



**THE HARRIS
CENTRE**
Memorial University





FINAL REPORT
prepared for The Harris Centre

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE NATURE OF EDUCATION IN
A RURAL AND REMOTE REGION OF THE PROVINCE OF NEWFOUNDLAND
AND LABRADOR: THE STRAITS.**

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INTRODUCTION

On May 17th and 18th 2006, the *Harris Centre*¹ in partnership with the *South Eastern Aurora Development Association* and the *Labrador Straits Developed Corporation* sponsored a Regional Workshop at the *Northern Light Inn*, L'Anse au Clair, Labrador, NL.² The *Harris Centre* sponsors such regional workshops for the purpose of promoting:

Memorial University as a resource for regional policy and development through research, teaching and outreach activities, as well as to identify future opportunities within the Zones in which *Memorial University* could become involved.

The workshops also provide the opportunity for local stakeholders to identify issues in their local regions that are in need of the kinds of research and development work the *Harris Centre* is concerned with fostering.

At the L'Anse of Clair workshop, one of the topics raised by local stakeholders was education. Those Straits residents attending the workshop identified a number of concerns they felt were undermining the quality of education provided to the children and youth of their region. The issues discussed included:

- The program choices students are making. There were concerns expressed that there appeared to be more students choosing basic or general programs than academic ones.
- The limited choices in terms of programs and courses available to students.
- Teachers having to teach a wider variety of courses than their urban counterparts and teach outside their areas of expertise and training
- The increased reliance on distance education to provide courses students need to graduate

Shortly after this meeting, *Partners in Learning*³, made a written submission [See APPENDIX A for *Partners in Learning* Submission] to the *Harris Centre* elaborating on the educational concerns that had been identified at the regional workshop. *Partners in Learning* is a literacy advocacy group serving the Labrador Straits communities of L'Anse au Clair, Forteau, L'Anse au Loup, West St. Modest and Red Bay.⁴ In their submission to the *Harris Centre* they expressed their concern about their perception that:

¹ The Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. <http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/>

² http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/Regional_Workshops/Lanse_au_clair/Lanse_au_clair.php

³ Partners in Learning: <http://www.nald.ca/litweb/PROVINCE/nl/pil/Index.htm>

⁴ <http://www.mapquest.com/maps/map.adp?formtype=address&country=US&popflag=0&latitude=&longitude=&name=&phone=&level=&addtohistory=&cat=&address=&city=&state=NL&zipcode=>

a growing trend in the Labrador Straits of more students graduating with basic credentials when compared to urban centres such as St. John's according to the Department of Education's most recent statistics. More students graduate with general requirements compared to the majority of students in urban centres who graduate with academic/honours certification.⁵

Why might more students be opting for general or basic programs and courses as opposed to the more academic ones? *Partners in Learning* question if the increased reliance on web-based distance education at the secondary level may have something to do with the choices students are making in these rural communities:

There is a trend emerging in rural communities towards reliance on distance education services and less teacher-student interaction. This education is often dependant on the ability of the student to learn independently and be predominantly self-directed. While support is provided to some extent by distance [online] teachers often there is limited support at the local level for students.

With increasingly limited resources in communities many students, who need more support than the current model of distance learning provides, are disadvantaged. Is the current model of education delivery sufficient for rural communities? Do current models of K-12 delivery favour urban more than rural students? Does this have implications for rural survival?⁶

At a very fundamental level, local stakeholders through *Partners in Learning* are questioning the responsiveness of the current model of education to the unique circumstances of small rural coastal communities such as those that constitute the Labrador Straits. They also have questions as to what should be done to improve education provision in their region:

How as a rural community do we support and deliver better education? Considering our challenges how do we develop a model that is conducive to rural education? How to we build student capacity, and promote life-long learning to be ready for the new-age economy?⁷

They conclude their *Harris Centre* submission with a suggestion that perhaps what is needed is a research project that would investigate these issues with an eye to developing a "Rural Model of Learning."⁸

This current research project was an attempt to respond to the expressed educational concerns of the communities of the Labrador Straits. Our intention was to investigate the questions they have asked regarding the current provision of education available to the children and youth of the Straits. In addition to the questions raised by *Partners in Learning*, we have also provided the

⁵ *Partners in Learning* submission to the Harris Centre, January 2007

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Partners in Learning*

⁸ *Ibid*

opportunity for research participants to raise other issues and concerns they may have. By casting this wider net we hoped to develop a comprehensive picture of secondary education in the Labrador Straits.

TOWARDS A RURAL MODEL OF LEARNING

The challenge is to be more responsive to context. We have models that are predicated on larger urban schools. We need a model that will take into consideration the school in Red Bay with a total student population of 30 and secondary enrolment of less than 10.
– Community member

It is generally acknowledged that we are at a very critical juncture in terms of the future of many of our rural communities. Some people even question whether or not many rural communities can or even should continue to exist (Emke, 2006)⁹. The future is full of uncertainty for many rural places despite the fact that the province as a whole is enjoying an unprecedented period of economic prosperity. However, one certainty that does exist is the fact that education and schooling will play an essential role in determining the future existence and economic development of rural places.

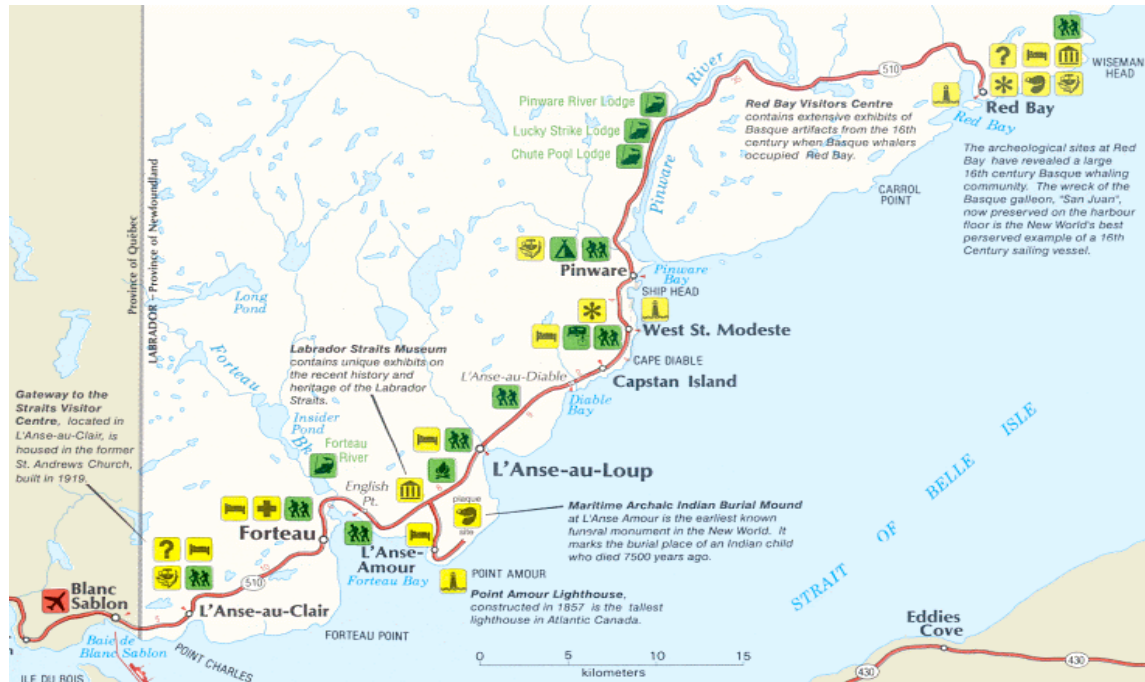
Rural schools must provide educational opportunities of the highest quality to *all* children and youth of rural communities: those who intend to pursue post secondary education as well as those electing to pursue work immediately after school either in their home communities or elsewhere. Furthermore, educators and parents must respect the career aspirations and life choices young people make.

