

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Meeting Discussion Summary and Recommendations February 12 - 14, 2018

Governance and Administrative Review

Council met with Education and Early Childhood Development Zach Churchill to share concerns about the Dr. Avis Glaze report.

First, Council asked about the impact of the Glaze report on government's continued willingness to consider and accept Council's recommendations. As an example, Council was concerned that the recommendation to create a new assessment office overturns Council's previous recommendation regarding the moratorium on new provincial assessments.

Minister Churchill assured Council that the Glaze report does not trump Council recommendations already accepted by government. He said that the assessment office recommendation is not one of the first recommendations that government is implementing. He also emphasized that nothing in the recommendation requires more testing; rather, the focus is on independent reporting of results. He also committed to consult Council on the implementation of this recommendation to ensure any action taken is consistent with previous Council recommendations.

Members also expressed concern about the speed of implementation. They said it is affecting the morale of some teachers.

As one example, Council expressed concern about the College of Educators: how much it could cost (particularly if teachers are expected to pay), added bureaucracy, and a focus on discipline versus professional support to teachers, which they believe are features of the Ontario College.

The Minister emphasized that the goal of the College is to empower teachers, and support them as professionals. He also assured Council that government is not just looking at the Ontario College, but also at self-governing Colleges and Boards in Nova Scotia. As well, while legislation will create a College, much of how they will conduct their work will be contained in by-laws developed by College members themselves.

Some Council members said principals and vice-principals should have at least until 2019 to decide if they wish to stay in their role or return to the classroom to teach. The Minister acknowledged that this is a big decision for principals and vice-principals, and said he was looking at an option that could give them more time.

Council said eliminating elected boards and moving to shared services represent huge changes, and advised against moving too quickly. The Minister said he met with elected board chairs, who do not support dissolving elected boards. However, the board chairs advised him, if the decision was not going to change, to move quickly.

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Local regional offices will remain, and while the report talks about opportunities for savings through shared services, significant consultation and work needs to happen before change occurs in this area.

Council asked questions about school advisory councils and the new provincial advisory council on education. The Minister said that legislation will create these councils, but consultation will occur on how they specifically function.

Council members want their NSTU co-chair back at the table, urging both parties to continue talking and find ways to make this happen. Council also asked for an independent facilitator to rejoin Council to assist in advancing discussions. The Minister agreed to engage a facilitator for the next meeting.

The Minister closed the meeting by acknowledging that Council members continue to have significant concerns about the report. He said he believes that many of those concerns will be addressed as more information is available.

The Minister said he looks forward to Council's recommendations on how to invest the \$10 million for 2018-19, as well as recommendations on a new assessment policy and report cards. He also acknowledged that a continuing frustration for teachers is around classroom composition. The Minister said he wants to work with Council on implementation of the report from the Commission on Inclusive Education.

Assessment Policy

As recommended previously, two behavioral psychologists were invited to Council to discuss how issues like social promotion, retention, deadlines and zeros affect children and youth.

Information was presented on the types of mental health conditions that are commonly seen in children and teens. Statistics were also shared:

- 70 per cent of mental health problems start during childhood or adolescence
- Of youth between 12 to 19 years old, about 3 per cent will experience a mood disorder and 4 per cent will experience an anxiety disorder

While some anxiety is normal and helpful, signs of depression and anxiety were presented that could help teachers use their professional judgment in assessing the individual circumstances of a student. Those signs include: depressed mood; irritability; uneasiness or apprehensiveness; markedly diminished interest or pleasure in activities; restlessness; difficulty calming down; significant weight loss, change in appetite or upset stomach; insomnia or hypersomnia; fatigue; feelings of worthlessness; concerns about abilities and skills; difficulty concentrating; concerns about safety; and thoughts of suicide.

Research was also shared on retention and social promotion.

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Research consistently indicates that having students repeat a grade has more negative than positive consequences for most children. The results can be poor social adjustment, more negative attitudes toward school, less frequent attendance, and more problem behaviors. These effects are more likely for children with mental health disorders.

