

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Meeting Discussion Summary and Recommendations November 6 – 8, 2017, Nova Scotia Teachers Union

Updates since October Meeting

Report Cards: The department distributed a survey on the Grades 4 – 6 curriculum and report cards in late October, through school boards and on the Grades 4 – 6 Moodle. Responses were requested by Nov. 10. However, Council members reported that many teachers had not seen the survey. The department resent the survey to principals, and extended the response deadline to Friday, Nov. 17.

School Board Assessments: School boards had originally expected to come back to Council at the November meeting with recommendations on their assessments. However, school boards want more time to talk to teachers about assessments and would like to return to Council in the new year. School board assessments remain suspended until after school boards present again, and Council makes recommendations on this topic.

Class Caps: Reaction to class caps remains mixed. In schools that had very large classes, the caps have been well received. Some other schools feel the caps:

- have led to more split classes or have prevented students from taking certain classes once the classes reach cap.
- contributed to the challenge of finding substitute teachers (with 139 hired this year alone through Council funding). The Deputy Minister said the department is working with school boards and universities on how to address the sub shortage over the short and long term.
- do not address class composition. The Commission on Inclusive Education is addressing this issue, with consultations occurring this fall and recommendations required in March 2018.

Council has also asked the department to discuss with school boards how caps are implemented or, more specifically, how planning class configurations occurs in spring, and again in fall. This can create a lot of duplicate effort for teachers and disruption in classes. Council recognizes that changes in enrolment can occur over the month of September, but asked if the department could review this issue with school boards and the Principals' Forum to support more efficient planning and implementation of class caps.

Attendance Policy: Council says that teachers are already seeing a difference in their classrooms. However, Council wants to monitor the impact of the policy on teachers' and administrators' workload. Council asked the department to accelerate work to have PowerSchool generate letters/emails to send home, and generate reports to help teachers and principals monitor attendance. The department is also reviewing the policy, to identify areas where work assigned to the principal can be delegated. Finally, when attendance support workers are hired, they should also reduce teacher workload.

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Early Development Instrument (EDI): In the spring, Council recommended that EECD and school boards do a better job “sharing EDI data with all elementary teachers, and providing supports for schools which have a high concentration of children with vulnerabilities.”

Work is now underway for administering the EDI in the new year. Training sessions will be held with Primary teachers in January, and Primary teachers will complete the EDI questionnaires in February or March. Primary teachers will be given release time/substitute coverage for this work.

The department and school boards will receive reports on the results by August/September 2018. In keeping with Council’s recommendations, prior to receiving these reports, strategies will be developed for consistent communications, community engagement and information sharing including resources and presentations for professional development opportunities to engage principals, early elementary teachers and early childhood educators (pre-Primary program).

Correspondence Request: Council members review and respond to correspondence they receive individually on an ongoing basis. Correspondence sent to ClassroomCouncil@novascotia.ca is reviewed at each monthly meeting. The most common correspondence topic over the past month was from guidance counsellors, in particular, related to workload. Council has shared this information with the Commission on Inclusive Education.

Engagement

Principals’ Forum: The Principals’ Forum had its first meeting on October 26. The Deputy Minister shared the 12 priorities that the Forum has identified:

- complex classrooms and the expectation that other departments and agencies step up with staff and resources to meet students’ complex needs
- class caps and their impacts on class composition and combined grades
- more authority to make decisions at the school level
- the new attendance policy
- leadership role of principals
- scope of principals’ responsibilities and general workload
- extracurricular activities, requiring more and more resources and coordination
- development of an “innovation agenda” by reviewing successful education models in other provinces and countries
- greater transparency in school board and school-level budget processes
- better coordination of professional development between EECD, school boards, and individual or team-level development opportunities (including through Professional Learning Communities)
- a strategy to address the unique challenges faced by rural schools in the areas of teaching loads, course offerings, and access to health and social services
- shortage/lack of availability of substitute teachers and other educational support staff (e.g., Teacher Assistants).

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Council noted that they share concern and interest in many of the issues identified by principals. Council looks forward to working more closely with principals through the Forum, and at principals' meetings with their boards. Council asked the department to look into arranging time with a principal or principals from the Forum for the December Council meeting.

