

**Negotiating Rural Futures:  
A Study of Relationships Between Boards of Education and Rural  
Communities During a Period of School Consolidation**

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**Executive Summary**

In the last five years Ontario public and secondary education has undergone yet another round of reform and consolidation. It is this process and its effects on rural Ontario communities that is the focus of this research. Past studies have indicated that although rural Ontario residents support the need for educational reform there are great differences as to the meaning and substance of reform and how that reform might be carried out. There is little research about the process of school accommodation and consolidation in rural Ontario. Nor is there documentation as to what research and information inform governmental choices and decisions as they relate to rural community schools.

The consideration of “rural” as a variable in the development of educational policy in Ontario continues to be ignored. Policy regarding educational change and restructuring assumes “no difference” between rural and urban educational needs and values, and generally disregards rural lifestyle, tradition, local knowledge and meaning. Past studies have argued that school closure and/or consolidation has been imposed on many rural communities and in Ontario there has been little opportunity for meaningful participation by parents and local school representatives.

The goal of this study was to explore the impact of periods of school consolidation on the relationship between rural communities and Boards of Education.

The specific objectives are:

1. To identify barriers from the perspectives of community leaders, board trustees, and board staff that hinder the development of partnerships between individual communities and Boards of Education.
1. To identify factors from the perspectives of community leaders, board trustees, and board staff that facilitate the development of partnerships between rural communities and Boards of Education.
1. Based upon the above, to develop a set of best practices for fostering effective partnerships between individual rural communities and Boards of Education.

The methodology employed for this study was a multiple cross case analysis. Four communities were studied as described in the Table 1 below. It should be noted that Case B and Case D were schools that were scheduled to be closed but through citizen action the board was convinced or forced to keep them open. In addition, Case C was scheduled to be closed but through community action has not yet been closed and its future, to date, remains uncertain.

	<b>Public School</b>	<b>Secondary School</b>
<b>School Closed</b>	<b>Case A</b>	<b>Case C</b>
<b>School Not Closed</b>	<b>Case B</b>	<b>Case D</b>

Data sources included public documents, newspaper articles, and in-depth interviews with key individuals as identified by community leaders, trustees, and board personnel. Respondents in this study all had a personal interest in educational reform in Ontario and had been closely involved in the process of accommodation and review in one of the four communities studied. Fifteen community members, seven trustees, five staff of Boards of Education and three retired trustees and/or Board staff were interviewed, making a total of 30 participants.

For the most part, relationships between boards of education and rural communities were fraught with tension, animosity, and frustrations. There was very little reported in this study by communities, trustees, or boards of education that could be broadly construed as positive.

The main findings are as follows.

First, it is worth highlighting that rural communities have been under assault on a number of fronts. They have not only been faced with school closures, but they have faced threats from hospital closure, the closure of post offices and banks, and coping with the realignment of responsibilities as communities have had to assume responsibilities that have been historically fulfilled by the province. Communities are tired and people are tired as they work to preserve their rural way of life. While the argument can be made that urban communities have faced the same assault, the bottom line is that economies of scale are different and larger urban centres have more “human resources” to cope with the changes. Furthermore, size has real implications for the provision of service and other impacts upon community life. For example, while the school plays a central role in the life of rural communities that is not necessarily the case for urban communities.

Second, the amalgamation of boards of education often resulted in two or more boards that subscribed to different values and beliefs becoming one. These differences seem to be exacerbated when rural boards were amalgamated with larger urban boards. As one of the trustees put it, “it felt like they were involved in a hostile takeover.” Furthermore, urban communities’ relationship to schools are different and informed “decision-making” is often rooted in an urban bias that neglects the unique needs of rural schools and communities. It clearly operates out of a one size fits all mentality. This has been further exacerbated as a result of fewer trustees serving larger constituencies and consequently are further distanced from their constituents. One of the trustees suggested that this was the intention of amalgamation - distance decision-makers from constituents so that the business of closing schools could begin. This was reflected in one of the respondent’s comment who stated that the Minister of Education argued there are schools in this province that need to be closed and it is the trustees job to get on with that.

Given the above, communication was a major issue in all the communities. Community respondents reported that often they could not get the information they needed from the board of education, or receipt of the information was not timely. Furthermore, there were concerns expressed by community members that the decision-making process was not an informed process and that research that might help understand the implications of proposed changes was not being consulted or used. Furthermore, community respondents reported that board staff and trustees did not seem interested in examining or using research conducted by community groups. In fact these community members maintained that they were treated somewhat paternalistically by staff and trustees, despite that they were often better informed about the issues as they related to rural life and schools than the professionals or their democratically elected representatives. Some trustees also complained about the issue of communication and maintained that often they could not get board staff to give them the information they needed. This, however, may be explained by the fact that board staff had to deal with changing rules and time frames and hence were constantly behind and reported that it often took up to six months to get their information requests filled by the Ministry of Education.

In many ways this issue can be explained in terms of expectations. Community groups fully expected to be consulted and engaged in a dialogue that would lead to joint decision-making. Boards of education, on the other hand, were engaged in a communication strategy that could be broadly described as dissemination. This may have been out of choice or it may have been out of necessity. Certainly the conditions, rules and time frames set by the Ministry of Education were not conducive to a process that involved extensive community consultation. We would argue that despite the intentions

of boards of education, it was often the imposition of conditions by the Ministry of Education that prevented community groups from being engaged in meaningful ways. Ironically the question that should be asked is who is in control here? The community thinks the board and trustees are while the boards point to the ministry. Clearly the Ministry of Education, despite their arguments that it is boards of education that close schools, must be held accountable for the deplorable state of relationships among communities, trustees and professional board staff as they engaged in this painful process.

One of the prominent themes running throughout the interviews was the destruction of community. First, there is the destruction of school community within communities. Second, there is the destruction of community infrastructure as rural schools that would be closed are an essential part of the community infrastructure. Third, is the destruction of the sense of community that existed among boards of education and residents prior to the amalgamation of boards of education. Most respondents reported good relationships among boards of education, trustees and communities prior to the period of board amalgamation. Fourth, is the destruction of regional community as communities competed with one another in an attempt to save their community schools. It was definitely perceived by community members as a win/lose situation, and to lose was to see one's community school closed.

One issue that community members in general agreed upon was that rural was not a variable that was considered in policy formation and that rurality and the unique needs of rural communities were not considered in making decisions. Furthermore, those making the decisions - board staff members and trustees - did not appreciate the potential impacts that school closure may have on other aspects of community life. For example, closure of secondary schools in small communities may have implications for part time student labour or may impact upon the ability of the community to attract health care professionals to the community. Community respondents also pointed out that historically those individuals who work in rural education seldom have opportunities to get additional credentials and hence senior administrative positions typically go to those who have access to continuing education and these tend to be urban based educators who are then transplanted into rural settings. Thus those making the decisions are not aware of the unique needs and condition of rural communities and the role that the school may play. Or when they did recognize these issues, they argued that it fell outside the purview of their mandate which deals only with education. Furthermore, and to reiterate a point already made, the process set out by the Ministry of Education did not create an environment that allowed communities and boards of education to enter into a true process of dialogue whereby mutual understanding could be realized before decisions were made.

The above issue points to a more fundamental problem, and that is there is an inherent urban bias implicit within policy formation in general, and specifically within education. As Lauzon and Leahy (2000) have argued, historically small schools were viewed as being inferior to larger schools and hence the closure of small rural schools was not contested, and perhaps even celebrated. Larger schools were viewed as inherently superior to smaller schools and the argument was that they provided a higher quality education for a lower cost. However, as Lauzon and Leahy (2000) have pointed out the empirical literature does not support the argument for economies of scale and small schools, in general, have better learning outcomes than larger schools.

How do we account for this sad state of affairs with regard to rural education?

Casey (1998) argues that over the last fifty years the idea of rural life has shifted from one in which we collectively took pride, to one of neglect, and ultimately to one of indifference. In a landscape increasingly dominated by urban and suburban landscapes, rural life simply disappears. At a recent conference on interdisciplinary research Sumner (2001) reported people questioned her on why she was interested in "rural" as a site for

interdisciplinary research, clearly suggesting it seemed somewhat odd. Lauzon (2001) has recently argued that rural life and communities are an important part of the fabric of our nation, and that rural people serve as our proxy stewards of the land. Stewardship, he argues, requires presence and it is our collective responsibility to insure that we maintain the quality of rural life to support those who would serve as our proxy stewards. This requires that we make sure that “rural” does not become lost in policy and that we actively advocate for evaluation of policy from a rural perspective. However, we must recognize that rural communities are different from urban centres, and different from each other. The impact of school closure on rural communities may vary across communities. Thus policy development needs to be context sensitive. A context sensitive approach to policy development then would begin to address cross sector issues such as the economic impact of school closure on rural communities. This requires greater participation of citizens and local organizations. The failing of educational reform in Ontario, from the rural perspective, has been the failure to engage rural citizens in meaningful ways about the future of their schools and their communities.

How can we move forward on the rural agenda?

First, there is a need for inter-ministerial coordination of policy development. Without coordination among ministries the accumulative impacts of different ministry policies can have a devastating impact on rural communities.

Second, there is a need for honesty. The Ministry of Education has argued that they were striving to restructure education in Ontario to be more cost efficient and effective. However, as Lauzon and Leahy (2000) argued, the government of Ontario has ignored the empirical literature that questions the validity of economies of scale as applied to the organization and administration of education. They have also ignored the fact that it has been demonstrated empirically that learning outcomes are better for smaller schools than they are for larger schools and that smaller schools do not have as many of the social problems that larger schools have (i.e. violence, teenage pregnancy etc.). Lauzon and Leahy (2000) concluded that educational policy development has ignored the empirical literature and is strictly ideologically driven. If policy is ideologically driven then solutions have been identified within the context of ideology and there are no need for community consultations. This is simply a waste of people’s time if their input is not to be valued or used.

Third, there is a need for transparency on the part of all stakeholders. Clearly the process that all our informants were part of was not transparent. Ironically a government that prides itself on holding others accountable have accepted no responsibility for the conditions they created in which this exercise was carried out. As mentioned by respondents in this report, they continually deflected their responsibility by stating that the closure of schools was a board of education decision. While technically this is true, the government has a moral obligation to accept some responsibility for the policy they develop that sets the ground rules and degree of flexibility that boards of education have in implementing government policy. It appears in this case that boards of education had little flexibility.

Fourth, policy needs to be flexible in order to account for the uniqueness and diversity of rural communities. Again, there is irony in that a government that concluded that a “one size fits all” approach to rural healthcare was not adequate has failed to see that the same argument applies to rural education. In fact, the organization of rural healthcare (i.e. administration of hospitals) has been quite successful when communities and regions have been left to decide how they can best meet their collective needs (this does not negate some of the other issues in rural healthcare such as physician attraction and retention). In fact, one of our respondents argued that government policy needs to encourage communities to engage everyone in a regional discussion on how to best meet everyone’s needs. While amendments have been made to try and accommodate the special needs of rural communities, these amendments are attempts at refining a formula

that is already fundamentally flawed according to our respondents. The government should look to rural communities and regions to put forth solutions to problems rather than trying to refine what they have already determined to be an unworkable solution.

Fifth, the Ministry of Education should be monitoring the impact of educational restructuring on rural education and rural community to insure that future restructuring operates from a more informed perspective on the implications for rural communities. This is needed given that we know very little about actual impacts on rural communities when their schools are closed. If there is to be further restructuring down the road then it would be helpful to know what the consequences are for those rural communities who lose their schools.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

Public and secondary education has a long tradition of change and growth in Canada's agricultural past. Gallagher (1995) tells us that over many generations, Canadian schools have played a critical educational, social and cultural role in rural and agricultural communities and have done "exactly what most Canadians have expected of [them]" (Gallagher, 1995:21). These expectations included the provision of basic reading, writing and math skills. It was expected that children would learn spelling, grammar and would encounter literature and advanced math as an extension of these fundamentals. Gallagher (1995) further suggests that schools and educational programs were originally constructs designed to accommodate Canada's agricultural and industrial traditions. Typically students who had completed a grade ten education were prepared for work and family life within their home community.

During these earlier times community-based schools were governed and managed by locally elected school trustees who carried out a broad provincial educational mandate. Their responsibilities included management of the physical plant and fiscal responsibility for school operation through direct tax levy. Schools were an integral part of the community they served and were deemed as community property (Fullam, 1991).

The post-war era distanced the community governing bodies from their school communities through the development of larger school districts. As the costs of education increased, provincial funding became available to district school boards to augment the local tax base. This further enhanced the decision making powers of district school boards to include all aspects of the educational process. Continued bureaucratization and professionalization of education has resulted in "a subtle and unanticipated marginalization of parents and other community members from the education of their children" (Gallagher, 1995:68).

## **Background of the Study**

In the last five years Ontario public and secondary education has undergone yet another round of reform and consolidation. It is this process and its effects on rural Ontario communities that is the focus of this research. Past studies (Lauzon & Leahy, 2000) have indicated that although rural Ontario residents support the need for educational reform there are great differences as to the meaning and substance of reform and how that reform might be carried out. There is little research about the process of school accommodation and consolidation in rural Ontario. Nor is there documentation as to what research and information inform governmental choices and decisions as they relate to rural community schools (Lauzon & Leahy, 2000).

The consideration of "rural" as a variable in the development of educational policy in Ontario continues to be ignored (Lauzon & Leahy, 2000, p. 40). Policy regarding educational change and restructuring assumes "no difference" between rural and urban educational needs and values, and generally disregards rural lifestyle, tradition, local knowledge and meaning. As Howley (1997:136) argues, "Actual studies must consider locally relevant issues that emerge from local experiences or that embody local dilemmas".

School closure and/or consolidation has been imposed on many rural communities in Ontario with little opportunity for meaningful participation by parents and local school representatives (Lauzon & Leahy, 2000). Changes of the magnitude experienced by many of these communities disrupts the social fabric of rural life and challenges individuals and whole communities to reevaluate their priorities and make

sense of the changes that have taken place (Fullam, 1991).

### **Goals and Objectives of the Study**

The goal of this study is to explore the impact of periods of school consolidation on the relationship between communities and Boards of Education.

