

# **Minister's Response to the**

School Review Process Study  
Report and Recommendations

April 2014

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# Introduction

Over the past year, the process to review a school for possible closure (the school review process) has been examined and discussed across the province. In spring 2013, amid growing concerns about the effectiveness of the school review process, the *School Review Process Study* was initiated. The study was led by Mr. Robert Fowler and consisted of the development of a discussion paper (*School Review Process Discussion Paper 2013*) and a province-wide public consultation. To ensure the local perspective of each region was captured, the consultation process was supported by nine community representatives who attended the meetings held in their local area and provided input to Mr. Fowler on development of the recommendations.

The mandate of the study was to develop recommendations to improve the school review process by creating a more comprehensive approach to school review that would meet the needs of school boards and communities. On February 28, 2014, Mr. Fowler submitted his report and recommendations.

The *School Review Process Discussion Paper* identified seven goals for a school review process. These goals guided the discussion paper content, consultation, and recommendations provided in the Fowler Report. These goals remain the focus as the recommendations are implemented.

- The future of a local school is part of a plan for the broader school region. Parents and communities are able to contribute to the solutions for the region.
- School boards use clear, consistent criteria to identify schools for review. The public understands why and how a school has been identified for review.
- Clear, rigorous, and trusted information will be available to help school boards and communities make effective decisions.
- The review process allows more flexible timing and makes accommodations for unique circumstances, while maintaining the principles of administrative fairness.
- Decision makers are in a position to make the best decision possible for delivery of education to all students, based on relevant information and input from stakeholders.
- School boards consider innovative ways to keep a school program in the community when it is in the best interests of the students and the community.
- Decisions focus on the best option for delivering the public school program, not on who pays or who benefits when a school site is closed. Levels of government work together to minimize the cost burden when a school closes.

I want to extend my thanks to Mr. Fowler, the committee responsible for development of the discussion paper, the community representatives who assisted with the public consultation, and each individual that participated in the study by providing written responses and attending meetings to share their experiences and suggestions to improve the review process.

I support the intent of every recommendation in the *School Review Process Study*. Taken together, they enable government to meet the goals set forth in the review process. In most cases, I accept the recommendation in its entirety; however, some recommendations can only be accomplished through collaboration with other government departments and stakeholders, or other creative approaches.

In the upcoming months, we will implement a new review process which is based on the study recommendations. Recognizing that implementation of the recommendations will rely on a collaborative approach amongst key partners, and the fact that the review process is the responsibility of a school board, a team of department and school board representatives will be formed immediately to put the new review process in place. To support this work, legislative changes will be introduced which will provide the framework for the new approach to school review. Conversations will continue or be initiated with other departments on those issues which reach outside the public education mandate.

The new process will focus on involving communities earlier in discussions about the future of schools through long-range planning by school boards. It will provide a more comprehensive review process by expanding the review to include a group of schools rather than an individual school and by having the review conducted by a multi-stakeholder committee, supported by robust data and facilitation assistance. The review process will not only consider closure options, but also provide an opportunity to examine a variety of options for a group of schools including any viable innovative scenarios (see Appendix A for more information on the proposed school review process).

I believe the new approach to school review, based on the recommendations brought forward, responds to the concerns heard through the consultation and by those who have been involved with school reviews in the past. The new review process takes a broader view and a more collaborative approach which I believe will result in the best solutions for our students.

# Response to the Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

*School boards should be mandated to complete a long-term planning document, with a ten year planning outlook. This document is to be available for community comment and input once drafted and presented through public meetings. The document should be reviewed, with applicable updates provided, on an annual basis, with a complete renewal of the document every five years. Annual updates should be advertised and available publicly.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that school boards should undertake long-range planning, involving the community, to discuss the future of schools and education delivery at the school board level. It is important that this plan remain current and reflective of the school board's strategic direction, focused on student achievement. A long-term, broad outlook will support a more effective school review process and allow the public to be engaged earlier in potential challenges that a school or schools may face.

