



# **NSTU Submission**

**to the**

***Nova Scotia Department of Education***

***Review of the School Closure Process in Nova Scotia.***

***October 19, 2006***

The NSTU appreciates the opportunity to add its voice to the discussion concerning school closure. The process is always emotional and difficult, even in circumstances in which all parties are in agreement. When that agreement is not present, the necessity of a transparent process accepted by everyone involved is paramount. It is also incumbent on the Department of Education to put in place a process that is uniform in all major aspects. The prospect of having a school closed by one board that would not have been closed had the school been in an adjacent board is not conducive to effective policy or community acceptance.

The NSTU has addressed the issue a number of times over the past and has established a policy framework that guides our thinking. That policy has been appended to this report as Appendix “A”.

The current review focuses specifically on process. While many aspects of the NSTU policy relate to process, this report will provide specific comments with respect to the feedback sought by the Department of Education.

Criteria appropriate for identifying schools for possible closure:

The four identified criteria are valid. Following the third criterion listed, an additional criterion focusing on the recognition of the cultural milieu and patterns should appear. We would, however suggest rewording the fourth (now fifth) option, “the effects that closing a school would have on the educational and social opportunities available to students” to “the effects that closing a school would have on the educational, social and cultural opportunities available to students”. The culture of rural Nova Scotia communities and urban neighbourhoods is often unique. Bringing students from two (or more) disparate cultures together may be a way to enhance communication and understanding or it may serve to exacerbate conflicts. A sense of community and indeed, the core of a community, are often centred in the school. The closure of such a school may mean the end of that community as anything other than a set of houses.

We suggest three additional criteria that must be considered. The first is the impact a closure would have on the student day. Such consideration recognizes the impact of the time spent in transit as well as additional time outside the formal school hours that scheduling of transportation might entail.

Student safety must also be a critical concern. Are students exposed to dangerous traffic conditions either associated with travel to and from school or with traffic around the school? Are the traffic conditions age-appropriate? What is safe for senior high school students may not be appropriate for early elementary students. Are they exposed to moulds, asbestos or other toxins in the school environment?

The impact that the school closure on the instructional start time of the school day would have on student learning cannot be ignored. While this is similar to the first of the additional criteria (student day), we suggest, it is conceptually distinct. Even if the student day is not increased, starting very early or very late does not contribute positively to the learning environment.

The Department of Education next asks about the key procedural elements to be followed during a school closure process. The NSTU agrees with all seven steps currently in place. However, the NSTU recommends an eight step process with a new seventh step to take place prior to the report written by the principal responsible for the school to which the students have been transferred. This new step would be a final report on the decision on the permanent closing of a school,

addressing all the criteria referenced above, which is prepared and made public through presentation and other distribution channels.

The composition of the committee to examine issues that are relevant to possible school closure is reasonable as presented. It should be clearly articulated, however, that the representatives from the School Advisory Council are parent representatives since other community members are referenced elsewhere and in the current description there is no explicit indication of the need to hear the views of parents.

We have reviewed the list of factors identified in the response form and rated each as *Very Important, Important, Somewhat Important* or *Unimportant*.

The NSTU believes there are four *Very Important* factors that must be considered in the analysis of the school closure decisions. *The effects that closing a school would have on the educational progress of students* is clearly of paramount concern. We believe this must be understood within a very broad interpretation of the phrase “educational progress”. Closely associated with students’ educational progress is the *social development of students*. Individuals cannot compartmentalize these two components of growth, learning and development. The cultural aspect of both of these must be recognized.

The impact of *transportation* also must be considered as a principal factor. This impact must be judged within the context of the criteria mentioned above.

Not on the list presented in the Response Form is the *Health and Safety of Students*. This must always be a prime consideration and included as a *very important* factor.

There are four factors that rank immediately below as *Important*. School board finances cannot be ignored or dismissed. Each regional school board is mandated by the Province to exercise fiscal responsibility and it is in the public interest for them to do so. Funding should not, however, be the key driver in education decisions.

An important part of students’ experience with school is the access to *co-curricular* and *extra-curricular activities*. Whether the current school or a new school enhances or detracts from these experiences must be considered when determining the future of a school. Much of what we remember from our school experience comes from these activities. They frequently define much of the context in which the formal curricular components of education take place.

As highlighted earlier in the discussion of criteria, *Traffic at the school to which students may be transferred* must be considered an important factor. This factor should include the traffic patterns that occur within the school, in the hallways, classrooms and common areas, as well as the vehicular traffic on school grounds and immediately off-site.

The impact of the school closure or of keeping a school open on the *community* must also be taken into consideration. We believe this should be added to the list of factors included in the analysis of school closure.

The ability of the facility to be *maintained* and the quality of the facility itself is *somewhat important*, but not critical since repair and refurbishing may be viable alternatives to closing the school.

