

# Commission on Education Governance

## Presentation by the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island  
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The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women is an arms-length government agency with a responsibility to educate the public and advise government on issues that are important to the status of women in PEI. The government-appointed members of the Advisory Council work to ensure women's full participation in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres of Island life.

So why is it essential that the Advisory Council on the Status of Women present to the Commission on Education Governance?

It is important to us to remember that this Commission on Education Governance was established in response to the dissolution of the Eastern School Board and the appointment of an unelected trustee, and that this dissolution came about after a lengthy, unresolved conflict among the elected members of the Eastern School Board. In the public and media discourse, the conflict on the Eastern School Board was framed in terms of gender division and even gender discrimination.

After the first debates about school closure created division among School Board Trustees, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women offered the Eastern School Board a presentation on gender analysis and women in government. We were pleased that the Eastern School Board accepted this invitation, and we made a presentation and answered Board members' questions. However, as we know, the conflict continued, and continued to be framed in terms of gender.

The gender dimensions of the conflict on the Board were not fully explored; the facts of the situation were not established in the public record. The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development intervened to dissolve the elected Board of Trustees without the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development first undertaking a gender and diversity analysis of the situation, despite calls for a gender analysis from the PEI Status of Women and other women's organizations in the community.

Throughout the discussion, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women argued for the importance of an elected school board, a position we continue to advocate for today.

We firmly contend that if the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development has the power and authority to dissolve an elected Board of Trustees, the Minister has the power and authority – and responsibility – to intervene in proactive, positive ways that prevent problems and support excellent policy-making on behalf of students and citizens: through consultation, strong communication, and collaborative problem-solving.

We also firmly contend that it would enable you, the commissioners on education governance appointed by the Minister, to make better decisions with more equitable results for student learning, if you apply a gender and diversity lens in your deliberations and decisions.

## Gender & Diversity Analysis

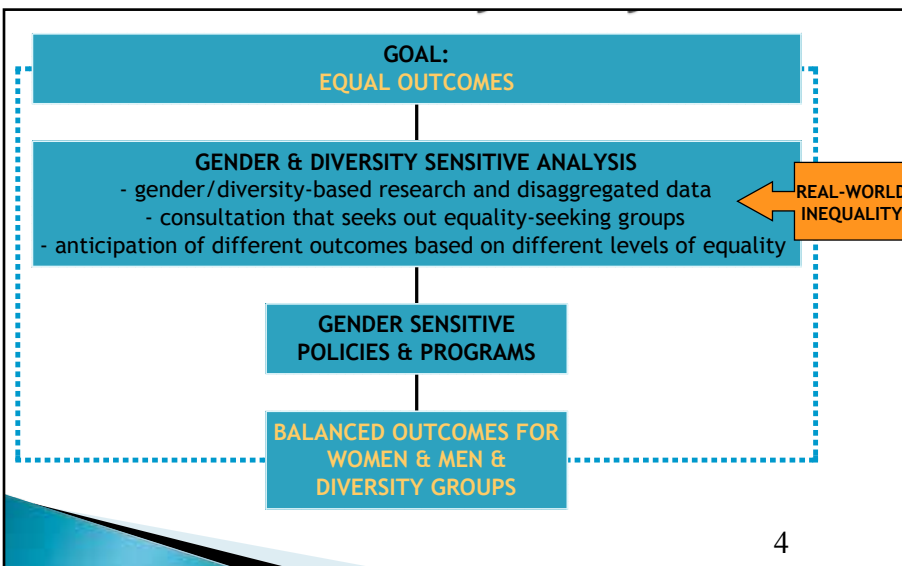
- ▶ “Gender and diversity analysis takes into account cultural, social and economic differences between men and women and between diversity groups.”
- ▶ To identify potential impacts of policies, programs, and legislation on men and women and on diversity groups
- ▶ To ensure policies, programs, and legislation have intended and fair results for men and women and on diversity groups

From a *Gender and Diversity Analysis* brochure circulated by the PEI Provincial Government

Gender and diversity analysis is evidence-based. It is a tool to examine policy to determine that outcomes will be similar for women and men and diverse groups. When it functions well, it results in policy that has better and more equitable outcomes for all citizens, not just women.