Rural schools have to provide a delivery and support system that ensures that those students capable of high levels of academic attainment are encouraged and motivated to take advantages of those opportunities. The children deserve it; the future of the communities depends on it.

The purpose of education is to enable young people to make a living *and* a life for themselves (Postman, 1998). The quality of both is very much tied to the quality of schooling they receive and the level of education they attain. The sustainability and economic development of a community is directly linked to the educational attainment of its youth who may chose to remain in or return to their home communities.

⁹ Emke, I (2006) http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/Memorial_Presents/Saving_Rural/NQ_article.pdf

THE CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY



The Labrador Straits

We need a few general comments about the Straits.

COMMUNITY PROFILES

L'Anse-au-Clair

L'Anse Au Clair is the closest Labrador Straits community to Quebec. It was first established by French settlers in the early 1700s. People began settling in L'Anse au Clair shortly after the Quebec-Labrador border dispute in 1825. The original name of the community was Anse St. Clair named after one of the first merchants to establish here, whose last name was St. Clair.¹⁰

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre, visitor centre, Anglican church, seasonal swimming pool, ball field, and hockey rink.

Retail Businesses: Accommodations, restaurant, gas stations, craft stores, grocery stores, hardware store, furniture store, garages, and beauty salons.¹¹

¹⁰ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

¹¹ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

Population: 226¹²

Forteau

Forteau has a long history of occupation by Native peoples and by French, Jersey and English fishermen. Its name is derived from the French words meaning "Strong Waters". A Jersey merchant started a fishing business there in 1774 and in 1818 it was reported that Forteau was the largest British establishment in the Straits. In 1849 the first church was built in Forteau. In 1909 the International Grenfell Association built a nursing station there. The Forteau River is an excellent salmon river. The mouth of the river is a good place to go bird watching.¹³

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre, health centre, RCMP detachment, ball field, school and playground.

Retail Businesses: Accommodations, restaurant, gas station, grocery store, bakery, hardware store, furniture store, pottery maker, garages, office supplies, and a salmon fishing lodge.

Government Services: Labrador Straits Outreach, Dept of Social Services, Dept of Development & Rural Renewal.

Other Organizations: Labrador Straits Development Corporation (Zone 5 Economic Development Board), Labrador Straits Historical Development Corporation, Southern Labrador Development Association, Forteau Lions' Club, Labrador Straits Chamber of Commerce, Smart Labrador Initiative.¹⁴

Schools: Mountain Field Academy (k-12)

Population: 448¹⁵

L'Anse-Armour

L'ance Armour is the site of the earliest known human funeral monument in North America. L'Anse Amour Burial National Historic Site which commentates the earliest known human funeral monument in North America, a grave site of a Maritime Archaic adolescent dated some 7500 years ago.¹⁶ There are only a couple of families living there.

Public Services & Facilities: Post office¹⁷

¹² Taken from Census 2006

¹³ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

¹⁴ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

¹⁵ Taken from Census 2006

¹⁶ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

¹⁷ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

L'Anse-a- Loup

L'Anse au Loup was established by the French in the early 1700s, but was permanently settled by the English, Scots and Irish. A thriving fishing and sealing industry was established at L'Anse au Loup as early as 1778. It is still primarily a fishing community. The Labrador Fisherman's Union Shrimp Co. Ltd, one of the most modern fish processing facilities in the province, has its headquarters here.¹⁸

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre, banking facility, public library, school, ball field, and swimming pool.

Industry-Related Facility: Fish processing plant (Labrador Fishermen's Union Shrimp Co. Ltd.)

Retail Businesses: Accommodations, restaurant, gas stations, grocery stores, garage, bakery, lounge, liquor store

Government Services: Dept of Works, Service & Transportation, Dept of Fisheries, Nfld & Labrador Hydro (diesel generating plant)

Other Organizations: L'Anse au Loup Lions' Club¹⁹

School: St. Paul's Elementary

Population: 593²⁰

Capstan Island

Capstan Island is a small fishing community with a rocky coastline. It is not actually an island but got its name from a small tidal island off shore, where in 1851 the residents constructed a capstan, a sturdy wooden post and handle, mounted in a stabilizing frame, used to wind-in a rope or cable. Around 1851 residents began sealing in this area. A large capstan was placed on the small island just offshore from today's community, and a seal net attached to it. When harp seals migrated along the shore in spring the net "box" trapped them. Capstan Island has excellent garden soil. The region's only commercial greenhouse is located here. The "battery", a formidable and very steep headland that has a history of frightful tales and a presence which gives a bad turn in winter's ice and snow, looms in contrast to the small community of Capstan Island.²¹

¹⁸ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

¹⁹ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

²⁰ Taken from Census 2006

²¹ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre, Anglican Church

Industry-Related Facility: Greenhouse²²

West St. Modeste

West St. Modeste was given its name by Pierre Constantine, a merchant of New France, who named it in memory of his ancestral home in Normandy- St. Modeste. He gave his concession the pompous title of "Seigneurie du Grand St. Modet" and directed his fishing operations from two locations, Grand St. Modet and Petit St. Modet. About 1800, these locations became the villages of East St. Modet and West St. Modet. Over the years Modet has changed to Modeste. East St. Modeste has been abandoned. Dr. Wilfred Grenfell opened the second co-operative store of Labrador in West. St. Modeste in 1903. The Oblate Missionaries chose the community for their mission " Our Lady of Labrador" which was established in 1958.²³

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre, playground, school, and a Roman Catholic Church.

Retail Businesses: Accommodations, restaurant, gas stations, grocery stores, and woodcrafts.²⁴

Schools: Our Lady of Labrador (K-12)

Population: 140²⁵

Pinware

Pinware is located near the mouth of the Pinware River, which his known for its salmon fishery. Long before there were any permanent settlers in the area, French fishermen lived here in big summer houses. They dried their fish, and barked their twine in a big iron barking pot that can still be seen at Ship Head. Some of the oldest archaeological sites in Labrador are located in this community dating back to 9000 years ago!²⁶

Public Services & Facilities: Post office, community centre.

Retail Businesses: Grocery stores, gas stations, craft shop, lounge, and salmon lodges.