Teacher Communications: Council members are concerned that all teachers are not receiving information about Council work in a timely manner. For example, teachers were telling their Council members that they had not yet seen the Grade 4 – 6 survey on Tuesday, when the deadline was Friday. In raising these questions, they discovered that some teacher Council members can email their colleague teachers directly within their board, while others cannot.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Some Council members can share information and gather feedback from teachers within their board while others cannot.		
Enable all teacher Council members to reach teachers within their board directly by having access to a board-wide email list.	All teachers will receive information and have opportunity to provide feedback on Council issues at about the same time.	School boards are asked to provide their teacher representatives with an email list as soon as possible.

Ask the User: TIENET Changes

The Ask the User team presented more than 30 opportunities for change to TIENET in 11 areas:

1. Streamline the process for finalizing adaptations, IPPs, case notes and any other documents requiring finalization – e.g., reduce the number of steps and clicks, try to automate at least some of the finalizations.
2. Streamline, simplify and integrate, wherever possible, IPP and adaptation documentation.
3. Simplify managing outcomes in IPPs to reduce the amount of effort, e.g., provide examples of Challenges, Strategies, Outcomes, etc. in TIENET (“bank” of examples), and remove the Developmental Scale in the IPP used to track progress/for AIO assessment.
4. Improve layout and navigation of adaptations and IPPs, e.g., remove the IPP Criteria page when creating the document, and simplify the IPP report for parents and students.
5. Streamline consent and referral process, e.g., remove the need to “finalize” referrals and consents, develop an electronic consent form, and automate notifications to specialists when referrals are completed.
6. Reduce the amount of effort required to manage documents that are scanned and attached in TIENET by streamlining workflow.

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

7. Simplify meeting management and minutes, e.g., provide an “Address Book” view of team vs. individually looking up and adding participants, and provide samples of how to write shorter, simpler meeting minutes.
8. Allow co-editing of documents. The presenter noted that this feature is familiar to educators because it is possible through Google docs; however, it may be challenging as it is not possible in most platforms.
9. Navigation, general usability and layout improvements, e.g., improve page layout (page width, colors used, positioning of elements), page copy (font size and copy layout for easier readability and scanning), and web forms (replace dropdown menu, update buttons).
10. French-language translation, specifically related to the browser compatibility.
11. Access to modern technology devices.

These opportunities came from the research with teachers across the province in the spring, then were shaped and refined in workshops in late summer and fall with teachers, administrators, and other school staff, board staff and government staff.

Based on feedback from Council, the Ask the User team will now finalize its report and submit it to the department. The department will then work with Internal Services and school boards to identify:

- what TIENET changes can be made now by the department and school boards
- what changes need to be discussed with the TIENET vendor
- what changes related to policy must be referred to the Commission on Inclusive Education
- what changes need to be discussed with other professionals or agencies (e.g., the consent and referral process)
- what changes need to be considered as part of the budgeting process (e.g., need for modern technology)
- what changes may not be possible, at least in the short term.

Once this work is complete, the report will be released and shared with teachers and all school and school board staff. Council emphasized the need to move forward with whatever changes are possible, as soon as possible.

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Student Assessment Policy

As work gets under way on a new assessment policy, the department presented an overview of what a new policy could address:

- guiding principles
- definitions including formative and summative assessments
- guidance on key issues, such as deadlines and missing assignments, grades (including use of zeroes), social promotion and retention, exam exemptions, and inconsistencies in practices within schools and school boards
- supports for vulnerable students

Council members emphasized the workload it creates for teachers when they are expected to mark all missing assignments at the end of a term or school year. Having to complete multiple assignments at year-end is also stressful for students and does not give them opportunity to present their best work. They also are concerned about how the absence of deadlines prepares students for post-secondary and their sense of responsibility when they begin working.

Teachers are also concerned with the practice in some boards of not being allowed to assign a mark below 40 per cent, even if the work isn't completed or submitted. They feel this is extremely confusing for students and families and is dishonest.

