

**HALIFAX REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD
RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S
STORM DAYS IN NOVA SCOTIA DISCUSSION PAPER**

PURPOSE: To report to the Board the input that was received from School Advisory Councils and school administrators in response to the Department of Education's "*Storm Days in Nova Scotia Discussion Paper*", as requested by motion (Yee/Finlayson) March 31, 2010.

BUSINESS PLAN GOAL: To continue to improve student achievement and learning for all students.

BACKGROUND: As a result of the approved motion of the Board (March 31, 2010), the School Administration Department designed and implemented a process to gain public input through school advisory councils (SACs) and school administrators in response to the Department of Education's "*Storm Days in Nova Scotia Discussion Paper*".

Written input was received from more than one hundred SACs. Many responded specifically to each recommendation in the discussion paper, while others offered general feedback on the document and indicated priority items for consideration in decision-making.

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

Feedback was in support of this recommendation, with a recurring emphasis on better communication of "*how storm day decisions are made*". Several contributions acknowledged the online video clip of Superintendent Olsen used last year as a good strategy. Several SACs in rural areas expressed concern about individual bus drivers making decisions about route alterations. This most often leads to ambiguity; more clarity on which roads are being serviced by busses is required. "*When left up to the driver, no one knows if the bus is coming or not.*"

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

Feedback was in support of this recommendation. Several submissions included underlining the importance of scripting local media messages to avoid historical language that is no longer used in our policies (e.g., references to former boards, paved or gravel roads, secondary roads, etc.). This is particularly important for our English Second Language families and students who are at home interpreting media messages when parents have already gone to work for the day. Efforts should be made to ensure that words and expressions used in public communication messages in the media are consistent with the terminology that we use when schools educate families in September about weather / bus cancellation.

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

Feedback varied on this recommendation. While most offered consistent messages about relying on other governmental departments to access timely information about weather and road conditions, several questions were raised about additional costs potentially inherent in the examples given in the report (e.g., school boards installing their own webcams).

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

This recommendation elicited much response. In general, there were divergent opinions on the positive impact of contingency options for weather conditions. While some felt that days with students absent and staff present could be used constructively for professional development, others stated that such suggestions underline the lack of value and understanding of effective professional development. There were many contributors who suggested that delayed starts would be complicated and not possible for working parents, and others who felt that this would be a good idea. Many explicitly stated that the vast geography of our board creates different challenges in different regions. Although articulated differently, another recurring message is summed up by the following contribution: *“In this response I know what the consultant is saying about concerns as the frequency of closures rise but this has no place in setting policy or safety standards. The same criteria should be used for the first and the twentieth closure.”*

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

In general, those who chose to respond to this recommendation were supportive. It is worth noting however, that most identified this as an issue for collective bargaining or the Human Resource Services Department and declined a more detailed response.

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

Similar to Recommendation 4, there was much opposing feedback on this recommendation. The importance of scheduled (not storm-dependent) PCT time was a recurring theme. There were many comments that saw the use of technology (conference calls, online PD, video conferencing - Skype) as a tool to support professional dialogue without the inherent risks of travel in poor weather conditions.

General Feedback

There were several recurring messages in the feedback from School Advisory Councils:

- Perhaps the most consistent message was *“safety is the top concern”*. This was articulated in many ways, often with expressions like *“err on the side of caution”*. Contributors suggested that a *“differentiated approach will be needed, based on the size and diversity of our municipality”*... *“The method our board currently uses to determine storm days / bus closures is a good, common sense approach. Be consistent with the idea that student safety being the forefront concern, not the amount of days previously cancelled due to weather.”*

- There was a definite recognition of the complexity and challenges related to the size of our board and regional differences – geography, local weather conditions and available infrastructure all variables contributing to the challenges of decision-making.
- Mid-day cancellations should be avoided if possible. There was a consistent recognition that school cancellation during the day presented logistical challenges for families and schools alike.
- There was also a general acknowledgement that nothing will make everyone happy.
- Many contributors felt this discussion paper is a reaction to a particularly harsh winter (2008-09) and that overall our district does not lose that many days.
- There was some positive support for the concept of delayed openings, although it was certainly not unanimous.
- Many SACs indicated that parents are strongly opposed to the idea of buses being cancelled and schools being open. *“If the roads are bad, parents prefer schools be closed, period.”* As emphatically as this was stated, others offered the opposite opinion stating there should always be an option for parents to drop off their children at school.
- Some interesting feedback was included from a number of parents who lived previously in other parts of our country. They offered examples of delayed openings (maximum one hour) and school systems that rarely closed. One person offered a more complex comparison stating that while their former city did not frequently cancel school, the city’s infrastructure included snow removal equipment which afforded a swift clean-up and a standard of bare roads in the winter months.
- Thoughts around the viability of work packages for students varied from *“yes, with DVD, questions and interactive material”* to *“there is no authentic learning if busy work is assigned”*. It would appear that there was more consideration of student work packages at the secondary level. Questions were raised about individual program plans, expectations for parental support and the possibility for work packages to reflect learning styles and varying student abilities.

In summary, the effort to collect feedback from School Advisory Councils on the Department of Education’s *“Storm Days in Nova Scotia Discussion Paper”* was very successful. Submissions were received from all levels (elementary, junior and senior) as well as all regions of our municipality. Opinions reflected thoughtful consideration of the recommendations as well as an identification of practical challenges present in our geographically vast school board. Although the feedback collected offers varied opinions on many of the issues related to school and bus cancellation, resoundingly our public prioritizes *student safety* as the critical factor in decision-making.

COST: N/A

FUNDING: N/A

TIMELINE: N/A

APPENDICES: N/A

RECOMMENDATIONS: That the Board receive this report for information.

COMMUNICATIONS:

AUDIENCE	RESPONSIBLE	TIMELINE
Board website	Doug Hadley, Coordinator, Communications	February 10, 2011

From: For further information please contact Danielle McNeil-Hessian, Director – School Administration or Elwin LeRoux, Coordinator – School Administration at 464-2000 ext 2275.

To: Senior Staff January 31, 2011
Board March 2, 2011

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