Population: 114

Red Bay

²² Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

²³ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

²⁴ Taken directly from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

²⁵ Taken from Census 2006

²⁶ Taken from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

Red Bay is one of the oldest occupied ports along the Labrador Straits. The earliest European occupants were Breton fishermen and Basque whalers during the 16th century. Men from the Basque Provinces of France and Spain sailed to the Labrador Straits each year to hunt the large right and bowhead whales. The Strait of Belle Isle was known to 16th century Basques as the "Grand Bay"; what is now Newfoundland and Labrador as the "Province of Terranova"; and Red Bay as *les Buttes*. It's an ideal natural harbour, sheltered from the ocean by Saddle Island. Red Bay is the site of an extensively studied archaeological dig, begun in 1978, of a large 16th century seasonal Basque whaling station. Underwater archaeology at Red Bay has revealed the most complete 16th century ocean-going vessel excavated to date. This vessel is believed to be the Basque galleon, the San Juan. Two other galleons as well as several smaller boats associated with the whaling industry were also located in Red Bay harbour. Parks Canada operates the Red Bay National Historic Site of Canada to tell an incredible story of hardship, exploitation and profit through walking tours, video presentation, interpretive displays and numerous original artefacts.²⁷

Public Services & Facilities: Red Bay Visitor Centre, post office, community centre, and school.

Retail Businesses: Accommodations, restaurant, gas station, building supplies, craft & gift shops, grocery stores, garage, passenger & freight ferry.²⁸

Schools: Basque Memorial (K-12)

Population: 227²⁹

METHODOLOGY

It was determined early in the planning stage that the best way to collect data for this project was to go to the Straits and talk in people directly involved in education in the region. Four potential sources of relevant information were identified: students, teachers, parents and members of the community with an expressed interest in education.

The project began with a series of conference calls with key community informants. The purpose of these conference calls was to clarify the key issues and concerns of the local stakeholders. Following these calls, the research team decided that the best way to collect data for this project would be to spend a period of time visiting the communities of the Straits and interviewing and holding focus group sessions with parents, teachers, students and members of the communities. To this end the research team worked with *Partners in Learning* to devise a schedule that would provide ample opportunities for local stakeholders to meet with the team and provide their views on the various issues. [See APPENDIX B for Schedule]

²⁷ Taken from <http://www.labradorcoastaldrive.com/home/2>

²⁸ Taken from <http://www.labradorstraits.net/home/>

²⁹ Taken from Census 2006

Additional data regarding curriculum offerings, student achievement, and student program choices were obtained by contacting educational officials at the schools and the *Department of Education*. Population and community data were obtained from *Statistics Canada*.

FIELD WORK AND DATA COLLECTION

In December, members of the research team travelled to Labrador to begin conducting interviews and focus groups sessions. Interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and students. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Survey questionnaires were distributed to all student groups prior to the focus group sessions.

Questionnaires:

Questionnaires were given to high school students of Mountain Field Academy in Forteau, Lady of Labrador in West St. Modeste and Basque Memorial in Red Bay. The questionnaire was designed to get a listing of the courses the students are taking, including the number of distance education courses and those that are basic or academic. [See APPENDIX C for Student Questionnaire]

Focus Groups:

16 focus groups were conducted in the Labrador Straits region between December 3-December 6, 2007. These groups included:

- 4 focus groups with parents and interested community members of L'anse au Clair, Lance au Loop, West St. Modeste/Forteau and Red Bay were held at community centres in the region.
- 3 focus groups with principals and teachers were held at the Mountain Field Academy in Forteau, Lady of Lourdes in West St. Modeste and Basque Memorial in Red Bay.
- 7 focus groups with high school students (level I-III) were held at the Mountain Field Academy in Forteau, Lady of Lourdes in West St. Modeste and Basque Memorial in Red Bay.

[See APPENDIX D for Interview Protocols]

Key Informant Interviews:

Several in-person or telephone interviews were conducted with individuals who have a specialized knowledge of the issues in the area. Such interviews included:

- Principal of Mountain Field
- Principal of Basque memorial
- Acting Principal of Lady of Lourdes
- Principal of Lady of Lourdes on Maternity leave
- Former Student of Mountain Field, Arlene Cabot
- Partners in Learning, Barb Marshall

- Choices for Youth

RESEARCH FINDINGS

“If you don’t get a good foundation then you can’t get a good roof.” –parent

Participants in this study are concerned about the quality of education being provided to the children and youth of the Labrador Straits. They believe that their students are entitled to the same quality of education and learning opportunities enjoyed by students attending schools in other regions of the province. Equality of educational opportunity is a just and fair expectation they insist on.

In discussions with parents, teachers and students and after subsequent careful analysis of transcribed interviews and other data, a number of issues emerge that are contributing to a sense of educational inequality in the opinion of educational stakeholders. These issues include:

1. Limited programming available in the schools
2. An Increased Reliance on Distance Education
3. Shifting Responsibility for Learning from the School to the Home
4. Program Choices Students are Making (Basic/Academic)
5. Other Issues
 - a. Parent and Teacher Communication
 - b. The Alberta Syndrome
 - c. Declining Population, Declining Enrolment, and Changing Demographics
 - d. Multi-grading
 - e. Special Education
 - f. The Future of The Straits

To a large degree all issues are interrelated and impact on the other. They will be discussed separately below to facilitate understanding of each issue.

2. Curriculum Programs

“Part of the problem is we have a high school program designed for urban areas.” – parent

The curriculum and the educational experiences available for students are key elements of a quality education provided by any school. The curriculum not only enables students to learn about themselves, their community and the larger world, it is also very important in preparing them to make post secondary educational choices in keeping with their hopes and aspirations as future citizens. Participants in this study are very aware of the central role the curriculum plays in the quality of education provided. Because of this awareness they raised a number of programming concerns.

One concern raised was the limitations in terms of programs and program delivery imposed on the schools because of their size. The three Straits schools that offer a high school program are small schools by provincial standards. The largest school has a total secondary enrolment this year (2007-2008) of 63 students; the smallest school has only 8 students in the secondary program. Program and course choices are limited and there is an increasing reliance on distance education. The smaller the school the fewer courses offered on site and the greater reliance on CDLI.

One teacher explains why this is the case: “There just aren’t enough teachers to deliver a more diverse selection of courses.” And the smaller the school the greater the frustration. A student from one of the smallest schools explains: “We don’t have any choice, only between a limited number of academic and basic courses. We go into the classroom [at the beginning of the year] and we are told here is the course you are taking.” A student at a different school says: “The choices are really limited. You have to make a decision based on what you can actually do [i.e. offered].” A parent notes the consequences of such a small course selection: “Students are coming out of school with just the bare minimum number of credits to graduate.”

While administrators struggle to provide adequate programming to their students, they have to ensure students get the credits they need to graduate. A teacher explains how courses are scheduled and selected at his school: “A couple of teachers get together to do up the schedule and we have to start with the level 3’s and we look at what they need to graduate and those courses are put in first. We put academic and basic in the same slots then we look at the level II’s and level I’s and in the end there is very little choice left for students. They get to choose between academic and basic really.” A teacher at another school says the same thing: “I have to say to students in September that this is what you have to do. There is no choice in reality because the schedule does not permit it.”

