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The Rural Effect on School Closures and the Limitations Within the Provincial Policy Framework

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**The Rural Effect on School Closures and the Limitations
within the Provincial Policy Framework**

MPA Research Report

Submitted to:

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July 2017

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education, in consultation with school boards, continue to look for ways to reduce the number of schools that are currently underutilized. As budgets are on the rise, so too is the desire for school boards to engage in a Pupil Accommodation Review to understand the underlying factors contributing to the shortfall. Through this process, the focal point has been on rural communities and the schools currently in place, which has led to a massive disruption of numerous rural communities. The slated closure of these rural schools has brought together all community stakeholders who have a lot more to lose than those who are within the urban setting. The announcement of proposing larger schools to support a richer curriculum and a change to the provincial funding formula does not sit well with residents of rural communities. This causes the need for the provincial government to develop a rural education strategy to solve this province-wide problem and preserve opportunities for students in Ontario to continue learning close to their homes.

The closing of rural schools will have profound and irreversible negative impacts on rural communities. Schools are an essential element of the fabric of rural communities, and an important and necessary link to the viability of local government. School closures impact the business community, property values, families, the workforce, student employment, and the growth, retention, and expansion of the community.

Small, rural schools inject millions of dollars annually into the communities in which they are located, in both private sector businesses and public facilities. Taking much-needed dollars out of rural communities and putting them into urban centers restrict the growth and vitality of rural living. Whether primary or secondary, these schools are the heart of the communities they serve. The character, nature of the student body, and milieu of rural schools are different than schools serving urban or mostly urban catchment areas.

Students who attend rural schools have a greater understanding and appreciation of local history and culture, an important part of what makes small communities close-knit and livable.¹

The Provincial Government policy framework tends to align with the needs of the urban electorate, and should include the rural communities in deciding the future of education. A review is the first step in addressing an outdated policy that does not seem to meet the needs of our students, communities, and schools. This could include a collaboration of government with local leaders, community stakeholders, and associations in establishing a policy statement that can adhere to the current changes and trends public education is encountering today and moving forward.

Introduction

A rural school can provide more purposes beyond being an educational institute. It can also provide social and economic opportunities, an arena for local politics, a delivery point for services and a resource for community development. Through their research, Semke and Shieridan (2011) determined that “the geographic and social contexts of rural communities often require schools to serve many functions beyond their primary mission of education.”² Through many studies and subsequent interviews with community members, teachers, students, parents, principals and administrators, a close collaborative relationship with the community was discovered to be a critical factor to school achievement.³

¹ SDG Warden outlines negative consequences of proposed school closures. (2016, October 11). Retrieved from <http://www.nationvalleynews.com/2016/10/11/sdg-warden-outlines-negative-consequences-of-proposed-school-closures/>

² National Education Association 2008 (p5)

³ Agbo, 2007; Barley & Beesley 2007; D’Amico & Nelson, 2000 (p12)

The funding formula for education is failing rural Ontario. Economist Hugh Mackenzie's critique from the creation of the funding formula identified limitations that "faced with substantial differences in operating costs, the government chose not to investigate the reasons for the differences."⁴ The overall research will highlight the cost implications to several stakeholders, but more importantly, the Municipality who will have community assets that will discourage development and families, and provide elected officials and staff with an almost impossible task of growing the community and municipality for future generations.

The funding for Ontario schools for the 2015-2016 year remained stable at \$22.5 billion. Of the allocation, the Province only spent \$3.7 billion on funding for rural schools.⁵ Rural Ontario accounts for 20% of the provincial population, which, based on the distribution by the Province, leaves rural schools underfunded by about \$800 million. The Ontario Ministry of Education expects school boards to have capital forecasts that address the future growth and need of the students they serve. Areas within their jurisdiction should demonstrate areas of enrollment growth as well as areas of decline. This should allow school boards to establish enrollment projections, school capacity, renewal needs, potential consolidations and the construction of new schools or new additions, including significant renovations. Through this extensive process, school boards will determine the location of new schools or additions which may be needed, which schools remain well-

⁴ Mackenzie, H. (1998). Education Funding in Ontario: How the government used its new funding formula to short-change our children's future. Ontario Alternative Budget Working Group. <http://www.ofl.ca/uploads/library/economy/tp5.pdf>.

⁵2015-2016 Education Funding: A Guide to the Grants for Students Needs. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1516/2015GSNguidEN.pdf>
Province of Ontario

utilized, which do not, and which schools may be potentially earmarked for consolidation or closure.

There is no evidence of substantive longer-term savings in announcing the closing of schools. The Province is making these decisions in absence of any economic or fiscal analysis on their part. It also appears that school closures are unreasonably disenfranchising children in rural and northern regions. Closing schools is creating problems in transportation, where some children will be facing 2-3 hours return trip every day. The Provincial Government have to start looking beyond the boundaries of Toronto and the GTA to focus on other communities that are facing financial, social, cultural, and economical hardship due school closures.

One in five Ontarians live in a demographic area considered to be rural. The Provincial Government deliverable should be to foster rural sustainability through the establishment of key policies that promote forestry, farming, mining, and food production as these rural communities must thrive to meet the province's growing needs.⁶ As the key urban issues such as transportation, sprawl, aging infrastructure, and transit gain the widespread attention of the Provincial and Federal Governments, it is the rural communities that are left to defend themselves. This has led to these policy changes at the provincial level that have targeted rural communities by eradicating the foundation of any future for these communities through school closures and relocation of students outside the boundaries.

⁶ Municipal World, The Importance of a Rural Voice - January 2017 Issue

Research Focus

The impact of school closures in any community can create financial and economical constraints, but closures in rural communities can be detrimental to sustaining continuous growth. The research paper will examine the statement that "The Ministry of Education Funding Model is inconsistent with the demands and needs of rural communities, and closures within these communities will have unprecedented impacts on municipalities, businesses, and ways of life." It is expected that through this research, some questions will be answered;

1. How effective are the provincial/board policies and guidelines in achieving public participation and rural education?
2. Can changes be made to the current policy framework e.g. one-size-fits-all and scalability to provide meaningful opportunity to shape policies?

The research paper is expected to focus on the current practices and policy measures in place from the school boards and the Provincial Government that impact communities, especially the rural centers in which schools are a cornerstone for families and growing economic development. The need for schools in every community is an approach worth exploring, as they provide more than education and represent a place where communities can come together for various activities, events, and other social gatherings. The vision of the policy-makers now looks at large schools as the models to support more programming and better education. This type of policy thinking cannot be sustained due to several variables beyond the control of any power that impacts the outcome. These variables include the demographics and geographic characteristics of communities that require specific policies that adhere to their needs.

The research will touch on the public process to which these decisions are made by the school boards to close rural schools. As the public process through local

government is considered, specifically the Planning Act, the legislation involves Municipal Councils, landowners, planners, developers, and the public to make important decisions on the future of the community. Under the Planning Act, Municipalities are required to provide as much information as possible in the preparation of an official plan, must hold public open houses to allow the public to review, ask questions, and provide comments or suggestions about the plan. Before the plan is adopted by Council, it must hold at least one public meeting in which the public can formally provide an opinion. This notice must be provided under the Act at least 20 days before the meeting through various media outlets, such as newspaper, mail and posted notices.⁷

Why are Municipalities held to a higher standard when it comes to public engagement than that of school boards? These decisions being made by the school boards are drastically impacting the communities and municipalities as the current policy regime lacks transparency, accountability and citizen engagement. This does not seem like an open process which promotes feedback and ideas for key stakeholders within their respective communities.

Ministry Funding Model

The Ministry of Education is a branch of the Provincial Government that oversees the distribution of public funding across the schools in Ontario. The funding allocation, also known as Grants for Students Needs (GSN), is anticipated to be \$23.8 billion for 2017-2018, compared to \$23.0 billion in 2016-2017. This funding is comprised of various

⁷ Citizen's Guide 1 - The Planning Act. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page1760.aspx>
Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Provincial Planning Policy Branch

subsidies which support the dissemination of the funds to Ontario's 72 district school boards as illustrated through **Appendix 1**.⁸

The Province, through the Ministry of Education, is accountable for the public education system and the policy decisions that determine the funding envelope for the respective school boards. These policies under the Ministry of Education and the allocation of funding to schools throughout Ontario has received criticism over the last several years because of proposed school closures and consolidations, especially in rural communities. These decisions have been met with great opposition from parents, businesses, students, communities, and municipalities looking for policy changes to address the needs for saving rural education. The Ontario Alliance for School Closures (OAASC) is calling on the government to make these policies congruent with the needs and socio-economic conditions in communities across the province. The OAASC spokesperson, Susan MacKenzie, was quoted as saying "We're paying a steep price for cuts in education. It is time to see beyond the boundaries of Toronto and the GTA. Kathleen's Provincial government needs to realize that she is Premier of the province of Ontario, not Toronto."⁹

So, why do the fiscal constraints and an environment of doing more with less continue in Ontario's public education system to this day? It's the funding formula. That same outdated, poorly thought out formula that the Provincial Government promised to change or abandon in favor of one that truly addresses student needs. Instead, the Government has found the formula to be a very convenient way to manage public

⁸ 2015-2016 Education Funding: A Guide to the Grants for Students Needs. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1516/2015GSNguideEN.pdf>
Province of Ontario

⁹ MacKay, J. (Ed.). (2016, October 28). Alliance Against School Closures calls for Moratorium. Retrieved from <http://blackburnnews.com/midwestern-ontario/midwestern-ontario-news/2016/10/28/alliance-school-closures-calls-moratorium/>

education through a lens of fiscal restraint rather through one of student need. Public education continues to be perceived by government as a cost to society rather than an investment. Until the Ontario Government changes its perspective on fiscal restraint, student needs will take a back seat to an austerity agenda.

