**
- 7. Continue extra-curricular and curricular activities**

1. INTRODUCTION

*“The issue is simple! Government is not allocating sufficient funds to provide a high quality, equitable level of education accessible to all students throughout this province. Too many discrepancies exist. Too many inadequacies exist. These cannot be overcome by school fees and should not be the responsibility of parents and teachers”.*¹

When communities and families have experienced long standing, intergenerational inadequate income, the prospects of children tend to be lessened, not only because of lack of money but also because of the cultural and social barriers that may be found in circumstances where mere survival is a challenge. Furthermore, the potential isolation from the mainstream may produce negative experiences.

The elementary and secondary school years are life influencing. Schools often reflect community divisions. The opportunities which children are able to access may affect growth and development and become indicators of future success. Prospects are often related to the following factors:

- family structure and income levels;
- the capacity, ability and willingness of parents to nurture, encourage and support young people’s involvement in a multitude of community activities;
- the nature of broader community willingness and support to integrate all children regardless of ability to pay; and
- the family’s level of personal development and engagement in the broader community-wide activities.

The elementary and secondary school system is viewed by many as the “great equalizer” – a place offering equal opportunities for all children. Public education is purported to be a universal program to which every child, regardless of family income or capacity, has equal access to its benefits. Parents, community activists, educators and journalists have all expressed concerns, however, that public education in Newfoundland and Labrador is not universally accessible. To quote the editorial board of The Telegram, “So much for the taxpayer-funded public schools. If universal medicare worked this well, you’d have to bring your own needle and thread when you had a cut that needed stitches.”²

Educators argue that schools receive inadequate funding from the provincial government so must charge fees and raise funds to support programs and cover expenses. In 2001, the President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers’ Association (NLTA) noted that “it is increasingly clear that fundraising is taking place for school supplies and basic needs within the school environment and for the regular school program.”³ A 2000

¹ Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers’ Association, “School Funding Inadequate,” News Release, September 26, 2000.

² The Telegram, “Cheer and Jeers,” August 19, 2002.

³ Rianne Mahon and Caroline Beauvais, *School Aged Children Across Canada: A Patchwork of Public Policies*, Canadian Policy Research Networks, Study No. F10 (Ottawa: Renouf Publishing, 2001).

Canadian Teachers' Federation study reported that the funding shortfall is so severe that teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador spend an average of \$485 per year to purchase school supplies and to subsidize students.⁴ According to the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils (NLFSC), many schools receive more money through schools fees and charges than they do from the provincial government.⁵

In discussing school fees and charges, it is critical to be clear about the meaning of these words. School fees can denote a basic fee at the beginning of the school year, monies for supplies, field trips, etc. For the purposes of this paper, the terms charges and fees are used interchangeably.

In exploring the issue of school fees it is important to consider the definition of curricular and extra-curricular activities. Should parents be expected to pay extra fees for physical education classes that take place outside school during the school day? It can be argued that if activities take place during the school day these are a component of the curriculum. The activity must be deemed a valuable learning experience or the school would not recommend that children participate. If an activity is part of the core curriculum for students, then it should be accessible to all students, not just those who can afford it. According to a September 2000 Government of Newfoundland and Labrador news release, "...the department also covers the cost of student field trips, including busing, when they are part of regular instruction but does not cover extra-curricular activities such as travel or sports."⁶ The Schools Act states that schools can charge fees "...for the cost of supplies provided to a student" and "...for other services provided to a student **outside** school hours..."⁷

Educational costs passed on to parents create financial pressures for some families and are considered to be an unfair burden. At the beginning of the school year, families experiencing difficulties seek help from agencies such as the Credit Counselling Services of Newfoundland and Labrador (CCSNL) and the Single Parent Association of Newfoundland (SPAN). To help address the issue, SPAN began a Back to School Project to provide school supplies (e.g., pencils, book bags, gym clothes, etc.) to single parent families. This program's popularity serves as an indication of the rising costs associated with primary and secondary education. The CCSNL also reports that many parents fall behind on their bills because of school fees and other school related costs.

A study recently carried out in Nova Scotia stated that many parents resort to food banks in order to use their funds to pay for their children's field trips.⁸ A similar trend has been reported in Newfoundland and Labrador where Community Food Sharing Network officials state that they, too, see an increase in food bank usage in August as parents

⁴Canadian Teachers' Federation, *Survey of Teachers*, December 2000. Web site URL: <http://www.ctf-fce.ca>.

⁵Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, *Management and Reduction of School Fees*, June 2002.

⁶Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "School fees-what parents should know," Press Release, September 2000.

⁷Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, *Schools Act*, 1997

⁸Meredith Kratzmann & Lois Jackson, "Food for all? An exploration of the food bank experience in the Halifax regional municipality," Canadian Social Welfare Policy Conference, 2003.

struggle to purchase needed school supplies. To assist these families, the Network also collects school supplies for food bank users.⁹

Under-funded schools affect all stakeholders in the education system. There are financial and personal ramifications for parents when their children cannot participate in activities or are otherwise excluded. Administrators and teachers are professionally affected when they have to devote time to fundraising and collecting fees. They incur financial costs when they spend their own money to subsidize students and curriculum needs in the classroom. There are also repercussions for students unable to obtain materials or participate in activities that can enrich their learning. They are personally affected by low self-esteem resulting from their exclusion. Society loses when its most vulnerable citizens – children – are robbed of an opportunity to reach their full potential.

⁹ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Back-to-school blue\$,” August 2002.

2. STUDY OBJECTIVES

In 2001, the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC), in partnership with MacMorran Community Centre and funded by Clarica, launched a project entitled *Expanding Their Universe, Reshaping the Future* to explore and address barriers leading to exclusion in school and community activities; to enhance universal access for children to developmental opportunities; and to expand personal development activities for youth and their families.

