

# School's Out, Again: Why "throw away" school days hurt students

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School days lost are gone forever. Missing a major chunk of the school year because of storm day closures can wreak havoc on students, eroding valuable class time, breaking continuity, disrupting tests and examinations, and sowing seeds of division between unionized teachers excused from duty and support staff left behind in empty schools. That is why the vast majority of Canadian school boards seek to preserve teaching time and resist the temptation to cancel school and give kids "the day off" at the first sign of inclement weather.

Yet in Atlantic Canada it is different. Storm day closures are a regular occurrence and the rather unique phenomenon of "throw-away" school days is now a deeply ingrained tradition. Student safety on the roads, we are told, always trumps other factors in the Atlantic region. Closing schools is treated as a local matter best left to the school boards and rarely raised a serious matter warranting provincial intervention. In spite of record numbers of school day cancellations in 2008-09, a Nova Scotia report on School Storm Days gave the local boards "good grades."

Repeatedly cancelling school has a disruptive effect upon students, families, and teachers. A careful analysis of the impact of "Throw-away Days" in Nova Scotia and neighbouring Atlantic provinces demonstrates that the high incidence of such disruptions can exact "collateral damage" on students as well as the public school system. The number and frequency of school closures in Nova Scotia, particularly during the 2008-09 school year, had an impact on student learning, especially in high schools already beset by chronic student attendance problems.

School days lost for "storm day closures" are part of a much larger problem – the ready acceptance of lost school days without considering their true impact on the core function of the system, student learning. Addressing the problem in Nova Scotia and the other Atlantic provinces calls for provincial action to establish a minimum number of teaching days, to provide improved roadway snow clearing in school transportation zones, and to ensure that schools remain open in all but the severest of weather.

## School Storm Days – The Public Controversy

The long winter of 2008-09 was one of the worst in the Maritimes, but it may have been what was needed to break the relative silence over the increasing incidence of “storm days” in public education. By April 2009, Nova Scotia’s regional school boards had cancelled classes for 11 to 14 days, and even the Halifax Regional Board had lost 7.5 school days. Growing concerns about the rash of cancellations in Nova Scotia raised “the level of frustration” among families, school officials, and the general public. The Halifax *Chronicle Herald* responded on April 1, 2009 with a front page expose raising the issue of recouping lost time.<sup>1</sup> The public furor eventually prompted the Nova Scotia Department of Education to commission retired superintendent Dr. James Gunn to produce a report on “School Storm Days” intended strictly as a Discussion Paper for the local boards.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Gunn’s report, released in December 2009, put the issue of Storm Day Closures on the public policy agenda in the Maritimes. It provided a reasonably reliable base line study and a few useful operational suggestions, but stopped well short of tackling the bigger questions. His study provided no assessment of the impact of repeated school day cancellations on the most important element of education — student learning and performance. He conducted a rather limited, selective analysis of school days lost in school boards in Atlantic Canada, Quebec, and Ontario. His report only touched lightly on the politically sensitive matter of constraints imposed by teacher contracts and mostly skirted the identified inadequacies of provincial and municipal snow clearance and plowing operations.

Given this year’s unseasonably warm winter it is difficult to assess the impact of Gunn’s report. If the most recent “snow day” is any indication, however, Nova Scotia school boards still show a marked tendency to cancel school at the first sign of snow. The Contrarian, Parker Donham, responded to a March 3, 2010 school day cancellation by calling the school officials responsible “fraidy cats” and charged that they cow-towed to the unions by seeking to fill an alleged quota. It sparked a minor furor and prompted school authorities to, once again, close ranks.<sup>3</sup>

## Storm Days Lost – Assessing the Damage

The winter of 2008-09 produced a record number of school cancellations across Atlantic Canada. Yet it was part of a larger and longer term pattern of a gradual and marked increase in the number of school days lost to storm closures in Nova Scotia and, to some extent, the other Atlantic provinces. This trend is not to be found in other parts of Canada. Provincial and local education authorities in the West, Ontario, and Quebec are far more vigilant in preserving valuable school days.

Nowhere else in Canada are provincial education departments so inclined to *be laissez faire* when it comes to school-board wide school cancellations. Unlike Central Canada, the West and other provinces, decisions to close schools in Nova Scotia are left entirely to the school boards. After closely examining “school storm days” over past decade, it is clear that such decisions are based solely on road safety conditions without any reference whatsoever to the potential collateral damage on student performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Fairclough, “No Catching up on Storm Days,” *The Chronicle Herald*, April 1, 2009, pp. A1 and A2.