Council acknowledged that these issues are very complex. On the one hand, students may feel stigmatized by failing a grade. However, students who are passed along, grade to grade, without truly learning what they need to succeed, can also feel like a failure and struggle more and more each year.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: The education system has lowered its expectations for students, limiting teachers' ability to prepare them for post-secondary and the workplace, as well as increasing teacher workload.		
Develop a research base, including data and professional advice, to guide policy development.	Council wants their decisions to be guided by research and the experience and advice of teachers, specialists and other professionals.	EECD will conduct a research review, collect existing board policies, and identify professionals, such as behavioral psychologists, to present to Council.
Develop a consultation plan, including focus groups of teachers, school advisory councils, parents, students and employers. Also present the anticipated policy structure and outline.	Everyone affected by the policy should have a voice in developing it.	EECD will develop these to share with Council in December. The consultation plan should consider how to work with the Principals'

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

		Forum and the Business Education Council on this issue.
Ensure the policy is supported by an operational guide, that includes supports for vulnerable students.	An operational guide supports effective implementation.	EECD is responsible for developing the operational guide.
Dedicate Council meeting time every month to the assessment policy to monitor the work.	Council wants to ensure the work continues to move forward.	The co-chairs will dedicate time on each agenda.

Commission on Inclusive Education

Commissioner Monica Williams updated Council on the Commission’s work, with particular focus on the fall consultations.

Along with meetings with targeted stakeholders, the Commission asked Council to encourage teacher participation in the consultation, as they are a very important voice. Opportunities to participate include:

- completing an online survey, which will be launched in early November and be open through mid-December.
- attending a public workshop (For more information, and to register go to www.inclusiveedns.ca.)
 - Yarmouth, Nov. 21
 - Stellarton, Nov. 22
 - Sydney, Nov. 23
 - Halifax, Nov. 27
- sharing your story by preparing a short video (2-3 minutes) or telling the Commission your vision of a new model – to help them understand what’s working, and what’s not, with the inclusive education system in Nova Scotia.

The Commission also shared their research questions:

- What are the best practices for the early identification and intervention for young children at risk of school failure?
- What is the evidence regarding the relationship between teacher knowledge, skills, and attitudes in inclusive education and student outcomes?
- What are the barriers to inclusive education in Canada and around the world?
- How is inclusive education funded in each province and territory?
- Where and how is inclusive education being successfully implemented?

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

The department also presented information on the Provincial Code of Conduct, as discipline is one of Council's 10 legislated priorities and it is also an area of focus for the Commission. Commissioner Williams also discussed the role of TAs, their workload and scope of work.

Council said they are concerned with the number of violent incidents reported. Council emphasized that while consequences always need to be age- and developmentally-appropriate, the safety of students, including the student involved, as well as the safety of teachers and everyone in the school must be the priority. The option of expulsion, education in an alternative setting, or referral for assessment should be part of the discussion.

The student's intent should be considered, as well as the impact of the consequence. Will the consequence help the student learn from the experience? Involving the program planning team is also often appropriate.

Having the school psychologist conduct a functional behavioral assessment can also help identify the function or reason for the behavior, and assist in developing an effective response. This could include time out of the regular classroom, with a transition plan to return to the classroom.

Council emphasized the need to consider and respect cultural differences, and differences in expected behavior between the home and the school. For example, some youth are brought up to try and resolve their own issues. These students need support in learning the culture in the school, where you are expected to involve adults to resolve differences with other students.

Council said guidance should be provided around cell phone use. While they can have value for educational purposes, they can also contribute to cyberbullying and can be a distraction in class. Teachers and principals should again be able to use their professional judgment.

While Council recognized that data to guide future decisions is important, the department should look at ways to streamline the reporting so the documentation requirement does not discourage full reporting. The Council said the current code has a lot of information on acceptable and unacceptable behaviors but very little on interventions to support students, teachers and schools.

Council also emphasized the need for more specialists to support teachers in this area, such as guidance counsellors. They feel students can also be taught skills such as self-regulation, coping, and appropriate play as part of the social studies and health curriculum in early elementary. The new Citizenship course is another opportunity.

