School Storm Days in Nova Scotia
A Discussion Paper
Prepared for the School Boards of Nova Scotia
and the Department of Education
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School Storm Days in Nova Scotia: A Discussion Paper

Introduction

The long winter of 2008-09 will be remembered in Nova Scotia public education for the number of "storm days" and the high level of frustration felt among families, the decision makers, school boards and the general public. Those responsible for cancelling school, school board members who set the policies, teachers and families concerned about the lost instructional time, families who had to arrange child care, and members of the general public who lacked understanding about how the decisions are made voiced their frustration with questions such as these:

• Do we have a lot more storm days than in years gone by? What has changed?

• Students are losing too much time! Can something be done?

• When the students are not in school, can school staffs use the time more constructively?

• What happens in other areas of Canada?

Over the past 2 or 3 decades, several factors taken together have influenced school cancellation practices and our perceptions about them. Our weather has changed and the accuracy of forecasters to predict weather has improved. The expectations of families, staff members and the general public regarding safe student transportation have moved up a few notches, along with the practices and standards for clearing our roads and highways. A major decline in the total student enrolment, along with a large number of school amalgamations, has created much longer bus runs in some areas of the province. The hour-by-hour attention to weather and travel conditions in the local media is instantaneous and highly profiled. At the end of a long Nova Scotia winter, such as the last one, only the number of storm days for schools gets as much attention as the weather.

The long tradition for storm days in Nova Scotia is that teachers do not have to report to work when schools are closed to students on storm days. Teachers are able to "claim a storm day" according to the Education Act and their Collective Agreement. For many years, other board employee groups have voiced their concern about the double standard regarding who can claim storm days and who cannot. In more recent years, other commercial, industrial, public service and post-secondary employers have raised their concern about how the storm day cancellation for teachers influences the expectations and attitudes of their own employees.

The purposes of this discussion paper are:

• To articulate the present-day issues with respect to school cancellation policies and practices in Nova Scotia, including the expectations for teachers and other board staff when bus transportation is cancelled,

• To be better informed about the related policies and practices in other areas of Atlantic Canada and beyond, and

• To offer some observations and recommendations for public consideration by Nova Scotia's school boards and their school communities.

To achieve these purposes, several boards in other areas of Atlantic Canada, Quebec and Ontario were contacted. To understand the practices in Nova Scotia and to gain input into the preparation of this report, superintendents of schools, and directors of programs, student services, human resources and operations were consulted through discussions at their respective, provincial meetings. The coordinators of transportation from each board were consulted through meetings with the provincial Pupil Transportation Advisory Committee which includes representatives of the school bus carrier companies and the motor carrier inspectors. Also, the Executive Director, Maintenance and Operations, for the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal and the Winter Works Superintendent for the Halifax Regional Municipality were interviewed.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three major components. The intent of the first component is to understand the circumstances of the past winter in the broader historical context of storm days in Nova Scotia and geographical...
context of what happened in other areas of Atlantic Canada and beyond. The second provides some information regarding the expectations and practices on storm days for teachers and other staff and the third offers some recommendations for public consideration by school boards and their school communities.

**Storm Days in Nova Scotia and Beyond**

**The Winter of 2008-09 in Nova Scotia**

Although this study may have been due for a number of years, it was prompted particularly because of the circumstances last winter. The winter of the 2008-09 school year will be remembered as unusual not only because of the miserable weather but also because of the above-average number of storm days in most of Nova Scotia’s school board regions. Table 1 reports the number of full-system storm or shutdown days during the last school year, 2008-09, for each board.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Board</th>
<th>Days Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annapolis Valley Regional School Board (AVRSB)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board (CBVRSB)</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strait Regional School Board (SRSB)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tri-County Regional School Board (TCRSB)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data for the Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial (CSAP) are not presented in Table 1 because of its wide variability from one area of the province to another. The CSAP serves all of Nova Scotia, so, not surprisingly, its numbers of storm days for last winter are very similar, region-by-region, to those of the other boards.