The NSTU does not see the presence, absence or quality of *lunchroom facilities* as a significant factor in the decision to close a school.

Two other factors listed in item 11 of the Response Form are ambiguous. We do not understand what is meant by *Student government finances*. Is this referring to the per-student funding allocation, the student council monies for extra-curricular activities or something else? The final item listed (*J – Consequences for the school board of keeping the school open*) appears to be covered by item (*B – School board finances*).

Finally, more time needs to be allocated to the process. Ten weeks from the first meeting of the committee examining a school closure no later than November 30 to the submission of the report by February 15 is not adequate. The NSTU suggests the first meeting of the committee should occur no later than October 31<sup>st</sup>.

The deadline of December 31<sup>st</sup> of the year in which the school was closed for the principal of the receiving school to prepare a report assessing the students who were transferred is not adequate. At the senior high level, one major reporting period has not passed by this date. Although this deadline represents four months, when time for the start of the year, the Christmas recess and report preparation are removed it is less than three months of effective contact with the affected students. The NSTU suggests this deadline be moved to February 15<sup>th</sup>.

We reiterate our appreciation of the opportunity to provide input to this consultation process. We look forward to seeing the development of a comprehensive, open and inclusive process to address the issue of school closure.

## Appendix “A”

### 78. CLOSURE (OR RESTRUCTURE) OF SCHOOLS

- (a) The Nova Scotia Teachers Union recognizes that the closure or restructure of a school within a community is a matter of such consequence to that community that the closest cooperation between school authorities and the community is necessary. Alternatively, the Nova Scotia Teachers Union recognizes that the reorganization of school districts is necessary to promote the efficient instruction of pupils.
  
- (b) The Nova Scotia Teachers Union recommends the following principles.
  - (i) The school is an essential part of the identity of a community.
  - (ii) The sense of belonging to a local community is an important part of the quality of life in the province of Nova Scotia.
  - (iii) Schools should not be declared surplus solely on the basis of declining enrollment.
  - (iv) It should be recognized that excess capacity may be temporary, given that changes in school enrollment patterns can be anticipated in the future.
  - (v) The utilization of surplus schools for additional educational purposes should be given serious consideration.
  - (vi) Schools with excess capacity could be modified to accommodate appropriate community needs and purposes.
  - (vii) Modification of excess educational facilities should be temporary in design to allow for ready reconversion to school purposes.
  - (viii) Municipal authorities and the Department of Education should actively cooperate with other government departments such as the Sport & Recreation Commission and the Economic Renewal Agency for the conversion of excess school capacity.
  - (ix) When the closing of a school is being considered, public notice of the projected closing should be given at least two years in advance and planning should meet the criteria set out in the model which follows:

#### Identification of Possible School Closures

- a. Not later than the month of October of any year, the school board should review the enrollment figures as of September 30 in that year.
- b. If the closure of a school is predicted from these figures, a school review committee should be struck.

- (c) Membership of School Review Committee
  - (i) The School Review Committee should consist of the Superintendent of Schools or his/her designate, a member of the school board, at least two parents of students in the school under review, the principal of each school under review or his/her designate.
  - (ii) From this group, the school board shall designate a chair of the School Review Committee.
  - (iii) Municipal officials such as the Mayor or Warden and area representatives on Municipal Councils should be invited to each meeting of the committee.
  - (iv) Resource persons, in particular Municipal Planning Officers, should be assigned to the Committee to act in an advisory capacity.
- (d) Functions of School Review Committee

- (i) Examine demographic data and report to the board on the enrollment trends for the past five years and projections for the next five years.
  - (ii) Hold public meetings designed to advise the community of the school review, provide information to the community, receive and record community input, and elect one or more parent representatives to the review committee.
  - (iii) Consider and make recommendations to the board on steps which might be taken to assist the school and its program during the period of review.
  - (iv) Consider and make recommendations to the board on the possibility of reorganizing the school buildings in the area.
  - (v) Consider and report to the board on any other related matters including:
    - a. distance from place of residence, in particular, bussing schedules;
    - b. effects on program;
    - c. the school as a social factor in the community;
    - d. alternative use of school plant;
    - e. physical conditions of buildings;
    - f. effects on administration and teachers;
    - g. communication with parent-public;
    - h. briefing of students;
    - i. optional transfers; and
    - j. informing other levels of government.
  - (vi) Present interim reports to the board when appropriate.
  - (vii) Present a final report to the board at a time specified by the school board on its recommendations.
  - (viii) At a community meeting, present a report to the community served by the school under review of the observations and recommendations which have been made by the School Review Committee.
- (e) Procedures by board
- (i) In instances where the board approved of the reorganization of a school:
    - a. The effective date will be determined by the board.
    - b. A committee to facilitate the reorganization of a school will be established by the board.
  - (ii) Members of the School Review Committee should be invited to serve on the Facilitation Committee.

*Reference: Resolution 2001-100; Amended 2004-75*