

**Minister's Response to *Promoting Student
Engagement: Report of the Minister's Working
Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate***

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Introductory Comments

It is widely recognized and understood that the quality of classroom instruction is the most important factor affecting student learning. However, high quality instruction can only have an impact when students are present and are actively engaged in their own learning. This is a shared responsibility with the student, the teacher, the parents and the school community all having critical roles to play.

Students have had a significant voice in the report on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate and in the discussions leading to the Minister's Response to this report. Students have told us that the most important factors to their engagement are respectful and supportive relationships with teachers and engaging, interactive classrooms that support active learning. The education system needs to be responsive to the needs of the 21st century learner and to support those learners who are struggling for a range of reasons. Our youth deserve the best possible education that we can provide for them, the economic welfare of the Province of Nova Scotia depends on it.

The Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate was charged with the difficult mandate of examining the challenges related to absenteeism and student engagement in the learning process. The committee was asked to recommend how to best support an effective climate for teaching and learning that would foster student engagement and encourage regular attendance.

I would like to extend my thanks to Mr. Howard Windsor and the entire Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate, for their diligent work on the complex issues of student engagement and absenteeism in the public school system.

As part of their review the committee examined the current legislation and policies dealing with student attendance; the approaches used in other jurisdictions to increase student engagement and reduce absenteeism; and successful programs, supports, and initiatives that are currently helping Nova Scotia's students succeed. The committee also met with a number of stakeholders and educational professionals to draw on their professional opinions and expertise.

I would also like to send a very sincere thank you to those who contributed to the review process and the many Nova Scotians who took the time to write to me with their views on the committee's report: *Promoting Student Engagement: Report of the Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate*. The input and comments were given careful consideration in the preparation of my response.

I would like to extend a special thank you to the many principals, school advisory council members, parents, and students that took the time to participate in focus groups with me to discuss the issues of student engagement and absenteeism after the release of the committee's report. Their insights and comments have been invaluable in the preparation of my response.

Understanding the Scope of the Problem

It is clear from conversations with stakeholders and education partners that absenteeism and disengagement are growing problems in Nova Scotia. While students, parents, and education professionals identified a number of factors leading to increased absenteeism, without provincially consistent data on attendance levels, it is difficult to have a full understanding of the scope of the problem.

There is a clear need for a provincial student information system. Schools and school boards are currently working with inconsistent technologies in the area of student and school data. Attendance records are gathered at the school level and there are no aggregated provincial statistics or common definitions related to reporting attendance. A modern, province-wide information management system will allow schools and school boards to track student attendance in relation to a number of other performance indicators.

The Department of Education is working to develop an integrated province-wide solution to manage, analyze, and report on student data. The provincial student information system project was approved in the fall of 2009, at a total capital cost of \$14 million. The department's 2010–11 budget includes \$4.5 million in capital funding for this project. The core operating system for the provincial student information system is currently being used in 78 schools in the province. This system is used primarily by school-based personnel for school operations and reporting, including: registration and enrollment, school administration, student achievement, attendance, behavior, and parent and student access. The province's remaining schools will migrate to this system before the end of the 2011–12 school year. As this project continues to develop, additional systems will be put in place to manage extended services and programming for students, such as individual program plans.

When it is fully implemented, the provincial student information system will allow the Department of Education and its partners to undertake evidence-based research on important indicators and trends related to student attendance. In short, a student information system will provide schools, school boards, and the department with a more complete understanding of the various issues related to student engagement and attendance. By understanding the scope of the problem, the department and its partners will be able to provide targeted supports and interventions to address issues related to absenteeism. A provincial student information system will further assist in the timing and delivery of these supports and interventions.

The Relationship between Student Engagement and Student Attendance

Consultations with education partners and stakeholders clearly illustrate that engaging students in the learning process has a direct, positive affect on student attendance. However, increasing student attendance through policies and regulations alone does not necessary translate into improved student engagement. It is not enough for students to be present in class, they must also be active participants in the learning process.

A number of the committee's recommendations focus on building and fostering learning environments that are conducive to student engagement. Specifically, recommendations 10 through 13 address fundamental issues with respect to the structure and delivery of educational programs. These recommendations promote student engagement by helping to create flexible and adaptable learning environments that provide students with the opportunity to pursue programs that appeal to their interests and regain credits in courses in which they may have initially struggled. Most importantly, these recommendations promote effective and engaging instruction through job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers. Studies show that developing a teacher's instructional skills has a direct, positive impact on student success and engagement in the classroom.

The committee made a number of recommendations to improve attendance through policies and regulations. These recommendations have been considered in conjunction with the recommendations aimed at creating and maintaining effective learning environments.

Response to the 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.

Minister's Response: While this recommendation reinforces the value that Nova Scotia needs to place on education as a learning province, it is will not necessarily have a significant impact on student engagement or student learning.

