

Promoting Student Engagement

*Report of the Minister's Working Committee
on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate*

September 2009

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Executive Summary

In response to growing concern from school administrators about student absenteeism in Nova Scotia, a Working Committee was struck to examine the issues related to the effectiveness of policies and practices dealing with absenteeism and the effective engagement of students in their learning. The mandate of the Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate was to develop recommendations to improve student attendance, increase engagement of students in their education and establish new and effective strategies to support a productive learning environment.

The Committee deliberated over a period of three months and engaged many key partners in its work efforts. Facilitated sessions with a large group of principals, opportunities to learn from school board program directors and regional education officers, and key messages from a very engaged stakeholder community through an on-line survey greatly contributed to the Committee's knowledge building and discussions. The Committee also undertook a targeted legislative review to determine practices in other jurisdictions and engaged selected advisors and experts to learn from their research and professional experiences.

Increasing student engagement requires balancing positive inducements, targeted interventions and consequences with clear expectations and high quality instruction in the classroom. A caring environment with respectful teacher-student relationships and a rigorous and relevant curriculum is critical for student engagement. School, family and community supports must be brought to bear to intervene promptly when students find themselves on wrong pathways or when they are in need of assistance. To ignore the problem when it starts will lead to further disengagement and unhealthy lifestyle choices.

The solutions to absenteeism and engagement are context and age specific, however what is clear is the need for:

- more communication among all stakeholders
- more support from parents/guardians
- a caring and safe learning environment
- clear consequences for absenteeism
- parents and a society that promotes and acts upon the belief that attendance and education are critically important to student development
- teachers who know how to engage learners in relevant and rigorous curriculum that promotes success for all students.

The issue of absenteeism is being evidenced at all levels of the education system. A comprehensive data system to monitor attendance and track individual students is foundational as is the necessity for greater involvement by community partners. Many partners have a role to play in bringing the necessary supports to bear.

The Committee's findings and conclusions have led to the development of 13 recommendations that, together, comprise a comprehensive package of interventions, consequences and supports to create engaged learners who take responsibility for their learning.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Minister of Education should consider an amendment to the *Education Act* requiring school attendance to grade 12 graduation or when a student reaches 18 years of age. This will serve to reinforce the importance of education and to ensure that students have more of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they require for their adult life.

Recommendation 2

The Minister of Education should support the development of a comprehensive and multi-pronged communications strategy to explain to parents and students, the important relationship between school attendance and student learning. Connecting with parents, students and other members of the school community through a range of vehicles will assist in communicating the importance of every student being engaged in their school every day.

Recommendation 3

The Minister of Education should undertake a review of school board attendance committees with a view to putting in place appropriate structures and operating procedures at the elected board level. This will ensure that school boards fulfil their responsibility to monitor overall student attendance and adopt strategies to ensure that high levels of attendance are maintained.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends to the Minister of Education that any opportunity to accelerate the development of a student information system, especially with respect to student attendance, be considered. While progress is being made on an information system, school administrators have repeatedly emphasized the importance of an attendance tracking system. A student information system would also support parental monitoring of student attendance.

In addition, the committee believes that in order for all schools to address issues that may affect absenteeism in an informed and effective way, current and accurate data is critical. All schools and boards should use a behaviour incident-tracking form to collect and analyse data to develop targeted interventions.

Recommendation 5

The Minister of Education should seek an amendment to the *Education Act* requiring a superintendent who believes a student's development or security to be at risk due to non-attendance at school to refer the matter to the Minister of Community Services for investigation under the *Children and Family Services Act*. To provide further support to students, the Ministers of Education and Community Services should require the development of protocols for their staff to follow in requiring students to attend school and assisting families that need assistance.

The Minister of Education should consider proposing to government that child protection legislation in Nova Scotia be amended to include withholding a child from school as neglect.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that school boards develop clear policies for staged interventions in response to student absenteeism. The policies must include the ongoing direct contact with parents (phone, letter, and in person) by the teacher and school administration, ongoing sharing of the attendance profile of the student with the parent, discussions with the student and the

parent on the benefits of school attendance and the consequences of non-attendance, referrals to student supports, and the use of in-school suspensions where needed. The policies should also outline the roles and responsibilities of the student, teacher, school administration, and school board in addressing attendance issues.

Recommendation 7

The Minister of Education should consider creating a new grant program with targeted funding for school boards to support their implementation of recommendation 6 to ensure that students and parents receive timely interventions and early contact from schools when attendance becomes an issue. The needs and approaches of school boards will vary across the province.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider adopting a regulation under the *Education Act* that requires attendance as a prerequisite for receiving credit for a course and will provide clear consequence for serious non-attendance. The regulation should stipulate the following:

- When a student is absent from a course for more than 20 percent of the total course time, the student will not be eligible to receive credit for the course and will no longer be permitted to participate in that course in that semester (or academic year if the course is year-long).
- If a student has exceeded the 20 percent threshold in more than two courses, the principal will recommend to the school board that the student be suspended for the remainder of the semester. The school board, in consultation with the student's parent, shall make every reasonable effort to provide alternative arrangements for the education of the student.
- Appeals to the elected board should be permitted to ensure fairness and due process for students. The appeal process should be subject to reasonable time lines. The decision of the board should be final.

In developing the regulation, the Minister should consider providing teachers with an option of assigning an "incomplete" mark to a student where non-attendance of less than 20 percent has made it difficult for the teacher to appropriately assess student achievement in that course.

Other Factors

- Absences due to serious prolonged and documented illness and religious holidays should not be counted as part of the 20 percent.
- Exemptions due to exceptional circumstances beyond the control of the parent and student may be granted by school administration for exclusion from the 20 percent count.
- A parent or student may request permission for an extended absence beyond the 20 percent, based on a proposed program of study, which may be granted by school administration in consultation with the Regional Education Officer. Awarding of course credit depends upon successful completion of the approved program by the student.

Recommendation 9

The Minister of Education should request additional government funding to support in-school suspensions. It is important that approaches be developed to ensure that students who are on long-term suspension continue to get their education.

- For those who cannot be served through in-school suspension, the committee recommends that school boards adopt policies and standards respecting the materials to be provided to students when they are out of school to ensure that the educational needs of these students are met.
- Students should be held accountable for ensuring that these program packages are completed and returned.

- Although the committee recognizes that, from time to time, out-of-school suspensions may be necessary, it recommends that use of out-of-school suspensions continues to be limited, as such suspensions are not aligned with the goals of increasing student engagement.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider a review of junior high/middle school curriculum. Additionally, the committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider the introduction of targeted funding for junior high/middle schools to support the transition from junior high to high school and to encourage school attachment. This includes both staffing as well as programming support.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that the Department of Education develop guidelines to assist school boards in developing high school programs to provide a 'second chance' for students to recover credits for missed courses.

Recommendation 12

The Province of Nova Scotia should financially assist school boards to accelerate and expand alternative programming in all boards. Some students cannot learn effectively in traditional school settings. As a consequence, their education suffers, and their behaviour can adversely affect other students. Many of these students are suspended either in school or out of school. Several school boards have implemented alternative schools to support these students.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Department of Education work with educational partners to create job-embedded opportunities for teacher professional learning. Students have indicated that they choose to attend classes where the teachers are respectful and employ a range of engaging instructional strategies. To improve the quality of their instruction, teachers need time to collaborate with their colleagues and to examine all aspects of student achievement.

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1.0 MANDATE OF THE COMMITTEE

The Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate was created by the Minister of Education in May 2009. In establishing the committee, the Minister charged it with the following terms of reference:

- Examine the challenges facing today's classrooms and the effectiveness of policies and practices dealing with absenteeism and the effective engagement of students in their learning.
- Identify best practices and using them to foster good behaviour in school and classroom.
- Recommend how to best support an effective climate for teaching and learning.
- Examine the role of school boards, school advisory council and parents.
- Review legislation, policies, and guidelines related to student and parental responsibilities.

A list of committee members is provided in Appendix B.

The Minister requested that the committee provide a report in September 2009.

2.0 CURRENT LEGISLATION, REGULATIONS, AND POLICY

2.1 Legislation and Policy

In Nova Scotia, the *Education Act* governs school attendance and classroom climate. Under Section 111 of the act, all residents of the province between the ages of 5 and 16 years are required to attend school, subject to the regulations. There are no regulations under the act with respect to attendance. The act stipulates the duties of students, parents, teachers, principals, and school boards. The following sections include those duties related to the issue of absenteeism and classroom climate.

Students

24 (1) It is the duty of a student to

- *participate fully in learning opportunities;*
- *attend school regularly and punctually;*
- *contribute to an orderly and safe learning environment;*
- *respect the rights of others; and*
- *comply with the discipline policies of the school and the school board.*

Parents

25 (1) It is the duty of parents to

- *support their children in achieving learning success;*
- *cause their children to attend school as required by the regulations;*
- *communicate regularly with their children's school;*
- *ensure the basic needs of their children are met, including ensuring that their children are well-nourished and well-rested when they go to school; and*
- *support their children's teachers in their efforts to provide an education for their children.*

Under section 117 of the act a parent who receives notice, and fails to ensure that their child attends school, may be charged with an offence under the act.

117 A parent or other person having charge or control of any child, shall, within five days after having been served with a notice by the school board naming the child, cause the child to attend school and continue in regular attendance at school, unless the child is excused from attendance under this Act or the regulations or unless that person satisfies the school board that that person is unable to induce the child to attend public school.

The act goes on to stipulate that if a parent is served with a notice under section 117 of the Act and the child is absent from school for a period of five or more school days (not necessarily consecutive) following receipt of the notice by the parent, then the parent can be charged with an offence under the act.

Teachers

26 (1) It is the duty of a teacher in a public school to

- *respect the rights of students;*

- *teach diligently the subjects and courses of study prescribed by the regulations that are assigned to the teacher by the school board;*
- *implement teaching strategies that foster a positive learning environment aimed at helping students achieve learning outcomes;*
- *encourage students in the pursuit of learning;*
- *monitor the effectiveness of the teaching strategies by analyzing outcomes achieved;*
- *acknowledge and, to the extent reasonable, accommodate differences in learning styles;*
- *review regularly with students their learning expectations and progress;*
- *conduct such assessments and evaluations as are necessary to document student progress;*
- *take all reasonable steps necessary to create and maintain an orderly and safe learning environment;*
- *maintain appropriate order and discipline in the school or room in the teacher's charge and report to the principal or other person in charge of the school the conduct of any student who is persistently defiant or disobedient;*
- *maintain an attitude of concern for the dignity and welfare of each student and encourage in each student an attitude of concern for the dignity and welfare of others and a respect for religion, morality, truth, justice, love of country, humanity, equality, industry, temperance and all other virtues;*
- *take all reasonable steps to secure full and regular attendance at school of the students under the teacher's supervision;*
- *keep accurate attendance records and report absent students to the principal as prescribed by the regulations;*
- *communicate regularly with parents in accordance with policies established by the school board;*

Principals

38(2) *It is the duty of a principal to*

- *ensure that the public school program and curricula are implemented;*
- *keep attendance records respecting every student enrolled at the school and report thereon to the school board, as required by the school board;*
- *take all reasonable steps to secure full and regular attendance at school of the students enrolled in the school in accordance with policies established by the school board;*
- *communicate regularly with the parents of the students;*
- *ensure that reasonable steps are taken to create and maintain a safe, orderly, positive and effective learning environment;*
- *ensure that provincial and school board policies are followed;*
- *co-operate with the staff of other departments and agencies of the Government to better meet the needs of the students in the school;*

School Boards

64(2) *A school board shall, in accordance with this Act and the regulations,*

- *make provision for the education and instruction of all students enrolled in its schools and programs;*
- *promote excellence in education;*

- *develop and implement educational programs for students with special needs within regular instructional settings with their peers in age, in accordance with the regulations and the Minister's policies and guidelines;*
- *promote its schools as safe, quality learning environments and as community resources;*
- *establish policies respecting the communication by teachers to students and parents of learning expectations and progress;*
- *establish an attendance committee to monitor attendance and carry out school board policies in respect of the absenteeism of students in the schools;*
- *take remedial steps, in accordance with school board policy, in respect of those students who have been reported to the school board by a principal as being habitually absent from the school without acceptable excuse;*
- *establish a regional student-discipline policy consistent with the Provincial discipline policy established by the Minister;*
- *develop policies and implement programs consistent with the Minister's policies and guidelines respecting students who have been suspended for more than five days or expelled from school;*
- *establish a policy for the protection of students and employees from harassment and abuse;*
- *co-operate with other school boards and Government departments and agencies to ensure the effective and efficient carrying out of this Act and the regulations;*

School Attendance

Section 111 *Subject to the regulations, every resident of the Province over the age of five years and under the age of sixteen years shall attend school in accordance with the regulations.*

Duties of Attendance Committee

Section 116 *The attendance committee of the school board shall*

- *monitor the attendance of students in schools in the district or region;*
- *take steps to reduce the absenteeism of students from schools in the district or region in accordance with policies of the school board; and*
- *recommend to the school board remedial steps and policies in respect of those students who have been reported to the school board by the principal as being habitually absent from school without acceptable excuse.*

Section 126 of the *Education Act* states as follows:

Where a student is suspended for more than five school days, the school board, in consultation with the student's parent, shall make every reasonable effort to provide alternate arrangements for the education of the student, in accordance with the regulations.

Governor-in-Council

Section 146(h) provides that the Governor-in-Council may make regulations prescribing the legal age limit for students and the conditions of satisfactory attendance at public schools.

2.2 Related Policies

In addition to the *Education Act*, the province adopted a Provincial School Code of Conduct in 2008. In the code, non-attendance or poor attendance at school is listed as a disruptive behaviour. The code suggests a comprehensive and co-ordinated strategy to managing disruptive behaviour effectively. The strategy includes the following:

- a school code of conduct with a positive approach emphasizing instructional strategies, consistency of approach, and classroom routines
- proactive promotion of positive behaviours
- involvement of families, students, school staff, and the community at large
- inter-agency collaboration
- co-operative discipline strategies
- tracking, monitoring, and analyses of data relating to behaviours and utilizing the data in school improvement planning
- a challenging and engaging curriculum for all students

The code lays out six actions or consequences that can be taken by schools to address non-attendance or poor attendance. They are as follows:

- conference with student and/or parent/guardian
- refer to school guidance counsellor
- detention with academic support to make up work and time missed
- in-school suspension with academic support
- withdrawal of privileges
- referral to board attendance committee, Education Act, s. 64(2)(p)

The code prohibits certain consequences from being applied to manage disruptive behaviour such as poor attendance. This includes the use of academic consequences such as assigning extra homework or course withdrawal for absenteeism.

School boards have developed their own codes of conduct and in some instances have developed their own attendance policies and protocols.

2.3 Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

The committee has undertaken a limited review of education legislation in other jurisdictions. Most provinces and territories have legislation similar to Nova Scotia's.

Some relevant provisions that are found in other jurisdictions are examined below.

Attendance Officers

Unlike Nova Scotia, some provinces have attendance officers assigned to school boards. These officers have the power to enter any place where children may be employed or where children may congregate. They also have the authority to conduct any children found in those places back to school or to their parents.

Mandatory Age Requirements

Most provinces have mandatory age requirements similar to Nova Scotia's. In Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nunavut, however, the age for leaving school has been raised to 18.

Child Welfare Legislation

There are two provinces in Canada that make a link between attendance of children at school and the child's security and development. In the New Brunswick *Education Act*, there is a provision for superintendents who believe the child's security or development is in danger to refer the matter to the Minister of Social Development for investigation under the *Family Services Act*. New Brunswick also, in its legislation, identifies that "the security or development of a child may be in danger when the child is in the care of a person who neglects or refuses to ensure that the child attends school."

Similarly, in Quebec, the *Youth Protection Act* identifies "neglect" as a child's parent/guardian failing to take the necessary steps to provide the child with schooling. It also states that the security or development of a child may be considered to be in danger where a child does not attend school or is frequently absent.

Loss of Credit

At least three boards in Canada use loss of credit/withdrawal from class. These boards are found in Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories. In all cases, this is an option only at the high school level.

