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**Advisory Council on the
Status of Women**

PO Box 2000
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Dear Minister Jameson:

The following are the responses that I have submitted to the consultation on models for elected school boards, on behalf of the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women. In addition to providing you with our survey responses, we are pleased to provide further comment on some of the questions. Thank you for the encouragement to participate in this consultation. Please consider these survey responses to be the advice of the Advisory Council to you as Minister Responsible for the Status of Women.

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women has held a public position in favour of elected school boards at least since the Council's presentation to the Commission on Education Governance, December 5, 2011, http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/acsw_edugov.pdf.

The rationale for this position included several key points:

- Women-identifying people have historically been under-represented at all levels of government in PEI, and this inequality continues. When elected school boards were in place in PEI, they were outpacing the provincial legislature in terms of electing women. For example, in 2007, the proportion of women elected to school boards reached a historic high of 36%. PEI has never elected as high a proportion of women at the provincial or federal level.
- 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. Currently, in non-partisan bodies, women make up 50% of Lennox Island Band Council, 25% of Abegweit Band Council, and 32% of municipal councillors; by contrast, in partisan bodies, women make up 26% of provincial MLAs and 0% of Members of Parliament.
- Some women who have met electoral success in provincial and municipal governments cited running in school board elections as an important first experience with electoral politics. For example, Gail Shea, who served as a provincial and federal Cabinet minister, was first elected as a school-board trustee.
- Elected school boards provide an opportunity to modelling civic leadership in electoral politics for students within the school system.

These and other arguments continue to underpin the Advisory Council's preference for a school board model that includes elected members.

The current consultation introduces the question of a hybrid model for the Board of Directors, with a combination of elected and appointed members. This type of model was not under discussion in 2011. However, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women sees a hybrid model as promising. The PEI Coalition for Women in Government has done research on increasing the gender representation and diversity of background and experience on agencies, boards, and commissions, through its "Equity in Governance" project. From a strong, international research base, the project findings enumerate some of the most promising practices for increasing equity in governance. Best practices are summarized in an infographic here: <https://www.peiwomeningovernment.ca/sitefiles/Documents/FINAL-Board%20Poster-WEB-UPDATE.pdf> and in narrative form here: https://www.peiwomeningovernment.ca/sitefiles/Documents/Equity-in-Governance_2015/Best-Practices_EN.pdf.

It is worth considering that interventions to increase gender parity and diversity on boards can be ranked according to effectiveness. The "Equity in Governance" research ranks the interventions as follows, from least to most effective:

- Having individuals **champion** gender parity and equity: The strategy of relying on champions is effective but limited as individual champions move on.
- Establishing **term limits**: Term limits ensure that the search for new voices is ongoing and the opportunities to enter the board continue to be renewed.
- Reviewing **recruitment** practices: Recruiting with gender and diversity in mind takes planning and deliberation to reach under-represented groups, especially those that are marginalized.
- Setting **nomination** committees and policies: Since boards tend to nominate people who are most like themselves, and boards can become self-replicating, nomination policies that require gender parity and diversity should be established.
- Setting **measurable** goals, targets, and timelines for gender parity and diversity: Setting goals that can be measured and then measuring results proves very effective.
- Establishing board **policies** for gender parity and diversity: Policies, such as quotas, are effective, especially when boards are transparent about them, and commit to them publicly.

Our Chairperson, Debbie Langston, submitted a response to the online survey on elected school board models. Below is a summary of survey responses, with further comment on the Advisory Council's advice to government, where explanation is needed.

COMPOSITION

1. Please rank your preferred model for determining the composition of the Board of Directors for the PSB?

Our survey response:

1. Hybrid of elected and appointed trustees
2. Fully elected trustees

3. Fully appointed trustees

Further comment: Designed and implemented properly, the hybrid model of elected and appointed trustees has the strongest potential to facilitate direct, democratic input from the public on education governance; to create opportunities for women-identifying people and people from under-represented groups to participate in non-partisan electoral politics; and to incorporate considerations of equity and diversity in the Board's composition.

In study after study, everywhere in the world, evidence is mounting that boards that have a strong balance of gender representation, that meaningfully include voices of BIPOC people, newcomers to Canada, people with disabilities, and people with diverse background of various kinds, including women-identifying people from under-represented groups, have better outcomes from their decision-making. Prince Edward Island students and educators deserve the best possible outcomes from education policy decisions. They deserve a model for a Public Schools Branch Board of Directors that engages and facilitates the best possible range of diverse voices and experiences in decision-making.

Looking at the "Equity in Governance" priorities for building better and more effective boards, a hybrid model has the most potential to build **recruitment** efforts (for elected and appointed members) and set **measurable targets** (for elected and appointed members); and the mix of elected and appointed members would also make **board policies**, such as quotas, realizable, if the appointment process committed to filling gaps in representation after elected seats were filled.

2 Please provide any suggestions for an alternative process for the selection of the Board of Directors of the Public Schools Branch.

