

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Record of Initial Recommendations, Summary of Discussions

March 21 10 AM – 6 PM

Expectations

Council members began meeting by noting the great diversity of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences at the table. Members shared individual expectations, as well as expectations expressed to by other teachers, parents and students. Those expectations include that:

- All voices will be heard and valued
- Voices will be heard beyond those at the table (Council members will reach out to others in their schools and communities)
- Teachers' autonomy in exercising professional judgment must be respected
Changes will enable teachers to spend more time teaching – not wasted on tasks that don't support students or go beyond their scope of practice (e.g., other professionals in Community Services, Health and Justice must do their part to support students)
- Changes must be tangible and practical -- seen and felt in the classroom by students and teachers
- Changes will be implemented equitably, serving all learners
- Change must be sustainable, and not all change costs money; creativity and shifts in attitudes and approaches can be just as important

Council members recognize the need to begin discussions on the five priorities already identified by teachers. Those priorities are:

- PowerSchool, TIENET and other technology work-related processes
- Student attendance
- Data collection and reporting
- Pupil evaluation, classification and administrative days
- Assessment and evaluation

Some changes should happen right away; others will take more time, research, evidence and listening. Council confirmed they will have initial recommendations on all five priorities in its report before the end of April.

Council wants its discussions and recommendations to be open and transparent.

Recommendation: Prepare and share a summary of discussions and record of actions following each monthly meeting.

PowerSchool, TIENET and Other Technology Work-Related Processes

Council members started with a roundtable discussion, leading to general observations:

- PowerSchool and TIENET have some benefits, and the systems work better for some teachers than others.
- The challenges are rooted in multiple causes, ranging from policy and procedural issues, to increasing expectations, to lack of training and support, to system issues.
- A lot of inconsistencies exist in practices, expectations, implementation and support among school boards, creating bigger challenges in some schools or regions than others.
- Some irritants have been talked about a lot, and should be acted upon immediately. Others need more information from teachers and other system users to lead to the right and most cost-effective response.

Council wants government and school boards to act upon the most common irritants immediately to:

- give teachers more flexibility and begin reducing data entry for teachers (by stopping the instant publishing of the overall term mark and ending the requirement in some school boards to record a mark for every strand or outcome)
- begin minimizing classroom disruptions (by setting realistic expectations around teacher response times to emails and giving teachers more flexibility about when they record attendance)

Stop instant publishing the overall term marks: Since PowerSchool was implemented at the junior high and high school level, teachers have been able to immediately post a student's marks. While the intent was to provide more timely information to parents and students, the system doesn't support a solid understanding of what the mark means, creating confusion and anxiety. (For example, different assignments and tests are weighted differently. As well, some boards require boards to show marks on individual outcomes, which is less clear and much more time-consuming than entering a global mark.)

Recommendation: Issue a provincial directive permitting teachers to publish marks less frequently on PowerSchool, at one set time within each month. This timeline should be established within each school for consistency. Teachers will continue to provide parents with information on student progress in between report cards, will save teachers time in data entry, and ease anxiety and questions from parents and students on an individual mark, versus a more meaningful, comprehensive mark based on a month of evaluation. Teachers will continue to mark, and provide feedback to students on tests and assignments, on a regular basis. Teachers also continue to have the detailed information available to support communications with parents and inform their own instruction.

End the requirement to record a mark for every outcome: Some boards require teachers to assign marks for every outcome. This can cause confusion for parents, as the mark on an individual outcome is not always reflective of a global or final mark. It is also extremely time-consuming for teachers, some who report it requires them to enter as many as 500 marks.

Recommendation: Issue a provincial directive to end any practice that requires teachers at any grade to assign a mark to every individual outcome in PowerSchool. Teachers continue to have the detailed information available to support communications with parents and inform their own instruction.

Set realistic expectations around teacher response time to emails: Technology enables parents to communicate with teachers at any time of day. As well, information available "live" through PowerSchool throughout the school day (e.g., attendance, marks) prompts more questions at times when teachers want to be focused on their students.

Recommendation: Explore ways that will enable teachers to post automated email responses, giving them up to two business days to respond. Report by the next Council meeting. The automated response will provide a contact number for referral if the issue is safety-related. This expectation should be communicated through many channels, including the school communications plan and on PowerSchool, as well as the reason for it – to minimize disruptions during teaching time.