The three primary objectives of the project were:

1. To define how some children may be excluded from various school and extracurricular activities such as recreational, sports and cultural activities and to explore how certain types of school fees create pressures for some families and affect the children's comfort and participation in school.
2. To provide opportunities for children and their families to participate in social, cultural, educational and recreational activities which are available in the broader community.
3. To support and facilitate the development of community leadership, parenting and personal development skills in community members, initially in the Brophy Place neighbourhood and then by reaching out to other neighbourhood community centres.

To meet the first objective, the project set out to

- identify schools to work with and review the range of areas where families and children are asked to pay fees or to fundraise for school activities;
- assess how this affects certain children; and
- develop strategies and recommendations to address these concerns.

Permission was sought and approval granted to conduct the research within the Avalon East School District (AESD).

A research advisory committee was formed to identify key issues, design survey questionnaires and oversee the research. The committee was comprised of five members representing MacMorran Community Centre, the Community Services Council, Avalon East School District and an independent professor from Memorial University (see page 2 for the list of committee members).

The study aimed:

- to determine whether the payment of school fees and fundraising is problematic for many families and if so,
- to determine how these issues affect those involved. Using a social exclusion / inclusion lens, this research identifies areas of exclusion and inclusion in the classroom.

This study is intended to provide a snapshot of the effects of school charges, costs and fundraising in one school district in Newfoundland and Labrador. Due to the financial limitations of this project it was not possible to carry out research on a provincial scale. The data and conclusions are not meant to be indicative of the provincial experience, although this data may very well be transferable.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research was carried out in four stages, including a literature review, key informant interviews, discussion groups, and surveys of administrators, teachers, students and parents. A brief summary of each component follows.

3.1. Literature Review

The concepts of social and economic exclusion and inclusion have been the focus of political debates in Europe since the 1970's.¹⁰ More recently, policy analysts and academics have begun exploring these concepts in the Canadian context. The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), for example, held conferences in November 2001 and March 2003 dedicated to this subject. A significant body of research resulted from these conferences, including papers by authors such as Dow Marmur, Andrew Mitchell, and Richard Shillington, on such topics as: ethics, recreation and poverty in relation to social inclusion, and the consequences of social exclusion.

Canadian policy makers have only recently begun using this concept to inform their approach to social and economic development, both provincially and nationally. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Reference Group on Social and Economic Inclusion looked to the Social Inclusion Division of the Scottish Executive as a guide in developing provincial policy.¹¹ Also recognizing that these concepts should inform the future direction of public policy, the staff of the Strategic Social Plan Office operating within the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador further argued that to improve the quality of life for residents of the province, government would have to work toward the inclusion of all citizens in every aspect of society. Each individual, they argued, should have access to meaningful employment, education, and other socio-economic determinants of health.¹²

People working with children and youth often refer to the concept of social and economic exclusion to explain the impact certain public policies have on children, especially children from low-income families. Many policy makers and academics argue that children and youth are often excluded from a variety of experiences and opportunities, not due to a child's individual failings, but to wider social and economic factors. Many children and youth are excluded from or denied access to programs and services offered by select Canadian institutions (educational or otherwise) because of their parents' financial and social status.

Andrew Mitchell and Richard Shillington define social inclusion as "...making sure that all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing

¹⁰ Janet Guildford, "Making the Case for Social and Economic Inclusion." Working Paper. Health Canada: Population and Public Health Branch, 2000, p. 8. In her article, Guildford argues that the term social inclusion was first used in policy debates in France. René Lenoir, Secretary of State for Social Action, used the term in 1974.

¹¹ Guildford, "Making the Case," p.13.

¹² Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, *People, Partners and Prosperity – A Strategic Social Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1998.

members of society. It is, therefore, a normative (value-based) concept – a way of raising the bar and understanding where we want to be and how to get there.”¹³ Within the education system, the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion have historically been used to refer to the integration of students with physical and developmental disabilities. The focus of this research, however, is the social and economic aspects of exclusion and inclusion.

Choosing to participate in school activities, for example, may not necessarily be a decision a child makes for himself or herself, but may result from their parents’ inability to pay the costs associated with those activities. Clyde Hertzman, of the Department of Health Care and Epidemiology at the University of British Columbia, argues “Canadian society systematically denies identifiable groups of children the opportunity for healthy development and this ought to be recognized as an important form of social exclusion alongside the others. This process of exclusion *begins before birth and unfolds slowly over the entire life course.*”¹⁴ He argues that policy makers allow this pattern to repeat itself by refusing to acknowledge that issues of social exclusion deeply affect children and by resisting attempts to rectify the situation, adding that “those who enter school in a vulnerable state will tend to be less healthy, experience lower levels of well-being, and be more likely to end up in socially marginal positions as life unfolds.”¹⁵ In other words, the impact of social exclusion reverberates well into the future. Children who endure isolation resulting from social and economic exclusion during their growing years are likely to experience exclusion in adulthood.

Some child development theorists believe that social inclusion or exclusion can also alter a child’s physical health and well-being and it has been suggested that early human experience can systematically alter human biology to negatively affect a person’s health. In particular, “parental and family experience of discrimination and exclusion can be transmitted to the young child through psychosocial pathways that affect the basic physiological development of the brain and the body’s stress response pathways.”¹⁶ Not only can exclusion affect the outcome of a child’s emotional maturity, but it can also leave a significant negative influence on a child’s physical health. In contrast, children enjoying social inclusion and economic security have better health. Consequently, not only must social exclusion be addressed to ensure complete access to education, but policies need to consider the effects exclusion may have on the overall well-being of children. To do so, the financial needs of families must be met.

Policy makers, teachers, and parents are coming to recognize that because of the many inconsistencies in funding, school fees and fundraising, the education system is inadvertently contributing to divisions among students in schools. Children whose parents can afford additional expenses generally benefit from participation in the “extras” provided by educators, while students whose parents are less wealthy tend to lack these opportunities. In other words, children from more affluent families benefit from a more

¹³ Andrew Mitchell and Richard Shillington, “Poverty, Inequality and Social Inclusion,” Perspectives on Social Inclusion Working Paper Series, Laidlaw Foundation, 2002, p. 8.

