



# “Miracles Could Report on an External

*More than ever schools are expected to meet the needs of a population that is racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, to confront gender, racial, and economic disparity and discrimination, and to create classrooms in which there is mutual respect and social harmony<sup>1</sup>.*

**C**ole Harbour District High School, a school with grades 10-12 and a student population of approximately 1100, gained provincial and national recognition during the 1990's around issues of race and racism.

One of the three rural communities in its catchment area, North Preston, is an African Nova Scotian community, one of the largest – and some would suggest most politicized – in the province of Nova Scotia. It has its own community school for grades 1-3, focusing on an African-centric curriculum, with a number of African Nova Scotian teachers. At the end of grade three, the students are bused out of the community to a predominantly white middle school with a history of racial tension. In 1997, at the time when national attention was focused on events in the high school, there was only one white student in the North Preston primary school (there are a number of white teachers).

North Preston has suffered a long history of economic marginalization, with a winter unemployment rate of approximately 75%. Combined with this history of economic marginalization, the residents of the community of North Preston have experienced low literacy and numeracy rates, a high drop out rate from school and a range of other individual and social problems.

The complexities of life at Cole Harbour District High School have too often been reduced to race. The media – locally, provincially and nationally – has often captured incidents of community and police confrontations. There have been confrontations between white and black students, between parents and guardians, and between teachers and administrators and students; TV crews have recorded police cars and ambulances arriving at Cole Harbour District High School to take away both students and teachers following what has been termed a

‘racial brawl.’ As a result, when the children and adolescents from North Preston come in contact with the wider population in the middle school situation, and later at Cole Harbour District High School, they arrive with a “reputation”. The general public is often surprised to learn that of the 1100 students in Cole Harbour District High School, fewer than 100 are African-Nova Scotian.

In their preoccupation with racial issues, the general public and the media have often overlooked the long history of economic marginalization, the resulting poverty and problems associated with it.

Because of concerns about academic achievement, the high drop out rate, the tension between the various constituencies within the school, and the ever-present media attention, the Board requested me to conduct an external review in 1997. The purpose of the review was twofold: 1) to make visible the complexities of the situation, and 2) to offer specific recommendations for discussion and implementation.

The initial investigation used a broad based, comprehensive, participatory and inclusive methodology, and employed a variety of data gathering techniques including: 109 open-ended confidential interviews with students, teachers, support staff, parents and guardians, school board personnel, members of various committees associated with the school, officials with the Department of Education and Culture and a wide range of

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# Happen Here”

Blye Frank

## Review of Cole Harbour District High School

community members who wished to speak with the review team; 12 focus groups with students and parents/guardians; interviews with administrators of each of the feeder schools to Cole Harbour District High School; observations of students, staff and community members in a variety of structured and unstructured situations; and a review of a wide range of board and school documents and records.

The process revealed that the ‘problems’ are not so straightforward as some had thought, and the ‘solutions’ not so easily established and put in place as many had hoped. The tensions and the contradictions found at Cole Harbour District High School are not reducible to a simplistic one-issue analysis. In its attempt to make visible the complexities of issues found within the school, the review situated them in a broader perspective, linking the school to the historical, social, political and economic environment of the area and the local, provincial and even global communities of which it is a part.

The school is shaped by its history and by the tensions inherent in a rapidly changing society. Issues of cultural and racial diversity, under-employment and unemployment, new technologies, lack of funds, changes in family constellation and the resulting stress on individuals and organizations will not vanish in the next brief while. If Cole Harbour, is to meet the challenges of a culturally diverse and pluralistic population in a technological era, it – like all schools – must be innovative, responsive and efficient in its selection and delivery of programs, as well as in the human processes that define and give it shape. Immediate recommendations were, indeed, difficult to suggest because of the danger of initiating a sporadic and patchwork approach to considering complex and often puzzling concerns. Therefore, we shifted our approach from a focus on ‘eradicating the problems’ to ‘the understanding and acceptance of, and the willingness to struggle alongside, various constituents who share diverse values and beliefs about how things should be done.’ We were convinced that this approach would offer the best chance for a more instructive dialogue and point us in the direction of a more productive future for everyone. As Jane Gaskell has written, “If schools are going to continue to be successful, they need to factor these challenges into their planning, continue to strengthen their ties with their communities, and take more seriously the potential of research in enlightening policy and practice.”<sup>2</sup>

An important issue then, was to move away from the notion of blame. As Kate Myers and Harvey Goldstein say:

*There are three main problems with attributing blame to schools that are troubled. First, it may not be justified... rarely has one person or one event caused the problem. It is more likely to be a series of unlucky and unhappy circumstances. Second, whatever is going on inside the school is often compounded by circumstances beyond the control of the school, for example, the level of support and resourcing, turnover of key personnel, local and national legislation, or the social deprivation of students and their families. Third, and perhaps most important... attributing blame does not help the situation get better. In fact, by lowering morale and thereby encouraging staff and students to leave a “sinking ship”, it may have the opposite effect.<sup>3</sup>*

**“Most of the stuff happens off the school grounds, and then erupts here in school, and then the school takes the blame.”**

– A grade 12 student.