<sup>2</sup> James Gunn, “Storm Days in Nova Scotia: A Discussion Paper,” Halifax: School Boards of Nova Scotia and the Department of Education, December 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See Parker Donham, “Fraidy Cats,” *The Contrarian* (Web Blog), March 3 and March 8, 2010. ([www.thecontrarian.com](http://www.thecontrarian.com))

**Table I: Storm Days Lost, 2008-09 and 2009-10\*, Nova Scotia**

School Board	Days Lost 2008-09	Days Lost 2009-10*
Annapolis Valley Regional School Board (AVRSB)	13	6
Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board (CBVRSB)	9.5	NR
Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB)	14	2
Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP)	4.5 - 12.5	1 - 6
Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB)	8	0
South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB)	9	5
Strait Regional School Board (SRSB)	10.5	NR
Tri-County Regional School Board (TCRSB)	3	5

\*School Year 2009-10 (up to March 15, 2010)

**Source:** Nova Scotia, Department of Education, *The Chronicle Herald*, April 1, 2009; James Gunn, *School Storm Days in Nova Scotia* (December, 2009), *Conseil Scholaire Acadien Provincial* Board; and News Reports, November 2009 to January 31, 2010).

In Nova Scotia, the most common explanation is that cancelling school on storm days is just part of the “public school culture.” In making that case, Gunn put it this way: “(1) Schools are closed to students when the buses are cancelled because of the weather and (2) Teachers do not have to report to work on storm days when schools are closed to students.”<sup>4</sup> That prevailing attitude is even enshrined in Nova Scotia’s provincial education policy. Back in 1971, the NS Education Department increased the number of in the school calendar from 190 to 195, to recognize and accommodate an average of five days lost per year. When the first Collective Agreement was signed in 1974 between the Education Department and the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union, teachers secured the legal right to be excused on storm days. It is so iron clad, that the provision withstood a formal challenge in recent years in a landmark arbitration decision.

The record numbers of school storm days in 2008-09 brought the festering public issue back to life. When pressed in April 2009 by Halifax *Chronicle Herald* reporter Ian Fairclough, Jim Burton, Nova Scotia’s Director of Regional Education Services, came clean. Even after Nova Scotia boards had suffered up to 12 to 14 lost days, he conceded that no provisions existed for making up lost time with extra days at the end of the year. Under the Education Act, there is a regulation permitting the Minister to designate part of the March break and up to three Saturdays for the purpose of reclaiming lost teaching days. School closures caused by storm days, leaky roofs, or furnace problems, Burton claimed, did not fall under those regulations. In short, the situation would now require a change in Nova Scotia’s Education Act and regulations.<sup>5</sup>

### Comparing “Days Lost” – Nova Scotia and the Rest of Canada

A more detailed review of “School Storm Days” in Nova Scotia compared with school districts from across Canada reveals radical differences in local education policy. The Nova Scotia Discussion Paper presented by Gunn provided a starting point, supplemented here with additional data for the Nova Scotia Acadian School Board. Building upon Gunn’s initial comparative analysis of school boards outside Nova Scotia, a broader

<sup>4</sup> Gunn, “School Storm Days,” p. 6. Reaffirmed in a Personal Interview, Dr. James Gunn, Halifax, January 18, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Fairclough, “No Catching Up,” *The Chronicle Herald*, pp. 1-2.

cross-section of boards has been included in this research study. (See **Table 1 – Storm Days Lost, Nova Scotia, 2008-10**)

Broadening the scope of the research data only further demonstrates how out of sync Nova Scotia boards are compared to their counterparts, urban, suburban, and rural, in other Canadian provinces. Nova Scotia leads all provinces in school days lost, in stark contrast to those in Ontario, Quebec, and Western Canada.