The specific objectives are:

1. To identify barriers from the perspectives of community leaders, board trustees, and board staff that hinder the development of partnerships between individual communities and Boards of Education.
1. To identify factors from the perspectives of community leaders, board trustees, and board staff that facilitate the development of partnerships between rural communities and Boards of Education.
1. Based upon the above, to develop a set of best practices for fostering effective partnerships between individual rural communities and Boards of Education.

### **Study Limitations**

Community informants that participated in this study were identified through a search of community newspaper articles covering the issue of school closure in each community. Trustees and staff of Boards of Education were identified through newspaper articles and through information posted at Board of Education Web sites. Several informants suggested other community members and past trustees and staff who might add valuable insights to this research. Because of the nature of these contacts it was difficult to identify community members who may have disagreed with the most vocal community participants.

This research was limited to four rural communities situated in southern Ontario. Time constraints limited the number of interviews that could be carried out as a number of references were either unavailable or could not be contacted during the interview period.

### **Review of the Literature**

This research seeks to identify barriers or positive initiatives that effect the development of partnerships between rural communities and Boards of Education. Although literature directly relating to this topic is almost non-existent nationally and internationally, research relating specifically to the rural Ontario context was not found at all with the exception of the study conducted by Lauzon and Leahy (2000). This literature review, therefore, begins with our understanding of the state of rural educational research and an overview of the value and needs of rural schools and communities at this point in time. We then discuss historical issues that have brought us to where we are today. Most importantly this review of the literature will hopefully provide a vision for the future by identifying the most appropriate means for making educational change.

### **Understanding Rural Communities and Their Relationship to Schools**

Beneath [a] skepticism about rural schools runs a deep disregard of actual rural places, diverse as they are. Disregard of [rural] places entails the invisibility of the peculiarities of rural families, rural ways of living and working, and local rural meanings and knowledge (Howley, 1996:10)

In a study of the Saskatchewan educational reform process Reddyk (1996) focused on stakeholder perceptions of what it means to choose to live a rural lifestyle. The report suggests that this choice is often equated with 'smallness', with a need to participate in community and school activities, a need for acquaintance with and understanding of neighbours, and the ability to give and receive the care and support of community members. In addition the report suggests that these are qualities that rural residents want to pass on to their children. Parents feel that it is important for children to be exposed to and actively participate in the social learning and community living available through community-based schools. Finally, the report suggests that "it appeared that 'community' to many rural residents could be synonymous with 'schools'. Without schools, there are no children; without children; there are no families; and without families, there are no communities" (Reddyk, 1996:15).

In his study of school reform, Mulcahy (1997) found a well informed, well prepared contingent of rural citizens with pertinent research data, critical questions and well articulated positions as they argued that

the school helps define the community and give it an identity. It is a connection to the past and represents a hope for the future. Most importantly a school is a sign of the community's viability as a place to live, a place to stay, and a place to move to. The presence of children and the sounds of their play throughout the day are signs of life and vitality sorely needed by our rural communities (Mulcahy, 1997:10).

Although government officials stressed that through educational reform they hoped to create an opportunity for more parental input and participation, rural residents pointed out the inherent contradiction in this proposal because by closing local schools and moving children to larger centres, they were in essence prohibiting parental participation because of time constraints, one car families and the distance to be traveled on sometimes snow covered and unkept highways. Rural residents concluded that "Reform efforts should set out to **make** small schools viable, not to close them. We make them viable because we

value them as necessary for the education of rural children and the future of rural communities” (Mulcahy, 1997:13). The ‘grass roots’ view insisted that any educational reform must contain a commitment to community based education including the “mutually beneficial, and reciprocal relationship that exists between a rural community and their school” (Mulcahy, 1997:17). A school principal put it this way: “Education is built on a community of human beings. It seems like a simple concept but I think we’ve forgotten it along the way” (Mulcahy, 1997:11).

## **Educational Reform**

In post WWII educational policy has developed, for the most part, consensually through dialogue and cooperation among educators, the public and, in Canada, provincial governments. Levin (1999) tells us that in the past decade, educational policy has been driven mainly by the political agenda and has generally been tied to economic considerations, and shaped, to a great extent, by business and a neo-conservative ideology. Following an Ontario royal commission on learning in 1994 the Ministry of Education struck a task force to investigate rising educational costs, alleged Board of Education inefficiencies, and lack of public accountability. Members of the task force met with stakeholders and reviewed the academic literature only to decide that nothing useful resulted from these inquiries. The task force proceeded to recommend the reduction of Ontario’s 168 Boards of Education to 87 (Fleming, 1997). The purpose of such cuts was to affect costs savings in governance, administration and staff contracts and, to improve educational opportunity and equity. Restructuring across Canada was generally in the form of a technocratic, top-down model of reorganization and Ontario was no different. The provincial government, in particular the Ministry of Education took on the responsibility of the development of policy, processes and models that guided the restructuring (Fleming, 1997). However, trustees and Board staff were very outspoken as they saw the restructuring, boundary changes and Board amalgamation as the first of many major cuts to the education budget in Ontario (Fleming, 1997).

Lauzon and Leahy (2000) suggested that ‘rural’ is not a factor often considered in educational research resulting in a dearth of educational policy that considered the unique needs of rural communities. Research by Mulcahey (1997) takes this idea a step further to demonstrate that rural was not considered because, in some circles, it was not worthy of consideration, as it was assumed that “everyone accepted the logic and necessity of closing a certain number of small [rural] schools as part of educational reform...Small schools are educationally deficient and a drain on the general resources of the province [Nfld] and the education budget in particular...Parents should accept these changes because they are in the best interests of the children” (Mulcahy, 1997: 4, 8). In Ontario (Lauzon and Leahy, 2000), as in Newfoundland (Mulcahy, 1997), rural residents expressed their outrage and dissatisfaction with their perceived lack of opportunity to take part in the educational accommodation and review process, resulting in animosity and distrust between parent/community groups and their respective Boards of Education. In addition, Lauzon and Leahy (2000) reported that while rural residents, in general, supported curriculum reform they did not support rural school closure and board consolidation. They also state that a significant number of rural residents reported that rural residents have not had the same opportunities as urban residents to participate in the discussion of educational restructuring in Ontario. Findings from this research (Lauzon and Leahy, 2000) suggested the need to determine how rural residents might develop productive partnerships with Boards of Education. The intent of this action would be to help Board staff and trustees to better understand rural issues and the important place of schools in rural communities.

## **Managing Change in Rural Schools**

Educational reform in Ontario is comprised of a multitude of change initiatives competing for scarce resources and energy of residents of rural communities. The 'one-size-fits-all' urban model of school reform further complicates the change in rural areas (Gulka, 1992). Gulka tells us that strong leadership, at the Board of Education level, must provide a detailed process for the implementation of change as well as the essential support mechanisms to work through the process. Perhaps even more critical is knowledge of the process of change and the will to change that must be cultivated and conveyed within the network of schools involved. A recent report by the UNESCO has argued that effective educational change occurs where there is a broad engagement with all stakeholders, including those within the formal educational system and those outside the educational system. As stated in the report, "further reform efforts must at least in part be based upon broader partnerships and more participatory development processes (Schaeffer, 1994: 4)." Thus the cultivation of teamwork and collaboration are essential ingredients both within the Board of Education and between Board and their constituent schools and communities. The development and clear articulation of an agreed upon vision must be continually clarified and supported by all stakeholders. This systemic approach to change within a Board constituency, while developing a sense of community, will allow for input from all participants in the decision making process and subsequent resource allocation. With the involvement of all partners in the change process efficiencies can be achieved while respecting diversity and allowing for the unique contexts and needs of rural community schools (Gulka, 1993). As Shaeffer (1994: 10) states, "Such a process - unlike the traditional technocratic, top-down approach - can increase the control of people over the development process; lead to more resources from a wider range of actors; increase programme demand, relevance, efficiency and sustainability; and develop new knowledge, skills, and attitudes in those participating in the process."

## Methodology

The methodology employed for this study was a multiple cross case analysis. Four communities were studied as described in the Table 1 below. It should be noted that Case B and Case D were schools that were scheduled to be closed but through citizen action the board was convinced or forced to keep them open. In addition, Case C was scheduled to be closed but through community action has not yet been closed and its future, to date, remains uncertain.

**Table 1: Community Cases**

	<b>Public School</b>	<b>Secondary School</b>
<b>School Closed</b>	<b>Case A</b>	<b>Case C</b>
<b>School Not Closed</b>	<b>Case B</b>	<b>Case D</b>

Data sources included public documents, newspaper articles, and in-depth interviews with key individuals as identified by community leaders, trustees, and board personnel. Respondents in this study all had a personal interest in educational reform in Ontario and had been closely involved in the process of accommodation and review in one of the four communities studied. Fifteen community members, seven trustees, five staff of Boards of Education and three retired trustees and/or Board staff were interviewed, making a total of 30 participants. Several trustees decided not to continue on the Board of Education as a result of their experience with school reform, while several community members decided to run in the municipal elections in November, 2000 and subsequently were elected to the Board.

This study, while conducted in the context of education, has implications for establishing constructive partnerships between citizens and governments in a variety of different areas. This is becoming increasingly important as government services are realigned to be delivered and managed at the regional and local levels.

### The Case Study Format

Each case begins with a narrative which describes the rural community and its surrounding area and the process of the negotiations of school closure/accommodation as described in the local or town newspaper. The second section, which is the most extensive, outlines the findings from a series of semi-structured telephone interviews conducted with parents, community members, trustees and staff of their respective Boards of Education. The questionnaire covered the following broad areas:

1. The relationship of each community with the Board of Education prior to amalgamation and subsequent school consolidation and how that relationship changed through the process of school review and closure;
2. The actual accommodation and review process as experienced by participants;
3. Rural community life and the place of rural schools within the community;

4. Each participant was invited to expand on questions or issues of personal interest and to give a final comment relating to their experiences with school consolidation and closure. Major concerns and issues are discussed in this section however, they may differ with each community;

5. Future review processes and how they might be conducted differently.

The words of the interviewees are used extensively in the findings to express their ideas and concerns relating to the process of school accommodation and closure in their community. The findings of each community are then analyzed for recurring themes and strong recommendations while keeping the goals and objectives of the project in the forefront.

As outlined in Table 2, the analysis of communities A and B (Group 1) are then cross analyzed to determine similarities or discrepancies between communities concerned with the closure of their public school. The same process is then followed for communities C and D (Group 2), communities whose high schools were being reviewed for closure. Finally, the cross case analysis of group 1 and group 2 are compared to provide an overall picture of the accommodation and review process between communities and Board's of Education in Ontario from 1998 to 2000.

**Table 2: Case Study Analysis Design**

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Community Case A Public School</b>	<b>Analysis Case A</b>	<b>Cross-case analysis Case A &amp; B</b>	<b>Cross-group analysis Group 1 &amp; Group 2</b>
	<b>Community Case B Public School</b>	<b>Analysis Case B</b>		
<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Community Case C High School</b>	<b>Analysis Case C</b>	<b>Cross-Case analysis Case C &amp; D</b>	
	<b>Community Case D High School</b>	<b>Analysis Case D</b>		

It should be noted that the narrative describing the process of accommodation and review was pieced together from information collected from community newspapers. In most cases statements and allegations reported in the narrative become clearer after reading the interview section of the paper as obvious constraints and background information not available to the press often softens what appears to be a very harsh decision or position.

All of the issues discussed are very complex and multifaceted and informants have graciously contributed to our understanding of the school accommodation and review process. The statements contained in these case studies should be viewed as such and not taken out of the context of the report.

## **Findings**

## **Group 1 - Public Schools**

### ***Community Case A***

Heidelberg, situated just minutes north of the major centre of Kitchener/Waterloo, has a population of 2,500. It has a mixed population including farm families, small business owners, and professional families who commute the short distance to businesses and universities in KW. Because of the size of the community it has no local newspaper and is dependent upon the radio and T.V. news from the K-W area. As a result it was difficult to piece together a narrative of the process involved in school consolidation from local material.

For many parents and town's people the closing of the Heidelberg school was a very emotional issue. Not only because of the loss of their only school but because they felt they were losing part of their history. One informant tells us "[the Board of Education] took [the school] over and now [they're] selling it...[they didn't] have our permission...it was built by the community ...101 years ago by people that wanted a school here" (16A).

Although Heidelberg is situated close to a large major centre, it associates culturally and communally more closely with several small communities within a twenty to thirty kilometre radius. In the past, children living in the rural areas between these towns were transported to school in the smaller communities. Over the years, as school governance had changed from local to county to regional and finally to the current Boards of Education, school boundaries were changed for any number of reasons including transportation issues and school enrolment. In the case of the Heidelberg school, their boundaries had been cut considerably and by 1998 included only the town of Heidelberg, thus reducing the number of children who might attend the school and putting the viability of the school at risk.

Parents learned about the school being on the evaluation list for restructuring when it appeared on the front page of the K-W newspaper. Community members immediately set up a meeting in Heidelberg. There were six to eight parents at the core of the inquiry. Although public meetings were held regularly to keep community members informed, these six to eight parents represented the community throughout the accommodation and review process. A small group of parents questioned the viability of keeping such a small school open but did not voice their opinions publically during the review process. The Waterloo District Board of Education then set up a working committee to meet with community members to form the accommodation and review committee to study Heidelberg School.

The committee met with two staff members working for the community of Heidelberg who suggested that an expanded task force be set up. This was to include representatives from area schools and was designed to provide an overview of what considerations needed to be in place in order to make informed decisions. A community member recounted that the township and the region of Waterloo also became involved by writing letters to the Minister of Education saying "don't be making changes until you've looked at the impact...those people were definitely saying whoa" (16A). However, community members felt the information they had gathered was not taken seriously. The information was presented to the Board of Education. The general consensus of community members, supported by a local trustee, was that once the school accommodation process was started it meant that they would lose their public school. That was in fact the outcome of the accommodation process in Heidelberg.

## **Relationship Prior to Amalgamation**

Most informants agreed that prior to restructuring there was always a positive relationship between rural communities and the Board of Education. There were trustees for each township which worked well for all concerned. As one informant put it "...they basically left [rural schools] alone and things didn't really begin to change until the provincial mandate changed" (18A). "When restructuring took over...we lost our representation" (15B). Even as the larger Waterloo District Board of Education took over, they generally had a good reputation as being most progressive and open to parent input. One dissenting view, however, characterized the district school board as "a very closed minded, narrow visioned board" (20A).