School Constraints & Challenges

The surplus of classroom space, the continued decrease in enrollment, and the escalating costs for school operations (e.g. heat, hydro) are the key contributing factors that are causing boards to close and consolidate schools. To better understand the criteria for determining surplus space it must be first documented that this is a creature of the funding formula. In the policy, for example, it recognizes computer labs as non-classroom space and it is deemed to be counted against a school in terms of 'full' use of space. The most recent published data from the Ministry of Education for the period of 2014-2015 illustrates the continued trend of decreased enrollment. For comparison purposes, **Appendix 2** illustrates the number of schools for the Public and Roman Catholic School Boards, which show an increase of 45 over a 10-year period, whereas the number of students enrolled reduced by 120,667 for the same period, as illustrated in **Appendix 3**.

As these enrollment numbers continue to decrease, so does that funding from the Ministry of Education. This is causing real concern and a challenge because the Ministry's funding policy allocation to the schools is founded upon the amount of physical school space required given student enrollments. The amount of space needed by school boards is predominantly influenced by enrollment, compared to the physical space available in schools. The foundation of this funding policy has many nervous and uncertain about the future of our schools in Ontario. Many politicians and key stakeholders continue to advocate the Province for changes, including the President of Elementary Teacher's

Federation of Ontario, Sam Hammond. Hammond questions the attention given by the Ministry on the utilization of space, which will result in more school closures. "The government's incentive funding to consolidate schools would have an adverse effect of driving elementary schools and students into high school settings. We know that when this happens, younger students don't get the access they need to shared facilities. They are also exposed to environments that are not age-appropriate," added Hammond.¹⁰

As school boards across Ontario continue to be burdened with the reduced provincial funding, continued reduction in student enrollment and higher operating and capital costs, our schools are on the verge of becoming extinct. What is more astonishing is the fact that the schools being selected are from rural communities, which are the cornerstone of these towns and villages. The thought of losing these public arenas have many worried and fighting against their local trustees and government on what is the right decision. This concern is not new, as in March 2003, the government announced \$50 million in funding to develop a Rural Education Strategy. The result of this strategy was to recognize essential resources needed by the small rural and northern schools and provide on-going additional funding to the schools to achieve the livelihood of these rural education community hubs.

Education Tax Distribution

The funding by the Province to schools is delivered through local government collecting these amounts through property taxation. The amounts collected by Municipalities vary across the province due to many factors such as the assessment of

¹⁰ Media Release: Education funding still won't fully support issues like special education, full-day kindergarten. (2015, March 26). Retrieved from <https://www.ett.ca/fdk/>
Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario

properties and the tax rates set by the Province. It is the responsibility of the Province to set the education rates as defined under the Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2.¹¹ The setting of the rates is based on the funding allocation needed by the Province for the given year, and are downloaded to local government for implementation.

These established rates are included within the billing of property taxes to all property owners within the respective municipal boundary. These funds are collected by the Municipality and relinquished to the school boards; English Public, English Catholic, French Public, and French Catholic based on the apportionment set by the Province. These amounts are paid quarterly throughout the year, with December being the reconciliation for any supplemental or write-off that occurred within the fiscal year. Despite collecting all the education taxes within the current year, the Municipalities are required to upload the entire amount for education purposes.

Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR)

The Upper Canada School Board is experiencing declining revenues in the form of decreased transfer payments it receives from the Province of Ontario. In some cases, the decrease in revenue is due to a change in the funding model within budget lines (e.g.: High Needs Amount support in Special Education). In general, however, the decrease in revenue correlates to the declining student enrolment within the school district. Board revenue depends upon student enrolment as the Province funds education, and most grants are based on the number of pupils.

As a result, the Board of Trustees for the Upper Canada District School Board (UCDBS) requested that staff deliver an initial staff report, ***Building for the Future***, which

¹¹ Education Act. (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.canlii.org/en/on/laws/stat/rso-1990-c-e2/latest/rso-1990-c-e2.html>

consisted of scenarios for school closures, the consolidation of student spaces by re-directing students to other schools in the surrounding vicinity, enhancing school facilities through the addition of new instructional space, or by rebuilding schools. Overall, the report seeks to present considerations regarding:

1. Reducing expenses given the realities of our funding due to our current enrolment and accumulated enrolment decline, and;
2. Maintaining and refreshing school facilities by projecting future capital planning projects that would enhance remaining school facilities or lead to proposals for the rebuilding of schools.

This report was presented and approved by the Trustees on September 28, 2016, which initiated a Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR). With the Board enrolment declining by 3,500 for elementary and 4,000 for secondary within the last ten years, along with inadequate funding policy changes, status quo was not an option. Enrolment projections show that while the enrolment stabilizes at its current rate in the next decade, there remains a high number of surplus student spaces that are not being funded by the Ministry of Education.

The result of the 185-page report concluded that 29 schools would be recommended for potential closure or consolidation across the boundaries of the UCDSB, as shown on **Appendix 4**. The announcement of schools slated for closure or consolidation was met with disbelief from the communities and local government due to the lack of prior communication by the Board. The fact that several rural communities could be affected, and the failure of the school board to initiate discussion with their local government from the onset is a far cry from a democratic process, and does not appear to meet the “test” of the PAR guidelines set out by the Province.

Accommodation Review Committee (ARC)

By the school closure policy and the Ontario Ministry of Education's Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines, the need to gain input and keep the public informed is fundamental and accomplished through an Accommodation Review Committee (ARC). The change in the provincial direction in 2015 altered the goals and objectives of this committee, from an advisory role to assist in the decision-making responsibilities of the Board of Trustees. The role and responsibilities of the ARC based on the new policy directive were to act as a conduit of information to assist the review process in its entirety.

The need for this public process is essential, and to some extent achieves this mandate which is to obtain information from their respective school communities in response to the Initial Staff Report, to assist the decision-making responsibilities of the Board of Trustees.¹² In addition to providing comments on the Initial Staff Report, this practice attempts to uncover other opportunities or potential partnerships that may impact the decisions including:

- Other opportunities for reducing unused student space in the community;
- The program or community use experiences that the community values and that may or may not be present in another existing school community;
- The views and attitudes of stakeholders such as parents, students, and community members;
- Information on future community plans or resources that may apply to the school;
- Alternative approaches or solutions that may address the matters under the pupil accommodation review;
- Alternative approaches and timelines for executing the recommendations of the Initial Staff Report.

All the information received through public meetings, school surveys, letters, and presentations are gathered and reviewed by the ARC, which is comprised of parents, parent councils and school officials working collectively to obtain the most effective

¹² USCDB Building for the Future Pupil Accommodation Review Committee – Terms of Reference, 2016

outcome. As in the PAR in September 2017, the Upper Canada District School Board received comments by the ARC from the public consultation on February 15, 2017. As commented by Warden Jamie McDonald of the United Counties of SDG, "this timeline is unnecessarily aggressive and diminishes the time to adequately consider all possible options, as well as the opportunity for meaningful input. The timeline also suggests to some that the Board simply wants to get the statutory process completed as quickly as possible."¹³

The need for public engagement and collective input should be the focus of this process, but at times can be forgotten as feelings of anger, frustration, and lack of accountability and transparency are evident. By the time these emotions have subsided, time has been lost and therefore valuable input and solutions have not been assembled. Why are Municipalities held to a higher standard under current legislation regarding public engagement and an open, transparent public process? Should these values and guidelines not be the same for the Ontario Ministry of Education and the school boards? As we continue through the literature review, many of these questions will be examined through empirical research that will show that local governments have several measures in place that promote public engagement which should be adopted by other levels of government and its ministries.

Literature Review

The need for a comprehensive and independent review of how we deliver services, including education in rural and northern Ontario, is essential to prevent further school closures. The current funding model and policy framework instituted by the Ministry of

¹³ Submission to Accommodation Review Committee 2A. (2016, November 17). Retrieved from <http://www.ucdsb.on.ca/programs/accomodationreview/schoolprofiles/Documents/ARC%202A/Delegati on%202%20-%20United%20Counties%20of%20Stormont%20Dundas%20and%20Glengarry.pdf>

Education is failing rural and northern communities, as currently 600 schools are under review for closure – 500 of which operate in rural communities.¹⁴ The Provincial Government's elimination of the top-up funding because the per-pupil formula was insufficient to support rural school in a time of declining enrolment, is proof that an urban lens is prevalent in making these policy decisions.

As part of the PAR in September 2016 for the Upper Canada District School Board, MPP of Leeds & Grenville, Steve Clark, indicated that "with appropriate funding restored and broad-based consultation, we can develop a plan that will recognize the important community and economic benefits provided by school. Any plan must also, of course, recognize the rights of students in rural areas to learn close to where they live."¹⁵ The current policy framework does not support this way of thinking as students, parents, municipal officials, and communities are left with the burden to find solutions and partnerships.

Schools are where we educate our children and are the heart of our communities. Rural schools have the capability to offer more than an educational experience to our children and can provide economic, and social opportunities which can be an arena for local politics, a delivery point for services and a resource for community development and initiatives.¹⁶ This type of impact to a community is not only realized in Canada, but globally in Finland, where small rural schools give a high priority to the establishment of associations with the local community and are pro-active institutions in the local

¹⁴ Municipal World, School Closures in the Modern Era – The Hollowing out of Rural Canada? April 2017 Issue

¹⁵ Presentation to the UCDSB - Speaking Notes for Steve Clark, MPP, Leeds-Grenville. (2017, March 02). Retrieved from <http://www.ucdsb.on.ca/programs/accomodationreview/Documents/3-Final%20ARC%20Report%2020170213.pdf>

¹⁶ Research Evidence on Impact of Rural School Closure on Local Community – Short Literature Review, Susan Robinson & Susan Whittaker, EAS: Learning Research, February 2012

community.¹⁷ These positive associations to communities are essential for the continued growth and development, and the need for policy and funding changes are critical to ensuring more schools do not close. Once a school has been identified as a candidate for closure and initiates this process, the probabilities of a school being restored in the future will be unattainable and lost indefinitely.

