

# **School Closures:**

## An Information Guide for Saskatchewan Teachers

January 2007



## Available Resources

Please visit the STF website at [www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca) to consult any of the following resources referenced in this guide:

- *The Education Act, 1995*
- *STF Code of Ethics*
- *STF Code of Conduct Respecting the Collective Interests of Teachers*
- *Good Practices and Dispute Resolution*
- STF policies regarding “School Division Reorganization,” “Teacher Redundancy” and “Teacher Transfers”

## Member Services

STF Administrative Staff support members and local associations by:

- Providing information and advice including access to legal advice when necessary.
- Presenting workshops and inservice opportunities.
- Advising and assisting members or groups of members who are experiencing conflict in the practice of their profession.

If you have any questions or need assistance in dealing with school closing issues, please contact the Executive Assistant for your area by calling or visiting one of the STF’s provincial offices.

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## Introduction

A school closure affects many individuals including students, parents, teachers<sup>1</sup>, board members and other citizens. In many communities, the school is the hub of activity and its closure can have far-reaching impacts on the people and place.

With long-term demographic shifts, declining enrolments and increasing costs, boards of education must make some very difficult decisions about the viability of schools throughout Saskatchewan. Consider, for example, that 300 schools in 2005-06 had 150 or fewer students. Boards should base their decisions on educationally sound reasons. Prior to making any final decisions about school closures, they are required to notify and consult with the school community council and the public. *The Education Act, 1995* defines this process.

This resource explains what teachers may expect and what is expected from them during the school closure process, and looks at four basic phases that may occur. For each stage, key procedures are identified along with the potential roles of teachers, local associations, the provincial organization and boards of education.

If the process does lead to a school closing, for teachers the inevitable sense of loss both professionally and personally may be great. Letting go of their school and community ties is not easy and they may feel angry, sad, frightened, depressed and confused. Not everyone experiences all of these feelings with the same intensity, in the same order or at all, but in any group, teachers can expect to encounter all of them. These emotional states are signs of grieving. Recognizing the need to work through these emotions will help teachers accept the situation and move forward.

Each teacher's experience is unique. The collective experience of the STF can assist members in moving through the process and finding opportunities for professional and personal growth. Local associations and the provincial organization are here to provide support, advice and assistance as teachers face this challenge.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that throughout *School Closures: An Information Guide for Saskatchewan Teachers* and the discussions related to it, the term "teachers" is understood to include school principals and vice-principals. In accordance with *The Teachers' Federation Act, 2006*, in Saskatchewan, principals, vice-principals and other teachers are all members of the same profession of teaching, and they belong to the same professional organization, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation.

## Core Guiding Principles

The following core principles apply to all phases of school closures and are intended to guide the work of teachers, local associations and the provincial organization. These principles are based on provincial legislation (e.g., *The Education Act, 1995*, and the *Regulations*) as well as STF bylaws and policies.

Throughout the entire process that may result in a school closure, ***teachers expect:***

- That any reorganization of schools or decisions about staffing levels should be based on a comprehensive plan that focuses on the requirements of the entire school division rather than specific schools.
- That their professional expertise about educational matters, their students' needs, and the implications of school closures for the quality of educational programs and services will be heard and considered by boards of education and school division officials through fair, respectful and timely processes.
- That they will be kept fully informed through timely processes about any developments or decisions regarding possible school closures.
- That all collective agreements and contracts of employment will be honoured.
- That they will be treated fairly, equitably and in accordance with the principles of due process.
- That any disputes that arise will be resolved expeditiously through the appropriate means (e.g., legislation and policy, collective agreements, contracts of employment). In addition, the principles and beliefs outlined in the *Good Practices and Dispute Resolution* agreement (signed by the STF, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and the Department of Learning in 2002) should be followed during dispute resolution processes. (Copies are available online at [www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca))

Throughout the entire process that may result in a school closure, ***teachers are expected:***

- To continue to carry out their professional roles and responsibilities to the best of their ability and as circumstances permit.
- To respect the roles and responsibilities of boards of education and school division officials in carrying out statutory requirements.
- To honour all collective agreements and contracts of employment.
- To continue to adhere to the *STF Code of Ethics* and the *STF Code of Conduct Respecting the Collective Interests of Teachers*.

Also refer to the STF policies regarding “School Division Reorganization,” “Teacher Redundancy” and “Teacher Transfers” available online at [www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca) for the teaching profession’s position regarding some important issues that teachers may face when schools close. These policies specify a number of key guiding principles.

Depending on the situation, other STF policies also provide relevant guiding principles. The complete *STF Policy Handbook* is available online through the Federation’s website. Teachers should also check to see whether their local association has developed policy regarding school closure issues.

## A Note About Staffing Implications

School closures have implications for staffing. Boards of education are expected to address these implications in accordance with legislation through their staffing and personnel policies and procedures (e.g., teacher transfers, redundancy policies and procedures) and in accordance with any provisions in the local agreement. It is very important for all teachers to take the time to read and understand these board policies and the local agreement.

Redundancy is only one possible outcome of a school closure. (Redundancy occurs when a board of education has more teachers under contract than it determines are required for the teaching requirements or educational program of a school division.) Being declared redundant by a board of education can involve complex issues. For further information or assistance, please refer to the brochure on redundancy available in print or online at [www.stf.sk.ca](http://www.stf.sk.ca) and/or contact the provincial organization.

