Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Discussion Summary and Recommendations, June 5 & 6, 2017

Attendance (Recs. 16, 18)

Council spent most of their two days of meetings on the attendance policy.

Day one was spent revising the policy based on feedback from teachers, principals, parents, students and others. Changes include:

- streamlining the policy to make expectations for regular and punctual attendance clear
- streamlining meetings and workload for teachers in implementing the policy
- emphasizing the expectation that other government departments and community partners have a responsibility to address the non-educational reasons that students do not regularly attend school
- increasing accountability, particularly in high school; for example, all absences (unexcused and excused) should be counted when teachers are considering if students have attended enough classes to earn a high school credit; changing "special circumstances" to "rare circumstances"
- re-enforcing the professional judgment of teachers and principals by ensuring attendance decisions made at the school level are supported and not overturned

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Teachers and principals have waited a long time for an attendance policy.		
Request that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development finalize and release an attendance policy, reflecting the changes described above.	Students need to be in school to improve achievement.	Fall 2017

Council emphasized the need for a solid implementation plan to support the policy and spent day two on that discussion. Three principals were invited and had agreed to join the council for the discussion; one had an unexpected conflict and was unable to attend.

Groups focused on universal prevention strategies, increasing connections, early interventions, and targeted interventions. Within these discussions, participants identified the following elements for an implementation plan, including:

- a plan for clear communications and public awareness, beginning in grade primary and the start of the school year
- support for children and families who are experiencing habitual absences, while recognizing that a gap or gaps exist with regard to who and what partners can make these connections. This is particularly important for early and targeted interventions, as described in the attendance policy.
- school-wide incentive plans for schools that consider incentives to be effective (the council noted that school advisory councils or home and school associations should be involved and asked to assist)
- initiatives that create a safe and supportive school environment

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- school board-wide attendance monitoring and targeting of resources where needed, through the school board attendance committee
- increased connections between families (including students) and schools as absences grow. Teachers should not have to work in isolation, and should be able to reach out to others in the school or existing school teams (e.g., program planning or SchoolsPlus teams) as necessary.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Schools have been directed to implement past policies without the right supports and plan.		
Ask EECD, in consultation with a council working group, to develop and share an implementation plan with elements that include: - clear communications around the specific policy elements and a public awareness plan on the importance of attendance generally. A public awareness campaign for 2017–18 plan promoting the importance of attendance - a plan for using PowerSchool to support attendance tracking within schools and to engage families in monitoring student attendance - clarity for school boards on their responsibility for promoting attendance; monitoring board-wide, systemic attendance issues; and targeting resources to help - support for principals in their discussions with students and families - identification of who can bridge the gap between families and schools when early interventions are required (e.g., who should call home and when, recognizing the need to balance the value of teacher/student/home contact with teacher workload. Consider also how mentors can play a role) - identification of individuals and partners to provide targeted interventions when required	The communications and public awareness plan should be strategic, multi-faceted (school communications plan, newsletters and bulletins, social and news media, school-based, public awareness elements, etc.), and repeated at strategic times of the year. Examples of how to use PowerSchool include the attendance log to identify students who are frequently absent and alerts to parents when students are not in school. Supports for principals could include templates for attendance contracts for schools who want them. Attendance contracts can be used to increase communication, record interventions, and raise awareness of the need for responses and accountability. The need to identify others to help with targeted interventions recognizes	Council working group will meet in the summer so critical implementation supports will be in place for the fall.

- proposed partnerships and strengthened connections with mental health agencies or practitioners - increased supports for alternate education settings and programs within the school - an evaluation framework for the policy and its implementation, including feedback from teachers and principals, after Year One.	that teachers do not have time to take the lead on interventions—nor should teachers and schools bear the sole responsibility for attendance. Council considered ideas for pilots from school boards and models and best practices from elsewhere, e.g., student attendance counsellors and officers. The discussion on alternate education should include more active involvement of Justice partners in transition planning for students from within the justice system. Alternate education centers and programs are also likely to be considered by the Commission on Inclusive Education.	

School Grants—Update from Working Group (Rec. 21)

Council reviewed the proposals from 40 schools across the province. Council was impressed with the creativity and variety of the proposals and with how they were tied to the unique needs of their schools.