Other Items

Two novel ideas were found during the jurisdictional scan. One was in legislation in Ontario whereby a student could lose their driver's licence for failure to attend school (this is not currently enacted).

Selected examples of school board policies that provide for staged interventions have been included in Appendix G.

2.4 Successful Program Initiatives: Selected Nova Scotia Examples

Throughout the committee's deliberations, members heard about several programs and initiatives that are believed to have had a significant positive effect on student engagement, student attendance and classroom climate. This selection is not intended to provide a comprehensive account of all initiatives, programs, and services available in Nova Scotia to support student engagement and achievement.

Positive Effective Behaviour Supports (PEBS)

One of the foremost advances in school-wide discipline is the emphasis on school-wide systems of support that include proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviours to create positive school environments.

Unfortunately, no magic wand single-handedly works to remove the barriers to learning that occur when behaviours disrupt the learning community. Recognizing that the climate of each learning community is different and that no one approach is necessarily appropriate to meet the needs of every school, PEBS provides a continuum of positive effective behaviour support for all students within a school. It is implemented in areas including the classroom and non-classroom settings (such as hallways, buses, and restrooms). Attention is focussed on creating and sustaining school-wide, classroom, and individual systems of support that improve lifestyle

results (personal, health, social, family, work, recreation) for all children and youth by making targeted behaviours less effective, efficient, and relevant and desired behaviour more functional. It enhances the capacity of schools, families, and communities to design effective environments that improve the link between research-validated practices and the environments in which teaching and learning occur.

PEBS is an interactive approach that includes opportunities to correct and improve the four key elements used in school-wide PEBS: 1) Outcomes, 2) Data, 3) Practices, and 4) Systems. Each school defines its set of outcomes (or expected behaviours), which are endorsed and emphasized by students, families, and educators and supported with positive reinforcement. The practices (interventions and strategies) are based on research and supported by data, which is used to identify status, need for change, and effects of interventions. Without data and evidence, interventions may target the wrong area and be ineffective or irrelevant and ineffective. PEBS requires a whole-school, systems approach in order to be effective.

Many principals and schools who have implemented all aspects of PEBS have reported significant and sustained improvements in student behaviour and learning.

Junior High Network

The Junior High School Network project, launched in 1997, centred on school improvement. It focussed on researching, developing, and promoting school models that are effective, inclusive, and committed to continuous improvement. The project built a network of schools and other education partners committed to working collaboratively to support student learning and success. The project promoted effective change strategies to guide school-based decision making, planning, and implementation of improvements in school practices and programs. The project also recognized the importance of building strong support systems outside the school and promoted networking as a powerful strategy for supporting the school improvement process.

The network promoted a significant paradigm shift in philosophy and attitudes toward student learning and success at junior high. The success of this project built a foundation for initiatives that followed. A prime example would be *Active Readers 7–9*, which firmly established increased support for students' development as readers as a priority for school improvement and called for a whole-school focus and co-ordination of efforts to maximize the potential for improvement in reading achievement of students in junior high.

Rewards to Promote Good Attendance

Exam Exemptions for Good Attendance

The committee recognizes that some high schools, under school board policy, permit high school students who achieve a high level of attendance to choose not to write required exams at the end of a semester as long as the course does not result in a Nova Scotia exam.

CME Attendance Excellence Award Program

The Council on Mi'kmaq Education instituted an incentive program to reward good school attendance among Mi'kmaq students if the students meet certain criteria. The Attendance Excellence Award was implemented for students in P-6 with 13 percent of students achieving the criteria in the first year. Now in year 5, up to 42 percent of students meet the required attendance levels to receive a reward. Plans are under way to introduce this program in grades 7-9. There are no plans as yet to introduce the program into grades 10-12.

Increasing Learning Success

Increasing Learning Success was published by the Department of Education in 2008. The document focusses on how high schools are introducing changes to more fully engage students and to support teachers in the process. Research shows that high schools need to change their organizational structure to become student-centred environments that nurture all students. The document outlines recent research and summarizes strategies that have been implemented in high schools that engage all students and that, if implemented, can help to ensure that young people are prepared for many opportunities in the future. In addition to an overview of national and international high schools that are changing and responding to the needs of the changing high school population, *Increasing Learning Success* includes four Nova Scotian secondary schools sharing their experience of enhancing student engagement.

Programs to Increase Student Engagement

Options and Opportunities (O₂)

Options and Opportunities (O₂) is a program designed to help students work toward a career or occupation in learning contexts that respond to their learning needs and that provide linkages to the workplace and other post-secondary destinations. The program is directed at students who are disengaged in school and require alternative options to traditional learning. High school students who participate in the O₂ program get hands-on experience in a career academy and increased opportunities for community-based learning such as co-op credits and short-term work placements. Forty-four schools will offer the program in 2009-2010, providing the opportunity for students not only to earn their high school diploma, but also to graduate with work-ready skills and a plan for the future.

To date, O₂ is proving to be a huge success. All indications are that this program is having a tremendous, positive impact on students, families, and schools. Student attendance and grades have improved, principals are reporting fewer discipline issues, and students are developing self-esteem and self-confidence. Some students have described the program as "life-changing." The department intends, when resources are available, to design a similar program for junior high students and to enhance opportunities for community-based learning, including service learning and volunteering.

International Baccalaureate

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program is a comprehensive, demanding pre-university program of studies delivered in grades 11 and 12. The IB Diploma has become a symbol of high achievement and has gained a reputation for its rigorous external assessment

with published global standards as well as the development of the whole student—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. This program was implemented in Nova Scotia to support the engagement of any academically ambitious high school student who seeks to attend university. The program requires a great deal of reading outside the classroom, and it is expected that students in the program have excellent reading skills. The program culminates in a series of international examinations written in six academic subjects chosen by each student—one subject from each of six groups, which correspond to the principal domains of knowledge.

The IB Diploma program is currently offered in 13 public schools. IB involves very rigorous program requirements, and to be successful, students must be fully engaged in the learning process. Schools that offer IB have indicated that students feel more academically challenged and that many students have performed very well on the IB examinations.

Students are required to make a significant commitment to be involved in either IB or O₂. Similarly, students are required to make a significant commitment when they enrol in co-operative education courses. Co-operative education opportunities can also play a strong role in enhancing the relevance of the educational experience. They require students to make choices and to be in regular attendance. These programs also require teachers to make a significant commitment. The students in these programs know that the teachers go the extra mile to support their individual participation and their development, and students know that these teachers care about them personally and about their success. In some cases a written contract is signed by the student, which outlines what the student will learn and will do as part of the learning. Also critical to the success of the students in these programs are the engagement of the parents and the professional development of the teachers.

Alternative Schools or Alternative Programs

Some school boards have implemented alternative programs or alternative schools to enhance the flexibility of programming and schedules for students who are experiencing challenges. This programming has been implemented to respond to the needs of students who have either been suspended from school or are considered to be at risk of being suspended for various behaviours.

These programs are usually characterized by each student having an individualized academic plan to meet the required learning outcomes through specifically crafted instruction and counselling, more individualized assessment, cross-disciplinary courses that increase the relevance of the learning for the student, support and programming to meet different learning styles, more hands-on learning, much smaller student-to-teacher ratios, immediate student support through an on-site social worker and psychologist, and a strong working relationship with parents. The goal is to address certain programming needs and behavioural issues for at-risk students and help them make the transition back to a regular school. Ultimately, accountability for the overall success of the students rests with both the students themselves and the school.

These programs are expensive and require a group of professionals with specialized skills and abilities; however, they have shown to be very effective in addressing the needs of particular students.

Parents as Career Coaches

Recognizing the very important role that parents play in influencing their child's education and career decisions, but also recognizing that parents sometimes feel less prepared to support their child in this decision-making process, the Parents as Career Coaches program was designed to help parents better understand today's labour market and the role they play in guiding and supporting their children as they move through post-secondary education and training to the workforce. The aim of this program is to help youth make informed and successful education and career choices. The program teaches career development as a lifelong process that involves taking the time to understand what today's youth need to find their place in the constantly changing world of work. The program covers topics such as post-secondary options, the changing labour market, career-building skills, talking to your teenager, and how to connect interests and skills with career options. It is a partnership initiative and is offered at no cost through three sessions to parents of high school students across the province. The program has experienced very high demand, and parents have reported it to be very valuable in assisting them in helping their children through the senior high years.

In addition to the examples noted above, 10 schools have been successful in receiving grant funding under the Increasing Student Success initiative and have undertaken program activities designed to increase student engagement, reduce absenteeism, and provide additional supports to students who are struggling in school. See Section 3.2 for further information.

3.0 2007 AND 2008 PRINCIPALS' REPORTS

3.1 Report Highlights

In response to concerns from principals about student absenteeism, in 2006 the Department of Education established a committee of principals to summarize the key issues in a report to the Deputy Minister. Reporting in 2007, principals stressed the importance of implementing the recommendations of the Nunn Commission. They also highlighted the importance of academic consequences as one of the measures to address the growing lack of student engagement, evidenced by a reported increase in the levels of absenteeism particularly at the senior high school level.

Building upon this early work the department constituted a second committee of principals and others to consider this report, attempt to quantify the issues raised, and develop a comprehensive set of recommendations for consideration.

Using a sample of 10 Nova Scotia high schools (representing approximately 20 percent of the high school student population), the committee estimated that more than 45 percent of the students in the sample missed 10 percent of time in one class, most of which was "unexcused". Further, an estimated 7.4 percent missed 20 percent of class time.

There were differing views on the appropriate consequences that would support greater student engagement and a decrease in absenteeism, with some members strongly advocating for the option of a withdrawal of academic credit after a certain number of classes are missed and others expressing concern that withdrawing credit may further disadvantage some students.

Both the 2007 and 2008 committees recognized the complexity of this growing and multi-variate issue and commented on the layered range of tools, supports, and agencies required to address it comprehensively and appropriately. What works in grade 11 may have no bearing on absenteeism issues in grade 5 or grade 8. The 2008 committee provided 10 recommendations related to student engagement, attendance, early intervention, and communication. A critical component that threads through each of those recommendations is the recognition of the need for a data system to track student absenteeism and monitor trends to support analysis and early intervention. The 10 recommendations are as follows:

Student Engagement

- Develop a provincial student information system.
- Increase the options for interactive learning and alternative settings .
- Provide targeted intervention to assist students in moving from one year to the next, for those who may not have met all of the learning outcomes in the previous grade.
- Review the legislated allowable number of working hours for students.

Attendance Policies

- Review and update school board attendance policies to ensure efficacy and comprehensiveness.
- Communicate the membership and role of school board attendance committees to schools and school advisory councils.
- Provide additional school support to address attendance issues to lessen the impact on principals' time for instructional leadership.

- Increase the professional staff to schools to support effective in-school suspension options

Interventions

- Proactively address issues at the elementary level to intervene early through such means as home-based interventions and engagement of other agency support.

Communication

- Implement a public awareness campaign aimed at informing the public of the issue of school attendance and their respective roles in addressing the issue.

Five other areas identified by the 2008 committee for future work included

- the definition of “authorized” and “unauthorized” absences
- responses when there is no parent or guardian
- inter-agency protocols
- gathering further information and perspectives from elementary principals and other partners
- possible inconsistencies with departmental enrolment audit practices

The Minister’s Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate wishes to acknowledge the committee of principals and express its strong appreciation for their work in advancing the issues related to student absenteeism and engagement and for providing the groundwork for the continued conversation on this important topic.

3.2 Pilot Initiatives

Beginning in the 2007–2008 academic year, schools boards were invited to propose pilot initiatives for secondary schools. Small funding grants were provided to increase levels of school attendance, provide in-school alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, and increase the amount of time available to school administration for educational leadership by decreasing the time needed to deal with attendance issues. In some cases funding was extended into the 2008–2009 year.

Pilots included Booster Clubs, in-school suspension rooms, “check and connect” systems for red-zone students and their families, additional professional staff for yellow-zone students, credit recovery programs, and alternative scheduling. The pilots also involved students having more regular engagement opportunities with professionals and other adults in the school, greater use of community resources, home visits, and development of individual PEBS plans. Schools that engaged in many of these pilot initiatives have indicated a dramatic and consistent drop in office referrals and external suspensions.

4.0 CONSULTATION METHODOLOGY AND KEY THEMES

The committee used several methods to obtain public and professional input to assist in preparing its report, including an online questionnaire with letters going out to principals, school advisory councils, and a range of key partner organizations to encourage participation; an invitation to school boards and key partners to provide written submissions to the committee, a facilitated working session with 25 Nova Scotia principals, a session with program directors from each school board, a questionnaire targeting input from the Regional Education Officers around the province, and discussions with selected education professionals and experts on issues related to student absenteeism and engagement.

The following section provides a high-level overview of the input provided to the committee to support its deliberations.

4.1 Online Questionnaire

A web-based public survey was developed to allow principals, teachers, students, parents, school advisory councils, and the general public to respond to questions that the committee developed. The goal of the survey was to gather input from stakeholders in the public school system with the aim of clearly identifying the following:

- conditions that encourage student attendance and an effective classroom climate that facilitates learning
- conditions that have a negative impact on student attendance
- reasons students choose not to attend school
- the effects of frequent absenteeism on students and the classroom climate
- current best practices for encouraging attendance
- effective consequences for absenteeism that would help address this issue
- the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in addressing attendance issues

Also, an opportunity was provided in the survey for respondents to submit comments. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix D. A more detailed summary on the responses to the online questionnaire may be found in Appendix E.

From the survey period of June 10 to July 10, the survey received 2,182 responses — 2,090 responses to the English language version of the survey and 92 responses to the French language version. Given the high number of responses to the committee's online survey, it is clear that absenteeism and classroom climate are important issues to all stakeholders in the public school system.

Major themes identified by respondents include the need to

- increase communication among all stakeholders
- increase support from parents/guardians
- establish caring and safe learning environments
- establish clear consequences for absenteeism
- promote the importance of both attendance and education
- provide students with engaging learning opportunities

Overall, the importance of better co-operation among all stakeholders, with more open lines of communication to help identify and address issues affecting student attendance, was highlighted. In addition, there was a strong focus on the need for greater inter-agency co-operation to address the greater social, medical, and legal issues that are related to student attendance.

The need for a positive learning environment was clearly identified: an environment where all students feel safe and valued and an environment with clear, consistently applied rules and consequences regarding attendance and appropriate behaviour.

Finally, the critical importance of parents (and guardians) valuing education was stressed by respondents to the survey. To ensure that greater value is placed on education, there is a need to clearly communicate how attendance affects student learning and student achievement.

The following subsections highlight both the general themes and themes by respondent group that emerged through responses to both open-ended and fixed-response questions.

General Themes

Communication between Home and School

Throughout the survey the importance of clear and open communication between the home and school environments was stressed. Frequent contact between school staff and parents would encourage attendance and help to identify any larger issues that may have an effect on student attendance. It was noted that the students without attendance issues are most often the children of parents who take an active role in the child's education. Many also felt that parents should ensure that their child is attending school; however, they agreed that it is the responsibility of school staff, specifically teachers and administrators, to ensure that parents are aware of their child's attendance and/or behavioural issues.

Family Support

A supportive home environment that places a high value on education was identified as an important factor in facilitating an effective classroom climate and encouraging attendance. It was noted that students are less likely to miss school when their parents stress the importance of education. Family support must work in conjunction with effective communication between the home and school. It was recognized that it is the responsibility of parents to prepare their children for school and ensure that they attend, as well as their responsibility to inform the school of any issues related to attendance, such as bullying. By maintaining an open dialogue with school staff, parents can work to address issues affecting the attendance of their children.

Caring and Safe Learning Environment

It is important to establish a caring and safe learning environment that will encourage students to attend school. The importance of positive and respectful relationships between students and teachers was stressed as a significant contributor to student engagement. School staff must work with students to create the best possible learning environment. Poor relationships between students, physical and psychological bullying, and violent incidents in school have created an atmosphere that is not conducive to learning and that does not encourage attendance.

Peer pressure was also identified as a means for some students to encourage others to skip class. Respondents noted that, especially in the teenage years, the desire to conform can lead students, who might otherwise not have problems with attendance, to miss school.