¹⁴ Clyde Hertzman, “Leave No Child Behind!: Social Exclusion and Child Development,” Perspectives on Social Inclusion Working Paper Series, Laidlaw Foundation, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁵ Hertzman, “Leave No Child Behind,” p. 1.

¹⁶ Hertzman, “Leave No Child Behind,” p. 9.

complete and well-rounded education as they enjoy more curricular and extra-curricular activities, including sports and field trips.

Furthermore, some studies indicate that such situations can be aggravated by a school's location, which often determines the success or failure of fundraising endeavours. Schools in wealthy neighbourhoods are able to fundraise more successfully than schools in poor neighbourhoods, which leads to more inequities as students attending schools located in wealthier areas benefit from a better financed education.¹⁷ Due to successful fundraising campaigns, these schools also rely less on school fees to provide learning opportunities for students.

3.2. Key Informant Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 16 key informants during the spring and summer of 2002. Participants included: parents (7), representatives of agencies that work with parents and/or youth (4), school staff (1), representatives of education agencies (2), and academics (2). The information gathered was used to frame questions for surveys conducted with administrators, teachers, parents and students. Common responses emerging from the key informant interviews included:

- schools are under-funded by government;
- school charges and fundraising pose financial problems for some parents;
- some students are excluded from school activities;
- some schools are falling behind others because of their inability to raise funds from the community and to recover costs from parents; and
- some parents refuse to pay school charges simply as a point of principle.

3.3. Discussion Groups

Four discussion groups with parents and students in the Avalon East School District were held to provide researchers with a more in-depth sense of the issues related to school fees. Discussion groups for parents were held at the Single Parent Association of Newfoundland (SPAN) and at the Women's Centre. Participants were recruited through advertising at both agencies as well as at Rabbittown Community Centre and on Cable 9's community events board. There were 8 participants at each event, all of whom were women. Youth discussion groups were held at the Buckmaster's Circle and MacMorran Community Centres. The first group included 8 participants from the host centre as well as 8 from Rabbittown Community Centre. Eight participants attended the second group, all from the Community Youth Network (CYN).

¹⁷ Lisa Widdifield and Betsy Odegaard, "Public Education as Charity: Fund-raising by schools raises many questions and concerns," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2000.
Web site URL: <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/edumon/article54.html>.

Common themes emerging from the discussion groups were:

- school charges and fundraising pose financial problems for some parents;
- fundraising is especially burdensome for families with low incomes;
- some students are excluded from school activities;
- students often do not attend school on special activity days because they do not have the money to participate;
- variations exist among schools as to what items or activities they charge for; and
- some schools permit students to have items or participate in activities they have not paid for, while others do not.

3.4. Surveys

Surveys for administrators, parents, students and teachers were designed, pre-tested and distributed within the District. This region is geographically diverse with prosperous urban neighbourhoods and inner cities as well as affluent bedroom communities, rural communities and economically depressed areas. There is a diversity of schools in the district including primary, intermediate, secondary and all-grade schools. Surveys were carried out in two phases: one administrator in every school was surveyed in the first phase, and a sample of parents, students and teachers in twenty schools (selected on the basis of size, region and grade level) was surveyed in the second phase. The latter three types of surveys were mailed to administrators, who were asked to distribute them to randomly selected teachers. The teachers were asked to complete a survey themselves and to distribute student and parent surveys to their homeroom class. Due to the highly controversial and often deeply personal nature of this research, respondents were not asked to identify themselves or the schools they work at or attend.

3.5. Administrator Surveys

A total of 64 surveys were mailed to administrators in the school district and follow-up calls were made to encourage their completion of the forms. Participants were given the option of filling out the form themselves or doing a telephone interview. Forty-five of the surveys (70%) were completed. One administrator volunteered to participate in a more extensive telephone interview in addition to completing the survey.

3.6. Teacher Surveys

A total of 100 surveys were given to teachers in twenty selected schools. Researchers sought an even distribution of teachers in grades Kindergarten to Level III. Administrators were instructed to use a formula provided by the researcher to randomly select teachers from specific grades (e.g., distribute surveys to every 3rd grade 9 teacher up to a maximum of 2 teachers). Selected teachers were later contacted through follow-up

letters and/or calls to encourage them to respond to the survey. Fifty-one surveys were completed, resulting in a 51% rate of response.

3.7. Student Surveys

In total, 216 surveys were distributed to students. This number was required to maintain the weighting system utilized by researchers to represent schools consistently. Teachers were provided with instructions to distribute the surveys randomly (e.g., every 5th student up to a maximum of 3). Surveys included a cover letter and a consent form to be signed by parents and returned with the completed survey in an enclosed envelope. For ethical reasons, only students in Grade 8 and higher were surveyed. The rate of response was 48 surveys or 22%. Given the low rate of response, researchers decided to survey a class in one of the selected schools that had not already been surveyed. Fifteen surveys were administered and completed in this manner, resulting in a total of 63 surveys completed.

The low rate of participant response may be due to a number of factors. One possibility is that, having changed hands so many times, some surveys were lost or not distributed. Also, the sensitive nature of the questions may have made students or their parents uncomfortable, thus resulting in surveys not being completed. Also, due to concerns regarding confidentiality, researchers were not given the names of student participants, precluding follow-up calls to encourage participation.

3.8. Parent Surveys

Teachers were also given 200 surveys that they asked students to take home to their parents. Teachers were given instructions similar to those for distributing student surveys. Parents were given the option of returning a form requesting a telephone interview or completing the survey and returning it to the researcher by mail. Sixty-three parent surveys were completed and returned for a 32% response rate.

