

Notes on stakeholder meeting,

Coles Island School

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January 15, 2015

Introduction

Coles Island School, the only school in the LSD of Johnston; the 600 signatures on the petition to save the school is approximately the number of people in Johnston.

LSD Advisory Committee responsibilities: solid waste management (trash), planning (building permits), and some Emergency Measures. Not education. Who has responsibility for education?

The District Education Council (DEC)

The unenviable situation of the DEC

I don't envy the DEC, not just because they have to endure the hostility of local communities that see them as the decision-makers who intend to close their schools, but because of a incongruity in the Education Act that gives each Council its policies and lists what it has "authority over."

Right at the top of the online page about the DEC we read, "New Brunswick's District Education Councils (DEC) are committed to guiding and moving forward the education of all students." and a bit later, "DECs develop objectives and policies to address the priorities and needs of their district."

So, how do they say they do this?

First thing in a long list of what the DEC has "authority over" is "hiring, firing and directing the superintendent who will, in turn, hire all school district staff on behalf of the DEC."

This is about the administration and management of a huge collection of schools: students, teachers, administrators, bus drivers, custodians and I'm sure others I don't know about. It's not until we get to number nine that we read something about education: "flexibility respecting local curriculum." This is something the DEC has "authority over." Number eleven is "developing district education plans." That's it. Looking carefully over the 18 things the DEC has "authority over" these are the only ones having to do with education. Meanwhile three and four are "budgeting and expending funds" and "retaining a small surplus." It seems to me that economics and administration are well looked after, while the education of children, not so much. If a person ran for the DEC to try to improve the education of her region's children, I predict she would soon become frustrated by the system that puts the DEC in place and gives its members their marching orders.

The last meeting

The last entry in the minutes from the November 20th meeting quotes a woman as saying, "If we give up our school are our kids going to have a better education, if not, we are giving them a ticket to leave the Province." My notes have something slightly different. I remember she was the last person to speak. I did not know her, but her nearer neighbours would. Like all of us, she was tired; it was the end of a long meeting. She sat right over there and said wearily but with intensity, "If you can convince me this [closing the Coles Island School] is good for our children, that it is good for their education, then I would consider it." After all 74 (or 78) pages of power point presentation, she had not been convinced.

I can imagine some members of the DEC thinking, "Not convinced? You gotta be kidding! The evidence is overwhelming."

But is it? Is it really evidence that bears on what is best for the children of this school? Is it really evidence about these children's education?

Mr. McTiminy had a lot of slides. Slides about enrollment, slides about functional capacity, slides about the building (and its flag pole), slides about staffing, about class size, about program delivery (with phrases like "EST- Resource onsite 0.2 designation." There were slides about "provincial assessment results" (testing), and about transportation and on and on. There were no slides that I saw either that night or when reviewing slides on line since that would convince our neighbour. She is worried about what's good for our children and their education. She was not convinced that any of these primarily economic indicators had any bearing on what would facilitate the learning of the children of Coles Island School. Those indicators just don't measure the right things.

With the odd marching orders the DEC works under, it is no wonder that its members lean to the side of the economic evidence. There is another side, the side of what really counts – teaching and learning in a safe but challenging environment. I would respectfully remind DEC members -- mindful of their unenviable situation -- that the E in D-E-C stands not for "economical" but "education."

Thank you for the chance to address you.