The Lack of Value Placed on Attendance and Education

It was recognized that there is a lessening of the value placed on education by parents, and this has led to higher levels of absenteeism. In some cases, the school may be seen as a “drop-in” centre, where students can attend or not as they choose. Value must be placed not only on the mark achieved at the end of the course but also on the instruction and process of participating in the classroom with peers to get the most value from the educational experience. In addition, it was recognized that a lackadaisical attitude toward attendance could have a significant negative effect on students when they leave school to begin post-secondary studies or find employment.

Clear Consequences for Absenteeism

The survey responses clearly indicate the need for clear consequences for absenteeism and for consistent enforcement of these consequences. Frequent absenteeism can have a negative effect not only on the absent student but also on their classmates. When students see one of their peers miss school without consequences, they begin to question the value of attendance and of education in general. Moreover, if an action is punished by one teacher but overlooked by another, students may begin to see the education system as inconsistent or unfair.

Establishing and enforcing clear consequences with respect to student attendance requires support from all stakeholders. Consequences and/or sanctions related to attendance issues must be supported by teachers, school staff, school administrators, school boards, and the Department of Education. In addition to establishing clear, consistent consequences for absenteeism, a formal system could be created that recognizes and rewards good behaviour and attendance. For example, good attendance could be used as one set of criteria for exam exemptions.

The Need for Alternative Education Opportunities

A number of respondents expressed the need for alternative education opportunities for those students who are struggling in school. The Options and Opportunities (O₂) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs were highlighted as positive examples. In some cases, alternative schools may be necessary.

Feedback by Respondent Group

Students

Student respondents often had very different responses to survey questions. They often put more emphasis on social relationships within the school. For example, more students felt that having friends in the school and/or having a positive relationship with teachers would encourage attendance than did any other respondent group. Similarly, more students felt that if students and teachers do not get along it will have a negative impact on student attendance. Interestingly, a much lower number of students identified school safety as an issue affecting attendance. For them, the greatest issue affecting attendance was classes being seen as boring and/or a waste of time.

Parents (and Guardians)

School safety was a major concern for parents, as were positive relationships between students and teachers. Even more parents than students felt that poor relationships between teachers and students lead to attendance issues. Parents were very supportive of tracking student attendance and providing clear and consistent rules for absenteeism.

School Advisory Council Members

School Advisory Council (SAC) members were particularly supportive of improving the school culture. SAC members felt that a caring and safe learning environment and a school culture that promotes both academic achievement and involvement in school life are important in encouraging good attendance. SAC members also valued school staff who regularly follow up with and provide additional supports to students who are struggling with academic and/or attendance issues.

Teachers

The majority of respondents to this survey were teachers; therefore, their perspectives are fairly clearly reflected in the overall summary of responses to the survey questions. There are, however, a few occasions where the responses from teachers stood out. Unlike students and parents, teachers did not put the same level of importance on positive relationships between students and teachers. Like parents, teachers did see the need for clear consequences for absenteeism. Finally, more than any other respondent group, teachers believed that a database to track student attendance would help to reduce absenteeism.

School Administrators

Similar to SAC members, administrators believed that a positive school culture would help improve student attendance. They also valued school staff who regularly follow up with and provide additional supports to students who are struggling with academic and/or attendance issues. However, like teachers, administrators put less emphasis on positive relationships between teachers and students.

4.2 Submissions: School Boards and Key Partners

The committee invited written submissions from all of the regional school boards, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, and other key partner organizations.

Responses from School Boards

Written submissions were received from the Halifax Regional School Board and the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. These submissions highlighted the following:

- the valuable recommendations from the Nunn Commission inquiry that should be acted upon, particularly those related to the public school system (school attachment and attendance, early intervention, discipline, programming, and training for teachers and administrators)
- the importance of students engaging in their education

- the important role played by junior high and middle school support teachers to support student engagement and early intervention and the need for targeted funding to support hiring these staff
- alternative programming options to increase student engagement or to support the continued education of students who are at risk of repeated or extended suspensions from school; examples included Youth Pathways and Transitions and the Credit Recovery program
- the need for adequate disciplinary measures and enforcement mechanisms for truant youth
- over-reliance on out-of-school suspensions and the need for in-school suspension options
- the development and implementation of systematic and research-based policies and protocols at both the provincial and board levels to increase student attendance
- the importance of balancing a student's right to attend school with the responsibilities that accompany that right
- increasing the understanding of the high correlation between the level of engagement the student has with the school/classroom and the attendance of the student
- the importance of parents valuing education through their actions (e.g., ensuring that their child attends school; not removing their children from school for family vacations or to pursue athletic opportunities)
- the importance of defining student success in school to include both achieving the public school program outcomes and school/classroom attendance and engagement
- the important role of teachers to grow their knowledge of teaching and the learning process and to adjust their teaching strategies to support a variety of learners

The school boards provided a number of suggestions and recommendations for the committee's consideration to address the concerns above. These included proposed elements for a provincial Attendance Management Policy including sanctions for non-attendance, communications strategies for increasing the valuing of education among parents and society, the concept of "deemed withdrawal", appeal mechanisms, programming, and funding directions.

The South Shore Regional School Board had also provided a letter to the committee indicating that they were taking active measures to encourage those in their board to complete the online survey.

Responses from Other Partners

Written letters were also received from the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU), the Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse (FPANE), and the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA).

The NSTU in its written submission noted the concern from teachers about rising student absenteeism, the lack of repercussions for non-attendance, and a devaluing of education by parents. It also stressed the linkages between student attendance and student engagement, noting that non-attendance effectively diminishes the school as a focus of learning and the importance of education. Further, the NSTU submission stressed that a student's performance cannot be assessed only through tests and that in-class conversation and observation are a large part of assessment for learning.

The NSTU noted that there may be some legitimate reasons why students may be unable to attend school; however, as the most important learning takes place in class as part of the classroom experience, it is important to address non-legitimate absences. Of particular concern are those situations involving student participation in illegal activity in the school or students not feeling safe or being bullied due to race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

The NSTU reflected the frustration of teachers where absences are not considered legitimate and students are not engaged in their own learning and are not willing to put the needed effort and focus into compensating for the absence. For example, teachers prepare lessons to be made up when absences occur, but the lessons may not be completed, and students return to school without being caught up to the rest of the class, making instruction challenging for the teacher and other students. This can lead to boredom, behaviour problems, and/or excessive demands on the teacher's time and attention. There is a sense that the burden of learning is often placed on teachers, administrators, and the school, rather than on the student after prolonged or frequent inexcusable absences.

The positive directions being taken by administrators and classroom teachers to improve the class and school climate were highlighted as important to ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment, often as a focus for school improvement or accreditation goals. However, the NSTU stresses the importance of having meaningful consequences for student absenteeism, including removal of credit. It is suggested that when credit cannot be achieved in two or more courses due to absenteeism, the student should have his or her status as a member of the school community revoked.

Finally, the NSTU submission stressed the importance of enforcing the parental responsibility of ensuring that their children attend school and improved communication and information sharing among all agencies working with youth.

The submission from FPANE indicated that student absenteeism and classroom climate are of relatively small significance in Acadian schools. They continued, however, to say that in schools where concerns related to these issues exist, actions such as reviewing successful practices and providing teacher and parent support might be appropriate directions.

The NSSBA expressed its interest in the issue of student absenteeism and engagement and noted that individual school boards may provide specific written comments from an individual board's perspective.

4.3 Facilitated Session with Principals

The committee undertook facilitated consultations with school principals to receive input related to the consequences of non-attendance; strategies to promote student engagement, classroom climate, and positive behaviours; and, shared responsibility for student engagement and attendance.

Each school board nominated three principals, representing elementary, junior and senior high schools, to participate in the working session. Three principals from Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey were also invited to participate. The chart below summarizes the insights and perspectives from the participating principals.

| Breakout Session | Key Points | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | Elementary School (P–6) | Junior High School (7–9) | Senior High School (10–12) |
| 1. Consequences of Non-attendance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance is parent-driven at the elementary level Late arrivals are a problem Students are missing large blocks of time There is a lack of professional support for students/parents at the board level and from outside agencies Students without attendance issues suffer when teachers have to take time to help frequently absent students catch up There is a lack of consequences for absenteeism Students “grade” from one level to another whether they meet the outcomes or not There need to be incentives to promote attendance In-school suspension for absenteeism removes the child from the learning environment Attendance habits developing in elementary carry through to junior and senior high | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get the students in the door and support them once they arrive Identify risk factors and direct specific supports/programming based on need Consequences should not be designed using arbitrary numbers Focus on support and counselling versus punitive measures <p>Issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> lack of engagement behaviour issues funding removed for biggest attendance issues additional workload on teacher interrupts learning for attending students alternative structures and/or programs put in place for chronic students who are absent do not fit in junior high setting excusable versus inexcusable absence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are special cases where students cannot attend school due to medical or psychological issues The DOE should define what acceptable excuses are for absenteeism and create provincial consistency Study packages should be prepared for students who are missing a large number of classes Most parents would be in agreement that there should be some consequences for too many classes missed Problem seemed to have started much earlier, even at the elementary level, but now the problem appears at the high school level Nothing happens even when students are chased down The O₂ program stresses attendance; if you miss too many classes, then you are removed from the program There is a food policy but not an attendance policy Service plan junior high students are not supported in high school Absent students take a great deal of resources |

| Breakout Session | Recommendations | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| | Elementary School (P–6) | Junior High School (7–9) | Senior High School (10–12) |
| 1. Consequences of Non-attendance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrate attendance • Educate parents on the importance of attendance and increase parental engagement • Increase parent, family, and community engagement in the school climate • Government departments need to work together to create supportive, positive, and effective processes to improve attendance • Supports must be the same across the province (e.g., guidance counsellors and school psychologists) • Alternative programming is needed for some students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use tracking sheets (check and connect) for students who have issues • Make use of safe arrival/ automated phone calls home • Make frequent contact with parents; meet with student and parents together • Reward good attendance with exam exemptions • Provide supervision to help students catch up on missed work • Remove school privileges • Develop a systemic continuum of interventions from classroom teacher all the way to inter-agency collaboration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw a line: institute sanctions for absenteeism, an appeal process, and loss of credit • Educate parents and students with respect to resources available, such as: programming, interventions, special support, flex programs, targeted funding for programs that support these students, PEBS, guidance, etc. • Calls home are vital • A clear definition of excused and unexcused absences is needed • Institute loss of credit and removal from the class after 20 percent absences (16 classes) • Remove driver's licence • Remove work permit |

| Breakout Session | Key Points | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | Elementary School (P-6) | Junior High School (7-9) | Senior High School (10-12) |
| 2. Strategies to Promote Classroom Climate, Student Engagement and Positive Behaviour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> External factors affect student involvement Professional development, positive classroom environments, and differentiated instruction are all important Teachers should share successful practices through mentoring, coaching, team teaching, etc. Schools have become more sterile, with less community engagement The DOE must make reporting of student behaviour useful, meaningful, and practical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide PD on differentiated instruction PD should be embedded (PLCs) Make consistent contact with home Greet students Involve students in conversations about decisions affecting them to encourage ownership Promote student clubs and committees Create smaller school cultures within larger schools Create positive incentives to go with the PEBS program (PEBS store, etc.) Increase programming options for students (e.g., service learning, mentorship, experiential learning) Encourage teachers to use a variety of strategies to engage their students Provide breakfast and lunch programs Establish in-school suspension/behavioural support areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Late arrivals can disturb the classroom instruction Enrich the students by increasing their participation in extracurricular activities PEBS is a positive program O₂ and co-op education promote interest to come to school Acknowledge student achievements and improvements, and create positive relationships Community involvement Youth health centres are a way of promoting student leadership Promote school safety Provide innovative and engaging lessons Teachers who show they care and make an effort to connect (PD needed on this) Students like structure and consequences Teachers watching teachers, PLCs, team-teaching Programs to meet a variety of needs: IPPs, IB, O₂, Career Access/Exploration, alternative schools, etc. <p>Issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> transition as principals move from one school to another principal's skill versus the need of the community and the school |

| Breakout Session | Recommendations | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | Elementary School (P-6) | Junior High School (7-9) | Senior High School (10-12) |
| 2. Strategies to Promote Classroom Climate, Student Engagement and Positive Behaviour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more opportunities for networking and sharing of successful strategies and techniques • Improve staff morale • Promote expected behaviours from entire school community • Provide opportunities for students to share their strengths with others • Reward students and staff for positive behaviour • Focus more PD on improving the classroom climate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers need to ensure that they address the multiple ways our kids learn (multiple intelligences, etc.) • Teachers need to reach out to and connect with all kids • Teachers need to be able to display student work (Fire Marshal rule of 20 percent is problematic) • Meet kids at the classroom door • Group students together to encourage all comfort levels • Provide funding to look after physical improvements to classrooms • Create interdisciplinary units and/or exploratories • Establish teen health centres at junior high • Provide full-time comprehensive guidance counsellors at all junior highs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate structure and expectations with positive and proactive relationships • Innovative instructional and pedagogically sound strategies for variety of teaching methods in classroom • Increase flexibility in the school day/year • Provide: effective supports, effective communication, flexible programming/setting, credit recovery, check and connect systems • Implement PEBs • Partner with agencies • Reward good attendance/behaviour • Regularly reinforce expectations |

| Breakout Session | Key Points | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Elementary School (P–6) | Junior High School (7–9) | Senior High School (10–12) |
| 3. Shared Responsibility for Attendance and Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role do parents play in this? • Who provides the preschool support? • Policy needs teeth • Provincial agency support is necessary at outset of problem • Provide a network sharing accreditation goals and other best practices • Schools need capacity and empowerment to solve problems • Schools are not child-focussed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support alternative programs • Schools need to be centres of learning and acknowledge changes to society, technology, etc. Funding is needed to make schools current and meaningful • Commitment is needed from agencies to work together to support students/youth • Recognize that schools carry many responsibilities beyond academic — teachers often have to act beyond their training to be social workers, counsellors, dietitians, mental health practitioners, etc. • There is a need for provincial consistency in policy with ability of schools to respond to individual needs • All stakeholders should be responsible for promoting the belief that school is valuable and has a direct correlation to success | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the policy to students, parents, and the public • The DOE and school boards need to come up with what constitutes an excused versus unexcused absence • Create a marketing campaign to promote attendance • Students who fail to meet the attendance criteria need to have support in order to get them back to some form of schooling, alternative programs, or even alternative schools • Community Services does not address the issue of school absenteeism • Target funding directly to schools, not to a co-ordinator at board level • Parents need to be involved with procedures • The DOE must create a provincial policy that shares responsibility for attendance |

| Breakout Session | Recommendations | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | Elementary School (P-6) | Junior High School (7-9) | Senior High School (10-12) |
| 3. Shared Responsibility for Attendance and Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government departments and agencies need to educate the public regarding their roles and responsibilities and promote the value of education • Government needs to establish process and procedures for problem solving and empower departments and agencies to work together and share information and solutions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement a Student Information System to fast track improved communication with parents to promote parent accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sanctions and procedures – goes back to limited number of missed classes/draw the line with procedures • Create a media blitz — what your son/daughter is missing, showing innovative classrooms • The policy should come from the DOE and not the boards • Present a report to the Minister regarding absenteeism |

4.4 Session with School Board Program Directors

Program directors reflected on the varying circumstances across schools that lead to attendance problems, noting some strategies that have been successful with various groups of students such as staged interventions with clear consequences at each stage, using positive rewards (e.g., exam exemptions for courses that have exams but do not require involvement in the provincial assessment program), following a “no excuses” policy, personal calls home after every absence (as opposed to using a depersonalized electronic call-in system), and holding parents responsible. The most troubled students require multi-supports from other agencies.

They also highlighted the critical importance of regular communication with parents around excused versus unexcused absences to help reinforce the value of attendance and education.

Program directors noted the importance of ensuring that unintended consequences were not the result of any strategies employed. For example, while a “no excuses” policy has resulted in a reduction of absenteeism, some students have chosen to come to school when they were ill, which is not a desirable outcome.

Program directors noted the great success schools have had with the Positive Effective Behaviour Supports Program when it has been fully implemented. They stressed that the more kids attend school the better they are going to do and that clear and high expectations need to be set and reinforced in every school every day to be effective at reducing absenteeism. This requires a whole-school approach.