## **Accommodation Process**

The community of Heidelberg had identified a number of issues with the accommodation process that they took issue with. These included: access to information; lack of research used to inform decision-making; lack of an evaluation process to assess impacts upon communities; lack of support for community schools; and the lack of community participation in the decision making process used by the Board of Education.

Access to information and lack of research were part and parcel of the same complaint. A community member suggested "I wouldn't say the board purposely kept information back...I think they just didn't have all the information. I don't think they were very well educated or they were not well prepared to do this in the first place" (18A). Discomfort with the information available and the lack of preparation of trustees and Board staff led to a general distrust among community members, trustees, and staff members of the Board of Education.

This lack of trust regarding the information that was provided to community members led to the suggestion that an independent facilitator or mediator be appointed to work with the Board and the community representatives. It was suggested that this facilitator might "review the process and the data that the Board is considering in making its decision..." (15A) to insure that both sides are getting the same information and that it is as current and accurate as possible. A facilitator might also insure that all issues of concern to both parties are addressed to both parties' satisfaction.

In particular, parents expressed the concern that

nobody really ...addressed [the] questions ...is there a financial advantage to closing this school, [and] what is it? ...if smaller schools...produce kids who are better educated or ...healthier in terms of their ....approach to [learning]...even though we're ...reducing our cost per child, we're not really producing the same level of education or love of education or schooling for that child (17B).

As these interviews took place two years after the completion process many informants were concerned by the lack of a review or evaluation process:

They need to go back and revisit the scenario a year later... and get some feedback from parents, from the community to say...how did it work, did the process work well, what things do we still need to learn to make the transition the best ...possible, what things did we miss, what

recommendations would you have for schools that are facing this kind of change (18A)?

Several informants (20A, 16A, 17B, 18A) expressed concerns regarding their representation by their trustees:

You elect your trustee to speak your voice and so, if [as] a community, we have issues with the direction... this funding model is taking us, you should be strongly opposed to it and you should speak that voice to the ministry because otherwise they think it's all jolly good...I said show me the correspondence that's going from this school board, from this school administration to the ministry to tell them about our unhappiness with the way this funding model is playing out, and I got nothing...On the other hand...I don't think administration supported it

You need to go directly to the ministry and then just give copies to the local school board, that's where your emphasis needs to be because I think school boards are just busy carrying out this funding formula and they're not really looking at the bigger picture (20A).

The decision making process at the Board of Education table was also questioned by one trustee and a community member:

It's pretty much the staff that give and take directions as opposed to the trustees making decisions...I guess I got very angry with statements around the table ...you know I'm not really happy voting this way, however the hand went up (20A).

...in hind sight I feel that the school board was very dishonest because I truly believe...they had their minds made up [about closing the school] (16A)

As for the experience of working through the school accommodation and review process, one frustrated informant put it this way:

I [thought] it was a terrible process, I looked at it and thought...how shabby (17B).

### **The Rural School Community**

Because of the size of Heidelberg, with only 2,500 residents, informants particularly like the "pedestrian lifestyle" where they would greet parents, children, teachers on their way to or from school or they might drop into the school for a chat or to volunteer. It became part of their daily routine.

Because the school building was one of few public buildings in town it was also the hub of many community activities. "It should be used for lots of experiences...after school...this school should be able to count on the community and vice versa with support for functions that are going on in the community"(20A). "Everybody had a very strong sense of belonging and being part of a group" (16A). Without the school, informants were adamant that "children lose their sense of community"(15A,).

Rural is critical...people who live out there have different expectations... [they] expect different things out of schools...it's a different atmosphere (15A).

However, a trustee summed up the Board perspective by saying:

I fully understand why schools are so important in neighbourhoods and the rural areas but ...school boards can no longer be the glue that holds communities together because we don't get the money any more... [The trustee did concede that it was time] for the ministry to stop using school boards as ...the cushion between them, their bad news and the community (15B).

An informant countered that opinion with the following:

You rely on communities, you want them on board with you...you need to look at it differently...we have the means and the support here to do a lot of things for our school and we can do it and what you guys need to look at is a different way of dealing with the money (20A).

A community members offered

We'll be responsible for the roof, we'll be responsible for the windows, my family would take on the lawn care and the grounds keeping...(16A).

A board member replied that

You can't take care of your own school because then schools are inequitable...your school might be better than someone else's and that wouldn't be fair (16A).

### **Final Comments**

When asked if there were other issues not identified in the interview, several informants (17A, 17B, 15A) responded that they felt educational policies were written with an urban focus and tended to "sweep the whole province with a single brush". In particular, rural areas and small towns did not benefit from the accommodation and review process as it was currently designed. One informant explained that most disturbing was that

certain schools had something to benefit by our school closing...so what it ended up doing is pitting communities against each other...It was that winning thing...that kind of short sightedness...I don't think they looked actively at any other solutions across Canada, across the U.S....as a parent I don't know why I was standing up there telling this information... Having three really vibrant schools in the rural area that potentially could grow and ...sustain itself would have been better than two (17B).

### **Recommendations**

As a result of their experience with the accommodation and review process, informants

(17A, 15B, 18A, 17B) in this community saw the need for leadership, research and planning before any talk of change is considered. Their concerns centered around helping small and rural communities work together rather than pitting them against each other. Suggestions included the following:

They never consider from a council or a planning perspective the overall scenario...let's revitalize these...there's very little effort put into keeping...any of these areas viable and vital so ...people with young families want to live there and so they would support the school system...I think there's some ownership that needs to be placed on regional planning municipalities as well and I don't think they accept any of the responsibility for...how they could impact that and make it different (18A).

It would be important to make that particular change in terms of allowing boards to work out agreements with their townships and local municipalities because that would go a long way to resolving some of the issues with neighborhood schools (15B).

Finally, respondents saw a need for the reevaluation and openness by Ministry of Education officials and the Ontario government:

If governments were more honest and used boards for the value they have in determining local needs and sort of overseeing things,...and working with communities and the school councils ...[it would] go a long way to repairing relationships between boards and community (17B).

### **Analysis of Community Case A**

The purpose of this research was to identify barriers that hindered or factors that facilitated the development of partnerships between rural communities and Boards of Education during the school accommodation process. Respondents in Heidelberg had very little to say of a positive nature. Barriers that hindered the development of good working relationships with their Board of Education centered on many aspects of communication, the accommodation process, and the overall organization of and assumptions underlying educational reform.

Involvement of community members in the accommodation and review process was seen by many as a farce. Community members felt that once their school was put on a review list, that they were just going through the motions of consultation. Informants expressed concern about the quality, timeliness and trustworthiness of *communication* they received from the Board of Education. Requests for answers to specific questions, such as the financial advantage of closing their school, were never addressed to the satisfaction of community members.

As part of the process, trustees also faced many difficult decisions. One trustee confirmed that most representatives around the table supported the recommendations of Board staff even though they expressed dissatisfaction and unease with the recommendations. On the other hand, Board of Education staff reported changing rules and demands from the Ministry of Education left them in the position of providing community members and trustees with ever changing information and strategies which led to a growing distrust among all parties.

As expressed by most informants the *process* of school accommodation was one of the most frustrating with which they had ever dealt. Community people did not feel well represented by their elected trustees. They felt that their unique rural lifestyle was never considered in the decision making process. They saw the need for an impartial third party or facilitator to gather and verify the authenticity of information and to act as a mediator in the accommodation process. Furthermore, they questioned the lack of an evaluation process to determine the impact of school closure on the children and families involved and on their community as a whole. Although, informants were quick to express that school closure had destroyed their sense of community and their rural lifestyle, they particularly feared for the future development of their elementary school aged children both educationally and communally.

Concerns relating to the overall organization and assumptions of *educational reform* included apparent lack of research on issues relating to educational reform both nationally and internationally, denial of '*rural*' as a legitimate category for consideration in policy development and the reform process, the divisiveness caused by the review process within and among communities and, the many contradictions caused by the ever changing funding formula.

Many community members took it upon themselves to research the topic of school accommodation and closure. As a result they were, in many instances, more informed on the subject than trustees and Board staff. They had gained a practical and theoretical understanding of what it meant to live in a small or rural community and complained that neither the Board of Education nor the Ministry of Education had such knowledge, nor did they appear to recognize the value of considering rural issues in the overall educational reform in Ontario.

The funding formula as set by the Ministry of Education seemed to cause the greatest concern and was an underlying factor in many of the other issues distressing community informants. It was the opinion of many that the funding formula pitted rural communities against each other where historically, rural families and communities worked cooperatively and collaboratively for mutual survival and development.

### ***Community Case B***

Ingersoll, a community of approximately 9000 people, is situated 40 km east of London, Ontario, with easy access to major transportation arteries. At the time of the accommodation review in early 1999, the community of Ingersoll had five elementary schools. These schools covered JK to grade eight in a number of different formats. In January of 1999 the Ingersoll Elementary Accommodation Study Committee (IEASC) was struck with the intent of designing a process to study school accommodation in Ingersoll. The committee was also given the task of identifying the information that would be needed to complete the accommodation process. It was made clear by the Board of Education representative on the committee that the IEASC was to identify and present several proposals to the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) by the first of March, 1999. After four to six weeks of study, the TVDSB would decide if it would implement any of the recommendations.

At a February Board meeting the IEASC gave the initial message to the TVDSB that they were happy with the schools the way they were and suggested maintenance of the status quo. After presentation of the three options identified by the committee, a community

representative presented a fourth proposal that had been discussed at a private meeting held earlier in the week. This proposal suggested minor changes including development of wheelchair access at one of the existing schools and the addition of grades seven and eight at another making it a JK to eight school. These changes were to take place within two years. The final alteration would see approximately thirty-three bussed students from an Ingersoll subdivision being diverted from their current school to a school located in the centre of the town. Angry parents from the subdivision accused committee members of considering the welfare of students from only two of the five Ingersoll schools.

In their deliberations over school accommodation the trustees of the TVDSB agreed that there were many more alternatives that might be studied to improve public elementary schools for all children in Ingersoll rather than just a select few as identified in the report from the IEASC. A meeting held at the end of April, 1999 presented all of the options considered to date and requested additional written input by May 19<sup>th</sup>. Among the three new options presented was, once again, the suggestion that the TVDSB maintain the status quo in Ingersoll. At the June 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the TVDSB, a motion was tabled to expand one school to accommodate JK to grades seven and eight over a two year period. Not all parents of the various school communities were happy with the decisions, however, Ingersoll schools were essentially left unchanged. However, parents saw the process as brutal, as there were no guidelines. Parents stated that the Board of Education seemed to make things up as they went along. A June Editorial in the Ingersoll Times<sup>i</sup> suggested that the “accommodation study was a mockery....[that] made fools out of everyone involved”.

### **Community/Board Relationship Prior to Amalgamation**

The Thames Valley District School Board covers a large geographic area and resulted from the amalgamation of four former county boards. Although the Boards that came together had different value systems (21A), community members felt that trustees did listen to what we were saying...[they] were definitely listening and sympathetic to our concerns (14A).

### **The Accommodation and Review Process**

From the beginning of the amalgamation process, informants felt that the Board of Education met their obligations as far as the advertisement of meetings and sending notices home about upcoming events.(14A).

However, because of the size and nature of the area covered by the Board some respondents felt “they slated school against school. They told other [rural and urban] schools that they couldn’t have any additions unless a school was closed. So then they had schools pitted against other schools” (14A).

The TVDSB has a large urban area as well as a substantial rural area. In the past Boards could get away with subsidizing smaller schools from the overall budget. However with all the publicity from the government about average class size, people in urban schools are getting much more conscious of the fact that they’re subsidizing small schools and that their class sizes were above what the government advises. “When you’ve got an

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urban/rural mix board...[they] are being pressured by the urban side to get class sizes down. It [becomes] a large versus small thing” (14B) making it more difficult for small or rural schools to survive.

Although elementary schools in the town of Ingersoll were left relatively unchanged, the process was not without its complications. Respondents felt that the Board could have provided more information backed up by costs and consequences of different actions. And although administration might not like the recommendations presented by the accommodation committee, respondents felt that the recommendations should have been tabled at a board meeting for trustees to consider and vote on. Although respondents felt supported by trustees they felt Board staff “weren’t really listening to what we were saying and they were coming in with a set agenda and trying to accomplish it (14A).

### **The Rural School Community**

Even though there are five elementary schools in the town of Ingersoll parents were adamant that they wanted their children going to their local community school. “We like the fact that our children can walk....it’s a very close knit community and people really felt if they close this school we were going to be giving up a lot that we had strived very hard to get for our children and fund raise for our children”(14A).

From another perspective, one informant suggested that the impact of school closure would be different depending on the infrastructure available in each community. In a town the size of Ingersoll there are other facilities available should one school close. “Where there is some community infrastructure then the impact of losing the elementary school is going to be different than if in fact there is no municipal infrastructure...there is no way for the board to easily turn the school over to the municipality to use for other forms of community infrastructure...that...surprised me that rural municipalities haven’t asked for some sort of change in the regulation so ...they can actually pick up empty schools and do something with them in terms of community infrastructure (14B).

Finally, in Ingersoll, the system of school councils worked well during this process. Although they vary in perspective and character they generally came with collaborative intent to which the trustees was very receptive.

### **Final Comments**

Informants noted the inflexibility of the funding formula and suggested that because of the diverse nature of communities being served that a flexible formula might result in more positive results.

One informant noted

It’s really interesting ...the way the funding model is structured, it’s really inconsistent the way the impact works [depending on the makeup of the Board]...part of the funding model that works spectacularly badly is the transportation funding and rural areas have to have transportation, so that’s a real struggle for boards...rural kids are at a disadvantage if you can’t afford a second [bus] run [after school] because that means they’re not getting to participate...in extra curricular activities (14B).

She continued by stating that

Part of the problem with a flexible process is...from the Board's point of view...you don't want to be subject to the losing end of a legal challenge...on a theoretical level a different process for different communities would make a great deal of sense, on a legal level a different process for different communities is a non-starter (14B).

