

Council to Improve Classroom Conditions

Summary of Discussions, Record of Actions: May 17, 18, 19, 2017

Council Updates

Change in Council Membership: Jennifer Field, a junior high/middle school teacher at E.B. Chandler Junior High in Amherst, Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB), was introduced to Council. Jennifer will replace Melanie Morrissey, the former teacher representative from CCRSB, who resigned on May 15.

Engagement with Principals: In line with Council's wish and recommendation to strengthen engagement with principals, the Principals' Planning Team has invited Council members to Principals in Focus on May 29. This is an opportunity for networking between Council members and principals. As well, this session focuses on the theme of how departments and partners in community services, justice and health can work together more effectively in meeting shared responsibilities to improve classroom conditions. Education Deputy Minister and Council co-chair Sandra McKenzie will be joined by the Deputy Ministers of Community Services and Justice as well as senior officials with the Nova Scotia Health Authority and IWK.

Ask the User: As of last week, the Ask the User team had completed about 25 per cent of its research. They had conducted interviews in CSAP, Tri-County, Chignecto-Central and Annapolis Valley school. This week, the team is in Cape Breton-Victoria, South Shore, and more CSAP schools. The team is on track to complete their interviews in schools during the first week in June. This will be followed by workshops with school boards and education department staff, with findings and insights delivered in summer, and recommendations delivered in September.

Timelines: Council members recognized the need to make recommendations on staffing as quickly as possible, as well as the need to respond to their colleague teachers who expect change. At the same time, they also want to take the time they need to develop recommendations that make meaningful and sustainable change. They emphasized the need to set their own deadlines in future, now that the legislated deadline for their report has passed.

Future Agenda Setting

Council discussed the need to tie individual priorities to a bigger picture, and not discuss them in isolation. As recommendations are being considered, key questions should be asked:

- Who will the decisions impact?
- What will the implementation of recommendations look like in different schools?
- How will they affect all learners?
- What is the objective? Will the recommendation move the needle toward that objective?
- Are the changes we make sustainable?
- What changes require money, and what ones do not?

Council acknowledged that these questions are not easy to answer. Teachers need help in their classrooms now, and while root causes must always be considered, teachers need help responding to the symptoms. For example, if students consistently miss deadlines, it is important to understand and address the reasons why. But teachers must be trusted in using their professional judgment on how best to respond. This supports a basic tenet of Council: authority and respect for that authority must be returned to schools.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Quick fixes do not always support the best or most lasting change.		
Request that EECD develop and map board-level data profiles, including historical context.	Profiles will emphasize talents and strengths.	Timeline: Fall 2017
Incorporate key questions in working group discussions and development of background materials. Identify overarching themes and tie individual priorities to those themes.		Dedicate meeting time in early fall.

Provincial Assessments

Council previously reviewed provincial assessments and recommended eliminating the Grade 1 Observation Assessment, Grade 2 Common Math Assessment, and Math at Work 10.

A council working group met in between the April and May meetings to review the remaining assessments. While regular classroom assessments give teachers the best information to support instruction and student learning, provincial assessments inform curriculum development and instruction, improve student achievement, and support accountability. However, the assessments must be appropriately scheduled and administered, and results must be shared in a clear, concise manner, with clear connections to the classroom.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Early fall is a busy time, and assessments at this time of year can add stress in classrooms for teachers and students.		
Combine the Grade 3 Reading and Writing Assessment and Grade 4 Math Assessment into one assessment. Reschedule the new, combined assessment, from early fall to spring and administer in Grade 3.	Fall is busy, and an important time to build classroom relationships and routines. Teachers say this timing is not in the best interests of students or classroom conditions.	Effective Spring 2018-19.
Ask Grade 3 and 4 language arts and math teachers and principals if they want to continue the assessments this	Ask teachers through the newly-established Google Group	May 29, deadline for response.

