

**STATE
OF THE ARTS**

SECOND IN A SERIES

Strategy to raise profile of arts

QUENTIN CASEY
FOR THE TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Much has changed since Carmen Gibbs first sat down to talk with teachers in the Acadian school system.

Those initial talks, which took place a decade ago, were aimed at fleshing out the role of art education in the school system. The encounters, however, proved awkward.

"We were speaking Chinese and Japanese. We didn't understand each other," recalls Gibbs of the former occupational solidities that isolated artists and educators.

On this day, Gibbs, the long-time executive director of AAAPNB, an association that represents New Brunswick's Francophone artists, is speaking via cell phone – on route from Fredericton to her Moncton office. She was in the capital for a 90-minute talk with 30 teachers,



Carmen Gibbs says teachers and artists have a greater understanding now than in the past. PHOTO: RON WARD/TIMES&TRANSCRIPT

Again the topic was the place of art in the school system. But this time the conversation progressed smoothly.

"They had questions and more questions," she says excitedly. "Ten years ago we wouldn't have even been invited.

"Never have I worked with so much hope."

So what changed from a decade ago? Gibbs says the answer is clear: the release of the Global Strategy for the Integration of Arts and Culture into Acadian Society in New Brunswick.

The length of the strategy's

title is only matched by the document itself – it runs for a full 200 pages. Released in 2009, Gibbs insists the global strategy has already done much to improve the province's arts and culture sector. And she argues the strategy should help guide the provincial government as it renews New Brunswick's overall cultural policy – a process now underway.

"The global strategy gave the government – on a silver platter – a way to invest intelligently in arts and culture," she says.

The global strategy developed out of a 2004 convention of

New Brunswick's Acadian community. In all, 600 delegates voted unanimously to investigate how arts and culture could be used as a "vehicle" for developing Acadian society.

What followed was an extensive, three-year research and consultation process, involving 2,000 people – from artists to municipal leaders. The community, Gibbs says, united to "imagine and dream and build the future of New Brunswick through arts and culture."

The global strategy cost roughly \$150,000 to create. An additional \$20,000 was spent to

translate and publish the document in English.

The final document, released before a crowd of 300 people in Caraquet, outlined seven strategies, each with detailed short-, medium- and long-term benchmarks. Those strategies varied from boosting the prospects of professional artists to better incorporating arts and culture in the education system.

Working with teachers and school board officials, the strategy's contributors developed programs to encourage art as a

PLEASE SEE → ART, A4

Art helps children express themselves and open up to the world

ART -A1

teaching tool. They also worked to better connect students with artists. And the results have been impressive.

In 2009-10, 100 artists visited Acadian schools. A year later, 550 artists visited those same schools, introducing students to the intricacies of their craft.

But there's still more work to be done, Gibbs says, noting the need to hire more teachers with arts training.

"Everybody now recognizes the importance of art as a vehicle to help children express themselves and open themselves to the world," she said.

The global strategy's widespread acceptance stems from its extensive consultation process. In tapping 2,000 contributors, the organizers created a network of "cultural ambassadors" - each committed to pushing the strategy forward.

That approach has impressed Acadians beyond New Brunswick's borders, including Ronald Bourgeois, the chairman of the Creative Nova Scotia Leadership Council.

"It was a very thorough conversation," says Bourgeois, whose group advises the Nova Scotia government on arts and culture matters. The global strategy, he adds, is aiding Acadian groups across the region in developing their own arts and culture communities. "There's a lot of value and merit in that strategy." Supporters of the global strategy offer plenty of anecdotal evidence to illustrate its impact. It's not clear, however, if the numbers support those claims.

For example, Gibbs is unable to say if the number of Acadian artists has increased since the strategy was released. It's equally unclear if wages have risen among the ranks of Acadian artists.

Gibbs says such questions could be answered through a professional survey. But her organization won't be launching such an initiative. "It is now a government responsibility," she said.

Though widely praised, the global strategy is not without contentious points. For example, it calls for ongoing funding commitments - as opposed to one-time funding agreements that force artists and art organizations to operate under a cloud of uncertainty.

The strategy also calls for a shift away from volunteer dependent arts organizations. Instead, the province must strive for a more professional model. In other words, more paid artists and fewer volunteers. That shift is essential, Gibbs says, if the province wants its artists to be recognized internationally.