An administrator explains how problematic time tabling can be in a very small school:

Coming up with a schedule that will accommodate all students in the particular courses that they want to do can be very difficult. You have such a diverse group of students. Some doing academic math, some doing basic math, science, then you factor all that into it and you only have so many slots available for it and you try to avail of CDLI to pick up some of the course you can't deliver at the face to face level and CDLI only has certain number of slots that they offer courses in so if you are lucky enough that the course you are looking for is offered in a slot that you got free then great otherwise you have to try and juggle it.

Planning the school's program for the year is further complicated by trying to coordinate the school's schedule with CDLI.³⁰ A student speaks of one such conflict: "I wanted to take physics this year, which was offered online, but I couldn't do it. It was offered in the same slot as Geography which I have to take in order to graduate." Sometimes students are forced into taking courses that are too advanced for them or too easy because of scheduling complications. A student explains: "Those who wanted to do Chemistry online had to take Advanced Math in order to do it. So there were people taking Advanced Math who wouldn't normally be, only so they could do Chemistry."

In addition to the limited course offerings, many students express dissatisfaction with the quality of some of the courses being offered. A parent explains: "My son's two lowest marks were in Religion and Music and everyday he comes home telling me how stupid the courses are and that he has no interest in them." Another parent offers her opinion: "The curriculum itself is not really interesting enough in certain courses and they got rid of the courses the students liked like Home Economics and Industrial Arts."

Students refer to some of the courses they're taking as "garbage" and "boring." Some students expressed the view that the program is geared too much towards students who are planning to go to university. They would like to have more variety and offer their opinion on what they feel is lacking:

"We need more trade type classes."

"Last year there was no gym class. We need a gym class."

"We have no music and no art and we have so many amazing singers here. It's a real shame."

³⁰ CDLI has provided students with more course offerings but this is not without its problems. CDLI is examined in greater detail later in the report.

“I would like a course in carpentry. I like working with my hands, because I don’t have it up here.”

“We are forced to take World Geography, as History isn’t offered but I would rather take History.”

The quality of the educational experience is very much tied to the qualifications of the person teaching the course. Unfortunately, on some occasions in these schools teachers are teaching outside their areas of expertise. One student reported on an example of this: “Our last French teacher didn’t know French to be honest. I mean it wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t his area.” The following year French was offered only on-line. Enrolment in French dropped that year.

Another issue that has an impact on program quality is the need in some situations for teachers to teach two different courses in the same instructional period.

2. An Increased Reliance on Distance Education

The problem is CDLI is being used at our school to teach the core courses ... like math and English and all the sciences, art and writing ... that’s all good if you have an above average student who has great work ethic but if you have a normal student who is easily distracted ... sitting him in front of a screen is not going to work... and we are going to lose a lot of students even average students... their marks are going down ... it don’t work if you have no teachers in there and you are sitting them there in front of a screen and they are supposed to work and if you have someone who is shy they are not asking questions and stuff ... it takes a lot of getting used to.. We are going to see our education system going backwards and not forward ... it’s going back to when I was in school where the smartest kids stay and the others quit because they aren’t able to do it. -parent

In its original conception (1987), distance education was intended to provide supplementary programming to small rural schools. The intended students were the top academic students in the school who were interested and capable of working in a self-directed and independent way. The first courses offered by distance in the province were in fact advanced placement university equivalent courses.

Since 1992, the province has experienced a dramatic decline in student enrolment. Hardest hit have been small rural schools. As a consequence of this decline increasing numbers of teaching positions have been eliminated from the system. The ability of small rural schools to offer even minimum programs and courses on site has become increasingly problematic. In addition over the ten years it has gotten increasingly difficult to staff the more remote and isolated small schools with specialists in the areas of math, science and French.

The Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) was established (2000) to provide high school programs and courses to small schools via the Internet. CDLI is charged with the responsibility of providing rural students with the courses that are not available in their schools because of their small size. What a small rural school cannot offer face to face in the school will be delivered to the school by CDLI via the internet.

This is a very significant change in the mission and purpose of CDLI and distance education in the province. Whereas before they were providing a service of choice for an elite and selective group of students, they are now operating as a necessary mode of curriculum delivery for even the most academically challenged and immature adolescents.

With enrolment continuously decreasing in rural schools, there is an increased reliance on online courses to deliver high school programming. Again, the smaller the school, the greater is the reliance on CDLI. In many rural schools CDLI is becoming the only way students can attain the academic credits they need to graduate. A teacher at a small school states: “In order to get the credits students have no other option but to take online courses.” The significance of this cannot be overestimated: you master the demands of distance learning or you compromise your future life chances.

For those adolescents who possess the necessary attributes³¹ to succeed in this virtual environment, CDLI provides them with access to a wide range of courses that they would not otherwise be able to take. For those lacking these attributes, CDLI is problematic.

The problem many participants in this study see with the increased reliance on distance education is that many students are just not suited to this type of learning. In the past, students doing online courses were a select group. However, as smaller schools have had to rely more heavily on CDLI, all students have to take one of more online courses. A teacher explains: “At one time they used to require very high grades in order to do CDLI courses but now we are letting students go into these courses who have even failed in the past. The problem with this is that many of these courses are not designed for them and they are just not capable of doing it.” A teacher from another school shares the same opinion: “CDLI was great for what it was designed to do initially—so schools could offer more advanced courses to academic students but the big problem now is that CDLI is being used to teach the core courses.”

“I think we have to look at who these kids are.”—parent

Parents, teachers and students agree that how well a student does with an online course is dependent on the ability of the student to learn independently and be predominantly self-directed.

³¹ A successful online learner needs to be disciplined and have the initiative to study in a flexible environment without the constraints and supervision of a traditional classroom. Important attributes include: the ability to be organized, motivated and self-directed. Although they can study and attend class at their leisure, online learners typically do not procrastinate. They set a pace that enables them to comfortably get their work done. They are usually very committed to their online high school classes.

A teacher with over 20 years experience offers her opinion: “CDLI works well for some and not so well for others. With adolescents, their learning paths are very individual.” As the personal makeup of the students plays a major role in their achievement— this can only mean many kids are left behind. A principal says: “You have to be extremely self-directed and very motivated to excel at it.”

Parents also believe online study requires an independence that not everyone possesses. One parent notes differences even in her own children: “My son is doing chemistry online and he doesn’t have a problem at all because he’s the independent type, but my other son will not be able to do an online course because he is just not independent.” Another parent adds: “My son has got to have a driving force behind him constantly. The teacher has to tell him to stay on task and he is fine as long as he gets that type of encouragement. Online he doesn’t get that.”

Students themselves confirm that in order to be successful with CDLI you need a certain “maturity.” One student commented: “You got to have a will to work otherwise you just slack off.” Students often rely on the encouragement of a “real teacher” and as one student said: “with CDLI there is nobody there to push you.” A teacher suggests the adolescent mind may not lend itself to such independence: “A student needs to be very independent to sit down online and unfortunately that only comes with maturity.”

A parent asks “How are those students who are not suitable for CDLI supposed to get their courses? Do they not deserve an education?” This parent goes to describe his experience with his child:

I have one of these students and he was put in CDLI for a couple of courses and I said you were setting him up for disaster and that is exactly what happened and without a lot of support from me he would not have passed at all ... and there are other students like that

What should be done for those students whose only access to courses is through distance education but who are not suited to CDLI model and/or do not have a parent who is willing and able to provide supplementary support at home?