### **Recommendations**

One clear recommendation from this community was "The funding model needs improvement" (21A). And, a participant cautioned that rural communities should pay particular attention to the Safe School Act which is about to be passed into law.

One of the things that may be really biased against rural Ontario is the whole new safe school policy...historically rural boards didn't do a lot of expulsion...boards and school in rural areas tried to manage the problem...the safe school act has mandatory expulsion for certain offenses (14B).

Their concerns focused once again on the neglect on rural issues in the Educational Reform process as designed by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

### **Analysis of Community Case B**

Although the community informants in the Town of Ingersoll were not happy with the process of accommodation and review within the town, they did feel that their elected trustees listened to their needs and supported them around the Board table. Informants also commended the *communication* efforts of the Board of Education, feeling that community members received notices of meetings and information in a timely fashion. Although, at times the content of the information received was poor.

While working through the accommodation process, parents and community members were particularly concerned by issues of safety and the loss of their close-knit school *community* that would be experienced by their elementary school aged children. Parents were quite vocal about the development that had taken place within their local school community and the fund raising events that had facilitated that development. Their feelings of pride and ownership of school and programs was quite obvious.

The local paper described the *process* of accommodation as a 'mockery...[that] made fools out of everyone'. It appeared that most of the dissatisfaction and discomfort was felt between school communities within Ingersoll rather than between the Town and the Board of Education. Once again the divisiveness and inflexibility of the funding model played one school community off against others. According to the Board, one school community's loss would be the gain for another. As informants pointed out, this tension extended across the Board as a whole to include the large urban centres to the west of Ingersoll who were also pitted against their rural neighbours in the win/lose situation.

Finally, community members were concerned with the obvious lack of consideration for

*rural* issues and concerns in the overall *educational reform* process. The loss of a community school might be compounded by an inadequate community infrastructure in many rural communities leaving residents without a meeting hall and a centre for community programs.

### **Cross Case Analysis of Group One Schools (Case A & B)**

The two rural communities facing closure of an elementary school had many common issues pertinent to their relationship with their respective Board of Education. Most of the issues can be categorized as barriers. The prime concern of these two groups was a loss of their sense of community. The accommodation and review process in general was a source of tension as was the overall educational reform process with its inflexible funding formula and neglect of rural issues.

The loss of community was felt deeply on many levels. On a personal level loss of the small class atmosphere for the children, loss of parental involvement in the daily lives and education of their children, and the loss of daily contact with other parents, teachers and children were expressed with extreme regret. Educationally, for the children it meant loss of personal identity as they went from a nurturing learning environment where everyone knew and supported each other, to becoming one of four to six hundred children in a larger public school. There was a fear that some of these children would become statistics as those who ‘fall between the cracks’ in a larger school environment.

As communities, informants felt a loss of connection both within their own town as well as between themselves and neighbouring rural and urban communities. Because of the nature of the funding formula there is a built in win/lose factor. If one school community is to be developed or receive new programming, it is generally at the loss of another school community. As demonstrated in Heidelberg, the cost may be the closure of a community school.

‘Community’ to rural residents also means a shared history, a connection, association and involvement with community, and working together to solve common problems. This type of community was evident as community members came together as the school accommodation and review process got under way. However, rural residents found that educational reform in Ontario was not about building community or collaboration, and that the process neither allowed for meaningful community input nor encouraged community participation. It soon became apparent that *rural* was not a consideration in any way when educational reform policies were developed.

Board of Education staff and trustees, finding themselves in arranged relationships, had the equally difficult problem of imposing the accommodation and review process and the funding formula on their constituents. With little room to maneuver, either financially or logistically, Board staff and trustees became the “messenger” for the Ministry of Education, who backed away from the daily fracas with a ‘hands off’ statement that “it was Board’s of Education who were closing schools”.

For community members, trustees and staff of Boards of Education, the rural elementary school accommodation and review process in these two communities was a harrowing experience.

### **Group 2 - Secondary Schools**

### *Community Case C*

The Town of Seaforth, with a population of 2,300 people, is centrally located in the catchment area of the Avon Maitland District School Board (AMDSB). Situated on highway 8 in Huron County, Seaforth is approximately half way between Stratford and the shores of Lake Huron. Seaforth District High School is housed in a 120 year old building. It is the smallest of the 11 high schools within the AMDSB jurisdiction. In September of 1997 the enrollment at SDHS accounted for approximately 340 of the 3,780 high school students registered with the AMDSB.

In late 1997 the Huron County and Perth County School Boards were amalgamated to form the Avon Maitland District School Board. The director of education for the Huron county board was retained as director for the newly formed board. Because previous board offices had been located in Stratford and Clinton, the trustees wanted to amalgamate their offices to a location somewhere along highway 8. A location in this area would be accessible to and central in the board catchment area. The AMDSB struck an ad hoc committee to investigate possible locations for the new office space.

During the three year negotiations regarding school closure, the AMDSB had changes in leadership positions for staff and board. In June of 1998, the Huron Expositor reported the resignation of Director of Education. The board minutes, however, announced the director's retirement, effective June 26, 1998. An interim director was appointed until the successor could take office effective August 17, 1998.

In November of 1998 the AMDSB announced that elections for the position of chair and vice chair of the board would take place the following month, in the absence of the current chair. This action resulted in the election of a new chairperson, replacing the chairperson who had been in place at the time of the amalgamation.

At their January, 1998 meeting, the board announced that Seaforth District High School (SDHS) was in need of "radical changes" or it would be in danger of closing. Dropping enrollment was the main concern as it complicated the program planning process, making it difficult for students to get the programs they wanted. Also, within the next two years, grades 11 and 12 would become available at an area Catholic school. It was anticipated that some SDHS students would transfer to the Catholic school to complete their high school program. It was also feared that the threat of closure of SDHS would prompt grade nine students to enroll in other area high schools. These perplexing circumstances further compromised the already declining enrollment at SDHS.

By March of 1998 community members had banded together to form the Friends of Seaforth District High School (FSDHS). This group appealed to the community and high school alumni to establish a trust fund to aid in the fight against school closure. Members of FSDHS encouraged residents of Seaforth to phone, write letters, and send e-mails to the SMDSB to voice their objections to the closure of SDHS. Accusing the school board of not listening to the people of Seaforth, the FSDHS challenged the board's decisions to close SDHS and to relocate the board offices to the vacated school.

Parents and community members expressed many concerns regarding the ramifications of school closure and the school board's inquiry and decision making processes. Concerns included:

- possible long bus ride for their children

- potential difficulty in attracting doctors and businesses to Seaforth
- the unknown effects of school closure on rural communities
  - the lack of economic or social impact studies
- the number and nature of ‘in camera’ sessions held by trustees
- alleged miscalculation of school footage figures and the calculation of their cost saving figures
- failure of the school board to consider reduction of administration costs
- reduced public access to board meetings
- limitation of the number of delegations allowed to make presentations at any one meeting
- exclusion of the press from a February 2000 meeting, stating that the education act did not apply to that particular meeting
- conflicting information and statistics received from the board
- use of inaccurate enrollment figures and information regarding school resources in reports to the Board of Education

The attitude of some trustees was a concern for Seaforth business people when they were told that the board’s mandate was “to educate students, not preserve rural Ontario”.

On several occasions community members accused the board of ignoring their wishes. They reminded trustees that the school building had originally been built and owned by the Seaforth District School Board. The community questioned the AMDSB’s legal right to close or sell the school. Community members also suggested that if a decision was made to close the school, that it should be sold to the community for a nominal fee.

Regardless of procrastination and indecision on the part of the school board, community members continued to make regular presentations to trustees through 1998 and into 1999 and remained optimistic that the school might stay open.

In efforts to accommodate the school board’s need to reallocate space and save money, community members made numerous proposals to the AMDSB. Early in the process SDHS proposed to expand their independent study program to help alleviate time-tabling problems. Although this program would not be suitable for all students, it had been used quite successfully in other Ontario schools for self motivated, independent students. Other potential cost cutting measures included closure of speciality classes used for French and music as well as the option of leasing excess space to community groups or service providers. In attempts to maintain enrollment, staff and students were proactive by inviting area grade 8 students to orientation and information sessions to encourage them to enroll in SDHS for the fall of 1998.

In December of 1999 The SDHSAC presented a five year development plan to the AMDSB as part of their effort to keep the school viable. This plan included the following recommendations:

1. 1998/99 no school closures, with no penalties from the Ministry of Education;
1. 1999/2000 no school closure or grade 7 & 8 would move to the high school, again with no penalties;
1. 2000/2001 suggest the board permit a public fitness complex to be built a SDHS;

1. 2001/2002 a local museum could be placed in the school in an under used area;
1. 2002/2003 a day care facility could be established at no cost to the board.

Other cost cutting proposals included the following:

- a proposal that grades 7 & 8 be moved to SDHS, keeping Seaforth public school open and closing Walton Public School.
- the possibility of opening an agricultural prep school in cooperation with the University of Guelph. This proposal would bring urban students to live with Seaforth families and work on local farms in preparation for further education in agriculture or veterinary science at the university.

The director of education indicated, or gave the impression that only board sanctioned options would save enough money.

In February of 2000, a community committee prepared a 500 page report proposing that Walton Public School be closed, grades 7 & 8 be moved to SDHS, and that both SDHS and SPS be kept open. The report included the suggestion that the Seaforth catchment area be enlarged to include 3 neighbouring communities.

In January, 1998, as a newly amalgamated board of education, the AMDSB was faced with two major decisions: integration and relocation of two existing board offices and school restructuring and closure. Decisions on these two issues were deferred, postponed indefinitely, changed, contested and changed again over the next two years. *Decisions* were further complicated by the exclusion of AMDSB from the rural school funding designation.

In March of 1998 the site review committee recommended that SDHS be closed and that school board offices be combined to work from the vacated building effective no later than September, 1999. Staff and students of SDHS would be relocated to Central Huron Secondary School in Clinton and SDHS would become a “school within a school” for the year 1998/99. This decision was deferred and subsequently withdrawn as the board struck a review committee to examine all schools in the catchment area where enrollment numbers were low or declining. At the April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1998 meeting the AMDSB announced there would be no schools closed during the 1998/99 school year, and suspended decisions on school closure and relocation of the board offices indefinitely.

By mid June, 1998 the AMDSB was considering three options regarding relocation of the school board offices. All of these options involved minor changes at SDHS, although the school would remain open. School board offices were constructed in the basement of SDHS, opening in the fall of 1998, with the first board meeting being held at the new location in February, 1999. In the fall of 1998, the AMDSB announced that they would take a holistic approach to restructuring by considering public and high school space, enrollment, programs and repair and maintenance costs as a group rather than separating the two. The director of Education recommended that SDHS be converted to an elementary school or that SDHS become grade 7 to OAC. This recommendation included the closure of Seaforth Public School. At an October meeting over 800 angry parents and community members voiced their concerns regarding restructuring and closure of their schools. The decision was tabled and then postponed as the AMDSB requested an extension from the Ministry of Education on the school closure decision.

During the summer of 1999 the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) reviewed the AMDSB as part of their province wide check-up on school restructuring. Through this process the EIC interviewed various stakeholder groups regarding the governance and administrative performance of the school board.

In the fall of 1999 the Director of Education announced that fewer than nine schools would have to close and that the Board of Education would again conduct public consultations, being more open and transparent than in previous discussions. An ad hoc committee was formed to conduct five regional meetings which were designed to outline process and time lines. At the November 23, 1999 meeting of the AMDSB, the Director of Education recommended that all three Seaforth schools be studied for closure using the rationale that these changes could be an improvement for Seaforth students. SDHS students would be transferred to Mitchell and Clinton high schools and SDHS building would be used to house elementary school students.

By November of 1999 the FSDHS had raised over \$14,000 to fight the closure of their school and had retained a lawyer to discuss a possible law suit. Friction continued between community and AMDSB resulting in police being called to maintain order at the November, 1999 meeting as trustees refused to allow community delegations to speak. Subsequently, a special meeting of the Board of Education was called in early December to hear delegations.

It was at this point that community members presented a five year development plan to the school board. The board's response indicated that although there were no new costs for the board, neither were there any savings. In February, 2000, five Seaforth residents requested an extension in the school closure decision in order to gather more information as they launched a law suit against the AMDSB. Their five hundred page report outlined information they had collected and made recommendations to the school board as outlined above. The law suit requested an injunction to stop the closure of the Seaforth schools citing unfair board practices. It also asked that the AMDSB be ordered to provide the information that the community had previously requested and had not received.

In a March, 2000 decision, Justice Heeney ruled that the AMDSB could make their decisions regarding school closure but could not implement them until after March 8, 2000 when he would make a decision regarding the fairness of the closure process. While waiting for the court decision regarding fair process, the Director of Education recommended closure of three Seaforth schools, saying that the community proposals were not a solution to the ongoing problem of falling enrollment. The AMDSB supported the director's recommendations with only one dissenting vote.

Stating that the community members had a strong case, Justice Heeney allowed the school board to make its decisions however referred the case to the judicial review court to be heard in May, 2000. Calling the AMDSB "arrogant and unfair" Justice Heeney suggested that the board did not follow Ministry of Education guidelines and questioned their lack of financial analysis as requested by the community.

In a May judgement by the judicial review court, the AMDSB was found to be unfair in its school closure process. This resulted in SDHS remaining open and grade 7 & 8 students remaining at the public school. The community committee were awarded \$15,000 in court costs. Still seeking fair and acceptable solutions to the school restructuring needs, community members continued to work with the school board

officials.

Stating that an appeal of the court decision was still possible, the director of education offered three options for restructuring. After a special meeting of the AMDSB, the following recommendation was approved: Walton Public School would be closed with its students moving to Seaforth Public School. Grades 7 & 8 would remain at SPS with portables being added to house a day care, one class room and custodial storage. The high school would remain open for at least one more year with grade 9 to OAC.

The AMDSB advised the community that it would not appeal the court decision. Yet they cautioned community members that they should continue to seek cost cutting measures and methods to enhance enrollment in an effort to make SDHS a viable operation. Future considerations included a community plan for a \$700,000 fitness complex at SDHS. The complex would include an indoor track, a portable gym floor, a dance studio, squash courts, a weight room, change rooms, offices and storage space. This proposal would cost the school board \$13,000 per year in maintenance costs. The proposal needed the commitment and support from AMDSB before plans could proceed.