The low response rate from parent participants was likely due to many of the same reasons as for the student response rate. The surveys were not given directly to parents so many were probably misplaced or not distributed. The personal nature of the questions may have made participation uncomfortable for some parents. As in the case of the student surveys, researchers were not given the names of parents, so follow-up calls could not be made. Also, some parents may not have completed or returned the surveys due to limited reading ability.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Extensive analysis of the key informant interviews, discussion groups and surveys conducted for this study has resulted in a number of key research themes being identified. These include:

- Prevalence of school charges and fundraising
- Perceived effect of school charges on students
- Perceived effect of school charges on families
- Perceived effect of school charges on school staff
- Fundraising as a contributor to social inclusion
- Fundraising as a contributor to social exclusion
- Student perspectives on fundraising
- Charges associated with curricular activities
- Inadequate communication between parents and school staff
- Refusal to pay school charges on principle
- Variations among schools in promoting social inclusion

4.1. School charges and fundraising are widespread

Of the 70% of schools in the district that participated in the surveys, all of them charged fees of some kind. All administrators stated that parents are charged for school supplies such as agendas (used for recording homework, assignments and general scheduling needs of students) and accident insurance. Ninety-six percent of respondents said that parents are charged for curriculum supplies, including consumable workbooks, musical instruments, novels and lab supplies. Seventy-six percent said that parents are charged rentals/deposits on items such as lockers, locks, musical instruments, novels and textbooks.

Fundraising is also widespread. Ninety-eight percent of administrators, 94% of teachers, and 100% of parents said that their schools take part in fundraising activities. As one administrator commented:

“Education is terribly under funded. We have to go to parents/guardians and fundraising to offer more than a skeletal program. Fundraising occupies too much of my time but I have come to accept that it is a way of life to provide books for our libraries, furniture for our classrooms or decent facilities for our children.”

4.2 Perceived effect of school charges on students

4.2.1. Change in attendance on special event days

All four parent and student discussion groups noted a tendency for students to stay home or, if they are young, to be kept home on days when fee-based activities are held. Youth participants stated that when they were younger, they were accustomed to faking sick or being kept home, and that this turned into “pipping off” (or playing hookey) when they were older.

Almost 45% of survey respondents (parents were not surveyed on this issue) were aware of a change in attendance on special event days. A small number of teachers say that there is actually an increase; but most state that there is a decline. Almost half of all students stated that students do not attend school when they feel they are unable to participate in activities. One teacher, echoing the comments of youth in a discussion group, stated: *“High school students have a variety of behaviors including “pipping off” which hide or avoid the “left out” feeling.”*

Survey question:
Is there a change in attendance on special event days?

Participant Group	Yes	No	Don't know	Unclear/ No answer	Total
Administrators	13	32	0	0	45
Teachers	28	18	4	1	51
Students	30	22	9	2	63
Total	71	72	13	3	159
Percentage	44.5%	45.5%	8%	2%	100%

4.2.2. Awareness of student exclusion from school activities

Survey question:
Are you aware of any situation related to costs in schools that may cause a child to feel left out?

Participant group	Yes	No	Don't know	Unclear/ No answer	Total
Administrators	5	39	0	1	45
Parents	11	49	1	2	63
Teachers	19	26	6	0	51
Students	16	38	5	4	63
Total	51	152	12	7	222
Percentage	23%	68.5%	5.5%	3%	100%

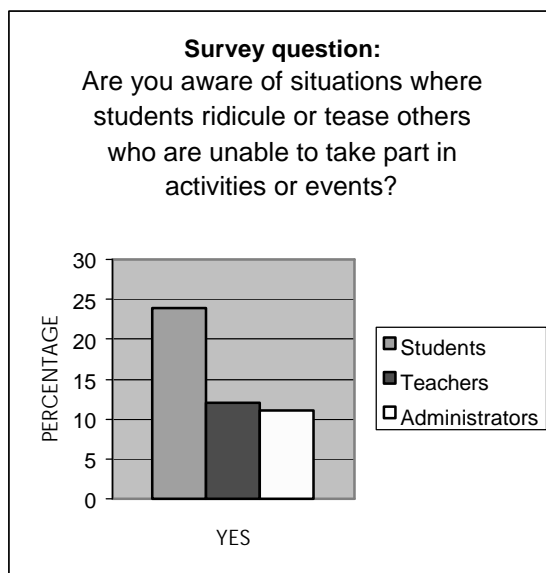
Of all those surveyed, almost one-quarter agreed that there are occasions when students are excluded from school activities due to a lack of financial resources. Teachers and students were most likely to answer yes, no doubt due to their daily interaction and regular observation of student participation in activities. One parent also commented:

“It (school charges and costs) provides a barrier between children. Families with low incomes cannot afford to send their children on field trips or outings, etc. This is not fair to these families that their child is not allowed to do what others are doing i.e. it is not fair of the school to put parents in this position.”

Many respondents pointed to graduation and, to a lesser extent, school leaving exercises as being particularly expensive and often exclusionary. One parent stated:

“I think Level III graduations have escalated to the point of a wedding. Grad dress, limos, hotels, tuxes, schools need to get a handle on this situation to keep it at a minimum so that all children can graduate equally and celebrate their academic accomplishments and not the financial accomplishment of parents.”

4.2.3. Teasing and derisive attitudes of peers



Participants reported knowledge of students ridiculing or teasing others who were unable to take part in activities or events. Students were most aware of these behaviours (24%), followed by teachers (12%), and administrators (11%). Parents were not asked this question. Respondents were invited to provide details regarding this issue and one student wrote:

(I know) “A girl whose family is on social services and last year our class went on a boat tour, the tickets were \$40 each and she couldn’t afford it so stayed home and told everyone she was home sick. People made fun of her the next day.”