The question was raised as to what extent schools provide students with opportunities to become independent learners as they progress through the grade levels. Students experience one kind of pedagogy coming up through (spoon-feeding was the term often used) and then at the high school level they are thrown into online courses unprepared for the level of independence required. A teacher explains: “Those that learned to be independent do better online for sure. But our students have been very nurtured going up through, and while there is nothing wrong with that, they don’t know how to work well independently.”

“If I had the choice I would not choose to do the same course online.” – student

A few students had positive things to say about the online experience and in a few cases even prefer it to the regular classroom. One such student remarked: “I find the online excellent. It

doesn't bother me at all, and I would rather it." However, for the majority of students this is not the case. Even for those students who are self-motivated, CDLI is not the preferred mode of learning and according to one teacher, "there is a social aspect to having a class with a teacher that they miss." Their preference is always for a "real teacher" and as one teacher put it: "The best instruction a kid can get is from a teacher in the classroom." In addition, some parents feel CDLI is being used as a band aid solution and that the real problem is there are just not enough teachers allotted to rural schools.

"There are many many issues with CDLI." –parent

Many students report finding online courses much harder than regular ones, claiming they were "too much work" and "time consuming." Most find there are more assignments than in regular courses and feel they are not given enough time in class time to work on projects. One principal suggests the possible reason students struggle so much with CDLI is that the online teachers place greater expectations on the students, where as in a face-to-face setting there is more flexibility and sometimes expectations are adjusted once a teacher gets to know their student.

Students reported that their marks also drop once they start taking online courses and as a student explains: "Ever since I started doing the online I started getting letters from the school saying I'm not living up to my potential." A parent notes what happened to her son in an online course: "He was falling badly and we had to get him a tutor, which was not an easy thing to do. He ended up with 72, but three others didn't make it. In his other courses his marks were much higher. They always were."

Some of the more academic students avoid online courses at all costs because they're afraid the lower marks will hurt their chance of getting scholarships. A teacher explains: "They[students] are worried that it will bring down their average ... some of the more competitive kids don't want to do that because of scholarships and bursaries ... that's a major factor to why some of the more capable kids are not doing on-line courses."

Even though most students find the online teachers to be quite knowledgeable and helpful, some feel too intimidated to ask questions. A student describes this experience: "Some of us are passive and if we don't know who we are talking to then we just don't have the confidence." Another student expresses his dislike of the impersonal nature of the courses: "I feel like a number. They don't know who you are." Most students report their online teachers are easy to reach by email and usually respond promptly to students' concerns. Some feel online courses get easier as you go along. A student explains: "In the first year it was difficult for me but once you get accustomed to it -- it becomes second nature."

The fact that, quite often, there isn't a teacher or supervisor of any kind in the online classroom is a real concern. One parent said: "CDLI is better than nothing, but without supervision it is very difficult and easy to get distracted." Teachers are all too aware of the problems that can arise from leaving adolescents unsupervised, but are already overworked and too busy to watch the CDLI classroom themselves.

One teacher explains the complexity of the situation: “I just don’t have time to monitor it. I tried but I’d be leaving my own class to check on them and that didn’t seem fair.” Another teacher explains what can happen when you leave students alone in a room: “There are kids fooling around, acting up and distracting others and no one is going to be the person who goes to the principal.” Students themselves report many distractions with online learning: “It’s just harder to concentrate when you’re on the computer. There are too many temptations to go to MSN, Facebook and You Tube.”

Clearly there is a need for more supervision and support for students engaged in distance learning. One parent outlines how he envisioned the role of a person designated to work with distance students. He felt the role was more than just supervising:

Not just supervising but someone who meets with them on a regular basis to ask how their course is going ... someone to say, I notice you have this to do ... you have an assignment due.... you had a test last week and you didn’t so well in it ... what’s the problem? ...and that person can communicate with the CDLI teacher because you get some kids who don’t ask for what they need.. Because they don’t know what they need and to expect them to ask someone who is just a voice is too much to expect them to do ... that’s an additional hurdle to them... It’s more than just supervising...

In terms of the equipment, most schools are fitted with top of the line computers and a high speed/satellite internet connection. Some report the occasional failure of the equipment, but for the most part these issues were resolved quickly and effectively. Problems did occur when the students were unable to get online for reasons beyond their control (ie. Power outages, server problems, weather etc ...) and many feel it is unfair for students to have to use their own time to make up missed classes.

Some report problems with the lab the component of certain online courses; citing difficulties with the equipment and in some cases being unable to do the required labs because they weren’t supplied the materials in the first place. Another issue related to science courses is students having to complete labs without adult supervision. It is not clear how often this may occur, but it does raise serious safety and legal concerns. A student explains: “We do the [science] labs on our own...not sure what to do really...we have lab facilities but we don’t have the materials we need.”

A selection of other comments regarding distance education include:

- CDLI teachers make themselves available to parents and I have to admit they were very helpful – parent
- very few problems with the CDLI equipment here but if there is you have to jump and run so they don’t get too behind ... I have to leave my own class to fix it ... M team teacher

- If it is online I 'm not doing it...-student
- I think our CDLI teacher is really good... Still not as good as one on one in the classroom... there is misinterpretation of over email ... it is so difficult... it might get easier as you go along.... you don't know his character so you might take him off guard in an emailIt would be real good to meet your online teacher face to face. - student
- Generally, students do not do as well with online courses as they do with face to face courses in the classroom.-teacher
- I think the schools are being held more accountable [When it comes to CDLI] we are getting calls saying why this kid isn't logged on... I think the communication has improved....
- kids have difficulty staying on task.... even five of the best students experienced difficulty with staying on task ...-teacher
- We are adults and we find online course hard enough.... And there is no time allotted to the M team.... It is easy for students to get off task ... You need more than someone who just drops in to check on them because they quickly make it look like they are working when they are not
- When they ran into a problem they couldn't get a hold of their online instructor right way and they get frustrated with it and say the hell with it....
- Sometimes the kids gets looked at like they are being lazy but it's not laziness it's their makeup ... it's just the way they are ... as adults even we need motivation to do certain things Kids need the same ... they need to be motivated.... –principal
- CDLI is starting to be used as a band aid.... There isn't enough choice for students and sometimes they are forced to be put into CDLI.... it's a band aid for not having enough teachers ... you need to have the right makeup to do it and students who don't have the right makeup are being forced into CDLI because there is no other course offered ... - parent
- “Us as parents have difficulty with the courses then we had no one to turn to ... no one to call... we did have a number to call in Gander... but that was a real issue for us ... it just wasn't the same as contacting a real person face to face ... you have to pick a certain time to contact him and you wouldn't catch him...
- I did talk to my son's instructor but he said the students are not motivated.... I told him I disagreed... they are not doing the labs the instructor said ... well they didn't have the lab

equipment to do the labs... I had the principal make a call ... after they did meet with all the parents online but a lot of the parents didn't really understand how to use the software ... there was an intimidation factor for sure.... CDLI can't expect the parents to know how to use it...-parent

4. Shifting Responsibility for Learning from School to the Home

“They are pushing too much at those kids.” --parent

There is a concern among many of the parents of the Straits that the education system is shifting too much of the responsibility for student learning from the school to the home. There are two manifestations of this: an apparent increase in the amount and kind of homework; and an increasing need for tutors.

