

**School Closure  
Due to Inclement Weather  
Storm Days Committee Recommendations**

October 2015

## **Executive Summary**

It is important that New Brunswick students receive the allotted amount of instructional time. Similarly, as a government, it is essential that we ensure we are providing value for service to New Brunswick citizens by continually examining current practice. Over the past several years, instructional time has been eroded due to school closures as a result of inclement weather.

To this end, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development struck a 'Storm Days Committee' to investigate this issue and provide viable recommendations to mitigate the number of days lost each year due to inclement weather.

The following report outlines the current situation with regard to storm days in New Brunswick, along with the impact on staff, students and stakeholders.

The first section of this document outlines the scope of the committee's work including the parameters within which the recommendations are put forth. The committee undertook a jurisdictional review of Canada's provinces and territories. Consultations were held with stakeholders during the month of August. The findings of the consultation process in relation to potential solutions to mitigate the impact of school closures due to poor weather conditions are outlined within the document.

This proposal outlines the following options, based upon the information amalgamated from the consultations as well as the jurisdictional review and educational research studies:

**Option 1** - Generally, schools remain open although pupil transportation may not be provided due to inclement weather.

**Option 2** - Provision of Storm Day study packages for days when schools are in fact closed or for students who cannot make it to school when pupil transportation is cancelled.

**Option 3** - A comprehensive communication strategy to inform key stakeholders and instil confidence in the Education System.

**Option 4** - Move professional development days to September through November and April through May.

The purpose is to mitigate the loss of instructional time and ensure value for New Brunswick citizens.

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## **Storm Days Committee**

### **Scope of the Committee**

The committee was formed on June 15, 2015 and met on a weekly basis throughout the summer. The committee was made up of Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) employees in various positions related to this committee's mandate. (Attached as Appendix 1)

The scope of the project includes:

- Defining uncontrollable and unpredictable events that cause loss of instructional time
- Identifying decision process for school closures
- Consultation with representative stakeholders
- Jurisdictional review/research
- Developing options for ministerial approval and subsequent implementation by the appropriate responsible authority
- Communication Plan (to be defined)

The scope of this project does not include:

- Changing collective agreements
- Other reasons for loss of instructional time
- Implementation plans

## **Current Situation**

In the last couple of years, there has been a significant loss of instructional days, due to natural and man-made events, that has impacted the quality of the learning experience as well as the programmed calendar of activities.

Although there have been attempts within the districts to mitigate this problem and ensure that essential curricula is covered (e.g. reduce the number of field trips and assemblies, tweet homework assignments on storm days) there has not been a provincial-wide approach put into place. There are members of the public who feel that this increased number of storm days is becoming the norm and are asking for a province-wide policy on school cancellation to be established.

Publically, the Minister has stated that he wants the number of instructional days maximized while ensuring student safety<sup>1</sup>. Given the high number of missed days, he indicated that he would like to strike a committee tasked to engage teachers, bus drivers and other education employees, to review options and develop a contingency plan that will make up for lost instructional time for future school years.

### **District Data**

(Attached as Appendix 2).

The total number of school days lost varied between districts and varied within the districts, depending on the local conditions. There were up to 16 inclement weather days in the 2014-15 school year in some districts. This data does not include closures for other reasons such as power outages, flooding, security threats, etc. The data available from the districts is not standardised and not all districts have the data available for previous years. There appears to be an upward trend of inclement weather days based on the data available, and in particular, this past year appears to be the highest to date for most districts.

### **District Policies**

All the districts have a process in place to deal with school closures due to inclement weather. These processes involve the transportation managers monitoring the situation with respect to weather forecasts and road conditions from various sources including local Department of Transportation and Infrastructure (DTI) road supervisors, weather reports and AMEC Weather Services (funded by EECD) from the evening before, and from 5 a.m. the morning of the decision. For most districts the District Transportation Manager contacts the Superintendent before 6 a.m. to discuss the situation. The Superintendent makes a decision on closure for 6 a.m. which is then communicated through various means including the district website, radio announcements, and voice messages on a hotline. In some districts the decision point is 6:30 a.m. and the responsible person is the Director of Finance and Administration. For all districts the parents are advised of these processes before the winter season and the information is available on the districts' website.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/school-snow-days-contingency-plan-committee-to-be-struck-1.3000311>

## **Research Summary**

### **Studies**

Three different studies (Department of Education North West Territories Literature Review: *Instructional Time and Student Achievement*, 2015; OECD Education Indicators In Focus, *How much time do primary and lower secondary students spend in the classroom?*, April 2014; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Opportunity to Learn - Quantity of Instructional Time*, August 2007) concerning the number of instructional days versus student achievement have been reviewed. The consensus of all three studies is that this topic has not been studied with consistent data that can isolate instructional days from all the various factors that contribute to student achievements.

