

Writers in Schools Project: A Brief History
By Michael O. Nowlan
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This month marks the 20th anniversary of the Writers in Schools project, and since this project has had a significant impact on the province's writing community, I have been asked to provide an overview of that history.

And, I must start with history...The provincial government established the first Department of Youth in 1960 and the evolution within that Department led to the Cultural Development Branch in 1975.

By the mid-1970s the Youth department became the Department of Youth, Recreation and Cultural Resources. The initial thrust was on youth and the performing arts. On February 3, 1975, government announced the formation of the Cultural Development Branch with John Saunders as the first director. On June 1, 1977, Mr. Saunders addressed the New Brunswick Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association at a meeting in Saint John where he pledged support for the literary arts and a desire to give literature a stronger position in the province.

Saunders was a man of his word. On June 9, 1977, he chaired a meeting of literary arts representatives which included Alden Nowlan, Kent Thompson, Jan MacDonald, Joe Sherman, Sheila Cotton, Nancy Bauer, Robert Gibbs and me. That group became known as the Literary Development Committee for the Cultural Development Branch. It later included Andrew Garrod.

Agenda items discussed at the June 9 meeting included a publishing industry for New Brunswick, provincial competitions, more publicity for the literary arts community, and a program to get the province's writers into the schools.

Other meetings followed in late August and on September 19. At each meeting, which I still remember with considerable detail, every possible aspect of the literary arts was examined, but the matter of writers in schools was ever a topic of discussion.

At an October 4, 1977 meeting, John Saunders announced that \$5,000.00 would go toward initiating the first Writers in Schools program, but the program needed a sponsor. I agreed, or had it thrust upon me, probably a combination of both, to take the matter to the New Brunswick Council of Teachers of English annual fall meeting which, that year, was held on November 10. That was an historic meeting of the teachers because it was breaking new ground. There was skepticism. There was support. The teachers approved the proposal.

On November 21, 1977, the Cultural Development Branch approved the program and the Writers in Schools program was born. And it has survived...sometimes on very rocky turf.

I was the first chair of the program which was operated much differently from today. The first 'blitz' of writers to go to the schools included nine writers who made a trek around the province the week before March break: February 27–March 3, 1978. (That was the University March break, and since most of the writers were connected with UNB or Mount Allison, that

week was chosen.) There were a few visits after the Break. It was a great success with many positive remarks and no snowstorms.

The second year it was operated in much the same fashion but nature did not cooperate. We had writers stranded all across the province as a blanket of snow closed schools and highways. I am sure many of the writers still remember that time. With schools closed in Oromocto, I sat by my phone waiting to hear from the writers, hoping none were on the highway.

After my two-year stint as chair of the program, Blaine Hatt and a group of teachers from Fredericton High School took over the task. I am not sure how long they were in the role, probably three or four years.

The responsibility then moved to the Moncton area where Paula White and Pam Sheridan-Weldon coordinate the work. As you know the project now operates on requests from schools, not a blitz of writers during a one or two week period.

Originally, the funding came partly from Education and partly from Cultural Development. Today the Department of Education puts \$10,000.00 annually into the program. I am confident no other education department in this country does the same for their writers. The program has also grown to where last year there were 60 author visits a year.

I still remember Kent Thompson, who strongly supported and lobbied for the program in the first place, recognizing government “does not have a lot of money, but they have their heart in the right place.” He felt, as many of the rest of us did in 1977, that the government representatives were “genuinely interested in an arts policy.”

I also remember negotiating for funding for the program long after I left as chair. The Teachers of English had to lobby education and cultural development. I recall one conversation I had with Harvey Malmberg, who was Deputy Minister of Education, when the program was in jeopardy. He said, “If they (Cultural Development) put up money, we will match it.” It took further lobbying, but we got it.

Our Writers’ Federation has supported the program and its members have benefitted from visits to schools. It is a program that we may take for granted, but I think we should go on record to thank and to encourage the Department of Education to continue the program with a letter to the minister. Moreover, I would strongly suggest the WFNB send a letter of thanks to Margaret Eaton. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of teachers and writers for years.

By the way, the Writers Advisory Committee evolved to the Literary Arts Advisory Committee in 1979, to the Literary Arts Advisory Council in 1981; and sometime during the 1980s it became the Literary Arts Board.

[Addendum on November 20, 2014: In September 1998, Ginny (Dernier) Hill took over as provincial coordinator for WiSP. She remains in that position to this day under the Department of Education.]