The plan for an agricultural prep school was put on hold. Other proposals being considered included the possibility of an “International Baccalaureate” program which would offer an enriched programme to eligible students. The new principal continued to work in cooperation with the community, the school council, and parents seeking solutions to the threats of closure in the future.

Although the school was spared in this round of negotiations, it may be considered for closure in future years as AMDSB must conduct an annual space and funding assessment as outlined by the Ministry of Education.

### **Amalgamation**

Trustees spoke of difficulties prior to the commencement of the process of amalgamation. Even in the planning stages, reports of which Boards were to amalgamate with whom “changed daily” (5A).

There was a tremendous amount of that childish manipulation at the time. You could see that the ministry was committed to amalgamation but I felt that perhaps they weren’t just committed to which particular area...so it would be my opinion that accidentally certain things were mentioned just to test the water and see how people would respond... it was incredibly frustrating...So I would argue that the process the government set up was completely ineffective...they didn’t seem to have any clear direction. I was never really sure what it was they were trying to accomplish other than they were trying to break education and if that was their goal which is what I believe it was, break local control, they did a very good job of it (5A).

Prior to amalgamation, although both Boards of Education were rural, one was reported as being very progressive while the other tended to be more traditional. However, both had their strengths and were reported to work well with their constituents. Once a decision had been made as to which two boards would amalgamate “all hell broke loose in terms of the attempts to bring things together. I believe there was one willing partner

and one very unwilling partner and that made it extremely difficult”(4A).

Informants reported that after amalgamation the different cultures and philosophies that were brought together produced a deeply divided Board which soon became apparent to the community. Having done some research, a community member told us that “it was quite interesting that the formation of the county boards back in the late 60's had a lot of similar circumstances to the merger of the two county boards...People still maintaining their loyalty at least initially to the local structure that they had know for some time” (8B). However, these types of issues were not taken into consideration as amalgamation was imposed throughout the province.

School Board amalgamation was just another in a series of difficult times for residents of rural Ontario. “There’s been so many things happening in rural Ontario...we’re kind of splintered...because we’re all fighting everything...the hospital closure...post office closures.... and bank closures...it’s just been horrible the last three years...it’s just been very stressful for rural Ontario” (4B).

Community members, trustees and staff all expressed similar opinions about the actual process of consultation between the Board of Education and the community of Seaforth:

The school closure issue... is...a nightmare fraught with all kinds of perils for anybody who dares to speak about it.(4A)

It was awful, probably the most awful thing I’ve gone through in my life (6A).

Throughout the accommodation and review process, communication was continually at the top of the list of grievances of community members, trustees and Board staff.

We have papers that are once a week. we have no television station, radio station to get the news out promptly...it doesn’t give you time to react so instead of being proactive you’re reactive which really doesn’t work...The first time they talked about closing our school, the community was given three days notice of the meeting” (4B).

However, trustees and Board staff were working with continually changing time frames and demands from the Ministry of Education.

Everything with this provincial government, it’s extremely rushed, there’s changes and a short time frame and things to be done very quickly so I honestly think that school boards or administration, you know were still kind of reeling in... shock (7A).

Community members became frustrated at the lack of response from the Board or were suspicious of the changing nature of the information they received. As distrust continued to escalate, community members would flood the Board office with requests for information which were difficult for the restricted Board staff to manage. As well, trustees and Board staff had to deal with insufficient information and long response times to their inquiries from the Ministry of Education.

There was a continuing lack of detailed information [from the ministry] to help trustees and the public understand the specifics of what was going to happen and that was a real nightmare (4A).

[The Board of Education] can write a letter and get a response 6 months later, it's completely inadequate... communication is far too slow, that's a real problem because it adds to the suspicion that we're lying.(5A&B).

The whole business of the funding model and the assignment of funds to various categories was in evolution all the way through this and the ministry continued to change and modify [the funding model]... and the public couldn't accept that and in particular the key spokespersons point their fingers at these things and says the board didn't know what it was doing. (4A)

The long response time and changing nature of the information strained community/Board relationships to the limit as the community assumed that the Board had a preconceived ideas of closure.

All the board said was which option of closure are you going to accept...so it wasn't even a true consultation, it was basically how do you want to be closed. And it was really unhealthy because what it did was pitted community against community (7A).

Many community members felt that the accommodation and review for the purposes of school closure was pushed through too quickly and should take at least a year of detailed study before decisions are made. Concerns were also expressed about the lack of an appeal process for communities that were not happy with decisions that were made. The only recourse for a grievance was to take the school board to court, which was what happened in this particular case. However, they could challenge only the process through which the school board had gone in making their decision and could not challenge the decision for closure itself.

Perhaps the most difficult situation for members of rural communities to deal with was the constant tension that had developed between themselves and their neighbouring communities. Throughout the amalgamation process changing school boundaries and bussing routes continually altered school population numbers.

Every time they talk about school closure they drive students to other boards who are a little more stable...the negative attitude is undermining the whole public system here" (4B)

What's happened is the rural communities who used to help each other...it's turned into a dog fight...like you're not going to have this because we want it...it's really terrible (4B)

However, the attitude of the School Board, which was perpetrated by the Ministry of Education demonstrated a complete lack of concern for the health and well being of rural communities.

They said that they have no commitment to the health of the community...it wasn't their priority to worry about what happens to the

community and they said that many times...they didn't understand the connection that rural people have with their community" (4B)

This was supported by an interview with Mrs. Eckert, newly appointed Minister of Education, as she was reported to have said "she knew that there were schools in the province that needed to be closed and we [the trustees] should go about the job and get it done..."(6A).

However, most respondents acknowledged the importance of a high school as the educational and social hub of activity in a rural community. They also recognized the need and desire to maintain a sense of community by keeping youth involved in everyday activities.

There are many advantages to having a small...high school, [with] a small but very strong network of people, of everybody knowing everybody else, of safety and security and that those things that might be missing from the curriculum or from extracurricular can be made up in other ways and aren't as important as being able to stay in town to go to school.(8B)

They have to realize that in rural Ontario ...communities are...important we want the students to come back to the community...because where you live and where you grow up is part of your education (4B).

The struggle to maintain a sense of that which is rural was paramount to community respondents.

Communities have a very important impact on students, especially rural areas... it's the whole concept of rural Ontario and what a rural community is and to keep these areas strong we need to keep our youth in our area...rural Ontario needs a strong, internal spirit (4B).

However, a Board staff person reminded us that the "independence... we used to have is no longer a luxury we're allowed to have"(C)

### **Final comments**

Each respondent was asked for final comments that they felt were important and perhaps had not been mentioned in the interview process. The most significant concern was the Ministry of Education's apparent lack of knowledge and concern for rural Ontario and its needs. As well, there was a general consensus that educational reform lacked coordination, leadership and planning that might have provided a province-wide approach to school closure. "Community members had done a lot of research and knew what was new and happening in other rural areas and countries" (4B) where as there was an apparent lack of research and planning that went into the educational reform process, especially as it affects rural Ontario.

Community members were most concerned with the effects of accommodation and school closure on their communities.

Rural Ontario is different from urban Ontario and it has to be handled differently... They're so worried about losing hospitals and ...losing

banks and post office, they've become insulated in their own little areas and so rural Ontario has lost all that "let's work together to make things happen (4B).

Trustees, on the other hand were concerned with trying to accommodate the needs of rural children with limited educational and transportation dollars.

We had a lot of people from the ministry making a lot of really helpful suggestions like why don't you increase the walking time by a quarter of a mile, well wonderful, it doesn't help anything in rural Ontario because there probably isn't a farm house...[and] it isn't going to change the size of your bus if you have one less or one more house, so that's useless. One other [person] suggested...we should run feeder buses up and down all the concessions and drop the kids at the end of each concession and run one bus up the side road and drop them all off. I said oh that's really quite a good idea...what happens in the middle of a snow storm when these kids are literally in a bare field with no trees and at the end of our road when it's blowing in the winter I don't even know where the road is much less where the kids are, they'd... freeze to death. (4B)

Board of Education staff felt the squeeze as the vehicle in the middle trying to satisfy an uncaring master and angry parents and community groups. Most of their concerns concentrated on the uncaring stance displayed by the Ministry of Education.

The really sad thing here is that the ministry is the driving force for all this stuff yet it's getting off entirely... I wish the provincial government would ...own up to its expectations and...come clean and work with the boards more publicly in...what it expects instead of trying to cop out and pass the blame. I really think they're being dishonest to the point of being immoral in terms of that...It's unfortunate because a lot of local people get hurt and unfortunately these processes create a lot of casualties along the way (4A).

The ministry is getting into, let me call it public flogging, if boards run a deficit...we are caught in having to implement a ministry funding formula which our board in particular has continued to say doesn't work. We launched the post card campaign back in '98, the whole one size doesn't fit all concept. And our point then was [the government has] an agenda, so if people think that either the trustees or administration within the board is going to make a difference they'd better get over it ...I think all rural communities need to work together with the government, not just the Ministry of Education and force the government to say basically whether they do or don't value rural education, or anything rural. If they do then they need to put money into it and use the data to support the funding flow. Because treating every board equally is not equity (12A).

I think it's a very awkward situation for the board to be put into, where the government is controlling all the finances, basically telling them how most of the money has to be spent and then shrugging their shoulders and saying but school boards have enough money to do whatever they want, if they want to close schools it's their responsibility, not ours. I think that's a little bit too slick (8B).

A final issue mentioned by trustees and board staff was the lack of credentialed, senior administrators with knowledge and experience in rural areas. Firstly, “rural issues” are not a component in the educational programs required to meet the qualifications of senior administrative staff. Secondly, even though there are many excellent administrators in rural areas, they have no access to the courses that urban educators might take as evening or summer courses. As one trustee explained it:

In [an urban] board...you’d have a lot more people with the papers even if they never actually use them but just saw it as good professional development...It’s just a lot harder [in rural areas], I mean you can start to do these things on-line now so... it’s becoming easier but it hasn’t to this point been as easy for someone who lives in Bayfield for example to get to school regularly enough to get the paper work behind them if they’re working... it’s just not as easy (5A&B).

### **Recommendations**

From a strictly educational perspective, informants considered parent or school councils as an excellent mode of communication among parents, schools, trustees and Boards of Education. If used “to its fullest degree...it’s the right vehicle for community participation and decision making (4A).

To reduce strain on limited staff, it was also suggested that a consulting or communication firm be retained for a limited time during the school accommodation process to ensure that the community consultation runs smoothly. Project funding to determine if this process might be helpful to Boards and communities was denied by the Ministry in this round of school accommodation.

A Board administrator had several suggestions that might enhance community development and Board/community relationships:

- Leadership is required that will enable Boards of Education and their constituents to devise plans that best suit ‘clusters of communities’.
- Planning and inter-ministerial cooperation and collaboration is required to bring together rather than separate individuals, communities and service provision that will enhance and support educational development in rural communities.

Other suggestions for change were considerably more radical and called for restructuring on a much larger scale. One trustee suggested the need for an infrastructure in rural Ontario. She explains that the school system might play a vital role in that structure.

In rural Ontario one of our biggest problems is we don’t have an infrastructure, we’ve destroyed our municipalities as well because we’re amalgamating them at the same time, pretty much as we’re doing school boards, so we don’t have that infrastructure, there’s nobody there to deliver service, there’s no where to tie people together and make sure everything’s working right... I believe... very strongly, that schools are a natural infrastructure...especially when you look at the kinds of services that are delivered... primarily to the youngest and the oldest members of

society in one way or another, even welfare and things like that all tie in... because the schools were already there and existent it made sense to keep that network intact(5A).

Building on that notion, several informants suggested the need for inter-ministerial cooperation and planning that would include bringing together facilities and resources, currently funded by various Government of Ontario Ministries, in rural communities to create common use facilities.

There has only been lip service paid to the concept of multi-use facilities and unless you can force the issue of bringing...those things... together and create common facilities. In a little village of 200 people...[with] a community hall and a library and a school, you can't have 3 separate facilities in this day and age. You've got to find a way to bring them together and in fact if there's any other way of integrating a school building with other facilities like... municipal offices and other municipal facilities then it should be done (4A).

[One] model...tried to organize areas right across the province that are rural and some of the agricultural organizations...I think that's the only way they're going to affect change. It needs to be on a concerted basis because...there are a whole lot of silos in the government where there is an intent to preserve their own ministry ... where if they could ever break down those silos and get some cross functional things happening, it might actually save money administratively in their own bureaucracy and deliver a better service, crossing between education, health, social services, all of those things (12A).

One Board of Education taking part in this research currently partners with local children's aid and public health. The director suggests that

This is a safety net, this catches small problems before they become big ones but it's not really part of the board's mandate and even though it's directly helping kids so that they can be ready to learn, that's the kind of thing that we have discretion and therefore may have to cut if we don't find other places to cut (8B).

With or without inter-ministerial cooperation, research and planning by Boards of Education are essential ingredients for a less stressful accommodation process.

The other thing is that the boards need to be predicting... and speculating in rational ways about the...possible scenarios for the future and how they might deal with them should such come to pass and they have to be bold enough to take actions on certain issues before the realities come into existence...this looks to be more probable based on the kinds of things that have happened so far or it's logical that this would be the next step and we were very public about those predictions, not only, I used to write them out and we used to circulate them to trustees as board information reports, we used to publish them on our intranet system to the schools... We also had our school council people on there. We had school councils before the school councils were mandated, based on the same kind of predictive process (4A).

## **Analysis of Community Case C**

As one of two communities in Ontario that resorted to court action to resolve the issues of school closure, a group of residents from Seaforth were extremely dissatisfied with the accommodation and review process which attempted to close their only high school. One year after winning a court case to keep their high school open, emotions regarding the process of school accommodation are still running high. The issues of contention included imposed amalgamation of Boards of Education, loss of student involvement in the community, loss of the school building as a hub of community activity, and a broad range of communication issues including lack of leadership, coordination and planning in the educational reform process. Concern was also expressed regarding the lack of 'rural expertise' available when hiring senior administrative staff, and the glaring lack of recognition of 'rural' and 'community' in overall educational reform policy and school accommodation process.

