



A 'dollars and sense' alternative – Community hub schools

Paul W. Bennett

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Smaller communities in Northern Ontario are accustomed to receiving the Queen's Park 'shock treatment.' It happened again on January 28, 2015 when Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals stated that \$1 billion out of the \$22.5 billion education budget could be saved by "closing about 600 half-empty schools."

A day later the Minister backtracked, saying that her primary concern was underutilized Toronto schools, not those in rural or remote communities.

The whole Accommodation Review process, as school closure exercises are now called, has been under fire in the North ever since Toronto consultant Margaret Wilson released her September 2013 independent report rapping the knuckles of the Near North District School Board (NND SB) for its "lack of public transparency" in the forced consolidation of three North Bay elementary schools.

A more recent provincial proposal to shorten the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process also aroused concerns for local school board trustees in North Bay and elsewhere.

It proposed to give municipal governments a bigger role, suggesting "a shift away from consideration (of the) impact of school closures" on "community well-being and the local economy" toward "a more exclusive focus on student achievement."

Veteran NND SB trustee, Al Bottomley, sees the ARC reform proposal as a "dangerous" initiative. "It seems that the government wants to close schools at all cost," he said. "Kids do better in small schools," Bottomley added. "Putting them in one school is not going to benefit the kids. They'll be so tired, they won't be able to do anything. The buses might be going 15 to 20 or 30 kilometres more. That's ridiculous. Student achievement is something they won't get."

The bigger question is whether closing small schools and moving students to regional education centres saves any education dollars at all.

School planners continue to base closure recommendations on predicted "economies of scale."

Such claims are highly suspect, according to American researcher Barbara Kent Lawrence, if and when you factor-in the operating costs per square foot, the actual cost per graduate, the added cost of busing students, and the often inflated costs of new school construction.

School capital funding decisions can also leave smaller towns and villages out in the cold. In the case of Mattawa, a town of 2,100 near North Bay, North Bay Nipissing News Editor Rob Learn recently laid bare what can happen. In mid-December, he made public the contents of a Ministry of Education – NND SB communications trail showing how between 2010 and 2013 that small town lost out on its promised school funding, not just now but into the future.

Without any public disclosure, and ignoring public pleas from Mattawa Mayor Dean Backer, a 2010 \$1 million grant commitment earmarked for F.J. McElligott Secondary School was quietly diverted from the town and shifted to fund a North Bay school re-build to turn it from an intermediate school to a K to 6 facility.

The Mattawa school controversy brought into sharp relief what NND SB Chair David Thompson recently conceded was a "shell game." Capital grants for Mattawa were diverted to North Bay, then topped-up with unspent money from Full Day Kindergarten capital grants, allocating a total of \$1.5 million to Silver Birches Elementary School which opened in September of 2014.

The nub of the whole matter is the spectre of school closures shifting even more students out of their home communities, down the highway to larger regional population centres. Proposed changes to the ARC school closure process will only worsen that problem.

Small school advocates have countered Sandals and the education officials at Queen's Park with a "community building" solution. Instead of closing the remaining rural and remote schools, the proposed plan is to transform underutilized schools into what Dr. David Clandfield terms "community hub schools."

The Hub School model, now authorized in Nova Scotia regulations, opens the door to the potential for school and community revitalization. Under such a model, the adversarial, divisive closure processes become community planning exercises designed to forge community partnerships and re-purpose the underutilized space without displacing the students and teachers.

Closing schools is a losing proposition for much of small town and rural Northern Ontario. It's time to explore a third option with better prospects. Stop the closures and consider more innovative solutions, starting with "hubification" and the sharing of school space.

Provincial and district education authorities must commit in a big way to school renovation rather than current 'tear down' and relocate approaches. Then let's empower school boards to hire local business development officers to initiate community partnerships, tap into alternative funding sources, and rent out school space to local organizations from child care and seniors groups to social enterprises and performing arts organizations.

Rebuilding struggling communities with emptying schools sure beats tearing them down and "community hub schools" could well give them a new lease on life.

*Paul W. Bennett, Ed.D., is Senior Education Research Fellow at the Northern Policy Institute, based in Sudbury and North Bay. His two most recent books are *Vanishing Schools, Threatened Communities* (2011), and *The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia* (2013).*