

BENNETT: Hub schools done right — the Ontario example

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Children hold signs in front of the River John Consolidated School on Sunday during the "picket-nic" held in support of keeping the school open. (FRANCIS CAMPBELL / Truro Bureau)

Transforming emptying or mothballed schools into community hubs is now becoming de rigeur — for other provinces and school districts.

Three weeks ago, Ontario became the latest to embrace the policy initiative and take on the herculean implementation challenge. Breaking into that educational silo will take what American policy analyst Frederick Hess has aptly termed “cage-busting leadership.”

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne has publicly endorsed a special report by provincial consultant Karen Pitre calling for closed public schools to be given a second life as “community hubs.”

Yet that Aug. 10 report, and the accompanying public announcement, curiously enough, made no reference whatsoever to the earlier Nova Scotia venture which is now floundering in its implementation stage.

A year ago, Nova Scotia was first out of the gate embracing the hub school model.

The recent “rejection” of three grassroots hub school projects in the rural communities of Maitland, River John and Wentworth has stalled that venture in its tracks. It provides important lessons for policy-makers and education authorities everywhere.

Premier Wynne and Education Minister Liz Sandals are out front promoting the changes and clearly see “hubification” as a provincial priority. It’s a good start because without robust and determined political leadership, policy pronouncements go nowhere.

That was the case in Nova Scotia, where the province took a hands-off policy and left hub school promoters to fight their own battles with the local school district.

Ontario is taking a far more comprehensive approach — short-term and long-term — to transforming schools into hubs. The initiative is being driven as much by urban neighbourhood imperatives as by rural village concerns.

It was all precipitated by the Toronto District School Board governance review, conducted by Margaret Wilson, and by related provincial school facilities studies that revealed the province was littered with “half-empty” and abandoned schools.

Ms. Pitre’s report recommends an immediate measure to lengthen the time allotted for school-site disposal, giving public bodies and community groups 180 days to come up with hub proposals. Her plan would also allow prospective buyers to pay less than market value and would open the door to shared funding by the province.

Instead of proclaiming legislation and then imposing restrictive regulations, Ontario is looking at clearing away red tape to preserve schools as public buildings.

It is making space-sharing easier, not harder, for community activities, health clinics, day cares, seniors' centres and cafés.

Jumping ahead with enabling legislation without integrating community planning, or investing in making it work, may well defeat the Nova Scotia project.

Lack of any visible provincial or school board support doomed the pilot projects from the start.

Two months after the axe fell, River John hub school promoters are still getting the run-around in their determined attempts to get someone, somewhere to take responsibility for community renewal.

The prospects look brighter in Ontario for a number of reasons.

Unlike Ontario, Nova Scotia's provincial strategy was essentially reactive. It was driven by a desire to quell a 2013-14 rural earthquake of local-school closure protests.

Indeed, it was essentially a concept proposed by "outsiders" and almost reluctantly adopted by Nova Scotia education authorities.

Community hubs are already more accepted and common in Ontario than in Nova Scotia, even without the enabling legislation.

Some 53 examples of hubs are cited in Pitre's report. Most are in urban and suburban communities rather than rural localities.

The big push at Queen's Park is also coming from Toronto and major southern Ontario population centres with far more political clout.

Instead of erecting a wall of administrative obstacles and imposing totally unrealistic cost-recovery targets, Ontario is looking at clearing away the red tape.

Pitre's report proposes recognizing the Social Return on Investment (SROI) in hubs.

There is a clear recognition that investing in hubs produces social dividends, including lower delinquency rates, better health outcomes, healthier lives for seniors, and higher levels of community trust.

Cage-busting leadership will be required to transform schools and other public buildings into viable community hubs.

It starts with tackling the fundamental structural constraints: the need for integrated community planning, the adoption of an integrated cross-departmental service-delivery model, and the provision, where needed, of sustainable public funding.

Gaining access to school space is a bigger challenge than finding the keys to Fort Knox.

Only a multilateral, whole-of-government approach will break into the educational silo.

At the school level, principals will have to accept broader management responsibilities, including commitments in July and August when, today, there is no visible "property management."

Creating viable community hubs is a true test of political and educational leadership. Little or nothing that is sustainable will happen without busting open the "iron cage" of education.

Only then will we see community hub schools that fill the glaring local social and community service gaps left by the regionalization of public services.

Paul W. Bennett is senior education fellow at the Northern Policy Institute, Thunder Bay, and senior author of *The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia* (2013).

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