### **Jurisdictional Review**

The provinces and territories appear to approach the problem in different ways. Some jurisdictions rarely close the schools, although buses may not be running. Prince Edward Island is conducting a study on using online learning. Quebec uses “floating days”, planning that a number of days will be missed. If these days are not missed then they are used as Professional Development (PD) days.

## Consultations

### Stakeholders

Consultation sessions with key stakeholders were held on August 20, 2015 with stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement was a critical component of the development of the committees' recommendations. The purpose of these sessions was to provide key stakeholders with an opportunity to help the committee develop recommendations for the Minister to mitigate the effect of school closures due to inclement weather. Due to the limitations imposed by both the time constraint and stakeholder availability due to vacations, these sessions were conducted through a consultation meeting of stakeholder representatives (one English, one French). An interview matrix was used as an engagement tool during the consultations. The Francophone *Direction Générale* attended the August 20 consultation session with their *Conseils d'éducation* presidents. A consultation session was held with the Anglophone Superintendents on August 13, 2015. An online survey was sent to stakeholders who were not able to attend the consultation sessions however no responses were received.

The following questions were asked at the consultations and on the online survey:

1. What are the largest pain points for you when it comes to unplanned school closures due to inclement weather?
2. Please list three (3) ideas of how EECD can minimize the negative impact of lost instructional time due to inclement weather.
3. If you are an employee of a school district, has your district established or implemented a plan to address the number of storm days in your district? If yes, what was the solution? What were the benefits or challenges of the solution?

### Pain Points

The key pain points identified through consultations, listed in order of frequency with which they were heard, are as follows:

- **Childcare** – parental pain point when school is closed, parents are left to find alternate care for their children on short notice. Some parents have to take a vacation day; others have to pay daycares for the extra day their child is there.
- **Concerns over loss of academics** – Parents are concerned with the amount of time their children are missing from school. With so much time missed due to storm days, people assume that student learning is negatively affected.
- **Timelines of decisions and communication** – Confusion over where to look to find out whether or not school is open. Not clear on “zones”, which radio stations to listen to, which websites to check. Confusion over late opening of schools and what to do with children until schools open.
- **Negative Media / Public Perception** – Public perception that school employees as public servants are not working while most other employees in the province are expected to report to work. The perception that schools are closed when there is no threat to safety and security. Throughout the consultation process, many stakeholders repeatedly questioned whether the issue of lost instructional time due to storm days was as significant as the media presented it to be. Many cautioned against a knee-jerk reaction to media reports that occurred in the context of

an extraordinary winter season.

- **Early Closures During School Day** – although this is infrequent, it creates many challenges in trying to notify parents/guardians. This can compound the safety concerns if parents are unreachable.

**Other out-of-scope issues that were raised:**

- General student absenteeism– it was noted that storm days were not the “real” issue when it comes to missed instructional time, but rather the total time that students are absent, including vacations, sporting events during class time, and vulnerable children who tend to have more frequent absences.
- Vulnerable students – While a small percentage of the general population, vulnerable children are typically the ones who need more instructional time. Stakeholders didn’t want storm day solution to further disadvantage these students.
- Clearing of roads and sidewalks.
- Amend collective agreements – this was outside of the scope of this committee.

## **Option Development**

The Committee analysed the results of the jurisdictional review, previous studies and consultations to develop viable options. Viability was assessed against the present regulations and policies as well as the scope of this project charter.

Viable options were then categorised against the ‘Pain Points’ identified during the consultation. Each ‘Pain Point’ was set up as a separate heading and viable options were aligned under the ‘Pain Point’ it addressed. Options could address more than one ‘Pain Point’.

In many cases the options were similar and could be categorized under one more comprehensive description. The result is four distinct options that address some or all of the pain points as follows:

- Option 1 - Generally, schools remain open although pupil transportation may not be provided due to inclement weather;
- Option 2 - Provide students with study packages to complete on storm days
- Option 3 - Work with school districts to develop a comprehensive public relations strategy
- Option 4 - Move professional development days to September through November and April through May

## **Options Analysis**

### **Option 1**

Generally, **schools remain open although pupil transportation may not be provided due to inclement weather**. There are a number of scenarios:

- Schools remain open, buses do not run (educational staff are required to report to their workplace).
- Schools remain open; buses have a delayed start (same as above, except the buses will run when the roads are cleared. Cut-off time of 10 a.m. for this option).
- Schools will only close early in case of emergency (e.g. power outage).
- Schools closed only if district office/education centre or government offices closed.

#### **Pros of Option 1:**

- The above noted option will allow schools to be open more frequently.
- School operations would align more with the general New Brunswick workforce hours of operations and other jurisdictions across Canada.
- This helps to address the concerns raised over childcare issues.
- This helps to address the public perception of school employees.