Our survey response: None

3 How many trustees should be on the Board?

Our survey response: 12

Further comment: Boards of 9 to 12 members generally seem to function well across PEI. Fewer than 9 members would limit opportunities to represent and include diverse voices and experiences that reflect the wider community. (Specifically, for example, a board of 8 or fewer would leave at least one of the 9 families of schools unrepresented.)

More than 12 members limits opportunities for the members to contribute fully and meaningfully to decision-making. (For example, 12 people can speak for 5 minutes each in a 60-minute meetings, whereas 15 people could speak for an average of only 3:45 minutes each.)

4 Does your above answer change if there is a hybrid model?

Our survey response: No

5 If a hybrid model is the chosen process, what percentage of the Board should be elected?

Our survey response: 60%

Further comment: We would like to see at least 50% and at most 75% of a hybrid model would seem reasonable.

6 If a hybrid model is chosen, what criteria should be used to appoint trustees?

Our survey response supports the following criteria:

- Members of key educational partner organization
- Representative of a diverse community
- Student
- Representative of Indigenous government

Further comment: From this list, we would support a hybrid model with trustees appointed from a key educational partner organization, such as the PEI Home and School Federation; representative(s) of an under-represented diverse community; a student or students, preferably elected by students in a special election through an online, in-school vote; and representative(s) of Indigenous government.

We would support regional representation *if* the elected members of a hybrid Board were elected without consideration of region (on a kind of “open ward” system). If elected members of a hybrid Board are elected regionally, regional representation should not be considered among appointed members. Below, we indicate our support for regional representation among the elected members.

7 What should be the term for the Board of Directors?

Our survey response: Four Years

Further comment: Research by the PEI Coalition for Women in Government on “Equity in Governance” showed clearly that term limits on boards are a key way to create opportunities for increased gender parity and diverse representation. Because we support school-board elections being aligned with municipal elections, we support a term of four years. Four years allows members to develop some expertise. If a hybrid model is chosen, we would recommend four-year terms for appointed members as well, but staggered with election dates, to increase continuity on the Board of Directors beyond elections. For example, if school-board elections were to take place in 2022 and 2026, appointed members could be appointed for terms from 2023-2027 or 2024-2028. The first appointees might have to have shorter term limits to set the pattern for a staggered appointment schedule.

Please note that one drawback of a four-year term is that a current student appointed to the Board would likely cease to be a current student before the end of four years, so an unintended consequence of four-year terms would be shorter terms for students and comparatively longer terms for non-students.

8 What skills or background would be advantageous for a trustee?

Our survey response: Other: passion for high-quality, equitable, accessible public education

Further comment: We contend that the most important background an elected or appointed member would bring to the Board of Directors would be a passion for public education and the totality of their lived experiences and unique perspectives. It is more important to us to see measurable targets and goals for gender parity and diversity of background than specific skills.

Certainly, experience as a parent of a school-aged child, board governance experience, post-secondary education, community involvement, educational policy development, experience as a current student, business background, knowledge of the education system, or capacity in multiple languages would be advantageous. However, if a hybrid model is proposed, we trust that, among elected Board members, the voters and the electoral system will select for the traits they see as most important; and, among appointed Board members, the categories of representation are more important than the competencies listed. We would see it as the responsibility of the Public Schools Branch and the Board of Directors to have a training plan for competency-development among Board members, particularly supporting them to learn more about the education system, board governance, and education policy development.

9 What should be considered when setting the eligibility for candidates for the trustees?

Our survey response supports the following criteria:

- A resident of the Province of Prince Edward Island for at least six months
- Lived in the boundaries determined by the election process for a period of time
- Cannot be an employee of the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning
- Cannot have been found guilty or convicted of an indictable offence for which an absolute discharge or a pardon has not been granted

Further comment: We identified three items listed in the survey options we do *not* support. We do *not* support requirements that a trustee

- be over 18 (because this would exclude most student representatives, in possible contradiction with having at least one student voice on the Board);
- be a Canadian citizen (because this would unnecessarily exclude, for example, a permanent resident without the financial means to apply for citizenship); or
- be a parent or a guardian (because care of a child or youth is not a precondition of having a passion for public education, and because everyone in PEI has a stake in good education, whether a parent or guardian or not).

10 Do you believe there are any limitations discouraging residents from seeking the nomination of a Board Trustee?

Our survey response: Yes. While this question is unclear as stated, if it is asking if there are structural or systemic barriers to some people seeking nomination for a school board, our answer is yes. Because our systems are founded in patriarchy and white supremacy, women-identifying people and under-represented groups often are discouraged from seeking nomination for electoral processes as a result of structural and systemic inequality. Women-identifying people are more likely to have caregiving responsibilities that take up a larger amount of their time. People of colour are more likely to face racist discrimination that discourages them from speaking up in public. People with disabilities are more likely to face literal barriers of access to meetings and to equal participation. Those are just a few examples.