Beyond the full system shutdowns reported in Table 1, schools in some counties or sub-systems within a few boards, were closed while the rest of the system remained open. Although there were 9 system-wide storm days for the SRSB, two of the counties had 10 days and the other 2 counties had 11 days; some families of schools had even more days. The West Hants schools (AVRSB) were closed for 2 days when the rest of the region’s schools were open, the Chignecto and Celtic families of schools (CCRSB) lost 1 additional day, and the Musquodoboit Rural High School family of schools (HRSB) lost 5 additional days.

The fact that the number of storm days lost last winter is higher than normal is evident in the historical data. Table 2 reports the number of system-wide storm days, since the boards were formed in 1996, for those boards which could find some accurate data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>AVRSB</th>
<th>CBVRSB</th>
<th><em>CCRSB</em></th>
<th>HRSB</th>
<th><strong>TCRSB</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Celtic Family of Schools only  ** Shelburne County data only

It is important to note that the number of days for last winter is not included in the table.

The Chignecto-Central Regional School Board storm day data are the most detailed, being reported by “family of schools” region. The Chignecto family is reported in Table 2 and the average number of storm days, since 1996, for the other 3 regions is as follows: Cobequid Family of Schools — 7.2 days; Nova Family of Schools—7.5 days, and Chignecto Family of Schools—9.0 days.
Those who can remember 30 to 40 winters in Nova Scotia might be interested in some data over the longer term. Some data found for the rural Pictou County area provides 10-year averages over 3 decades (1978-2008) and is reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Average No. of Storm Days over 3 Decades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Pictou County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978-1988</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-1998</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-2008</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-yr average</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 3 show a rather significant increase from one decade to the next. Quite a number of board transportation supervisors and other board administrators who were consulted in this study have 30 or more years of professional experience in Nova Scotia. Generally, they share the perception that the number of storm days has been increasing gradually over the past 3 decades. Although the data in Table 3 display this trend, these should not be given much weight because they represent only one area of the province. Similar data for other areas could not be generated from existing files.

The data reported in the tables demonstrate that the number of storm days last winter is obviously and consistently higher than what may be called normal. This evidence from the numerical data is directly related to a different form of evidence related to the weather.

One fact became clear in most of the discussions with school board staff and those responsible for clearing the roads: The weather in all of Atlantic Canada last winter was abnormal. Whereas some Nova Scotia winters can be described as harsh or severe, last winter cannot. It was not primarily heavy snowfall or cold, blizzard conditions that kept school buses off the roads. More often than not, the temperatures straddled the freezing point so that a daily mixture of wet snow, ice pellets and freezing rain characterized the weather forecasts and/or the actual weather conditions in several areas of Nova Scotia and the neighboring provinces. Temperatures that hover around the freezing point in the first daylight hours of a winter day, when a "storm system" is crossing Nova Scotia, make things more difficult for meteorologists, student transportation decision makers and those clearing the roads.

Two of the board transportation coordinators kept personal notes last winter as they made the early morning decision on whether or not to keep the buses off the roads. These notes are telling. Of the 13 storm days for the West Hants area of the AVRSB, 4 cancellations were caused by heavy snowfall, 1 by drifting snow, and 8 by freezing rain, ice pellets/rain or black ice. Of the 13 storm days for the Musquodoboit Rural High family of schools of the HRSB, 4 were caused by heavy snowfall or drifting snow and 9 were caused by freezing rain, ice pellets/rain or black ice. In a few cases in some areas, it was the weather forecast that caused the cancellation, although what was forecast did not materialize. These descriptions of the weather conditions were expressed frequently by those contacted in other boards.

Last Winter in Other Areas of Canada

Others boards in Atlantic Canada and beyond were contacted to gather information that should help to understand the Nova Scotia situation from a broader perspective. Table 4 reports the number of storm day bus cancellations last winter in several Atlantic Canada school boards or education councils.

Table 4: No. of Storm Days in 2008-09

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Board</th>
<th>Storm Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District 6 (Rothesay), N.B.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 2 (Moncton and area), N.B.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western School Board, PEI</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern School District, NL (4 regions)</td>
<td>4.5 to 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Townships School Board, Que.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of storm days last winter in the Eastern School District of Newfoundland and Labrador vary across the 4 regions with the lowest number (4.5) for the St. John's Metro Region and the highest (12) for an area within the Burin Region.

