

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Discussion Summary and Recommendations, September 11 – 13, 2017

Updates since June Meeting

Council Membership

Over the summer, two Council members – Rachel Ross Mantley, Halifax Regional School Board, and Liz Brideau-Clark, South Shore Regional School Board – accepted new positions with their respective school boards. As their new responsibilities are no longer primarily in the classroom, Council co-chairs accepted their resignations, with appreciation for their contributions to the Council during the last school year.

The co-chairs contacted school board superintendents, requesting their appointments of new members. The first member, Cheyanne Tolliver, Grade 5/6 teacher, Fairview Heights, Halifax Regional School Board, was welcomed to her first Council meeting. South Shore Regional School Board will have an appointment soon.

Education Governance Review

In its April report (www.ednet.ns.ca/classroomcouncil), Council identified a list of priorities beyond what were legislated to improve classroom conditions. Due to the inconsistencies in practice and policy board-to-board, Council identified school board governance as one of those priorities. An independent consultant will be hired to conduct a comprehensive review of how public schools are governed, including school boards and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD).

The review will inform recommendations to government with respect to governance of the education system and administrative procedures. Recommendations are expected by the end of December so changes can be made in time for the next school year.

Class Size Caps

Most Council members have heard positive feedback on the class size caps. However, Council members noted that some classes remain above the cap. The Deputy Minister clarified that school boards have until September 30 to implement the class caps, to account for course changes, changes in student registration, etc. The principal can discuss with affected teachers a rationale for exceeding the cap in exceptional circumstances. If teachers do not agree, the principal will discuss with his or her immediate supervisor ways to bring classes in line with the cap.

Principals' Forum

A Principals' Forum is being created to give principals a voice in priority educational issues. In meetings last year, principals identified priorities a Forum could work on. An expression of interest will be issued this month seeking interested principals. Principals and teachers have a common interest in the educational issues both the Council and Forum are considering, requiring ongoing communication and collaboration between the two groups.

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Math Homework Hub

Council received information on the Math Homework Hub introduced last year for Grade 10 students. The Homework Hub provides free one-on-one online tutoring sessions and mathematics resources (tutorials, practice questions, unit reviews, exam practices and more). The hub should be up and running for Grades 10 and 11 students by the end of October and available to Grade 9 students by the end of November.

Student Success Planning

At its meetings during the last school year, Council identified significant concerns about the amount of paperwork, data collection and processes involved with Student Success Planning. As well, the purpose of much of the work is unclear.

As a result, department staff with school board Student Success Planning coordinators, met with principals across the province and identified improvements. Council received a presentation on the improvements, which have led to significant streamlining:

- “Smart” goals with specific percentages are no longer needed. Goals should be broader, e.g. “improvement in reading, or reading comprehension”.
- Fewer measures to monitor achievement are required. Use what you have, select one or two measures of evidence.
- Common goal areas and templates are available to build consistency across the province. A brief document, available in Word, can be used for both the plan and the annual report – replacing binders for Student Success Planning that have existed in some schools.
- Plan setting and reporting should take much less time, with no need to spend a year developing a plan. And teacher voice must inform the plan and reporting.
- Boards will now pull information from Finance instead of schools having to report on their spending.
- Peer review teams are no longer in place.
- The accreditation decision at the end of the cycle is no longer in place.
- Rigid time frames associated with the process have been replaced with a flexible time frame.

This information has been shared with school board Student Success Planning coordinators, who are in turn sharing it with principals and schools. Council welcomes these changes, and wants to be certain that the information is effectively communicated.

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
<p>Problem: Student Success Planning was taking too much time, adding significantly to teachers' workload without clear benefits to students.</p>		
<p>Broadly and effectively communicate these Student Success Planning changes to principals and teachers immediately, so time is not wasted again this year.</p>	<p>Recommendations on significantly streamlining the focus have been accepted, but are not yet known and understood by principals and teachers.</p>	<p>EECD and school boards should make this a priority in meetings and communications with principals. This will be reinforced at the new Principals' Forum. Teachers should also talk to their principals and Council members if the changes have not yet been communicated and adopted at their school.</p>

Attendance

In June, Council finalized a new attendance policy to be in place this year. The policy is intended to help improve student attendance through a balance of supports, incentives and consequences, without adding to the workload of teachers.

The Council co-chairs agreed that the policy would be better understood and supported with an implementation plan, which has never been developed before with new provincial policies.

Over the summer, a Council working group developed an operational guide to support effective implementation. The operational guide contains information on:

- Monitoring and recording attendance
- Providing materials for absent students
- Responding to absences and chronic lateness (early and targeted interventions, incentives, and accountability, including loss of credit)
- Defining roles and responsibilities
- Communicating policy changes and promoting the value of attendance

In terms of monitoring and recording attendance, Council wants this to be as straight-forward for teachers as possible – is the student present or absent? While students are considered present for school activities, those activities should occur outside of class time as much as possible.