year, or suspend them and restart with the combined assessment in 2018-19.		
Move Grade 6 Reading, Writing and Math, now in September, to after Thanksgiving.	This moves the exam out of busy September.	Effective Fall 2017.
Introduce breaks in the Grade 8 Reading, Writing and Mathematics Assessments as necessary, similar to those introduced for the elementary assessments.	Breaks ease stress, and give teachers more flexibility to respond to the needs of individual students.	Effective Fall 2017.
Streamline the documentation around adaptations as they relate to assessments.	Teachers are expected to complete time-consuming documentation on adaptations being used routinely in classroom assessments before the adaptation can be granted in the provincial assessment.	Effective before fall assessments.
Problem: Teachers don't always get the results in time or in a format that helps inform instruction and student learning.		
<p>Maintain remaining provincial assessments, but:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • require EECD to share and interpret assessment data clearly and concisely, with practical tips on how results can inform instruction and student learning • build PD modules on assessment scoring, (using the provincial marking session as a model) that could be available at the board or school level • use the provincial assessment results to eliminate or streamline board- or school-based data collection in school planning for improvement. 	Existing documents and practices that work well should be available for more teachers. e.g., The <i>Lessons Learned</i> document is popular but not available for all assessments, and to all teachers. As well, participating teachers consider the provincial scoring sessions as excellent PD, but they are available to a limited number of teachers.	EECD staff should work with classroom teachers who have credibility with their colleagues on the value of the assessments.

Attendance

Council members, as well as EECD, received considerable feedback on the attendance policy. The feedback was primarily focused on:

- teacher workload: many felt that the policy downloads work to teachers. In particular, the number of meetings is potentially overwhelming.
- loss of credit: opinions are significantly divided – some want flexibility, others want hard and fast rules. (e.g., the credit **will** be lost versus **can** be lost), but this limits room for flexibility and professional judgment. Teachers and principals welcomed the support for schools to make final decisions, while boards raised the need for an appeal or review process.
- accountability: seems greater for the teacher than parents and students
- unexcused and excused absences: teachers' and parents' views are divided. (e.g., vacations)
- incentives: research, practices and preferences are mixed

In line with Recommendation 18, Council heard presentations on best practices on outreach to families and other supports and accountability measures to increase attendance:

- a South Shore elementary attendance pilot project (a partnership between SchoolsPlus, the South Shore Regional School Board, and South Shore Mental Health)
- Glen Thompson, a teacher now working for the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board, presented on restorative packages and how they can make schools more welcoming, inclusive and culturally responsive.

EECD also presented approaches used in other provinces. For example, every Ontario and Manitoba school boards have one or more school attendance counsellors or officers respectively. Roles vary even within the province, ranging from a focus on enforcement to a focus on collaboration and relationship building.

Next Steps

Based on feedback, opinions remain significantly divided. More work is needed on the policy, and the policy can only be released if a plan is developed to support teachers and principals in implementing it. Council is devoting most of its June meetings to advance this work, in partnership with interested principals and others identified by the Council.

Assessment, Evaluation, Promotion and Retention

In response to Recommendation 14 in the Council's April report, Council reviewed research and information as background to developing a policy to address deadlines, use of zeroes for missing assignments, and retention and promotion.

Deadlines, Late Assignments, Use of Zeroes

Council began discussion on key questions:

- Should students have a chance to resubmit work or receive an extension after missing a deadline? If yes, should there be a maximum number of chances? Should it be at the teacher's discretion?
- Should missing or incomplete work be marked with zero, missing or incomplete, or insufficient evidence? Should students lose a percentage of the mark for every day late? Should teachers use their discretion on how the missing or incomplete work affects the student's final grade, based on their knowledge of the student and his/her performance on other assignments? How should these codes affect a student's final grade if the work is never submitted?
- How can the assessment policy and practice better prepare students for post-secondary education and the workforce by building understanding of the importance of deadlines?

In considering these questions, Council talked about why the students are not meeting deadlines in the first place. They also emphasized the need to review the policy with an equity lens, as well as the impact on teacher workload.

Council stressed that the policy should be built around "ages and stages" - how the policy should look differently at elementary, middle/junior high, high school.