Other initiatives that have yielded positive results with high-risk students include Check-and-Connect programs, in-school suspension programs, the new Schools Plus Pilot initiative, and the Options and Opportunities program option.

Program directors noted the importance of the classroom experience in keeping students engaged and reflected upon the importance of pre-service education in this regard. They noted that pulling teachers out of the classroom for various reasons yielded more occurrences of student absence; therefore, job-embedded professional learning must be supported in a more targeted way. Classroom instruction must be differentiated to meet the differing learning styles of students, characterized by respectful student-teacher relationships and high expectations. Effective use of technology, a student-centred approach, and project-based learning are also critical components to increase student engagement. Creating a safe and caring environment for all students is critical.

It was noted that a change in the mandatory age from 16 to 18 years (or graduation) may be an approach worth considering. Program directors also reflected upon the absenteeism situations where students and their parents are choosing to participate in sporting events, family vacations, or other non-academic experiences during regular school time rather than during March break and on weekends. Concerns were expressed around the amount of rigour attached to the processes to provide for the ongoing education of students who are absent for these purposes.

Finally, program directors discussed the importance of a well-rounded education that fosters good citizenship and civic engagement. They stressed that “*Attendance is not merely being in the school but being in the designated space, at the designated time, for the purposes of pursuing curriculum.*”

4.5 Input from Invited Education Professionals and Research Experts

The committee also met with a number of education professionals to inform themselves on some of the projects and research under way to address attendance, classroom climate, and support for students.

Jodene Dunleavy, National Coordinator, "*What did you do in school today?*"
Canadian Education Association

Jodene Dunleavy reviewed with the committee the current research being undertaken as part of the "*What did you do in school today?*" initiative through the Canadian Education Association. This research examines levels of students' social, academic, and intellectual engagement as well as the importance of student relationships with other students and with their teachers.

Robert Wright, Executive Director, Child and Youth Strategy, Province of Nova Scotia
"Inter-agency cooperation and collaboration"

Robert Wright shared with the committee the steps that led to the creation of the Child and Youth Strategy and highlighted the recommendations of the Nunn Commission as they relate to student absenteeism and engagement. He talked about the importance of the school culture and identified successful programs, such as PEBS, that focus on creating a common culture within a school. Mr. Wright spoke of the challenges that arise when the values and expectations of the learning culture clash with the values and expectations of a student home or community. He also discussed the importance of inter-agency collaboration and the appropriate roles that could be played by the Department of Community Services.

Michael Ungar, Professor, Dalhousie University
"Research on Children Who Access Multiple Social Services"

Michael Ungar shared the findings from federally funded research, highlighting the importance of service providers located at the school site to support ongoing student engagement. He notes that the best schools address, and attempt to foresee, the needs of the students rather than reacting to issues as they occur. In addition, increased community involvement reduces incidences in school by helping the student identify aspects of their own culture within the school culture. He stressed that students need a purpose and a place in the school community to feel successful and that this sense of personal power and control over their environment supports enabling them to make constructive contributions.

Don Glover (Director, Student Services) and Rola AbiHanna (Provincial Guidance Consultant),
Department of Education, "Positive Effective Behaviour Supports"

Positive Effective Behaviour Supports (PEBS) is described as a process and set of behavioural expectations that support reinforcement of positive behaviours in the school by students and school staff. The program helps to create and maintain a positive school culture and gives everyone a sense of ownership. PEBS works to create consistent, defined approaches to behavioural issues to ensure that teachers and administrators are using their time effectively when dealing with behavioural issues. In order to work effectively, PEBS

must be data driven and must be implemented in full to achieve success in creating a positive school climate.

Phil Legere, Former Principal, Dartmouth High School
“Experiences with Credit Recovery Programming”

Phil Legere shared with the committee his positive experiences with the Credit Recovery program as a way to extend the learning time to give more students an opportunity to meet course outcomes and graduate with a high school leaving certificate. Condensed courses were delivered after school and included clear rules for attendance. Course work was undertaken strictly during class time, and the classes were characterized by a very low student-to-teacher ratio (usually about 5:1). Credit recovery was made available to students in danger of not graduating and those students who had recently dropped out. Students were able to recover up to 10 percentage points, which resulted in a much higher level of buy-in.

Jenny-Kate Hadley, Coordinator, Halifax Regional School Board
“Youth Pathways and Transitions Program”

The Youth Pathways and Transitions Program (YPT) was established by the Halifax Regional School Board six years ago to respond to students in long-term suspensions. The program has since grown to enable the board to proactively work with students to address issues prior to suspensions. YPT works with 6 junior high and 12 high school students. These students are supported by four teachers and an on-site social worker and school psychologist. The social worker and school psychologist work closely with families to address issues and provide help with finding appropriate agencies for additional support. Teachers make use of cross-curricular studies, skilled trades, hands-on learning, and multimedia to engage students and assist them to meet the outcomes in multiple subject areas. Attendance is not a significant issue in the YPT. When attendance issues do arise, frequent contact is made with the home. YPT makes use of a scaled-down version of PEBS (eight outcomes) to outline behavioural expectations. Students can be dismissed for severe behavioural issues when they affect health and safety.

4.6 Input from Regional Education Officers

Regional Education Officers were requested to complete a set of questions to support the Committee’s understanding of the current situation. Specifically, REOs were asked about the tracking of student attendance, about the effectiveness of board committee structures and school-based structures to support attendance, and for their advice or suggestions from a regional education perspective.

Tracking Systems

Regional Education Officers (or REOs) reported that all boards are using software systems to track attendance at the school level; however, the systems and definitions vary. Each school can electronically record student attendance for morning and afternoon sessions (P–9) or by class/period (7–12). Reports can be generated at the school level, and data is also accessible by the central office. The systems can also track in-school and out-of-school suspensions. The latter information is generally tracked at the regional level.

REOs report that principals at individual schools monitor attendance. In most schools, a conversation is held with the student after a certain number of absences, and if absences persist, the parents are contacted. If there is no improvement, a letter is sent to the home, and an appointment is set up to meet with the parents. If the absences are not excused, many secondary schools apply an in-school three-day suspension.

In some boards, individual schools have established an exemption “reward” for attendance, whereby students are exempted from writing an examination based on good attendance and a reasonable academic standing. The exemption cannot apply to a provincial examination.

In most boards, chronic absenteeism is reported to the board attendance committee. The board committee reports the matter to the REO who responds with a letter and visit to the parents. In some cases, there are investigations as to whether there are other underlying issues affecting the student’s attendance such as problems in the home or involvement with gangs (involving other agencies), learning difficulties, behaviour difficulties, falling behind in work, complete disengagement, bullying, or any other relevant factor.

Board Committee Structures

REOs have reported that all boards, except one, have a board attendance committee. Five boards involve elected board members, and three consist of central office staff. In some boards, the suspension appeal/review committee serves as the attendance committee. REOs indicate that these attendance committees are struggling to delineate what they can and should be doing. In the case of individuals with chronic absenteeism, the committees try to determine if additional support can be made available by the board or other agencies.

School-based Structures and Processes

In considering structures and processes in place at the school level, REOs identified the school-based PEBS committees as effective (where they are fully operational) in improving school climate, reducing the occurrence of suspensions, and improving attendance.

Other school-based initiatives include

- program planning committees to ensure that appropriate programming is in place so that all students can be engaged and experience success
- check-and-connect committees to support a student’s connections with an individual staff member who meets with the student, discusses his/her progress, and encourages the student
- “catch-up” or booster rooms for students who are falling behind
- “credit recovery” options for a second chance for students

Suggestions from the REO Perspective

In their advice to the committee, REOs stressed the importance of implementing strategies that promote student engagement. They noted that increasing staffing levels at the school could support a greater focus on strategies to promote engagement and support for students requiring additional support, such as in-school suspension options. In addition, fully implementing PEBS and ensuring that PEBS committees are active in all schools will assist in reducing the incidence of suspensions and in improving attendance and school climate.

REOs note that the lack of serious consequences for unexcused absences is seen as a major impediment by many principals. Many principals are recommending that a certain attendance level should be required to achieve a course credit.

4.7 Other Related Initiatives

Teacher Professional Learning and Instructional Leadership

The Department of Education, school boards and other key partners have been engaging in research and dialogue to develop new and more effective ways to support teacher professional learning. This has a direct impact on the quality of instruction, student engagement, and student learning.

Research has indicated that student achievement can be increased by raising the quality of instruction. To do this effectively requires regular job-embedded teacher collaborative learning opportunities, where teachers meet regularly with colleagues during the school day to plan instruction and assessment focussed on student learning and continuous improvement. In this way, practices that have proven to be effective in one classroom can be shared and honed with other teachers at the moment of the learning opportunity. Effective collaborative learning processes move teaching away from isolation and are data driven. Teachers work together to assess student data, reach a shared understanding of what the student data means, and collaboratively learn new instructional strategies that address specific learning needs of their students and lead to greater student engagement.

Effective instruction means that students are empowered to have a greater role in their education. Focussing on student voices, teamwork, enhanced use of technology, and more hands-on learning help to contribute to this empowerment.

Effective learning communities are also characterized by strong instructional leadership to encourage and support the use of a variety of data and research for instructional decision making; continually model, monitor, and engage teachers in discussing their instructional practices; and help to create time and space for teachers to engage collaboratively.

Around the world, experience has shown that learning communities are effective in improving quality of instruction, student engagement, and student achievement. This staff development approach is focussed on results of students, and it is specifically designed to enrich the classroom experience and enhance the quality of education.

5.0 COMMITTEE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The committee has heard that student attendance is a concern in Nova Scotia. Principals and other education professionals have been engaged in discussions about the rising levels of student absenteeism and the personal and societal impact that will result. Student attendance in school and student achievement are highly correlated. As well, low levels of attendance and student disengagement are also highly correlated and have a direct impact on the school environment and the learning that occurs in our schools.

Chronic absenteeism is a growing problem at all levels (elementary, junior high/middle, and senior high schools). It is an issue that has been evidenced among all socio-economic groups. However, the scope and degree of the problem have been difficult to quantify with precision.

School attendance records are maintained at the school level, and they are reported to individual school boards, but there are no aggregated provincial statistics or common definitions related to reporting on attendance. A significant amount of focussed attention has been given to communicating the necessity for a comprehensive provincial Student Information System that, among other things, will provide detailed information on student attendance. This is a resource-intensive initiative that has had to compete with our provincial capital priorities. Without such a system, it is difficult to undertake evidence-based research on Nova Scotia students for important indicators and trends such as attendance, school suspensions, and student records, among others. In a highly mobile society, it is also very difficult for the school system to keep track of students without a provincial information system. There are no consistent definitions around excused versus unexcused absences across schools or boards, and the approaches and consequences to absenteeism vary considerably across schools. Without agreement on these terms and approaches, the statistics generated for the province will not be meaningful or comparable.

In 2008 a committee of principals and other partners appointed by the Department of Education sampled 10 high schools to estimate levels of absenteeism. Of the high schools sampled, more than 45 percent of the students missed 10 percent of the time in at least one class, and 7.4 percent missed up to 20 percent of class time. There is no equivalent data for elementary and junior high/middle schools.

Educational professionals and other stakeholders have been very engaged in sharing their views to the committee regarding the many reasons why poor student attendance in schools should be a concern to all Nova Scotians. Included among them are the following:

- Absenteeism has a direct impact on the academic success of the student; some students will fail because of poor attendance, while others will fall short of their full potential.
- If students fall behind in their studies, there is a likelihood that they will disengage from school or become disruptive in school.
- Provincial and school board initiatives to maximize the time devoted to instruction in schools are adversely impacted by poor attendance.
- Valuable teaching, learning and administrative time is lost supporting students who do not attend school. This takes time and attention away from those students who are attending.
- To ignore poor school attendance may serve to diminish schools as a focus of learning and the overall importance of education in the minds of parents, students, and the broader community. Failing to address school attendance may inadvertently send a message to parents and students that regular attendance in school is not critical to student achievement and lifelong success.

- Students who disengage from school, as a result of poor attendance or for other reasons, may tend to disengage in other ways from their future work and community. Over time, this will have broad societal implications.

Why do students choose not to come to school every day and why do they disengage? The reasons are varied and differ between the elementary schools and junior/senior high schools.

Elementary students for the most part enjoy school and student disengagement, if it happens, tends not to occur until later. However, teachers and principals do report unacceptable levels of absenteeism in elementary schools. For the most part chronic absenteeism in elementary school can be attributed to parents who are either unwilling or unable to fulfil their duty to get their children to school. Some parents do not understand the relationship between attendance and student achievement and therefore do not make the necessary effort to ensure regular attendance. Teachers and principals report that students are often removed from schools by parents for extended periods to travel on vacation, to assist parents at home, or for other family-related matters. While there may be exceptional circumstances for students to assist at home, to attend to family matters, or to engage in other activities for compassionate reasons, in general, the committee does not believe that family vacations are an acceptable rationale for students not attending school.

There may be instances where students do not feel safe at school, and parents will agree to allow them to stay home, but the duty of the parent is to have their child attend school and to work with teachers to address these concerns. In some instances, parents are struggling with personal problems that make it difficult for them to ensure regular attendance, and parents and schools should work together to address these situations.

Because of the uniqueness of elementary schools, the committee believes that the strategies for addressing absenteeism will differ from those that would be effective with junior and senior high students. The reasons for chronic absenteeism by junior and senior high students relate more to risk taking and disengagement from school. At junior high/middle and senior high, students are expected to take greater responsibility for their own education, and as a consequence, bad choices sometimes get made that result in poor attendance. Several factors have been cited to explain increasing levels of absenteeism:

- Respondents to the committee's online survey overwhelmingly indicated that the absence of consequences significantly contributed to students not attending school. At present, schools may provide for in-school suspensions for up to three days for chronic absenteeism.
- As students fall further behind as a result of poor attendance, attending school becomes less important to the student. Without the support of teachers and connections with other students, it becomes increasingly difficult for the student to remain current with the curriculum. Students find it particularly challenging as they move from grade 9 to grade 10, particularly if they have not gained the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
- Research indicates that for some students the traditional classroom setting is not conducive to student learning. These students disengage from school or become disruptive to the school.
- Many students have indicated that they find the curriculum boring and not sufficiently challenging or relevant. They do not see school as important. Often, they feel that they have little control over what occurs in their schools and classrooms. Some students would prefer to

have more flexibility in how they navigate through high school. Some have also indicated that they can achieve a certain level of achievement without attending classes regularly.

- As students advance in school, many parents become less involved in their children's school life and leave the students to have even more responsibility for their own education. Many respondents to the committee's survey indicated the need for greater parental involvement. Engagement is often not an issue in those schools where students develop a relationship with an adult.

Students who are suspended from school for more than five days are not attending school. The committee has heard that in some instances these students are either not being provided with alternative education, as required under the *Education Act*, or they are not completing the educational packages being provided to them. As a result, on their return to school they have fallen behind their classmates.

One of the critical findings from the online survey is that students indicated that they choose not to attend school because their classes are boring or non-engaging. The effectiveness of instruction is critical in this discussion. Finding time and space for teachers to engage with their colleagues to analyse student data, assess their practices, and learn from each other to try new approaches is critical if student engagement and student achievement are to be improved.

Effective use of technology, hands-on learning, differentiated instructional practices, and strong instructional leadership to model and ensure a high quality of instruction are all part of the necessary equation.

Finally, the committee is of the view that learning can occur in many settings: museums, parks, sports arenas, to name just a few. But we cannot ignore the critical value of being in a classroom with a professional educator and the interaction that occurs among students and between students and teachers.

Furthermore, the long-term civic and societal implications of disengagement and an underachievement of human potential needs to be more clearly understood and recognized. As much as anything else, education is about developing responsible and engaged citizens who understand the importance of commitment and fulfilling their obligations.

In recent years school boards and the Department of Education have placed increased emphasis on the importance of ongoing student assessment, not just the writing of periodic exams, as a way of assessing student learning. Assessment takes many forms, such as written assignments, classroom participation, oral presentations, constructing knowledge in group processes, etc. A teacher cannot assess a student appropriately using all of those different vehicles unless the student is in attendance in school. In cases where a student has not been present for a sufficient amount of time in the classroom learning process, the evidence is likely to be insufficient for a teacher to fully determine the level of student achievement, perhaps leading to an "incomplete" score at the end of the course.