According to the administrator contacted in Rothesay, N.B. (District 6), 3 or 4 storm day cancellations were avoided last winter because some storms occurred over weekends.
The Eastern Townships School Board

The ETSB is singled out because of its apparently unique data compared to the Atlantic Canada school districts or regions. This Anglophone school board generally serves the large geography from Drummondville, Quebec, south to Vermont and the American border.

Although the region is not that far away from Atlantic Canada and has about the same range of latitudes (Sherbrooke, Que. and Amherst, N.S. are on the same latitude), its number of storm days is significantly less—both last winter’s number and the annual average. Part of the answer seems to be related to the winter weather conditions, while another part may be related to a particular ETSB or Quebec government policy. Conversations with the Superintendent of Transportation and the Director General helped to understand the situation in the Eastern Townships.

According to the Superintendent of Transportation, Mr. Austin Baillie, last winter was a “fairly good winter” and they had no storm days. The previous winter was worse so they “lost 2 or 3 days” and, based on memory, they “lost 2 or 3 days, on average, over the past 10 years”. In discussing how last winter’s conditions varied from those in Atlantic Canada, generally the weather of the Eastern Townships is steadier and colder. Last winter, there was the normal snowfall, but no major snow storms and no freezing rain or ice caused problems. The Superintendent of Transportation advised that freezing rain or rain falling on cold roads and highways can cause bus and school cancellations, but it is not a common occurrence.

Temperatures in the Eastern Townships last winter did not hover around the freezing point as it did in Atlantic Canada. This is consistent with what one would expect based on historical data. The data in Table 5 derived from the “Canadian Climate Normals for 1971-2000” were prepared by Environment Canada. Table 5 provides average temperatures over the 4-month winter period, December-March, along with the average daily maximums and minimums for the same period. Comparing Truro with Sherbrooke, Quebec, Sherbrooke is obviously colder.

From the same Environment Canada data source, the expected normal snowfall for Truro is 229.1 cm. and, for Sherbrooke, it is 294.3 cm. Because the normal snowfall in the Eastern Townships is greater than that expected in Truro, a possible conclusion might be that the variability in temperature below and above freezing does not cause transportation problems for the ETSB as it does sometimes for boards in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada.

From two conversations with Mr. Baillie and a separate interview with the Director General of the Board, Mr. Ron Canuel, one is left with the impression that the bus drivers and community members of the Eastern Townships are used to driving in “winter” conditions, meaning temperatures consistently below the freezing point most of the time and roads and highways often covered or partially covered with snow. Compared to Atlantic Canada, they commonly do not have to deal with roads being snow-covered one day and then being hit with ice pellets or freezing rain the next, with temperatures possibly going from one extreme to another during the day or overnight.

The other factor that may contribute indirectly to the relatively low number of storm days for the ETSB is a matter of policy and traditional practice. The Department of Education for the Province of Quebec expects strict compliance with a requirement that the schools will be open to students for 180 days each school year. According to the Director General, each school board in the province can determine how many storm days are appropriate as long as the requirement of 180 days is achieved. Because the length of the entire school year for Quebec school districts can reach a maximum of 200 days, the number of “professional days” adopted by individual districts ranges from 16 to 20 days. The ETSB operates with 20 professional days beyond the 180 days for students, with three of them being assigned for “storm days”. Each storm day beyond the 3 assigned in the annual calendar causes one of the professional days to be cancelled so that the 180 day requirement for students is protected.

Cancellation Procedures in Nova Scotia

On any particular winter day when the weather is causing or may cause poor driving conditions, parents and members of the general public will disagree on whether or not schools should be cancelled. No one will disagree on the fact that it is a very difficult decision to make and everyone will be glad that someone else has to make the decision. A listing of the critical factors that must be considered may help to explain why making the decision is difficult.

| Table 5: Normal Average Temperatures, Dec. to Mar., Truro, and Sherbrooke, Que. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Area       | Average C | Daily Max. | Daily Min. |
| Truro, N.S. | -4.7       | 1.7        | -9.3       |
| Sherbrooke, Que. | -8.6       | -2.6       | -14.5      |
The main question to be answered before 6:00 a.m. is this: *What is the level of risk for a professionally trained school bus driver to be transporting children and youth in a large, heavy school bus that is properly equipped and maintained for winter driving conditions?* Driving any vehicle under any conditions has a level of risk. The risk of having to drive in winter white-out conditions or on black ice is unacceptable while having to drive on snow-covered back roads when the temperature is well below freezing is not. Every board’s professional transportation staff has the expertise to assess the level of risk under various conditions in consultation with meteorologists and those responsible to keep the roads and highways clear. *Well before dawn each winter morning, they apply board-approved procedures to make decisions with student safety as their top priority.*

