IMPROVING RURAL EDUCATION

Executive Summary

AN EDUCATION PROJECT FUNDED BY

THE UNITED COUNTIES OF STORMONT, DUNDAS & GLENGARRY

ONTARIO, CANADA

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The United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry ("SDG") in Ontario, Canada has a population of 66, 000 distributed over six rural municipalities. The elected body of County Council, issued a call for proposals for an education improvement project titled *Improving Rural Education in Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry* counties on February 5, 2021.

The education project was one of five key priorities identified in the Council's strategic plan 2019-2022 under the heading *Rural Schools- Educating Children in Their Communities,* in alignment with the guiding principles of: "*Our residents are our first priority, no municipality gets left behind, partnerships as essential for our success and our environmental legacy is important"*. These principles are encompassed under a Mission "*to create better communities"* and a Vision "*to be a progressive regional government"*. "*The County is committed to working with the province, local school boards, parents and other stakeholders to develop strategies that maintain the vibrancy of our rural schools"*.

The migration of people from rural communities to urban centres has been a global trend since the middle of the 20th century. Rural agricultural regions have faced limited growth and development, resulting in steadily declining school enrollment for over 40 years due, in part, to families having fewer children, overall declining birth rates in the Canadian population and resident mobility in search of employment.

Declining school enrollment is evidenced by school closures, school board amalgamations and student transportation to schools further away from a student's place of residence. More recently, the restructuring of educational service provision, programs and student support services and the emergence of online and virtual platforms as a means to access education during the global COVID19 pandemic have given rise to new meanings for school, education and community.

The full report investigates the challenges and opportunities for educational planning in the present and into the future, by all stakeholders who benefit from quality public education services offered to students regardless of their place of residence within the province of Ontario, or by extension, any province in Canada. Strategies include local, provincial and federal initiatives and funding related options which can be engaged to prevent rural schools from closing.

The results and recommendations in the full report are intended for rural county councils to develop new educational initiatives within regional government, provincial government recognition of required support to students with a lens on equity in funding programs and services to increase best practices at school boards, and for local, provincial, national and international cooperation to enhance educational opportunities for all students.

In the province of Ontario, the restructuring of school boards in 1997 and the creation of four publicly funded school systems (English Public, English Catholic, French Public, French Catholic) has led to a continuous shift in education demographics over the last twenty years.

School board funding also underwent a major shift from municipal governments overseeing taxation rates related to education at a local level, to a process shifting it to provincial jurisdiction and centralized funding processes.

The dynamic of a four- school board system operating within a region of low population growth has created more competition for students. Aggressive public and social media marketing campaigns have been employed by some school boards to attract parents and students.

The increased interest for choice in schooling options by more involved parents and adolescent students choosing programs of interest with peers offered in different schools are also factors in the development of new solutions.

New data is required to measure the impact of these changes to inform new strategies, create new initiatives and opportunities for students; to demand compliance to existing policy, legislation and service standards for public education to maintain equity and to create new policies and changes to existing legislation where none exist, to enhance the delivery of educational programs and services.

The premise of community ownership of schools by citizens and taxpayers is also a new perspective which presumes school boards to be stewards of the schools in their operational structures but partners with the community and businesses to ensure the vitality and maintenance of each school in the context of the social fabric of each rural community.

Canada as a country relies heavily on immigration to sustain economic growth and the stability of health, education and social services. While immigration remains a federal responsibility, provincial and municipal governments can access funding from federal initiatives and programs to support local communities.

Barriers and obstacles

In the context of this study a barrier is defined as a situation over which a parent or group of individuals has no direct control and is difficult to change (for example: policy, legislation, lack of data, type of building construction).

An obstacle is defined as a situation in which there is a lack of initiative, motivation, understanding and/or empathy on behalf of an entity which requires a large amount of advocacy time and energy to overcome by a group of people, but can be more easily changed than a barrier (bias, stereotypes, assumptions, beliefs, fossilized practices).

The full report aims to quantify and qualify main barriers in the maintenance of community schools and propose solutions to overcome those barriers with options and best practices that maximize local educational opportunities.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's 2006 *Equity Strategy* set the following additional expectations of the learning environment for students:

DIVERSITY: The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

EQUITY: A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected.

PART 1 – TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Prior to providing solutions, an environmental scan of existing data must be undertaken to understand trends related to student enrollment in rural areas.