In s170(1), paragraph 6 of the Education Act, school boards have a duty to "provide instruction and adequate accommodation during each school year for the pupils who have a right to attend a school under the jurisdiction of the board." While the school boards have a responsibility to provide education to students in their jurisdiction, it appears that there is no obligation on boards to offer school facilities in rural or remote areas rather than bussing students, to a more distant and larger school, even though many boards do have a distance policy in place. This type of behavior by school boards and the Ministry of Education is nothing new, as back in 2003-2004 a technical paper was generated labeled the *Rural Education Strategy*. This report involved a series of roundtable discussions with key stakeholders in the community and the education field to formulate a method for the distribution of \$50 million in funding under this strategy. As referenced in the report and based on the Advisor's recommendations, the Ministry of Education has designed a funding mechanism that recognizes key financial resources needed to facilitate the existence of small rural and northern schools.¹⁸

This shortfall was recognized over 14 years ago by the Ministry of Education which resulted in additional funding provided to address the crisis of inadequate education funding for rural and northern communities. Now, as communities encounter the same

¹⁷ Research Evidence on Impact of Rural School Closure on Local Community – Short Literature Review, Susan Robinson & Susan Whittaker, EAS: Learning Research, February 2012

¹⁸ Technical Paper 2003-2004: Rural Education Strategy, Ministry of Education – September 2003

problems, the Ministry of Education delivers messages that they are unable to overturn school board decisions and become involved. Is this not the reason why we are in this predicament? Is it the Ministry's policy and guidelines that are restricting boards in allocating the needed financial support for rural and northern communities? The Ministry and school boards have redistributed the needed resources away from rural students, to maximize the opportunities through funding the larger urban schools. This decision has resulted in a poorer quality of education for rural students, as the recent *People for Public Education Study* suggests. As documented by the Rural Ontario Institute, it is projected that close to 1/3 of the under-utilized schools in the province are in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) where closing a high school might imply a transit stop or two more for a teenager, whereas closing the only school in a community has profound implications¹⁹. This provides more reasoning for structure and system changes about the funding formula, as the current message is that urban education is the priority of the Ministry of Education. Is that the message we want to portray to our children, parents, communities, local elected officials/staff, and stakeholders?

The continued message that schools must close has been a recurring theme over the last 18 years, and still today we are faced with the same dilemma. The reality that the funding formula remains to be ineffective in delivering the needs of schools, more importantly, the small rural and northern schools exemplify the lack of engagement and competencies from the Ministry of Education. The funding formula, according to Cathy Dandy, a former Toronto District School Board Trustee, and a member of the steering committee of Community Assets for Everyone (CAFÉ), illustrated two major flaws – there is no evidence to suggest the numbers are in the best interests of students, and the

¹⁹ Problematic Response by Ministry of Education to Rural School Closures Raises Questions – Rural Ontario Institute, November 2016 - Blog

numbers ignore the fact that these schools are a community investment. The funding formula was created to pay for a certain number of square feet containing a teacher and 30 students, and that's it.²⁰

In the past, the success of our students was based on a factory model of putting all kids through the same mill and then testing for success. The challenges of standardized testing over the years have found that this has resulted in many students dropping out or achieving marginal results. This information has changed the way we educate our students by managing the size of the classrooms to allow administrators and teachers to know who they are teaching and establish a relationship. We continue to look at innovative and progressive programming that engages kids, such as computer science and robotics. This philosophy requires instructional space, which, by the policy framework, is based on the number of pupil spaces. Just because these school facilities can hold 2,000 students, doesn't mean they should. The priority should be educating our students and preparing them for success with programming that meets the needs of the future, rather than focusing on the number pupil spaces.

Development over the last year which is gaining momentum is the community embracing the idea that these public spaces should not be merely thought of as schools, but as a community hub. Although not new, this model is being implemented with success throughout Canada, with the exception of Ontario. As this model is the integration of education, mental health, health and senior's services, it is proving to be advantageous and brings collaboration between different levels of government to utilize the open spaces within our schools. The call to close schools is due to the lack of interest in aligning the policies at the Provincial level between ministries to promote the utilization of this space.

²⁰ Closing schools not the answer to budget woes, Toronto Star, February 15, 2015

In May 2016, over 100 participants gathered to examine the barriers to wider adoption of integrated use of schools. These participants comprised of provincial, municipal, and school board officials who focused on a co-ordinated approach to the funding and the utilization of space within the schools. In attendance were several mayors from small, rural communities who understand the impact of the narrowed vision that currently dictates that student enrollment is the only criterion used to determine if a school remains open. This approach has been gaining momentum and advocates pushing for stronger alignment between local government and school boards. The functionality of schools 30 years ago is so vastly different today and must adapt to the growing needs and services of the communities. Cathy Dandy, a former trustee, says it best by saying "schools are the heart of most communities and to close them based on the funding formula is to rip at the fabric of neighborhoods. The factory model of education and siloed use of school space is dead. Let's stop the cry for closure and move into the 21st century with a robust vision of how to use and fund out public space."²¹

As the closure of rural and northern schools continue to be the target of the Ministry of Education, support for advocacy groups of these schools and the impact they have on their respective communities has increased. The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is committed to addressing rural school closures and was discussed extensively at a recent Policy Advisory Council (PAC) meeting in Brockville. The OFA is in strong opposition to these closures and advocates that these decisions are made without consideration of critical factors that impact the students, rural families, and communities. The Ministry of Education, as in the past, makes crucial decisions without understanding

²¹ Closing schools not the answer to budget woes, Toronto Star, February 15, 2015

the full implications of these conclusions such as; transportation, student employment opportunities, and parental involvement.

The effects of rural school closures mean students are faced with longer bus rides to larger schools in the urban areas. The hours spent on the bus daily will impact students' attentiveness, learning potential, and the ability to be part of an extracurricular activity. The ability of students to obtain part-time employment after school will be jeopardized due to the timing that students will return home. This will also affect the businesses in urban and rural communities that rely heavily on students to operate their business. Some students will not gain work experience or will not be able to save for post-secondary education. With students traveling long distances to school, parents will lack the capability to volunteer and contribute to the school atmosphere, disengaging the parents from their kids' education. Another consideration to maintaining rural schools is that they become the central public arena for the community, offering social opportunities, services, athletic events, and community groups that the community heavily relies on for improved quality of life.

There is no good way to close a school, only poor processes that impact people involved in the decision making. The communication process involved in a Pupil Accommodation Review prior to and during, the process is limited in which school boards only achieve the minimum requirement with local governments and the public. These guidelines are outlined by the Ministry of Education, which was updated in 2015 and instructs the process to which the boards are to follow throughout the review. Upon the approval of the PAR by the Board of Trustees, school boards are required to invite the affected lower, single, or upper-tier municipality, as well as other community partners that expressed an interest before the PAR, to discuss the recommendations in the report in

the initial staff report.²² This component of the process was completed through its first Community Planning and Partnership (CPP) meeting held on June 9, 2016, which was communicated as an information session on collaboration and partnership initiatives when, in fact, it was a requirement of the PAR process. The agenda of the meeting did not speak about closing or consolidated schools as more people would have taken an interest to attend. The messaging was weak and did not indicate the real objective of the meeting and surprised all local government representatives when in the PAR process it was indicated they had already had earlier discussions with municipal delegates.

The responses from the affected municipalities are to be submitted to the Board before the final public meeting and form part of the report submitted to the Trustees for a final vote. The guidelines also mention that the school boards must arrange a minimum of two public meetings for the community at large in response to the initial staff report. These meetings are facilitated by school board staff to achieve community feedback in the recommendations within the report. The notices of these meetings are left to the school boards to determine the most effective means to advertise to the public. This could involve a letter coming home to parents, website, local newspapers, etc. but this is left to the discretion of the school board personnel.

The process employed by the Upper Canada District School Board was deemed aggressive and provided limited resources for an open, collaborative communication system. A delegation from Jamie McDonald, Warden of the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas, and Glengarry, stated that "the magnitude and scope of the PAR demand that

²² Ministry of Education - Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines. (2015, March). Retrieved from <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1516/2015B9appenAEN.pdf>
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sufficient time is taken to properly review all available options, as well as providing sufficient time for community consultation. The timeline laid out by the Board is unnecessarily aggressive and diminishes the time to adequately consider all possible options, as well as the opportunity for meaningful input. The timeline also suggests to some that the Board simply wants to get the statutory process completed as quickly as possible."²³ This is the same message being advocated through many of the PARs across Ontario, and thus has resulted in community outrage and demand for better policies and guidelines.

To achieve effective citizen engagement, one must form an open, collaborative communication system which, according to Sherry Arnstein (1969), "Informing citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation."²⁴ She also cautions that a closed system, such as the PARs, can regulate and limit the focus of the message. However, too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information – from officials to citizens – with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in the policy process, individuals have little opportunity to influence the program designed “for their benefit.”²⁵ In looking at **Appendix 5** from the UCDSB, this could be viewed as one of a closed system that attempts to limit the impact from the stakeholders and community to achieve the intended outcome.

²³ Submission to Accommodation Review Committee 2A. (2016, November 17). Retrieved from <http://www.ucdsb.on.ca/programs/accomodationreview/schoolprofiles/Documents/ARC%20A/Delegati on%202%20-%20United%20Counties%20of%20Stormont%20Dundas%20and%20Glengarry.pdf>

²⁴ Arnstein, S. – A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, 216-224, 1969

²⁵ Arnstein, S. – A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, 216-224, 1969

The process should be one that promotes citizen engagement with community partners, including local government, parents, students, businesses, agencies, etc. but can be viewed by many to be overwhelming. The Ministry guidelines do not specifically illustrate which mediums to use for presenting the information to the public, which creates inconsistencies amongst the boards. For public meetings to be successful and achieve effective feedback, people must be given the appropriate information to process. As referenced in the final report to the UCDSB Trustees, many survey responses pointed to concerns over the condensed timelines of the ARC process, and the transitions and implementation of changes, specifically related to students with special needs. The type of communication process remains ineffective and does not promote a sense of inclusiveness within the community. The process by the UCDSB referenced under **Appendix 6** is an example of this aggressive timeline that leaves communities inundated with information, but no effective measures to have open dialogue and offer solutions.

In comparing this type of process to local government, there could be a case made that governments are held to a higher standard of transparency and openness than local school boards. Municipalities are governed by legislation that provides clear direction on the measures to be taken when notifying the public on certain issues, including tax sales, official plans, zoning amendments, council meetings, etc. This is different for school boards that are provided a guideline to follow that is vague and allows room for interpretation and implementation. As both are creatures of the province and are heavily dependent on public funding, the same should apply to the decision-makers engaging local citizenry in policy and program activities. This, however, is not the case and can be illustrated in **Appendix 7** as to the administrative processes for zoning by-law/amendments in which municipalities are held to a prescribed process under Ontario Regulation 543/06 and 545/06 of the Planning Act for engaging citizen participation.