Some research participants feel too much homework is often given to students and that it starts at a very early age. A parent explains: “The homework is unreal – the amount of it the kids are expected to do.” The same parent also wonders if this type of workload is placing too much stress on her child. Others believe the homework is often too difficult for the students to complete on their own. A parent reflects on what it was like when she was in school: “Homework was work I could do on my own. I don't remember my parents having to sit down around the table teaching me.”

This becomes further complicated in a situation where many parents do not have the academic background needed to help their children at the secondary level and especially in certain subjects such as Math and Science. One parent says: “For the ordinary parent we just don't understand the material. Most of us don't have a clue and it's harder for the average parent.”

For a number of years now, there has been a significant growth in the commercial tutoring business. More and more parents have to resort to hiring tutors to supplement the instruction their children receive in school. What this has to say about the appropriateness of the provincial curriculum and/or school based instruction is a topic for another study. However, this increased reliance on tutoring is highly problematic for parents who do not have the financial resources to hire tutors and/or live in rural areas where there is a scarcity of tutors.

A parent explains: “I am so worried I won't be able to find a tutor for my son in Math. And there are just no tutors around here. In the cities anyone can find a tutor.” Another parent commented: “Very few adults here who can tutor.... I would love to have my daughter in grade 11 tutored for math but no one who can do it.”

There was mention of a *Tutoring for Tuition* program that some students availed of but parents say that too is not without problems: “There is no one to tutor the kids in the community only the grade 12s which isn't great for sure.” One parent, whose daughter is a tutor in the program, points out that the tutors only can give so much of their time to this initiative:

I know one of my daughters is doing the tutoring for tuition... The thing is she is doing all academic and has public exams coming up so as a tutor she only has so much time and she's also involved in sports and her time is very limited some kids just don't have time and that has to be monitored

The serious consequence of the lack of extra help available to students is evident. For example, one student reported dropping academic Math, because of the lack of help available to him. His mother explains: "He was forced to give up academic Math, even though, I know it is essential for anything he might pursue later. But there weren't any tutors. There was no one to help after school, and I mean I couldn't help him with Math, so it seemed like there was no other alternative."

Some think the schools should be doing more to help the students. A parent expressed her opinion: "I find a lot of times they are too quick to put them in basic when they are quite capable of doing academic with some more encouragement and a little extra help." Another parent shares a similar view: "There is no one-on-one anymore. I believe 85-90% of students could do academic if they had help, but there is no help at the schools anymore."

Others feel it unfair to place the onus on teachers to provide extra help after school, as they are already overworked. And as one parent says there can be other factors at play: "Often times they [teachers] have kids of their own and just don't have time to stay." The amount of help available to students from teachers after school did tend to vary from school to school, teacher to teacher, and from subject to subject. One teacher commented: "I think if a student came and asked a teacher but as far as taking hours of your own time after work and you have to remember that as a teacher in a small school you have to be jack of all trades and run all the sports programs etc ... the grad and other things."

A student from one school relays another side of this story: "Our teachers will stay to help us any day from 3-9pm. Our academics are very high so I guess the teachers are more willing to help us." Another also says: "Our teachers take the time to know our strengths and weaknesses so they can really help you where you need the help." Ultimately, no matter what you do it's the student who has to do the work. As one parent says: "A parent can only do so much and the teachers can only do so much and at some point the child themselves has to take responsibility."

If students need additional instruction beyond what is provided in the classroom it has to come from teachers volunteering their time after school hours, parents, or from hired tutors. If none of these options are available to an individual student, he or she is in a very difficult situation. Whose responsibility is this?

3. The Program Choices Students are Making (Basic/Academic)

Given the concerns expressed by *Partners in Learning*, that an increasing number of students were choosing basic or general programs over academic ones, the research team gathered data relevant to this issue. We contacted each of the schools in the study and asked the administration

of the schools to provide us with data related to program choices being made by students over the last three years. [See APPENDIX F for School Data.] *Consider reporting on the data here*

An analysis of the data reveals that the Labrador Straits Region as a whole compares quite well with the Province as far as percentages of students enrolled in academic versus basic or general programs. However, this analysis also shows that two of the schools have a higher percentage of students graduating with a basic program.

There is no straightforward answer to why students choose to do a basic versus an academic program. This is a complex issue and there was no clear consensus of views. The increased reliance on distance education and the difficulties many students appear to have adjusting to this mode of program delivery, as noted in the previous section, appear to be a contributing factor. There is no doubt that the lack of supervision and support students receive while taking distance courses is leading both the students themselves and their parents to avoid taking online courses if possible. If an academic course is only available online, then students may end up choosing a basic course so as to avoid the extra demands imposed by distance courses.

However, other contributing factors were also identified.

One teacher offered this view when asked why he thinks more students are choosing basic programming: “I just don’t see a trend [in relation to distance education]. If I look at my classes now and I have several students in academic who should be doing basic and I have way less kids in basic that should be doing academic.” Another teacher adds: “I haven’t seen the connection [basic courses linked to increased reliance on distance] to be honest. For the most part the kids who are doing basic are doing it because it was the decision of the parents and the student. They don’t feel the child can handle it academically.”

There are many reasons why a student would choose the basic route over the academic one and as one parent says: “Some of it is the regular stuff like kids saying I’m going in the army and they don’t need academic.” Another parent wonders if its language and math achievement in grade nine that is forcing kids to choose the basic route in high school. She goes on to explain: “I think we have to look at why the kids are not making the requirements in grade nine? What’s going on?”

Another teacher believes it might have something to do with a lack of motivation on the part of the student: “When their intent is to just get a pass and the basic route is the easier way to do that.” Administrators do not make the decision to put a kid into basic lightly. As one principal explains: “We put no students in basic without the consent of the parents.” However, one parent stated: “I know there are kids who have deliberately not choosing an academic course because it was offered online.”

A community member offers her opinion: “I think it’s the mindset of “I don’t need all this stuff in high school ... I’m going to do a trade. I work with kids at the youth centre and they can come in the evening to get help and have space ... homework night ... but we don’t get anyone ... maybe 5 students...”

A principal also shares her insight: "...in some cases the kids that are doing the general courses for the most part it is a decision of the parent and student ... academically they don't feel that the child can handle it ... I know he or she is not going to university anyway... he is only go to do trades and if he can be a truck driver then that is good enough for me... I think the intent is to get a pass and the general stream is the easier way to get a pass ... we had a student drop out of academic math this year who could have easy gotten 60 in that coursebut wanted to follow the easier route."

A student who was doing academic math online dropped back to a classroom based basic course. The principal of the school commented: "Yes, and dropped back to basic in class ... now I don't think CDLI was the issue for him ... He just wanted to change because he didn't want to put the work in ... [you're saying that the CDLI is not the main factor?...] I don't think so and to be truthful I think the parents might be using CDLI as a scapegoat.... As an excuse for their children doing basic when really it's the students and parents who decide because it's an easier route with fewer obstacles...."