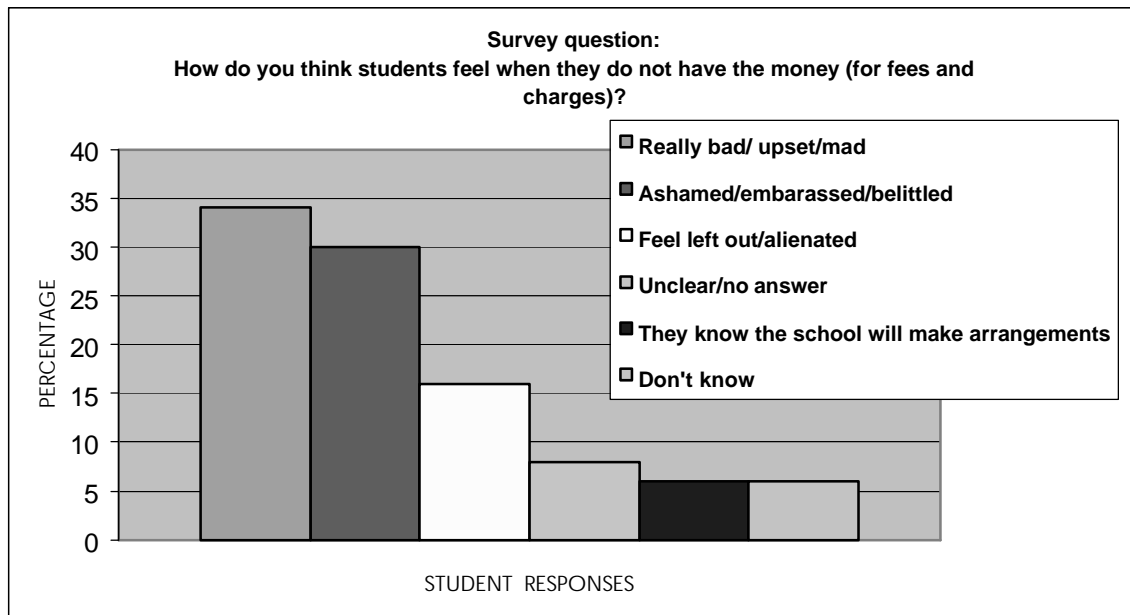
4.2.4. Parent and teacher perceptions of the effect on students

Teachers and parents were surveyed regarding the perceived impact of school charges and costs on students. A majority of both respondent groups (51% and 56% respectively)

felt that school charges have negative impacts such as causing students to feel embarrassed or left out or resulting in ridicule from other students. One teacher said:

“ I feel that school charges and costs can put a lot of pressure on students. They do not want to be different from their peers and worry about not being able to get the money for an activity or supplies.”

4.2.5. Student perceptions of the effect on students



Students were asked how they think their counterparts feel when they do not have the money to pay for fee-based activities or materials. The vast majority responded that they feel upset, ashamed, alienated or otherwise negatively affected.

Students were also asked how they themselves feel when they have to bring home requests for payment of school charges and other costs. More than one-quarter said they didn't like it or felt uncomfortable delivering such requests to their parents. Eleven percent stated that they worry about their parents' reaction. One student stated:

“I feel overwhelmed, because it seems like we always have to pay out money for something, and there's not a lot of money at home.”

4.2.6. Student part-time jobs

Youth discussion groups revealed that many students work in order to pay for some school charges and costs. In our survey, 35% of students said that they have a part-time

job, 86% of them using some of the money they earn to cover school-related costs. A teacher made this observation on students getting part-time jobs:

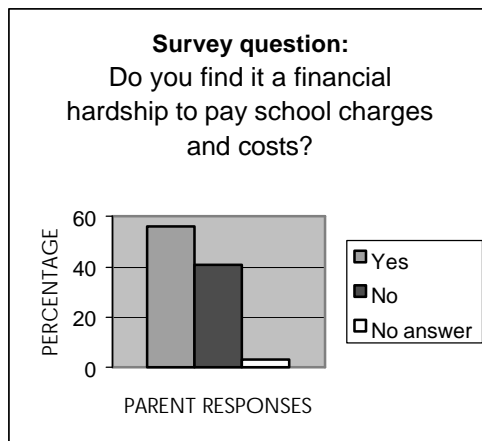
“From a teacher’s point of view it (school charges and costs) forms a class distinction between students. Very frequently I observe students getting part-time jobs to try and stay at par with peers – work during weekends and weeknights. Usually there’s a negative effect on grades.”

4.3. Perceived effect of school charges and costs on families

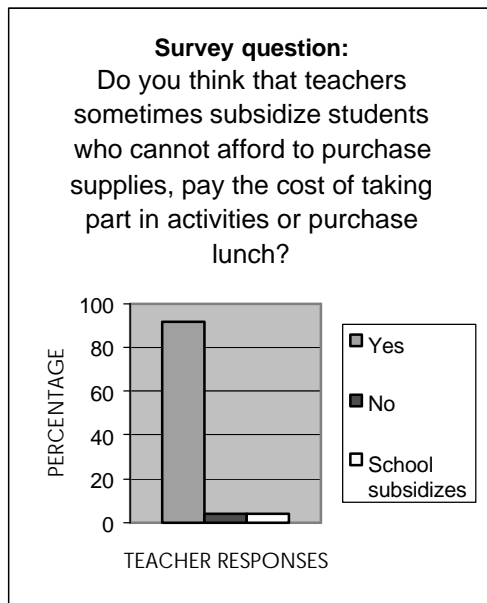
Respondents were asked if they think some families really struggle to pay for school charges. The overwhelming majority of teachers (84%) and parents (95%) feel that this is the case. Administrators were asked to answer this question by selecting the percentage of families they felt fell into this category. Twenty-seven percent of administrators responded that between 11 to 50% of families struggle to pay costs. Students were not asked this question.

When parents were asked if they find it a financial hardship to pay school charges and costs, over one-half replied in the affirmative. When asked to explain, many said that these costs were more than they could afford and others said it was especially difficult at the beginning of the school year. One parent responded:

“Making sure they’re paid (school fees and charges) or having to tell my child we can’t afford to pay it has to be one of the worse things a parent may have to face.”



4.4 Perceived effect of school charges on school staff



Ninety-two percent of teachers surveyed stated that they subsidize students who do not have money for field trips, school supplies or other school costs. Many teachers also said they purchase materials required for teaching, with forty-one percent stating that collecting school charges is a source of extra stress and work for them.