Give teachers more flexibility about when they record attendance: Teachers waste a lot of time, opening and closing PowerSchool disrupting teaching and learning, when they are expected to record late arrivals as students come into class. As well, when attendance is posted live, it can again prompt emails and questions from parents directly into the classroom, disrupting teaching and learning.

Recommendation: Issue a provincial directive that high school teachers do not have to enter attendance into PowerSchool until the end of day.

Council needs additional information and costing to enable the Council to recommend ways to:

- increase release time for teachers to complete Individual Program Plans
- reduce time classroom and resource teachers spend uploading documents

Increase release time for teachers to complete Individual Program Plans (IPPs): Teachers have no control over the number of students with IPPs in their class. They need release time to prepare appropriate plans for these students, so the plans are not rushed and other teachers are teaching their class while the planning occurs.

Recommendation: Require EECD to report on the number of students on IPPs, the average time needed for a teacher to adequately prepare an IPP, the amount of release time provided now versus what is needed, and costing for release time options. Information must be provided before the next Council meeting.

Reduce the time classroom and resource teachers spend uploading documents: Resource teachers are spending an increasing amount of time entering adaptations, as well as scanning and uploading all medical and professional reports, consent forms, etc. – time they want to spend meeting the needs of the students this paperwork is all about.

Recommendation: Require EECD to present alternatives to entering adaptations into TIENET, or to present other streamlining options for Council's consideration, before the next Council meeting.

Recommendation. As an immediate, short-term measure, direct EECD to assess the legal implications of allowing more school administrative assistants to have secure access to TIENET files. If permitted, this would more broadly share the workload associated with uploading, freeing up more time for classroom and resource teachers, and others working directly with students. Council acknowledges that all who work in the school are busy, and the better solution is to streamline the paperwork and simplify the process for users. However, this immediate measure will give principals and vice-principals more flexibility in how to share the workload until more efficient, sustainable actions are identified.

Teachers have expressed frustration over many TIENET and PowerSchool issues. However, the reasons for the frustration and their solutions are less clear and less widely held. In general, the systems were developed and imposed, expecting teachers to meet the systems' needs, instead of asking teachers about their needs and needs of their students and designing systems to respond.

Council considered a proposal on ways to make substantive policy, process, implementation, and system changes to TIENET and PowerSchool based on the advice and observations of teachers and other system users.

Recommendation: Immediately engage Service Nova Scotia to work directly with teachers and other PowerSchool/TIENET users in to understand the roots of the challenges, benefit from evidence and experience, and, based on that research, recommend changes to the Council to streamline the system and improve efficiency. System users will be invited through an Expression of Interest to participate in the research. The research engagement and the cost of substitutes to allow teachers to participate will be paid for by EECD. Research and recommendations will begin this spring, and cover all aspects of the systems, beginning with TIENET, including policies and process, roles and responsibilities for related tasks, training, communication, implementation supports, and system changes. Some recommendations will emerge quickly and result in changes before the next school year. More significant system changes would need to be tested with teachers in the fall.

March 22 8:30 am – 8:15 pm

Council dealt in-depth with student attendance, and began discussions on data collection and reporting, as well as pupil evaluation, classification and administrative days. Council also identified almost 30 systemic issues identified by other teachers, parents and students to be dealt with over the Council's mandate.

Student Attendance

Council wanted to understand the foundation for the attendance policy, and spent time learning about data; previous consultations on attendance, engagement and classroom climate; an attendance pilot project; and the attendance discussion paper released last year. They also shared their individual frustrations and priorities around attendance, as well as those of their colleagues.

The attendance pilot project generated a lot of discussion, with two Council members who had experience with the pilot. In brief, the pilot was tested in high schools, and had staged interventions that increased communications and consequences as the number of absences increased. Ultimately, if a student missed more than 20 per cent of classes, the credit would be lost.

The increased communications among the school, student and family had a positive effect on attendance. The teachers who had experience with the pilot said the potential to lose a credit also initially motivated better attendance. However, once some school-based decisions around credit loss were overturned by the board, students and families did not take the possibility of a credit loss seriously, so the motivation for behavior change declined.

Last May, more than 3,500 Nova Scotians responded to a student attendance discussion paper. Of that total, about 85 per cent say absenteeism is a problem. About 87 per cent were concerned that being late – even by 10 minutes – disrupts learning of classmates.