## EN BREF

L'école secondaire du district de Cole Harbour, en Nouvelle-Écosse, a fait les manchettes nationales au cours des années 1990. Cependant, en raison de l'accent mis sur les questions raciales, le grand public et les médias ont passé à côté d'un passé fait de marginalisation, de pauvreté et de nombreux facteurs sociaux et historiques interdépendants qui ont contribué aux difficultés de Cole Harbour. Une enquête indépendante est arrivée à la conclusion que les problèmes sont complexes et que les solutions ne seront pas faciles à trouver.

The investigation showed that many members of the Cole Harbour school community understood the complexity of the situation and resisted the temptation to point the finger of blame. As one parent said, "If you pull one thing out to look at then it seems quite simple, but when you begin to look below the surface you see how complicated that one issue is. And when you take several issues altogether, you have an intricate web that isn't easily pulled apart or fixed." A grade twelve student said it this way. "Most of the stuff happens off the school grounds, and then erupts here in school, and then the school takes the blame." And a teacher said, "Our problem is so big it doesn't feel like it's confined within our walls."

Of course, it isn't confined with the school walls.

The situation in which Cole Harbour District High School finds itself today is the result of numerous interwoven historical and social circumstances, many of which are shared by other Canadian schools: the separation of community and school; the numerous expectations placed on teachers working with students of diverse needs; the financial cuts to education; the increased demands on families; the demands of new technologies; racism; poverty and the under- and unemployment; sexism; literacy and numeracy levels; and the amalgamations of school boards with varying expectations.

The review of Cole Harbour District High School divided its 75 recommendations into eight areas of concern: coordination, planning and implementation; communication; communities; staffing; programs, curriculum and pedagogy; literacy and numeracy; support; and school climate. It was our feeling that the visible signs racism were symptoms of issues that could best be addressed within these broad areas.

Among the reports specific recommendations were:

- the hiring of a Facilitator of School Improvement to work closely with the Advisory Council of the school, the school

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administration and teachers, and the communities to build upon the already established Site-Based School Improvement Plan;

- the development of an internal and external communication policy which was transparent, and which paid particular attention to establishing linkages between the community and the school;
- a concentrated effort to improve community-school relations by active out-reach through both informal and formal processes;
- a five year hiring strategy to result in a minimum of 10 racially visible full-time teachers at Cole Harbour District High School by the fall of 2003;
- specific programs to improve literacy and numeracy skills, including literacy inservice for all teachers in all subject areas and appropriate technology to assist with literacy and numeracy;
- strong connections with feeder-schools to identify students at risk;
- an increase of five staff over the next five years to the Race Relations, Cross-Cultural and Human Rights office at the school board level and the development of a research section within that office;
- a series of workshops for students, teachers and parents/guardians on anti-violence, anti-racism, issues of gender and sexual harassment, bullying, building self-esteem and study skills be initiated.

Since the process of implementing the recommendations of the 1997 review, administrators and staff of Cole Harbour District High School report that the school is functioning much better. The dedicated and hard work of the School Improvement Officer, along with that of the administrators, teachers, students and the community has resulted in far less tension and a much more positive atmosphere.

A follow-up report was commissioned by the board in 2001. That report, entitled "A New Sense of Urgency: An Evaluation of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the 1997 External Review of Cole Harbour District High School", recognized that the implementation of the 75 recommendations is no small task for a school board, a school, and a school facilitator. Of the original report's recommendations, the follow-up study found that 6 had been fully implemented and 36 partially implemented. However, recognizing the complexity and history of the problems at hand, this evaluation should not be regarded as a failure. Progress has been made; more is being made. The report reminded the school community that improvement should be seen as 'always in process', and recommended that the board, administrators, teachers and community re-prioritize and begin acting on the original recommendations.

In conclusion, we often offer simple 'quick-fix' solutions to complex, psychological, historical and social concerns within schools. My work in schools over the last three years, including the reviews mentioned above, reinforce for me the fact that pulling out one issue -- such as race and racism -- for investi-

gation and exploration, while ignoring others – such as a history of economic marginalization – leads us down a path which is not very helpful. Every student, like every teacher, comes to the complex set of relations in schools with a gendered, sexed, cultured and raced history (along with a number of other traits, characteristics and social circumstances). To my way of thinking, what we need is a careful and rigorous investigation of issues of inequities in schooling, with a view to pedagogical, curriculum and school climate changes that work toward social justice. This, of course, is no small task; but surely if we are to make any significant changes in schools, and in the wider society, this is where we need to focus our attention. ①

- 1 Helen Harper, "Difference and Diversity in Ontario Schooling," *Canadian Journal of Education* 22, no. 2 (1997): 192.
- 2 Jane Gaskell, *Secondary Schools in Canada* (1995): 281.
- 3 Kate Myers and Harvey Goldstein, "Rethinking Educational Change with Heart and Mind," *ASCD Yearbook* (1997): 125.

**Dr. Blye Frank** has recently taken up an appointment as Professor in the Division of Medical Education in the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University. Prior to this, he was the Associate Chair of Graduate Studies in Education at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. Dr. Frank has a long academic and professional history of work in the area of social issues and schooling, including gender, sexuality, class and race.

# A Warrior's Cries

**A falcon reigns inside me**

**With razor blades for wings  
A beak like a blazing battle axe**

**His cries rip through the air  
Like those of a warrior shouting commands**

**To his regiment in the heat of battle**

Dunbar Justin Henri  
St. George's Independent School  
Vancouver, British Columbia



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