In the conversation around providing materials for absent students, council members wanted to be clear on the need for students and families to take on more responsibility in catching up on missed work.

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Teachers are not required to prepare additional materials or release tests prior to their release to class. As well, teachers are not required to provide students with materials distributed in class during the student's absence, unless asked by the principal.

Further, if an absence can be predicted (for example, if a student is participating in high-level activities such as the Forum for Young Canadians, Canada Games, etc.), the student and family – not the teacher – are responsible for submitting an educational plan detailing how they will continue their learning during their absence.

In talking about roles and responsibilities, Council discussed information presented in the spring about the value of pilot projects that have people to take on some of the responsibility from teachers and schools to reach out to families and students when students are missing a lot of school. They can also lead in connecting students to community supports. This is critically important in terms of teacher workload, and the supports are critical in terms of equity for students.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Students are missing too much school. Statistics show that more than 25 per cent of students miss more than 16 days a year.		
Release the attendance policy and operational guide without delay. Make the policy effective no later than October 1.	Teachers and principals have waited a long time for an attendance policy.	EECD will finalize documents, based on Council input, and release them the week of September 18 for review by teachers and principals in advance of the October 1 effective date.
Meet with the Nova Scotia School Athletics Federation (NSSAF) and others about scheduling school activities outside of the regular school day.	While school activities contribute to student engagement, interruptions to learning should be minimized.	EECD should meet with NSSAF without delay.
Move forward with pilot projects that involve community partners to work with the school in providing outreach and services to families who need support in improving student attendance.	The responsibility for improving attendance has been largely left to teachers and schools, even when the reasons for absence go beyond education.	Pilots should be tested in schools with the highest levels of absenteeism first.
Develop a template for an educational plan when extended absences for high-level activities are expected.	This will enable students and families to prepare the plan without additional work for teachers.	The Principals' Forum being created this fall should lead this work, and bring the plan back to Council for review.

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Promote the value of regular attendance for all students. Provide template letters that schools can use to support communications with parents.	Students and families need to understand the importance of attending school to support student achievement and develop responsible work habits students will need after graduation.	EECD and school boards should make materials available to schools.
Seek ongoing feedback on the policy and operational guide, with a policy review at the end of the school year.	This is the first province-wide attendance policy. As it is implemented, the need for adjustments may be identified.	Feedback can be provided at attendance@novascotia.ca

Commission on Inclusive Education

Members of the Commission met with Council to recap their interim report, *Turning Point*, released on June 29 (www.inclusiveedns.ca). In general, the Commission found:

- gaps between changing student needs and the current model of inclusive education (e.g., programs, settings)
- widespread support for the principle of inclusive education but lack of support for how implementation is working
- a need to redefine and redesign inclusive education

Report themes are: Policy; Funding, Resource Allocation and Accountability; Teacher Education; Interagency Collaboration; the Program Planning Process; Classroom Composition; and Student Behavior.

Council members broke into working groups to begin discussions on a variety of themes. Initial comments were around:

- the need for clear, consistent policy and practice supported by the right training and adequate resources
- high caseloads for resource and specialist teachers and the importance of recruitment and retention, particularly in rural areas
- the need for more practical preparation in the Bachelor of Education Program (e.g., now taught *what* inclusive education is, but not *how to* teach in an inclusive classroom)
- the need for a simpler program planning process
- demands on teacher assistants
- the importance of partners in community services, health and justice working with schools
- accountability

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These are complex issues. Council members will be discussing these issues with other teachers in preparation for their November council meeting. After the November meeting, Council expects to provide specific feedback on the report's themes.

Ask the User

In the spring, Council asked a team of research experts to work with teachers and other TIENET and PowerSchool users to recommend changes to make the systems, beginning with TIENET, easier to use. Recommendations could touch on all aspects of the systems, including policies and processes, roles and responsibilities for related tasks, training, communication, implementation supports, and system changes.

An Ask the User team was created and conducted 63 one-on-one interviews, one school based workshop and three stakeholder workshops plus other targeted meetings over the months of May and June. More than 125 individuals were engaged in this process so far, including classroom and resource teachers, school administrators, specialists, and board and government staff.

The Ask the User team presented what they heard to Council. A representative from the Commission on Inclusive Education also attended, due to the overlapping nature of the work.

The Ask the User team said interviews were both insightful and emotional for participants, and most interviewees appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback. In general, the team found that:

- The program planning process is not meeting the differing support needs in Nova Scotia classrooms.
- Teachers are not adequately trained in program planning and assessment given the complexity that exists across the system.
- The way the department, boards and schools communicate is adding confusion and ambiguity to an already difficult situation.
- Software updates to TIENET alone are not going to address these overarching issues.