The importance of attendance is reinforced by the Conference Board of Canada, which has identified the nine skills that future participants in the workforce are required to attain. These are how to communicate, manage information, think and solve problems, be responsible, be adaptable, work safely, work with others, use numbers, and learn continuously. Most if not all of these skills are acquired by actively attending and participating in school, particularly communication skills, problem-solving skills, and learning how to learn.

6.0 POLICY PRINCIPLES

The purpose of the Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate is to advance policies and strategies that will contribute to student learning and student success. With this overall goal in mind, the committee has adopted the following principles to assist them in developing their recommendations.

1. Attendance in schools is critical to a successful school experience and successful course work for students.
2. Students, parents, and guardians are responsible for student attendance and for supporting student learning at home. To fulfil this responsibility, they are supported by teachers and school administrators.
3. Students who do not attend school cannot be engaged in school.
4. Engaged students are more likely to attend school and participate in their school learning.
5. Safe schools, a respectful school climate, challenging curriculum, and a caring staff are essential for school attendance and student engagement.
6. Positive initiatives and educational supports must be provided to assist students in attending school.
7. When positive initiatives and educational supports are not sufficient, then sanctions must be available to encourage attendance.
8. Policies that address attendance and promote a positive school climate must be equitable to all students.
9. Attendance in schools must be a community priority supported with the resources of schools and other government agencies.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

After careful consideration of the wide-ranging and varied input from members of the public, teachers, principals, school boards, key partner organizations, and other expert advisors, the Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate offers the following recommendations.

It is important to note that these recommendations should not be considered in isolation of one another. They are part of a comprehensive package of policies, programs, and supports that, together, will lead to increased student engagement and decreased absenteeism in Nova Scotia schools. It is likely that applying negative consequences without the programmatic supports will lead to unintended effects and will further disadvantage the students who are most in need. Likewise, increasing student engagement requires balancing positive inducements, targeted interventions, and consequences with clear expectations and high-quality instruction in the classroom.

Some recommendations require a significant resource commitment, while others may require a refocusing of existing policies, priorities, and partnerships. The investment is significant, but without this investment, the cost is higher in terms of lost student potential, production of economic wealth, and the long-term civic and social engagement of Nova Scotia's future adult citizens.

Recommendation 1

The Minister of Education should consider an amendment to the *Education Act* requiring school attendance to grade 12 graduation or when a student reaches 18 years of age. This will serve to reinforce the importance of education and to ensure that students have more of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they require for their adult life.

Recommendation 2

The Minister of Education should support the development of a comprehensive and multi-pronged communications strategy to explain to parents and students, the important relationship between school attendance and student learning. Connecting with parents, students and other members of the school community through a range of vehicles will assist in communicating the importance of every student being engaged in their school every day.

Recommendation 3

The Minister of Education should undertake a review of school board attendance committees with a view to putting in place appropriate structures and operating procedures at the elected board level. This will ensure that school boards fulfil their responsibility to monitor overall student attendance and adopt strategies to ensure that high levels of attendance are maintained.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends to the Minister of Education that any opportunity to accelerate the development of a student information system, especially with respect to student attendance, be considered. While progress is being made on an information system, school administrators

have repeatedly emphasized the importance of an attendance tracking system. A student information system would also support parental monitoring of student attendance.

In addition, the committee believes that in order for all schools to address issues that may affect absenteeism in an informed and effective way, current and accurate data is critical. All schools and boards should use a behaviour incident-tracking form to collect and analyse data to develop targeted interventions.

Recommendation 5

The Minister of Education should seek an amendment to the *Education Act* requiring a superintendent who believes a student's development or security to be at risk due to non-attendance at school to refer the matter to the Minister of Community Services for investigation under the *Children and Family Services Act*. To provide further support to students, the Ministers of Education and Community Services should require the development of protocols for their staff to follow in requiring students to attend school and assisting families that need assistance.

The Minister of Education should consider proposing to government that child protection legislation in Nova Scotia be amended to include withholding a child from school as neglect.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that school boards develop clear policies for staged interventions in response to student absenteeism. The policies must include the ongoing direct contact with parents (phone, letter, and in person) by the teacher and school administration, ongoing sharing of the attendance profile of the student with the parent, discussions with the student and the parent on the benefits of school attendance and the consequences of non-attendance, referrals to student supports, and the use of in-school suspensions where needed. The policies should also outline the roles and responsibilities of the student, teacher, school administration, and school board in addressing attendance issues.

Recommendation 7

The Minister of Education should consider creating a new grant program with targeted funding for school boards to support their implementation of recommendation 6 to ensure that students and parents receive timely interventions and early contact from schools when attendance becomes an issue. The needs and approaches of school boards will vary across the province.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider adopting a regulation under the *Education Act* that requires attendance as a prerequisite for receiving credit for a course and will provide clear consequence for serious non-attendance. The regulation should stipulate the following:

- When a student is absent from a course for more than 20 percent of the total course time, the student will not be eligible to receive credit for the course and will no longer be permitted to participate in that course in that semester (or academic year if the course is year-long).
- If a student has exceeded the 20 percent threshold in more than two courses, the principal will recommend to the school board that the student be suspended for the remainder of the semester. The school board, in consultation with the student's parent, shall make every

reasonable effort to provide alternative arrangements for the education of the student.

- Appeals to the elected board should be permitted to ensure fairness and due process for students. The appeal process should be subject to reasonable time lines. The decision of the board should be final.

In developing the regulation, the Minister should consider providing teachers with an option of assigning an “incomplete” mark to a student where non-attendance of less than 20 percent has made it difficult for the teacher to appropriately assess student achievement in that course.

Other Factors

- Absences due to serious prolonged and documented illness and religious holidays should not be counted as part of the 20 percent.

- Exemptions due to exceptional circumstances beyond the control of the parent and student may be granted by school administration for exclusion from the 20 percent count.

- A parent or student may request permission for an extended absence beyond the 20 percent, based on a proposed program of study, which may be granted by school administration in consultation with the Regional Education Officer. Awarding of course credit depends upon successful completion of the approved program by the student.

Recommendation 9

The Minister of Education should request additional government funding to support in-school suspensions. It is important that approaches be developed to ensure that students who are on long-term suspension continue to get their education.

- For those who cannot be served through in-school suspension, the committee recommends that school boards adopt policies and standards respecting the materials to be provided to students when they are out of school to ensure that the educational needs of these students are met.

- Students should be held accountable for ensuring that these program packages are completed and returned.

- Although the committee recognizes that, from time to time, out-of-school suspensions may be necessary, it recommends that use of out-of-school suspensions continues to be limited, as such suspensions are not aligned with the goals of increasing student engagement.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider a review of junior high/middle school curriculum. Additionally, the committee recommends that the Minister of Education consider the introduction of targeted funding for junior high/middle schools to support the transition from junior high to high school and to encourage school attachment. This includes both staffing as well as programming support.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that the Department of Education develop guidelines to assist school boards in developing high school programs to provide a ‘second chance’ for students to recover credits for missed courses.

Recommendation 12

The Province of Nova Scotia should financially assist school boards to accelerate and expand alternative programming in all boards. Some students cannot learn effectively in traditional school settings. As a consequence, their education suffers, and their behaviour can adversely affect other students. Many of these students are suspended either in school or out of school. Several school boards have implemented alternative schools to support these students.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Department of Education work with educational partners to create job-embedded opportunities for teacher professional learning. Students have indicated that they choose to attend classes where the teachers are respectful and employ a range of engaging instructional strategies. To improve the quality of their instruction, teachers need time to collaborate with their colleagues and to examine all aspects of student achievement.

APPENDIX A: Terms of Reference

Mandate

The mandate of the Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate is to develop recommendations to improve student attendance, increase engagement of students in their education and establish new and effective strategies to support a productive learning environment.

Areas of Focus

The goal in conducting this review is to ensure a respectful and productive school and classroom environment while ensuring students take responsibility for their learning and engagement. Toward this end the Climate Working Committee will

- examine the challenges facing today's school and classrooms as they relate to the effectiveness of policies and practices dealing with absenteeism and the active engagement of students in their learning;
- identify best practices in fostering good behaviour in schools and classrooms;
- examine the roles of school boards, school advisory councils and parents in this issue;
- review legislation, policies and guidelines related to student and parental responsibilities;
- and
- recommend how to best support an effective climate for teaching and learning.

Process

A concise report containing a select set of recommendations will be provided to the Minister of Education by mid-September. It may be appropriate to identify the more immediate recommendations as separate from the longer term recommendations. While the focus of the review is primarily the absenteeism and school climate of the junior high/middle and senior high schools, significant issues related to the elementary school could also be highlighted.

This review will include a web-based consultation to invite public input and an invitation to key informants to share their perspectives related to the Working Committee's mandate. A working session will also be organized with a select group of junior and senior high principals and a meeting will be held with program directors at the board level.

Membership

The Climate Working Committee will be chaired by Howard Windsor and each of the following partner groups will be invited to participate:

- Nova Scotia School Boards Association
- Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators
- Nova Scotia Teachers Union
- School Advisory Councils
- Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations
- Council on African Canadian Education
- Council on Mi'kmaq Education
- Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse
- Youth Representative
- Principal Representative
- Department of Education

APPENDIX B: Membership

Howard Windsor
Chair

Vic Fleury
Nova Scotia School Boards Association

Jack Beaton
Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators

Janine Kerr
Nova Scotia Teachers Union

Jeannette Sanchez-Smith
School Advisory Councils

Janet Walsh
Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations

Charles Sheppard
Council on African Canadian Education (Past Chair)

Darren Googoo
Council on Mi'kmaq Education

Kevin Deveaux
Principal Representative

Darren Pottie
Youth Representative

Alan Lowe
Public Schools, Department of Education

Shannon Delbridge
Corporate Policy, Department of Education

Jeremy Smith
Staff Support, Department of Education

Note: The Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse declined to participate on the Working Committee.

APPENDIX C: Press Release [Tuesday, May 19, 2009]

EDUCATION – Review of Improving Learning Environment in Schools

Chronic absenteeism and other issues affecting the learning environment in Nova Scotia schools will be the subject of a provincial review, Education Minister Judy Streach announced today, May 20.

The Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate will make recommendations to improve student attendance, increase engagement of students in their education and establish new and effective strategies to support a productive learning environment.

"This review will result in improved class climate for all students," said Ms. Streach. "Our schools must, at all times, belong to the students who want to learn in a productive and respectful environment."

The committee's terms of reference will include:

- Examining the challenges facing today's classrooms and the effectiveness of policies and practices dealing with absenteeism and the active engagement of students in their learning;
- Identifying best practices and using them to foster good behaviour in schools and classrooms;
- Recommending how to best support an effective climate for teaching and learning;
- Examining the roles of school boards, school advisory councils and parents;
- Reviewing legislation, policies and guidelines related to student and parental responsibilities.

The committee will have representatives from the Department of Education, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the Association of Nova Scotia Education Administrators, the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, the Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations, the Council on African Canadian Education, the Youth Advisory Council, and the Council on Mi'kmaq Education.

The committee will be chaired by Howard Windsor, the former appointed Halifax Regional School Board and a former deputy minister.

"Chronic student absenteeism is a huge concern for teachers," said NSTU president Alexis Allen. "We are pleased to work with our education partners to strengthen policies and practices in addressing this issue."

Ms. Streach said while there is room for improvement, people should not forget that Nova Scotia's schools are still safe places to learn and work. "Our provincial school code of conduct, school board policies and the programs we have in place provincially to promote respect and good behaviour are making a positive difference in schools," she said. "But I also recognize that there is frustration from many parents, teachers and students who believe we can do more to improve the learning environment. It is important that we continually examine the effectiveness of our strategies, and make improvements where we can."

The committee will proceed with an internal review and present its report to the education minister before the new school year. There will be an opportunity for public input during the process.

Ms. Streach said she is determined action will be taken in time for September.

APPENDIX D: Online Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire.

The **Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate** is examining the challenges facing today's classrooms related to student absenteeism and engagement of students in their learning. It is important that the committee hears from various stakeholders and the information they receive from this survey will be valuable as they develop recommendations to establish new and effective strategies to support a productive learning environment.

Participation is voluntary and individual responses will be kept confidential. The questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire will be available online until July 10, 2009.

1. I am a (choose all that apply):

- Student
- Parent
- School Advisory Council member
- Teacher
- Principal / Vice-Principal
- Other, please specify

2. I am most closely involved with grades:

- P-6
- 7-9
- 10-12
- All grade levels (P-12)
- Another grade combination, please specify

3. In your opinion, what are the most important conditions to help facilitate an effective climate for teaching and learning? Please choose up to three:

- A caring and safe learning environment
- Peer support systems for students
- An environment where students are empowered as learners
- Positive relationships between teachers and students
- Classrooms where teachers use a range of instructional strategies aimed at the needs and abilities of each student
- Teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable
- Teachers who are trustworthy, helpful, and respectful
- Teachers who challenge their students
- Principals who provide strong instructional leadership to the school
- A school culture that encourages both academic achievement and involvement in the life of the school
- Other, please specify

4. In your opinion, what would most encourage students to come to school every day? Please choose up to three:

- A caring and safe learning environment
- Student has friends in the school
- Students are encouraged to learn in their own way

- Teachers and students get along well
- A caring adult at the school whom the student trusts
- Teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable
- Teachers who are trustworthy, helpful, and respectful
- Teachers who challenge their students
- Principals who are strong leaders in the school
- A school culture that encourages both academic achievement and involvement in the life of the school
- Clear consequences and/or sanctions for absenteeism
- Other, please specify

5. How likely are the reasons below the cause for students not attending school?

a) Students view classes as boring, and/or a waste of time

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

b) Students and teachers do not get along

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

c) Students do not get along with each other

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

d) Students do not feel safe

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

e) School work is too difficult and students cannot find the help they need

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

f) Students feel they cannot catch up after being absent

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

g) Lack of family/social support

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

h) Students' commitments outside school (such as family or work)

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

i) Family vacation plans or other non-academic activities

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

j) There are no consequences for missing school

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

k) School sanctions such as suspensions or expulsions

| | | | |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|
| Very unlikely | Unlikely | Likely | Very likely |
|---------------|----------|--------|-------------|

6. A. In the school/s you are associated with, do issues surrounding gender, race, culture, and/or sexual orientation significantly impact student attendance?

- yes
- no

B. If yes, please briefly describe how these issues significantly impact on student attendance.

7. A. When some students are absent often, does this significantly affect the ability of the other students who are attending school to learn?

- yes
- no

B. If yes, please briefly describe the significant impact on those students who are attending.

8. What best practices does your school and/or school board have that encourage students to attend school? Please choose all that apply:

- Clear rules about attendance
- Consequences for non-attendance are enforced
- A formal reward and/or recognition system to encourage positive behaviour and attendance
- Teachers and/or principals follow up with students when they are absent (for example, to ask them where they were or if everything is okay)
- Provide help to students who are missing school
- Provide help to students who are finding school difficult
- Schedules that keep the same students together throughout the school day
- When a student is missing a lot of school, teachers and principals regularly discuss the issue with the student's parents/guardians
- Database that tracks student attendance in the school
- Other, please specify

9. A. Do students in your school know what kind of behaviour is expected of them when they are in a classroom and different areas of the school?

- yes
- no
- ___ don't know

B. If no, are there strategies you can suggest to address this situation?

10. A. Do students in your school know what the consequence will be if they do not behave as expected?

- yes
- no
- ___ don't know

B. If no, are there strategies you can suggest to address this situation?

11. What should be the consequence for a student who frequently misses school and there is not a valid medical or academic reason for the absence?

12. What role, if any, do you see the following groups playing in addressing school attendance issues?

- a) Students
- b) Parents
- c) School Advisory Councils
- d) Teachers
- e) Principals / Vice-principals
- f) The School Board
- g) The Department of Education
- h) Other

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

APPENDIX E: Report on the Responses to the Online Questionnaire

This report provides a summary of the information gathered through the online responses to this survey.