Based on this consultation, EECD developed a draft attendance policy. Council reviewed the draft, and was not satisfied that the draft addresses the complexity, or the most important, issues.

Recommendation: Revise the draft attendance policy to ensure the following priorities are clear:

- *respect the professional judgment of teachers*
- *ensure school-based decisions are respected and not overturned by school boards and staff*
- *set a clear expectation that students need to be in school, and ensure supports (including behavioral supports) within and beyond the school are in place to help students and families meet those expectations*
- *hold parents accountable and introduce age-appropriate consequences for students for unexcused absences*
- *reduce the workload of teachers in terms of makeup packages and tests for students*

The revised draft must be returned to the Council for the April meeting. The Council can then release it for a focused consultation so the policy is in place for September.

Data Collection and Reporting

Council had preliminary discussions on school board and government data collection and reporting requirements. These requirements are taking more and more time away from teaching, and the purpose is not always clear.

The preliminary discussion identified inconsistencies in what individual boards request. Council wants a clear picture of the requests and purposes for them at their next meeting, to guide their initial recommendations to streamline data collection and reporting requirements.

Recommendation: Direct EECD and school boards to prepare a summary of all data collection and reporting requirements of teachers before the next council meeting, to inform recommendations on streamlining to free up more time for teaching. The summary should include an explanation of how the data is being used, and recommendations can be made to reschedule necessary data collection and reporting at less busy times of the year.

Pupil Evaluation, Classification and Administrative Days

Council had preliminary discussions on pupil evaluation, classification and administrative days. Some teachers have said they would like these days scheduled just before report card days. This is the practice in some, but not all, boards.

Recommendation: Ask school boards to provide information on current scheduling of pupil evaluation, classification, and administrative days. Request the rationale for current scheduling and identify any issues that could be created by a change.

Other systemic classroom issues

Council identified almost 30 systemic issues identified by other teachers, parents and students to be dealt with by the Council.

March 23, 8:30 am – 1 pm

Assessment

Teachers' time is best spent on teaching, and every effort must be made to limit their administrative burden. Assessment for learning is an integral part of instruction, and monitoring student progress and reporting results must continue. However, this must be done in a way that benefits from the professional judgment of teachers, and supports student achievement and accountability.

On November, 2016, government and school boards suspended all provincial and school board assessments until further notice. EECD and school boards prepared a summary of these assessments and related reporting (as well as some planned for introduction), including timelines.

Council started discussions with the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a measure of children's developmental health on entering Primary. The EDI provides valuable data, however, some Council members are not aware of the data. As well, Council wants more information on how the data is used to help students. For example, what help or early intervention is provided when children are identified with the vulnerabilities?

Recommendation: Require EECD and school boards to share EDI data with all early elementary teachers, and create plans to support schools which have a high concentration of children with vulnerabilities.

Council also wants to limit provincial assessments.

Recommendation: End 3 provincially-mandated assessments and exams:

- the Grade 1 Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (elements of it may still be used by Reading Recovery, Early Literacy and Resource teachers)
- the Grade 2 common math assessment (with questions available to teachers who want them for their own assessment)
- the Math at Work 10 provincial exam

Recommendation: Continue the suspension of the Grade 8 Reading, Writing and Mathematics assessment for this year.

Recommendation: Continue the suspension of Grade 10 exams for this year, but make them available at teachers' request.

Regarding school board assessments, Council reviewed preliminary recommendations on assessments they want to continue, review, eliminate or streamline. However, Council feels the recommendations are incomplete and needs additional information before making recommendations.

Recommendation: Institute a five-year moratorium on any new board- or EECD-initiated assessments, unless proposals are submitted and approved by the Council.

Recommendation: Direct boards to present their rationale to eliminate or streamline as many assessments and related reporting as possible, and bring recommendations back to Council. Present rationale for any assessments they wish to continue to Council so Council can make recommendations, before any assessments are re-initiated next year.

Council welcomed interest from the boards to end some assessments, limit some from board assessments to once versus twice a year, and eliminate central reporting requirements for some assessments.

Council also emphasized the need to discuss at upcoming meetings other evaluation issues, such as policies and procedures around deadlines for assignments, "zeros", and "no fail".

Next meetings

Council has scheduled four days of meetings in April (18 – 20, 27) to prepare its initial report by the end of April.

If you have questions or comments about this report, email classroomcouncil@novascotia.ca.