Council was also asked to provide information to the Commission on these questions: *How do you successfully deal with a complex classroom? What does it look like? How do we bring in other agencies?*

Council emphasized that the current ratios for specialists, such as guidance counsellors, school psychologists, resource teachers and learning centre or special education teachers are not adequate to

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

support complex classrooms. They said teachers struggle with the balancing act of teaching students with diverse needs while attending to the needs of others, particularly with limited access of teachers to specialized services. Their growing workload and paperwork adds to the time pressures.

They also talked about a vision of having schools as a hub, where other agencies (Justice, Community Services, Health) could co-locate, giving students and teachers better access to specialized services. Having centres within schools, or families of schools, or feeder systems, that could provide respite, academic support, socialization, art and other therapy, and life and work skills development was also discussed.

Council provided all ideas generated as part of a brainstorming session directly to the independent Commission for its consideration.

Student Attendance & Engagement Policy – Proposed Pilots

In response to Council’s October recommendation, the department and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union brought forward a job description for an attendance support worker to (a) work with students, families and schools to identify the reasons a student is missing a lot of time, and (b) connect the student and families with the right service or support – from inside or outside of the school – to help improve student attendance.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Teachers need help in responding to attendance problems, especially when the reason for the absence is unrelated to school.		
Invest \$1.9 million over the next two years (beginning as soon as staff are hired and running to June 2019) to implement 14 pilot projects across the province aimed at improving student attendance.	This will help share the workload so it is not left on the shoulders of teachers alone.	Use funding to hire 14 attendance support workers assigned to families of schools, feeder schools, or individual schools, and support each pilot with funds for attendance programming and supports.
Require that the attendance support worker be a teacher or a professional eligible to be certified as a teacher, such as a social worker or school psychologist.	Having knowledge of the education system is considered an asset for the position	EECD will expedite request from any professional eligible for teacher certification.
Ask school boards to nominate pilot schools for review by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Nova Scotia Teachers Union.	School boards are in the best position to identify where support is needed most.	In nominating schools, boards are asked to consider attendance data, and identify a variety of schools, in

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

		terms of grade levels, cultural diversity, geography and school size.
Conduct an independent evaluation of the pilots.	This will inform next steps on expanding the pilots to more school sites.	EECD should begin this work immediately.

Student Attendance: Public Awareness Campaign

Education and Early Childhood Development has hired Stir Creative, a company with experience in marketing related to projects with a social benefit, to develop promotional materials to support student attendance.

They presented Council with two wordmarks and approaches:

- Every Day Counts – based on the idea that you learn something new every day. It’s not okay to miss class.
- School Needs You – intended as a positive, inclusive statement – we need you here, we need parents, attendance is a shared responsibility.

Council has asked Stir to advance work based on the Every Day Counts theme. Stir will come back to Council with further development of the concept, as well as a tool kit with ideas and products schools can adapt for their use in promoting the value of attendance. They also asked for costing information and options.

Education Administration and Governance Review

Dr. Avis Glaze met for the second time with Council to gain their views on the administration and governance review of elected school boards, school board administration, and administration of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The discussion focused on the same three questions that were posted for public consultation:

- What administrative changes would you propose should be made to the education system to ensure the focus is on the needs of students?
- What changes would you propose should be made to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development?
- What changes would you propose should be made to the administration of school boards?

Council also reviewed organizational charts for the department and school boards and a timeline on how the number and roles of school boards have changed over the past 20 years.

Department staff, including the Deputy Minister, left the Council meeting for these discussions, respecting the independence of the review. Council provided its notes on these discussions directly to Dr. Glaze.

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Mental Health Resources

The McConnell Foundation has created a new granting opportunity -- “Student Wellbeing for Systems Change Fund” -- to support projects that combine (a) activities to support student social and emotional wellbeing and (b) efforts to integrate wellbeing into the K-12 education system. (See www.wellahead.ca for more information.)

Dr. Stan Kutcher, Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health is working with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and school boards on a grant proposal to support use of the mental health literacy resource as part of the junior high health curriculum. The proposal also includes a funding request for teacher professional development.

Dr. Kutcher will meet with the teacher team working with the department on the curriculum. While Council is interested in learning more about the proposal, they said they generally support resources that can help students in mental health, as well as assist teachers in delivering the mental health curriculum.

Next Meeting

The next meetings are December 4, 5 and 6.