

LETTER TO MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Submitted: January 6th, 1994

Hon. Chris Decker
Minister of Education
Department of Education
Confederation Building
St. John's, NF

Dear Sir:

The Newfoundland-Labrador Human Rights Association has been an active participant in the public debates regarding the need to restructure the provincial education system. In order to make a positive contribution, we have previously presented two extensive briefs. In February, 1991, we made a formal submission to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Delivery of Programs and Services in Primary, Elementary, Secondary Education. In October, 1992, we presented a detailed response to the Recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Your government recently released its position on restructuring the educational system and we have noted the recommendations contained in Adjusting The Course. Our detailed position has been stated in our previous briefs and therefore does not need to be repeated. Nevertheless we feel it imperative to respond to a number of issues raised in the government brief.

The Newfoundland-Labrador Human Rights Association commends government for the goals and principles listed in Adjusting the Course and is encouraged by the direction government is taking to reduce discriminatory aspects of the present educational system.

The proposed educational model in Adjusting The Course appears to preserve the right of members of the enumerated denominations to educate their children in accordance with their religious beliefs.

We continue to be concerned, given our pluralistic society, that the rights of members of non - enumerated denominations and those with no religion continue to be neglected. We further note that numerous surveys over the past fifteen years have consistently shown the majority of Newfoundlanders to favour a single public school system without church control. This was clearly identified in the Royal Commission report Our Children Our Future.

The Newfoundland-Labrador Human Rights Association therefore reiterates its position calling for the immediate establishment of an alternate non-denominational public school system. We nevertheless feel it is appropriate to respond to the recommendations of Adjusting the Course with

the assumption that this proposed model alone would be implemented without an alternate public system.

1. The Association does not oppose the delivery of religious education by the Department of Education. Indeed, it can be a vehicle for cross-cultural understanding within a social studies context. We cannot, however, agree to the primary role provided to the Churches in the development and provision of religious education.
2. The Association objects to the institutionalization of the Churches' representation on the proposed school boards. It does not object to Church participation as representatives of the community, but rather opposes guaranteed membership independent of the democratic wishes of the community.
3. The Association opposes the establishment of Denominational Committees:
 - a) Religious and family life education must be delivered in a professional manner similar to other subjects in the curriculum.
 - b) Teacher assignment must be guided by similar professional considerations.
 - c) Pastoral care should be provided outside of the educational system.
4. The Association recommends that the power of appointment to the School Construction Board be the direct responsibility of the government.
5. The Association recommends that the sole function of the Denominational Education Commission should be to advise government on educational policy which affects the rights of denominations. Since this body will act as a voice for the churches, it must be open to representatives of all denominations, including the non - enumerated ones.

Yours truly,

Jerry Vink

Executive Director

Newfoundland-Labrador

Human Rights Association