Analysis of Respondents

In total, the committee's survey received 2,182 responses — 2,090 responses to the English language version and 92 responses to the French language version of the survey. This is a surprisingly high number of respondents, especially given the time of year, when many students, parents/guardians, and education professionals are preparing for the summer break. Clearly, given the high level of response, attendance is a very important issue to all stakeholders.

Respondent Categories

Respondents were asked to complete two self-identification questions. These questions were used to gain a better understanding of the stakeholders who completed the survey.

Respondents were asked to identify themselves as a student, parent, SAC member, teacher, or principal/vice-principal. The analysis by respondent group helps identify common issues and themes that are important to specific groups of stakeholders. It reflects the answers of that group as a whole and should not be interpreted as representing the individual opinions of every respondent who may fall into any particular group.

Respondents were also asked to identify the grade levels with which they are most closely involved. As with the previous self-identification question, respondents were able to choose multiple answers to this question. Therefore, a parent/guardian with children in grade 5 and 8 could choose both the primary–6 and 7–9 categories.

Key Findings

A number of key themes and common concerns emerged through the responses to the committee's survey. Respondents identified a number of factors that they felt played a major role in encouraging student attendance and addressing not only the issue of chronic absenteeism, but also some of the larger problems that can be root causes of absenteeism. The key themes and common concerns emerged through responses to both open-ended and fixed-response questions.

General Themes

Communication between Home and School

Throughout the survey, respondents continually stressed the importance of clear and open communication between the home and school environments. It was agreed that frequent contact between school staff and parents/guardians would encourage attendance and help to identify any larger issues that may have an effect on student attendance. Respondents stated that the students without attendance issues are most often the children of parents/guardians who take an active role in the child's education.

Respondents felt that parents/guardians should ensure that their children are attending school; however, respondents agreed that it is the responsibility of school staff, specifically teachers and administrators, to ensure that parents/guardians are aware of their children's attendance and/or behavioural issues.

Family Support

Respondents identified a supportive home environment as an important factor in facilitating an effective classroom climate and encouraging attendance. One student respondent explained that she or he attends school regularly because of "parents who value education, tell me to go to

school every day, and won't let me pretend I am sick." This quotation is particularly relevant as it points to another important factor that affects attendance, the value placed on education. Respondents stated that in many cases parents/guardians and students do not value education, which leads to frequent absenteeism. If parents/guardians do not see the value of regular attendance, then they may, consciously or not, enable their child to skip school. Similarly, if parents/guardians stress the importance of education, their child is less likely to miss classes.

Family support must work in conjunction with effective communication between the home and school. Respondents agreed that it is the responsibility of parents/guardians to prepare their children for school and ensure that they attend. It is also the responsibility of parents/guardians to inform the school of any issues related to attendance, such as bullying. By maintaining an open dialogue with school staff parents/guardians can work to address issues affecting the attendance of their children.

Caring and Safe Learning Environment

It is important to establish a caring and safe learning environment that will encourage students to attend school. Respondents identified the need to develop positive relationships between students and teachers. As with open communication between the home and school, a positive relationship between a student and a teacher would help identify issues affecting that student's attendance. As a parent/guardian respondent stated, "my son was bullied because of his race and did not want to go to school at all. Luckily, the principal and teacher looked after the situation and everyone turned out alright." As this positive example illustrates, school staff must work with students to create the best possible learning environment. As another respondent explained, "With some students, feeling supported by other students and staff is a huge motivator in attendance." As this respondent notes, a feeling of safety and belonging can have a positive impact on student attendance.

Clear Consequences for Absenteeism

Respondents agreed that there needs to be clear consequences for absenteeism. Further, respondents felt that these consequences should be consistently enforced. Respondents noted that frequent absenteeism can have a negative effect not only on the absent student but also on his or her classmates. When students see one of their peers miss school without consequences, they begin to question the value of attendance and of education in general. Moreover, if an action is punished by one teacher but overlooked by another, students may begin to see the education system as inconsistent or unfair. Therefore, respondents emphasized the importance of clear and consistent consequences for absenteeism.

Establishing and enforcing clear consequences with respect to student attendance requires support from all stakeholders. Respondents agreed that consequences and/or sanctions related to attendance issues must be supported by teachers, school staff, school administrators, school boards, and the Department of Education.

In addition to establishing clear, consistent consequences for absenteeism, a number of respondents recommended creating a formal system that recognizes and rewards good behaviour and attendance. For example, good attendance could be used as one set of criteria for exam exemptions.

Common Concerns

The Lack of Value Placed on Attendance and Education

Respondents felt that not only many students, but also many parents/guardians, do not value education and/or do not see attendance as important. A number of respondents made the comment that this has led to schools being treated as "drop-in" centres, which students can

attend or not as they choose. In addressing the issue of providing supports for frequently absent students, one respondent noted that while a teacher may be able to photocopy materials, “you can’t photocopy missed instruction.” Respondents agreed that value must be placed not only on the materials covered in class, but on the importance of instruction and, thus, attendance.

Student Interrelationships and Bullying

This concern is directly related to the need for caring and safe learning environments. A number of respondents felt that poor relationships between students, physical and psychological bullying, and violent incidents in school have created an atmosphere that is not conducive to learning and that does not encourage attendance.

Peer Pressure

While peer pressure can be related to bullying, respondents also identified it as a means for some students to encourage others to skip class. Respondents noted that especially in the teenage years, the desire to conform can lead students who might otherwise not have problems with attendance to miss school.

Preparation for the Real World

A number of respondents noted that without consequences for absenteeism students are beginning to feel entitled to miss school. Respondents agreed that this attitude will have a negative effect on students when they leave school to begin post-secondary studies or find employment.

The Lack of Alternative Education Opportunities

A number of respondents expressed the need for alternative education opportunities for those students who are struggling in school. The Options and Opportunities (O₂) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are considered positive steps forward. However, some respondents felt that alternative schools are also necessary. Respondents agreed that student engagement is directly related to student attendance. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that all students are engaged in their education.

Feedback by Respondent Group

Respondent groups had slightly and sometimes very different answers to survey questions. Students, in particular, often had very different responses in comparison to other respondent groups. The following section provides a general overview of the important issues identified by each of the major respondent groups.

Students

As mentioned above, student respondents often had very different responses to survey questions. Students often put more emphasis on social relationships within the school. For example, more students felt that having friends in the school and/or having a positive relationship with teachers would encourage attendance than did any other respondent group. Similarly, more students felt that if students and teachers do not get along it will have a negative impact on student attendance. Interestingly, a much lower number of students identified school safety as an issue affecting attendance. For students, the greatest issue affecting attendance was classes being seen as boring and/or a waste of time.

Parents/Guardians

School safety was a major concern for parents/guardians, as were positive relationships between students and teachers. Even more parents/guardians than students felt that poor relationships between teachers and students lead to attendance issues. Parents were very supportive of tracking student attendance and providing clear and consistent rules for absenteeism.

SAC Members

SAC members were particularly supportive of improving the school culture. SAC members felt that a caring and safe learning environment and a school culture that promotes both academic achievement and involvement in school life are important in encouraging good attendance. SAC members also valued school staff who regularly follow up with and provide additional supports to students who are struggling with academic and/or attendance issues.

Teachers

The majority of respondents to this survey were teachers; therefore, their opinions are fairly clearly reflected in the overall responses to survey questions. That said, there are a few areas in which responses from teachers stood out.

Unlike students and parents/guardians, teachers did not put the same level of importance on positive relationships between students and teachers. However, like parents/guardians, teachers did see the need for clear consequences for absenteeism. Finally, more than any other respondent group, teachers believed that a database to track student attendance would help reduce absenteeism.

School Administrators

Similar to SAC members, administrators believed that a positive school culture would help improve student attendance. Moreover, like SAC members they valued school staff who regularly follow up with and provide additional supports to students who are struggling with academic and/or attendance issues. However, like teachers, administrators put less emphasis on positive relationships between teachers and students.

Summary of Responses

In total, the survey received 2,182 responses (2,090 responses to the English language version and 92 responses to the French language version of the survey). The following table breaks down the respondents by the major respondent groups:

Table 1: Respondent Groups

| Respondent Group | Number of Respondents n = 2,041 | |
|-------------------------|--|-----|
| Student | 90 | 4% |
| Parent | 355 | 17% |
| SAC member | 226 | 11% |
| Teacher | 1057 | 52% |
| Administrator | 166 | 8% |
| Other | 147 | 7% |

A number of respondents self-identified in more than one category. The above numbers are based on the categories outlined in this report. In addition, 141 respondents could not be classified as they did not choose to self-identify. A number of respondents self-identified as SAC members and in one or more other categories. SACs comprise multiple stakeholder groups including students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. The following table shows the breakdown of those respondents that self-identified as SAC members:

Table 2: School Advisory Council Respondents

| Respondent Group | Number of Respondents n = 226 |
|---|--|
| SAC members (respondents did not self-identify in any other group) | 65 |
| Student | 5 |
| Parent | 136 |
| Teacher | 49 |
| Administrator | 5 |
| Other | 19 |

Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across all levels of public education. However, a higher number of respondents self-identified with grades 10–12, than either primary–6 or grades 7–9. Table 3 illustrates the breakdown of respondents by the grade level with which they are most closely involved.

Table 3: Respondents by Grade Level

| Respondent Group | Number of Respondents n = 2,020 | |
|-------------------------|--|-----|
| Primary–6 | 723 | 33% |
| Grades 7–9 | 538 | 25% |
| Grades 10–12 | 875 | 40% |
| All Grades (P–12) | 164 | 8% |
| Another Combination | 9 | 1% |

*Respondents could identify with multiple grade levels.

Factors That Ensure a Positive Classroom Climate and Encourage Attendance

Respondents were asked to identify the most important conditions that help facilitate an effective climate for teaching and learning. Respondents were able to choose up to three conditions. In total 1,884 respondents answered this question. Table 4 illustrates the percentage of support that each condition received.

Table 4: Conditions That Facilitate an Effective Classroom Climate

| Effective Condition | Percentage of Support n = 1,884 |
|--|--|
| A caring and safe learning environment | 55 |
| Classrooms where teachers use a range of instructional strategies aimed at the needs and abilities of each student | 45 |
| Positive relationships between teachers and students | 45 |
| A school culture that encourages both academic achievement and involvement in the life of the school | 36 |
| Teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable | 29 |
| An environment where students are empowered as learners | 25 |
| Principals who provide strong instructional leadership to the school | 16 |
| Teachers who are trustworthy, helpful, and respectful | 16 |
| Teachers who challenge their students | 14 |
| Peer support systems for students | 4 |
| Other | 8 |

*Respondents could choose up to three responses.

Responses to this question varied among respondent groups. The two respondent groups with the most significant variations were students and school administrators. For example, 73 percent of school administrators who answered this question identified a caring and safe learning environment as a condition that helps to create an effective classroom climate, while only 37 percent of students chose that option. Similarly, classrooms in which teachers use a range of instructional strategies received much higher support from administrators (62 percent) than from students (27 percent).

Students ranked peer support systems much higher than any other respondent group, including administrators—20 percent of students endorsed peer support systems, but only 4 percent of administrators supported that option. Further, both students and parents/guardians had higher levels of support for teachers who are trustworthy, helpful, and respectful, with 33 percent and 21 percent support respectively. In contrast, only 9 percent of administrators supported that option.

Respondents were also asked to identify what would most encourage students to come to school every day. Again respondents were given the option of choosing up to three conditions. In total 1,871 respondents answered this question. Table 5 illustrates the percentage of support that each condition received.

Table 5: Conditions That Encourage Consistent Attendance

| Conditions that Encourage Attendance | Percentage of Support n = 1,871 |
|--|--|
| Clear consequences and/or sanctions for absenteeism | 44 |
| A caring and safe learning environment | 41 |
| A school culture that encourages both academic achievement and involvement in the life of the school | 37 |
| Student has friends in the school | 33 |
| Teachers and students get along well | 22 |
| Teachers who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable | 21 |
| Students are encouraged to learn in their own way | 21 |
| Teachers who are trustworthy, helpful, and respectful | 20 |
| A caring adult at the school whom the student trusts | 18 |
| Principals who are strong leaders in the school | 9 |
| Teachers who challenge their students | 7 |
| Other | 10 |

*Respondents could choose up to three responses.

As with the previous question, a caring and safe learning environment scored very high, with 41 percent support from respondents. Once again, a greater number of administrators (53 percent) and a lower number of students (21 percent) supported this option.

Respondents agreed that clear consequences for absenteeism would be most effective in encouraging students to attend class regularly. This was further reflected in a number of subsequent survey questions. Teachers and administrators were particularly supportive of this option, with 55 percent and 46 percent endorsing clear consequences for absenteeism, respectively. This option received lower levels of support from all other respondent groups, particularly students and parents/guardians with 21 percent and 29 percent support, respectively.

As with the previous survey question, the greatest variation in responses came from students. This was particularly noticeable in student support of conditions that deal with relationships in the classroom. For example, 66 percent of students—twice that of any other respondent group—felt that students would be more likely to attend if they had friends in school. Further, 48 percent of student respondents agreed that students who get along with their teachers are more likely to attend. Interestingly, only 19 percent of teachers and 11 percent of administrators chose this option.

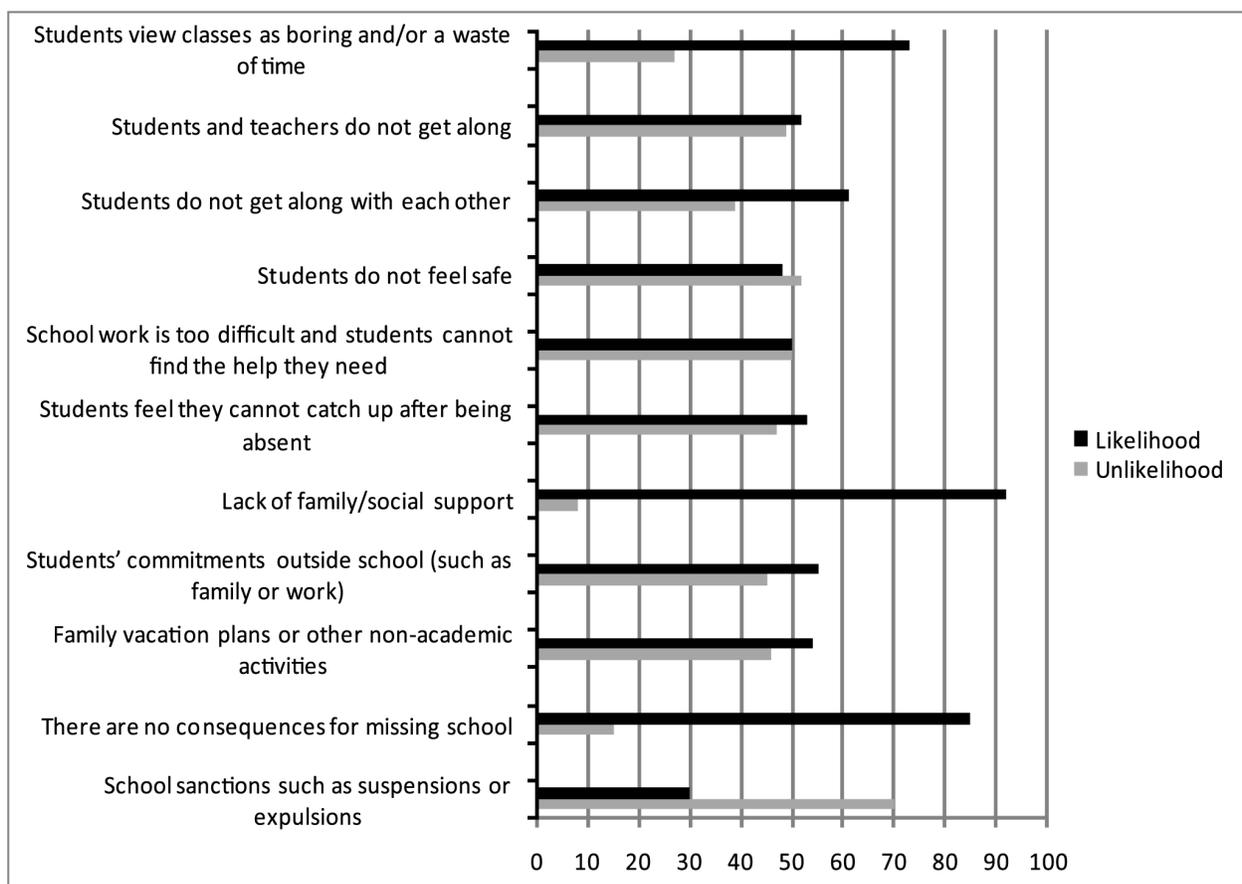
Reasons for Student Absenteeism

Respondents were asked to complete a series of questions addressing the potential reasons why students do not attend school. Respondents were asked to rate a statement in each sub-question as to whether or not it was a likely reason students were not attending school. Respondents used the following likert scale for each sub-question:

- Very likely
- Likely
- Unlikely
- Very unlikely

As the following graph illustrates, respondents identified a lack of family/social support and a lack of consequences for absenteeism as the two most likely reasons students do not attend school. Please note that Graph 1 summarizes the information gathered in survey question 5. For the purpose of this graph the very likely and likely categories have been combined, as have the unlikely and very unlikely categories.