Community issues were high on the list of concerns of informants in Seaforth, although they were somewhat different than those of the previous communities discussed. As children of high school age, students became more involved in the community with part-time and volunteer jobs and other extra curricular activities. With its 120 year history, the high school was a focal point in town as students were able to walk to after school opportunities while gaining a sense of involvement, support and commitment to the community. Loss of the high school would mean students leaving town in the early morning and not returning until late afternoon. Informants were concerned with the disconnection from the community that this would cause for both students and their parents. The economic impact on the community was also expressed as part-time and co-op positions with local business would disappear.

The lack of leadership and planning and the lack of inclusion of 'rural' and 'community' within the Ministry of Education's vocabulary highlight only a few of the many concerns expressed by residents of this community. Trustees and Board staff were heard on many occasions that their responsibility began and ended with education. The health and survival of rural communities was not on their agenda. Staff informants and a community member were very critical of the lack of concern for coordination and development of rural infrastructure and multi-use facilities. However, they acknowledged that this was a direct result of the inflexibility of the funding formula, the educational reform process and the general separateness of the Government of Ontario's ministries.

Because of the extreme divisiveness within Board of Directors after the imposed amalgamation, the AMDSB found itself in the position of needing to hire a new Director of Education. Concern was expressed at this time by trustees and community members of the lack of candidates with experience and knowledge regarding educational issues in rural areas. However, it appears that this is only a symptom of a larger issue that, once again, 'rural' is not recognized in the curriculum requirements for credentialing as an academic administrator. To further complicate the issues, courses for acquiring the necessary credentials usually require attendance at a university either on a part-time weekly basis or as a full-time summer commitment, making it difficult for rural educators to complete the educational process.

Seaforth was certainly the most militant of the communities studied. However, trustees and Board staff reported many calls from parents and residents who were not convinced

that the SDHS should be kept open. Because of the size of the community, these residents felt outnumbered and preferred to remain quiet for fear of retaliation towards their businesses or families.

### ***Community Case D***

Port Dover, a town of 4,196 people, located on the north shore of Lake Erie, is one of seven small towns which constitute the City of Nanticoke. Nanticoke has the largest population of six area municipalities which make up the region of Haldimand-Norfolk, Ontario. The City of Nanticoke is part of a larger area including Brantford, Delhi, Dunnville, Cayuga, Caledonia, Hagersville, Paris, Simcoe and Waterford, all of which are served by the Grand Erie District School Board.

Port Dover High School, constructed in 1963 on land donated by the Port Dover Lion's Club, remains in good physical condition. In 1998 a new school library housing state of the art research and IT equipment was opened. In 1997, the publically funded Todd Eaton Memorial Track, an olympic-style field and track facility, was accepted by the Grand Erie School Board for school and community use. This track is considered to be one of the best of its kind in southern Ontario. The school is conveniently located within the town of Port Dover, close to amenities such as an arena, tennis courts, community centre, medical centre and ball diamond. Only 10% of students are bussed. As well, PDCS has an international reputation, attracting students<sup>ii</sup> from Asia, Europe and South America.

Port Dover Composite High School (PDCS) is one of 17 high schools within the catchment area served by Grand Erie District School Board. In September of 1998 the Grand Erie District School Board announced that PDCS was one of four area high schools being considered for closure. At the time of the announcement PDCS had an 80% enrollment. One of Port Dover, Simcoe, Hagersville and Delhi high schools would likely be closed in order to meet new Ministry of Education guidelines. However, the local MPP suggested that with a new funding formula, no schools would be closed.

Notwithstanding the announcement by the MPP, the GEDSB struck a community accommodation/consolidation ad hoc committee (CA/CAHC) to begin a review of local schools. This committee was to make recommendations to the school board regarding school closure by April 30, 1999. Being aware that more money might be made available for class room use, community members were concerned that less money would be available to meet maintenance and operating expenses. As a result of the uncertainty, forty Port Dover residents met to organize a community group that became known as SOS (Save our School). This group was made up of community representatives as well as members from the advisory councils of PDCS, Port Dover Public School and Doverwood Public School. Over a two year period, the SOS committee listened to, negotiated with and responded to the many requests, orders and ultimatums given by the Grand Erie District School Board. Within the community, this group organized letter writing campaigns and distributed protest signs. They kept the community informed at each step of the negotiations with the school board. The committee prepared proposals, alternatives, program options, and presentations for consideration by the school accommodation/consolidation ad hoc committee (SA/CAHC) and the school board as a

whole. Committee members also met with the Minister of Education, David Johnson, presenting him with alternatives and requesting that the Rural Funding Formula be made available to the GEDSB.

As the first school closure announcement was being made several other scenarios, with varying impacts on the school closure debate, were shaping up in the wider community. In anticipation of the need to prove the viability of PDCS, school supporters were investigating the feasibility of three separate ventures, one with Fanshawe College, one with the Festival Lighthouse Theatre and a third with the Port Dover public library. First, Fanshawe College revealed that the property adjacent to PDCS was one of two sites they were considering for expansion of their current campus. The prospect of this development was strongly supported by the City of Nanticoke. A second partnership, between PDCS and the Lighthouse Festival Theatre was being enthusiastically pursued by the theatre's artistic director. He proposed a partnership to create a Performing and Technical Arts Program<sup>iii</sup> between the Lighthouse Festival Theatre and PDCS. It was anticipated that this partnership could provide both a performing arts curriculum for students, as well as hands on skills training in all aspects of theatre production. Thirdly, the SOS committee was investigating a library unification project. This proposal would consolidate the current Port Dover public library with the PDCS library at the high school site. The newly established library at PDCS would be preserved, making this state of the art facility available to the public.

The announcement regarding school closure also coincided with an announcement by the Brant Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic District School Board (BH-NDSB) that a new Catholic high school was to be built in the Town of Simcoe within the next year. This proposed development created tension between the Grand Erie District School Board and the BH-N Catholic School Board to the extent that the local MPP offered to intervene in an effort to find a mutually agreeable solution. Furthermore, the second site under consideration by Fanshawe College for their campus expansion was in cooperation with the proposed new Catholic high school development project in the Town of Simcoe.

In May, 1999 the SA/CAHC presented eleven recommendations to the Grand Erie District School Board. These recommendations suggested that the Grand Erie District School Board pursue a relationship with the BH-N Catholic School Board, Fanshawe College and the Town of Simcoe to develop a multi-use facility in the Town of Simcoe. As a part of this merger plan, excess space at Port Dover, Delhi, Simcoe and Waterford secondary schools could be offered for lease to local social service agencies. In June, 1999 the chair of the Grand Erie District School Board announced that, conditional upon receipt of extraordinary funding from the province, the school board would pursue a partnership as outlined above. PDCS would be closed and the students would be transferred to Simcoe. This recommendation hinged on receipt of extra funding from the province. Due to the mounting tension, the Town of Simcoe council decided not to rush into a partnership with Fanshawe College and, the BH-N Catholic School Board agreed to defer opening their new high school in the Town of Simcoe until at least September 2001.

With the Town of Simcoe seemingly out of the picture, The City of Nanticoke mayor and council actively pursued Fanshawe College to encourage them to develop their new campus in the town of Port Dover. However, representatives from Fanshawe College

declined to take part in further negotiations at that time. With the prospects of a deal with Fanshawe College temporarily off the table, the City of Nanticoke turned their attention to the Grand Erie District School Board with a proposal to amalgamate the PDCS library with the Port Dover public library. This proposal was well received, but did not deter the board of education in their school closure proceedings. School board staff indicated that if the library project went ahead and PDCS was subsequently closed, the City of Nanticoke might consider purchasing the school/library complex if it came up for sale.

Throughout this period, directives and decisions of the Grand Erie District School Board were received by the SOS committee. As noted above, in May of 1999 the SA/CAHC recommended closure of Simcoe Composite School and the development of a new multi-use secondary facility in the Town of Simcoe. With boundary adjustments that would affect Port Dover, Waterford and Dehli, this new facility would mainly benefit the Town of Simcoe. Questioning the viability of this plan, the recommendation was defeated by a majority vote of the school board. Other unofficial suggestions by members of the ad hoc committee included joining PDCS with Simcoe Secondary School in the Town of Simcoe and turning PDCS into a public school. As these recommendations and negotiations fell through, members of the SOS committee accused the GEDSB of looking only at numbers, refusing to consider the needs of students and ignoring the wishes of the community.

In September, 1999 a trustee put forward a motion to the GEDSB to close PDCS. This motion was not supported by a seconder and was summarily dropped. By November the Director of Education of the GEDSB presented two options for consideration. These included creating a middle school at PDCS and transferring grades 11 and 12 to Simcoe Composite School. A vote to close PDCS or convert it to a middle school was passed by the school board later that month. At this point, a second ad hoc committee, with representative from SOS and Port Dover school advisory committees, was established. When questioned by the ad hoc committee about their decision to create a middle school, it was discovered that the Board of Education had no facts or figures to substantiate their decision. Requests by the ad hoc for information pertaining to capital and operating costs, program and staff projections were not met.

The City of Nanticoke and the Port Dover Board of Trade offered some practical assistance and support to the SOS committee by urging the Grand Erie District School Board to defer any decisions on school closure until they had reviewed all pertinent information and were fully aware of the implications that such decisions might have for Port Dover and the wider area. In December of 1999 the City of Nanticoke council requested that the local MPP be invited to meet with council to discuss the school closure issue. They further instructed city staff to request a board wide consolidation/school closure plan from the Grand Erie District School Board, and to request a formal meeting between members of the city council and the school board. Also, the City of Nanticoke formally endorsed the SOS committee. In March, 2000, in an unprecedented decision, the council agreed to cover any legal costs incurred by the SOS committee in their fight to keep PDCS open..

In March, 2000, the ad hoc committee and community representatives again stated that closure of PDCS was not an option. Instead, they recommended to the GEDSB that grades 7 and 8 be transferred to PDCS making that school a grade 7 to OAC. Doverwood public school would become a JK to grade 6 and Port Dover Public School, the oldest of the three schools, would be closed. Although the board of education noted that this was not one of the options presented for consideration, they officially approved the

recommendation in May, 2000. These changes would become effective September, 2001, with Port Dover Public School officially closing in June, 2001. It was also noted that these decisions could be revisited as the GEDSB underwent their annual consolidation/accommodation review as required by the Ministry of Education.

### **Amalgamation**

Prior to amalgamation most community members and Board staff and trustees assessed the relationship between board and community as being fairly congenial. Community members noted that trustees and staff of Board's of Education were generally very accessible to community members who requested information or assistance. These relationships were noted as being more personal, with community members feeling they might have an impact on education issues of importance to them. However, one informant cautioned that the past is often remembered with nostalgia and simply due to the passage of time, these relationships may have seemed more amicable.

One issue of importance to both trustees and community members was that prior to amalgamation, Boards of Education were able to discuss issues relating to educational/school improvements directly with community taxpayers. With local agreement, taxes could be levied for a particular project or increased to provide ongoing educational improvements. Under the new funding formula this kind of local cooperation is no longer possible.

In early 1998, the GEDSB underwent a three way amalgamation as Educational Reform was imposed on school boards within the province of Ontario. This amalgamation led to poor relationships within the newly formed board of education as two predominantly rural boards were combined with one larger, urban board. An informant explained that "the feeling amongst the rural [trustees]...was that ...it was a hostile take over by the urban board." (3a). Although the majority of trustees were from rural areas and had many concerns in common, when school closure became an issue each wanted their community school kept open. This conflict pitted rural communities and their trustees against each other rather than providing a united front dealing with rural concerns.

A staff person from the GEDSB suggested that "amalgamation was imposed...from the province under the pretense of efficiency...". He went on to say that "in the larger board, the relationships are obviously more distant, that was part of the intent of the amalgamation... to make sure that there were larger units... to reduce administrative costs but also to allow the board to get on with the issues of rationalizing school space and school accommodation" (13a).

### **The Accommodation Process**

Parents and community members looked at the results of amalgamation rather than the intent and felt that "restructuring was...an arbitrary thing" which saw many rural communities thrown together with urban, suburban areas. They were distressed that their specific rural needs and concerns were sufficiently different from their urban counterparts and might be ignored as many "trustees...[had] no ideas where some of these schools are even located" (3B). A community member suggested that "our future is being dictated by people who are further and further removed from the cores of our community" (1a).

Following quickly on the heels of board amalgamation, the issue of school closure was raised. Although, according to one trustee, closure of Port Dover Composite School had been an ongoing issue of discussion for the old Norfolk Board of Education since the late 1980s. Community members, trustees and staff who had more recently joined the educational controversy were not aware of this ongoing debate.

With the announcement that PDCS was on the review list, community members came together ready to make contributions, presentations and to offer opinions as to viable solutions for their community. However, many community members felt that the decision to close the school had been made before the community was asked to participate in the debate.

Rural communities...fight for what they believe is right and I think that if the situation is brought to their attention a lot sooner than there doesn't need to be all the acrimony ...we are truly all supposed to be working for the...best interests of our children (1a).

The Port Dover SOS committee was supported by municipal government, local business, separate school supporters as well as parents and the general public. However, as noted by several informants, staff and teachers of local schools were unofficially told that they were not to be involved in the community discussions unless officially requested to serve on an accommodation and review committee. Municipal representatives were told that their input was of marginal interest as "education is not part of a municipal affair and municipal health is not part of education" (9a). An official request from municipal representatives to meet and discuss the accommodation and review process and its possible effects on the town was refused.

Early in the process, community members felt alienated from the decision making process and felt they "were not a partner in the decision making at all" (3b) Access to information, timeliness of and poor quality of information received from trustees and Board staff was an ongoing concern. More importantly parents and community members noted the disrespect shown them by trustees at local meeting throughout the process. This included what several informants described as insulting body language, inattentive behaviour by trustees during community presentations, inadequate meeting space and police presence at public meetings.

The service clubs were big...individual school groups...alumni... those type of people, they didn't do anything for me, I just sounded them out...they brought in stuff like real estate values going down...you know what, that's not my problem... the more I heard that I think, that's not the school board's job (Trustee9b).