That school buses transport children and youth, rather than adults, is a very significant factor. Those trying to assess the level of risk must think especially about elementary school children walking along roads with no sidewalks and waiting in winter conditions for their bus which, hopefully, will not be delayed by poor driving conditions. The winter weather conditions for students to walk to school or their bus stop must be taken into account along with the travelling conditions for school buses.

The weather conditions of the past winter lead to school cancellations that may be difficult to understand from the perspective of the kitchen window at 7:30 a.m. Only those who have been assessing the road conditions professionally and gathering detailed weather information, since 4:30 a.m., can understand why a decision to cancel or not cancel has been made. For example, families can observe on a Tuesday morning in February, that it is raining at 2 degrees Celsius and school has not been cancelled. The very next morning it is raining at 2 degrees and school is cancelled. *What’s going on? The professionals who made the decision know that the temperature of the road surface on Wednesday morning was minus 3 degrees Celsius because the temperatures had dropped to minus 8 through the night and then warmed by morning. The rain on Wednesday morning more than likely will be freezing on many roads thus making very treacherous driving conditions. When temperatures hover above and below zero, the driving conditions can change from safe to unsafe very quickly.*

School boards follow their own procedure to decide whether or not school buses should run each winter morning—and a similar procedure to decide that schools should be dismissed early because of the weather or road conditions. *There is a high level consistency from board to board in how the road conditions are assessed and then weighed/predicted in conjunction with an up-to-the minute weather forecast. It is not within the purpose of this study to evaluate or question the decision-making procedures or the actual decisions made for individual boards. Rather, the procedures are described here in general terms simply for the purpose of providing information that may raise awareness and understanding.*

The following steps generally and typically define the school cancellation procedures followed quite consistently from board to board:

- From about 4:30 a.m. to 5:45 a.m., professional transportation staff members are out and about in several critical areas of each board’s geography to assess the road conditions and report to the coordinator of transportation.

- While the road conditions are being assessed, the coordinator of transportation contacts directly a meteorologist, to get an up-to-the-minute weather forecast, and supervisory staff with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal or municipal highway maintenance to determine the actual and expected conditions on the roads and highways.

- Once the coordinator of transportation has gathered accurate details about the expected road and weather conditions, she/he makes a final decision or makes a recommendation to the superintendent of schools or a director who has the authority to make the final decision.

- The decision to close all schools or some schools in the system is communicated to local and provincial radio and television stations and on board websites — the normal practice and expectation is that cancellations must be communicated to the media by 6:00 a.m.

There are some unique circumstances for some boards that require variations in the procedures. The Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial has jurisdiction over the whole province so its procedure in some areas is tied closely with the Anglophone board in those areas, while in other areas the board has a private contractor operating the buses quite independently of the Anglophone board. The Halifax Regional School Board has a private contractor operating its entire transportation system, as does the AVRSB in Kings County and the CCRSB in Cumberland County. In all cases, the board’s coordinator of transportation and the superintendent of schools or a director has final authority on cancellation decisions.

*Two other “authorities” have responsibility to make their own decision in the interest of safety when the decision has been made to operate the buses under winter driving conditions: (1) Individual bus...*
drivers have discretionary authority to decide that they should not drive on a particular part of their route because it is not safe and, of course, (2) parents have the final say on whether or not their children leave the house to go to the bus stop or to school another way.

Relationship between School Boards and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal (DOTIR)

School board transportation decision makers have a long tradition of contacting staff in the local snowplow depots, early in the morning, to check road conditions and the progress in getting them cleared. The procedure worked out between some boards and Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal (DOTIR) local offices has been worked out quite formally over the years while the procedure for other boards is less formally defined.

The consultations with the Nova Scotia Student Transportation Advisory Committee and a senior staff member of the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal confirmed that there may be real benefit for board staffs and DOTIR staff at the provincial level to get together to define their relationship more concretely and to consider other matters of mutual interest; e.g., sharing information and resources and developing a common language for communication with the public.