As Minister, I support the tenet that high school graduation should be the minimum expectation for all students. Employment options for those with less than high school graduation are rapidly disappearing. According to Statistics Canada, the employment rate of high school graduates is twenty (20) percent higher than those who do not graduate from high school. Employment rates continue to climb for those individuals who go on to pursue some form of post-secondary education.

Placing more emphasis on the value of graduating from high school is a necessary first step in ensuring that Nova Scotia's students have the knowledge and skills they need to complete in the global economy. However, it is unlikely that adjusting the compulsory age of attendance alone will achieve these ends. Focusing on strategies to increase student engagement through effective instruction and coordinated approaches with partner agencies in delivering support and services to youth will have greater effectiveness in advancing student learning. It is important that students have access to an expanded array of programs, to ensure that they are actively engaged throughout their academic careers. As such, I do not intend to move forward with the legislative change at this time.

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.

Minister's Response: I support this recommendation in principle and agree that all education partners need to continually reinforce the key messages of the important relationship between school attendance and student learning in effective classroom settings.

We know that student learning takes place in many settings; however, regular school attendance is very important if students are to achieve all of the learning outcomes of a well-rounded education system. Through public education, students not only work to learn curriculum content, they also develop their capacity for critical thinking, continuous learning, and problem solving, while learning to communicate and work effectively with others. These critical employability skills will continue to serve students as they pursue post-secondary studies and transition into the workforce. The department will work with its partners and through its communications vehicles to reach all parents and students with reminders of the direct relationship between attendance, engagement and student success.

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.

Minister's Response: I support the recommendation to undertake a review of school board attendance committees to determine the most effective practices currently in place for supporting student attendance and engagement, and developing a consistent approach across the province based on these practices. With the new student information system being developed, school board attendance committees will have better information to enable them to monitor attendance data, identify trends in their school board and across boards, and to support schools in their efforts to engage students and parents.

School board attendance committees will play an active role in monitoring and analyzing data collected as part of a two-year trial period for a provincial policy on high school attendance, as outlined in the response to recommendation 8. Attendance committees will also examine the education strategies that are in place to support students who are unable to continue in a course or grade.

A number of boards have attendance committees in place, however, they appear to have varying levels of responsiveness and effectiveness. This review will work to ensure that appropriate structures and operating procedures are in place at the elected board level. Department staff will work closely with school boards and the Nova Scotia School Boards Association to undertake this review.

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 analyze data to develop targeted interventions.

Minister's Response: I support the recommendation to accelerate the development of a student information system, as resources allow. The Department of Education's 2010–11 budget included \$4.5 million in funding for development of a province-wide student information system. While school administrators, educational professionals, parents, students, and a number of other stakeholders clearly identified student absenteeism as a growing concern in the Nova Scotia public education system, it is not clear how pervasive this problem has become due to the lack of a solid information base. As the report notes, more detailed, quantitative information with respect to student attendance patterns across all grade levels is necessary in order to make informed decisions on effective next steps. A provincial student information system will provide schools, school boards, and the department with consistent and comprehensive data concerning student attendance. This will help to inform the timing, scale, and roll out of initiatives designed to increase student attendance and engagement in the future.

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.

Minister's Response: The Department of Education will continue to work with its departmental partners to provide a range of services to students and families; however, at this time we will not pursue changes to either the Education Act or to child protection legislation, as proposed in this recommendation.

I recognize that a number of issues affecting student attendance extend beyond the classroom, and may have their roots in the home and/or community. All departmental partners have a responsibility to identify and address issues related to absenteeism.

Therefore, I am requesting that the existing Child and Youth Senior Officials team examine the growing concern of absenteeism among younger children and prepare specific recommendations on how we can work more collaboratively across departments to address this issue together. I invite the Departments of Community Services and Justice to work closely with the Department of Education and school boards to ensure that we are bringing our collective resources and energies to bear on this important issue to support students and their families. These supports will focus on addressing the root causes of absenteeism to help improve attendance at school.

The Department of Education recognizes the critical need for better integration of services among partners at the school, board and departmental level to ensure that students and families have access to a comprehensive and co-ordinated range of services. I would also like to highlight in my response that, as part of the Our Kids Are Worth IT: Strategy for Children and Youth, the Department of Education and school boards have been implementing SchoolsPlus, an integrated service delivery program, in four areas of the province. The goal of SchoolsPlus is to make schools the centres for the delivery of services designed to help children, youth, and families. This involves close collaboration between partners and service providers, including the Departments of Education, Health, Community Services, and Health Promotion and Protection, as well as the Child and Youth Strategy, and non-government and community organizations.

SchoolsPlus sites have reported that facilitators and community outreach workers are able to provide more services and integrated supports than were provided prior to SchoolsPlus. The increased range of health, justice, and social services supports available to SchoolsPlus sites have enabled the involved schools to address issues of student non-attendance.