Updated information was collected on the 10-year enrollment trend, capacity, utilization rate and facility condition index for all schools in the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry (SDG) within the four-school board context.

Challenges were raised by Council members, students, parents, grandparents and residents in SDG and were stated in the call for proposal and through online survey results conducted from May to August 2021. This information was used to aid in the research and development of solutions, by quantifying and qualifying these issues.

1. The call for proposal listed these challenges:

a) *Slow population growth*
b) *Low population density throughout the region*
c) *Large school boards encompassing most of Eastern Ontario*
d) *Four school boards competing for students*
e) *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) incompatible with rural Ontario realities*
f) *Shifting school boundaries, facilitating growth in some schools while 'choking off' others*
g) *Inequitable per pupil funding formulas that create disparities among/between boards/schools*
h) *Inequitable distribution of programming among schools*
i) *Inequitable per student transportation funding*
j) *Provincial and board transportation policies that enable the bussing of students long distances from their home communities*
k) *Funding formulas for new schools that favour larger facilities and disincentivize boards to share facilities*
l) *Lack of maintenance of older schools*
m) *Reluctance of coterminous boards to share facilities*
n) *Pandemic impacts, specifically remote learning*
o) *Reluctance of school boards to enter into community use agreements*

2. An Adult and Student Community Survey identified these additional challenges:

Challenges identified as Obstacles:

> *Same programs, courses not available at all high schools*
> *Large classes, split classes*
> *New start times, busing schedules, adolescents starting earlier than young children*
> *Incorrect facts or data used for school closures*
> *Quality of education /Arts programming and sports opportunities*
> *Mental health support to students*
> *Support to parents and consideration of families' needs*
> *Special education, access to assessments & professionals supporting disabilities*
> *Acknowledgment & consideration of community, educator and parental input*
> *Lack of support staff, quality of French Immersion teaching*
> *Diversity of staff and students*

> - *Outdated texts and curriculum (Eurocentric) contributing to sexism and racism*
> - *Lack of communication from teachers*
> - *Unfair boundaries*
> - *Virtual learning*
> - *Access to after school activities, field trips, sporting events due to busing cost*
> - *Transportation to coop placements*
> - *Academic and applied courses in the same class*
> - *Perception of rural students headed to vocational work after graduation*

Challenges identified as Barriers:

- *Lack of internet or poor internet,*
- *Threat of school closures or school amalgamations*
- *Water quality*
- *Provincial funding formula*
- *Too many schoolboards*
- *Childcare availability*
- *Teachers' unions*
- *Accessible transit*
- *School ventilation and air quality*
- *Lack of Early Learning Centres*
- *Folding public and Catholic school boards into one school system*

Consultant identified challenges

i. School program information hard to obtain through school board website searches for parents seeking to relocate
ii. Lack of diversity in school board leadership
iii. Lack of data and /or reliable data (one source only- school board data)
iv. Municipal council members' perception of having a limited role in providing educational input
v. Internet services (access and signal quality)
vi. Obtaining information directly from school staff and school board personnel
vii. Student trustees having a restricted role in feedback as key clients of educational services
viii. School boards' perception of education monopoly over decision-making (transportation, costs, programs, school builds) business focused rather than service focused (bottom line vs client satisfaction)
ix. Disconnect between regional employment sectors (energy, environment, manufacturing) and duplication of program offerings in Specialist High School Majors; no data on whether school boards are meeting the need for student skills training for sector employment
x. Lack of school board policy to support decisions which are detrimental to the community (parent-initiated survey input and feedback are ignored)

Field study work and interviews were completed to develop the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats), which is a tool to facilitate the key elements around which strategies, options and recommendations can be articulated. It can be viewed in the full report.

PART 2 – PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

1. **Competition for students.** In areas such as SDG where there is a significant francophone population, competition for students is having a demonstrable negative impact on the quality of education and opportunities for students to be educated close to home. Students have become commodities for competing school boards. Steps to reduce/eliminate competition include:
   a. Consolidate the current four publicly funded school systems into a new publicly funded system for each official language (English and French). By following the lead of other provinces, Ontario can improve equity of access across rural Ontario, improve the sustainability of rural schools and their communities and achieve opportunities for cost-savings province-wide.
   b. Ban explicit advertising campaigns used by school boards to poach students from other school boards. Such campaigns represent a gross misuse of public funds.
   c. Existing inequities in current funding models should be analyzed and addressed – students should be funded at the same level regardless of language and/or religion.

