

Backgrounder

Local publishers want province to use local bookstores to handle teacher schoolbook purchases

A little-noticed recommendation made by consultant Avis Glaze was that Nova Scotia update its decades-old method of buying and distributing books to schools across the province.

Glaze called on the education department to continue its role in reviewing and approving books for school use, but recommended that teachers no longer be required to spend funds coming to them from the province's learning resources budget at the department's Book Bureau.

The Book Bureau has been operating as a wholesaler, purchasing books in bulk from publishers and reselling them to teachers and principals.

Local publishers see an opportunity for an innovative approach to give teachers better access to new books that they haven't been easily able to buy up to now. It could also ensure that, for the first time, locally-written and published books that fit curriculum needs would have a prominent place in classrooms.

A new model for the Book Bureau

Nova Scotia's publishers have come up with an innovative proposal for teacher book selection and buying. The key components of the plan are:

- An accreditation system for independent Nova Scotia bookstores who stock and display the books on the approved list, for browsing and purchase by teachers (plus parents and kids, too)
- Channeling provincial funds to teachers to spend in these accredited bookstores, giving stores a much-needed boost in business and financing a bigger stock of books
- Setting up an attractive, colourful website with detailed information about every book approved for classroom use – a site as good as Amazon.ca and Chapters.ca, but with additional features tailored to teacher needs
- A set-aside portion of book budget, to be used for locally published books on the approved list, ensuring that teachers and students have much greater access to the quality books now being written and published here

- A one-time joint effort by department curriculum consultants and classroom teachers to review the 600+ new and recent locally published books currently sitting in limbo waiting for approval decisions

Publishers are launching a *School Books Start Here* campaign to present their proposal to provincial officials and politicians, teachers, and parents. The campaign follows the successful *Books Start Here* campaign of three years ago, which resulted in the government providing new support for Nova Scotia book publishers through the Creative Industries Fund.

Quebec Model

The accredited bookstore proposal is based on a program that has been in place in Quebec for 25 years. There, school and library purchases using public funds are channeled through retail bookstores. Quebec today has 250 independent bookstores located in cities and towns large and small throughout the province. In the rest of Canada, the highest estimate of independent bookstores is 300.

“With indie bookstores benefiting from school purchases of classroom materials, Nova Scotia's bookstores could see a substantial increase in business – and we would see startups in towns that currently lack a bookstore,” says publisher John MacIntyre of MacIntyre Purcell, based in Lunenburg. “All bookstores would be able to carry a larger inventory of kids books, which would help teachers make their selection of materials and would be good for parents and grandparents too,” he added.

Part of the publishers' plan is a one-time catch-up of review of recently published books which are awaiting approval. “We have presented displays of new and recent locally published books that support the Nova Scotia curriculum,” says publisher Errol Sharpe of Fernwood Publishing, located in Black Point. “One recent display featured 600+ books, and a later display included another 170 newly published titles.” Curriculum consultants and teachers alike were surprised at the range and quality of the books coming from local publishers. But most have not been available for purchase, due to the backlog of books waiting for approval.



Mabel Murple's Book Shoppe,
River John
Photo: Sarah Baker Forward



Woozles Bookstore, Halifax
Photo: The Coast



Tattletales Bookstore, Dartmouth
Photo: Joseph Muise



Lexicon Books, Lunenburg
Photo: Sarah Sawler

Given the range of books for children and teens that fit curriculum objectives, publishers have been asking for a “set-aside” from the \$7 million annual provincial book budget. “We proposed an annual set-aside of \$1 million for local books,” says publisher James Lorimer of Formac Publishing of Halifax. “That was two years ago. Now there is such a backlog of appealing, suitable books we propose that the set-aside should be bumped up to \$2 million for a couple of years.”

The future of the book bureau has been under discussion within the Department of Education for some time. The trigger was that the space used for the bureau’s warehousing and shipping operation was required for other government purposes, and renting new warehouse space was expensive. Department officials as well as teachers also recognized that the computer software used by the book bureau was out of date and did not meet teachers’ needs.

Book Bureau Website

In December, 2017 Nova Scotia’s book publishers offered their services to work with department officials to set up a new website that would be user-friendly and meet teacher needs. They pointed out that publishers have extensive experience in developing low-cost but highly functional websites for books. This offer is part of the *School Books Start Here* proposal. Publishers estimate that the cost of the website would be modest, and that it could be up and running within six months. They are suggesting that the website be a partnership between the government and the local publishers’ organization.

Accredited Bookstores

The Glaze report recommending that a new approach to teacher book buying came at an opportune time. Nova Scotia publishers Errol Sharpe and James Lorimer attended an industry think tank session in December where an English-language Quebec bookseller, Peter Mandelos of Paragraphe Bookstore in Montreal, described how the Quebec model of accredited bookstores works.

“As soon as I saw that the Glaze report recommended a new approach, I thought of the Quebec system,” says Sharpe. “It offers something for everyone in Nova Scotia – teachers could see books in a local bookstore before deciding to buy, parents would be able to find a wide range of Canadian and local books they could buy for their families, and booksellers would be able to expand based on the increased business. It could also lead to new bookstores in other Nova Scotia towns, following the lead of the two new bookstores in Lunenburg and Sherrie Fitch’s new bookstore in River John. Every sizeable Nova Scotia town could have a bookstore under this plan, and existing bookstores could afford

to offer a much wider selection of new and recent books, particularly by local and Canadian authors.

An accredited bookstore system requires provincial involvement in the accreditation process and in handling budgeting and payment for books. Book bureau personnel could fill that role. “The big difference would be that provincial dollars would be sustaining local bookstores, and teachers would be able to select from books on bookstore shelves in their local community,” says Lorimer.

In an accredited bookstore system, publishers sell their books to bookstores at their usual discount, which is specified in regulations. Bookstores in turn price the books at a standard school discount, and don’t compete with each other on price. The competitive element in the system is the quality of service each store offers, the range of books it stocks, and – most important – the store’s location for teachers looking to browse the shelves. Teachers and the department of education would benefit from a discount from the retail price on their purchases, and would pay prices no higher than those charged by the book bureau under the old system.

Most of the books that teachers need for their classrooms would be found in the bookstores. What have traditionally been referred to as ‘text-books’, now referred to as learning materials, would not go through the accredited bookstores but continue to be purchased directly from the publisher and would be shipped to an ongoing refurbished book bureau operation.

Provincial curriculum consultants would retain the control they have now over about 60% of the book budget. “Most of the books used in classrooms today are there in smaller quantities,” says John MacIntyre. “This gives students a wider range of interesting books to read. The accredited bookstore system makes it easy for teachers to select the books that are best suited to their particular classes.”