One teacher said:

“We all realize we are living in a time where cutbacks are the norm and funding is just not available for “extras.” But at the same time, as teachers we are expected to provide children with fun and exciting learning experiences. My partner and I have spent over \$1,000 of our own money this year so far to provide the children with experiences that should not be considered “extra” (i.e. baking, craft materials, stickers).”

4.5. Fundraising as a contributor to social inclusion

Fundraising can serve as an agent of social inclusion. Schools often fundraise so that they can offer activities and materials to all students. According to 20% of administrators, the money is used to subsidize those students who do not pay charges for materials or for field trips. One administrator stated:

“All money raised is used to support curriculum initiatives. It also goes to general revenue which does subsidize the cost of books and materials of students who do not pay.”

4.6. Fundraising as a contributor to social exclusion

Twenty-nine percent of administrators stated that without fundraising, they would not be able to offer the curriculum, “extras,” or activities that they do now. Yet,

twenty percent also stated that smaller schools or schools located in the inner city or in poorer areas, find it difficult to raise needed funds. One administrator in a more affluent school said:

“The department of education/government has to address the inequities created by the vast discrepancies among the schools in their ability to access extra (needed) funds from parents to provide a quality education. Our school is fortunate in that the great majority of parents are working and have the funds to contribute.”

The discussion groups and key informant interviews also revealed the potentially exclusionary nature of fundraising. Key informants discussed how schools with well off families are able to fundraise more successfully than schools with a higher percentage of poor families. The fear that some schools would fall further behind their more prosperous counterparts was also raised. Some respondents suggested that students who attend schools in wealthier areas benefit from a better-financed educational system as they have a more affluent fundraising base and tend to receive more individual and corporate donations. One teacher, when asked to comment generally on the issue of school fees and fundraising, stated:

“Smaller inner city schools have less money and fewer opportunities. Other “have schools” receive larger donations, raise more in fundraisers and can offer more to students. At my school “cupcake day” covers the cost of one bus for a field trip. This school cannot have expensive activities because parents and the school cannot afford it. Many students have never ever been to the cinema while my child’s school has been 2-3 times this school year. CRT¹⁸ will reflect the limited opportunities of students from my school.”

In the discussion groups, parents raised the option of paying a levy in lieu of fundraising as a matter of concern. Some believe this might result in only people who were unable to afford the levy carrying out fundraising, which would further mark students and parents as being different from others in the school. Parents did not raise this concern in survey questionnaires. This option does not appear to be widespread as only a minority of administrators who completed the questionnaire (7%) stated that their schools offer parents the choice of paying a levy in lieu of fundraising. One administrator stated that this option was a failure in his/her school because many people either did not or would not pay the levy. The amount of the levy ranged from \$25 to \$30 per year.

4.7. Student perspectives on fundraising

Students were asked more specific questions regarding their participation in fundraising and how they feel about taking part. The majority, 74%, stated that they engage in

¹⁸ CRT refers to criterion referenced test.

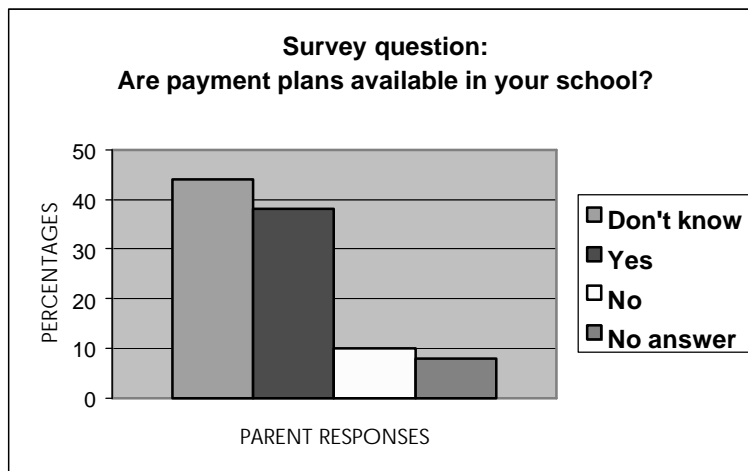
fundraising and 69% said that they feel or sometimes feel that they are expected to take part in these activities. Students were also asked what happens if they do not participate in fundraising and 50% of them said that nothing happens and a small percentage, 14%, said that there are negative repercussions (e.g., students who did not take part in fundraising are asked to pay the amount that might have been raised or teachers are upset when students decline to raise funds).

4.8. Charges associated with curricular activities

Administrators identified activities that, in many instances, are considered “curricular” but which often require a charge. These include: field trips, movies, book fairs, school choir, school band, swimming, skating, music drama festivals and year end activities. This issue was raised in discussion groups, with parents expressing concern that children who cannot afford these costs miss out on these elements of the curriculum. If these activities are deemed to be curricular but have an associated charge, this would appear to be a contravention of The Schools Act.

4.9. Inadequate communication between parents and school staff

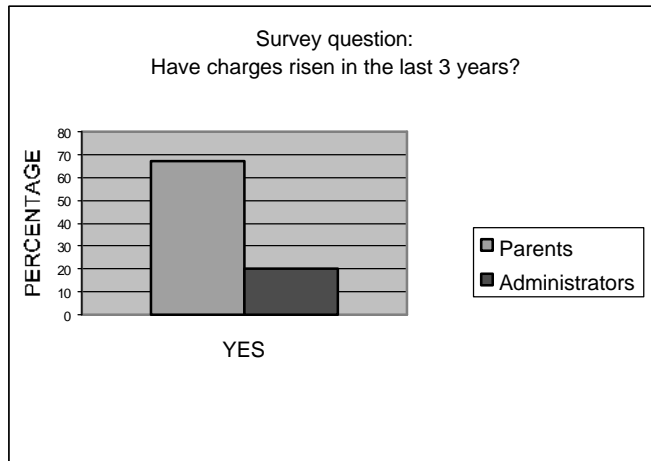
There appears to be a communications breakdown between school staff and parents on a number of important issues, particularly on the availability of payment plans and knowledge of changes in school charges. All administrators responding to the survey stated that payment plans and/or partial payment options are available, yet parents expressed a different view. Forty-four percent said that they did not know if payment plans were available in their child’s school, 10% said they were not available, and only 38% said payment options were available.