In comparing the process requirements from that of the local school board to local government, it can be clearly surmised that municipalities are subject to a more in-depth and restrictive protocol than that of the school boards. Demonstrating openness and transparency in local governments continues to be a priority for elected officials and staff to encourage citizen participation in shaping the community. As local government is moving in this direction, the Ministry of Education has local school boards doing the opposite by pushing through initiatives and reviews that can have detrimental impacts on any community, especially in rural areas. These policies can be viewed as lenient, which set only a minimum standard, are more passive than proactive, provide little opportunity for individuals to influence the program design, and emphasize a one-way flow of information from officials to citizens. This is not an effective democratic process that demonstrates public engagement and promotes discussions.

The research literature focus has been given to the school size and design, which suggests smaller schools provide better learning experiences than the modeled schools created by policy decisions. A literature review prepared by Jon Bailey (2000) for the Center for Rural Affairs found a growing research consensus that students fare better in smaller schools, academically and socially. Among the consistent findings were that larger consolidated schools tended to have higher rates of violence, lower parental and student involvement, lower academic achievement and higher drop-out rates at the high school level.²⁶ While a smaller school will not have the diversity of programs/sports that a larger school may have, many benefits are still realized to the community and the students.

In comparing this way of thinking to local government, the size and design of a committee of council or advocacy group are always part of the implementation process.

²⁶ Bailey, J. (2000). The Case for Small Schools. Nebraska: Center for Rural Affairs

The need to keep committees/groups at a reasonable size for better management and overall effectiveness is part of the mandate. In the Municipality of South Dundas, the terms of reference speak to a maximum size of 7 people which has proved to be effective in delivering the overall objective. My experience in local government suggests that keeping groups small and manageable provides more opportunity for input and discussions. The same can be said for professors at Universities that break-up a class of 40-50 student into small groups. Regardless of the organization, it is standard practice to ensure the numbers are of a size that is manageable and allows the opportunity to be heard. Since 2010, the schools in United States have been faced with overcrowding of 100,000 pupils, which has resulted in the debate on the effectiveness of the policy and the fate of school instruction for the future. As many communities are looking for answers and pondering what to do next, it is the right time for Ontario to review its policy framework so that small schools have a stronger presence and voice in the education system.



<https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=LCqgyZ7Z&id=48D421CABF299D641D602C447E6DCA0D4097BF70&thid=OIP.LCqgyZ7Z4ReV5LBvD98HNQEsDd&q=darn+budget+cut+cartoon+for+school&simid=607989876915373729&selectedIndex=1&ajaxhist=0>

During the delegations under the PAR, several common themes were raised when speaking about smaller schools and their impacts. When attending a smaller school, students and teachers form a stronger bond than is seen in larger schools due to the ratio between teachers and students. If students are facing problems at school or home, the likelihood of going to a teacher for guidance in a smaller setting is greater due to the relationship and interaction that has been formed within the environment. As well, students will experience the opportunity to be part of sports teams, clubs, or groups that would not have been possible in a larger school. Another statement made by a delegate throughout the ARC process was that the reason for sending his kids to a smaller school was so that they would know the kids he hung around with, and likewise, would get to know the parents. This would be lost in a large school of 2,000 students where parents would be limited to the daily exposure of their kids to the school environment.

The research shows that 300 to 500 is the ideal size for a small school based on the current resources input from the government. The notion of small schools is gaining popularity in many communities and demanding the government to look at policy changes to address this dilemma. A summary of research (Glass, 1982) on class size suggest that: class size is strongly related to pupil achievement; smaller classes are more conducive to improved pupil performance than larger classes; smaller classes provide more opportunities to adapt learning programs to individual needs; pupils in small classes have more interest in learning; and teacher morale is higher in smaller classes.²⁷ The continued qualitative research demonstrates the need to focus more on the existence of smaller schools and the impacts they have on students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

²⁷ Glass, Gene, ed. SCHOOL CLASS SIZE: RESEARCH AND POLICY. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1982. ED 217 111.

The need for the government to listen and begin the conversation with the community leaders is fundamental for the attainment of this approach.

The fact that we still have four school systems running independently of one another while facing the same challenges and obstacles could be an opportunity to place schools as conveniently as possible. The fact that these education systems are experiencing the same variables of reducing student enrollment, increased transportation costs, increased building costs, and aging infrastructure, the thought of amalgamating and consolidating the schools to maximize usage would seem like an ideal approach. The only issue is the lack of political will and vision from the current Provincial Government to begin this process and find efficiencies that could save millions and save more rural schools that continue to be the focus on the political agenda.

The literature review has pointed out some interesting facts on the provincial funding for education and the shortfalls it exhibits, as well as the lack of effective communication through the review process that prevents communities and stakeholders from becoming an integral part of the solution. The need and desire for smaller schools are beginning to take shape, and the advantages can be summarized as follows: students are at the center of the school, discipline is usually not a serious problem which results in an increase in time spent learning, teachers still have a sense of control over what and how they teach, less bureaucracy allows for more flexibility in decision making, low pupil-teacher ratios allow for more individualized instruction and more attention to students, relationship between students, teachers, administrators, and schools board members tended to be closer, and parental and community involvement tends to be stronger than in larger schools and manageable for administrators.²⁸ Ensuring that smaller schools are

²⁸ Barker, B. (1986, February). The Advantages of Small Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.ericdigests.org/pre-923/small.htm>

providing meaningful education is essential for their success, and hopefully, through time, the government will see the benefit to which these small schools play in the development of students and the community. While school size and design is not predominantly a rural issue, the impact that this has on the rural communities as being more of an education function is being supported and advocated the levels of government and political members to champion this thinking for changes in the policies.

Impacts

Local Government

As local school boards proceed with closing/consolidating schools as part of a Pupil Accommodation Review, so does the effort for municipalities in sustaining a vibrant and attractive community for families, future development, businesses and community members. This is the common aftermath from a school closure/consolidation that local governments must use its resources and influences to foster new ideas. Municipalities continue to develop and implement Economic Development Strategic Plans that provide a proactive way of anticipating outcomes and managing change to create the best possible future. A strategic plan is an asset-based, locally led plan that establishes a vision shared by its citizens, businesses, elected officials and staff which is reflective of an inclusive consultation process. As Municipalities are planning for growth through new infrastructure, increase services and programming, parks and attractions, etc., the Ministry of Education and school boards begin to hinder these efforts through the policy implementation and the review process.

As part of the PAR process in 2016-2017, the Municipality of South Dundas conducted an Economic Impact Assessment which illustrated how the proposed closures would impact our community, including direct, indirect and induced effects, and provide

decision-makers with additional information beyond the financial framework assumed by the PAR that the community believes need to be taken into consideration when the UCDSB proceeds with its rationalization. It was not until after we completed the exercise that we discovered that the Ministry of Education removed this criterion in 2015 from its guidelines. It is bewildering as to why the Government would not want to understand the financial impact that local government and the community would be facing if a school was closed/consolidated. As stated earlier, the policy is of an urban design and to better understand the rural communities is not within the Provincial Government's mandate. For a community of about 11,000, we were projected to lose between \$15.5 to \$17.5 million annually. How can a small rural community survive after being hit with such a significant loss to the community? The impact of the proposed school closing will be to exacerbate the "hollowing out effect" in this rural area. This is not in the interests of the municipal, provincial or federal governments.

Notwithstanding the public consultations, the process does not afford any mechanism to evaluate the local social, cultural, or economic impacts of the proposed closures. The process dictates that school closures are to be assessed solely on their impact on learning and the funding envelope for education provided to the board.

Students & Families

The biggest impact of a school closure/consolidation is the transition for students to a new school where they must integrate into a new social structure by making new friends, meeting new teachers, and understanding new rules and guidelines. Students that have been displaced from a rural school to an urban school will now be facing longer bus rides that will prevent them from obtaining part-time employment, joining extra-curricular activities, and other milestones or achievements that they would have been part of if the

school remained in the community. This is just the beginning of what students go through during a PAR implementation, but the Ministry and local school boards speak to the resilience of our youth. This type of change for students can lead to mental, emotional, and physical concerns that can affect their years in school and shape them for the future.

As part of the delegation on November 17, 2016, under the UCDSB we heard from a grade 11 student who captivated the audience through her courage and will to save her school that she has been part of for 10+ years:

"I just want you to know what its been like for us, the students. We have been in turmoil for the past few weeks, praying and hoping that we will not have our family split up. The primary purpose of the UCDSB is to educate and inspire us. Right now, all that you're inspiring in us is resentment. You've always preached the character traits to us, to try to make us into kind, caring people. Well, I suggest that you practice one of the character traits yourselves, empathy. I want you to take a moment, and imagine what its like to be us right now. Think what it would be like to be split apart form all you have ever known. I know you're all worried about your vacancy numbers and your Ministry of Education funding, but you need to stop and realize that every student in your school board is a real person, with real emotions. We're not just numbers in your book."

This is just one student among thousands that spoke up to let the board, administrators, parents, teachers, politicians know that these type of policy decisions have significant short-term and long-term impacts on the students that have been displaced. Why should our students suffer for the lack of will and vision to get it right? This has been 18 years in the making, and the Ministry of Education has failed them due to an ineffective and outdated funding policy.

Families are impacted by these changes as they are disassociated with the new school, faculty, and activities taking place. Parents must endure long car rides to pick up their kids for appointments that would result in missing more time from school and work, than if it remained in the community. As their kids would be unable to obtain part-time employment due to the extended time on the bus, parents would be responsible for all

costs including phones, gas, etc. The impacts on parents, aside from time consumption, can be expressed as emotional stress, economic consequences, lifestyle changes, and concerns for their children. In attending a small Catholic school and enduring short bus rides, I can be fully appreciated the value this had in spending time with friends and family, while building relationships with other members within the school community. For students, not to experience this is quite troubling and should not be accepted. It is time that communities, including local government, politicians, and other partners, stand beside our students and parents to demand change, as we are stronger in numbers.