Research also cautions about the use of negative, “failure” language with children and youth who have anxiety and mood disorders. These students may already be struggling with their self-worth, and negative language can make this worse.

At the same time, merely moving a student on to the next grade does not improve a student’s learning or emotional and social development.

In sum, students and teachers are trapped between two options (retention and social promotion) that don’t work in isolation. They can work, however, with a clear intervention plan in place.

A resource was recommended, known as the Light’s Retention Scale, that can assist school professionals in making sensitive and often difficult decisions about promoting or retaining a student. Council asked the department to make the resource available to Council to inform its advice on the development of an assessment policy.

The issue of deadlines was also discussed, with one Council member saying, out of a class of 28, just 7 students passed in an assignment on time. While some students may have legitimate reasons for being late, that is unlikely the case for 21 out of 28 students.

Council members asked, what is most likely to encourage positive behaviors, so that those who can turn their assignments in on time do so? This would give teachers more time to work with students who are struggling.

Research previously made available to Council shows that while deadlines can create some anxiety, a certain level of stress is part of healthy development that helps prepare most children and teens to cope with the higher levels of stress and anxiety they will face as adults.

At the same time, research shows that consequences may work for some students, but do not work for all. Rather, the most effective way to get students to meet deadlines is to identify early the reasons why they are not doing so, and support them in overcoming the obstacle.

For example, scaffolding major assignments or breaking them into parts with interim deadlines can help a teacher identify if the student is falling behind before getting too close to the final deadline. Having homework rooms, extra help, and mentors or coaches available to the student can help. Ways to involve parents were also discussed.

Council members agreed with teaching good work habits early, having students take on more responsibility as they progress to higher grades, and providing more supports for struggling students.

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They also agreed that these are complex issues that require more work, particularly to get more supports in place for students.

As that work continues, teachers should not have to go through another school term, having to accept assignments beyond reasonable deadline extensions – in some cases, until the end of the school year.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
<p>Problem: Some teachers are expected to accept assignments well beyond deadlines and negotiated extensions – in some cases, until the end of the school term. Postponing assignments until end of term does not allow students to produce their best work, and creates an unreasonable workload for teachers at a very busy time of year.</p>		
<p>Teachers’ professional judgement will be respected in setting deadlines for student assignments.</p> <p>Teachers can use their professional judgement and equitable decision-making practices in working with students to negotiate reasonable extensions.</p> <p>Teachers are not required to accept assignments beyond the original deadline or negotiated extensions.</p>	<p>This recommendation is consistent with the Guiding Principles for the assessment policy, confirmed at a previous Council meeting. It is intended as an interim step to provide some relief for teachers until a new assessment policy is developed.</p>	<p>EECD should send a directive to school boards immediately, and communicate the same information directly to principals and teachers.</p>

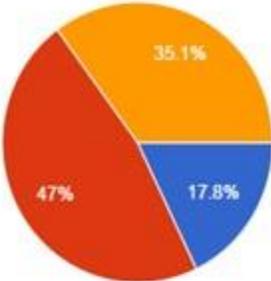
Report Cards

Council again reviewed results of the Grade 4 – 6 teacher survey related to report cards, with a goal of making recommendations that would make elementary report cards less time-consuming for teachers, while remaining meaningful for parents and students.

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I would like to see the Grade 4–6 report card:

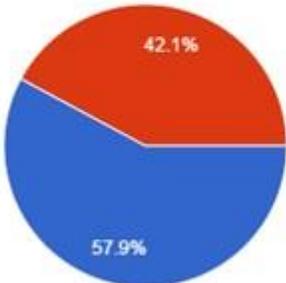
538 responses



- Report on the Learner Profile and all subjects, the same as now.
- Report on the Learner Profile, Language Arts and Mathematics only, using the A-D grade scale and comments. This would be the same as the current P-3 template.
- Report on the Learner Profile, Language Arts and Mathematics using the A-D grade scale and comments and report all other subjects using the developmental scale with no comments.