Graph 1: Reasons for Student Absenteeism



The answers to this question varied a great deal between the different respondent groups. Students in particular often had very different responses in comparison to other respondent groups. That said, there were significant variations from a number of respondent groups to each of the sub-questions.

Students view classes as boring and/or a waste of time

- Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, 92 percent of students believed that it was likely that students are absent because they find classes boring and/or a waste of time
- Eighty-six percent of parents/guardians also found this to be likely
- Although a lower percentage than students or parents/guardians, 69 percent of teachers and 64 percent of school administrators agreed with this potential reason

Students and teachers do not get along

- Seventy-six percent of parents/guardians and 69 percent of students felt that poor student-teacher relationships are a likely cause of absenteeism
- Thirty-eight percent of teachers and 44 percent of school administrators felt that poor student-teacher relationships are a likely cause of absenteeism

Students do not get along with each other

- Seventy-two percent of parents/guardians and 73 percent of SAC members believed that it is

- likely that students do not attend because of poor relationships with other students
- Fifty-two percent of school administrators felt that poor relationships among students are a likely cause of student absenteeism
 - Interestingly, 63 percent of students believed that this was a likely cause of absenteeism—only 1 percent more than the total response to this sub-question

Students do not feel safe

- Sixty percent of parents/guardians indicated that it was likely that students did not attend because they do not feel safe
- Only 33 percent of students indicated that students are likely to miss school because they do not feel safe—well below the average response for this question

School work is too difficult and students cannot find the help they need

- Sixty-two percent of parents/guardians and 57 percent of SAC members believed that students are likely to be absent because school work is too difficult
- A lower percentage of teachers (43 percent) felt that this was a likely reason for absenteeism
- Student respondents were just under the average mark at 49 percent

Students feel they cannot catch up after being absent

- The responses from each respondent group were very close to the average indicated in Graph 1.

Lack of family/social support

- Seventy-six percent of students and 83 percent of parents/guardians believed that this is a likely reason for absenteeism
- Ninety-four percent of SAC members, 95 percent of teachers, and 92 percent of administrators felt that this is a likely reason for absenteeism

Students' commitments outside school (such as family or work)

- Seventy-six percent of students and 60 percent of teachers indicated that it was likely students miss class because of outside commitments
- All other respondent groups believed that outside commitments are a less likely or unlikely reason for absenteeism

Family vacation plans or other non-academic activities

- Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, less than half (42 percent) of parents/guardians found that it was likely that vacations and other non-academic activities lead to absenteeism
- In contrast, 69 percent of students and 61 percent of teachers found that vacations and other non-academic activities are likely causes of absenteeism

There are no consequences for missing school

- Ninety-three percent of teachers and 84 percent of administrators felt that it was very likely that the lack of consequences for missing school has a direct impact on student attendance
- Sixty percent of students felt that the above reason is a likely cause of absenteeism
- *School sanctions such as suspensions or expulsions*
- All respondent groups agreed that it was unlikely that suspensions or expulsions are the reasons for absenteeism
- Nineteen percent of administrators believe that the above is a likely cause of absenteeism
- Many more students (49 percent) felt that suspensions are a likely cause of absenteeism

The Impacts of Gender, Race, Culture, and Sexual Orientation on Attendance

Participants were asked if they felt that issues surrounding gender, race, culture, and/or sexual orientation played a significant role in student attendance. In total, 1,765 respondents answered this question, of them 1,580 respondents (88 percent) did not feel that these issues have a significant impact on student attendance. Of the 225 (12 percent) respondents that did feel these issues play a significant role in attendance, approximately half agreed that students do not feel safe and accepted or are bullied because of their gender, race, culture, and/or sexual orientation. As a student respondent explained, “Children are scared to go to school because of the comments other children [are] making to them.”

Interestingly, only approximately 11 percent of respondents who identified a caring and safe learning environment as a condition that facilitates an effective climate for teaching or as a condition that encourages attendance also felt that issues of gender, race, culture, and/or sexual orientation would have an effect on student attendance.

Absenteeism Affecting Other Students

Respondents were asked if they felt that frequently absent students have a significant effect on the ability of other students to learn. Of the 1,749 respondents who completed this question, 35 percent agreed that frequently absent students affect the ability of other students to learn. Respondents explained that teachers spend a great deal of time and energy helping frequently absent students catch up, which can take away from the time spent on students that do attend regularly. Respondents also stated that absenteeism has a negative effect on group work, as group projects are often delayed by students who regularly miss class.

A number of respondents stated that when students with attendance issues are absent it can actually have a positive effect on the class. As one respondent explained:

When those students who are absent are the class bullies, other students feel better on those days and are more open to learning. Then when those students return to the classroom, it also affects the others, because the teacher needs both to help the absent students catch up and to continue with his teaching for the rest of the class.

It is important to remember that the majority of respondents (65 percent) did not feel that frequently absent students have a significant impact on the ability to learn of the students who do attend school regularly.

Best Practices

Participants were asked to identify the current best practices that encourage students to attend school. In total 1,743 respondents answered this question. Respondents were able to choose multiple responses to this question. Table 6 illustrates the percentage of respondents who supported each best practice.

Table 6: Best Practices to Encourage Student Attendance

| Best Practice | Percentage of Support n = 1,743 |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Database that tracks student attendance in the school | 63 |
| Teachers and/or principals follow up with students when they are absent (for example, to ask them where they were or if everything is okay) | 60 |
| Provide help to students who are finding school difficult | 58 |
| When a student is missing a lot of school, teachers and principals regularly discuss the issue with the student's parents/guardians | 54 |
| Provide help to students who are missing school | 42 |
| A formal reward and/or recognition system to encourage positive behaviour and attendance | 33 |
| Clear rules about attendance | 29 |
| Schedules that keep the same students together throughout the school day | 18 |
| Consequences for non-attendance are enforced | 18 |
| Other (e.g., contact parents/guardians, provide activities that engage students, provide rewards for good attendance, etc.) | 11 |

*Respondents could choose multiple responses.

The majority of respondents agreed that having a database in place that tracks student attendance is an effective practice. Seventy-one percent of teachers were supportive of this best practice. Fifty-four percent of respondents also agreed that education professionals should discuss attendance issues with parents/guardians. When asked to identify effective consequences for dealing with absenteeism in a later survey question, 30 percent of respondents recommended some level of parental involvement. Further, in a number of open-ended sections of the survey, respondents reiterated the importance of a reliable, effective system for tracking student attendance. A database would allow education professionals to clearly communicate trends in student attendance and absenteeism to parents/guardians.

Respondents also strongly supported having teachers and/or administrators follow up with students when they are absent. In total, 60 percent of respondents agreed that a member of the school staff should follow up with a student. School administrators were particularly supportive of this best practice—80 percent of school administrators believed that teachers or administrators should follow up with students when they are absent.

Respondents believed that providing supports to struggling students and creating the opportunity for a dialogue between students and teachers with respect to attendance issues would encourage student attendance. A number of respondents emphasized the importance of discussing attendance issues with students and/or parents/guardians to ensure that the school is providing the necessary academic and social supports to the student. Many participants also

agreed that creating a dialogue with students would help identify larger issues behind absenteeism.

While enforcing consequences for non-attendance received one of the lowest levels of support, second only to the Other category, many respondents stated in a subsequent open-ended question that clear rules for attendance are necessary. Similarly, clear consequences and/or sanctions for absenteeism received the highest level of support in survey question 4, which addressed options for encouraging student attendance. The disparity between the relatively low support for enforced consequences in this question and the high support for consequences in other survey questions would seem to stem from the wording in the survey. This question asks respondents “What best practices does your school and/or school board have that encourage students to attend school?” Whereas, respondents were later asked “What should be the consequence(s) for a student who frequently misses school without a valid medical or academic reason for the absence?” Respondents made a clear distinction between the best practices and effective consequences. One respondent stated,

There has to be a positive incentive program but there also has to be significant consequences too—at this point there is little in the way of consequences for missing school.

Respondents agreed that it is important to create a positive learning environment that engages all students in order to encourage attendance.

Effective Consequences

Participants in the online survey were asked if students in their schools know what kind of behaviour is expected of them while they are in school. In total, 90 percent of respondents answered that students do know what behaviour is expected of them while they are in school, 6 percent were unsure, and only 4 percent felt that students do not know what behaviour is expected of them.

Respondents were also asked if students in their school know what the consequences are if they do not behave as expected. In total, 76 percent of respondents answered that students do understand the consequences associated with inappropriate behaviour, 14 percent were unsure, and 10 percent felt that students do not understand the consequences.

The respondents who do not feel students understand what behaviour is expected of them, or what the consequences are for inappropriate behaviour, recommended that the rules and guidelines in place be clearly communicated and consistently enforced. In many cases, respondents noted that rules are inconsistently enforced from classroom to classroom, which causes confusion in students. Respondents also stated that in some cases consequences do not exist or are simply not enforced. In addition, a number of respondents noted that consequences are often very minor and are not taken seriously by students. Participants noted that an effectively implemented Positive and Effective Behaviour Support (PEBS) program would be a positive step forward in dealing with behavioural issues in most schools.

Consequences for Non-attendance

Respondents were asked to propose effective consequences for students who frequently miss school without a valid medical or academic reason for the absence. This was an open-ended question. Respondents were encouraged to make multiple suggestions. In total, 1,566 respondents answered this question. Table 7 identifies the most commonly suggested consequences and the percentage of respondents who recommended them.

Table 7: Respondent Suggested Consequences for Absenteeism

| Consequence | Percentage of Support for Consequences n = 1,566 |
|--|---|
| Full or partial loss of credit | 31 |
| Parental involvement and/or accountability | 30 |
| In-school suspension or detention | 13 |
| Suspension or expulsion | 9 |
| Responsible for all missed work | 8 |
| Review of family situation / involvement of other agencies (Community Services, Department of Justice, etc.) | 7 |
| In-school counselling | 6 |
| Sanctions on extracurricular activities | 5 |
| Academic supports | 4 |
| Loss of academic support | 1 |
| Extra credit work | 1 |
| Rewards for good attendance | 1 |
| No consequences | 1 |
| Unsure as to what the consequences should be | 8 |

*Multiple responses were allowed.

While a full or partial loss of credit received a very high level of support, in many cases, respondents recommended a system of staged interventions and consequences for various levels of absenteeism. For example, one respondent recommended “in-school suspensions so student can get caught up with the work they missed” followed by “a meeting with parents, students, teachers, and administrators,” and finally, if the situation does not improve “after too many absences the student should be removed from the course.” As this example illustrates, many respondents felt a full loss of credit or retention is a last resort to be used only when other interventions have been exhausted.

Many respondents advocated for increased parental involvement in dealing with absenteeism. Respondents stated that parents/guardians could help ensure that their child attends more regularly. Moreover, parents/guardians could reinforce the value of attendance and education, and help identify any larger issues leading to frequent absenteeism, such as bullying.

When examined by respondent group, the consequences suggested were very similar. Full or partial loss of credit and parental involvement were the top two suggested consequences from each respondent group with the exception of SAC members. SAC members had the highest level of support for parental involvement (39 percent); however, they ranked in-school suspensions (17 percent) slightly higher than loss of credit (14 percent). Please see Table 9 for the levels of support for each consequence by respondent group.

Proposed Consequences

Loss of Credit

A full or partial loss of credit and/or good standing was the most commonly suggested consequence for non-attendance. Many respondents suggested that part of a student's final grade should be based on their attendance. Another common suggestion was that after a set number of unexcused absences a student would lose credit for the course. Many respondents suggested that students be retained if they fail to meet the outcomes of a given course. As one participant explained, "It's ridiculous that these students are just pushed through, year after year, without meeting the outcomes."

Parental Involvement/Accountability

Respondents agreed that parents/guardians need to play a more active role in ensuring that their child attends school. Thirty-three percent of parents/guardians responding to the survey suggested that parents be contacted when their child is absent. In general, respondents made a distinction between parental involvement and accountability at the elementary level and at the high school level. Participants agreed that at the high school level the student is primarily responsible for their own attendance, whereas at the elementary level the responsibility lies with the parents/guardians. As one respondent explained,

The consequences [for absenteeism] would depend on the age of the student. For students at the elementary level, the school team should be meeting on a frequent basis with parents. At the secondary level, it might be more effective to work directly with the student in order to lay out an attendance plan.

At the high school level, respondents agreed that it is important to ensure that parents/guardians are given regular updates with respect to their child's attendance record. Moreover, respondents often suggested that parents/guardians meet with teachers, school administrators, and/or guidance counsellors to discuss issues related to the attendance of their child. It was agreed that increased parental involvement would have a positive impact on overall attendance and would help to identify the larger issues that may be related to poor attendance. Meetings with parents/guardians could also help to identify family and social situations that may require attention from other agencies.

Respondents clearly stated that it is the responsibility of parents/guardians to ensure that elementary students attend school. One participant stated,

I feel as though it is the parents' responsibility to ensure their child is in attendance. I am an elementary teacher, the students in my class are not mature or responsible enough to get themselves to school. The parents should be held accountable.

Respondents agreed that at the elementary level students should not be punished for being absent. As one participant explained, "we can't expect a five-year-old to take on the responsibility of getting themselves to school." Respondents agreed that parents/guardians should be accountable if their child is absent without excuse. Many participants suggested that other agencies, such as the departments of Community Services or Justice, become involved if a student continues to have poor attendance after the parents/guardians have been contacted by the school. A number of participants likened the failure of parents/guardians to ensure that their child was attending school to child neglect or abuse.

In general, respondents agreed that at both the high school and elementary levels parental involvement would lead to increased attendance. A number of participants suggested that students, parents/guardians, and educational staff work together to create an attendance plan and to deal with any issues that may be affecting attendance. Respondents also stressed the importance of ensuring that parents/guardians understand the importance of attendance; respondents generally agreed that it is important to communicate the value of education to all parents/guardians.

In-school Suspension or Detention, Academic Supports, and School Work

Participants generally agreed that students should be responsible for completing any and all work that they miss during the time they are absent. A number of participants advocated for in-school suspensions or detentions to provide students with structured time to make up any missed assignments. During these in-school suspensions or detentions a teacher should be assigned to assist students and provide them with academic support.

Participants agreed that detentions during lunch, recess, free periods, and after school would deter students from skipping class and would allow them to catch up on missed lessons. Similarly, in-school suspensions would remove students from their regular classrooms and allow them to catch up on missed work. Some participants felt that in-school suspensions had the dual benefit of providing structured assistance to frequently absent students, while limiting the frustration they may feel from being so far behind their classmates. A few participants noted that in-school suspensions would limit disruptions to regular classrooms, as teachers would not be required to re-teach material.

A small number of participants (4 percent) stated that academic supports should be available to help frequently absent students catch up in their classes; however, they did not elaborate on the structure or nature of these supports.

A number of participants (8 percent) simply stated that students should be responsible for completing any and all missed work. However, they did not advocate for in-school suspensions or academic supports. A few participants also stated that students should be assigned extra-credit work.

