

Thank you Steve,

Mr. McTimmoney, Mr. Noel, members of the DEC, ladies and gentlemen. I would also like to introduce a colleague of mine from the riding of Hampton, Mr. Gary Crossman. Gary has attended a number of 409 in the Southern parts of the province and is the opposition critic for education.

I have been your MLA for four months, but I can't begin to tell you—in this this short time---what an experience working with you has meant. Enriching is the first word that comes to mind, but somehow it's not enough. So I say Thank you to the "Save Coles Island School" committee and thank you to the community of Coles Island and surrounding area.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you. I think we can all agree that New Brunswick's financial situation dictates that savings and efficiencies must be found in every department and Education is no exception.

Our Premier has asked ask for our two cents worth, our Finance Minister has asked for our help with New Brunswick's fiscal challenges.

I am asking the school board to step up to the plate and help take down the silos between all districts. Anglophone and Francophone districts must start working together for the benefit of all students, not just make little fiefdoms for themselves.

Cannot English and French speaking students travel on the same busses?

Can we not have a curriculum that works for all students?

Can we not treat all students equal?

We find ourselves here because we have an under-utilized, under-populated school building in Coles Island. The easy solution appears to be:

Close the school and bus the children elsewhere.

But is that the best thing to do?

Our Premier has asked ask for our two cents worth, our Finance Minister has asked for our help with New Brunswick's fiscal challenges.

I will speak briefly about the 409 process and about the potential that exists for the Coles Island School. I will also touch on the potential for growth in the Coles Island area as it relates to the school. As well I will ask you to consider the broader question of our rural schools province-wide, their future and the need for a social license to make changes and closures that in most cases would likely be permanent. I will focus the remainder of my comments about the most important factor in this or any government policy exercise--the people it impacts; the children who attend Coles Island school from kindergarten through to grade 5 and their families; the teachers and staff of the school and the community as a whole.

The 409 process itself has been under scrutiny for some time and I expect could undergo some changes as a result of the exercise to develop the ten year plan for education. I have heard many people describe the 409 process as flawed and outdated, but it is what we have to work with at this point.

The Coles Island School was recently described as "the heart" of the community. It is arguably the best piece of infrastructure in the community. The school has several classrooms that could be adapted to a variety of purposes along with a very good gymnasium. When we consider that two of the greatest ongoing challenges for our citizens are adult literacy and the need for exercise to help combat obesity, it is no stretch to imagine the after-school potential of this

building for the people of the Coles Island area. I understand that the school building will be examined under the Facility Status Review and in that review, item 8, "Facility Area and Usage" allows for current community uses such as daycare, access centre or community space to be outlined so I won't elaborate beyond stating that it is my belief that the building itself has the potential to serve the people of Coles Island well beyond its primary purpose as a school.

I think I am safe in saying that any government would far prefer to be in a situation of needing to open more schools rather than close them. What a great day it would be if we were gathered here because the Coles Island School is over-populated and we need to discuss expansion. We would all prefer that scenario, and it may not be all that far-fetched.

When we consider the possibility for growth in the Coles Island area we must consider opportunities through forestry, mining, the pipeline project and in particular the development of a new potash mine. These projects combined could lead to several hundred jobs in the Coles Island vicinity. Many new families could settle in the area, but if there is no education infrastructure it seems more likely that the parents would feel compelled to make home elsewhere and commute to work rather than have their children commute to school. These economic possibilities help make the argument that we should not rush a decision.

In Appendix "C" of policy 409 we read that parents must be:

- Informed of the process

- Given relevant information
- Given time to consider relevant information.

There is no guideline that indicates how much time is to be given. It has been suggested that Coles Island School could be closed by September of this year. Whether that timeline is reasonable is, of course a matter of opinion.

I would like to point out once again that the Premier has committed to developing a new ten-year education plan. Any reasonable person would expect that this new ten year education plan will address the unique challenges and opportunities that face our rural students. The Premier has stated that it is unlikely that the plan will be ready to implement by the end of 2015. With that in mind, I would suggest that closing any rural school before the new ten year plan has been rolled out would be premature and in the end could prove to be a mistake.

Let's turn our attention to the children and the impact a closure would have on their lives. One consideration is whether they would be travelling by bus to school in Chipman or to Cambridge Narrows. What we know for sure is that there would be bus travel involved. Parents are understandably concerned and upset about the prospects of putting a five year old on a school bus in the morning with older children and high-school students. We have all lived through those years in our own lives and many of us have seen our own children live through those years. We know the antics and the topics of conversation and language that a five or six or seven year old could be exposed to twice a day. What I mean to say is that I am very sympathetic to that concern by the parents.

It is my understanding that there will be no layoffs of teaching staff which I take to mean that teaching staff will be relocated. I am uncertain of the impact on custodial staff, but certainly the building must be maintained at least in the short term.

My point is- how much money will actually be saved annually and is it worth it to move forward quickly when there is the ten year education plan being developed and there are real possibilities of a change in population for the catchment area of this school?

We all understand that our province is in critical financial condition, but the dollar amount cannot be the only consideration. The human element has to be carefully considered. The social license needs to be considered. The children, the parents and the entire community are engaged and anxious to help find a solution that will keep this school, this “heart of the community” open and serving the people of Cole’s Island.

Thank you