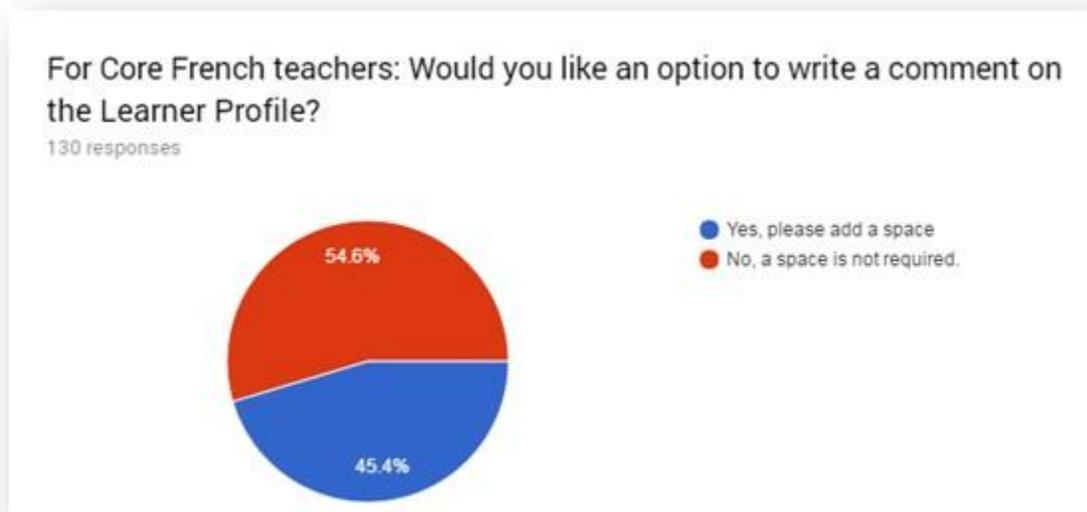
For Physical Education and Music teachers: Do you wish to retain the ability to comment on the Learner Profile?

121 responses



- Yes
- No

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The survey showed that the vast majority of teachers who responded (82 per cent) do not like the current Grades 4 – 6 report card. However, teachers are divided on what changes they would like.

With this in mind, Council reviewed the templates for the current Grades 1 – 3 and 4 – 6 report cards <https://inschool.ednet.ns.ca/teachers/powerteacher/uguides/all>, while considering their mandate to reduce data entry for teachers.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Report cards are time-consuming for teachers to complete and are confusing for parents and students.		
Align the Grades 4 – 6 report card with the integrated Grades 1 – 3 report card, resulting in one common template for Grades 1 - 6. This means: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting on the Achievement of Expected Learning Outcomes will be limited to Integrated Mathematics, Integrated Language Arts, French, Physical Education, Music, and Visual Arts (where applicable). The Learner Profile comment boxes for phys. ed. and music teachers should be removed. Music and phys. ed. teachers can comment on social skills and work habits from the Learner Profile in the Subject-Area comment boxes if these affect the 	Response to the integrated Grades 1 – 3 report card has been positive. These changes reduce data entry for teachers, while still providing meaningful information to parents and students.	EECD should work with Grades 4 – 6 teachers and principals on how to ensure all subjects are considered as part of the integrated math and language arts mark and comments.

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<p>student's achievement in that subject (e.g., Jean needs to continue to focus on following directions and fully completing tasks with independence.) This removes the need for a separate Learner Profile comment box for those subject areas.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The home room teacher will continue to comment on the learner profile, based on his or her professional judgment. 		
<p>Clearly communicate the changes to principals and teachers with videos and other tools. Reinforce the principle of teachers' professional judgment, allowing comment boxes to remain blank, when appropriate.</p>	<p>Previous information about report card changes was not shared consistently with all schools.</p>	<p>EECD should lead this work, in cooperation with regional/CSAP program directors.</p>