A majority of parents (56%) said that they had difficulty paying school charges, so many of them likely would be interested in a payment plan if it were an option. Another 19% of parents said that they find the costs especially hard at the beginning of the year. A

payment plan that is non-stigmatizing would therefore be an attractive alternative to parents.

4.9.1. Perceptions about fee changes



Parents and administrators also sharply disagree on whether parents are charged more now than they were three years ago. Seventy-eight percent of administrators believe charges are no higher, while twenty percent said charges had increased. In contrast, sixty-seven percent of parents thought charges were higher, with twenty-two percent disagreeing.

4.10. Refusal to pay school charges on principle

One issue raised in key informant interviews was the tendency of some families to not pay school costs or raise funds as a matter of principle rather than due to financial difficulty. One reason cited for this position was a statement in 1999 by then acting Minister of Education Beaton Tulk suggesting that the payment of school fees is voluntary. His comments created an impression that schools receive adequate funding from the provincial government and that schools are arbitrarily and unnecessarily charging fees.

Administrators were asked if they think many parents do not pay charges solely on principle. Seventy-eight percent considered that this perspective influenced up to one quarter of the parents in their schools. When parents were asked if they do not pay school fees solely on principle, thirty-two percent responded that this is the case.

4.11. Variations among schools in promoting social inclusion

Although this study was not permitted to identify schools participating in the research, our data indicates that variations do exist among schools in promoting social inclusion. This is demonstrated in policies relating to: whether a student receives materials if these have not been purchased, confidentiality of payment plans, parents delivering take-out food to students, “special food days,” and students’ ability to participate in events requiring a charge if they have not paid that charge.

4.11.1. Access to school supplies, curriculum supplies and rentals

There is wide variation in the experiences that students have when their parents do not or cannot pay for school supplies, curriculum supplies and rentals. Of the 63 students responding to our survey, 40% said they do not receive school supplies, 36% do not receive curriculum supplies, and 32% do not receive rented items if they do not pay. One student commented:

“If you don’t pay then you don’t get a lock for your locker, and you don’t get to be involved when doing assigned work if you need a book and you haven’t paid.”

4.11.2. Confidentiality of payment plans

There is wide variation among schools in the manner in which confidentiality of payment plans is handled. When asked who is aware of such arrangements, 52.5% of administrators responded that arrangements involve administration, office staff and a teacher, and 35% stated only administrative personnel were responsible. Other responses were administration and guidance counsellor (7.5%) and homeroom teacher (5%).

4.11.3. Parents delivering take-out food to students

When asked if parents are allowed to bring their children restaurant lunches while at school, the majority of administrators (86%) said yes while others (10%) were emphatic that this would never be allowed. Some of those who responded in the affirmative qualified their answer by saying that, while this practice is allowed, it is discouraged.

4.11.4. “Special food days”

There is variation among schools as to whether they offer “special food days” such as “pizza days” and “ice cream days”. Of those that hold such events, some permit all children to take part and some do not. When asked what children who lack money to participate do, 70% of teachers, 52% of students and 39% of parents stated that these students do not take part in the special food days or only do so if their friends share with them. One parent said that those who do not participate “*sit with kids that are eating but don’t get any food unless friends give it to them.*”

4.11.5. School leaving and graduation exercises

There are also variations among schools regarding policies relating to high school graduations and school leaving exercises. A number of schools do not permit students to attend graduation until school charges, such as agendas and accident insurance, are paid. This practice does not appear to be widespread. There are also apparent differences in the

cost of school leaving exercises, as some respondents stated that these are too expensive while others said that it is great because there is no cost to families.

5. CONCLUSION

The school years are a critically important time in a child's life. This is the time when children discover the joy of learning as well as the possibilities that the future can hold. It is hoped that schools can be the 'great equalizer,' a place where all children, regardless of socio-economic status, can receive an equal opportunity to grow and develop. Viewing public education through the lens of social exclusion / inclusion, it becomes clear that this is not presently the case. Some children are unable to access learning materials that are necessary to complete their courses. There are also times when students are not able to attend field trips and other activities that augment their classroom learning. Many are not able to access recreational activities such as skating and swimming, which are both fun and promote physical wellness.

The development of a two-tiered education system can result in striking differences within schools and also between schools. Two students in the same school will have distinctly different educational experiences depending upon their parents' ability to pay for extra costs. One child can take swimming lessons and music lessons as well as go on a trip to Europe, while another in the same class is unable to participate in any of these opportunities and experiences. One school may be able to offer drama lessons and stage musicals while another school is unable to take children to the local museum.

Charges, fees and fundraising are creating an environment that fosters social exclusion in our schools. Individual students are missing out on valuable learning opportunities and, just as importantly, often feel alienated and left out. The wide range of requests for money is contributing to family stress. As well, the divide among schools is becoming increasingly apparent as some struggle to pay for the bare necessities while others offer a myriad of exciting opportunities.

Based on the research findings, a set of recommendations is being proposed that, if implemented, would help counteract some of the disparities among schools and among students.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested as ways to help overcome exclusionary practices in the school system.

i) Increase funding to schools

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians had great hopes for an improved education system following school reforms in 1997. The expectation was that more money would be available to schools as there would be less duplication of services and fewer schools to fund. The school tax was eliminated and personal income tax was increased by 4% to compensate for the loss of this revenue. Despite these changes, parents are still being asked to subsidize the education system through charges and fundraising. Many parents and students feel that these are unfair or unreasonable. Furthermore, the allocation of \$65 per student has not increased since 1997 / 1998. Prior to consolidation, the school district had an emergency fund that schools could use for unexpected expenses and did not require repayment. This funding was terminated without explanation and is an added hardship for schools.