Amendments to the *Education Act* will be introduced to add a requirement for school boards to undertake long-range planning. Ministerial direction will be provided to outline the requirements for long-range plans to ensure consistency at a provincial level.

## Recommendation 2

*Long-term planning by a school board should identify schools in subsystems or families of schools. When a long-range plan identifies an issue to be addressed, school boards may identify a subsystem/family of schools for review. School boards should clearly identify which schools are included in a subsystem/family of schools review. Examining schools as a group rather than individually will allow a more complete assessment and analysis of the impacts when considering viable options for a school region. This analysis can include boundaries, consolidations, transportation, and any other factors which are deemed to be significant to a solution.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that a more comprehensive review process can be achieved by examining a group of schools together. It is clear that what happens at one school in a region has an impact on the schools around it. Examining a group of schools together will provide a more complete discussion about the options available and the impacts and opportunities for the students of those schools.

Amendments to the *Education Act* will be introduced to provide authority for the Minister to establish policy to govern the school reviews conducted by school boards. The policy will outline the process to be followed for school review and ensure that it is based upon principles of administrative fairness. A department/school board team will provide input into the Ministerial school review policy.

### Recommendation 3

*When a subsystem/family of schools has been identified for review, a committee (School Options Committee) should be formed to conduct the review process, guided by a mandate from the school board. It is recommended that a facilitator be provided to guide the work of the committee. The committee (School Options Committee) conducting a subsystem/family of schools review should include School Advisory Councils, school principals, school board staff, municipalities, community members/leaders, and any other participants as deemed necessary. A facilitator should be appointed to assist the committee. The mandate provided to the committee by the school board should identify the issue to be addressed by the committee, as well as the objectives for the review and any conditions/limitations to possible solutions proposed by the committee. For example, an objective may be to reduce square footage and a condition/limitation might be a geographically isolated school within the subsystem/family of schools which must remain open.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree with the review process being conducted by a multi-stakeholder committee supported by a facilitator. The benefit of a broad-based committee is to bring a range of solutions, experience, and expertise to the process. It is very important that the work of this committee be guided by the mandate and objectives provided to them by the school board. While the mandate will define the scope of the committee's work, it should not limit the ability of the committee to consider a variety of solutions to a particular issue.

The Ministerial school review policy will address the composition of the review committee, committee responsibilities, the terms of reference for a review committee, and the role of the facilitator.

### Recommendation 4

*Where a subsystem/family of schools review results in a recommendation for school closure, and the recommendation is accepted by a school board, the school board should communicate the recommendation to the public and provide information on how to provide input on the recommendation. A public meeting should be held prior to the final decision. Before school boards make a final decision with respect to closure as recommended by the committee reviewing the subsystem/family of schools, notice should be given to the community of the recommendation and proposed closure. The community should have the opportunity to provide input to the school board either through written submissions or at a public meeting.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that school boards must ensure the community is aware that the board will be making a decision with respect to permanent closure of a school based on a recommendation from the review committee.

Details with respect to the process, including what public notifications and meetings are required by the review committee and school board, will be outlined in the Ministerial school review policy.

## Recommendation 5

*School board submissions to the province for capital spending should be prioritized based on subsystem/family of school review analysis and outcomes. When long-term planning at a subsystem/family of schools level results in the need for a capital investment (i.e. new school construction and additions/alterations) by the province, the school board should submit its request(s) on a prioritized basis. This will ensure school boards are able to address capital needs identified through long-term planning in a way that supports the work done by the school board and the communities.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation. Long-range planning and the new school review process will better inform school boards as they develop a business case for school board requests to government for capital investment. School boards will be asked to prioritize capital requests and to demonstrate through the business case how the request aligns with their long-range plan and school reviews.