As the review process became more contentious, community informants complained about the number and appropriateness of in-camera sessions which seemed to be a spontaneous decision by trustees as a result of their discomfort with meeting process. These incidents increased community distrust of trustees and board staff as they questioned trustee and board commitment to the community consultation process.

Timely access to accurate information was an ongoing concern for community members. Community informants felt their requests were unnecessarily delayed or ignored and that the information they did receive was controlled by bureaucrats. However they also questioned the quality of the information being provided to trustees:

[Trustees] are given the information by which to make their decision by bureaucrats within the education system and that creates a problem because those bureaucrats...dictate the information that is put on the table to [trustees]...those bureaucrats should be held accountable for the information that they are giving to the decision makers.....the statistics that they would put up...you could blow a hole in them so fast it was just a joke...and then what do you do. you have embarrassed your representative because he understands that he's been given information he needs to make a proper decision (1a)

At the same time trustees and staff of the newly formed GEDSB were experiencing internal difficulties as suggested by several informants. Some complained of poor communication and limited information transfer to trustees from staff. Community involvement in the review process further divided the trustees. Although most agreed that communities should have a voice in the school closure process they disagreed as to the nature and extent of community involvement.

The building itself, the location is only one component and often not a very important component...under the Education Act and the funding model, it's the elected trustees of the board who are responsible for making all the pieces work... [the] funding model imposed by Ontario government...[dictates that] decisions [are] made by elected trustees, they are the decision makers(13a).

The accommodation and review process in Port Dover was long and difficult and took it's toll on all that were involved. Trustees, in particular felt manipulated and in many cases defeated by the process. Interviews with trustees highlighted their frustration with a process of accommodation and review that was fraught with contradiction. As one trustee confessed: "I think the board, we did it real bad, I don't think we did it well the first time...we've learned a lesson from that...you gotta let them (community members) help you"(9b). However as previously stated the Education Act dictates who makes decisions yet does not suggest what kind of community involvement is appropriate or acceptable.

Being a trustee you get \$5,000 a year to get beat up, people expect a lot from you and you have to make decisions that 99% of the time people don't like...and when good people stop wanting to be involved then it opens the door for the government to say bye bye school boards, hello voucher system, hello charter schools....(9b)

Community informants expressed concern that their rural status and the ongoing accommodation and review process was costing them in many ways. Yet there was little 'official' recognition that the 1998-2000 accommodation and review process in Port Dover was both personally and professionally devastating for many people.

What's sad is that they (trustees and Board of Education staff) don't seem to have learned anything from this battle...when you make a decision and it doesn't work out then you rework it. You don't go blundering ahead insisting that it's going to work (1a)

As a community they had enhanced their school with a state of the art library, computer access for all students as well as other positive initiatives resulting from community

involvement and donations. Nonetheless, Port Dover school stood to lose these enhanced programs as a result of amalgamation and consolidation. The community was also left facing an inherent contradiction in the process. A community informant suggested that “in order to gain equity, we have to come down...we’ve seen a definite loss” in programs and activities (3b). Yet another informant noted that “...if we’re going to be allowed to keep our schools, we’re going to have to have a school that beats the provincial standards” (2a).

As parents and community members became frustrated in the lack of response and cooperation received from the GEDSB, several members went directly to the Ministry of Education for assistance and answers. A community leader told us that the relationship with the Ministry of Education was

very challenging because it appears that the Ministry has set regulations for Boards to operate under but the Ministry will only enforce a very small portion of those regulations, one regulation being class size, they’ll enforce that, operating under a deficit, they’ll enforce that..but when it comes to whether the board can hold a public meeting and deny access of people...they refused to do it...the Ministry refused to do anything about that...they said well it’s up to the public to sue the Board to do it (9a)

### **The Rural School Community**

When asked about the future of their community, informants were adamant that a high school is “critical to the life of a [rural] town” (9A), particularly a tourist town such as Port Dover. “Having a full [public] education system makes a big difference to the future of the town” (9A). A trustee agreed that closing a high school is like “ripping the heart out of a community” (3A). The high school was considered part of the community infrastructure by one informant (1B) and, residents should have the same voice in educational decision making as they have in municipal decisions. As with the other communities studied, informants felt that the high school contributes to the unique history of the community and represents a central focus for students growing up in the community.

Parents wanted their children to retain the personal contact and educational support afforded to children in smaller schools. Informants indicated that they were actively seeking partnerships with local business and social services to enhance the opportunities available to students and to the community at large. However, although the Government had suggested that Boards and school investigate community partnerships, the funding formula and educational reform policy did not support such endeavours.

A senior administrator (13A) of the Board of Education explained that one of the guiding principles and assumptions of school accommodation is the provision of quality programming for all students. He went on to explain that due to the new curriculum there is a need for a ‘critical mass’ of students at each grade level in order to be able to offer the a well rounded program to address the needs of all students. He conceded that “it would be nice to keep [schools] in small communities but not the point at which the kids suffer or the extra costs become prohibitive to the other students in the system” (13A).

### **Final Comments**

When given an opportunity to expand on their comments in certain areas or when asked

for a final comment many informants were very candid regarding their feelings towards educational reform and the role of the Ontario Ministry of Education and/or the Ontario government of the day. These comments can best be summarized in two categories, one relating to the overall design of reform and the second relating to personal and organizational understanding, definitions and ideologies inherent in the educational system.

#### a) Overall Government Preparation and Design of Educational Reform

According to a community informant (9b) the time frames for the amalgamation of school boards, introduction of the funding formula, school accommodation and review, the new curriculum, and various other educational reforms were poorly thought out as Board's of Education and communities had to scramble to keep up with constant imposition of change. Some seemingly arbitrary changes left Boards of Education to implement new policies and deal with fall out from community.

The following were identified by community informants as design problems:

1. There is no consistency in the way Ministry of Education policies are interpreted and carried by Board's of Education out across the province;
1. Because all trustees are up for election every four years there may be no continuity in representations from election to election;
1. The Ministry of Education is seen as having neglected rural issues in development of funding model and in recognition of the needs of rural communities;
1. Educational policies treat all schools the same way and do not take into consideration individual and community issues.

This neglect of rural issues lead to the larger issue of the place of research in the design of and preparation for educational reform. Community informants were quite outspoken about this. Research done by informants and other community members identified a wealth of national and international literature & precedents relating to the issues which created ongoing tensions during the review process:

There have been precedents across the country, across North America and in fact around the world of what happens... and what are some of the alternatives to closing a rural school and to pretend that those do not exist is really an insult to the intelligence of the general public...the government with all its resources, should have been able to see some of these problems coming ...and it should have been more properly researched at that point...it would appear to me that the government should have known the consequences of their actions and I can't help but think that they did know that (1a).

A trustee agreed that "The SOS committee (in Port Dover)...was probably the most effective because I think the people they had running it were very committed individuals...they probably know more about school closures and the legislation than I do" (9b)

The lack of an obvious evaluation process was also identified by community informants who stated that the “ministry hasn’t learned anything from the process”. They are still not aware of urban/rural differences, nor are they aware of the impact of their educational reform policies on rural communities. A community informant suggested that “A lot of educational reform hasn’t really resulted in better educational opportunity” (3a).

The final area of concern with the design process, identified by community informants, trustees and Board staff was that of accountability and support for participants in the reform process. Community members suggested the following:

I think that there could have been less of a confrontation about it if the provincial government had been more open in the beginning to explaining to the public in general and further to the school board, what their intentions were as far as cutting funding....it’s at that level that first there would need to be recognition of rural needs being different than those of the urban and suburban areas...We should not have to educate the government about the difference between rural and suburban school needs, that should not be our role (1a).

There seem to be guidelines for boards to follow but there... doesn’t seem to be any way to ensure that they carry them out (3b)

A trustees expressed the concern for the lack of confirmation available to Board’s of Education through out the reform process:

It was quite convenient I believe for the provincial government to say very clearly, oh we’re not closing schools, only Boards of Education close schools... and that is true, I mean the decision to close, it’s quite clear in the Education Act ...It’s clearly our responsibility, it’s clearly our mandate...One thing that bothered me immensely was not the lack of support from the ministry...but the lack of acknowledgement of somehow, they had nothing to do with this happening, this is the...school boards problem, this had got nothing to do with us. When in reality, very clearly, the new student focussed funding model had a devastating impact on boards...that had a lot of small schools (3a)

#### b) Definitions & Ideologies

The differences in personal understanding and interpretation regarding education, schools, educational reform, rural vs urban ideology, democracy, trustee responsibility and allegiances, as well as many other issues became evident throughout the research process. Community informants continued to feel alienated by the process. “The government is saying community partnerships but there isn’t anything to support what they’re saying” (3b). As well community informants felt that their involvement in the process of consultation meant that there might be negotiated outcomes. However, a Board staff person pointed out that “I don’t think that...[negotiation is] anywhere in the regulations or legislation” (13a)

Some trustees described themselves as constituent representatives while others condemned colleagues for that approach. Others felt they had been elected to make their own informed decisions regardless of the opinions expressed by constituents. There was

continual controversy between community and trustees as well as among trustees as to where their allegiances should lie.

The overwhelming controversy was regarding the uniqueness of the role of education and schools in rural communities, especially one school communities.

That's just rural mentality again, if it has to be done you figure out a way to do it (9a).

We were fighting...the battle of the funding formula and getting it changed to recognize the needs of a single school community...there was no recognition what so ever for rural schools and the effect that closing the only school in a community would have (3b).

I see this as a partnership between the Board of Education, the community and our elected officials, the government. and this particular government, it would appear to us is very narrow minded in its approach to these things (1a).

## **Recommendations**

Even with this painful process behind them, many informants remain optimistic about how things might be different in the future. Informants noted “some boards across the province have been successful with implementation of new policies...[these boards] seem to have a wide open process that allows time for public input, you know forces the board to respond to the public (9a). The processes and practices used by these boards might be studied to determine what might be helpful for struggling communities. Other community members suggested the need for a complete, informed process from conception to followup and evaluation to be identified by the Ministry of Education. This process should be built through community consultation and research rather than imposed by government.

A trustee suggested that communities need to know “up front” what their involvement might be, what they can and cannot do, and what Board's are asking them to provide and why. This same trustee suggested that school closure is like a “grieving process”. As with any change of this magnitude, individuals at all levels of involvement need to be better educated as to the process of change and how it can be managed.

## **Analysis of Community Case D**

The GEDSB was formed from two rural boards and a large urban board, immediately creating tension for all concerned. Although rural trustees outnumbered their urban counterparts and seemingly had more in common, in fact this union only created conflict for rural representatives, each wanting to keep their own community school open. The divisive nature of the accommodation process and funding formula again created distrust and dissent among trustees and the communities they represented.

Community members in Port Dover were very active, vocal, and well organized from the first announcement that their high school was on the list for review by the Board of Education. This group of very active citizens researched every aspect of school closure, small and/or rural schools, and the effects of school closure on the communities involved.

Community informants described their interactions with the Board of Education as confrontational and had the feeling that decisions regarding closure of their high school were made before consultations began.

Concerns of this community centered around the issues of non-enforcement of Ministry policy regulations, the absence of an evaluation process and, the funding formula. As a result of frustration regarding the seemingly non-response of the Board of Education regarding requests for information, the community informants approached the Ministry of Education for assistance. They (9A) quickly discovered that not all regulations would be supported and were advised by Ministry officials to sue the Board if they were not happy.

This community was successful in keeping their high school open for another year with some minor changes. However, the process through which they went was long and difficult, one that most informants did not want to repeat.

### **Cross Case Analysis of Group Two (communities C&D)**

As was seen with the elementary school, the relationship of the two high schools studied with their respective Boards of Education can best be characterized as difficult. The imposed amalgamation process presented a difficult start to the accommodation and review process for both communities. The Ministry of Education's 'hand off' policy when trouble was brewing between communities and Boards was a constant source of tension as was the seeming lack of research, preparation and design of the educational reform process by the Ministry of Education. Once again the lack of knowledge about rural issues, the funding formula and the needs of small, one school communities were a prime concern and a source of constant frustration as both communities attempted to work cooperatively with Boards of Education and the Ministry.

Loss of a sense of community was an issue, but from a different perspective from the elementary school communities. Respondents wanted to maintain the support and nurturing atmosphere available in a small school but were also cognisant of the many opportunities their community might offer these older students. Students of high school age were able and willing to take part in community activities, volunteer positions and part time jobs as they took an active part in the creation of their community. Closure of the school would make it difficult for the teens to be involved in these kinds of activities.

### **Cross Group Analysis (Group One & group Two)**

According to the Webster's dictionary, relationship means 'a connection, association or involvement' without qualification as to quality. The communities and Boards of Education involved in this research had always had a relationship, however restructuring had changed that relationship through the consolidation of boards of education and legislation which limited the ways and means in which the boards of education could interact and consult with communities as a result of educational reform. For example imposed unrealistic time frames for implementation for new legislation and policy. At best community engagement might be characterized as 'somewhat involved'. However, in most cases, however, it would be best characterized as limited or token involvement.

Trustees and Board staff indicated that they had no choice with whom they would work as rural and urban Boards were amalgamated. In some cases, according to trustees and staff, there was little foresight or planning in the amalgamation process. Trustees and

Board staff began a very difficult process of school accommodation with the added tension of differing cultures, philosophies and rural/urban mix around the board table. As a result of these amalgamations, rural and urban communities faced similar tensions as they were thrown immediately into the process of school review and closure. With this history, it is little wonder that the subsequent relationships and processes of accommodation were fraught with difficulty.

Community informants were most concerned with the loss of the viability of their community as a result of the closure of their school. This research identified a continuum of concern from the the nurturing and supportive learning atmosphere available to elementary school children in small rural schools to the community involvement of high school students that is so necessary for community growth and retention of youth. Community members reported that closure of either a rural elementary or a high school would destroy this added educational dimension of community caring and engagement which is crucial to childhood development of self-esteem and the love of learning. It is also seen as central to rural community life and the sustainability of rural communities. While rural communities struggle with the out migration of it best and brightest youth, the question must be asked what is the message youth hear when their community does not even warrant the investment of a school? Is this a place they would like to make their home and raise their children?