**Table 2: Storm Days Lost, Comparative Canadian Boards, 2008-10**

School Board	Days Lost 2008-09	Days Lost 2009-10*
Calgary Public School Board (Alberta/Large Urban/200 schools/100,000 students)	0	0
Durham Region District Board (Ontario, Suburban & Rural / 136 schools/ 69,086 students )	0	0
Eastern School District, NL (4 regions) (Newfoundland/Urban and Regional / 122 schools / 44,000 students)	4.5 – 12	NR
Eastern Townships School Board (Quebec/Rural / 26 schools / 6,500 students)	0	NR
English Montreal School Board (Quebec/ Medium Urban / 68 schools / 38,000 students)	1	0
Fredericton/ NB District 18 (New Brunswick/ Urban & Regional /34 schools / 12,000 students)	6	1.5
Moncton/NB District 2 (New Brunswick/Urban & Regional/ 38 schools / 16,000 students)	9	2
Western School Board, PEI (Prince Edward Island/Rural / 23 schools / 6,244 students)	13	3
Winnipeg Public School Board (Manitoba/Urban & Regional/ 77 schools / 33,000 students)	0	0
York Region District School Board (Ontario/ Large Suburban/ 168 schools / 108,000 students)	0	0

\*School Year 2009-10 (up to January 31, 2010)

**Source:** AIMS Research Survey, February 8-March 15, 2010; and James Gunn, *School Storm Days in Nova Scotia* (December, 2009)

The December 2009 Nova Scotia Discussion paper tread very lightly, pointing out that Nova Scotia school boards, faced with a terrible winter, were simply doing their best.<sup>6</sup> A more thorough, comparative analysis of Nova Scotia in relation to comparable education districts elsewhere in Canada raises serious questions about the validity of conclusions reached in that Discussion Paper. Few school boards reviewed in the present study come even close to those in Nova Scotia when it comes to cancelling school for storms, freezing rain, or anticipated adverse weather conditions. No one outside of Nova Scotia and P.E.I interviewed was willing to give Nova Scotia “good grades” for its 2008-09 record on storm closures.

The radical variations among school boards across Canada are startling. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, the largest public board reports that, in spite of incredibly frigid winter weather, no classes have been cancelled for weather

<sup>6</sup> See Pat Lee, “Good Grade for Storm Closures,” *The Chronicle Herald*, January 7, 2010.



since April 1957, fifty three years ago. Two of Ontario's fastest growing regional/suburban boards, York Region and Durham Region, maintain extensive student transportation systems, busing thousands of students each day. Yet both York Region and Durham Region only cancel school on extremely rare occasions, keep regional schools open often in severe weather, and expect teachers to report for duty whenever the schools are open. The highly ranked Calgary Public Board, with more than 200 schools and 100,000 students, "never closes," according to school officials.

Two Atlantic provinces with school day cancellation records comparable to Nova Scotia are Newfoundland/Labrador and Prince Edward Island. Newfoundland and Labrador have much snowier winters and, according to Environment Canada, average 12.7 heavy snowfall days a year.<sup>7</sup> Prince Edward Island has only 70 schools and 20,000 students, and many are scattered along mainly rural roads. Two of New Brunswick's 18 provincial school districts, the Moncton Area and the Fredericton Area, remain open far more often than comparable boards in Nova Scotia.<sup>8</sup>

### **Storm Weather, Road Plowing, and Bussing – The Great Disconnect**

Thousands of Canadian families depend upon daily bussing to get their children safely to school. In the Maritimes, outside of Halifax, St. John's, Saint John, Fredericton, Sydney, and Charlottetown, it is the principal mode of daily student transportation. During winter storms or in anticipation of severe weather, it all hinges on road driving conditions and the effectiveness of snow clearance operations. In spite of this, Nova Scotia stands out as a province where the Department of Transportation gives no real priority in its clearing operations to identified school transportation zones. In a few of Nova Scotia's school board districts, Jim Gunn reported that formal arrangements do exist, but in other districts the storm day procedures remain very loosely coordinated.<sup>9</sup> While a coordinating body exists, known as the Nova Scotia Pupil Transportation Advisory Committee, it meets only irregularly and rarely, if ever, with provincial officials from the NS Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal (DOTIR).<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to student bussing, Nova Scotia is neatly divided up into school board districts, each with its own protocols and procedures. The only Nova Scotia School Board operating province-wide is the one serving first language French children, called the *Conseil scolaire acadien provincial* (CSAP). For most children and families of the Acadian Board, CSAP Board Secretary Mariette Dugas says "when there are no buses, there is no school." Snow clearance is a huge issue for everyone associated with CSAP as it is for other boards with extensive rural bus routes. Few are willing to speak openly, given the close interdependence of the various players and offices. When asked about the state of snow clearing on Nova Scotia's secondary roads, it is common to hear the bus operators complain: "It's ridiculous in rural areas. There's no priority in Nova Scotia for snow clearing. The DOT waits for the snow to fall then sends out the crews."<sup>11</sup>

Clearing the roads of snow and ice is a serious matter determining whether students can even get to school during severe winter weather.