Ideas ranged from purchasing technology to hiring staff (classroom teachers, student support teachers, a culturally-responsive lead teacher, substitutes, resource and guidance); purchasing classroom resources and supplies; supporting attendance; enhancing library services; offering free tutoring, homework and nutrition programs and school clubs; and creating "Learning Zones" and "MakerSpaces."

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Junior high/middle school teachers need more support in math and literacy.		
Accept all 40 proposals, based on the priorities in their schools.	Accepting the proposals respects the professional judgment of the principals who worked with their teachers and board staff to identify initiatives that will make a difference.	Funding should be provided immediately.
Ask schools to share their results and experiences with other schools and the council.	This will enable best practices to be shared and inform the council's decisions if the grants should continue.	This will support evaluation.

Council Updates

Allocation of 40 Junior High Teachers (Rec. 20): All school boards have assigned their share of the 40 teachers to support math and literacy in junior high/middle school classrooms with a high number of students on IPPs and adaptations. In most cases, boards are hiring math and literacy support teachers, while one is hiring resource teachers. The teachers are being shared among schools.

Ask the User (Rec. 28): The Ask the User team has completed its individual interviews with more than 60 classroom teachers, resource teachers, specialist teachers, and administrators in schools across the province. The Ask the User team thanked everyone who participated, describing the interviews as being "insightful and emotional." Participants also appreciated the team coming into schools to hear their feedback. The following common themes were identified:
- technology issues and improvements
- non-technology issues, including: training, policy, and consistency in applying rules
- variations among school boards
- examples of good practices across the province that could be shared

Broader group workshops are being scheduled during the month of June. Information learned through the interviews and workshops will be used to develop an Insights Report, as well as initial recommendations. Throughout the summer, the Ask the User team will consult groups (including sub-groups of council) on both the Insights Report and initial recommendations. A final report will be submitted to government and the council in September.

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*Google Group Responses (Recs. 1, 3):*

A Google group has been created for Council to share information and seek feedback from people who work in school. Anyone who does not wish to be part of the Google group can opt out.

In its May meeting, council recommended:
- combining the Grade 3 Reading and Writing Assessment and Grade 4 Math Assessment into one assessment, and rescheduling the new combined assessment from early fall to spring and administer in grade 3.
- asking grades 3 and 4 language arts and math teachers and principals if they want to continue the assessments this fall, or suspend them and restart with the combined assessment in 2018–19.

Through the Google Group, council asked grade 3 and 4 math and language arts teachers and principals if they wanted to continue the existing grade 3 and 4 assessments in 2017–18 or suspend them until the new assessment is place for spring 2019.

In summary, 262 teachers and principals responded. Of those, 86.6 per cent are in favour of suspending the grade 3 and 4 assessment and restarting with new assessments in the spring of 2018–19.
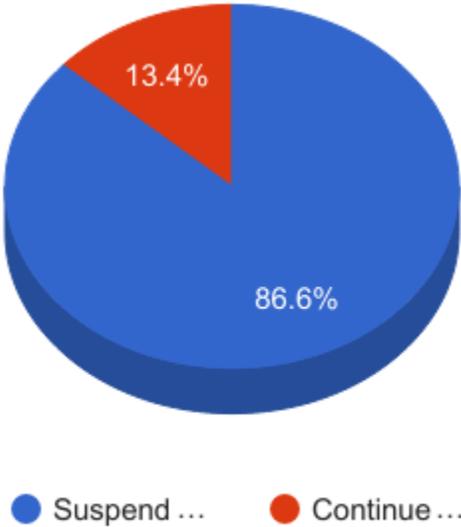
One council member reported that teachers appreciated being asked for their feedback on this recommendation. However, they would have liked more context to assist in answering the question. Future forms will link back to the council discussion summary to provide the background.

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Assessments in the fall are not the best time for students or teachers.		
Suspend the Grade 3 Reading and Writing Assessment and Grade 4 Math Assessment for 2017–18, and restart the combined assessment in spring 2019 for grade 3.	This allows teachers to skip these assessments this year, while item writing and field testing for the new assessment is taking place.	The recommendation is based on feedback from grades 3 and 4 language arts and math teachers and principals.