Almost every aspect of the accommodation and review process and educational reform in general has been criticized throughout this research. Poor communication, lack of accurate information, selective enforcement of Ministry regulations and most importantly, the almost complete void of any mention of the needs of rural Ontario communities in educational policy top the list of concerns.

### **Discussion & Implications**

This study set out to determine what the barriers are to Board of Education/rural community partnerships and what factors and processes enhance these partnerships, particularly during periods of school consolidation. For the most part, what we found were relationships fraught with tension, animosity, and frustrations. There was very little reported in this study by communities, trustees, or boards of education that could be broadly construed as positive. Perhaps the lessons to be learned do not arise from understanding what to do, as much as they arise from what not to do.

First, it is worth highlighting that rural communities have been under assault on a number of fronts. They have not only been faced with school closures, but they have faced threats from hospital closure, the closure of post offices and banks, and coping with the realignment of responsibilities as communities have had to assume responsibilities that have been historically fulfilled by the province. Communities are tired and people are tired as they work to preserve their rural way of life. While the argument can be made that urban communities have faced the same assault, the bottom line is that economies of scale are different and larger urban centres have more “human resources” to cope with the changes. Furthermore, size has real implications for the provision of service and other impacts upon community life. For example, while the school plays a central role in the life of rural communities that is not necessarily the case for urban communities.

Second, the amalgamation of boards of education often resulted in two or more boards that subscribed to different values and beliefs becoming one. These differences seem to be exacerbated when rural boards were amalgamated with larger urban boards. As one of the trustees put it, “it felt like they were involved in a hostile takeover.” Furthermore, urban communities’ relationship to schools are different and informed “decision-making” is often rooted in an urban bias that neglects the unique needs of rural schools and communities. It clearly operates out of a one size fits all mentality. This has been further exacerbated as a result of fewer trustees serving larger constituencies and consequently are further distanced from their constituents. One of the trustees suggested that this was the intention of amalgamation - distance decision-makers from constituents - so that the business of closing schools could begin. This was reflected in one of the respondent’s comment who stated that the Minister of Education argued there are schools in this province that need to be closed and it is the trustees job to get on with that.

Given the above, communication was a major issue in all the communities. Community respondents reported that often they could not get the information they needed from the board of education, or receipt of the information was not timely. Furthermore, there were concerns expressed by community members that the decision-making process was not an informed process and that research that might help understand the implications of proposed changes was not being consulted or used. Furthermore, community respondents reported that board staff and trustees did not seem interested in examining or using research conducted by community groups. In fact these community members maintained that they were treated somewhat paternalistically by staff and trustees, despite that they were often better informed about the issues as they related to rural life and schools than the professionals or their democratically elected representatives. Some trustees also complained about the issue of communication and maintained that often they could not get board staff to give them the information they needed. This, however, may be explained by the fact that board staff had to deal with changing rules and time frames and hence were constantly behind and reported that it often took up to six months to get their information requests filled by the Ministry of Education.

In many ways this issue can be explained in terms of expectations. Community groups fully expected to be consulted and engaged in a dialogue that would lead to joint decision-making. Boards of education, on the other hand, were engaged in a communication strategy that could be broadly described as dissemination. This may have been out of choice or it may have been out of necessity. Certainly the conditions, rules and time frames set by the Ministry of Education were not conducive to a process that involved extensive community consultation. We would argue that despite the intentions of boards of education, it was often the imposition of conditions by the Ministry of Education that prevented community groups from being engaged in meaningful ways. Ironically the question that should be asked is who is in control here? The community thinks the board and trustees are while the boards point to the ministry. Clearly the Ministry of Education, despite their arguments that it is boards of education that close schools, must be held accountable for the deplorable state of relationships among communities, trustees and professional board staff as they engaged in this painful process.

One of the prominent themes running throughout the interviews was the destruction of community. First, there is the destruction of school community within communities. Second, there is the destruction of community infrastructure as rural schools that would be closed are an essential part of the community infrastructure. Third, is the destruction of the sense of community that existed among boards of educations and residents prior to

the amalgamation of boards of education. Most respondents reported good relationships among boards of education, trustees and communities prior to the period of board amalgamation. Fourth, is the destruction of regional community as communities competed with one another in an attempt to save their community schools. It was definitely perceived by community members as a win/lose situation, and to lose was to see one's community school closed.

One issue that community members in general agreed upon was that rural was not a variable that was considered in policy formation and that rurality and the unique needs of rural communities were not considered in making decisions. Furthermore, those making the decisions - board staff members and trustees - did not appreciate the potential impacts that school closure may have on other aspects of community life. For example, closure of secondary schools in small communities may have implications for part time student labour or may impact upon the ability of the community to attract health care professionals to the community. Community respondents also pointed out that historically those individuals who work in rural education seldom have opportunities to get additional credentials and hence senior administrative positions typically go to those who have access to continuing education and these tend to be urban based educators who are then transplanted into rural settings. Thus those making the decisions are not aware of the unique needs and condition of rural communities and the role that the school may play. Or when they did recognize these issues, they argued that it fell outside the purview of their mandate which deals only with education. Furthermore, and to reiterate a point already made, the process set out by the Ministry of Education did not create an environment that allowed communities and boards of education to enter into a true process of dialogue whereby mutual understanding could be realized before decisions were made.

The above issue points to a more fundamental problem, and that is there is an inherent urban bias implicit within policy formation in general, and specifically within education. As Lauzon and Leahy (2000) have argued, historically small schools were viewed as being inferior to larger schools and hence the closure of small rural schools was not contested, and perhaps even celebrated. Larger schools were viewed as inherently superior to smaller schools and the argument was that they provided a higher quality education for a lower cost. However, as Lauzon and Leahy (2000) have pointed out the empirical literature does not support the argument for economies of scale and small schools, in general, have better learning outcomes than larger schools.

How do we account for this sad state of affairs with regard to rural education?

Casey (1998) argues that over the last fifty years the idea of rural life has shifted from one in which we collectively took pride, to one of neglect, and ultimately to one of indifference. In a landscape increasingly dominated by urban and suburban landscapes, rural life simply disappears. At a recent conference on interdisciplinary research Sumner (2001) reported people questioned her on why she was interested in "rural" as a site for interdisciplinary research, clearly suggesting it seemed somewhat odd. Lauzon (2001) has recently argued that rural life and communities are an important part of the fabric of our nation, and that rural people serve as our proxy stewards of the land. Stewardship, he argues, requires presence and it is our collective responsibility to insure that we maintain the quality of rural life to support those who would serve as our proxy stewards. This requires that we make sure that "rural" does not become lost in policy that we actively advocate for evaluation of policy from a rural perspective. However, as Casey (1998) pointed out, there is a larger problem and that is as a society we no longer value rural.

Hondale (1999) argues that in order to counter this urban bias decision-makers must be capable of contextual thinking. This, according to Hondale (1999: 2) requires that decision-makers recognize that

- first, a policy that is appropriate in one locale may lead to disastrous results in another - context is important for determining substance;
- second, context influences the processes that can be used to formulate policy - without contextual sensitivity, effective policies may never be developed; and
- third, contextual maps are needed to execute policy - context stands in the way of the transformation of pronouncement into performance, and context changes over time.

A context sensitive approach to policy development then would begin to address cross sector issues such as the economic impact of school closure on rural communities. Wagemans (1992) maintains, as did the recent UNESCO report on education (Schaeffer, 1994), that a more integrated perspective to policy development requires greater participation of citizens and local organizations. The failing of educational reform in Ontario, from the rural perspective, has been the failure to engage rural citizens in meaningful ways about the future of their schools and their communities.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Hargreaves (1991) tells us that

Restructuring...has no single, agreed definition. Its meaning, rather, is to be found in the context and purpose of its use. In the centralization of curriculum change, and assessment demands, where restructuring is a camouflage for reform, it can support intensification of bureaucratic control. Strong, singular visions and imposed, inflexible mandates—are the stuff of such control (30).

The general consensus gleaned from this research is that the school accommodation and review process in Ontario, from a rural perspective, was poorly researched, poorly designed, and poorly implemented. Many among the respondents would argue that educational reform served only to impose tight controls on educational development in Ontario and to destroy the public school system in Ontario, causing distrust between and alienation of communities from the Board of Education and from each other. Many participants suffered personal hardship as a result of this process. Personal integrity forced the retirement of several trustees and some educator/administrators as they could no longer be a part of a system that was having such a devastating impact on individuals, communities and the public education system.

Rural residents are adamant that formal education cannot be separated from the experience of everyday living. These issues are strongly supported in the literature relating to the value of rural and small community schools. Community activists were very creative in their visions for educational reform in rural communities. Informants suggested a multitude of cooperative and collaborative actions that might make their schools more viable. Some Boards of Education were actively coordinating with health and social services within some of their rural communities.

However, these extra resources will be the first to be sacrificed as funding becomes more stringent. Board staff have also suggested the need for multi-use facilities, inter-ministerial cooperation and maintenance of a rural infrastructure through the educational system.

The literature review suggests that an active consultation process is necessary *before* the design and implementation of educational reform. Leadership and vision are also necessary components for successful reform.

Hargreaves concludes that

The challenge of restructuring in education and elsewhere is a challenge of abandoning bureaucratic controls, inflexible mandates, paternalistic forms of trust and quick system fixed in order to hear, articulate and bring together the disparate voices of teachers and other educational partners. ...It is a challenge of building trust in the processes of collaboration, risk and continuous improvement as well as more traditional kinds of trust in people, and it is a challenge of supporting and empowering school cultures and those involved in them to develop changes themselves on a continuing basis (1991: 31).

This type of creative, developmental restructuring is *not* happening in rural Ontario.

### **Recommendations**

Each community noted systemic needs in the educational reform effort in Ontario. Many are radical, in that they call for a complete rethinking and restructuring of the Ministerial responsibilities and organization in Ontario. Rural informants see an urgent need for the development of a rural infrastructure which would include multi-use facilities to be used cooperatively and collaboratively by inter-ministerial teams, municipal and regional services, educational activities and community activities.

Rural communities have sustained countless attempts at closure of traditional social, health and educational services in the past five years. They are calling for development of a rural infrastructure that would enhance the viability of clusters of communities working together. Rural communities are demanding to be recognized in governmental policy development as equal partners with urban centres. In particular, educational partners are demanding the development and availability for the educational programs and credentialing of rural administrators capable of understanding rural issues and challenging rural communities to collaboratively meet rural needs. Finally, rural communities are demanding the right to their rural lifestyle which includes providing the opportunity for their children to be educated in their home community if they so choose.

How can we move forward on the rural agenda?

First, there is a need for inter-ministerial coordination of policy development. Without coordination among ministries the accumulative impacts of different ministry policies can have a devastating impact on rural communities.

Second, there is a need for honesty. The Ministry of Education has argued that they were striving to restructure education in Ontario to be more cost efficient and effective. However, as Lauzon and Leahy (2000) argued, the government of Ontario has ignored the empirical literature that questions the validity of economies of scale as applied to the

organization and administration of education. They have also ignored the fact that it has been demonstrated empirically that in general, learning outcomes are better for smaller schools than they are for larger schools and that smaller schools do not have as many of the social problems that larger schools have (i.e. violence, teenage pregnancy etc.). Lauzon and Leahy (2000) concluded that educational policy development has ignored the empirical literature and is strictly ideologically driven. If policy is ideologically driven then solutions have been identified within the context of ideology and there are no need for community consultations. This is simply a waste of people's time if their input is not to be valued or used.

Third, there is a need for transparency on the part of all stakeholders. Clearly the process that all our informants were part of was not transparent. Ironically a government that prides itself on holding others accountable have accepted no responsibility for the conditions they created in which this exercise was carried out. As mentioned by respondents in this report, they continually deflected their responsibility by stating that the closure of schools was a board of education decision. While technically this is true, the government has a moral obligation to accept some responsibility for the policy they develop that sets the ground rules and degree of flexibility that boards of education have in implementing government policy. It appears in this case that boards of education had little flexibility.

Fourth, policy needs to be flexible in order to account for the uniqueness and diversity of rural communities. Again, there is irony in that a government that concluded that a "one size fits all" approach to rural healthcare was not adequate has failed to see that the same argument applies to rural education. In fact, the organization of rural healthcare (i.e. administration of hospitals) has been quite successful when communities and regions have been left to decide how they can best meet their collective needs (this does not negate some of the other issues in rural healthcare such as physician attraction and retention). In fact, one of our respondents argued that government policy needs to encourage communities to engage everyone in a regional discussion on how to best meet everyone's needs. While amendments have been made to try and accommodate the special needs of rural communities, these amendments are attempts at refining a formula that is already fundamentally flawed according to our respondents. The government should look to rural communities and regions to put forth solutions to problems rather than trying to refine what they have already determined to be an unworkable solution.

Fifth, the Ministry of Education should be monitoring the impact of educational restructuring on rural education and rural community to insure that future restructuring operates from a more informed perspective on the implications for rural communities. This is needed given that we know very little about actual impacts on rural communities when their schools are closed. If there is to be further restructuring down the road then it would be helpful to know what the consequences are for those rural communities who lose their schools.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questionnaire

1. Prior to the restructuring of education in Ontario (consolidation of boards and school closures) how would you characterize the relationship between the board of education and your community?
1. How did this relationship change during 1998 to 2000? Can you think of critical turning points or events that changed the relationship?
1. From your perspective, what is the role of community participation in the decision-making process as it relates to school closures?
1. How would you characterize public involvement in (your community) relating to threats of school closure?
1. Who were the main stakeholders involved in making the decision to close?
  - How would you characterize these relationships?
  - How did they change over time?
  - What were some of the critical incidents?
6. From your perspective what conditions or factors constrained stakeholder involvement?
  - What are the challenges of stakeholder involvement?
7. What is the role of the small school in rural or small communities?
8. What factors should be examined when Boards of Education are considering closing schools in rural and small communities?
9. From your perspective, what factors were considered when the decision was originally made to close a Public School in (your community) ?
  - Were there factors identified that were not considered?
10. What are the challenges of involving stakeholders in making these types of decisions (i.e. closing schools)?
11. What constraints were you operating under?
12. How could things have been done differently?