In elementary, the focus should be foundational when young childrens' brains are still developing: start teaching an understanding of the importance of deadlines and finishing tasks, give students strategies to succeed in doing so (e.g., Finish Up Fridays), and allow a "consequence" (e.g., a loss of free time) if the student is not making an effort.

In junior high/middle school, teachers want students to have reasonable opportunities to complete the work, but the chances cannot be unlimited and must be negotiated. Strategies can include organized efforts in schools, like study halls. Council members also said having the option to give students a zero, and communicate to them what that can do to their mark can be very effective.

At high school, the need to build accountability for students increases. Focusing on citizenship, real life expectations and consequences is key. This can still allow for negotiation of deadlines, as in real life, but students must take responsibility for initiating the negotiation with the teacher and meeting the commitments made.

Retention, "No Fail"

Research indicates that holding students back or pushing them ahead is not effective. The key is to support students who are struggling – what needs to happen to help students progress?

At elementary, retention should be a possibility but not an isolated decision. A Program Planning Team, including families, should decide, based on data and a range of assessments that are culturally and linguistically responsive. This should include broadening perspectives on

how knowledge can be exhibited, and exploring methods to bridge non-dominant cultural students with school knowledge.

Council also discussed the concept of “Developmental Promotion”, versus grades for Primary to 3. This would enable teachers to focus on where the child is developmentally, and less on a June pass or fail, as students can progress along developmental levels throughout the school year.

While Council recognizes that more study is needed before making such a substantial change, the concept has a much more individualized, student focus. Would an extra year reduce the number of children on IPPs? Would this help normalize taking an extra year to get to Grade 4? Would this help children who enter students at age 4 overcome any vulnerabilities identified as they begin school?

Within the current structure, Council emphasized the need for more supports for struggling learners before they receive a Learning Disability diagnosis.

At junior high, Council said many students arrive without having achieved all outcomes. What has to change?

- More supports -- behavior support teachers, specialists, EAs and more, based on the advice of the Program Planning Team
- Better connections for the student with an adult in the school
- More student involvement and commitment in any transition plan
- More Program Planning Team involvement

Council has similar conversations around cheating and plagiarism. In earlier grades, teachers need to be taught what is acceptable and unacceptable. Technology has made “cut and paste” easy, and students need to be taught what is and is not appropriate. Accountability can again increase, as students develop and progress.

Recommendation	Rationale	Additional Comments
Problem: Teachers and principals need to be supported in using their professional judgment on how students are marked, and in decisions on retention and promotion. At the same time, the issue is complex with mixed research and evidence.		
Create a working group to review research and best practices, leading to a provincial policy.	While there is pressure to respond to this concern, the issue is complex.	Time frame for policy implementation, September 2018

Commission on Inclusive Schools

Commission members Monica Williams and Adela N’Jie presented to Council to introduce their work. They began with their guiding principles, core values, and principles for their consultation.

Council and Commission members had some discussion around why inclusive education is so complicated.

The relationship between the Council and Commission were discussed. The Commission emphasized the need to work together. The Council’s mandate is to make recommendations on systemic demands on teachers’ time that limit their ability to facilitate student learning (including complex classrooms as an identified priority). The Commission’s mandate is to reform inclusive education and identify creative and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced in delivering quality education for all students within an inclusive education. Obviously, these mandates overlap and both groups need to work closely together.

Council members requested regular meetings and updates. Council members also talked about their contacts and links into classrooms, and ways they can help promote discussions with people working in the classroom. The Commission shared consultation plans, including meetings in every school boards. Council members volunteered to attend and support these meetings.

The Commission also is on the process of establishing a web presence to support consultation and the exchange of information.

The Commission is required to issue an interim report by June 30.

The Commission will provide its report to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) and the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU). EECD and NSTU will then provide the report to Council.

Status of Recommendations: April 2017 Report

Council reviewed and released a Status Report on the 40 recommendations in its April Report (see attached).