Teachers are also strongly advised to contact the provincial organization to seek advice before considering any changes to their contract of employment. **Please contact the provincial organization immediately upon receipt of a notice of termination of a contract of employment.**

## Basic Steps Leading to School Closures: What Teachers Can Do

School closures usually involve several key phases or steps:

- Teachers (and others) first hear that schools may close.
- The board of education announces that it is considering school closures.
- The board of education decides to close schools.
- The school closure dates draw near (and what happens afterwards).

The following summary provides some basic information and suggestions about what teachers can do during each step or phase. (These suggestions are consistent with the core guiding principles that are listed in the preceding section.) Whichever step or phase your school division is in, please keep in mind that it is more effective for teachers to plan and act collectively whenever possible.

# 1 Teachers first hear that schools in a division may be closed...

Prior to any formal announcement by the board of education that school closures are being considered, teachers, parents and community members may think that their school will likely close.

## What can teachers do?

Teachers can:

- Separate rumours from facts.
- Exercise caution when talking with students, parents or the public about possible school closures and refer questions to the appropriate authorities.
- Alert local association and provincial organization leaders about any information or concerns they may have regarding possible school closures.

Local associations can:

- Contact school division officials early in the process to clarify what is happening.
- Develop or implement a plan to communicate with members about what is taking place.
- Work with provincial organization leaders to address teachers' concerns.
- Track any new developments.

The provincial organization can:

- Work with local associations to address teachers' concerns.
- Provide advice, representation and legal assistance (if necessary) to teachers.
- Monitor developments from a province-wide perspective.

# 2 The board of education has indicated it may close schools...

Before a final decision is made to close a school, a board of education must determine what classrooms and schools are to be maintained in the school division and notify electors of a public meeting to advise that the closure of a school is being considered. The board must conduct this public meeting at least three months prior to the effective date of the closure.

## What can teachers do?

Teachers can:

- Exercise caution when talking with students, parents or the public about possible school closures and refer questions to the appropriate authorities.
- Consider carefully the possible implications of attending public consultation meetings. If teachers choose to attend, they are strongly advised to do so **only as observers, not as participants**.
- Take an active role in their local association by raising any concerns or suggestions about possible school closures and identifying options that may be available (e.g., collective agreements).

Local associations can:

- Clarify what is happening with school division officials.
- Host a general information meeting with the provincial organization.
- Host a general information meeting with the director of education and/or the board of education.
- Facilitate, where appropriate, other communications between teachers and the board of education.
- Advocate for board of education decisions that focus on meeting the educational interests of students.
- Continue to communicate with members as needed about what is happening.
- Work with provincial organization leaders to address teachers' concerns and ensure proper procedures are followed.

The provincial organization can:

- Advocate to protect students' educational interests and to address teachers' professional needs.
- Work with local associations to ensure proper procedures are followed.
- Provide advice, representation and legal assistance (if necessary) to teachers.
- Monitor developments on a province-wide basis.

## 3 The board of education has decided to close schools...

If a board of education decides, following public consultations, to close schools, it must notify the school community council at least three months before the closure date. The board and school division officials should also have plans, policies and procedures in place regarding the closures, including the implications for staffing.

### What can teachers do?

Teachers can:

- Exercise caution when talking with students, parents or the public about school closures, and refer questions to the appropriate authorities.
- Learn as much as possible about the board and school division's plans, policies and procedures regarding school closures.
- Take an active role in their local association to examine the implications of the board's decision and identify options that may be available to address concerns (e.g., collective agreements).
- Contact the provincial organization if they have any concerns or questions about their employment situation.
- Contact the provincial organization immediately upon receipt of a notice of termination.

Local associations can:

- Contact their boards and school division officials as soon as possible to clarify the plans and procedures for the school closures, ensure due process, and address issues that may result from the board's decision.
- Work with provincial organization leaders to address teachers' concerns and ensure proper procedures are followed.
- Take appropriate steps, where possible, to address teachers' employment concerns.

The provincial organization can:

- Work with local associations, boards of education and school division officials to address teachers' concerns, ensure due process and resolve issues.
- Provide advice, representation and legal assistance (if necessary) to teachers.
- Monitor developments on a province-wide basis.

## 4 School closing dates draw near (and afterwards)...

Between the time it decides to close schools and the effective date of the closures, a board of education must consult with school community councils about the educational services for students. The board and school division officials are also expected to continue to implement their plans, policies and procedures for school closures, including the implications for staffing.

### What can teachers do?

Teachers can:

- Continue to exercise caution when talking with students, parents or the public about school closures, and refer questions to the appropriate authorities.
- Offer support to (and be open to support from) colleagues, students, parents and others as the school's operations wind down.
- Take an active role in their local association to examine the implications of the board's decision and identify options that may be available to address concerns (e.g., collective agreements).
- Contact the provincial organization immediately upon receipt of a notice of termination.

Local associations can:

- Continue to work with boards and school division officials to ensure due process, confirm that school closure plans, policies and procedures are being followed, and resolve any outstanding issues.
- Work with provincial organization leaders to address teachers' employment concerns and ensure proper procedures are followed.
- Continue to communicate with members about school closures that are taking place and encourage offers of support for teachers affected.

The provincial organization can:

- Work with local associations, boards of education and school division officials to address teachers' concerns, ensure due process and resolve issues.
- Refer teachers to counselling services.
- Provide advice, representation and legal assistance (if necessary) to teachers.
- Monitor developments on a province-wide basis.