5. Other Issues

In this section of the report we are going to present an overview of a number of other issues that were raised by residents of the Straits that they feel are impacting on the quality of education in their region.

A. School and Parent Communication

"For the ordinary parent we don't always understand." --parent

Research participants note that in some cases a lack of communication exists between the school and the parents. For instance, many parents were not aware of how poorly their kids were doing in grade nine until it was too late. (Grade nine is the year that determines whether or not a student should do an academic or basic route in high school.) A parent of a former grade nine student explains: "We had a meeting with our son's teacher in the spring and she told us if he didn't get 65 in Math then he was doomed. It didn't give us much time." The following school year the same parent was forced to make a decision, and she put her son in academic math even though he only got a 55 in grade nine.

She expresses concern over doing this: "Kids are being pushed through the system that allows them to be weak by putting them on when they are not ready." She feels her son might have benefited from repeating grade nine but the school didn't recommend it. A retired teacher also expresses concern after attending a parent teacher night level 1: "I really felt sorry for some of the parents. They were there in November and they didn't even know their child was in basic. They felt helpless." For the "ordinary" parent even when the school keeps them informed they don't always fully understand what is being said. Another retired teacher explains what happened when parents were invited to a school for a presentation on the high school curriculum:

“We watched a slide show about the curriculum and it went over my head and I’m a teacher and my husband was looking at me and he said do you understand this and I said not all of it... it was a general slide show that they showed in St. John’s and had no bearing here... it talked about having choice to do this course or that but our students don’t get a lot of choice here... it was positive thing don’t get me wrong but it went over our heads... I would have liked to have seen that earlier like in Grade 8 before they choose their high school courses... no good to wait until he/she is in grade 11... I go into the school and ask questions and get advice but a lot of parents they don’t do that... you know almost every parent showed up for that presentation so they do care. They just don’t understand or know what to do and they feel intimidated.”

Another parent gives an example of how it can positively impact a child when there is good communication. Her son had been struggling in some of his courses and she explains a situation that occurred recently: “We have a different principal this year and he has a system set up where he emails parents so we are informed of everything. He’s the same guy who called me to tell me how well my son was doing in English and to tell him to keep up the good work. I told my son the principal called to say he was doing well and he was all excited. It really motivated him.”

In addition to communicating with parents, some feel the schools should be reaching out to the community as a whole as well. One interested community member says: “The administration needs to recognise the partners they have in the community and invite us in.”

It should also be mentioned that some teachers and parents feel it is equally important to have a good relationship with the school board, though many feel it is impossible since the boards amalgamated. A retired teacher explains: “When we had a smaller board the board knew the schools in the district, but the board office is now so far away and they are staffing the schools based on a formula without even knowing the schools.” A parent agrees: “The consolidation of the school boards made it very impersonal for everyone.”

B. The Alberta Syndrome

“I can think of at least 20 guys with 80 averages caught in the Alberta syndrome.”

– teacher

The lure of the Alberta boom is being felt in the Labrador Straits. As with other parts of the province people are leaving the area and making a permanent move to other places such as Alberta. However, a significant number of people maintain their homes in the Straits but travel to and from Alberta for work. Sometimes it is just one parent who goes; however, there are some instances where both parents are away.

Many young people just out of high school also go to work in Alberta. They are able to make a good deal of money with very little educational credentials. Teachers and parents expressed

some concern that this situation makes it more difficult to have their children work hard in school. They see these people return from Alberta with a new truck and lots of spending money without having worked hard in school.

A mother at a female dominated focus groups says: “Most of us have husbands who are away.” This means children are often left with one or both parents away. A student, who has both parents away working in Alberta, speaks of the troubles associated with this: “It’s kinda hard to work when you don’t have parents by your side. We’re like orphans. Well not really, but some of us have gone for months without our parents ... me and her.”

A teacher says she has noticed a change in student’s attitudes towards their school work since people from the community have been moving out west: “I see it in the boys. They are not as motivated because Alberta is their backup plan.”

And the reality of the situation is that young people have little choice but to leave. One mother says: “We are resigned to the idea that once your child leaves grade 12 they are gone.” Another parent adds: “It’s not that they don’t want to stay there are just no jobs for them here.” Some feel even if there were jobs available they would still leave: “The outside world is exciting to them because they haven’t travelled much having been so isolated for years.”

C. Declining Population, Declining enrolment and Changing Demographics

“70% of the people living here are senior citizens.” –parent

For some time now the province of Newfoundland and Labrador has been experiencing a significant decline in population as well as a decline in school enrolment. This has been due in part to outmigration as many people leave their rural communities to seek work elsewhere. There has also been a dramatic decline in the province’s fertility rate which currently is below replacement value. The decline in population in both community and school has also resulted in changes in the demographic profile of many communities as a result as who is leaving, who is staying, and who is returning. These changes are having an impact on the school system.

A teacher who is also a parent says: “You got to wonder about the future of the small school as the numbers keep going down and they start thinking we have too many teachers. How will we ever offer a solid education to students?” Another parent also says: “You are pretty much seeing the last generation of people who stayed around here at this table.”

In addition, to a decline in population some also feel there is a demographic shift which also has impacted communities and schools. A teacher explains how she believes this could be contributing to a lack of motivation she sees in students: “In some ways communities were more progressive twenty years ago. I think we are seeing a regression in social values and I think you have to attribute the lack of motivation of students to that. You would have to blind not to admit it.” Another teacher offers his thoughts: “Maybe what is happening is you have a lot of people moving out of the rural areas and maybe a lot of those are professionals. The ones staying

behind are the ones who are not so educated and they don't have the skills and opportunities and maybe their kids are not so academically inclined." Yet another teacher explains:

I think you need to look at what's not in the community. ...Many parents are unable to provide help ... if I look at a student in Mount Pearl Senior High then they have more to avail of in the community for help...We have a lot of one parent families here now ... we have many have fathers that are away to work...It's all interconnected....There many more males going away to work and coming back.... a lot senior high students have fathers who are away at work... And because they are going away that is passed on to the students ... I'm going off the Alberta too ...I see it in the boys ... that's their backup plan ... they can go to Alberta ... the army used to be the backup....Kids now are getting more ... school is secondary because they can afford to do so many things because their fathers are away making lots of money...

D. Multi-grading

"As school counsel chair my biggest concern is multi-grading, that's a big issue."

The primary focus of this study was the secondary level of schooling, levels 1, 2 and 3. However, a number of issues were raised that pointed to concerns at the K-6 level. One of the most significant of these was multi-grading. A school council chair explained his concern:

Our primary teacher has four grades in a classroom ... teaching four grades with four curriculums is daunting and I don't care if you only have four students it's still four grades if you are going to do justice to it ... so instead of looking at the number of students I think you need to be looking at the number of grades factored in to your formula."

F. Special Education

A second issue primarily related to K-6 was the problems associated with the testing and diagnosis of children with learning disabilities.

If the kids are documented... and that's another problem, this board getting documentation for all of the students who need it has been difficult because of staffing and it's not necessarily the board's fault.. They try to hire guidance counsellors and they can't fill the positions If the documentation is not there you can't go to the board and say you need this ...