In our view, these structural and systemic limitations have implications for how information is disseminated about Board vacancies and election processes. In wanting to ensure representation, we have to anticipate that people from marginalized communities may not be linked to the usual paths to governance. Therefore, steps should be taken to disseminate information to them through community

organizations such as the PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada, the PEI Council of People with Disabilities, the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, other community organizations, and other known networks that under-represented communities are known to use.

11 Please rank from 1 (being most preferred) to 4 (being least preferred) method for voting for candidates of trustees.

Our survey response:

1. In-person voting aligned with municipal elections
2. Online voting
3. In-person voting located in the schools
4. In-person voting aligned with provincial elections

Further comment: Our preferences are discussed in more detail in the responses below. We would note that the ranking system in question 11 unnecessarily conflates voting locations and the timing of a vote. Our preference is for voting aligned with municipal elections, with in-person, online, and mail-in options for voting.

12 Do you have a preferred method for voting not listed above?

Our survey response: Yes. We prefer a system that combines both online and mail-in voting options with in-person voting options, aligned with municipal elections.

Further comment: We would like to see options for online, mail-in, and in-person voting, to maximize ease of votings. We believe this range of options provides numerous accessibility, affordability, time, and infection control options for voters. We also believe a higher voter turnout could be encouraged with voting that is aligned with municipal elections. We recommend aligning with municipal rather than provincial elections because municipal election dates are more reliably fixed; provincial governments have been less tied to fixed dates for provincial elections.

One concern with aligning with municipal governments also exists: it would force candidates with an interest in running for election in a non-partisan contest to choose between school board elections and municipal elections, potentially reducing the pool for both important sets of elections, and potentially limiting opportunities for women-identifying and under-represented people to get a foot in the political door.

13 What can be done to encourage higher voter turnout for the Board of Directors election?

Our survey response: The best prospect for increasing voter turnout is probably to align the votes with another election and to offer online voting options. We also expect that if the provincial voting age were reduced to sixteen, students sixteen and up would be enthusiastic voters in school-board elections.

14 How should the boundaries be determined for elected trustees?

Our survey response: Based on families of schools

Further comment: Regional representation is essential in a province with a mix of families of schools based in cities, towns, and rural communities. The circumstances and student needs in

each family of schools are distinct. As we suggested above, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women prefers for regional representation to be assured through the electoral process for Board of Directors members, while other factors may be considered in appointments. What is most important is ensuring that more than regional representation is considered in the process overall: gender and diversity considerations are important alongside regional considerations.

15 Please provide your thoughts on how to involve more parents and community members in the Public Schools Branch Board of Directors.

Our survey response: The most important step for which we would advocate is a seat on the Board of Directors reserved for a representative of the PEI Home and School Federation.

16 Please provide your thoughts on how more people could be encouraged to run as candidates.

Our survey response: The best way to encourage more people to run as candidates would be to work with community-based organizations to develop strategies and provide connections between potential candidates and the skills and supports they need to run. A vital link for increasing the number of women-identifying people and people from under-represented groups would be the PEI Coalition for Women in Government, which has resource materials for candidates and province-wide networks of people committed to increasing the diversity of elected officials in PEI. That being said, and as noted in our response to Question 10, reaching out to any one organization is insufficient, particularly to reach groups that have been marginalized by existing structures and systems. A robust recruitment plan will reach marginalized groups where they are, through the networks they have created for themselves.

Public commitment to measurable targets and goals for diversity, including gender diversity, should be established for the Board of Directors, and, in a hybrid model, specific board policies should apply to appointments to ensure diversity in the overall Board composition.

17 Please provide your thoughts on how students can be more involved in the education system.

Our survey response: In the context of this consultation, our advice has been to reserve a seat on the Board of Directors for a student representative; to engage students in the voting for the student representative; and, if the provincial voting age were to change to 16 years, to ensure that eligible youth would have access to online and in-person voting options that would encourage their participation.

As the Advisory Council on the Status of Women noted in its submission to the Commission on Education Governance in 2011, a well-governed school board can encourage and engage students by “model[ling] good governance and civic engagement for students, educators, and citizens, with measures that support and enhance equity.” This essential role in modelling governance remains key to involving students more in education governance.

18 Any additional comments or questions on reinstating an elected Public Schools Branch Board of Directors?

Our survey response: As emphasized in our 2011 submission to the Commission on Education Governance, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women would like to see any model for a Public Schools Branch Board of Directors subjected to a careful gender and diversity analysis before being finalized, and monitored after its establishment for equitable outcomes so that any barriers to equity can be addressed.

For more information, please refer to the written submission that provides further explanation of the Advisory Council on the Status of Women's survey responses. Thank you for the opportunity to make input into this important question.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Langston", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Debbie Langston, Chairperson

cc: Legislative and Planning Coordinator, Elected Public Schools Branch Board of Directors Public Consultations, Department of Education and Lifelong Learning

Michelle Harris-Genge, Director, Interministerial Women's Secretariat

Members and staff, PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women