The DOTIR has invested in a “state-of-the-art” professional meteorology service that provides frequent, daily updates on expected weather conditions and has developed a sophisticated network for gathering, detailed information on the condition of its roads and highways. The Department gives high priority to remaining up-to-date with the most advanced technology and expertise; presently, it is developing a “weather severity index” which will bring greater accuracy in describing and communicating the expected weather conditions.

From the school board perspective, some boards are in the early stages of using “state-of-the-art” technology to gather information about weather and road conditions — one board has installed its own cameras at several critical areas of the school system. Also, the Nova Scotia Pupil Transportation Advisory Committee is looking into the purchase of an hourly weather forecasting service. Given that both the DOTIR and boards are trying to access the best possible information on weather forecasts and road conditions, the obvious question is, “Might there be a sharing of resources, with the understanding that sharing can be reciprocal?”.

There are likely several matters of common interest to be discussed for the purpose of raising understanding, promoting greater consistency among boards, and generally refining “best practice” in dealing with Nova Scotia winters. One obvious example of a relatively new issue that should be understood is related to how the 100-Series highways may have affected and may continue to affect storm day decisions. The amount of new, twinned highways in Nova Scotia is much greater than in earlier decades and will continue to increase. This change raises questions.

Understandably, the DOTIR gives top priority to plowing the 100-Series highways and major roads carrying high traffic volumes. Plowing roads with lower traffic volumes and local roads are given lower priority. Similarly, roads are salted according to defined “levels of service” and the 100-Series highways and roads carrying high traffic volumes are given the highest or best level of service. This being the case and the fact that most school buses do not travel on these high-priority highways and roads raises questions about the impact, if any, on clearing the roads travelled by most school buses. These questions and others of common interest need to be discussed in joint sessions between the school boards and the DOTIR. (See Appendix A for the Road Maintenance Standards for Nova Scotia’s roads and highways).

Storm Day Expectations and Practices for Staff

The Nova Scotia Tradition

Two closely connected practices have become a long-held tradition in the public school culture in Nova Scotia: (1) Schools are closed to students when the buses are cancelled because of the weather and (2) Teachers do not have to report to work on storm days when schools are closed to students. This second practice or tradition was written into the first provincial collective agreement in 1974 and has remained in place without interruption. Not only is it solidly established in the provincial collective agreement between the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union and the Department of Education, but also, it has withstood a formal challenge in recent years through the grievance and arbitration processes.

The storm day tradition was addressed formally in another way, almost 40 years ago. In 1971, the total number of days in the school calendar was increased from 190 to 195 to anticipate an average of 5 storm days per year.
Although the storm day expectations and practice for teachers have not changed in the past 40 to 50 years, the circumstances for both teachers and school boards have changed significantly. In the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, school boards essentially had only one group of employees — teachers — and all teachers worked in schools. It was easy to understand and accept that teachers did not have to report to school if their students were at home for the day. Furthermore, the nature of a teacher’s duties beyond the classroom was such that teachers could use storm days productively at home to prepare for classes and mark student assignments. The roles of teachers have become increasingly complex, as have the human resources management responsibility or function of school boards.

Now, school boards are large organizations with large school and regional staffs which include administrative assistants, educational/program support assistants, custodians, tradespersons, and operational staff in communication, planning, finance, HR and payroll. School boards have been under increasing pressure to ensure that the expectations for their various groups of employees are fair or equitable. Some understandings for board employees who work in schools are gradually evolving — perhaps haphazardly and informally in some instances and more formally in others. For example, administrative assistants and educational or program support assistants in schools do not have to report to work on storm days, with the understanding that the days can be covered by overtime accumulated or by attending a meeting or in-service activity in the future beyond the regular work schedule. A tension or pressure tends to build up if board staff members in regional offices have to report to work while those in schools do not. It is reasonable to expect that this pressure will not be relieved until there is greater fairness or equity.