The department is currently working with partners to expand the SchoolsPlus model to an Integrated Service Delivery model. The goal of the expanded model is to provide an improved range of services to Nova Scotia students and their families.

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.

Minister's Response: It is important to make every effort to re-engage students in the learning process as early as possible. I support the development of clear policies for staged interventions in response to student absenteeism, and recognize that consideration needs to be given to the range of resources and tools available to school boards to do this effectively. Interdepartmental collaboration is a critical part of the intervention approach.

Recognizing the integrated nature of recommendations 3, 5, 6 and 7, the Department of Education will embark on a process with school boards and its interdepartmental colleagues to develop a comprehensive intervention strategy and provincial policy framework to more clearly define the parameters with specific attention paid to:

- parameters to provide support for in-school suspensions;
- attendance responsibilities of students and parents;
- roles and responsibilities of school administration and school boards;
- supports and responsibilities needed from other government agencies;
- guidelines for contacting parents in cases of frequent absenteeism;
- parameters for credit recovery programs; and
- identify strategies for increasing learning success.

At this time I do not support the development of a targeted grant program as it is a core area of school board responsibility and accountability to support regular school attendance.

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.*

Minister’s Response: I have spent considerable time deliberating on this recommendation and have had many discussions with stakeholders and key partners to understand the benefits and potential impact of this proposed direction.

While it is essential that schools continue to work on student engagement and supports for students experiencing difficulties and challenges in maintaining consistent attendance, I do recognize that many high school principals report increasing difficulty in maintaining an orderly business-like environment in schools where there is widespread ‘skipping’ and non-attendance of classes. This recommendation highlights the absence of an effective tool for educators to address absences where student are making poor choices about attendance and are not maintaining their learning. It also recommends a departure from the current departmental policy in that it allows, within constraints, an academic consequence for absenteeism and as such, must be managed carefully and thoughtfully.

I agree that it is important that teachers and principals have a range of tools to encourage regular attendance at school; however, it is also important that these tools be used in a manner that supports student learning and does not unintentionally punish or further disenfranchise students who, for a variety of complex reasons, find it very difficult to attend class. It is also important to recognize that student learning takes place in many ways, not all of which occur in school settings, and we must ensure that those opportunities are managed appropriately to balance the learning needs of the student.

In addition, it is important to gain a more complete understanding of the variety of complex issues that may affect student attendance. A student information system will provide more accurate data on student engagement and attendance. Without a comprehensive data system, it is difficult to assess the magnitude of the problem or to assess the degree to which such a tool can help to address issues related to attendance in a supportive way.

Students must take responsibility for their learning and the learning process is as important, or perhaps more so, as achieving the grade at the end of the course. It is through the learning process that students build their problem solving abilities, their critical thinking skills, and their abilities to work in a team environment, as well as other critical employability skills they will need in the labour market.

I am therefore authorizing a two-year trial period where boards may allow high schools to implement a policy whereby students who do not attend 80% of classes may become ineligible to receive credit for a course. The trial period will begin on September 1, 2011. During this time data will be gathered and the use of this tool will be monitored to support an assessment at the end of the two-year period to determine if the practice will be adopted as provincial policy. Department staff will work closely with school board staff to establish appropriate and consistent criteria in order to measure the effectiveness of the two-year trial. The criteria will be used to determine what effect this type of approach would have on factors related to attendance, as well as factors related to student achievement and success, such as: suspension rates, course pass rates, high school graduations rates, and student withdrawal rates. School board attendance committees will play an active role in monitoring and analyzing data during the two-year trial period, as noted in the response to recommendation 3.

While it is important to ensure that there are clear consequences for absenteeism, it is equally important to ensure that there is due process with checks and balances along the way to ensure the appropriate use of this tool and to ensure that the tool does not unintentionally punish or further disenfranchise students for circumstances that may be beyond their control, or where students and parents have developed ways to ensure the learning needs of the student are met in certain circumstances.

This is intended to be a tool of last resort after the staged interventions highlighted in recommendations 6 and 7 are exhausted. The Department of Education will work with school boards to determine appropriate staged interventions to support students and encourage them to attend regularly. These interventions may include:

- contacting the parent(s) after five absences;
- creating an attendance contract for the student, with input from the teacher, parent(s), and student after eight absences; and
- meetings between the parent(s), administration, and student after ten absences.

In order to further ensure that students are not unintentionally being punished for circumstances beyond their control, the final decision regarding credit withdrawal will be with the school board. The principal may make recommendation to the school board for

credit withdrawal. The School Board Attendance Committee under the elected board will monitor the broad application of this policy within in the board.

Opportunities for credit recovery and use of in-school suspension will be required in these situations to ensure students have opportunities to recover their credit and re-engage in the learning process.