How do other provinces compare? In Ontario, the Prairie West, and most of Quebec, highway systems are more extensive and snow clearance operations and equipment are often far superior than in the Maritimes. In rural PEI, the provincial department only manages the main highway, leaving the back roads to small contractors.

<sup>7</sup> Environment Canada, "Weather Winners" Website, March 16, 2010 ([www.on.ec.gc.ca/weather/winners](http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/weather/winners))

<sup>8</sup> Telephone Interviews and Electronic Messages: Linda Wilson, Winnipeg Public School Board, February 10, 2010; Erin Bain, York Region District School Board, February 10, 2010; Ted Flitton, Calgary Board of Education, February 10, 2010; Jean Doherty, PEI Department of Education, February 11, 2010; Aubrey Kirkpatrick, NB Education District 2, February 10, 2010; and Alex Dingwall, NB Education District 18, February 12, 2012. Supplemented by Michael Cohen, English Montreal School Board, February 10, 2010

<sup>9</sup> Gunn, "School Storm Days," p. 6; and Interview, James Gunn, January 18, 2010

<sup>10</sup> Interviews: Shane Buchan, Perry Rand Transportation Group, February 11, 2010; and Mariette Dugas, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, February 11, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews, Gunn, January 18, 2010; Dugas, February 11, 2010; and Buchan, February 11, 2010.

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School boards in other regions are simply much more proactive in keeping schools open through patches of severe weather. Communications Officer Ted Flitton of the Calgary Board of Education was crystal clear about that board's commitment. "The CBE does not call snow days," he says, "nor do we close schools due to inclement weather. We have not done so for many years, The key reason is safety... Not having the schools open can put children in danger, driving in the family car or being left unattended at home." All families in Calgary are advised "not to take risks in getting to school", but the schools stay open through even extreme weather conditions.<sup>12</sup> That kind of clarity helps to ensure that provincial and municipal transportation departments commit the resources necessary to keep the schools open.

Since the early 1970s in Atlantic Canada, local school boards have grown accustomed to five or six snow days a year. It has been long recognized as an operating principle under provisions of the Nova Scotia teachers' collective agreement. Veteran business managers like Harvey MacEwen of the PEI Western Board have come to accept the inevitable lost school days each year. "We always err on the side of safety," he says, and that usually means closing the schools. In the case of Nova Scotia, school board officials and bus operators tend to shift the responsibility back and forth for closure decisions. Speaking off the record, bus operators agree that the Nova Scotia DOTIR needs to reassess its current road clearance policies and procedures. Currently DOTIR crews give high priority to the larger Series 100 highways, then turn to the secondary roads, sometimes never getting to the remote dirt roads.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Big Bite – Chewing into Teaching Time**

School cancellations eat into valuable learning and teaching time. During the severe winter of 2008-09, the sheer number of school storm days in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and parts of New Brunswick, cut deeply into the annual school calendar. Over the winter months, prime teaching time, Nova Scotia boards, except for Tri-County District, lost from 8 to 14 school days because of storms, heavy snowfalls, or freezing rain conditions. Over a school year of 185 actual teaching days, the losses were significant. In the Chignecto-Central School Regional Board based in Truro, most students missed 14 days or approximately 7.6 per cent of their teaching time. For students attending schools in Annapolis Valley (AVRSB), Strait Regional (SRSB), Cape Breton (CBVRSB), or the South Shore ((SSRSB), the loss rates ranged from 9 (4.8 per cent) to 13 (7.0 per cent). Even in the provincial capital, home to the Halifax Regional school Board (HRSB), students lost 8 full days or 4.3 per cent of teaching time. In Nova Scotia high schools, where courses are rated and organized by credit hours, many classes across Nova Scotia reportedly fell short of the minimum requirement of 110 hours of instruction. That lost teaching time was never recovered, and simply written off by school officials.

School day cancellations have far greater impact upon secondary school students. High school students face heavier regular coursework and the pressures that come with studying for, and writing formal examinations. In the case of Nova Scotia during the long winter of 2008-09, school storm days completely disrupted the regular academic schedule in many public high schools. Fourteen high schools were offering the academically challenging International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program, and students at 12 different schools were facing the final set of international exams for the first time. Repeatedly missing school days can cause the work to pile-up and raise anxiety levels, or the reverse, lead to tuning-out and disengagement.