Looking at the strengths in PEI’s current education governance, we view a commitment to gender and diversity analysis in policy and curriculum planning as a significant strength of the current system. Education policy has a strong base in evidence and a strong commitment to equity.

Parents, educators, and policy-makers for education hold in common the principle that all children have the right to learn to their fullest capacity. When we have done research on gender-based policy for our Equality Report Cards in 2008, 2009, and 2011, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has consistently shown an understanding of gender and diversity. The Department has demonstrated ways that this understanding has been applied, especially in curriculum development, to help ensure equitable results in the education of both girls and boys and members of diverse groups that might experience disadvantages.



There has been – and there continues to be – careful attention to research that looks at gender-related imbalances in the school system. This work has direct effects on student learning: better results for girls in science, math, and computer science; better results for boys in literacy and school retention; better ideas about how to address emerging challenges such as the continuing under-representation of women in trades and technology, and the recent under-representation of men in some university programs.

In other words, there is a solid recognition of the importance of gender and diversity in policy-making in education.

Two questions arise: Why is policy and a good structure for policy-making important to student learning? And, crucially, why is an elected school board important?

When we attended a Community Conversation as part of this Commission, a great many issues emerged in the conversation, from supports for children with special needs, to work to prevent and address bullying, to the appropriate student-teacher ratio, to the ideal number of curriculum outcomes, to the clarification of roles and responsibilities throughout the school system. Participants saw all of these as important for solid foundations for student learning. The consistent theme was how to meet students’ diverse needs equitably. Almost all of these issues are influenced by policy.

It was clear from the impassioned discussion at the Community Conversation that good policy, appropriately enforced – and created and maintained through a sound and functional governance structure and – supports good student outcomes.

In that Community Conversation, we were privileged to be in a group of great diversity: teachers, principals, school custodians, school bus drivers, parents of special needs children, retired administrators and policy-makers, parents with pre-school children, and citizens with an active interest in education. The diversity of experience and input was in itself a convincing argument for having a role for elected school board trustees in policy-making. School board elections ideally engage this diversity of all citizens in the collective project of educating children and youth. Providing health care and education are the two biggest collective projects under our provincial jurisdiction, and Islanders are passionately opinionated on both health and education issues. Without an elected school board, it would be more challenging for citizens who do not have children in the school system to express their stake in education. A school board election has the potential to engage parents of school-age children, new parents, non-parents, new high school graduates, grandparents, educators, retired educators, and all voting-age citizens who care about education.

We have to admit, this potential is unrealized in the current system, where a dearth of candidates put their names forward as potential trustees and voter turnout is admittedly dismal. However, looking at this situation with a gender lens gives us incentive to advocate for an improved system for elected school boards, rather than to advocate for eliminating them.

Elected school boards have created much-needed opportunities for women in electoral politics.

## Women in Government: PEI Stats

- ▶ 50% of appointed Senators
- ▶ 36% of school board trustees (elected 2007)
- ▶ 29% of municipal councillors
- ▶ 25% of MPs
- ▶ 25% of the Lennox Island First Nation Band Council (no women currently on the Abegweit Band Council)
- ▶ 22% of MLAs
- ▶ 18% of Executive Council

According to the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, the proportion of women elected to school boards reached an historic high of 36% in 2007. By comparison, just 22.2% percent of MLAs elected in the October provincial election were women.

Research from the PEI Coalition for Women in Government has shown that women often face fewer barriers and are sometimes elected in higher proportions in non-partisan elections, such as those for school boards, First Nations band councils, and municipalities in PEI.

Additionally, school board elections have been an important first experience with electoral politics for some Island women who have sought leadership roles. Hon. Gail Shea, now a federal Cabinet Minister and only the third woman in PEI history ever to be elected as a Member of Parliament, was first elected as a school board trustee.