## Recommendation 6

*The department should convene a committee to further examine the concept of joint-use/hub/community schools, including what level of stakeholder engagement is required to pursue this approach and what specific criteria are required. The committee should represent government departments and school boards and engage other stakeholders as appropriate. The committee would only exist for the purpose of developing the criteria. Criteria for a non-traditional school setting would require some flexibility to allow for the varied and unique circumstances that may need to be addressed, however some oversight and guidance is needed as this concept is further developed. It is suggested that best practices be examined using the experience of those schools in Nova Scotia already utilizing a non-traditional scenario (e.g. Greenfield Elementary, Chedabucto Place Education Centre/ Guysborough Academy). Student safety, cost neutrality to the school board, and compatible use are three main areas identified as broad criteria considerations.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that more clarity is needed with respect to non-traditional school arrangements. As we begin to consider unique ways of delivering education, the need for guidelines will become even more important, ensuring the education and safety of children remain the number one priority of the department.

A department/school board team will be responsible for developing a set of general criteria to guide school boards and community groups in their consideration of possibilities for a hub/joint-use/community school facility, with student safety, cost neutrality to the school board, and compatible use as the primary elements. This team will consult with other stakeholders as necessary in the development of the criteria.

## Recommendation 7

*In all analysis of a school or subsystem/family of schools, an assessment of the value of a school as a focal point in the community should be included to ensure potential innovative partnerships and solutions support retaining an educational program in the community. During a family of schools review, there should be a mechanism to assess the desire, willingness, and ability and capacity of a community to contribute to innovative solutions for identified issues in an area.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that the review process is an opportunity for a variety of stakeholders to become involved in the discussion about the future of a school or group of schools. It is clear that there are opportunities for partnerships and innovative solutions across our province and a willingness by the community to bring those opportunities forward. The role of government is to ensure that these initiatives are consistent with the values and goals of the education system and in the best interests of students.

Within the review process there will be an opportunity for the review committee to apply a variety of lenses to a scenario being considered by the committee, including the degree to which it supports the value of the school to the students, school board, community, and local economy.

## Recommendation 8

*School boards should be provided with financial support to enable more focus on relationship building and community engagement and to better support the work of a subsystem/family of schools review. Incremental, targeted funding should be allocated to school boards to provide resources for the purposes of community engagement and relationship building. This function is necessary to explore and develop innovative opportunities and solutions. Resources should also be available to support the subsystem/ family of schools review through use of a facilitator. It is recommended that consideration be given to provide up to \$100,000 per board for these initiatives.*

**Minister's Response:** I agree with this recommendation in principle and acknowledge that school boards are continually looking for ways to engage communities effectively. The individual circumstances of each school board and the availability and need for additional resources to undertake community engagement vary. The department is committed to supporting school boards in their initiatives and will work with them as required.

I fully support the recommendation that a facilitator be appointed to lead or support review committees as they conduct the review of a group of schools. The department will be considering various ways to ensure this support is provided.

## Recommendation 9

*Government should recognize innovative community solutions where there are broader community partnerships to support community sustainability/development and the retention of an education program in a community. Government could support innovative community solutions by providing financial incentives from monies outside of the education funding envelop (e.g. Tangible Capital Asset Funding). This would provide funding for such things as repurposing a building for joint-use which would help maintain an education program that is seen as essential to community sustainability and development.*

**Minister's Response:** I agree with this recommendation in principle, recognizing that it will require discussion with other government departments and creative solutions.

Department staff will initiate a dialogue across government to assess current and future opportunities to support innovation at the community level on this issue.



## Recommendation 10

*The department should provide assistance to ensure school board boundaries do not impede the best solutions for students (e.g., better transportation options, access to programming).*

*The department should act as a facilitator where there is a desire to work toward a solution for students which may cross school board boundaries. Arbitrary boundaries should not be a barrier to implementation of the best solution for students.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and will ensure that the department provides the support necessary to school boards as they examine solutions for students which may require coordination between or among school boards.

## Recommendation 11

*The department should, in conjunction with key stakeholders, develop province-wide criteria, presented in the form of templates, designed to support each stage of long-range planning.*

*School boards must have a template outlining what information needs to be provided at each stage of planning. In developing these templates, the department should engage the departments of Economic and Rural Development and Tourism, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, and Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, as well as the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and understand the importance of consistent and reliable information to support long-range planning and the school review process. Templates for use by school boards will ensure information used throughout the school review process is consistently presented across the province.