The circumstances for teachers — and consequently their professional duties at school — have changed very significantly since the present storm day expectations were first established many years ago. The general profile of their students is not the same at all. In the 1950’s and 60’s, only those students who could achieve as learners, without additional program and/or instructional support, were successful in school. Because most children today remain in school no matter what their circumstances or what individual supports are required, the professional challenge for teachers is to be able to respond positively to students who have many and varied personal, social and educational needs. To be prepared for this challenge, teachers need quality time together with colleagues, beyond the time spent with students — what could be called, “professional collaboration time” or PCT.

The case to argue that teachers need time together is solidly established in the professional literature from at least three, somewhat related perspectives. Surely, there is and can be no disagreement that building effective staff development programs, creating successful “Professional Learning Communities” (PLC’s) and implementing progressive school improvement processes require large commitments of time from teachers in settings suited for meaningful collaboration. One could take several pages to build this case with specific references to leading educators in North America and around the world. But the case for professional collaboration time for teachers seems so strong, at least to this consultant, that presenting pages of evidence with a list of references seems unnecessary. It seems sufficient for the purposes of this paper to simply state what has become obvious in recent years.

The Tradition in Other Areas of Atlantic Canada

The storm day practices and expectations for teachers in New Brunswick are identical to those in Nova Scotia and are firmly established as a tradition or part of the school community culture — likewise for the Eastern Townships District School Board in Quebec.

Members of senior staff of the Eastern and Western District School Boards of Newfoundland and Labrador were contacted during this study. The traditional practices for the teachers of the 2 boards are the same as those in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, but could be different according to language in the collective agreement. Although schools are closed and teachers do not report to work when buses are cancelled, the collective agreement allows for the possibility that they could be called to a professional development activity. This has not become a common practice.

The tradition is quite different for the teachers in Prince Edward Island. According to Mr. Dale Sabean, the Superintendent of Schools for the Western School Board, an understanding regarding storm days was worked out, through a consultation process with the Prince Edward Island Teachers’ Federation, which is not part of the collective agreement. On a second storm day and any consecutive days, teachers may be responsible for attending professional development activities or other group activities subject to appropriate notice through radio announcements. Principals are responsible to have such PD or group activities prepared in advance of storm days.

The expectations for other school-based employees in Prince Edward Island have been worked out in recent years through collective bargaining. Educational assistants and youth services workers do not have to report to work on storm days, but they
are expected to log the storm day hours for future participation in activities which are scheduled outside their assigned schedule; for example, staff meetings, case conferences, and professional development sessions, among others.

The storm day tradition for teachers in a large area of cities, towns and rural communities around and including metropolitan Toronto is very different from the tradition in Atlantic Canada. The Durham District School Board (DDSB) has been singled out in this study because its storm day policy for teachers seems to be quite representative of several other boards (if not all) in that area of Canada. According to the information on their websites, the Halton District School Board, Peel District School Board and York District School Board, to name only three, could have been selected to demonstrate this very different tradition.

The Durham District School Board

(This description of the situation for the DDSB is based on a review of the relevant board policies and on an interview with the Director of Education, Mr. Martyn Beckett. A second follow-up interview occurred with Mr. Beckett and the Superintendent responsible for transportation, Mr. Mark Joel, to clarify some information gathered initially.)

The Durham District School Board serves over 70,000 students in the cities of Whitby and Oshawa and the surrounding communities. The Durham Region covers a highly populated area to the south, along the Highway 401, and a large rural area to the north. A private consortium of student transportation providers serves the DDSB and the Durham Catholic School Board within the Durham Region.

The normal or expected number of bus cancellations for inclement weather is 4-6 days per year, on average. The greater number of cancellations per year are called in the northern area of Durham Region because the more severe weather conditions occur north of what is called the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Contrary to the normal average, no bus cancellations were called last winter in the whole DDSB system. Buses were cancelled for nine days for some of the northern areas of the region during the previous winter because of more severe weather conditions.

As in Nova Scotia, a common practice has become a tradition or part of the school community culture over the past 30 to 40 years in the Durham Region — and in any neighboring regions. But, it is a very different tradition. Schools remain open when buses are cancelled due to inclement weather and all board staff groups, including teachers, are expected to report to work. (Those who do not report are not paid, but an appeal procedure, defined in policy, gives them an opportunity to argue their case to be paid).

