

May 14, 2010

Nicole Charette
Senior Advisor
Corporate Communications
and Strategic Planning
Rainbow District School Board
69 Young Street
Sudbury ON P3E 3G5

Dear Ms. Charette,

There is always a great deal of emotion when the possibility of a local, school closure is proposed. This current accommodation review is no different. What is the main goal of the Board in an accommodation review? According to information provided to parents it is “to maximize student learning within the resources available to the Board in keeping with two guiding principles – all students will continue to have access to the best programming possible in quality school facilities and surplus space will be reduced.” There are many aspects of the ‘quality’ of a school facility, and many criteria in determining ‘surplus’ space. It is of concern that, despite the value of local schools to students and to community, the Board’s actions in the past few years have followed a strong trend to close small, local schools and to house our children in schools with over 500 students.

In 2007, Valley View was merged with Val Caron Public School at a cost of \$12M to house 526 students.
Jesse Hamilton was merged with George Vanier at a cost of \$14M to house 500 students.
Princess Anne will house 490 children when merged with Wembley students.
Plans are now being proposed to enlarge MacLeod School, which was meant to house 463 students, into one, which can accommodate 650 children.

What is the result of closing small, local schools and building new, large schools?

Consider the following findings of an extensive review of academic studies on the impacts of schools size (*School size, school climate, and student performance. 1996. Kathleen Cotton*). In smaller schools:

- Academic success is equal or superior than for students in larger schools
- Students have higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities, are more likely to hold leadership positions, and report higher satisfaction in their participation
- Student attitudes and attendance are better
- There are lower incidences of negative social behaviour
- Parental involvement, recognized as a crucial factor in student success, is better

So in many core measurements of school value, smaller schools are clearly best for students.

Further, what does it do to a student's sense of belonging to be one of 500 students, in a school, a long bus ride away with none of their classmates living nearby?

I quote from Keith Leithwood's study about school size effects:

Only 30% of children surveyed in elementary schools with over 600 students felt a sense of belonging whereas 70% of children in schools with 300-400 students found a sense of belonging. Research also shows that students in disadvantaged communities are significantly more successful in both smaller elementary and secondary schools. The optimal size appears to be under 400 students in elementary schools and between 600 and 900 in secondary. *Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (2009, March). A Review of Empirical Evidence About School Size Effects: A Policy Perspective. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.*

How are local schools beneficial to the health of children? More children could walk to school and would spend less time sitting in a bus. Active living is crucial to overall health. Living far away from school reduces the ability of some children to engage in extra curricular sports activities after school. This is not in the best interest of the health or engagement of students.

What are the impacts on the wider community? Local property values go down when a local school closes. Families do not want to buy a house in a community where their children have to be bussed an hour or more. Raising their family close to a school is an important contributor to quality of life.

Does building a 'green' school cut down on CO2 emissions? The cost for building new schools brings with it new CO2 emissions. Bringing in supplies by truck or train and manufacturing all new materials, all adds to more CO2 production. Bussing more children, farther, increases emissions and can add unexpected new costs to the board as gasoline prices go up. Schools built farther away also force some parents to drive their children to school. Building a new 'green' school may not be the best choice for reducing emissions.

So how else can the Board go green? **A great way to reduce emissions and energy use is by retrofitting older buildings.** The Ministry of Education understands this and is spending \$500M to help make schools more energy efficient, which will lead to future cost savings. By retrofitting existing buildings, the Board can advance green technologies and create green jobs. Innovative new ways to boost energy efficiency in existing buildings will have a far greater impact on reducing energy demands than focusing only on energy-efficient new buildings. Retrofitting also provides a learning opportunity for children and parents on best practices for energy saving that they can take home to their older homes. Installing solar panels or a wind turbine can decrease energy costs by 15%. Repairs to an older building need not be onerous. Retrofitting is doable and brings with it many advantages.

Population trends must be considered. The data we have, now, says that from 2001 to 2006 the population in the South end went up 4%. This translated into 6.4% more 0 to 4 year olds and 7.7% more 10 to 14 year olds. Since then, the number of residential units built has gone up 52% so we can expect the number of children to have gone up even more in the last three years. Will this continue in the South end? From development plans of new subdivisions and since a \$27 million dollar rock sewer tunnel is being built, we should expect an increase in children in the area to continue.

But what about schools that are under capacity now? Communities with underutilized schools should be encouraged to find other uses for their buildings. To make underutilized school buildings more of a community hub and to make them more cost effective to the Board, they may include early learning or child-care programs, space for non-profit organizations, health clinics, sports programs, family resource or seniors' centres, industry training, or branch libraries. All of these measures strengthen the tie between the school and the surrounding community. The school can become a renewable energy resource hub and reduce their energy costs at the same time. Exploring partnerships with the City and other Boards may also provide opportunities for solutions to keeping neighbourhood schools viable.

Why are some schools underutilized while others are over utilized? MacLeod Public School provides one example. Over the past 10 years, MacLeod Public School has expanded in student size. According to Board figures, only 7% of MacLeod students are out of catchment area. However, more and more children have been permitted to enter the school if they have babysitting or friends in the catchment area. These children are not included in the 7%. No one has ever reported what percentage of children at MacLeod is out of the catchment area but have babysitting in the area. I believe this has partially contributed to the over capacity problems, along with the general population increase. Over capacity, at MacLeod, has led to the elimination of change rooms, lack of space for resource teachers, large class sizes in the upper grades and the removal of the library and music room from inside the main building to two new classrooms attached to the Annex. The influx to this school is likely related to the under utilization of schools like Wembley, Long Lake, and possibly even Wanup. Keeping children in their local community, in high quality neighbourhood schools, should be a priority for the Board, as it would help eliminate many problems we are facing now.

Many factors contribute to the value of a school, and small schools have been shown to be equal or better in most of those key factors.

On the other hand, EQAO results and funds parents can raise, currently in the school information profiles, should not be part of this evaluation. EQAO results are not meant to be used for school ranking according to the EQAO website and should be removed from the profile since it they are often incorrectly interpreted.

<http://www.eqao.com/NR/ReleaseViewer.aspx?Lang=E&release=b08R007>

“EQAO results provide a “snapshot” of how students are achieving at one point in time and do not fully represent the richness and depth

of multi-faceted schools and their students. Every school's staff has access to many sources of data in addition to EQAO reports. School staff and parents need to take into account the complexities of their school by examining their EQAO results *along with* all of the other information they have about student achievement, such as that found in or through report cards, classroom assessments and board assessments. In addition, contextual factors—such as attendance patterns, absentee rates, mobility rates and special program needs of students—can influence student-achievement levels in any school. **This is why it is meaningless and misleading to rank schools according to EQAO data.”**

How much a school can fundraise should also not be of interest to an accommodation review committee and should be removed from school profiles to prevent the impression that only high fundraising schools are of value.

Public education is such an important and beneficial part of our society that we should find creative and innovative ways to reduce costs without harming our children, our environment and our communities. Keeping local, smaller schools open benefits us all now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Lilly Noble
Communication, Coalition for a Liveable Sudbury

Cc Minister of Education, Leona Dombrowsky