The department/school board team will work with a variety of stakeholders in the development of the templates to ensure they are comprehensive, understandable, and reflect the wide variety of factors that must be considered throughout a review process.

## Recommendation 12

*The department, working with other government departments/agencies, should provide standardized, verifiable information that is to be used by school boards for planning purposes.*

*There are a number of information pieces which may be more easily compiled and provided at the provincial level based on work already being undertaken by government departments. For example, the province currently works with Statistics Canada to develop population projections. The department must identify what information is currently available and how to best make this accessible to school boards to support planning.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and will ensure that, where possible, information used throughout the review process is standardized and readily available for use. Department staff, in coordination with the department/school board team, will begin working with other government departments to determine what information and data are available and how to best utilize this information.

## Recommendation 13

*Where information is provided directly by school boards, it should be specific to the individual schools, sourced (where possible), and explained. In some cases, the information required for completion of process templates will only be available from school boards. In these cases, the information provided should be specific to the school(s) to the extent possible, with the source of the information provided. An explanation of the information should be included to ensure clarity if appropriate.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that information sources must be readily available and clear to the public. The Ministerial school review policy will require data to be sourced and explained in such a way that it is useful to the process.

## Recommendation 14

*Long-range planning by school boards, subsequent subsystem/family of schools reviews, and individual school closure processes should be able to be initiated at any time of the year. Timeframes for completion of individual stages should be provided, but not attached to calendar dates. It is important to provide time frames and minimum/maximum allotments at the various stages of any planning/review process. The process should not be allowed to continue on indefinitely and should be responsive to changing circumstances.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation. School boards are responsible for a variety of decisions and processes which are related to the school review process (e.g. capital planning) and it is important that a review process aligns with other processes and/or decisions.

The Ministerial school review policy will outline the timeline for school review by establishing minimum and maximum timeframes for completion of the various stages of the school review process. These timeframes will not be tied to calendar dates.

## Recommendation 15

*Consideration should be given to providing exemptions to a closure process under specific circumstances, (e.g., no students registered in the school, school is unfit for students). The department should engage with school boards to define what circumstances may exist which are not best examined through a review/closure process.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation. There are currently exemptions to the review process provided in the Ministerial Education Act Regulations. There are circumstances where a review process is not necessary (e.g. where the school is being replaced by a new school).

The regulations will continue to provide exemptions to the review process, and the department will work with school boards to determine if there are extraordinary circumstances which may require an exemption from the review process that are not currently captured in the regulations.

## Recommendation 16

*The department should develop an abridged review process for circumstances where no subsystem/family of schools review has been undertaken but there is a capital project announced or where a school community has expressed general agreement with a proposed course of action which includes closure of a school. Elements of an abridged process must include the provision of information to the public in the same form/template as recommended in this report, with opportunity for public review and input, and a public meeting prior to the final decision being made.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation in principle and acknowledge that circumstances can arise which do not necessarily align with the purpose of the current review process. Implementation of long-range planning by school boards and a more collaborative review process for groups of schools will achieve better alignment to supporting processes such as capital planning. The focus of the review process will also be on looking at groups of school together and not making decisions for one school in isolation of those schools around it.

While an abridged process will not be developed specifically, unique circumstances will be addressed through the Ministerial policy and direction will be provided on how to best manage these circumstances, recognizing the need outlined in this recommendation.

## Recommendation 17

*School boards should retain the responsibility and accountability for decisions regarding the closure of schools. School board members must be engaged in the process, be knowledgeable about the school and the review and be in a position to make the best decision for students overall.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that school boards, with their close connection to the local community, are the best decision makers for this difficult but important task. It is clear that school board members take this responsibility very seriously and feel it is part of their responsibility as elected members of a school board. Additionally, the majority of feedback from all stakeholders indicated that this responsibility should remain with school boards.