School Staff & Administrators

The recommendation within the PAR affects the school staff and administrators as their job will no longer be available and will result in bumping. Depending on the years of service, some will be able to find another school within the board to relocate, while others may find themselves out of a job. It is expected that as these faculties move on to other schools so will they look to transfer to a community closer to their employment. The loss of these educators will also bring a loss of revenue to businesses and the community that would have been spent within the community for groceries, gas, restaurants, etc.

The loss of school staff and administrators will also have an impact on the community, especially in a small community where they would be leaders for our youth and contribute their time to events and programs. This impact is hard to measure, as being a close-knit community and losing these types of mentors can affect the students, parents, and community at large. Having these types of jobs in the community allows financial stability and provides resources for community partners for growth and development in shaping the future of our children and the community.

Businesses

The impact of students leaving the community to attend school in another boundary has instrumental impacts on businesses and, for some, can determine the future of their business. Businesses within a small community rely heavily on students for part-time employment, as well provide opportunities for students through co-op programs as part of the curriculum offered through the school. By removing these students from the community, they will now endure longer bus rides that will prevent them from obtaining part-time employment and building skills and making money for their post-secondary education. Having the availability of students presents an opportunity for businesses to hire them to cover evenings and weekends at a lower wage than that of a full-time employee. This makes it extremely difficult for business owners who must look at alternatives such as reducing its hours of operation, taking on more hours, and hiring more full-time staff. Any of these decisions will affect the business financially and, depending on the size, could have lasting effects on the ability to remain open in the community.

As in any small, rural community, businesses know the importance of giving back to its community and school, and as part of this, provide bursaries for graduating students pursuing post-secondary education. The impact this has on some students and their families are life changing and can make a difference. For comparison purposes, in 2016 our small businesses within the community provided grants to the high school exceeding \$40,000. As part of the Economic Impact Assessment engaged by our Municipality we could provide more of a financial snapshot of the impact to the businesses which are outlined below:

1. Our surveys and interviews across eastern Ontario indicate that there is a consistent pattern of spending by high school students during school days at local convenience stores and groceries for lunches, snacks, and refreshments. For about half the total student population, these amount to \$10 per student per school

day, times the 200 school days. For Seaway District High School, this would be 206 students spending \$412,000 annually.

2. Local businesses would also suffer severe loss from parents no longer patronizing local stores and restaurants at times of drop-off and pick-up. They will tend to shop where the students are now located. This will be especially important for extra-curricular activities, such as sports, music, theater, and after-hours courses. Several local restaurants and convenience stores in a mall close to Seaway District High School would be especially vulnerable. If there was a reduction in spending equivalent to just six businesses losing 20% of ongoing revenues, and each had revenues of about \$500,000, the total loss to the local economy would be \$600,000.

In a rural community, farming is a vital component of the labor force and is impacted by the policy decisions made by the Province and the local school boards. The ability to have their children do chores in the morning or after school on the farm or to hire students is not possible, due to the displacement of our students in another community. This type of impact for farmers has received support from many farming advocates, especially the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) in which Rejean Pommerville, Director of the OFA indicated that “Rural school closures were discussed extensively at a recent OFA Policy Advisory Council (PAC) in Brockville. OFA members across all counties and regions share the concern of school closures – a result of cutbacks in operating expenses that are done at the expense of rural students and communities. PAC members have identified these closures as a provincial concern and OFA will be working with regions impacted by the threat of rural school closures.”²⁹

The effects of a school closing and the displacement of students are more than an inconvenience. The impacts to a community are immeasurable, as everyone is affected one way or another. Whether a student, parent, business owner, farmer, grandparent, local contractor or government, the impact is crippling and can have long lasting impacts on the community and the ability to survive and grow.

²⁹ Pommerville, R. (2016, October 28). OFA: The Real Cost of Closing Rural Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.farms.com/news/ofa-the-real-cost-of-closing-rural-schools-2016-114833.aspx>

Community

The policy decisions made by government foster the future of communities, especially the existence of rural communities moving forward. Beyond their core, educational role, these schools act as a hub for the community where people gather for events, activities, programming, and offer services. Eric Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) contends that "in many impoverished small communities and neighborhoods, the school is part and parcel of the community's core institutions. Therefore, closing a school would affect the life of those communities."³⁰

Schools over the years have evolved into more than just educating young people. School facilities that are well-maintained can help revitalize struggling neighborhoods, just as crumbling buildings can harm them. These hubs attract businesses and workers to the area, directly impact the property values and enhance the neighborhoods and the community vitality by producing centralized spaces for civic life. The vast amount of research available continues to demonstrate the influential role schools play within the communities. In order to preserve these communities for future generations the need for collaborative thinking is essential for sustaining an identity for rural living.

The absence of a local school can materially impact the decision of future residents on whether to relocate to an area and for residents to remain. Both effects cause a reduction in the demand for such things as housing, local services, etc. This, in turn, reduces the overall wealth of all residents and destabilizes the community. According to Larry Gigerich a managing director for Indianapolis-based Ginovus LLC, a leader in site selection, emphasizes the importance that many companies place on quality of life issues

³⁰ Fredua-Kwateng, E. (2005). School Closures in Ontario. Who has the final say? Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 46, 2-26.

for their employees, more specifically to K-12 and higher education. With his expertise, he states "We evaluate the K-12 public and private education and higher education systems because we see it as a complete pipeline," he says. "The K through 12, in addition to post-secondary, develops a pipeline that occurs over time and creates a work force that develops over a specific area."³¹ He goes on to discuss the long-term vision for business when making a decision to locate within a community and says, "A company is not going to make a long-term decision and pick a community that struggles for quality of life," he says. "They don't want to make a decision and five years from now the world looks a lot different, and then they say, 'How did we end up here? We've made a real mistake because we can't recruit the talent we want.'³²

Regardless of whether a school closes or not, the impact of the community could be affected long-term due to the uncertainty of essential services that developers and businesses are looking for. The paradigm of school closures is not only emerging throughout Canada, but across the globe, as cash-strapped districts in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, etc., are being faced with tough decisions due to strained budgets and changing politics. This again has drastic effects on the community and the ability to recover from this type of shift is almost unheard of. Communities are resilient and will continue to push for changes in the core policies that have an urban presence, and do not factor in the need for rural communities and their right to education.

³¹ C. (2011, November). Top Site Selection Factors: Quality of Life Still Matters. Retrieved from <http://www.areadevelopment.com/siteSelection/November2011/quality-of-life-site-selection-factor-0011153.shtml>

³² C. (2011, November). Top Site Selection Factors: Quality of Life Still Matters. Retrieved from <http://www.areadevelopment.com/siteSelection/November2011/quality-of-life-site-selection-factor-0011153.shtml>

Analysis & Discussion

The idea of governments and local school boards deciding the fate of our communities and the students is new to me and disconcerting. In my role as Chief Administrative Officer for the Municipality of South Dundas, I will never forget the day we received word that our only high school, and one of our elementary schools, were recommended to be closed, and the rationale to transfer students between 2 different schools based on where they reside. This was September 28, 2016, that would expose our community to the flaws and misalignment of policies and guidelines that contribute to the shortfall in funding small schools, most particularly the almost 500 rural communities at risk of being closed/consolidated. The fact that a one-size-fits-all policy approach is not practical has thousands of people demanding policy changes and the process to which the PAR is followed.

In looking at the current issues facing school boards; surplus of classroom space, decreased enrollment, and escalating operating costs, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that we have problems that need to be resolved through budget cuts, innovative thinking, and additional funding from the provincial government. What is disheartening is the process to which they look to addressing the issue, rather than working with community leaders and provincial representatives to propose viable and practical solutions. I agree that school consolidation is necessary to address some of these deficiencies, but I have a hard time supporting the closures of a single-school community as everyone should have the right to education in the place they live, rather than being bussed for hours each day. This is where the policy fails to address this ongoing epidemic facing thousands of communities worldwide.

As we continue to push for change, we are often reminded of the disconnect between government and the communities in which they serve. In a statement from Ontario Minister, Mitzie Hunter, "We understand the vital role that schools play in any community, particularly rural communities. Potential school closures are among the most difficult decision that school boards and communities have to consider."³³ If they truly value rural communities, why don't they provide the right tools and policies to support keeping them? During this whole process, the Ministry remains isolated from the process and the communities, even though they are the ones responsible for this situation.

Going through the PAR review from the onset allowed me to fully understand the problems with the process. First, as a government body, we were not part of any preceding discussions about the potential school closures within our community. The fact that this type of announcement would have critical impacts on the community and the work being accomplished by the Municipality to strengthen services and programming was overwhelming, uncivil and demonstrated a lack of engagement. After the shock and frustration had diminished, we began to pull stakeholders together to outline a plan moving forward as the deadline for submission was not pragmatic. This is where the next 3 to 4 months would be spent in pulling together solutions and building partnerships in the hope of saving our schools and allowing our community to continue to foster growth.

The school board was moving relatively quickly in appointing the representatives for the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) which, again, was met with disbelief that no local government or community representatives were part of this review team. The group consisted of school administrators, staff, and parent council members that would

³³ How rural school closures are 'ripping the heart out of the community'. (2017, June 19). Retrieved from <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/rural-school-closures-apos-ripping-090000448.html>
CBC News

begin listening to 20 delegations over 4 hours to determine the fate of our schools and community. To many in the community, including political representatives, the process was controlled and managed by the school board which provided minimal resources to the community, selected the delegations which could speak to a maximum of 10 minutes, and trustees that kept silent through the whole process. It appeared a decision was already made before the public consultation process began. Through my research, I came across a model being used at the Oak Grove School District in Santa Clara County that established a 'School Consolidation Task Force' which remained objective and independent from the school board and other political agendas. The group consisted of representatives from every entity within the community; students, professional groups, labor organizations, local government, teachers and administrators, business community, public agencies, parents, service organizations, etc. which demonstrated a more robust public consultation process.³⁴

Throughout the process, many colleagues questioned the communication requirements under the PAR and the ability for local school boards to achieve only minimum requirements. Meanwhile, municipalities are legislated to ensure a fair and open process for any decision affecting its residents and communities. Should both entities not be held to the same standard for public engagement, and for the fact it is public funding? These policies and guidelines established by the Ministry of Education exhibit a more temperate approach that permits more flexibility, than the prescriptive process forced upon local government.

