

A Pivotal Presentation: 1997 Nova Scotia Multi-Departmental Meeting on School Health & Safety

This presentation marked the pivotal day when five of Nova Scotia's government departments began working in a more coordinated fashion towards improving school environmental health across the province. The systems for operating and maintaining existing schools needed improvement, and the school construction process needed upgrading in order to deliver the healthiest indoor environments possible. The departments met several times over the years and continued the joint efforts.

Perhaps this model for improvements may help others accomplish similar goals. Since then, Nova Scotia has become a leader in healthy school operation and creation.

Background:

CASLE's newly formed board collected every complaint that came to them in Halifax schools beginning January of one year and ending December of the same year. They compiled a brief account of these concerns and sent it to the Minister of five government departments that each had some aspect impacting school environments in their jurisdiction. At the time, CASLE was concerned only with existing schools, so Transportation and Public Works were not included. That oversight may have caused problems later on, but perhaps not.

CASLE's letter to each Minister asserted that these incidents could not possibly be isolated events. Statistically speaking, such events must have been happening prior to the start of the study and can reasonably be assumed must be happening since. That these are not minor incidents. CASLE asked to meet with the ministers to discuss ways to solve this problem. Each minister responded positively. CASLE then asked if we could all meet together, in a round-table sort of session to find solutions together.

Invited were the Departments of Health, Education, Environment, Finance/Procurement, and Labour/Occupational Health and Safety. The Occupational Health and Safety Division championed the event, offered their boardroom and to provide a minute-taker.

This was not to be an everyday sort of meeting. On the day, CASLE's board brought a white table cloth and centre piece, homemade muffins, biscuits and jam, with freshly made coffee. CASLE's goal was not so much to present problems but to encourage discussion and achievable ways to jointly solve them. We presented a strong case. We expressed that no-one wants to hurt children, but the system currently allows children's health and safety to slip through the cracks between the departments. The challenge was to close the gaps if we could.

For years afterward CASLE usually brought treats to follow-up or related meetings, and when we didn't we were teased about our lapse in good fun. The important thing is that everyone was engaged in this joint project and it lasted long-term. We all did amazing things for schools, government and CASLE together. Nova Scotia became a leader in North America.

(The minutes of this meeting will be posted when we locate them in archived files)