2. **Daycare availability.** The availability of daycare, either full time or before/after school programs, should be reviewed by the province. Ten-year enrolment data for SDG indicates a lack of available daycare spaces. It is noted that French language school boards are able to offer significantly more daycare spaces in their elementary schools as compared to the English language school boards.

3. **Schools as community assets.** As part of the Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) process, co-terminus boards must be mandated to review alternatives to school closures by demonstrating that other options (e.g. sharing facilities with other school boards, community groups, creating a community hub for health, social services, etc.) have been analyzed. Municipalities must be engaged in this process to ensure that current statistics and trends are available (e.g. housing starts, growth in settlement areas, etc.) and are accurately captured. Similarly, revise existing legislation to create a system where school facilities are jointly owned by school boards and municipalities to maximize the use of these public assets by community groups and local taxpayers. Increased access to existing facilities will enhance quality of life by increasing available programming and services to residents in small population centres.

4. **French Immersion programming.** In SDG, the lack of French Immersion programming is a clear determinant in whether a school thrives or closes. Some schools offer French Immersion programming, while others do not. Using metrics similar to those employed by the province in determining where to provide French language services to the public, should be considered; a review of how/where French Immersion programs are provided is warranted.

5. **Secondary School Specialized Programming.** In rural areas such as SDG, programs such as the Specialist High Skills Major, Cooperative Program, and the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program are very valuable and should be reviewed to remove any existing barriers (e.g. transportation) to maximize student participation.

6. **Transportation.** The Ministry of Education should adopt a provincial school transportation policy limiting ride times for students, reviewing efficiencies and sustainable transportation alternatives that align with provincial health strategies aimed at reducing childhood obesity and keeping community schools open in rural areas where students can bicycle or walk to school. It is not

uncommon for students in SDG to be bussed to schools an hour and a half from their residence twice per day. School boundaries must be included as part of this review.

7. **Internet access and technology.** Students across SDG face serious disadvantages in the area of both internet connectivity and access to at-home/in-school Information Technology (IT) resources. School boards should ensure that they are adequately supporting students and providing an equitable learning environment by furnishing IT hardware (such as laptops and tablets) to all students. With the emerging expectation that each student must complete two online courses to graduate, school boards need to better support students in the digital age by investing in 'learning commons' spaces which provide both a physical space and digital access for students.

8. **Transparency and Public Service.** The Ministry of Education must commit to Ontario Public Service (OPS) Standards for communication, feedback and complaint processes, by developing appropriate policies and procedures to improve parental engagement, restore trust in public education, and shift the administrative mindset and institutional culture towards public service. Students must be reprioritized and made the prime focus of education once again.

9. **Ontario Student Bill of Rights.** Adopt an Ontario Student Bill of Rights to access equitable educational opportunities, funding, transportation, and quality educational services (instruction and assessment) with teacher expertise in subject content areas.

10. **Public Engagement.** The province should develop and implement a "grassroots to government" view rather than the current top-down model for pupil funding policies, pupil accommodation review guidelines, and community partnership protocols, where parents, advocacy groups and municipalities create submissions, templates and frameworks for the Minister of Education and school boards to adopt. Doing so will create efficiencies and hasten the speed of change.

Conclusion

It is critical that the rights of students and parents are acknowledged and respected through authentic consultative processes with school board personnel with meaningful and reciprocal exchanges and a variety of data reviewed. Consultation needs to be rooted in oral and written submissions that are shared with all parties and the public.

All policies and decisions must reflect evidence-based processes and open and transparent financial implications and explanations that are logical and meaningful to both school boards and the community within the context of a public service provision model of quality and excellence, and not a business model of cost effectiveness and bottom-line savings, at the cost of the best interests of students, families and the community.

Policy updates need to be more nimble than legislative changes which are complicated and require government and political will to influence and parliamentary process which is cumbersome and prone to significant time delays. Updates need to be evidence based with data, research, analysis and impact statements, demographic and trend information, be authentic and relevant to the target audience to which it applies.

While some federal funding in official languages education (minority and second language) does flow to the provinces, the majority of education funding is driven by taxpayers in every province.

The best solutions come from parents, teachers, residents and students in local communities as lived experience provides a source of ideas and initiatives. Collaboration with all sectors and authentic engagement will lead to better learning experiences for students and vibrant school communities in small population centres.

This Executive Summary is an abridged version of the full report which contains appendices with data, statistics, survey results, information sources and references used in the production of the report.