A second Google Form was also shared, asking Google Group members to submit their contact information and identify areas of interest from the list of 10 priority areas.
- 482 members responded as of June 1st
- Complex classrooms was the most frequently selected priority (66.5%), with student discipline policies coming second
- 55 respondents identified additional areas of interest separate from the 10 already identified

The Google Form is still open; Google Group members can continue to respond. Council will refer to this list of names when creating any future working groups.

Administrative Access to TIENET (Rec. 35): Council previously recommended:
> *"Give administrative assistants access to TIENET to facilitate uploading of documents and reduce administrative tasks of teachers in a shared, collaborative way at the school level."*

In accepting this recommendation, council emphasized that making this change is at the principal's discretion, in collaboration with school staff. Circumstances and workloads differ from school to school, and council wants principals to decide what works best.

Council reviewed materials that are now available to principals and schools who plan to give administrative assistants access. These materials include:
- a list of TIENET documents that can and cannot be accessed
- two user guides to support administrative assistants located on the iNSchool website (www.inschool.ednet.ns.ca), addressing how to log in to and navigate TIENET and how to attach documents in TIENET. The training will depend on the administrative assistant's level of knowledge and experience with technology and TIENET. Training can be arranged from within a school, supported by these guides. If additional training is required, the department will work with school boards on delivering training in the fall.

These materials will be shared with principals by June 9.

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Early Development Instrument (Rec. 9): The council has raised concerns that data collected through the Early Development Instrument (EDI) is not broadly shared with teachers and not regularly used to help students. The council made the following recommendation:

> *"Require EECD and school boards to share EDI data with all early elementary teachers, and provide supports for schools which have a high concentration of children with vulnerabilities."*

EECD reported to council that school boards do distribute EDI results, but they do so in different ways.

The next administration of the EDI is scheduled for February 2018. Council has asked EECD to look at how other jurisdictions share results and come back in the fall with a plan for how the results could be shared more effectively with schools and other community partners, such as the Provincial Early Years Partnership (PEYP). The PEYP includes government and community partners across the continuum of early years' services and programs, as well as school board representation.

Report Cards (Rec. 15)

Teachers have been dealing with repeated changes in report cards in recent years—in 2001, 2006, 2010–12, 2013–14, and 2015. While changes were based on extensive consultation, teachers are still frustrated, particularly with the frequency of change, lack of clarity and poor communications around the changes, comment expectations, and the move away from percentages to a 1 to 4 scale. Teachers are also frustrated by having to assign multiple grades to different strands within some subject areas. These factors also make the grades harder for parents and students to understand.

Council concluded that past consultation processes have not worked. Report cards create a lot of work for teachers, and at least some parents find the information confusing or unclear.

Council does not want to rush another set of changes without consulting teachers and others in a meaningful way. However, the differences between the P–3 report card and that for grades 4– 6 have been particularly frustrating for some. Specifically, the P–3 report card is integrated and streamlined, with a focus on math, language arts, and the learner profile. Council believes teachers may be able to advise on this quickly. It should also be noted that some parents expressed concern with the move to an integrated P–3 report card, as they wanted to see their child's progress in other subject areas.

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Report cards are time-consuming for teachers to complete and are confusing for parents and students.		
Ask grade 4–6 teachers if they want to move immediately to an integrated report card like that used in P–3 (focused on math, language arts and the learner profile) or wait for broader feedback, including from parents.	Teachers would like to see simpler report cards, but also want to ensure the changes improve understanding for parents.	Use a Google form and survey, so if teachers want changes now, they can be implemented for September.
Align any changes to junior high/middle school report cards with curriculum renewal.	Making changes now before the curriculum is renewed could lead to yet more report card changes in the following year.	Curriculum renewal is planned for 2017–18.
Identify additional, practical report card changes and streamlining at all grades, including learner profiles, as required.	Engage teachers, administrators, parents, and students in meaningful ways.	2017–18 school year

Next Steps

This is the last formal meeting of the Council for the 2016–17 school year. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will issue a status report on the May and June recommendations before the end of June.

Council members may participate in meetings over the summer, as they choose. For example, council sub-groups will meet with the Ask the User team on TIENET and PowerSchool and on attendance implementation so changes can occur in the fall.

Council co-chairs must set meetings for the 2017–18 school year prior to August 15.