After the delegations were completed on November 17, 2016, and January 31, 2017, respectively, municipal submissions were required by the UCDSB by February 1,

³⁴ California Department of Education – Closing a School Best Practices Guide.

2017, to be considered as part of the final staff report going to the Trustees on March 23, 2017. The fact that communities and elected officials need to propose alternate solutions to school closures in the respective communities is far from fair, as the public is not privy to all the pertinent information that created the initial staff report and got us to where we are today.

Through my analysis, the persistent hindrance was the different messaging being publicly shared by other Ministries that contradict the current policies and guidelines under the education funding mandate. First, the proposed closure of rural school is in direct contract to the Provincial Government's long-standing policies of schools acting as 'hubs' and 'centres' as referenced in the Planning Act. This long-standing philosophical approach to building strong rural communities has made the school the heart and center, the core of rural communities since their creation. The Province's own Provincial Policy Statement from 2014 "focuses growth and development within urban and rural settlement areas while supporting the viability of rural areas."³⁵ For anyone involved in economic development and attempting to retain and attract residents, investment or new business activity to a community knows without a school presence this is virtually impossible.

Second, in 2014 the Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs was directed to "foster vibrant rural economies" and to "continue to work with other ministers to support growth of manufacturing and the digital economy in rural Ontario. The decision to close the schools does not support this political agenda. Third, in 2014 the Minister of Municipal Affairs was directed to "continue to apply a municipal lens to decisions made across the government, ensuring the impact on municipalities is carefully

³⁵ 2014 Provincial Policy Statement. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/AssetFactory.aspx?did=10463>
Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

considered. Allowing local school boards to propose and enforce school closures in these rural communities is contradictory of this statement. Finally, in 2016 the Ministry of Environment Climate Action Plan stated "more than one-third of Ontario's greenhouse gas pollutions is caused by the transportation sector, with cars and trucks responsible for more than 70 percent of the total. It's important that this reduces."³⁶ In adopting the arrangement set forth by the school boards as directed by the Ministry of Education, this will put more children on more buses to collectively commute much further to and from school which will add to the greenhouse gas pollution dilemma.

In concluding my analysis and self-reflection through the PAR process, I look back at a statement made by a local MPP from Leeds-Grenville, Steve Clark, who said, "the Minister of Education can continue to talk platitudes about supporting rural education and her confidence in the accommodation review process because boards won't call her out." He adds, "the only path forward for your budget and, more importantly, the future of rural education and the educational opportunities of the students attending small schools represented tonight, is to force the provincial government to accept that it is responsible for this problem."³⁷ The consistent message through this whole process from the school boards was their inability to make changes because of provincial policies and guidelines. I do agree with the MPP that the board needs to take a stand with the help of politicians, community leaders, students and parents to lobby the government that policy changes are needed to allow the future growth of our rural communities.

³⁶ Ontario Five Year Climate Change Action Plan 2016-2020. (2016). Retrieved from http://www.applications.ene.gov.on.ca/ccap/products/CCAP_ENGLISH.pdf

³⁷ Presentation to the UCDSB - Speaking Notes for Steve Clark, MPP, Leeds-Grenville. (2017, March 02). Retrieved from <http://www.ucdsb.on.ca/programs/accomodationreview/Documents/3-Final%20ARC%20Report%2020170213.pdf>

What's Next

Municipal/Stakeholder Partnerships

Through these reviews across Ontario, the Ministry of Education has faced a lot of criticism and pressure, and as a result, Mitzi Hunter launched 10 "rural engagement sessions" across the province in 2017 to gather feedback on how best to support and enhance the rural and remote communities.³⁸ Many believe this initiative should have begun years beforehand to understand the needs of rural and remote communities. Whether the feedback is carefully analyzed and instituted to alter the policies and guidelines remains to be seen.

As well, the Province developed a discussion paper called "Supporting Students and Communities – A Discussion Paper to Strengthen Education in Ontario's Rural and Remote Communities." The literature speaks to the importance of education for students, but more importantly in rural and remote areas that continue to face declining student enrollment. It goes on to present the process of closing schools and the decision-making involved by school boards and the communities. It discusses how education is funded in Ontario and the restrictions that governments are facing. This almost seems like a discussion paper that tries to justify their actions rather than address the real problem that the funding formula is not working.

Back in May 2017, our Municipality was part of the 2nd Annual Community Planning and Partnership (CPP) Meeting with the UCDSB which the only requirement under the PAR review process for consultation with local government. The outcome of the meeting

³⁸ How rural school closures are 'ripping the heart out of the community'. (2017, June 19). Retrieved from <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/rural-school-closures-apos-ripping-090000448.html>
CBC News

was to provide municipalities and service agencies an invitation to engage in collaboration projects with school boards to utilize the unused space. In accordance with the UCDSB Policy 4002 regarding facility collaboration it states that “in optimizing the use of its land and school facilities, the Upper Canada District School Board is committed to maintaining strong working relationships with its coterminous and contiguous boards, area municipalities, community organizations and local businesses.”³⁹

The meeting was again a one-sided affair in which municipal representatives received limited information and comments on the recent PAR process was not addressed. The path moving forward for school boards seems to be community hubs, collaboration agreements that will occupy the space currently not being used for its students. This type of arrangement is only a short-term solution as the real problem is with the funding formula and policies that guide the allocation. This is where local school boards and community leaders should be pressuring the government for change. With an upcoming election in 2017, the change in government could be an opportune time to make changes to an outdated and ineffective policy.

To illustrate these new initiatives that school boards are entertaining a brief outline of our municipality’s proposal of an ‘Innovation Centre’ at our high school, which was pivotal in saving all of our schools. How long these schools remain protected is still to be determined. The creation of this new partnership has taken shape due to the contributions from key stakeholders that know the benefits of ensuring schools remain in rural Ontario. A summary of this initiative is as follows:

³⁹ Facility Collaboration - Policy 4002. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.boarddocs.com/can/ucdsb/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=A6XQQ2690499>
Upper Canada District School Board

It was determined that to effectively establish programming by September 2017, that the Municipality and partners would concentrate on setting up a Student Technology Laboratory in some unused space at Seaway District High School. It is proposed that the laboratory be made available to all students in South Dundas to help augment their computer and information technology learning.

The proposed partnership is outlined as follows:

- 1) Seaway District High School would provide the physical location of the Student Technology Laboratory in the space that formerly housed the Communication Technology Lab (Room 152);
- 2) The Municipality would provide the required funding for each school year of this proposal and will contract Code Heroes, a company that specializes in Computer Technology training, to be on-site at the laboratory for one full day per week during the school year. They would provide many learning opportunities for Elementary and Secondary students from South Dundas that are outlined in the appendix of this proposal. The attached workshops are baseline programs that would be offered. Code Heroes has indicated that they look forward to future discussions with School staff to build off these baseline programs in order to offer more advanced workshops throughout the year. The Municipality would work with School Officials and allow them to choose which learning opportunities they feel would be most beneficial to the students to maximize learning. The Municipality will allow school officials to determine the programming that will be contracted for each school year of this proposal, as they can properly determine the needs of the students;
- 3) Ross Video will donate a total of twenty (20) new computer systems for the lab. These computers will provide students the required equipment they need to be able to take part in the learning opportunities provided by Code Heroes. They will also be available throughout the week to augment any other student courses or learning opportunities that school officials identify and wish to run in the lab;
- 4) Outside partners are willing to provide IT support for the computers if required;
- 5) St. Lawrence College, Carleton University, Big River Technologies and Ross Video will make staff available to act as guest speakers during the school year to help augment student learning;
- 6) A 3D printer will be donated for the lab in which the process engineer team from Ross Video has offered to assist in setting up and commissioning the printer;
- 7) Ross Video has agreed to provide a number of Co-op education placements for students wishing to have a Co-op experience in the Technology field; and

- 8) This proposal for a student technology laboratory is for a three (3) year period, starting September 1, 2017. It is suggested that it be reviewed at that time to allow partners to ensure that the technical capabilities of the equipment provided is aligned with the requirements for the programming provided for the students.

Our approach through the PAR review was to think outside the box and offer viable solutions that could make schools in our community a leader in technology, and a hub for students to learn about computers and coding. This could draw new students to the school or allow for online learning with our school acting as the host site. This however is only a short-term fix as the underlying issue is the Provincial Government's resistance to policy changes, and the local school boards who are keeping silent rather than joining the push for immediate change for the future of our schools and students.

Conclusion

There are several factors that contribute to the ineffectiveness of the policies and guidelines within the provincial government framework. This has been a focus for many years by advocates and community leaders that the creation of these policies cannot function in all communities' due the geographical and demographical constraints. This type of thinking by the government has led to the challenges and decisions made to the rural and remote communities that are unable to thrive due to a policy framework fit for an urban setting. As mentioned earlier in the research, one in five Ontarians live in a demographic area considered to be rural and receive a funding envelope estimated at \$3.7 billion. In analyzing these figures, 20 percent would calculate to \$4.5 billion, or a shortfall of \$800 million. This is just the beginning of several inaccuracies and speaks to the inexperience from the Provincial Government within the decision-making process.

The structure under the PAR process illustrates numerous flaws that deters public participation due to the lack of transparency of information and the belief that decisions have already been approved prior to the process. In comparing to local government,

school boards are provided greater flexibility within the communication system to determine the appropriate method to share or gather information with the public and community leaders. Municipalities on the other hand are governed by legislation under several acts including the Municipal Act, Planning Act, Assessment Act, etc. that provide the requirements of the staff and Council to follow when engaging the public on key decisions that benefit the community. The fact that local government and school boards are publicly funded entities, they should be borne the same processes to move their respective communities and government forward.