The strongest recommendation coming out of this study is that government increase its funding to schools.

Increased government funding would allow for the elimination of fees and charges. School staff assert that they need additional funds or else school fees and charges must remain in place.

The Department of Education must also acknowledge and address the unique issues and difficulties facing inner city schools, small schools and those in economically depressed areas. Schools are generally finding it difficult to manage with the current rate of funding but these schools are finding it even more difficult. Having a smaller number of parents who can or do pay school charges and a lesser ability to fundraise, these schools foresee falling further behind other schools in their ability to provide for their students. When school staff commit to providing an inclusive environment for students, this can result in fewer activities being offered to students.

ii) Standardize and advertise payment plans

As payment plans are an option in all of the schools surveyed, it would be helpful if this were made explicitly clear to all parents. It is especially important that it be presented in a non-stigmatizing manner and that confidentiality be assured. If parents feel that they are presented with payment options as an acknowledgment that school charges and fees are expensive, they may feel more comfortable seeking alternative methods of payment.

iii) Establish a school fund to subsidize student expenses

The establishment of an inclusion fund would permit schools to include students in activities or cover expenses when a family is unable to do so. One means of achieving this is to establish a trust fund that could receive donations from individuals or companies

and issue tax receipts. Another option would be to use the existing Avalon East Educational Foundation to accumulate and distribute donations for an inclusion fund. A third option could be to fundraise through parent volunteers, such as through the School Council.

iv) Exercise discretion when subsidizing families in need

A confidential method of payment for school activities should be considered. For example, a School Lunch Association-style envelope could be used when students bring money to pay various school costs. The amount paid, if any, would not be public knowledge. When promoting inclusion, it is paramount to be aware of this necessity for confidentiality. It is important to include everyone while preserving the dignity of both parents and students.

v) Create sensitivity and awareness of social exclusion and inclusion

Administrators and teachers care about student well-being; this is very clear from the research. Many go to great lengths to ensure that school is a welcoming and caring place for children and youth. It would be useful to draw on this strength to create sensitivity and awareness training for all school staff working with students. Using a tool such as the Social Inclusion Lens,¹⁹ the Department of Education, in consultation with school staff, could devise a workshop to discuss what they are doing to make their schools more inclusive and to share their learning and practices. As administrators, teachers and office staff are overtaxed and have little time for in-depth discussions, a workshop would give them an opportunity to learn from each other how best to achieve social inclusion.

Research participants suggested a number of practices that might be introduced easily and make a real difference in promoting an atmosphere of social inclusion, including:

- Teachers should not open Christmas gifts from students in front of the class, as this can be embarrassing for students who cannot afford a gift or whose gift is less expensive than those of other students.
- Bring back school uniforms to reduce the cost of buying school clothes.
- Arrange times for book fairs so that students do not have to go if they do not wish to or if they cannot afford to purchase books.
- Do not remind individual students in class that school fees or charges are due.
- Refrain from criticizing students who have to carry their books into the classroom because they do not have a locker.
- Do not permit parents to drop off restaurant meals to students, as not all children can afford such treats.
- Do not penalize students who have outstanding charges and fees by preventing them from attending graduation ceremonies.
- Provide parents with a list of school costs at the beginning of the year. This will allow them to budget for activities or, if they cannot afford all activities, to select those that they and/or their children feel are most enjoyable or important.

¹⁹ *An Inclusion Lens: Workbook for looking at Social and Economic Inclusion*, Health Canada, 2002.

vi) Limit graduation and school leaving expenses

Respondents identified graduation and, to a lesser extent, school leaving ceremonies as particularly expensive activities which can foster exclusion. A limit could be placed on how much is to be spent by students and their families. Schools do charge for tickets to the graduation but the greatest expenses are optional ones (e.g., clothes, tanning sessions, hair dressing, limousines, hotel rooms, etc.). Peer pressure can create an environment where teens feel lessened if they are unable to afford the same level of preparation as their peers. Parents can find it difficult to tell their children that they cannot afford a limousine or other extras. Schools cannot restrict parents from paying for hairdressing and tanning sessions but there are some things that can be limited. Schools could introduce a policy restricting events to semi-formals or staging events at locations that are less expensive.

vii) Continue extra-curricular and curricular activities

In discussing issues around exclusion, it is essential to not lose sight of the need to retain extra-curricular and curricular activities. The goal is to promote inclusion of all students, not to lower the bar by providing less to all students. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that all school activities are universal. The enrichment provided by extracurricular activities is an important feature of our school system.

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Who We Are

The Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador is an independent voluntary organization founded in 1976. CSC aims to identify unmet community needs; to stimulate interaction amongst voluntary organizations; to enhance the voluntary sector's capacity to work effectively with the public and private sectors; to provide a forum for citizen participation in social policy development; and, to support volunteerism. CSC works with individuals and groups in hundreds of communities throughout the province and across the country.

What We Do

CSC acts as a *social entrepreneur*, evolving with the province's needs and bringing a dynamic, creative approach to the issues of the day. At any given time we work on dozens of different projects to support citizen involvement, promote the integration of social and economic development, and provide leadership in shaping public policy. We achieve our goals by:

- *advancing the voluntary, community-based sector*
- *conducting leading-edge research*
- *advocating policy positions*
- *pioneering innovative programs and services*
- *building bridges and cultivating collaboration*
- *harnessing the power of technology*

These activities nurture social inclusion, build social capital and improve community capacity.

Strategic thinking and innovative approaches are essential in addressing critical economic and social issues and facilitating the management of change. The public, private and voluntary sectors - the three pillars of society - must work collaboratively for greater integration of policy and action.



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A social development, research, planning and service organization, dedicated to citizen engagement and the promotion of volunteerism.