## PEI Women in Government: Research

### Key Findings from the PEI Coalition for Women in Government:

- ▶ PEI voters do not discriminate against women at the polls.
- ▶ The problem does not lie with electing women; it lies with getting women's names on the ballot.
- ▶ Barriers to women running for elected office in PEI include a perception that the job of being a PEI politician is one with low pay and long hours and little privacy, the competitive nature of politics, a perception that power brokers in political parties prefer to support men, and the fact that women do the majority of the unpaid work in their homes, as well as working outside the home, and do not have time.
- ▶ Most jurisdictions worldwide that have high proportions of women in government have some form of proportional representation.
- ▶ More research findings: [womeningovernmentpei.ca/](http://womeningovernmentpei.ca/)

The United Nations has reminded us that women's under-representation in elected office is a matter of human rights, and a critical mass of at least 30% women is needed before legislatures produce policy representing women's concerns and before political institutions begin to change the way they do business.

In PEI, in Canada, and around the world, there is strong support for the idea of more women in elected office.

How appropriate it would be for the elected school boards that make policy for our schools to be models of democratic engagement and civic responsibility for students who will graduate from the school system as voters.

It is also important to note that government-appointed boards are not a panacea for gender balance. If we look at Health PEI as an alternative model for an unelected, government-appointed, competency-based board, we see that gender imbalances are still not always adequately addressed. When the Health PEI Board was first established, government appointed only three women to the eleven-member board, an especially dramatic imbalance, given that at that time women made up 85% of the provincial civil service in health.

School board elections do need to change. In the future, we would be interested to see your Commission recommend that government explore options for reforming the way school board trustees are elected. Many in Canada have questioned the effectiveness and the fairness of the first-past-the-post electoral system we use for elections in Canada. School board elections, with their small number of self-nominated candidates and low voter turnouts, seem to us to be the ideal venue for government to experiment with electoral reforms.

Perhaps a system with some degree of proportional representation would work for school board elections. Perhaps the trustees on school boards could be elected to represent diversities instead of (or alongside) geographical regions. Imagine the powerful insights of a school board made up of elected representatives from groups such as educators, parents, new graduates, persons with special needs, persons with disabilities, women and girls, and boys and men. Imagine the experience such a group could bring to decision-making. Imagine a future school board election requiring gender parity between male and female trustees.

## Women in Government: Support

- ▶ The United Nations says that a **critical mass of at least 30% women** is needed before legislatures produce public policy representing women's concerns and before political institutions begin to change the way they do business.
- ▶ The United Nations recognizes under-representation of women in government as a matter of **international human rights**.

## Women in Government: Support

- ▶ **90%** of Canadian voters believe in **increasing the number of women** in politics to achieve a well-functioning political system.
- ▶ **90%** of men and women in parliaments around the world agree that **women bring different views**, talents, and perspectives to politics.
- ▶ **86%** of men and women parliamentarians agree that greater numbers of women in parliaments would **increase women's influence** on political policies and agendas.

The way we have run elections in the past does not need to be the way we run elections in the future. Given that school board elections are non-partisan, partisan interests would not have to dictate the electoral reforms government might try. School boards could be a very effective venue to try new models and evaluate results. However, any changes that would improve these elections would also require sensitivity to gender. Most importantly, it would be important to continue to support gains women have made in being elected to decision-making positions.

In conclusion, we urge you, the Commission on Education Governance, to find ways to examine your decisions with a gender and diversity lens. If there are ways the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women can assist, we will be happy to help. We recommend a role for elected school boards that are accountable to voters and both mandated and empowered to work collaboratively with other policy-makers in education. We urge you, further, to recommend that government explore electoral reforms that would empower voters to participate more fully in decision-making and support gender and diversity equity on school boards. We urge you to recommend changes in our model of education governance that you are convinced will model good governance and civic engagement for students, educators, and citizens, with measures that support and enhance equity among women, men, and diverse groups.

Thank you, and good luck.

***For more information about this publication or other publications, please contact the Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women.***



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