A recent Nova Scotia report on Student Absenteeism and School Climate, conducted during 2008-09, identified a serious and growing problem of school attendance. Based upon a sample of ten high schools, the Committee's report estimated that 7.4 per cent of students missed over 20 per cent of their classes, while about 45 per cent "skipped" 10 per cent or more.<sup>14</sup> In 2008-09, school storm days accounted for even more days lost. In extreme

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<sup>12</sup> Electronic Message, Ted Flitton, Calgary Board of Education, February 10, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Gunn Interview, January 18, 2010; Buchan Interview, February 11, 2010. See also Gunn, "School Snow Days," p.6.

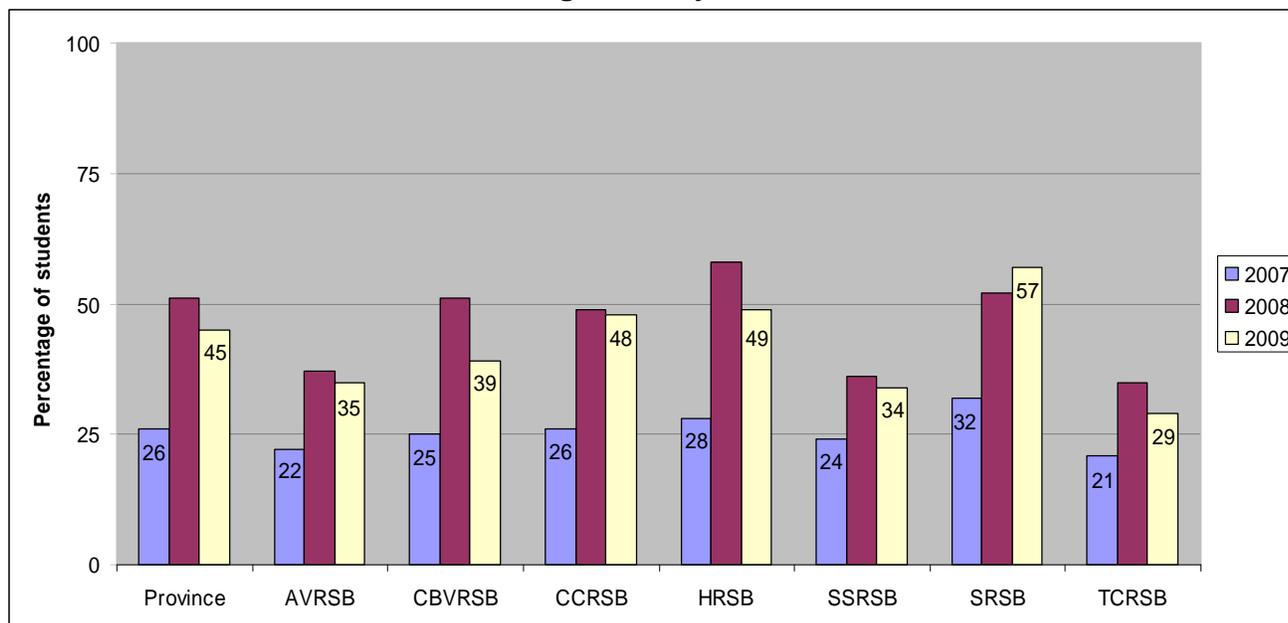
<sup>14</sup> See *Promoting Student Engagement*, Report of the Minister's Working Committee on Absenteeism and Classroom Climate (Halifax: Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2009), p. 17.

cases, about 1 out of 10 high school students likely missed 25 % of their originally scheduled classes and an astounding 45 per cent were away for 15 per cent of the classes. For such students, most likely struggling at school, repeated school cancellations only compound the chronic problem, further contributing to underperformance.