The reason we can't get help is because our son has to be diagnosed by a doctor and they are not sure what to diagnose -- is it ADHD? Attention Disorder and they don't know what is wrong but it's something.. The closest thing we have is Autism ... So he's in school and he's supposed to be in grade three and he can't do kindergarten

I feel the school is doing what they can to get a diagnosis. And we flip guidance counsellors and they are either off the wall or if they are good they are gone after a year ... Parent

E. The Future of the Straits

We took some time with each of the student focus groups to talk with them about their future plans and asked them if they saw themselves living in the Straits region after they finished their education. The majority of students interviewed say they plan to leave.

A teacher told us about a writing exercise she had her class complete. She asked them to write a letter to themselves in 20 years time. Four of them thought there would be people still living in the Straits but 25 of them thought no one would be there. However, several young people did indicate that they would return to the Straits if there was work for them.

Here is some of what the students say when asked about their plans once they finish high school:

“I’m going as far away from this place as possible.”

“You can’t get the training or experience you need here so you have to leave.”

“You have to travel away to get experience.”

“Once you’ve been in a place so long you just want to get out of it.”

“Maybe if there was work here I would come back. But maybe not.”

“There are no opportunities here.”

“We are getting smarter and realising we can’t stay here.”

“There is so much talent here but we have to leave because we are so isolated.”

Many worry about their communities with so many young people leaving but not everyone sees the future as grim. As one student says: “People are leaving, but I think there will be lots of jobs here when all the baby boomers retire. I would love to come back.” Another teacher feels if the opportunities are there people will return. He speaks of his own situation and the situation of other teachers who grew up in the area and eventually returned: “We came back because we could.”

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this project has been to give the students, teachers, parents and interested community members of the Labrador Straits the opportunity to identify those factors they believe are impacting on the quality of education being provided in the region. The project team travelled to the region and met with all stakeholders and through a series of interviews and focus groups engaged in open ended discussions of the pertinent educational issues.

A number of concerns have emerged in this study. There is a concern about the overall quality of education being currently provided and there is a further concern about what may happen in the future.

Two interrelated major issues have been identified. One is the curriculum – the programs and courses students have access to in the schools; the other is curriculum delivery – the increased reliance on distance education through the facilities of CDLI to provide programs and courses.

As has been noted above, the schools of the Labrador Straits are small schools and two the schools are very small. In addition because of declining enrolment and subsequent reduction of teaching staffs, the ability of the schools to offer a full program of studies at the secondary level is becoming increasingly problematic. This is a challenge that is confronting small schools throughout rural Newfoundland and Labrador as well rural areas elsewhere in Canada, the United States and Australia. Small schools do not have sufficient teachers on staff to provide programs and courses to satisfy the curricular demands of their students. In addition, it is increasingly difficult to get qualified teachers in the areas of math, science and French to take positions in remote and isolated schools.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador created the Centre for Distance Education and Innovation in 2000 to respond to the curricular challenges confronting small rural and remote schools. The central mandate of CDLI is to provide access to the programs and courses to students attending small rural schools via the internet that cannot be provided by teachers working in the schools. When distance education was first conceptualized and implemented in the province in 1987, the idea was that it was to be a program for a fairly selective and elite group of students primarily interested in accessing very high level academic courses and Advanced Placement University level courses.

However, as enrolments continued to decline distance education changed from being a restricted alternative mode of program delivery for a limited number of self-directed students to become the only way for many rural students of all levels of academic ability and maturity to obtain the high school credits required for graduation. The literature on distance education is quite clear as to the necessary attributes learners need to succeed when engaged in online learning. Students must be high motivated, academically orientated, mature, self-directed and capable of completing their work without constant supervision. While there are some adolescents who may possess these qualities, the majority of young people do not. And therein lies the problem.

It was clear from our discussions with parents, teachers and students that the majority of students find the current model of distance education problematic. It is clear that they require more school

based support and assistance when they are taking one of their high school courses online. Although the current CDLI model has provision for the establishment of an “M Team” in schools offering distance education, it is clear that the teachers who are members of these teams are unable to meet the student demand for assistance. The reasons for this are very much to do with the working conditions of teachers in the smaller rural schools. Teachers in these schools have few if any unscheduled teaching periods and are generally teaching more courses than their urban counterparts as well as working at several different levels. Because they are few in number the full demand of providing an extra-curricular program falls to just a few people.

The current CDLI model puts members of the M Team in a difficult situation. In some situations teachers have to take time away from their existing teaching duties in order to assist an online student. This means they have to interrupt and disrupt their school based classes to provide the needed assistance. This is unfair to the school based students. In other situations the help has to be provided at recess, lunch time or after school. Rural teachers have to volunteer their precious free time to work with online students. Neither of these situations is pedagogically sound or acceptable. Distance students cannot be dependent on the volunteerism and good will of overworked rural teachers. Nor can their educational needs be defined as an add on for a teacher who already has a full and demanding teaching load.

It is our recommendation that a modification to the existing CDLI model is appropriate and needed. There has to be some provision for increased support and supervision *in the school* for students taking distance courses. There is a need for someone who would have dedicated time away from other duties and responsibilities to work with a school’s CDLI students. Based on our discussions with parents, teachers and students the task for this support person would not be primarily academic. CDLI has excellent teachers who make themselves, for the most part, readily available to their students. The academic expertise is in place. The real need is for a person who would monitor and supervise students while they engage in their online courses. This person would act as a liaison between the student, the online teacher, the parents and the school’s personnel. They would help students keep track of their assignments and tests, assist with technical problems and facilitate contact between students and their online instructor.

We believe if this recommendation is accepted and acted on it would ameliorate many of the serious concerns raised by the stakeholders of the Straits. There is no question that more and more students are going to have to rely on distance education provided by CDLI to graduate from high school. If students are going to graduate with an academic qualification, depending on the size of the school they attend, most will have to take a significant portion of their program online. We believe if the right supports are in place more students will avail of the academic programs and more importantly have a better chance to succeed.

Conclusion

This study had its origins in an opportunity provided the people of the Labrador Straits by the Harris Centre to identify the issues and concerns they felt were impacting on the quality of education being provided their children at the secondary level of schooling. With funding provided by the Harris Centre we travelled to Labrador and met with parents, teachers, students

and other interested members of the community. Through an extensive series of interviews and focus sessions we collected a comprehensive data set related to the expressed issues and concerns of the stakeholders. Access to a quality curriculum was a major issue as was the increased reliance on distance education. Concerns were also raised about the apparent shifting of responsibility for student learning from the school to the home, the lack of available tutoring in the area, the quality of communication and interaction between the home and the school, the negative influence on student motivation of the job opportunities in Alberta, the absence of parents from the community away for work and its impact on students and their learning, multi-grading and the difficulties having children tested in a timely fashion for possible learning problems.

These are all important issues and concerns and certainly worthy of further investigation. We have chosen for this report to limit our recommendations to the issues surrounding curriculum and curriculum delivery. We feel this is an issue that requires the immediate attention of CDLI, the Department of Education, and the school districts. We would also like to note that the issues identified in this report are not unique to the Labrador Straits. Similar concerns are apparently being expressed in many other areas of the province. That makes addressing them all the more urgent.



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