

Leaving Early— A Study of Student Retention in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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and Nova Scotia, of papal bureaucracy, and even a few glimpses of the United States. One is able to look at a growing Roman Catholic Church in a colony which, despite its many years under British rule, was only on the verge of acquiring some of the political institutions long since part of colonial life elsewhere in British North America. One is able to appreciate the importance of the Irish element in that period of Newfoundland's development and the role played by Irish bishops and priests in the integration of immigrants into colonial life. For these reasons and more, it is fitting to end this review with "thank you very much," but in words which would have been understood by most of those Irish men and women who made Newfoundland the most Irish part of North America by the early years of the nineteenth century: *Go raibh míle maith agibh a Raimoinn agus Cyril!*

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Leaving Early—A Study of Student Retention in Newfoundland and Labrador. (Study prepared by a committee drawn from several educational organizations.) St. John's: n.p., 1984. 126 p.

PATRICIA A. THORNTON

This profoundly disturbing report, released last November, should be compulsory reading for all parents, teachers and statutory bodies concerned with education in this province. The study traces, as far as possible, all high school students born in the province in 1963 who did not die, leave the province, or transfer from one school system to another, and who should, therefore, have graduated between 1980 and 1982. Despite the untraceable students numbering approximately four thousand and the further eighteen hundred excluded from the study for the reasons stated above, the results are nevertheless beyond dispute. Based upon the sample of 7672 students, then, only 51% of the 13,500 born in 1963 graduated and at least 33%—some five thousand students—dropped out. By any criteria this represents a shocking wastage of human potential, but especially when—as the report goes on to show—the prospects for these drop-outs are so bleak: 70% were unemployed; one in three had not worked in the last year; 75% had worked less than twenty-one weeks and half of these had had no work at all. By contrast, those who completed high school had a considerably better record of employment and especially of long-term employment. The prospect for female drop-outs was particularly dismal: their employment record was considerably worse than that of their male counterparts, many were on social assistance, and a large number were unwed mothers.

The typical drop-out has a distinct "persona": (1) possibly slightly more likely to be a boy than a girl, (2) from a small outport community, (3) barely sixteen years of age, (4) who quit in Grade X after repeating at least two grades. The overwhelming reason given by students for dropping out is academic failure and other school-related problems. This varies little with the age, sex, grade of the student or the size of the community and is a sad indictment of the "success" of our educational system.

This said, however, perhaps the most striking revelation of the report, and one which seems more particular to Newfoundland than elsewhere in Canada, is that almost half (45%) of all girls who dropped out were pregnant at the time. A closer examination of the data suggests that much of this waste could be avoided in that many of these female drop-outs did not otherwise exhibit the normal characteristics of a drop-out. The 27% of females—some six hundred or more girls—who actually cited medical grounds (meaning pregnancy in most cases) as the reason for leaving school are interesting in that they do not seem to be typical of other drop-outs. First, a medical reason is not a "normal" reason for leaving school early: almost no male early leavers cited medical grounds. Second, medical grounds were the *only* cause which was almost exclusively a primary cause of dropping out; all other causes were equally cited as first, second or third reasons for leaving school early. Moreover, the case histories show that several of the girls who dropped out because of pregnancy completed their schooling subsequently. Together these suggest that at least half of the girls who dropped out when they became pregnant were not "normal" drop-outs and could therefore have been spared their pitiful fate had they escaped teenage pregnancy.

The report is divided into seven sections. The introductory section reviews studies done elsewhere in Canada on early school leavers and explains the methodology used in this study. The next four sections present the quantitative results derived from a 46% response to a questionnaire survey of 1644 of the 2567 drop-outs identified and consist of the personal characteristics (age, sex, grade and community size) of drop-outs; their first, second and third reasons for leaving school early broken down into school-related, economic and personal reasons; the advice drop-outs received from teachers, parents and peers; and the effects of dropping out on chances of employment. Section six contains the qualitative data—in the form of personal profiles—derived from interviews with ten randomly selected school leavers. The final section contains the summary and eighteen recommendations.

Unfortunately the report, especially the statistical material, makes unexciting reading. It is made even more dry and difficult to read by a superfluity of tables and bad graphics. One particularly unforgivable practice is the use of line graphs rather than bar graphs with discontinuous or discrete

categories of data. For these reasons the major findings are often lost in a plethora of detail. This situation could perhaps have been avoided had the data been subjected to some more sophisticated statistical analysis that would have permitted more precise or crisp statements of findings. I appreciate that the task force decided against "fine" statistical analysis in the hope of reaching a wide audience. However bad graphics, poor prose and a barrage of numbers seriously undermine that aim and relatively simple descriptive statistical procedures, well within the reliability range of the data, would have strengthened both the validity of the results and the forcefulness of the conclusions. Some of these shortcomings in the quantitative analysis were rectified by the "human face" provided by the individual interviews. It is a pity more of these were not carried out.

These criticisms of sample, methodology and presentation in no way invalidate the basic findings of the report, all of which point to a real crisis in student retention in this province stemming largely from inadequacies in the school system itself. The report represents a great improvement in our understanding of the dimensions and nature of the drop-out problem in Newfoundland schools, and I strongly urge both further analysis of the problems and the implementation of the recommendations.

I suspect that many of the shortcomings stem from a lack of government support and hence totally inadequate funding of and technical assistance to the project. Partly related to this, it is difficult to know what mandate the task force had and hence what power and authority the recommendations carry. Why did the Department of Education not initiate or at least sponsor such an important undertaking as this? One can only hope that the Department along with the other agencies identified in the report and parents finally address the issues raised and make a concerted effort to rectify the problems.

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