### Impact on Student Learning and Performance

Previous studies, including Jim Gunn’s 2009 School Snow Days report, make no attempt to connect school cancellations and lost days with either the quality of classroom learning or levels of student performance. While it remains difficult to make those linkages, the issue is so fundamental to current “student learning” initiatives that it is worth the effort if only to stimulate further, more authoritative research. In the case of Nova Scotia, the verified data for system-wide school snow days per board in the 2008-09 year can be compared with student performance test results on a board- by-board basis. When the two sets of figures are compared, it is abundantly clear that primarily rural Nova Scotia school boards, such as CCRSB, AVRSB, SSRSB, TCRSB, and SRSB, suffer more lost school days and also perform less well on annual Grade 12 examinations, particularly in regular Mathematics. (See Table 3). In June 2009, for example, the NS boards with the lowest average examination pass rates in Advanced Mathematics and regular Mathematics were, on the Regular exam: TCRSB (29%), SSRSB (34%) and AVRSB (35%); and on the Advanced exam: TCRSB (34%), SSRSB (49%), and AVRSB (60%).

**Table 3 – NSE Mathematics 12, Percentage Pass by Board, 2007-2009**



Source: Nova Scotia Department of Education, Evaluation Services

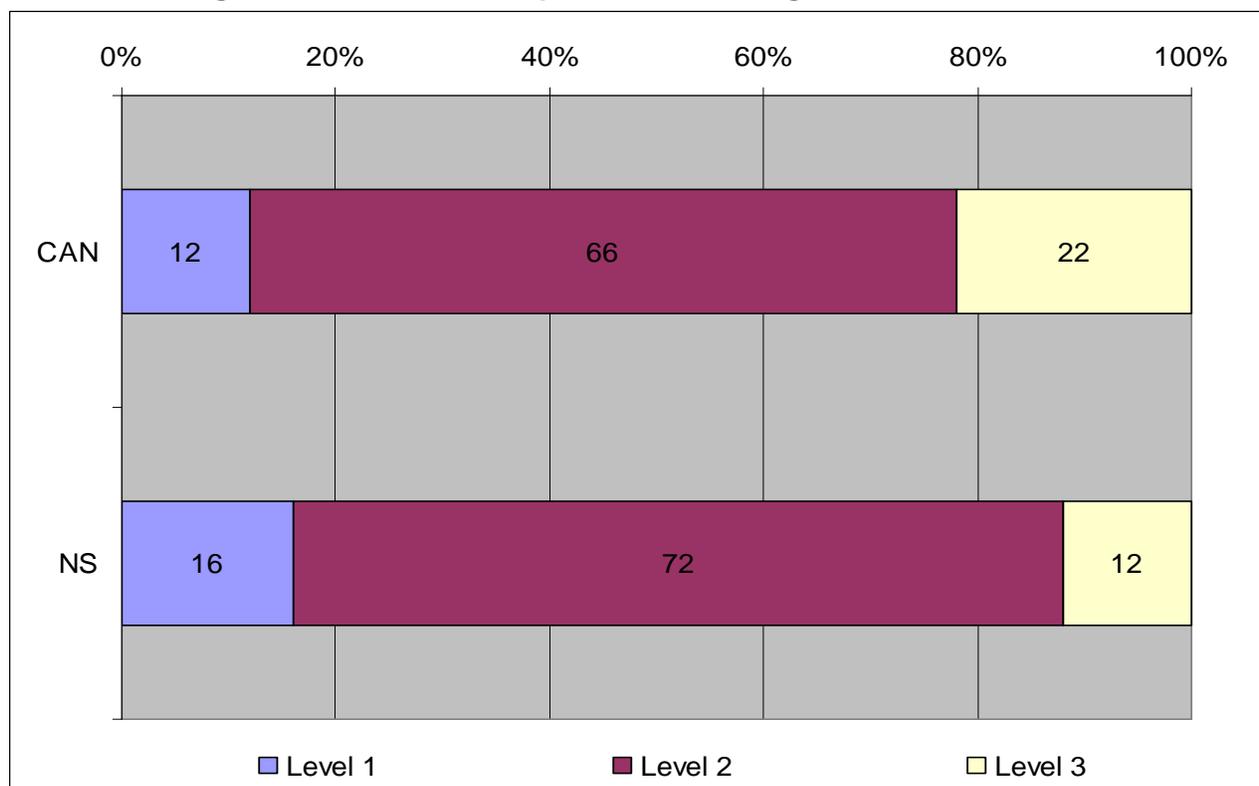
Nova Scotia and its neighbouring provinces have not only the highest number of storm days, but also, as often observed, the most mediocre results on recent international assessments of student performance. On the 2006 OECD PISA study, the NS Education Department took some pride in the science results of the province’s 15-year olds, who scored “above average” and finished 18<sup>th</sup> out of 67 jurisdictions in the world.<sup>15</sup> Those same students also finished, as usual, in bottom half among Canada’s provinces. The first Pan Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) results, released in April 2008, assessed 13-year old students and provided a more sobering