"We'd never consider having a school system full of volunteers. It wouldn't cross our minds," she said. "It's no different in arts and culture. We just want to be treated equally." But there's a problem. Increasing the professional ranks requires more funding and training. It's a quandary Stephen Tobias is very familiar with.

Tobias, the executive director of the Saint John Theatre Company, says his organization presented or produced 25 works of theatre last year. The company worked with 250 people - from actors to set designers. Fifty of those contributors were professionals. The other 200 were volunteers.

Why is the Saint John Theatre Company so reliant on volunteers? "Because we have to be," Tobias said.

The company's annual budget sits at \$500,000 (only three per cent of which flows from the province). The

organization, Tobias notes, would need an additional \$1 million to pay all its contributors a proper union wage.

That means he has two choices: find extra cash or shrink the company's productions - in both number and breadth.

"We either have to gut our creativity or get an extra million dollars," he concluded.

Gibbs, meanwhile, is optimistic the province will step up with the financial assistance needed to build a more professional talent base. If not, New Brunswick will suffer.

"A society that doesn't recognize its art is a dead society," she said bluntly. "If we want New Brunswick to be recognized as a vibrant province, these politicians have to recognize the value of their artists.

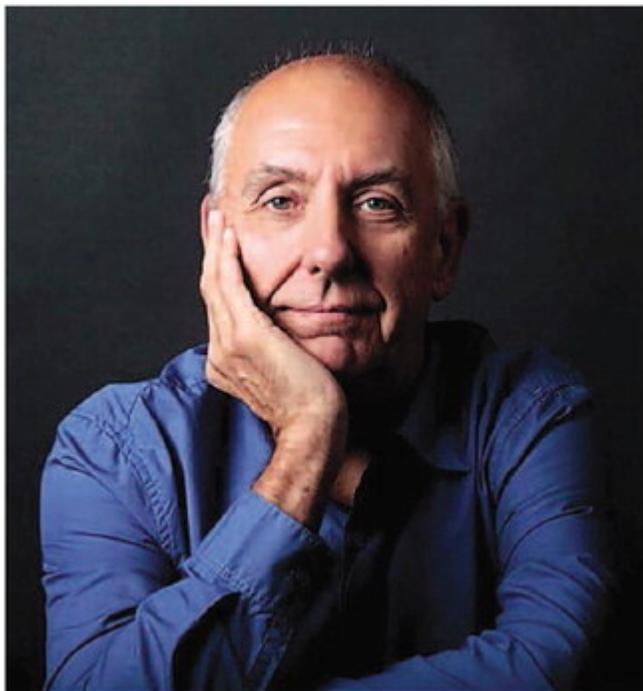
"Arts and culture doesn't cost any money. It's an investment."



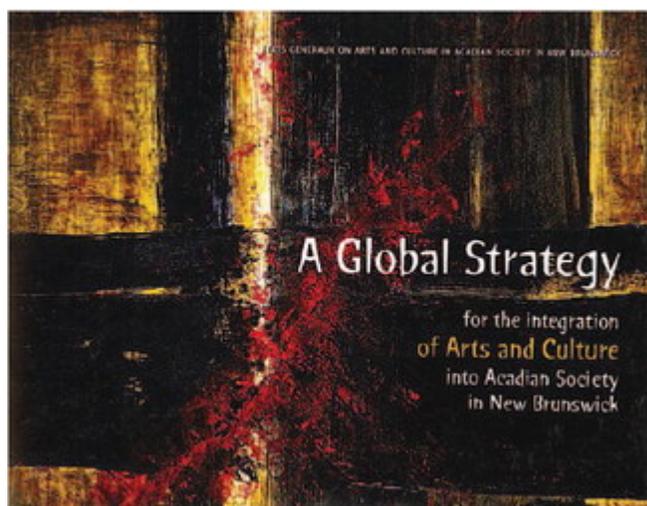
Philippe Beaulieu, Denis Lanteigne, Louise Lemieux, Carmen Gibbs, and Marie-Pierre Valax-Nadeau. PHOTO: RON WARD/TIMES&TRANSCRIPT



The 2009 launch party for the Global Strategy. The report required three years of research and involved 2,000 people from artists to members of government. PHOTO: YVON CORMIER



Ronald Bourgeois, the chairman of the Creative Nova Scotia Leadership Council. He says there's a lot of merit in the Global Strategy. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



A Global Strategy for the Integration of Arts and Culture into Acadian Society in New Brunswick, a 200-page report on how the arts can be used as a 'vehicle' for developing Acadian society was released in 2009.