Council members also spoke to the need for simpler report cards in junior high/middle school and high school. While Council appreciates that junior high/middle school report card changes may need to wait until curriculum is streamlined (happening with teachers now), changes should be made at the high school soon. Council members also discussed the frequency of report cards at all levels.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
<p>Problem: Report cards are time-consuming for teachers to complete and are confusing for parents and students.</p>		
<p>Provide Council with more information to support discussion and recommendations for change in junior high and high school report cards, including information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paperless report cards The purpose and value of comments Other ways to report student progress to parents and students <p>Council would like more information on the frequency of report cards for all grade levels.</p>	<p>This could relieve workload for teachers, while ensuring parents and students continue to get timely and useful information on progress.</p>	<p>EECD should provide this information to Council.</p>

Remaining 2017-18 Funding

Council has \$100,000 remaining in its 2017-18 budget. One area of pressure that Council has not yet addressed is teachers struggling to effectively support EAL students.

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Teachers need additional resources and supports to help them help EAL students.		
Direct EECD to work with school boards on allocating the \$100,000 to schools with the greatest number of EAL students. Funding should be used in a way that supports classroom teachers, again with the greatest number of EAL students. All school boards who have schools with EAL students should get a base allocation.	While this is a relatively small amount of funding, Council wanted to recognize that this is an area where teachers and students need additional support.	EECD should develop a long-term plan to help support EAL and refugee students transition into Nova Scotia schools. Council would also like more information from boards on what action they are already taking in this area.

Updates since January Meeting

Feedback on Inspiring Schools, 40 Additional Teachers Pilots: As requested at the January meeting, the department has been gathering feedback from schools and school boards on the Inspiring Schools grants and the 40 additional teachers supporting junior high math and literacy teachers. The department has received feedback from 13 Inspiring Schools, and three school boards. A summary report representing feedback from all school boards will be available for Council to review at the March meeting.

Attendance Support Workers: All attendance support workers are now hired. Along with their lead principals, they participated in a two-day professional development session on February 5 and 6. Along with review of their responsibilities and the attendance policy and operational guide, attendance support workers discussed culturally responsive approaches, relationship building, home visits, interagency practices, trauma-informed practices, privacy and confidentiality. They also worked through case studies and identified topics for further professional development.

Results of Substitute Teachers' Survey: At the January meeting, as part of the discussion about concerns regarding a lack of substitutes, board-level data collection and a survey of substitute teachers were referenced. The department was asked to report back on the data collection and survey results:

- The work was initiated after school boards identified difficulty in securing substitutes to fill vacant positions.
- In the spring of 2017, Boards compiled data on the number of FTEs, Substitute Teachers, Fill Rate, and unfilled absences. This data confirmed a problem with classroom vacancies. Data suggested there does not appear to be a sub-shortage, but rather an issue of existing substitutes not filling the opportunities: 53% of full-time subs worked less than 40 days in the 2016-2017 school year.
- A survey was conducted to explore this further, to try and identify the reasons that available substitutes are not working more. The survey was sent to approximately 2500 substitute teachers.

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- Of those who responded, 53.8% of respondents began substitute teaching prior to 2013; 42.6% of respondents identified themselves as regular, full-time subs; and 58.8% of subs stated they were available to work 5 days a week, however 45.1% stated they worked two or fewer days per week.

Boards and EECDC continue to look at data this year and see similar trends accompanied by a 9% decline in full-time substitute availability province-wide. The department would like to discuss next steps with Council at a future meeting.

Participation in Research Studies: At its January meeting, Council asked the department to report back on how the criteria for participation in research studies were used to guide this year's participation in the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Study. The department reported back that:

- criteria have been provided to school board superintendents, program directors, and the researchers
- researchers were instructed to communicate to schools, teachers and school boards that participation is optional
- researchers have been told to share results with teachers most closely related to the subject matter

The department also committed that once the national and provincial reports are available, the department will work with the researchers, in consultation with the Council and the Principals' Forum to ensure results are appropriately communicated.

Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for March 5, 6, and 7. Agenda items may include the public school program, report cards, assessment policy, and funding priorities for 2018-19.