<sup>15</sup> Media Release, Nova Scotia Department of Education, December 4, 2007; and “Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA Study,” Paris: CMEC and OECD, 2007. (Retrieved: 9/02/10)



message. On Mathematics and Science, PCAP reported that “Nova Scotia and the other Atlantic provinces results are below the national average.”<sup>16</sup> The results for reading were no better. Nova Scotia students lagged behind in Reading Levels, only 12 percent were reading at Level 3 compared to 22 percent for the Canadian average, and more students in Nova Scotia were reading at Level 1, the lowest level, than the Canadian average (16 percent versus 12 percent). With such results, it’s not surprising the mean scores for Nova Scotia students were also significantly lower: Females - 484, compared to 513 for Canada; and Males - 463, compared to 490 Canada-wide. (PCAP Report, pp. 7-8) Given those scores, losing days and missing classes certainly does not help.

**Table 4: Reading Results – PCAP, Comparison of Reading Levels**



Source: Pan Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP)

Losing school days falls heaviest on Grade 12 graduating year students. Surveying the student assessment data, red flags go up concerning the real impact on the 2008-09 class of that highly disrupted school year. Provincial English results are more of a summative assessment and tend to reflect writing skills developed over time, so they are less reliable as an indicator, in this instance. Judging from the published results from the HRSB, however, the June 2009 Mathematics exam results were a set-back. In the HRSB, after a record year of lost days, the exam pass rates plummeted, in Advanced Mathematics from 77% (2008) to 62% (2009); and in Regular Mathematics from 58% (2008) to 45% (2009).<sup>17</sup> The “official” results, posted February 12, 2010, confirm that the Grade 12 Mathematics exam pass rates dropped 6% province-wide.<sup>18</sup> Such dismal Mathematics results not only raise serious questions about the direct impact of the lost days, but warrant a fuller, comprehensive, province-wide review.

<sup>16</sup> NS Department of Education, Evaluation Services Division, *Pan Canadian Assessment Program, Results for Nova Scotia 13-Year Old Students (2007b Administration)*, April 28, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Halifax Regional School Board, Annual Report to the Community, September 2008-June 2009, Charles P. Allen High (Halifax: October, 2009), p. 2; and NS Department of Education, PLANS, NSE Mathematics, July 17, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Nova Scotia Education, Evaluation Services, NS Examinations: Mathematics 12, Percentage Pass, by Board, 2007-2009, posted February 12, 2010. [www.PLANS.EDnet.ns.ca](http://www.PLANS.EDnet.ns.ca) (16/03/2010)



## Lost School Days – Gone Forever

Storm seasons come and go in Atlantic Canada, leaving behind a chronic problem eating away at the quality of public education. The current winter season is the warmest on record and quite an exception. Over the longer term, Jim Gunn's report demonstrates that the average numbers of storm day closures are on the rise in Nova Scotia. From 1996-97 until 2008-09, a 12 year period, storm day losses mounted and averaged 8.3 days in the AVRSB, 7.3 days in TCRSB, and 7.0 days in CCRSB. School day cancellations were even up in the Halifax Board, standing at an average of 2.9 days a year.<sup>19</sup> Allowing an excessive number of school days to be lost runs counter to the main thrust of Nova Scotia education policy. The province committed millions of tax dollars to Nova Scotia Education's *Learning for Life* program, established a whole Program of Learning Assessment (PLANS), and now offers internationally-assessed IB examinations at over a dozen high schools. In Nova Scotia, when the snow hits the roads and or turns to freezing rain, the busses do not run and whole school systems shut down.

Curbing the numbers of school snow days, without compromising student safety, would have a positive effect on the entire school system. It would clearly reaffirm the importance of regular attendance and the value of classroom time. Keeping the schools open will definitely require more political will and firmness of purpose, especially with today's generation of parents. "The biggest challenge," according to one seasoned Nova Scotia bus company owner, "is the mindset of parents. We need to get the message across that on a snowy day travelling on slippery, treacherous roads, the family's safer in the school bus than in any other vehicle."<sup>20</sup>

