

Children are not Fish

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Introduction

The Eastern School District (ESD)ⁱⁱ is the largest school district in Newfoundland and Labrador and one of the largest in Canada. ESD manages 119 schools, serves 40,000 students and employs 4200 teachers. It encompasses a huge territory that includes the Avalon, Burin and Bonavista Peninsulas.

In September, 2012, ESD publicized its “Multi-Year Plan.”ⁱⁱⁱ This document described

The mission of the Eastern School District is to create enhanced learning environments so that all students can achieve and succeed in the 21st century within a healthy, active, safe, caring, and socially just environment. As part of its governance function, Eastern School Board has a responsibility to ensure a wise investment of resources. All decisions regarding reconfigurations and/or closures have been evaluated in terms of meeting this function.

To create “enhanced learning environments” and to “ensure a wise investment of resources” would require the closure of five small rural schools.^{iv} To provide an opportunity for communities to respond to these closure decisions ESD scheduled a series of public consultation meetings for October, 2012.

One of these schools targeted for closure was Swift Current Academy, a K-12 school, situated in the community of Swift Current, NL. Swift Current is a very small community with a population of approximately 200 people. It is 181 Km from St. John’s and 21 km down the Burin Peninsula.

Swift Current Academy is the community’s only school and provides education for all children from Kindergarten to Level III. The enrolment of the school is 49 students and the school makes use of multiage classrooms and distance education via the web to provide instruction at the senior high school level. The closure of the school would result in the bussing of the entire school population to Clarenville and Shoal Harbour to attend larger schools. This would mean even the youngest children would have to endure a one way bus ride of more than an hour. They would spend almost 3 hours of their day riding the bus to and from school. ^v

In the view of the Eastern School District (ESD) this long distance bussing would be worth it for the larger schools would provide a better educational experience for the children of Swift Current. ESD scheduled a series of public consultation meetings in all five communities to provide an opportunity for the parents and other community members to respond to the Board’s proposals. . The meeting for Swift Current was held Oct 23, 2012.

As part of my work as a professor of education at Memorial University I have focused on issues related to rural education and schooling for more than twenty years. The “consolidation wars” has been a central focus of that work. I decided that I had an obligation to travel to Swift Current and make a presentation at this public meeting. I was determined to point out the flaws in the ESD thinking not just in relation to Swift Current but to all five schools scheduled for closure. I have reproduced my comments below.

Presentation at Swift Current, NL, Oct 23, 2012

I have no vested interest in or personal connection to this community or its school. In fact this is my first time in this community and this school. I have come here tonight to speak because I think it is important that rural communities engaged in this struggle know that they are not alone and that there is considerable research evidence to substantiate their claims that their community schools are viable.

The Value and Viability of Community Schools

I have travelled here tonight because I believe in the viability and value of small rural schools. I believe in the value of community and neighborhood schools.

Children are best served when they are educated close to home; communities are best served when they have a school to support and identify with. Schools provide communities with hope for their futures. It is amazing how little regard is given to the effect of a school closure on a community.

For the past 50 years educational officials in this province have persistently and sometimes perniciously attacked and dismantled rural community schools. Hundreds of good and valued schools have been closed. Today we have more children than ever before, even our youngest ones, spending increasing amounts of time being bused.

And for what?

There is no evidence that school or district consolidation saves money or improves education. Let me say that again.

Given the number of closures and consolidations that have occurred in this province, shouldn't there be a mountain of data clearly indicating this was a good thing to do? Where is the evidence that money has been saved, achievement has been improved, and communities have not been affected?

False Claims about Small Schools

Over the years our educational leaders have made many false claims against small-scale schooling.

First there was the argument that children could not learn as well in small schools as they could in larger ones. Study after study has shown this was a false argument. Children learn as well or better in smaller schools.

Then we had the argument against multi-grade or multiage classrooms. Again this was shown to be a false argument. There are many distinct educational advantages to grouping children of different ages and grade levels together for instruction.

Then came the argument saying programming was deficient in small schools. The fact is with the advent of E Learning via CDLI the size and location of a school is totally irrelevant to its ability to offer programming. The whole of the high school program is now available to all schools via distance learning.

There are no valid educational reasons for closing small rural schools and busing children from their home communities to more distant ones. Rarely is there any money to be saved.

Mistaking Children for Fish

A more recent argument for closing community schools seems to mistake children for fish.

Lacking any credible pedagogical arguments for closing community schools, our educational leaders have resorted, somewhat desperately, to industrial and business reasons. So today, the argument is capacity – over capacity and under capacity.

