

STERLING STRATTON: Getting back on right education track

There are problems in education more important than counting desks, square footage and students

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Concerned parents gathered at East Wiltshire Intermediate school in early January to hear recommendations in the Public Schools Branch school change report. The report recommended closing five P.E.I.

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This article seems to be about the past; it isn't, it is about the future. During my professional career I was CEO of the Teachers' Federation, Director of Curriculum at the Department of Education, and

Superintendent of Education in Charlottetown. Working on the inside, I participated in many decisions that plague our province today. If I could go back, I should have supported the 'Small Is Beautiful Elementary School Concept' for both rural and urban area schools. All of the elementary schools should have been medium in size (including urban) with major emphasis for seven years on basics in the English Language and mathematics; backed by music, arts, and physical education with special provisions given to immigrant children. Each school should have been a place where everyone knows your name and parents play a major role in the education of their children. The small is beautiful concept would have allowed strict zoning practices to take place that would have guaranteed that families and friends would stay together in their communities. With regard to Early French Immersion, the program should have been equally available to all students rather than to a selected number of schools so early in the students' school career. In some elementary school locations, two competing social classes were created. Instead of the early program, Late French Immersion should have been offered to all interested students in grade seven. Even in junior high schools with limited enrollment, inventive class procedures would have been available. It is generally accepted that the late immersion program has been a success story and that students can reach satisfactory standards by the end of high school. All students should be given equal access to the program. I also participated in the development of other policy mistakes: (a) The independent school districts, with locally elected trustees with nonpartisan professional staff, should not have been allowed to be eliminated, and (b) The zoning rules with regard to where students attend school should have been more strongly and persistently enforced. The provincial government (department of education; school branch) must recognize that there are problems in education more important than simply counting desks, counting square footage, counting students, counting dollars and eliminating 'small is beautiful elementary schools,' which enrages parents. The full attention of the provincial government should be centered on the following 10 steps to get education back on track:

- 1. Stop closing schools** - End the current attempt to close elementary schools; instead, determine why the smaller schools are so successful and what are their teaching secrets. Perhaps the large elementary schools should introduce "Small Is Beautiful" clusters in their schools.
- 2. Immediately attack overcrowding** - Immediately develop a plan to relieve the severely overcrowded schools for next fall.
- 3. Recognize the role of elementary schools** - Recognize that the first seven years in elementary school (Kindergarten to Grade Six) should concentrate on traditional basics - English ... Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking backed with Music, Arts, and Physical Education. Plus special attention to the children from immigrant families.
- 4. Provide equal opportunity in French Immersion** - Give every child an equal opportunity to select French Immersion by offering the program in all junior high schools. Note that evidence suggests that "Late Immersion" provides students with adequate skills in French re employment opportunities.
- 5. Review zoning regulations** - Begin to develop and implement a strict Zoning plan.
- 6. Attend to the public's recommendations** - As recommended by the public, plan to reintroduce two English Language School Boards in the province.
- 7. Define roles** - Clearly define the roles of schools, school boards, and Department of Education, too much

overlap has been generated in recent years.

8. Review staffing allotments - Reexamine staffing practices and allotments in both the School Boards and the Department of Education with the likelihood of relocating more than one-third of the staff to the schools

9. Reduce common testing budgets - Save money by eliminating the expensive and complicated provincial testing program and replacing it with commercial standardized tests.

10 . Adopt a new approach to school board elections - Have school board members elected within the family of schools using the voting system similar to procedures used during nomination meetings (refer to New Approach to School Board Elections).

Recognize the real problems and stop closing schools!

- *Sterling Stratton is a retired public school educator/artist*