The design and size of schools has changed over time and need to adapt to the demands of the communities. Schools in rural and remote communities serve more than an education function, as it is a public arena for several activities, programs, events, and service agencies. The notion that schools must be designed to accommodate 1,000 to 2,000 students is not realistic and should not be a contributing factor in school boards making decisions. The research shows that small schools of 450 to 500 students contribute to a better learning experience⁴⁰ and provide students the opportunity to have stronger relationships with administrators, staff, and other students. It also allows them more success in being part of a sports team, club, afterschool program, etc. that they may not experience in a large school. This type of thinking is the result of being in the trenches going through the challenges and experiencing opportunities, that policy makers rarely observe or willingly to partake in. This experience would provide more understanding on the needs and wants of the community while moving towards building stronger relationships.

⁴⁰ Lawrence, B. (2002). Dollars & Sense - The cost effectiveness of small schools. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/document/289168148/Dollars-and-Sense-The-cost-effectiveness-of-small-schools>

The sole purpose of policy-making as defined in the literature is fundamentally about constrained actors attempting to match policy goals with policy means in a process that can be characterized as ‘applied problem-solving.’⁴¹ These policies under the Ministry of Education does not support this type of objective, as policy deliberations are managed to avoid any influence or public pressure. The need for a government that understands the objectives of policies and the policy tools available through public consultation, local government, school boards, etc. are critical for minimizing the impact of rural and remote school closures. These policies are fundamentally developed and implemented to serve the urban population, with the smaller communities being the subject of school closures and consolidations that destroy the fabric of the community and something that can never be restored.

The impact of school closures for the community, particularly the students, parents, businesses, and local government continues to be ignored by the Provincial Government and the local school boards due to a 2015 policy decision change to eliminate the weight of an economic impact assessment on the decision. To have a government deliberately remove this criterion illustrates their understanding of the public impacts, but chose to ignore and allow communities to be negatively impacted and changed forever. The government continues to make these instrumental decisions with the lack of understanding and the outcomes delivered from these policy decisions. As the final PAR’s wrap up for 2017 in anticipation for a new school year in September, several communities have become vocal to the policies and processes being applied and the severity it has within the community that is recommended for closure or consolidation. This has made its way up to the provincial government with a recent announcement in June 2017 of a

⁴¹ Howlett, Michael – Studying Public Policy, Policy Cycles & Policy Subsystems, Oxford University Press, 2009

moratorium on school closures until further review of the policies and processes can be conducted.

The message delivered by Education Minister, Mitzie Hunter, identified a three-step strategy to assist schools in unique geographical circumstances.

1. Strengthening the Province's pupil accommodation review process so that it remains inclusive of community and student perspectives;
2. Addressing the need to maintain quality education through additional funding of \$20 million to the annual legislative grants provided by the Province to all school boards, known as the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF);
3. A focus on greater communication and collaboration between school boards, municipalities, and community partners so to address the excess space in schools through innovative and creative agreements.

It remains to be seen if the timing of this announcement due to an election in 2018 is relevant, and the reasoning for this message after the latest round of PAR which determined some school closures. In an article from the Sudbury Star on June 29, 2017, Hunter is quoted as saying "I can't pretend the election isn't coming. We all know that it is. But I also want to be clear that we've heard directly from the communities that improvements are needed."⁴² The fact that the statement is not retroactive to the prior decisions does not sit well with some communities, but is being applauded by many. The fact that the Provincial Government recognizes a problem in the process and the delivery is the first step in addressing this issue and allowing rural and remote schools to survive and become an indispensable contributor to education in Ontario and around the globe. If one thing is clear from the research, it is that the cost of saving small schools is a cost worth paying. If the students, parents, businesses, the community, and local government can see this, why can't the school boards and the Ministry of Education?

⁴² Dempsey, K. (Ed.). (n.d.). Grits Invest \$20M in rural, northern schools. Retrieved June 29, 2017. The Sudbury Star

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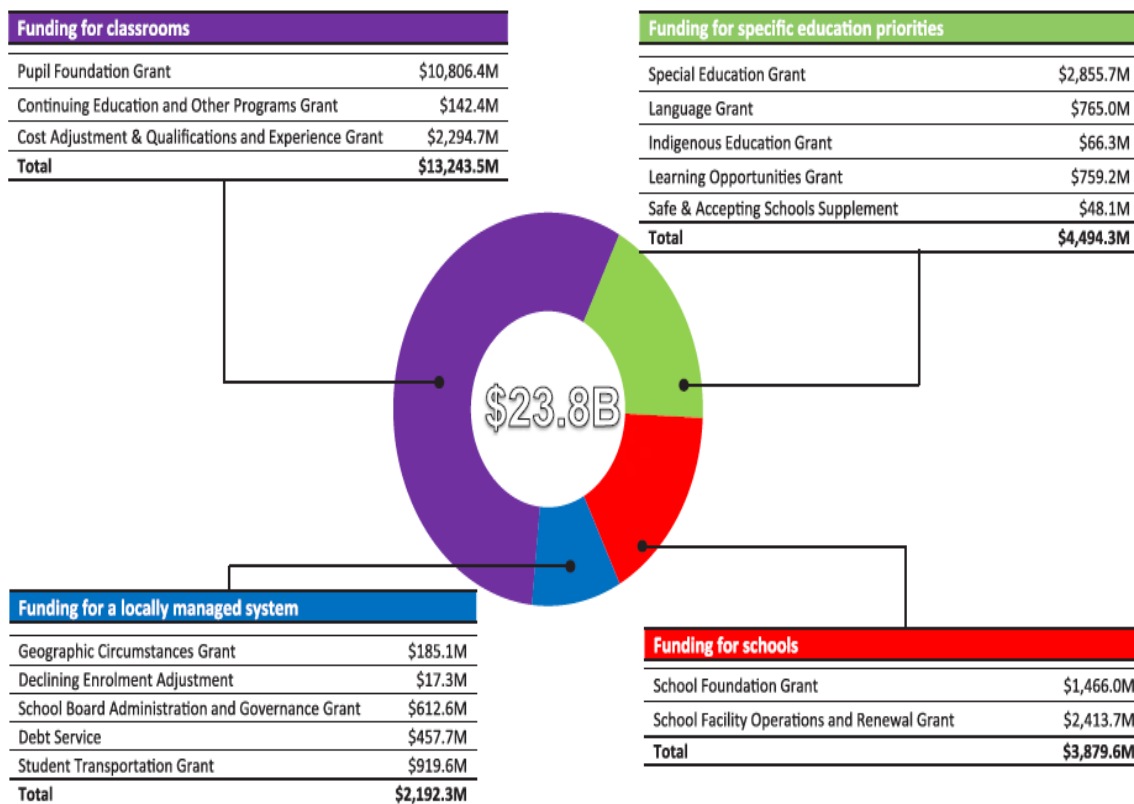
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Appendix 1: 2017-2018 Education Funding Allocation

WHAT DOES THE GSN SUPPORT?



Note: School authorities funding (\$34.3 million) are included in the total, but not in the pie chart. Figures may not add due to rounding.

For the school board sector as a whole, GSN funding represents the overwhelming majority of revenues, more than 90%.

Appendix 2: Number of Schools, 2004–05 and 2010–11 to 2014–15

	Elementary and Secondary					
	2004–05	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
Public	3,209	3,251	3,238	3,239	3,238	3,234
Roman Catholic	1,639	1,662	1,661	1,652	1,659	1,659
Total	4,848	4,913	4,899	4,891	4,897	4,893

Appendix 3: Elementary and Secondary School Enrolment, 2004–05 and 2010–11 to 2014–15

	Elementary and Secondary					
	2004–05	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
Public	1,449,728	1,397,925	1,394,585	1,388,106	1,376,374	1,368,283
Roman Catholic	674,176	653,940	648,532	643,089	639,011	634,954
Total	2,123,904	2,051,865	2,043,117	2,031,195	2,015,385	2,003,237

	French-Language Schools					
	2004–05	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	2013–14	2014–15
Elementary	66,674	69,942	71,913	74,216	76,315	78,066
Secondary	23,165	24,907	24,767	24,481	24,226	23,772
Total	89,839	94,849	96,680	98,697	100,541	101,838

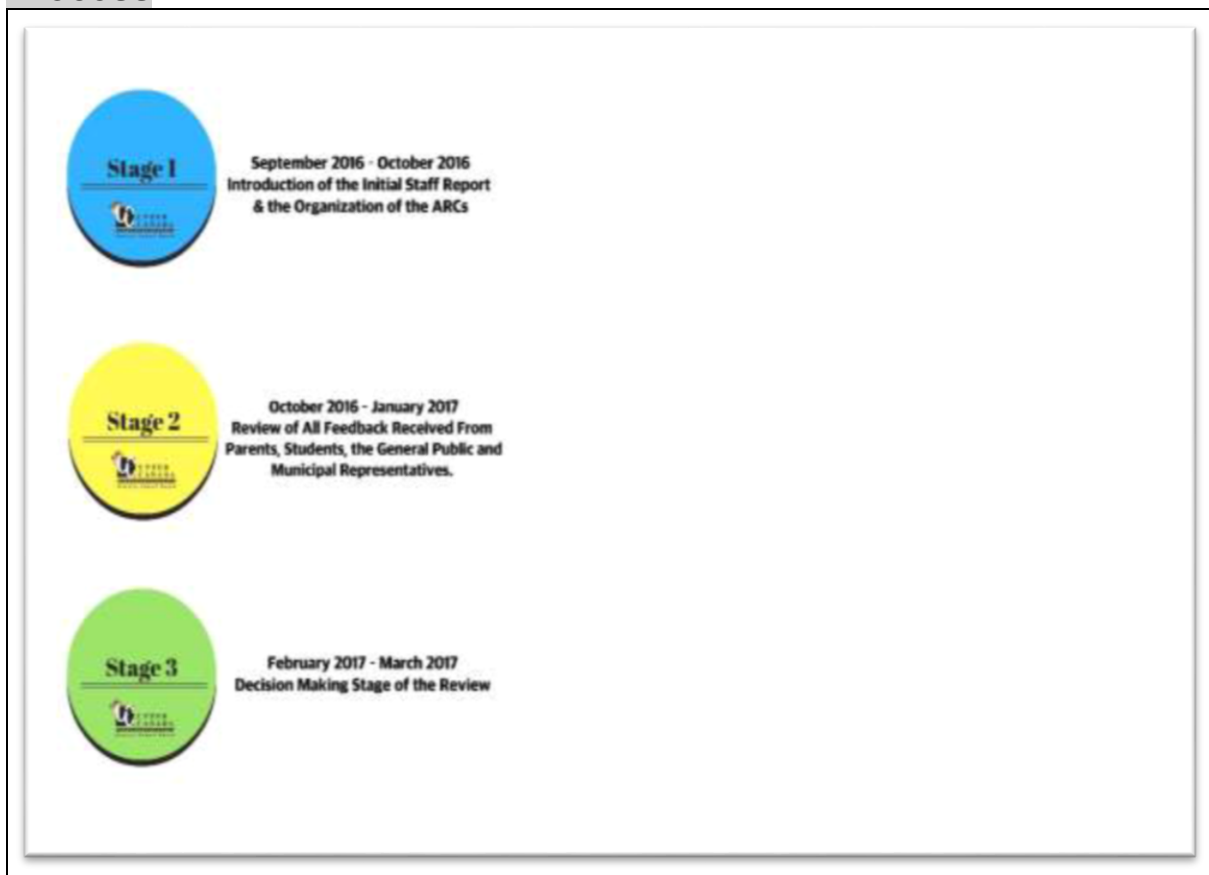
Appendix 5: Upper Canada District School Board – Timelines: Building for the Future