## Recommendation 18

*The department should work with the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations to resolve or improve the process of surplus school buildings reverting back to municipal ownership. There are several options for resolving this issue, most of which require coordination between levels of government. Some of the options which could be considered are:*

- a) Including the cost of demolition in either capital or operating budgets to minimize financial burden on municipalities, unless municipalities exercise right of first refusal.*
- b) Provincial ownership of all school buildings (i.e. Nova Scotia Lands approach).*
- c) Making additions/alternations the preferred approach when considering renovations and/or new school construction to avoid demolition costs and school siting challenges, where possible.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and acknowledge that the department must continue to work with the Department of Municipal Affairs on this issue. This is an important issue for the province, as well as municipalities, and it must be addressed.

## Recommendation 19

*The department should develop a transition plan to the new long-range planning process, with the goal of school boards completing stage one of long-range planning no later than April 2015. The transition phase should ensure that school boards who have recently undertaken a long-range planning process are able to act on what they have heard from the community.*

**Minister's Response:** I accept this recommendation and agree that a transition plan which supports the proposed review process, including long-range planning, is necessary. The department/school board team will be responsible for developing the transition plan.

# Appendix A: Overview of the New School Review Process

## Overview

The new process for school review that will be introduced is grounded in better long-range planning and public engagement, and focused on examining a group of schools together to ensure solutions are explored and developed in the context of the broader area.

### 1. Long-range planning

School boards would be required to prepare a comprehensive long-range plan no later than April 2015. The Minister will provide details with respect to the minimum requirements for the long-range plan and provide templates to assist in the development of the plan.

The long-range plan will provide high level information about each school in the board, identify families of schools (i.e. feeder systems) and provide context to this information by including information about the school board's strategic direction and goals for the region. The information gathered and shared at this stage will help inform the need of a school review for a group of schools and will also provide an opportunity to engage parents and other stakeholders earlier about the future of the schools in their community.

### 2. New School Review Process

The new school review process will be outlined in a Ministerial policy with accompanying guidelines and templates provided to support the process.

There are four basic stages in the new review process:

#### 1. Identification

A school board may identify a group of schools for review based on a number of 'triggers' such as concerns with providing an equitable or suitable range of learning opportunities for students (due to declining enrollments or other reasons) and/or higher than average building maintenance/capital needs.

#### 2. School review committee

Once a school board has identified a group of schools for review they must appoint a multi-stakeholder review committee (School Options Committee) to conduct the review. The composition of the committee will be detailed in Ministerial policy. The board will be required to provide the committee with a Terms of Reference to guide their work which includes their purpose, responsibilities, procedural items, and reference criteria which outline the objectives in undertaking the review. Details on the Terms of Reference and other information templates will be set out in Ministerial policy. The committee would be led by a facilitator and be composed of a number of stakeholder groups including parents/guardians, principals, school board staff, municipal staff, and community/business representatives.

#### 3. Solution development with public consultation

The committee's mandate would be to examine opportunities or solutions that satisfy the objectives given to them by the school board. The committee has the scope to examine a variety of options for the school region within their mandate including school closure, consolidations, boundary changes, or any alternative/innovative solutions that are deemed viable.

The responsibilities of the committee include reviewing and finalizing information provided by the school boards, ensuring all information relevant to the review is made available to the public, examining and creating options for the schools which are part of the review, consultation with the public, and preparing and submitting a report with recommendations to the school board.

#### **4. Final Decision**

The school board is responsible for making a final decision based on the recommendations from the committee.

Key milestones of the process would no longer be attached to calendar dates allowing a review to be initiated at any time.

#### ***Key Differences of the new School Review Process***

- The public will have a snapshot of overall trends at a school board level through long-range planning.
- School Boards can identify a group of schools for review.
- Boards can initiate a review process at any time and process milestones are based on minimum time frames between each process element (e.g. 30-60 days) rather than set calendar dates.
- Composition of the review committee includes representation from a larger group of stakeholders which will provide a broader perspective to the review.
- A facilitator will lead the review committee.
- The mandate of the review committee is focused on examining the best solutions for a region/ group of schools, based on the goals and objectives of the school board, versus responding to a proposed closure of only one school.
- The reports and recommendations to the school board will be generated by the review committee and not be prepared solely by school board staff or by the parents/community of one school.