#### **Cons of Option 1**

- Concerns were raised that vulnerable students would be less likely to get to school on storm days if buses are not running, which may further disadvantage those students.
- This option could cost more money if employees are unable to come to work due to safety reasons on days where schools are open, replacements would be needed for those employees.
- There would be a heavier management burden on school administrators on those days.
- Buses are the safest mode of transportation. If we choose not to run buses there is the perception that we are putting children safety at risk.

### **Option 2**

**Provide students with study packages to complete on storm days, if schools are closed or to complete at home if students are unable to attend, where relevant:**

- This would be overseen at the district level. A variety of options exist for this recommendation (on-line, study package, tutoring sessions, etc.) and schools are in the best position to determine the needs of individual students.

#### **Pros of Option 2:**

- Would help address the public perception related to negative impact on education with respect to lost instructional time.
- Could help address individual learning needs of students.

### **Cons of Option 2:**

- While some teachers may already prepare study packages, this could create additional work for teachers.
- May be perceived by parents as a burden to get completed.
- There are limitations to what can be included in these packages as well as what can be achieved by students.

### **Option 3**

#### **Work with school districts to develop a comprehensive public relations strategy:**

- Make people aware safety of buses, process for decisions making, etc. (Team up with districts for this)
- Public communication strategy –
  - Websites – follow *District Scolaire Francophone-Sud* format with section on site dedicated to bus delays and school closures – *each district can have their IT team design this. Once a decision is made to close school or buses are delayed, the Transportation Manager could update the district’s website in a timely fashion.*
  - When listing closures by zone, clarify which communities fall into each zone.
  - Make sure bus numbers and routes are identified in notices.
  - No duplication of bus numbers within districts (occurred due to amalgamation of districts).
  - Pamphlet for parents – where to find notices on storm days.
  - Map of province and zones identified.
  - Fridge magnets.
  - Facebook, Twitter.
  - Push out communications to parents/guardians.
- Explore the option of establishing guidelines for Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and school districts for communicating storm days and bus delays publically.
- Work with districts and employees to raise awareness of personal use of social media.

#### **Pros of Option 3**

- Will clarify roles and responsibilities of educators and parents.
- Will reduce confusion over whether schools are open or buses are running.

#### **Cons of Option 3**

- This option alone does not address childcare issues.
- Would require systemic consistency and a lot of resources to execute.

### **Option 4**

**Move professional development days to September through November and April through May.** This will help to avoid having professional development days and snow days occurring at the same time which gives the perception that students are never in school.

**Pros of Option 4**

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- There is no discernable advantage to student performance to having professional development days interspersed throughout the school year<sup>2</sup>.
- Facilitates the management of instructional days.

**Cons of Option 4**

- This could not be implemented in the 2015-2016 school year.
- This option alone does not address childcare issues.
- There is a limitation to the positive impact of this option.
- This option has the potential to devalue the importance of professional development.

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<sup>2</sup> PCAP 2010 Contextual Report (see page 41)

## **APPENDIX 1 - Terms of Reference for Storm Day Committee**

### **DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Terms of reference**

<b>Name of group:</b>	Storm Days Committee
<b>Purpose of the group:</b>	The Storm Days Committee will conduct jurisdictional research, consult with stakeholders, review options and propose recommendations to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development on how to deal with storm days in the education system going forward.
<b>Members:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Director of Human Resources</li><li>▪ Labour Relations Advisor</li><li>▪ Human Resources Advisor</li><li>▪ Director of Policy &amp; Planning</li><li>▪ Director of Educational Facilities and Pupil Transportation</li><li>▪ Director of Assessment and Evaluation (Anglophone Sector)</li><li>▪ Directrice des programmes d'études et de l'évaluation (secteur francophone)</li></ul>
<b>Roles and responsibilities:</b>	The committee will conduct research, consult with stakeholders, review options and make a recommendation to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development on how to approach storm days on a go-forward basis.
<b>Meetings:</b>	The committees will meet bi-weekly starting the week of June 15, 2015.
<b>Additional notes:</b>	The Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development is looking for recommendations on how to proceed with storm days by September 2015.

## **APPENDIX 2 – District Data**

### School Closure Days 2010-2015

<b>DISTRICTS</b>	<b>2014/2015</b>	<b>2013/2014</b>	<b>2012/2013</b>	<b>2011/2012</b>	<b>2010/2011</b>
<b>DSF-S (1-11)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>
<b>DSF-NO (3)</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>
<b>DSF-NE (5-9)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>
<b>ASD-E (2)</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3½</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ASD-N (15-16)</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>*</b>
<b>ASD-S (6-8-10)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9½</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ASD-W (14,17,18)</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>*</b>

**Note.** For all districts, the data includes only the number of lost school days due to inclement weather. Individual schools may have been closed for more days than indicated.

\*data not available