There has been plenty of talk regarding capacity in this province recently with reference to fish plants and paper mills.

But our schools are not fish plants or paper mills; they are not factories. Our children, who are our future, are not fish or blocks of wood to be processed in the most efficient and standardized manner.

Efficiency and standardization may be appropriate goals for industry, but to use such terms in reference to schooling and education is to demonstrate reckless disregard for children and their home communities.

To justify the closing of a community school and to disrupt the lives of children and their parents on the basis of an industrial concept such as capacity is to reveal a very low level of educational thought and consideration.

Children are human beings; they deserve humane treatment.

The Lack of Regard for Rural Children

The lack of regard and respect for rural children is evident in many aspects of their education. One of these is the new consolidated rural schools that have been built.

Invariably they are small and cramped places with inadequate cafeterias and gymnasiums. The design of the classrooms shows no appreciation for how creative teaching and learning occurs in today's schools.

There is no room whatsoever except for students to sit in their desks and not move. Who designed these schools? Did they have anything to work with other than a measuring tape? Did they consider anything except square footage?

I have heard that many teachers broke down and cried when they saw where and how they were expected to teach in their so called new school. They would love to have some extra capacity!

Perhaps the clearest disregard for the wellbeing of rural children is the increased bussing so many of them are forced to endure every day.

Bussing Issues

Bussing is a very serious issue and the decision to close a school and bus children cannot be taken lightly.

You may have noticed that officials, when discussing busing always speak in terms of distance, emphasizing how many KM the ride will be. However, the key issue is time not distance.

It not how far the ride is but how much of the children's time will be taken for the ride to and from school. Precious time is lost and wasted.

There are many safety and health issues to be considered. What kind of road conditions exist, what dangers will winter driving bring? Remember, there are no seat belts on buses.

It is kind of ironic that children cannot be left alone in the school or classroom for 30 seconds. They must be escorted by a teacher to and from the bus in the schoolyard.

Yet, forty, fifty, or more children, even the youngest ones, can be put on a bus for more than an hour without any adult supervision other than the driver whose job it is, we hope, to keep his or her eyes on the road.

How do we as responsible adults get away with this?

With such long unsupervised bus rides there is ample opportunity for bullying as well as physical and even sexual abuse of the children. And if you think this is not going on, you are only fooling yourself. In addition there are an increasing number of children with health issues that will not be helped by long bus rides.

Busing inhibits children from being fully involved in the life of the school. It is much more difficult for them to take part in extracurricular activities such as sports and arts programming and to avail of after school tutoring that may be offered. They cannot stay after school because they have to get the bus home.

It is very difficult for students to feel any attachment to a school they have little or no involvement in other than their academics. And this lack of involvement can negatively affect their interest and achievement.

I would caution you about the offer of a so-called late bus. History has shown that the promise of such a bus is short-lived if it materializes at all.

Unfortunately, the professionals who know the effects of bussing the best are not allowed to speak at these meetings. Teachers and principals see these effects every day, they see the tired children, the traumatized children, the scared children; they see the effects on their school work, they see the disappointment in their faces and their broken hearts when they realize they cannot fully

experience the life of the school as they did in their community schools. But these professionals have been denied a voice in these public meetings. Their employers, the school districts, have silenced them.

More unfortunate, is the fact that the officials who will be making the decisions to close schools and bus children may not appreciate the potential harmful and hurtful effects of busing. How can they? It is not their children who have to endure long bus rides and be deprived of the rich life a school has to offer. They are not deciding to put their own children on the bus. It is not they who will see on a daily basis the effects on their children. It is not their community that will be deprived of a school.

It is crucial I believe for district officials to de-center and to listen to the parents and teachers in these rural communities so they can know the consequences of what they are about to do.

Fight for your Children

I encourage this community and the others under siege to fight for your school and for your communities but mostly fight for your children.

With the consolidated boards you are very much out of sight and perhaps out of mind. Rural communities exist on the fringes and on the margins; within the district's big picture you may not be very meaningful. That is why you have to fight that much harder.

ⁱ Dennis M. Mulcahy is a professor in the faculty of education at Memorial University. Rural education and schooling is a major component of his research and development work in the faculty.

ⁱⁱ Eastern School District web site: <http://www.esdnl.ca/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Full text of the Multi-year Plan can be read at the ESD website.

^{iv} The targeted schools are Swift Current Academy, Catalina Elementary, Epiphany Elementary in Heart's Delight, Whitbourne Elementary, and Immaculate Conception in Colliers.

^v <https://maps.google.ca/maps?hl=en&tab=wl>