Council members stated that the people who participated, and all teachers, are eager for an update, and eager to see the changes that result. While Council understands that legislation prevents significant policy changes until after the Commission on Inclusive Education reports, Council asked the Ask the User team to identify any immediate system or process changes that could take place this year.

Next Steps:

School-based, school board and government staff are participating in workshops to begin shaping recommendations to address the existing challenges. Recommendations will come forward later this fall.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: TIENET is cumbersome, and the processes around it need to be simplified.		
Report back on what the Ask the User team heard to date.	Teachers are eager to hear progress.	A summary of what teachers shared in

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Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
		interviews should be available from EECD.
Identify practical changes to TIENET that can save teachers time, to take effect this year.	Teachers have been frustrated for a long time and are extremely busy.	Recommendations on quick wins should be made this fall.

Report Cards

At its June meeting, Council recommended asking grade 4–6 teachers if they want to move to an integrated report card like that used in early elementary (focused on math, language arts and the learner profile).

EECD staff felt Council should have additional information before asking teachers this question, specifically information on: (a) past discussions with teachers on an integrated report card for Grades 4 – 6; (b) a survey already planned for grade 4 – 6 teachers this fall; and (c) the need to consult parents and possibly students on any report card changes.

Past Discussions

The move to an integrated report card for early elementary has been very well received. The Grades 4 – 6 curriculum team – which consisted of 10 teachers from across all boards except CSAP and education Department staff and met during the 2015–16 school year – also considered it for late elementary. The results of that discussion were mixed. Some considerations raised included:

- The same teacher may not teach all subjects. If, for example, the social studies teacher doesn't teach math or literacy, how does the social studies mark get integrated into the report card?
- Moving to an integrated report card would no longer reflect the various subjects. If students excel in subjects beyond the core subjects reported, does integrating the mark take away or dilute the opportunity to show and celebrate that strength?

Planned Survey

As part of curriculum streamlining, EECD committed to surveying 4–6 teachers and administrators in the fall of 2017–18 on curriculum changes and report cards.

Parent/Student Feedback

The report card is a communication tool for parents/guardians. They, and students, should also be consulted before changes are made.

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Next Steps

Council members say they hear a lot of support for an integrated report card for Grades 4 – 6. At its next meeting, Council wants to identify the pros and cons, and explore ways to overcome any challenges that may exist in making the report card simpler for teachers. Report cards for students on IPPs would also need to be considered.

Council members recognize that parents as well as teachers are frustrated by report cards. Teachers feel they are expected to talk about outcomes; parents want more general information on how their child is doing and, when needed - what can be done to help the student improve.

Council members will review and make recommendations on the report card questions within the department’s curriculum survey for Grades 4 – 6 teachers. Ways to engage parents must also be discussed.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Report cards should be simpler for teachers to complete, and easier for parents to understand.		
Finalize a survey for Grades 4 – 6 teachers on their interest in an integrated report card, like what is used in early elementary. Identify a way to consult parents and students.	Teachers need to be consulted before any changes are made.	The teacher survey should be finalized, and a way to engage parents and students should be identified at Council’s October meeting.

Pupil Evaluation, Classification and Administrative Days

Some Council members have reported positive feedback on the recommendation to schedule administrative days in advance of report cards; others have heard some concern. The main concern is about moving one or more days in June (depending on the board’s current practice) to earlier in the year before report cards are due. Some teachers feel they need the days more at year end.

As Council originally discussed, these days are specifically noted in the collective agreement, and teachers have been concerned that they were not getting the time they needed to prepare report cards.

Moving one or more of these days before report cards are due has been a priority in negotiations, and Council was required by legislation to make recommendations by April 30.

Council recognizes that teachers are busy at many times of the year. However, they do not want to change the recommendation until teachers have time to experience the change this year. The collective agreement allows for up to two other days for organizational purposes, and Council encourages boards,

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principals and school staff to identify ways to streamline or reschedule end of year work to ease pressure on teachers.

Youth Mental Health and Schools

Dr. Stan Kutcher, Sun Life Financial Chair in Adolescent Mental Health, presented to Council on youth mental health. His main theme was around confusing stress with a mental health disorder. He said that listening to media, you get the impression that any stress is bad for a child's mental health, and that stress has reached epidemic proportions. Dr. Kutcher says that prevalence rates for mental health issues have not changed in 50 years.

Dr. Kutcher said parents can fuel their child's anxiety by using the wrong language – for example, talk about excitement of going back to school instead of anxiety.

Young people need to experience daily stress, and not avoid it, to help them develop resilience. Students also benefit from music and exercise in responding to stress.

Next Meeting

Council's next meeting is October 10 – 11.