According to the Director of Education, schools have not been closed to students because of inclement weather for almost 20 years. Mr. Beckett is a life-time resident of the area and has spent his whole teaching and administrative career with the DDSB. He remembers that last time schools were closed to students because of a very heavy snowstorm. It was 17 years ago on December 11, 1992.

Obviously the tradition or culture of the Durham Region with respect to school closure in inclement weather contrasts sharply with that of Atlantic Canada—or the Eastern Townships in Quebec. In our corner of Canada, a decision to cancel buses is also a decision to close schools to students and teachers. In the Durham Region, a decision to cancel buses means that parents must decide whether or not to allow their children to venture out or to take them to school. Similarly, teachers and other staff groups must make the choice of reporting to work or giving up a day’s pay.

One obvious question was discussed during the interviews: What about student attendance on storm days? The Director of Education and the Superintendent in charge of transportation, among other responsibilities, indicated that on the first few storm days of the winter, attendance is very low. On the first storm day, practically no students attend, but as the number increases through the winter, the attendance increases proportionally. In the winter before last, when 9 days were lost, the student attendance climbed to the point of being generally close to normal by the ninth day.

Recommendations

The sections above were written primarily to (a) understand the winter of 2009-09 in a broader context and (b) provide information that might help to raise the level of understanding of all who have an interest in the impact of storm days on our students, staff, schools and families.

The recommendations below follow only partially from the information in the previous sections. More so, they are an outcome of the many discussions with the various groups and individuals contacted during this study. They are offered to suggest ways to make improvements and to prompt school board policy discussions, both with the goal of being better prepared for the abnormal weather conditions experienced last winter—hopefully such conditions will remain abnormal and infrequent.
The first 5 recommendations are intended primarily for consideration and action by the school boards in Nova Scotia, individually and collectively. Recommendation 6 is intended to generate discussion at the local board and provincial government level.

An important note about these recommendations:
To recommend certain actions that might lead to improved practice and greater public understanding is not meant to suggest that school boards have not been making improvements. In fact, the recommendations are primarily a reflection of progressive steps that one board or another has taken already or is considering now.

Recommendation 1: Use various communication strategies, including the local and provincial media, to help families understand how storm day decisions are made and the criteria on which they are based.

At 7 o’clock on a winter morning, families at the breakfast table cannot always understand why schools have been closed or not closed. It would be helpful to understand, for example, that a decision to cancel buses can be based on the level of risk for the younger students walking to a bus stop and waiting for their bus, on the below-freezing temperature of road surfaces when it is raining, or on the fact that snow clearing or salting has been delayed for a variety of reasons.

Recommendation 2: From a provincial perspective, develop among boards and the local media a more consistent language for public communications regarding inclement weather decisions.

Two families live in the same area and the children travel in different directions to schools under the jurisdiction of neighboring school boards. One winter morning, family members in one household, who just moved to Nova Scotia from British Columbia, hear the announcement that school buses may not be able to travel on some back roads. Those in the other household hear, on the same radio station, that buses will not be travelling on unpaved roads; although their road is paved, they are aware that the regular bus route includes some sections of unpaved roads. Neither family can be sure whether or not the bus will show up.

Although this example may be exaggerated, it is meant to demonstrate how a common language for communication to families should be beneficial.

Recommendation 3: Work with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal and municipal transportation departments to develop a greater, mutual understanding of matters of common interest and to consider ways to share resources.

Those responsible for clearing and salting our roads must have accurate weather forecasts and detailed information on road conditions at their finger tips. They seek annually to improve policies and procedures and to have at their disposal the very best information and technology. Those responsible for student transportation must have the same information regarding weather and road conditions to make their decisions each morning. The potential to gain operational benefits and greater efficiencies through a sharing of information and technology is obvious.

As a specific example of sharing resources, the board transportation coordinators are working on a joint venture to purchase an hourly weather forecasting service so that all boards would be accessing the same information — not to mention sharing the financial burden. Given that the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal and various municipal transportation departments also depend on frequent weather forecasts, it makes sense to check out the possibility of having all boards and the provincial and municipal departments using the same information from the same source.

As another simple example of cooperation, boards are looking into installing their own web cameras at critical locations in the region to visually inspect road and weather conditions. In each region, the school board, the DOTIR and the municipal transportation department could be using the same cameras to access the same information.