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.*

Minister's Response: In-school suspensions cannot simply be a punitive measure, but rather they must help students work to meet their educational outcomes in a supportive setting. During my discussions with stakeholders a number of principals and students described learning support opportunities that provided students with a safe and caring learning environment and allow students to get the focused support they need to succeed and rejoin their classmates.

I support the direction to offer in-school suspensions/learning support opportunities as they have proven to be an effective way to ensure that students on long-term suspensions continue to participate in the learning process. They have also been very effective in helping students transition back to the regular classroom after an extended absence.

The department will work with boards to assess needs, supports in terms of policy development standards, and other material supports, to advance this recommendation.

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.

Minister's Response: A comprehensive review of the Public School Program offerings and requirements is being undertaken with a particular focus on middle/junior high and senior high programs. This recommendation is supported in principle and will be part of the broader review process.

The review will include an examination of grade-level configurations, including the critically important grade 9 transition year. Other key topics will include compulsory/elective subjects in junior high, instructional time requirements, the development of an alternative program of the calibre of O₂ for junior high, reduction of the number of courses at grades 10–12, semestering, and other organizational structures and time issues. An overarching theme will be to move toward a Public School Program where students have much greater involvement in their own learning and less emphasis is placed on teacher-directed instruction.

Department staff will work closely with partners and stakeholders to undertake this review. It is important that the department engages with all stakeholders, especially students, during this review process. Studies clearly show that when students have a voice they become more engaged in their own learning. All partners in education must work to more closely involve students in decision making processes, as a means of improving engagement and fostering mutual respect between students and educational professionals.

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.

Minister's Response: I support the development of guidelines to assist school boards in developing high school programs to provide a 'second chance' for students to recover credits for missed courses. It was clear from the public feedback and discussions with principals, parents, and students, that all stakeholders feel that it is important to provide students with the opportunity to recover credits for missed courses. Credit recovery programs have been, and continue to be, successful in re-engaging students in their education and helping them work toward graduation. These programs provide students with a respectful learning environment, which allows them to connect with their instructor and take ownership of their own learning.

The department will develop a framework for credit recovery programs. This framework will address eligibility along with the learning plan. Nova Scotia will also take the opportunity to learn from other jurisdictions with similar frameworks, such as Ontario.

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.

Minister's Response: During the feedback process, participants expanded the definition of alternate programming to include differentiated instruction, hands-on learning, and providing students with an expanded array of programs, including Options and Opportunities (O₂), community based education, and Skilled Trades Education. These programs have had a positive impact on student attendance and student engagement. For example, enrolment in the O₂ program has quadrupled, since it was introduced in 2006–07, and principals are reporting improvements in attendance, grades, as well as fewer discipline issues. It is important that the Department of Education continue to work with its partners to ensure that successful programs continue help students to succeed in the Public Education System.

Alternative programming should be considered an essential part of a comprehensive high school offering. A number of participants strongly advocated for alternative schools. While alternative schools have had a great deal of success in promoting engagement and regular attendance, they provide specialized support for a small population of students and, as such, are not a feasible province-wide solution for problems associated with student engagement and absenteeism. Through Increasing Learning Success, the department is exploring a variety of options to provide a wide range of students with programs, initiatives, and services to help them re-engage in the classroom.

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.

Minister's Response: This is a critical recommendation to support student engagement and learning and I commit the Department of Education to working with educational partners to create job-embedded opportunities for teacher professional learning. Job-embedded professional learning provides teachers with the opportunity to work together to share and reflect on best practices, and to foster the respectful and effective learning environments that encourage student engagement and success.

I recognize the importance of creating capacity and time for teachers to engage in deep reflective practices, using student data, to continually improve the quality of instruction in every classroom. It is a complex issue and one that requires a partnership approach to support deep and sustainable change. This will not only require changes in practices at the school level, it will also require supportive structures and approaches to be in place at the school board and department level. The development of the new student information system will also greatly support teacher collaborative learning as it will provide an opportunity for access to real-time data on student achievement across all classrooms for all teachers in the school that support the student in their learning.

Students benefit when teachers engage in meaningful professional learning opportunities. Teachers and principals need to be advocates for their own professional learning. Teachers should communicate regularly with parents and students, to promote their understanding of how professional learning improves instruction and helps students succeed. Anecdotal evidence has shown that students and parents are more supportive of professional learning opportunities when they understand how those opportunities translate into improved instruction.

The department is committed to working with the school boards and Nova Scotia Teachers Union in partnership to create deep capacity and time for teacher professional learning and reflection in all schools. We will learn from those schools who have found creative ways to embed collaborative time in their daily work and use research on best practices to co-design with our partners models that can work here in Nova Scotia. At the same time we will work to examine processes outside of classroom teaching that are not highly impacting the quality of teaching and learning with the goal of eliminating or reducing processes to provide more time for reflection.