Provincial departments of education cannot afford to see the recent gains in student engagement and improved performance slip away every winter season. Faced with a spate of school cancellations, a Minister of Education does have some recourse. After Prince Edward Island suffered the loss of at least 9 full school days in late January 2004, the then Minister of Education, Mildred Dover, took swift action reclaiming an upcoming professional development day. It may have been largely symbolic, but it demonstrated where the government's priorities lay – first and foremost, in providing an education for students. In doing so, Minister Dover made use of a provision under the PEI Education Act permitting her to revise the provincial school calendar.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Nova Scotia, the Act permits the Minister to reclaim lost school days. Under the Act's regulation, time can be recouped, during March break or on three Saturdays per year. Since reclaiming time lost through storm days, leaky roofs, or furnace problems is excluded a change in the regulations is now urgently required. Yet much of the current controversy stirred up by Gunn's report centres on its possible impact upon the NSTU, and specifically on the teachers rather than the kids.<sup>22</sup> Letting snow days pile up is really the problem, not insisting that everyone report for duty in empty schools.

Cancelling school days with such frequency does not make common sense and is not in the long-term interest of students. When pressed to rectify the single biggest cause of lost school days, it is simply not good enough to shrug and mumble that that's always the way it has been in Atlantic Canada. That is not even the case, judging from the distilled wisdom found in the diaries of those who guided the "Little White Schoolhouse." When one hard-working Inverness County schoolteacher Mary Ann Ellison was asked about giving the pupils a "day-off" in the 1920s, she declared: "School was never cancelled on account of the weather."<sup>23</sup> School consolidation, busing, and cancelling school at the first sight of freezing rain are all creatures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps we still have something to learn in this new century.

<sup>19</sup> Gunn, "School Storm Days," p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Buchan Interview, February 10, 2010. See also Raissa Tetanish, "School Board Already Working on Gunn's Recommendations," *The Amherst Daily News*, January 12, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> News Release, PEI Department of Education, "School Calendar Revised to Help Make Up for School Cancellations," January 29, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Beverley Ware, "Consultant: End Teachers' Storm Days," *The Chronicle Herald*, February 9, 2010, A3.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Ann Ellison, Schoolteacher, Inverness County, interviewed in Leslie Christine McDaniel, *The Little White Schoolhouse* (Hons. BA Thesis, St. Francis Xavier University, 1984), p. 39.

## Recommendations

This Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) research report, responds directly to the Discussion Paper, prepared by consultant Dr. James Gunn for the Nova Scotia School Boards Association and the Nova Scotia Department of Education. The Consultant's report provided a reliable summary of the background data and ventured a few, mainly operational suggestions. Since Gunn assumed that school closures were strictly the preserve of the local boards, little if anything was entrusted to the province. His paper made no reference whatsoever to the "collateral damage" inflicted by repeated school cancellations impacting directly upon students, classroom learning, or student academic performance. Building upon Gunn's findings, the present study takes a different approach to the chronic problem of "throw-away school days" mostly caused by repeated "school snow days" and calls for immediate action to curb the number of school day cancellations in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in the Atlantic region.

**Recommendation 1: Reaffirm the Department of Education's primary responsibility for the maintaining the integrity of the provincial school schedule, including the provision of a minimum number of teaching days and that schools actually be open for all of them;**

**Recommendation 2: To facilitate recommendation one, amend the Education Act and regulations so as to reaffirm the authority of the Minister of Education to reclaim school days lost because of access problems or other adverse facilities conditions, including storm closings, leaking roofs, or furnace problems;**

**Recommendation 3: Amend the Collective Agreement with the teacher's union so as to guarantee a minimum number of teaching days and stipulate that when the schools remain open teachers (as well as support staff) are expected to report for duty;**

**Recommendation 4: Mandate the Department of Transportation (DOTIR in NS) to develop (in collaboration with the provincial Pupil Transportation Advisory Committee) a coordinated province-wide strategy for snow clearance and highway plowing assigning higher priority to heavy daily student transportation zones, particularly along secondary roadways and working more closely with municipalities to improve services on dirt roads;**

**Recommendation 5: Mandate every School Board/District to produce a contingency plan to reclaim days that are lost, including using holiday periods and giving absolute priority to restoring lost teaching time;**

**Recommendation 6: Initiate an independent Provincial Review of the Impact of Lost Class Time on student engagement, classroom learning, and student performance, particularly on provincial, national and international assessments;**

**Recommendation 7: Assess the impact of reducing the numbers of school storm days on student learning and performance once every five years, commencing in 2014-15.**

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