Recommendation 4: Develop or revise school board policies, using school community consultations, to define contingency options for responding to the various inclement weather situations — such as those experienced in the winter of 2008-09.

If it is the middle of January and schools in Nova Scotia have been closed for 2 or 3 storm days, the level of concern is low and the traditional way of dealing with them is the way to go. If it is the middle of January and schools have been closed for 6 or 7 storm days already, then the level of concern is higher and school boards and families are starting to ask about other options. Schools boards should anticipate and prepare for the possibility of another winter of frequent cancellations.
Some policy questions need the thoughtful attention of Nova Scotia’s school boards in a process that would include widespread community input. The following questions are offered as examples to prompt policy discussions:

1. If the weather is clearing, but more time is needed to clear roads, is a delayed opening of 1 or 2 hours, announced before 6:00 a.m., a reasonable option, if schools and families have planned carefully ahead of time for such an announcement?

2. If 90% of a school’s students are bussed to school, closing the school is a reasonable option. Is it necessary to close another school in the same region, if 90% of its students walk to school?

3. If the conditions on a particular morning are such that elementary school students should not be expected to walk to their bus or school, is it still reasonable to expect high school students to attend school that day?

4. If the number of storm days is reaching the higher limits of lost instructional time, might “educational” or “learning” packages be prepared to anticipate the loss of more days?

Please understand! These questions are offered as examples to prompt policy debate. They are not recommendations of options to be adopted. Truly, they are questions.

Recommendation 5: Acknowledge the need to address any real or perceived inequities in the storm day expectations for the various board employee groups.

Schools boards have been trying to address this concern in one way or another, at least at the regional level. Perhaps a more concerted effort from a provincial perspective would lead to more rapid progress.

Recommendation 6: Adopt the position that creating “Professional Collaboration Time” (PCT) for teachers is an educational investment for students.

This is a recommendation for consideration by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, school boards, the Department of Education and the Government of Nova Scotia. Because the arguments on which it is based were presented earlier in this paper, only a couple of brief comments are added here for emphasis.

Any and all discussions of this recommendation must reflect a respect for the collective agreement rights of Nova Scotia’s teachers and even the most preliminary discussions must include representation and input from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union. Efforts to implement lasting, meaningful change must always involve those who may be affected most significantly and most directly.

To emphasize the potential, long-term impact of this recommendation in another way, the storm day practice for Nova Scotia’s teachers was understandable and appropriate when it began at least 50 years ago. To say that the circumstances for teachers and students have changed is an understatement. Surely, a more appropriate practice can be in place before too many decades go by!
Appendix A

Road Maintenance Standards, Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, (www.gov.ns.ca/tran/winter/Winter Maintenance Standards.pdf.)

Plowing Priorities:

1. Plowing for 100-Series highways, and major roads carrying high traffic volumes.
2. Plowing for roads with lower traffic volumes and local roads with higher traffic volumes.
3. Plowing on mainly local roads that have lower traffic volumes.

Service Levels:

1. Bare Pavement — Salting will be done on all 100-Series and selected high volume highways resulting in bare pavement. Salt is applied at the beginning of a storm and after a storm if required. Salt may be applied during a storm, depending on weather and road conditions.
2. Centre Strip Bare — Salting will be done on selected major and local roads, resulting in a 2.5-metre to 5-metre bare strip. Salting is applied at the beginning and after a storm if required.
3. Centre Strip Bare — Salting will be done on lower volume and local roads resulting in a 1-metre to 2.5-metre bare strip. Salt is applied only after a storm.
4. Snow-Packed — A snow-packed surface will be maintained on all gravel roads. Sanding will be completed as needed and when conditions warrant. Sand is applied to roads in environmentally sensitive areas, to gravel roads when required, and during times when temperatures are very cold when salt will not work effectively. On gravel roads, sand is normally applied to hills, turns, intersections, and railway crossings. Level areas on gravel roads will not normally be sanded unless severe slippery conditions exist.

Delays In Service

Storm conditions, such as blowing snow, may keep equipment on major highways to ensure they are being continuously maintained, which may cause delays for other roads.

Emergency Conditions

In a medical or other emergency situation call 911. Snow and ice control equipment will be dispatched to clear the road for emergency vehicles at the request of appropriate authorities.