A very small number of participants (1 percent) stated that frequently absent students should not have the benefit of academic supports or extra assistance. However, in most cases, the

participants explained that teachers should not be required to re-teach material to students who are absent without excuse.

Suspensions and Expulsions

A number of respondents advocated for out-of-school suspensions or for expulsion of chronically absent students. Many respondents who advocated for either suspension or expulsion would frequently outline a series of consequences, using suspensions or expulsions as a last resort. For example, one participant suggested the following steps for addressing absenteeism:

- Contact the parents/guardians and advise them that their child has been absent
- Meet with the student to discuss the reasons for the absence
- Ensure that the student is aware of the work they will be required to complete
- Provide assistance to the student, including regular reviews with teachers
- Monitor the student's progress and report any ongoing issues to parents/guardians
- Suspend student if recovery action is not being executed

As this example indicates, a number of respondents believed that suspension or expulsion should be used only as a last resort after other interventions and/or disciplinary actions have failed. That said, a number of respondents also felt that if a student fails to come to school he or she should simply be suspended or expelled. As one respondent argued, frequently absent students should be "suspended for the term ... When these students do come to school they disrupt the learning of others, and they are not coming to learn themselves."

It is important to note that a small number of respondents argued specifically against suspending or expelling frequently absent students. As one such respondent stated, "why reward lack of attendance with further lack of attendance! Provide in-school supports and encouragements."

Counselling and/or a Review of Home Situation

A number of respondents advocated for in-school counselling and/or a review of the student's family situation by an outside agency, 6 percent and 7 percent respectively. In many cases, respondents stated that these interventions should be staged. First, a guidance counsellor would meet with the student and possibly the parents/guardians, to discuss any issues that may be leading to non-attendance. Some respondents felt that if the guidance counsellor believes that the student needs additional interventions or support, then an outside agency should be contacted to do a review of the student's family/home situation.

Some respondents argued that outside agencies should be more accessible to provide students and families with the necessary supports to ensure that students come to school ready to learn. As one respondent stated, "Community Services should be involved. A coordination of outside agencies such as mental health should also happen. Many of these students come from families that need help and guidance, as well as parenting skills." Another respondent also argued for greater co-ordination between agencies. They stated,

We need a fleet of psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and doctors for each family of schools—or at least rapid access to these professionals ... Some of the homes these children come from are destructive and contribute greatly to emotional instability.

Generally, respondents agreed that better co-operation between agencies such as the Departments of Education, Community Services, Health, Health Promotion and Protection, and Justice, would greatly assist in identifying and dealing with many of the more serious issues leading to frequent absenteeism.

Sanctions on Extracurricular Activities

A number of respondents (5 percent) agreed that if a student is absent without reason, they should not be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities such as school dances. These respondents also felt that frequently absent students should not be allowed to be members of any school clubs or sports teams.

No Consequences

A very small number of participants (1 percent) felt that there should not be consequences for absenteeism.

Roles of Stakeholders

Respondents were asked to identify what role students, teachers, SACs, school administrators, school boards, the Department of Education, and other stakeholder groups need to play in addressing absenteeism and issues related to attendance. In general, respondents agreed that it was the responsibility of the Department of Education to create policy that could be adapted by school boards to deal with absenteeism. Respondents agreed that SACs and school boards should be involved in creating and adapting the attendance policy to fit the needs of their individual boards and schools. School boards would then support school administrators, teachers, and other school staff in applying the policy. Administrators would provide support for teachers, and both administrators and teachers would apply the policy consistently and fairly. Parents/guardians and students would work closely with school staff to identify and address all issues related to attendance.

In addition to creating and applying a policy to address non-attendance, respondents agreed that clear lines of communication between stakeholders must be maintained. Respondents felt that open communication would help promote the importance of education and would assist in addressing any issues that may be having a negative effect on education.

Roles of Stakeholders, by Group

Students

Respondents agreed that students, particularly high school students, should be responsible for attending school on time and for completing all missed work when they are absent. Many respondents felt that students should be held accountable for all non-excused absences. A number of respondents stated, in order to value attendance, that students must understand the effect absenteeism has on their education.

Students have the ability to help provide input into the causes of absenteeism. Many respondents felt that students could help other stakeholder groups better understand why they or their peers are not attending school. Similarly, a number of respondents believed that students could encourage their peers to attend by providing either formal or informal peer support groups. One student respondent illustrated the power of what some respondents called “positive peer-pressure.” As she or he explained, “I know personally that within my group of friends, if

somebody's missing a lot of school for no reason, we give them a hard time and get them to come." A number of respondents felt that students could play a major role in encouraging each other to attend.

Parents/Guardians

Respondents agreed that parents/guardians need to be actively involved in their children's education and that they need to regularly reinforce the value of education and attendance. Like students, parents/guardians can help to identify issues that lead to absenteeism by maintaining open communication with teachers and school staff.

A number of respondents noted that parents/guardians should not enable absenteeism by allowing their child to stay home without a valid reason or by planning family trips during the school year. Further, respondents agreed that parents/guardians should be accountable if their child is absent without reason. For example, respondents suggested monetary fines, involving child services, or calling the police if parents consistently fail to get their child to school. This was felt to be particularly true of parents/guardians with children at the elementary level.

School Advisory Councils

Respondents felt that SACs should assist in developing policies and consequences to address issues related to absenteeism. Moreover, respondents agreed that SACs could help to support teachers, school administrators, and school boards in tracking absenteeism, reviewing specific cases, enforcing policies, and working to create a safe, caring learning environment in schools. SACs can also play an important role in promoting attendance and reinforcing the value of education to all stakeholders, as well as the general public.

Teachers

Respondents agreed that teachers are at the front line in identifying and addressing issues related to attendance. Teachers must accurately and consistently track student attendance and should follow up with students who frequently miss time. Respondents agreed that by following up with students, teachers could help encourage attendance and could identify any larger issues that may be leading to frequent absenteeism.

Respondents agreed that teachers must work to create a safe and caring learning environment. In order to create a positive learning environment, it is important that teachers consistently apply consequences for absenteeism or unacceptable behaviour. A number of respondents noted that when teachers are inconsistent or when inconsistencies exist from classroom to classroom, students get mixed messages and may not have a clear understanding of the behaviour that is expected of them.

School Administrators

Like teachers, administrators must consistently enforce policies and consequences around student attendance. Further, as with other stakeholder groups, administrators must promote the importance of attendance to students and parents/guardians. Many respondents agreed that administrators need to provide leadership and support to school staff, in order to help deal with issues related to absenteeism.

Respondents agreed that administrators need to maintain open communication with students and parents/guardians. A close relationship with students and parents/guardians has many benefits. First, administrators can more easily track attendance issues. Second, if an

administrator has a good relationship with his or her students, it will be easier for him or her to approach a student to address any attendance or behavioural issues. Finally, the administrator can help to create a positive school culture in which all students feel valued.

School Boards

Respondents agreed that the primary role of school boards is to create and enforce an attendance policy with clear consequences for students who are frequently absent. Boards must also support all school staff in applying the policy or policies. In some cases, respondents felt that support may require additional resources or funding.

Department of Education

As with school boards, respondents agreed that the role of the Department of Education is to create an attendance policy. Many respondents stated that this should be an umbrella policy that could be adapted to the specific needs of individual school boards or schools. Respondents agreed that the department should provide additional funding and/or support to school boards and schools to ensure that the attendance policy is properly executed. Finally, some respondents suggested that the department develop curriculum, outcomes, and alternative programs to engage a wide range of students in the classroom experience.

Other

A number of respondents agreed that outside agencies including the Departments of Community Services, Health, Health Promotion and Protection, and Justice need to play a more active role in addressing issues related to poor attendance. In addition, respondents agreed that there should be greater community involvement in this issue. Respondents suggested increasing communication to all stakeholders and to the general public to increase the awareness of absenteeism as a major issue affecting education.

Supporting Material

Table 8: Results for Survey Question 5: *How likely do you feel the reasons below are the cause for students not attending school?*

| Statement | Percent Likelihood | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------|----------|---------------|
| | Very likely | Likely | Unlikely | Very unlikely |
| Students view classes as boring and/or a waste of time | 22 | 51 | 23 | 4 |
| Students and teachers do not get along | 12 | 39 | 40 | 8 |
| Students do not get along with each other | 13 | 49 | 34 | 4 |
| Students do not feel safe | 14 | 34 | 42 | 10 |
| School work is too difficult and students cannot find the help they need | 14 | 36 | 39 | 11 |
| Students feel they cannot catch up after being absent | 13 | 40 | 40 | 8 |
| Lack of family/social support | 55 | 37 | 7 | 1 |
| Students' commitments outside school (such as family or work) | 14 | 41 | 39 | 7 |
| Family vacation plans or other non-academic activities | 15 | 39 | 38 | 8 |
| There are no consequences for missing school | 58 | 28 | 12 | 3 |
| School sanctions such as suspensions or expulsions | 7 | 24 | 52 | 17 |

Table 9: Results for Survey Question 11 by Respondent Group

| Consequence | Percentage Support by Respondent Group | | | | |
|--|--|--------|------------|---------|----------------|
| | Student | Parent | SAC member | Teacher | Administration |
| Full or partial loss of credit | 22 | 18 | 14 | 42 | 25 |
| Parental involvement and/or accountability | 22 | 33 | 39 | 26 | 36 |
| In-school suspension or detention | 9 | 13 | 17 | 11 | 17 |
| Suspension or expulsion | 17 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 7 |
| Responsible for all missed work | 11 | 7 | 9 | 8 | 9 |
| Review of family situation / involvement of other agencies (Community Services, Department of Justice, etc.) | 0 | 10 | 6 | 7 | 10 |
| In-school counselling | 4 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 7 |
| Sanctions on extracurricular activities | 4 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 5 |
| Academic supports | 4 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 7 |
| Loss of academic support | 6 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Extra credit work | 4 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Rewards for good attendance | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| No consequences | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Unsure as to what the consequences should be | 11 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 2 |

APPENDIX F: Selected School Board Policies Providing for Staged Interventions

Liverpool Regional High School

Consequences of Unauthorized Absences:

1st unauthorized absence—parent contact

- detention after school

2nd unauthorized absence—parent contact

- in-school suspension

3rd unauthorized absence—parent contact

- suspension 1 day

4th unauthorized absence—parent contact

- suspension 3 days

5th unauthorized absence—parent contact

- suspension 5 days

6th unauthorized absence—parent contact

- suspension 5 days

Recommendation for suspension for balance of year

Loss of Credit:

1) If a student has missed 8 periods of instructional time in a course, approximately 10 hours of the necessary 110 hours of credit will have been missed. As a consequence, a letter will be sent home advising parents/guardians that attendance is a major concern. The letter must be signed and returned by the parent. The student may be placed on attendance probation at this time.

2) If a student has missed 16 periods of instruction, approximately 20 hours of the necessary 110 hours for credit will have been lost. As a consequence, he or she is ineligible to obtain credit for that course.

3) Students who have been injured or hospitalized, or who have extended illness will not be affected by this policy. The school administration reserves the right to address any other exceptional circumstances.

Notre Dame

At 5 absences in any subject, the subject teacher will contact the parent/guardian to inform them of the attendance profile.

At 10 absences in any subject, the subject teacher will contact the parent/guardian to inform them of the attendance profile. An attendance profile, indicating that the credit is in jeopardy, may be sent home to the parent/guardian.

At 15 absences in any subject, the administration will review, in consultation with the subject teacher, the attendance profile and make a determination as to credit loss or deferral. The parent/guardian will be informed of the situation.

Loss of Credit:

Students with four truancies or unexplained absences in any course may be removed from that course.

Mount Boucherie Secondary School

1 unexcused absence

- Teacher meets with the student privately to review the attendance policy and the consequences of further absences
- Teacher directs the student to bring in a note from a parent clarifying the absence by the next class. If the student does not comply, the teacher is to phone home and notify the parent. A message on the parent's voice mail is sufficient at this stage.
- A SynerVoice automated message will reinforce, not replace, the teacher's contact.
- Misused class time will be made up with the teacher upon request

2 unexcused absences

- Teacher makes contact and has an actual conversation with the parent
- Teacher reviews the attendance policy with the parent or caregiver and outlines the consequences of further absences
- Student may be required to make up the lost class time outside of regular class time
- Teacher posts a message on the "Attendance" icon on MBS Staff and copies it to the Behaviour Support Teacher as an FYI
- The "work ethic" mark may be lowered at the teacher's discretion

3 unexcused absences

- The teacher refers the student to the Behaviour Support Teacher
- The student will be assigned to the detention room at lunch to make up lost instructional time
- Consequences for further absences will be reviewed by the Behaviour Support Teacher
- A "N" may be assigned for the "Work Ethic" mark
- A template is available for staff to send a note home with students including helpful tips for parents to improve attendance

4 unexcused absences

- The student referred to the Behaviour Support Teacher
- 1 day disciplinary workstation may be assigned in The Den by the Behaviour Support Teacher
- Consequences for further absences will be reviewed by the Behaviour Support Teacher or Administration
- The parent is contacted by Behaviour Support Teacher or Administration

5-6 unexcused absences

- The student is referred to the appropriate Vice Principal by the Behavior Support Teacher
- The student will be assigned a 2-day in-school suspension
- The student is not permitted to return to any classes until a meeting with the parent has occurred
- Administration will set up meeting with the parent
- A plan/agreement will be established between the parent and school with clear conditions and consequences
- This plan is to be distributed to the student, parent and appropriate staff members
- The student's course grade may be significantly impacted by lost class time

7-8 absences

- Students missing more than 7 days may be referred to School Success Team (SST)
- SST will consider a referral in Hospital Homebound Program alternate program IRP, or if further disciplinary action is required
- The student may lose the opportunity to continue with the affected course(s)
- The counsellor and administrator to review with the teacher whether or not the course should be dropped

10 absences

- The student is placed on Academic Probation which will be a contract stating clearly what is expected, and what the consequences will be for further absences
- Administration will discuss the contract with the student and parent and provide a copy to each of the student's teachers and his/her counsellor

Kennebecasis Valley High School (NB)

Any missed* class or classes will result in a phone call to the student's home via an auto dialer system. If parents or guardians are aware of the absence and a written excuse is provided (other than school sponsored activities) then no further response is necessary. A second contact with the student's home will be made when a student has missed seven (7) class periods; and a further notice will be issued when a student has been absent for ten (10) class periods. The student will also be interviewed by a vice principal, and referred to a guidance counsellor when s/he has missed (10) classes.

When a student has missed twelve class periods, a vice principal will inform the student that s/he must appear before the Attendance Committee and explain his/her absences. Parents/Guardians will be invited to the Attendance Committee hearing also. The committee will decide whether that student be allowed to continue attending classes or be suspended for the remainder of the semester. If the student is allowed to continue attending s/he will not be permitted to miss any class period or to be tardy without an acceptable excuse**. In either case, the student will be permitted to write his/her examinations. The student may return to school in the next semester with a fresh record of attendance.

If a student is suspended by the attendance committee, that student will become an eight day student. This means that the protocol described above will be followed but the steps will occur at 4, 6 and 7 days absent. The designation of "eight day student" will remain in effect until the student graduates.

* A student who has failed to attend class for any reason is deemed absent

** Documented illness, religious holidays, or circumstances of a compassionate nature (as outlined in the New Brunswick *School Act*)

WC Miller Collegiate

Loss of Credit:

Daily attendance as evident in absences:

* Excused absences (E) – 12 hours of lost instructional time (12 absences equals 15% of course contact time) may lead to loss of credit; when 12 absences are reached, the student will meet with the classroom teacher, administration and their parents to address attendance concerns. Overall attendance habits as evident in both absences and punctuality will be taken into account.

Students are responsible for lost instructional time due to excused absences.

* Unexcused absences (A) – three unexcused absences may lead to loss of credit. Students will be expected to account for each unexcused absence within one day and are responsible for the lost instructional time. When 3 unexcused absences are reached, the student will meet with administration and parents will be contacted to address attendance concerns. Overall attendance habits as evident in both absences and punctuality will be taken into account.

* School Initiated absences (S) – Students are expected to make up the lost instructional time that results from a school-initiated absence; students are also expected to communicate clearly with their classroom teachers regarding school initiated absences.