

Report to Committee of the Whole June 20, 2005



Waterloo Region
District School Board

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "B. Cassidy", written over a horizontal line.

Director of Education

SUBJECT: The Balanced School Day

ORIGINATOR: This report was prepared by Bob Cassidy, Superintendent of Instruction, in consultation with Executive Committee.

PURPOSE:

To update the Board on the implementation of the Balanced School Day.

BACKGROUND:

During the past five years, a number of Ontario school boards have implemented the Balanced School Day in several schools. Following a review of the research and visitations to a number of schools in other boards, the Waterloo Region District School Board implemented the Balanced School Day in the following five schools in September 2004: Conestogo P.S. (JK-8), Dickson P.S. (JK-6), Hillcrest (JK-6), W.T. Townshend P.S. (JK-6), and Woodland Park P.S. (JK-8).

The Balanced School Day breaks the instructional day into three, one hundred minute blocks of time separated by two, forty minute nutrition/activity breaks. The students eat during the first twenty minutes of the break and engage in outdoor activity for the second half. Schools will designate one of the breaks as the "going home" break for those students able to do so.

The *Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario*, developed by the Ministry of Education, outlines a number of conditions which will support the development of literacy skills and student learning. The report indicates that research on effective schools shows that schools and classrooms should be organized around the learning needs of students so that meaningful and sustainable improvements in student achievement can be supported. To help maximize instructional time and engage students in learning, the principal should:

- schedule large uninterrupted blocks of time for reading and literacy instruction;
- explore alternative timetables and school organizations that maximize instructional time;
- reduce or eliminate unnecessary interruptions during instructional time;
- schedule time for team planning and learning.

During our investigation of the Balanced School Day in schools in other jurisdictions, we heard a consistent message that when students have longer blocks of time to learn supported by regular nutrition breaks and physical activity, their concentration and readiness to learn increases. This position was strongly endorsed by the staff of our pilot schools who reported on the following **instructional** opportunities:

- longer periods of uninterrupted blocks of teaching time allowed teachers to delve deeper into the curriculum and reteach more difficult concepts leading to greater understanding;
- increased time was available for the use of manipulatives by the students reinforcing kinesthetic learning ;
- students are better able to focus and concentrate in the classroom, especially during the middle of the afternoon following the second nutrition break, enabling teachers to provide optimum learning opportunities during the complete day;
- with one less break in the school day there is a reduction in the transition time spent putting coats on and off adding approximately one hour of instructional time to each week;
- teachers are finding more opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with their colleagues, resulting in improved teaching practice.

School staffs have also commented on the improvement in the **climate** of the school. They have noted that:

- the tone of the school is much calmer providing a better learning environment;
- playground behaviour is improved with fewer discipline problems;
- there is an improvement in the quality of play as students no longer have to try to eat their snack and play at the same time;
- there is far less litter outside reducing the number of bees on the playground.

The Balanced School Day has provided an opportunity to educate students and parents on **nutritional** issues. The nutrition document produced by the Region of Waterloo Public Health Unit provides excellent information to assist families with food preparation for the two breaks. It has been observed that:

- many students are bringing more nutritious snacks to school because they have more time to eat their food;
- food that is not eaten during the first break can be saved for the second break;
- parents have commented that their children do not come home as hungry at the end of the day.

Kindergarten classes in Balanced Day schools continue to operate on the traditional half-day schedule. Morning classes begin and afternoon classes dismiss at the same time as the remainder of the school, enabling parents to walk their other children at the same time. During the past few years, for safety reasons, it has become practice for an adult to drop off and pick up Kindergarten students.

The original long-range plan was to implement the Balanced School Day into our elementary schools during the next few years. As indicated previously, five schools are currently piloting the Balanced School Day, and another dozen were committed to implementation in September 2005. The terms of the Collective Agreement, and the Memorandum of Settlement which implements it, accelerated the implementation of the Balanced School Day. A key factor was that the recently ratified Collective Agreement includes a provision which provides teachers with an uninterrupted forty minute lunch break. Staff saw three main solutions to the challenge of providing adequate student supervision during the longer teacher lunch break.

One option was to hire lunch supervisors at a cost of approximately 1.5 million dollars. In order to budget for this expense, significant cuts to student programs and services would have been necessary. Another alternative would have been to use principals and vice-principals to supervise the students during a portion of the lunch break. This option would present an unreasonable burden on our administrators, and would create some serious concerns around not having sufficient supervision to provide a safe and secure environment for our students. Given the consistently positive reactions from school communities to the Balanced Day, in contrast to the challenges posed by the previous two alternatives, it became apparent that the Balanced School Day was the best alternative. Student supervision could be provided by implementing the Balanced School Day with its two nutrition breaks.

It was in this context that the implementation of the Balanced School Day was included in the Memorandum of Settlement with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, which implements the amendments to the Agreement. The clause states, "*It is understood and agreed that the Board will exercise its management rights and implement a Balanced School Day in all schools commencing in the 2005-2006 school year.*" The Board approved both the Memorandum of Settlement and the amendments to the Collective Agreement with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario on May 30, 2005.

It is important to note that the timing of the ratification of the Collective Agreement did not allow for our preferred plan for implementation. Unfortunately time did not allow for a full consultation with our stakeholders, particularly our parents. However, an effort has been made to inform parents of the impacts of the Balanced Day. A letter was sent home to all parents announcing the introduction of the Balanced School Day, starting in September 2005. Further information about the Balanced School Day, as well as nutrition information and suggestions for menus prepared by the Region of Waterloo Public Health Unit has been sent home.

STATUS:

Elementary administrators are currently working with their teachers to establish school organizations and timetables which will incorporate the Balanced School Day. Problem-solving groups in each school are addressing a variety of issues associated with the new structure of the day, such as extra-curricular activities, supervision schedules, and working with support staff. A conference is available on WaterWorks for administrators to ask questions and share ideas. Principals report that staffs have been generally very positive as they explore the opportunities provided with the Balanced School Day. Both school and Board staff are meeting with parents to assist with the effective implementation of the Balanced School Day in each school community.

The Transportation Department is surveying schools in order to coordinate bell times as bus routes are planned for September. The Special Education Department is consulting and planning for the coordination of their programs with the schools. Board staff has been in contact with the Juvenile Diabetes Clinic to share information to support students with a smooth transition to the new school schedule.

It is more difficult for students to go home for lunch with this new organization as the break has been reduced from sixty to forty minutes. Our pilot schools report that students continue to go home this year, only in smaller numbers. On the average, across the Region, about ten per cent of our students currently go home at the lunch break on a regular basis.

The nutrition breaks provide an increase in the amount of time for eating and nourishment, but there is an overall reduction in the amount of scheduled activity time. Our pilot schools report that they have observed a significant improvement in the quality of activity during these breaks, as eating time has been clearly separated from the playtime. We continue to attempt to increase the overall level of student physical fitness as we implement the Quality Daily Physical Activity and Playground Activity Leaders Programs in our schools.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Board staff will continue to meet with executive members of school support staff seeking solutions to issues which may arise.

Information on the Balanced School Day and nutrition ideas has been sent home to all parents.

Principals remain as the main contact with parents as they discuss issues relevant to individual schools. Additional plans for implementation will be sent home to parents before the end of June with information specific to the school.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

There may be a slight increase in transportation costs depending on the coordination of school start and dismissal times.

RECOMMENDATION:

No recommendation. For information only.