Timelines: Building for the Future																					
<p>The timeline chart displays key dates from September to March. Key events include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> September 28: Initial Staff Report to the Board October 17 & 21: Municipal and Community Meetings October 20 & 24: Orientation Meetings October 28: Presentation of Final Staff Report to Board November 14, 17, 23 & 31: Public Meetings (ARC 2A, 2B, 3, 4) November 19/17: Orientation Meeting (ARC 3 & 4) November 17, 23, 30, 31, January 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, 31, February 6, 13, 20, 27, March 6, 13, 20, 27: Public Meetings (ARC 1, 2, 3, 4) February 15: Presentation of Final Staff Report to Board March 2 & 9: Delegations (Special Board) March 23: Final (Special) Board Decision </p>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 10%; text-align: center;">September 28</td> <td>Initial Staff Report presented to the Board of Trustees</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">October 17 & 21</td> <td>Municipal and Community Meetings</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">October 20 & 24</td> <td>Orientation Meetings (ARCs 1 & 2) Oct. 20 at Tagwi (Prescott-Russell, Cornwall, Highland and Dundas) Oct. 24 at Smiths Falls DCI (Grenville, Brockville, River, Rideau, Lanark North and Lanark South) Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">November 10 & 19</td> <td>Public Meetings (ARC 1): Prescott-Russell Family SD: V. Allen (Rockland & Yankleek Hill) Location: Rockland DHS Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">November 14, 17, 23 & 31</td> <td>Public Meetings (ARC 2A): Dundas Family (ARC 2B): Cornwall & Highland Families SD: T. Mills (Cornwall, Glengarry, Char-Lan, Tagwi, R-C, North Dundas & Seaway) Locations (ARC 2B): Mtg 1 - General Vanier Mtg 3 - General Vanier Locations (ARC 2A): Mtg 2 - Seaway Mtg 4 - Seaway Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">November 15 & 24</td> <td>Public Meetings (ARC 3): Grenville, Brockville & River Families SD: D. Coombs (South & North Grenville, Brockville & Althens) Meeting 1: South Grenville DHS; meeting 2: BCI Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">November 16 & 30</td> <td>Public Meetings (ARC 4): Rideau, Lanark North & Lanark South Families SD: S. Edwards (Rideau, Smiths Falls, Perth, Almonte & Carleton Place) Meeting 1 -Perth DCI; meeting 2 - Smiths Falls DCI Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">February 15</td> <td>Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Presentation of the Final Staff Report to the Board Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">March 2</td> <td>Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Delegations received by the Board Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">March 23</td> <td>Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Final decision made by the Board Time: 6:30 pm</td> </tr> </table>	September 28	Initial Staff Report presented to the Board of Trustees	October 17 & 21	Municipal and Community Meetings	October 20 & 24	Orientation Meetings (ARCs 1 & 2) Oct. 20 at Tagwi (Prescott-Russell, Cornwall, Highland and Dundas) Oct. 24 at Smiths Falls DCI (Grenville, Brockville, River, Rideau, Lanark North and Lanark South) Time: 6:30 pm	November 10 & 19	Public Meetings (ARC 1): Prescott-Russell Family SD: V. Allen (Rockland & Yankleek Hill) Location: Rockland DHS Time: 6:30 pm	November 14, 17, 23 & 31	Public Meetings (ARC 2A): Dundas Family (ARC 2B): Cornwall & Highland Families SD: T. Mills (Cornwall, Glengarry, Char-Lan, Tagwi, R-C, North Dundas & Seaway) Locations (ARC 2B): Mtg 1 - General Vanier Mtg 3 - General Vanier Locations (ARC 2A): Mtg 2 - Seaway Mtg 4 - Seaway Time: 6:30 pm	November 15 & 24	Public Meetings (ARC 3): Grenville, Brockville & River Families SD: D. Coombs (South & North Grenville, Brockville & Althens) Meeting 1: South Grenville DHS; meeting 2: BCI Time: 6:30 pm	November 16 & 30	Public Meetings (ARC 4): Rideau, Lanark North & Lanark South Families SD: S. Edwards (Rideau, Smiths Falls, Perth, Almonte & Carleton Place) Meeting 1 -Perth DCI; meeting 2 - Smiths Falls DCI Time: 6:30 pm	February 15	Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Presentation of the Final Staff Report to the Board Time: 6:30 pm	March 2	Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Delegations received by the Board Time: 6:30 pm	March 23	Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees Final decision made by the Board Time: 6:30 pm
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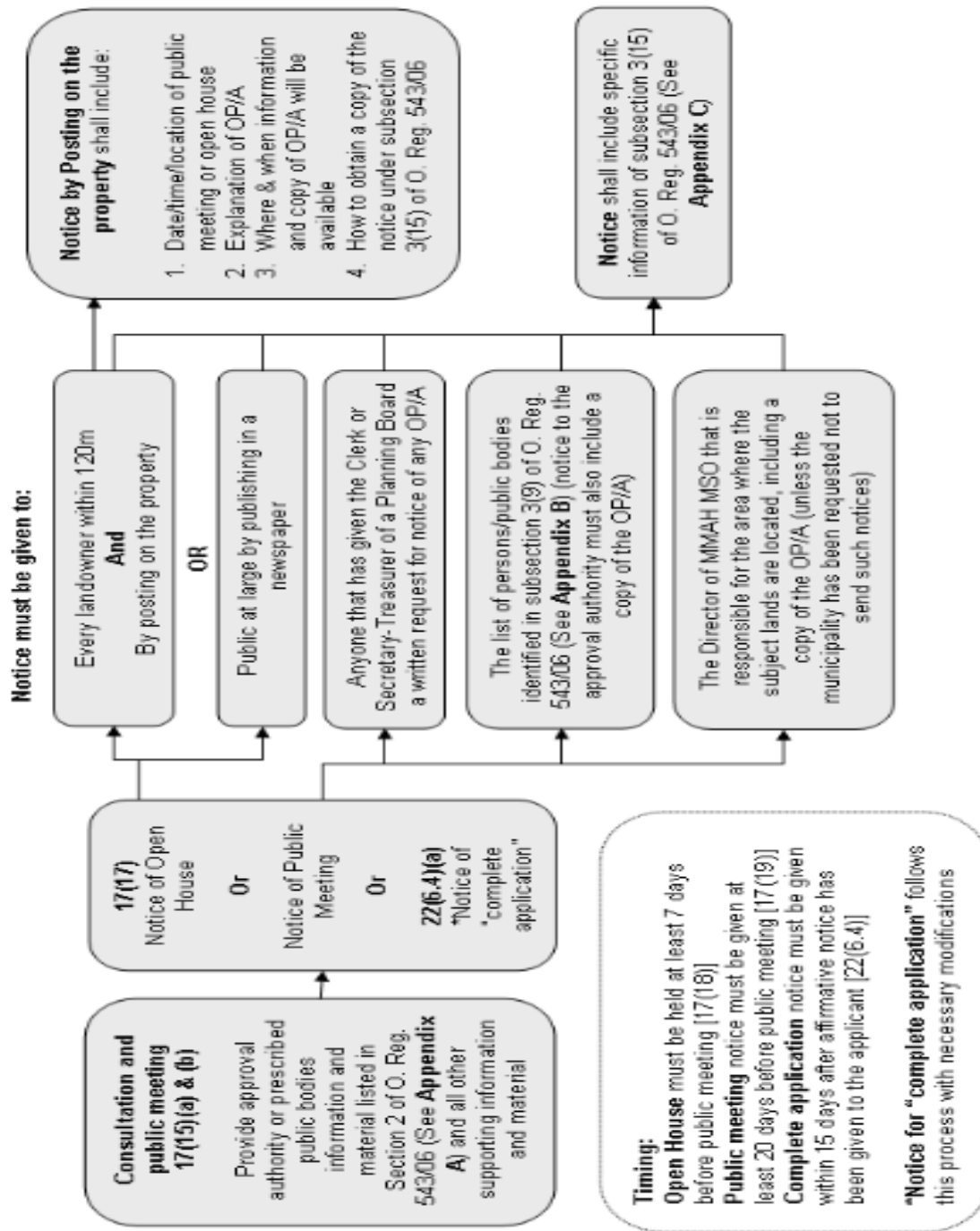
Upper Canada District School Board - Pupil Accommodation Review 2016

Appendix 6: Upper Canada District School Board – Overview of Process



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Upper Canada District School Board - Pupil Accommodation Review 2016

Appendix 7: Administrative Processes for Zoning By-Law/Amendments



Flow Chart 1 - Notice of Open House, Public Meeting and "Complete Application". (2015, December 3). Retrieved from <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page8002.aspx#Flowchart1>
Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing