

# **School Review Process Study**

## **Report and Recommendations**

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**February 2014**

Submitted by R.C. Fowler

# Introduction

In response to the publication of the *School Review Process Discussion Paper* in November 2013, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Education initiated the public consultation phase of a study of the school review process initiated in June 2013<sup>1</sup>. It was announced that Mr. Robert Fowler would continue as chair of the study throughout the consultation. The consultation phase would provide a broad-based opportunity for Nova Scotians to provide input and solutions to the challenges surrounding school review.

In launching the consultation phase Minister Casey stated:

“School reviews have been challenging for families and communities. We want a full discussion on a solution that works for all –students, families, school boards and communities”

The consultation phase ran from November 26, 2013 to February 7, 2014. Submissions were accepted by email, online form, and mail. A series of nine public meetings were held across the Province in Amherst, Berwick, Bridgewater, Dartmouth, Port Hawkesbury, Sydney, Truro, and Yarmouth, with a Province-wide, French-language consultation held via video conference. Separate meetings were also held with school board members and senior staff, representatives of School Advisory Councils, and a number of stakeholder groups. In all, over 500 people attended the meetings and 56 written submissions were received.

To ensure the local viewpoint from each meeting was fully represented, a community representative was appointed in each location to attend the meetings as a listener, along with the committee chair. There were nine community representatives in total. Community representatives came together at the end of the consultation phase to validate and consolidate what was heard across the province and provide input to the committee chair on recommendations.

The meeting schedule and names of community representatives are included in Appendix A and a list of meetings with stakeholder organizations is provided in Appendix B.

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<sup>1</sup> The study of the School Review Process was completed in two phases. The first phase of the study was to develop a discussion paper to support a broad-based consultation in phase two. The Discussion Paper and information on phase one of the study can be found at:  
[http://www.ednet.ns.ca/schoolreviewprocess/SchoolReviewDisPaper\\_Eng\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ednet.ns.ca/schoolreviewprocess/SchoolReviewDisPaper_Eng_FINAL.pdf)

## Overview

It was clear throughout the consultation that the issue of school review can evoke passion and emotion in those involved. As people spoke in the meetings and written submissions were reviewed, it became apparent that school reviews were having a negative impact on the relationship between school boards, parents, and communities.

This is most likely attributed to a lack of early and meaningful engagement between these groups around the future of a school. School boards struggle with the challenges of offering quality educational programs and services to students in the face of declining enrollments, building conditions, transportation, geography, and fiscal realities. School communities express a lack of trust in the information compiled by school boards and feel that community opinions and interests are not given priority when decisions are made about schools.

While there was unanimous agreement that the focus should always be on the quality of education for children, there were various opinions on how this is best done. Many people shared the benefits of a smaller, local school with more community engagement, while others brought forward the advantages of access to curriculum and extracurricular offerings that can be provided with a larger student population. With respect to closure of smaller community schools, the focus was largely on the impact for elementary-aged children, in particular, the length of time young children spend on a school bus and how this impacts the overall quality of their education. There was general acceptance that junior/senior high students could tolerate longer travel times and there was a benefit to them in attending schools where larger student populations enabled the range of courses necessary for graduation and student-learning interests and needs.

Aside from the quality of the educational program provided at a school, there was also a significant concern raised with respect to the school's role as a focal point for the community and, in some cases, the last bastion of community identity in a province demonstrating a trend to urban and suburban living. In general, feedback received from the public suggested that a much broader view of a school's role in a community must be considered, including community revitalization and ethnic and cultural preservation. Opinions ranged on how this was best accomplished. The range of options provided includes:

- School boards should be open to innovative, community-based solutions to keep a school open, but are not the leaders of this initiative.
- School boards should champion a community-centric approach and bring others to the table.
- A new model of rural economic development should be in place with schools as the primary enabler of this model.

It is the opinion of the Chair that whatever the process, there will still be schools that close. Whether a review process remains focused on the education program of students, or becomes a much broader discussion about community preservation and/or growth, there will be circumstances where closure becomes the only appropriate course of action if we are to ensure a quality education program is our number one priority. The Chair also believes that what becomes of the community school in Nova Scotia

is largely dependent on how innovative, consultative, and engaged all parties are in the issues which define a community, the role of the school, and the future of both.

Population and enrollment trends, aging infrastructure, and fiscal constraints are well known in this province. *Now or Never: An Urgent Call to Action for Nova Scotians*, the report of the Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy, sets out a bold challenge to all Nova Scotians that change and innovation are required. The section of the report titled, *Excellence in Education and Training* (page 58), echoes many of the concerns and opinions of the Chair after examining the issue of school review and closure.

We need to embrace broad-based community partnerships that include, but are not solely dependent on government. We cannot rely on government to continually provide the total financial solution. Our proud heritage, geography, and communities of interest are important to all of us, however, traditional solutions have not provided the answers. We must take advantage of community capacity, cross-government partnerships, and private sector engagement to find new ways to grow Nova Scotia and our communities, inclusive of our schools. We must also recognize that maintaining a school cannot come at the expense of the education provided to our children.

In the following section you will find the recommendations of the Chair which outline a new process to examine schools in their broader context and ensure full consideration is given to any school at risk of permanent closure.

The revised process will:

- a) be based in better long-term planning of our school systems and include greater public engagement opportunities at the school board and subsystem/family of schools level;
- b) be criteria driven and support clear, verifiable, and accountable information which is publicly available to all interested parties in a consistent and comparable format across the province;
- c) provide the opportunity for solutions which may support the retention of a school program within a community through new and innovative models;
- d) retain the accountability for decisions regarding schools and their future with school boards;  
and
- e) support the positive engagement of municipalities throughout the process.

# Recommendations

## Long-range Planning and Better Collaboration

### *Discussion Summary*

A recurring theme heard throughout the consultation, from all stakeholders, was the need for more and better planning for a broader school region, with earlier engagement of the public and other stakeholders. This was termed “long-range planning” and there was unanimous support for this across the province.

Throughout the consultation a number of issues were brought forward related to a lack, or perceived lack, of coordination, planning, engagement, information sharing, and innovation in the current process. It was heard that there is a need for meaningful information sharing between school boards and the community. It was also suggested that there needs to be better coordination between levels of government, especially at the provincial and municipal level.

**Goal:** *The future of a school is part of a plan for the broader school region. Parents and communities are able to contribute to the solutions for the region.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper  
(2013)

Throughout the consultation it was also expressed that reviews should provide a meaningful opportunity to explore a variety of options, including those brought forward by the community. Most participants felt that by the time a review was initiated, the opportunity for discussion about possible solutions was passed.

### *Recommendation*

The Chair believes that long-range planning is a way to engage all stakeholders (school boards, parents, community, municipalities, business, etc.) earlier in a discussion about the challenges or opportunities of education delivery for a region. The focus of the discussion becomes more positive (working toward a solution) and closure becomes just one of a number of options that can be considered. A long-range planning process provides context for future decisions and will better support capital planning for school boards. Long-range planning will also set the stage for more detailed discussions about the appropriateness of school additions, alternations, or new school construction.

A more comprehensive planning process will also provide a holistic approach, allowing a group of schools to be examined together, broadening the discussion around options for schools and communities. Having the review led by a committee with representation from a number of stakeholder groups would allow for collaboration, discussion, and analysis of options by those affected by the outcome.

It is recommended that:

**1. School boards should be mandated to complete a long-term planning document, with a ten year planning outlook.**

This document is to be available for community comment and input once drafted and presented through public meetings. The document should be reviewed, with applicable updates provided, on an annual basis, with a complete renewal of the document every five years. Annual updates should be advertised and available publicly.

**2. Long-term planning by a school board should identify schools in subsystems or families of schools. When a long-range plan identifies an issue to be addressed, schools boards may identify a subsystem/family of schools for review.**

School boards should clearly identify which schools are included in a subsystem/family of schools review. Examining schools as a group rather than individually will allow a more complete assessment and analysis of the impacts when considering viable options for a school region. This analysis can include boundaries, consolidations, transportation, and any other factors which are deemed to be significant to a solution.

**3. When a subsystem/family of schools has been identified for review, a committee (School Options Committee) should be formed to conduct the review process, guided by a mandate from the school board. It is recommended that a facilitator be provided to guide the work of the committee.**

The committee (School Options Committee) conducting a subsystem/family of schools review should include School Advisory Councils, school principals, school board staff, municipalities, community members/leaders, and any other participants as deemed necessary. A facilitator should be appointed to assist the committee. The mandate provided to the committee by the school board should identify the issue to be addressed by the committee, as well as the objectives for the review and any conditions/limitations to possible solutions proposed by the committee. For example, an objective may be to reduce square footage and a condition/limitation might be a geographically isolated school within the subsystem/family of schools which must remain open.

**4. Where a subsystem/family of schools review results in a recommendation for school closure, and the recommendation is accepted by a school board, the school board should communicate the recommendation to the public and provide information on how to provide input on the recommendation. A public meeting should be held prior to the final decision.**

Before school boards make a final decision with respect to closure as recommended by the committee reviewing the subsystem/family of schools, notice should be given to the community of the recommendation and proposed closure. The community should have the opportunity to provide input to the school board either through written submissions or at a public meeting.

**5. School board submissions to the Province for capital spending should be prioritized based on subsystem/family of school review analysis and outcomes.**

When long-term planning at a subsystem/family of schools level results in the need for a capital investment (i.e. new school construction and additions/alterations) by the province, the school board should submit its request(s) on a prioritized basis. This will ensure school boards are able to address capital needs identified through long-term planning in a way that supports the work done by the school board and the communities.

**See Figure 1 on page 19 for a step-by-step representation of the new recommended process.**

## Innovation

### *Discussion Summary*

Schools are valued in communities for many reasons. They are not only seen as vehicles for delivering the education program but also as community assets that provide valuable space for other purposes. Schools are a gathering place, an employer in the community, and are sometimes described as the heart of a community.

There was a strong feeling among consultation participants, in particular parents, that children get the best start to their education in a local school where they have a close connection with the school and local community. Local schools also mean children are not on a school bus for long periods of time each day. Throughout the consultation there was a strong bias towards keeping younger children (elementary aged) in small local schools.

**Goal:** *School boards consider innovative ways to keep a school program in the community when it is in the best interests of the students and the community.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper (2013)

Another key issue brought forward in the consultation, particularly in the rural areas, was the connection between a local school and the economic viability and sustainability of the community. It was expressed that schools are essential to attracting and retaining families, especially younger families, to an area. Many people felt that the presence of a school contributes significantly to the economic viability of a community. It was suggested that the issue of closing a school, especially if it is the last school in a community, does not solely affect the education of students but also the viability of the community itself.

It was suggested that the province implement a rural economic development strategy, with education as a partner. Participants acknowledged that school boards are not in the business of economic development and felt the primary role of a board is to provide the best education possible within the resources provided. However, school boards should be willing partners in discussing alternatives to school consolidation and closure and be open to working with partners in a community. School boards agreed that their main concern needed to be on educating students and, although willing, were unsure of what their role is in community/economic development.

### *Recommendation*

The Chair believes that an opportunity exists to explore more innovative approaches to keeping education in our local communities particularly in the elementary grades. There are examples around the province of where partnerships between school boards, the province, municipalities, and local communities have enabled an education program to be offered in a setting which benefits students and communities.

School boards need to be open to innovative approaches while ensuring that the integrity of the education program is maintained. However the Chair believes that school boards are neither equipped nor do they necessarily have the capacity to lead this type of function. Municipalities are an obvious partner with a vested interest and mandate closely connected to community development and viability.



It is the opinion of the Chair that education programs, particularly for early elementary aged students (i.e. primary to grade 3), should remain in communities where possible. In order to do this, alternatives to the current norm of accommodating students in a school building, built and used only for the purpose of delivering the public school program, may need to be considered. Specifically, consideration should be given to a school serving more than one purpose in the community. For example, a school could house other government services or provide space for a compatible use, which would alleviate the excess capacity burden on the education system.

Developing partnerships at the local level and collaborating with other government departments and agencies are key elements in the success of a multi-use facility. Flexibility is also essential in this approach, ensuring that a solution is able to respond to the varying needs of communities across the province, while maintain safety and other necessary standards. At a minimum, the safety of students, compatibility and appropriateness of services, and financial viability are essential standards of any alternative arrangement.

It is recommended that:

**6. The department should convene a committee to further examine the concept of joint-use/hub/community schools, including what level of stakeholder engagement is required to pursue this approach and what specific criteria are required. The committee should represent government departments and school boards and engage other stakeholders as appropriate. The committee would only exist for the purpose of developing the criteria.**

Criteria for a non-traditional school setting would require some flexibility to allow for the varied and unique circumstances that may need to be addressed, however some oversight and guidance is needed as this concept is further developed. It is suggested that best practices be examined using the experience of those schools in Nova Scotia already utilizing a non-traditional scenario (e.g. Greenfield Elementary, Chedabucto Place Education Centre/Guysborough Academy). Student safety, cost neutrality to the school board, and compatible use are three main areas identified as broad criteria considerations.

**7. In all analysis of a school or subsystem/family of schools, an assessment of the value of a school as a focal point in the community should be included to ensure potential innovative partnerships and solutions support retaining an educational program in the community.**

During a family of schools review, there should be a mechanism to assess the desire, willingness, and ability and capacity of a community to contribute to innovative solutions for identified issues in an area.

**8. School boards should be provided with financial support to enable more focus on relationship building and community engagement and to better support the work of a subsystem/family of schools review.**

Incremental, targeted funding should be allocated to school boards to provide resources for the purposes of community engagement and relationship building. This function is necessary to explore and develop innovative opportunities and solutions. Resources should also be available to support

the subsystem/family of schools review through use of a facilitator. It is recommended that consideration be given to provide up to \$100, 000 per board for these initiatives.

**9. Government should recognize innovative community solutions where there are broader community partnerships to support community sustainability/development and the retention of an education program in a community.**

Government could support innovative community solutions by providing financial incentives from monies outside of the education funding envelop (e.g. Tangible Capital Asset Funding). This would provide funding for such things as repurposing a building for joint-use which would help maintain an education program that is seen as essential to community sustainability and development.

**10. The department should provide assistance to ensure school board boundaries do not impede the best solutions for students (e.g., better transportation options, access to programming).**

The Department should act as a facilitator where there is a desire to work toward a solution for students which may cross school board boundaries. Arbitrary boundaries should not be a barrier to implementation of the best solution for students.

## Consistent Criteria and Clear Information

### *Discussion Summary*

One of the main themes heard throughout the consultation was about the role of information throughout a review process. The committee heard clearly that the information used must be clear, accurate, consistent, and complete. Transparency and trust were significant issues for the community with respect to the information used to support a decision.

There were four main concerns brought forward during the consultation:

- the accuracy and availability of data produced and used;
- criteria that are missing from a review process;
- the community's access and capacity with information; and
- what information led to identification of a school for review and possible closure.

**Goal:** *Clear, rigorous, and trusted information will be available to help school boards and communities make effective decisions.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper (2013)

### Accuracy and Availability of Data

An issue heard throughout the consultation was that of confidence/trust in the information provided through the reports prepared to support the review. There were several presentations made from the public during the consultation expressing concern that the information was either inaccurate or incomplete. School boards expressed an opinion that data may not always be understood by the public and was therefore thought to be lacking in some way. All groups agreed that identifying common data sources and/or having a consistent source or methodology used throughout a review would be helpful. There was a suggestion that criteria for the review be set provincially and that efforts be made to ensure all information be available publically.

### Criteria Missing from Review Process

There was also a concern that the impacts of closure, including how the education of the students would be impacted, what opportunities would be gained, and recognition of the value of a community school to students (non-tangible benefits), were not fully considered. Consultation participants suggested that the process should recognize the importance of a school in, or close to, First Nation, African Nova Scotian, and Acadian communities.

Some specific examples of criteria that should be part of a review process were provided during the consultation. These included the safety, health, and social impacts of transportation; impacts on the students and community when dividing students among different schools, impacts on marginalized students and families in the school, the diversity of school populations at both the closing and receiving school, and implications of combining student populations which may have historical and cultural challenges to overcome (e.g., rival schools).

### Access and Capacity

There were several challenges brought forward with respect to the ability of communities to respond to data and information provided in the reports prepared for the review process. The community felt there

was no opportunity for clarification, verification, or discussion about the information once the review was initiated and the reports were produced.

Study Committees felt they didn't have the resources or appropriate access to the information required to adequately analyze what was provided in the reports prepared by school board staff. It was noted on a number of occasions that the Study Committee is comprised of volunteers of varying abilities and experiences and that the members of the Study Committee commit a large amount of personal time and resources to the process, with little or no support provided to them.

There was general acceptance that if the community was involved earlier in the process of preparing the reports, allowing for discussion and clarification, that some of these issues would be alleviated.

#### Identification Criteria

Communities felt it was not always clear how or why their school had been identified for closure. Suggestions were made that a provincial set of criteria, or rubric, be developed which would clearly show the factors which have led to identification of a school.

**Goal:** *School Boards use clear, consistent criteria to identify schools for review. The public understands why and how a school has been identified for closure.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper (2013)

#### *Recommendation*

The Chair believes that it is essential to the process that standardized criteria and data sources are developed for use during all stages of a long-term planning process, including a subsystem/family of schools review, and that these criteria are applied consistently across the province. The Chair believes that information provided at all stages of a review should be provided according to templates developed to ensure consistency and inclusiveness of the information. In development of the templates, various lenses should be applied when considering the criteria needed (e.g. diversity, socio-economic, fiscal).

Some issues brought forward through the consultation with respect to how information is provided and used will be addressed as a by-product of implementation of other recommendations made in the report. For example, a revised committee structure at the subsystem/family of schools review (School Options Committee) will alleviate the pressure on School Advisory Councils to act solely as the study committee. Better long-range planning will improve the public's understanding of why a school is being considered for closure.

It is recommended that:

**11. The department should, in conjunction with key stakeholders, develop province-wide criteria, presented in the form of templates, designed to support each stage of long-range planning (see Figure 1, page 19).**

School boards must have a template outlining what information needs to be provided at each stage of planning as described in Figure 1. In developing these templates, the department should engage the departments of Economic and Rural Development and Tourism, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, and Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, as well as the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities.

**12. The department, working with other government departments/agencies, should provide standardized, verifiable information that is to be used by school boards for planning purposes.**

There are a number of information pieces which may be more easily compiled and provided at the provincial level based on work already being undertaken by government departments. For example, the province currently works with Statistics Canada to develop population projections. The department must identify what information is currently available and how to best make this accessible to school boards to support planning.

**13. Where information is provided directly by school boards, it should be specific to the individual schools, sourced (where possible), and explained.**

In some cases, the information required for completion of process templates will only be available from school boards. In these cases, the information provided should be specific to the school(s) to the extent possible, with the source of the information provided. An explanation of the information should be included to ensure clarity if appropriate.

## Flexibility

### *Discussion Summary*

There was general agreement among all stakeholders that more flexibility is required in the process. School boards and community members agreed that there are circumstances where the full review process as it currently exists can be long and onerous particularly when there is consensus on the direction for a school. The feeling was that once a solution was established, the focus of the discussion should be on implementation, not revisiting the issue of closure.

Other circumstances mentioned where an exemption or an abridged process may be appropriate include:

- very low student populations, such that the education program cannot be delivered effectively;
- a building which is unsafe for students; and
- an approved capital project for a new school or renovation of an existing school.

**Goal:** *The review process allows more flexible timing and makes accommodations for unique circumstances, while maintaining the principles of administrative fairness.*

School Review Process Discussion  
Paper (2013)

Participants recommended considering when a review process can be initiated and how much time is allocated for each step in the process. The committee heard from a number of stakeholders, who felt that attaching specific actions to calendar dates decreased the ability of the school board to respond to changing circumstances, and limited the ability to coordinate with other processes (e.g., capital planning). There was also a concern in one board about initiating a process at the end of a school board's mandate (election year) and the impact on a new board related to picking up mid-way through a process.

### *Recommendation*

The Chair believes there are circumstances which do not require a review process to the extent currently required in legislation. The purpose of a planning/review process is to explore options and develop the best solution to specific circumstances. In some cases there are no viable options to be considered, as in the case of an empty school or a school unfit to house students. In these types of circumstances, it is unnecessary to complete a full review for the school and an exemption or alternate process should be available.

The Chair also believes that there is no significant benefit to attaching specific actions to calendar dates and, in fact, this can cause unnecessary delays and difficulties with respect to other school board processes. It also removes the ability to shorten or extend the time frame of a review, as may be deemed appropriate.

It is recommended that:

**14. Long-range planning by school boards, subsequent subsystem/family of schools reviews, and individual school closure processes should be able to be initiated at any time of the year. Timeframes for completion of individual stages should be provided, but not attached to calendar dates.**

It is important to provide time frames and minimum/maximum allotments at the various stages of any planning/review process. The process should not be allowed to continue on indefinitely and should be responsive to changing circumstances.

**15. Consideration should be given to providing exemptions to a closure process under specific circumstances, (e.g., no students registered in the school, school is unfit for students).**

The department should engage with school boards to define what circumstances may exist which are not best examined through a review/closure process.

**16. The department should develop an abridged review process for circumstances where no subsystem/family of schools review has been undertaken but there is a capital project announced or where a school community has expressed general agreement with a proposed course of action which includes closure of a school.**

Elements of an abridged process must include the provision of information to the public in the same form/template as recommended in this report, with opportunity for public review and input, and a public meeting prior to the final decision being made.

## Decision Making

### *Discussion Summary*

There was general agreement from participants that the school board should remain the decision maker when the question of closure is being considered.

School boards felt strongly it was part of their responsibility and should remain a duty of the governing school board. Parents and community felt that the decision should remain at the local level of education government. Leaving the decision with the school board allows for better coordination and implementation of decisions about education delivery for an area.

**Goal:** *Decision makers are in a position to make the best decision possible for delivery of education to all students, based on relevant information and input from stakeholders.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper  
(2013)

Despite the agreement that decision making should remain with school boards, it was clear from participant's comments that there are significant issues of trust between communities and school boards across the province. Some community members expressed a concern that the decision making process of the school board is not always transparent. There is a perception that school board members may not always read the work of the Study Committee and/or give it full consideration. Communities asked for more transparency and more participation in the process by those making the final decision. School board participants made it clear the review process was challenging and emotional for board members as well.

Alternative decision making suggestions made during the consultation included a collaborative model which seeks consensus on a decision; allowing the community to make the decision; and referring the decision to a quasi-judicial independent body. These suggestions were not widely supported by stakeholders. Some participants also suggested that there be an appellate procedure in place where communities feel a decision has been made in an unfair way. The current avenue for appeal is through judicial appeal.

### *Recommendation*

The Chair believes there is little evidence to suggest that an alternative decision making model is desired or would be more effective than the school board. School boards are best positioned to make this type of decision as it relates so closely to other responsibilities of the board.

Additionally, the Chair believes that the current mechanism for appeal, judicial review, is an appropriate method of appeal where a community may want the process leading to a school closure examined.

It is recommended that:

### **17. School boards should retain the responsibility and accountability for decisions regarding the closure of schools.**

School board members must be engaged in the process, be knowledgeable about the school and the review and be in a position to make the best decision for students overall.



# School Ownership

## Discussion Summary

Municipalities, especially in rural areas, expressed concern about acquiring school buildings which have been declared surplus to the needs of a school board. In many cases these buildings can represent significant liability/costs where renovations are needed to convert the building to another purpose. Demolition costs are often not affordable and can be higher than the value of the land.

Municipalities pointed to the recent Union of Nova Scotia Municipality resolutions as their preferred solution to this issue. The resolutions generally indicate that the province should assume responsibility for closed school buildings with right of first refusal provided to municipalities. (See Appendix C)

**Goal:** *Decision focus on the best options for delivering the public school program, not on who pays or who benefits when a school site is closed. Levels of government work together to minimize the cost burden when a school closes.*

School Review Process Discussion Paper  
(2013)

Throughout the consultation it was also heard that there is an opportunity to involve municipalities earlier in discussions about the future of schools. Better communication before a school is being considered for closure may lead to the identification of partnership opportunities and better planning for the future use of a building.

## Recommendation

The Chair believes that regardless of who is responsible for a school building once closed, there is a significant financial implication for government and an ultimate cost to Nova Scotian tax payers. Steps should be taken to ensure that more communication is undertaken, earlier, about the future of a school building. This is a significant issue for the province and for municipalities as it involves over half of the current school stock.

It is recommended that:

### **18. The department should work with the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations to resolve or improve the process of surplus school buildings reverting back to municipal ownership.**

There are several options for resolving this issue, most of which require coordination between levels of government. Some of the options which could be considered are:

- a) **Including the cost of demolition in either capital or operating budgets to minimize financial burden on municipalities, unless municipalities exercise right of first refusal.**
- b) **Provincial ownership of all school buildings (i.e. Nova Scotia Lands approach).**
- c) **Making additions/alternations the preferred approach when considering renovations and/or new school construction to avoid demolition costs and school siting challenges, where possible.**

## **Transition**

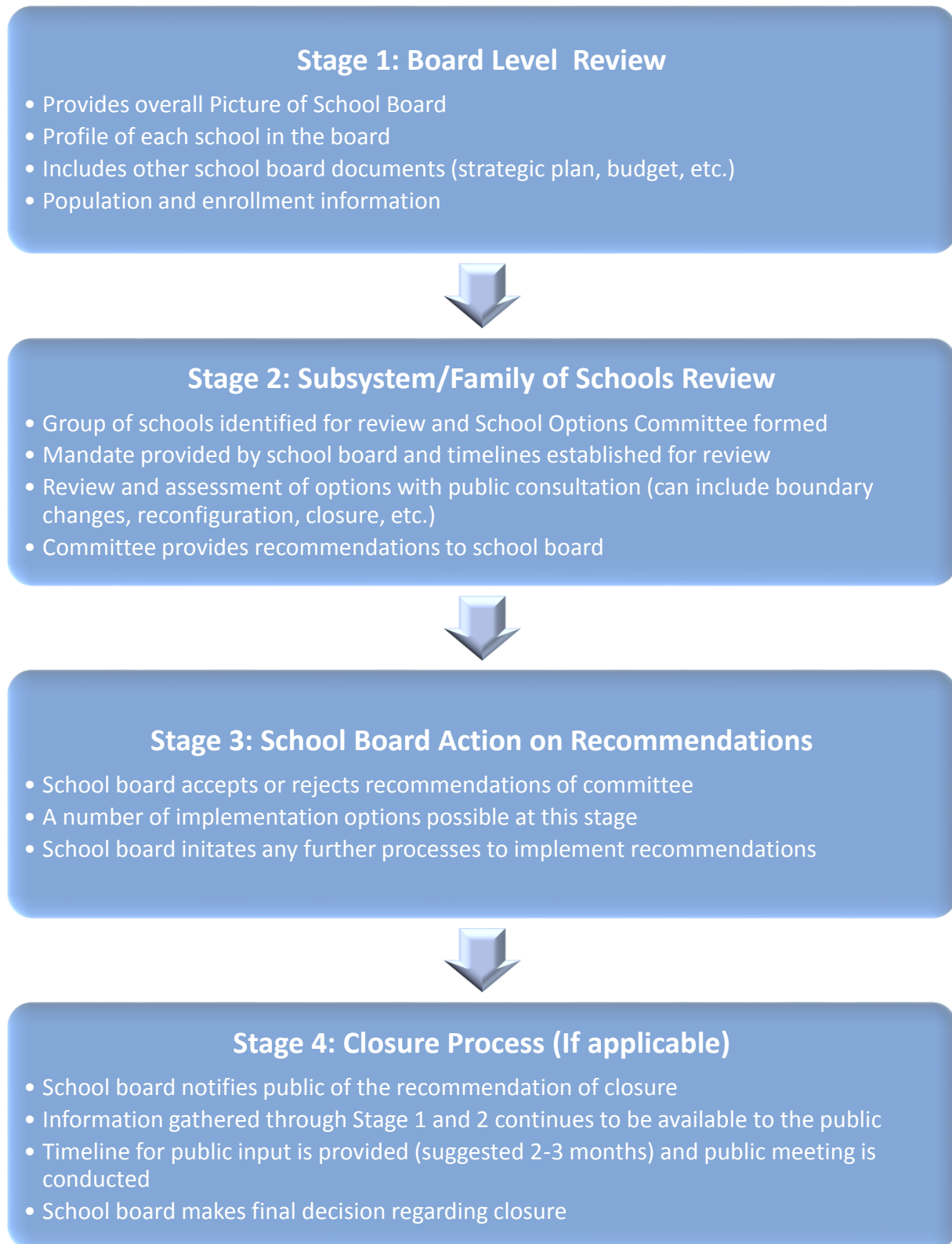
It is recognized that should the Province adopt the recommendations regarding a new long-range planning process and subsystem/family of schools review, a transition period will be required.

It is recommended that

**19. The department should develop a transition plan to the new long-range planning process, with the goal of school boards completing stage one of long-range planning not later than April 2015.**

The transition phase should ensure that school boards who have recently undertaken a long-range planning process are able to act on what they have heard from the community.

**Figure 1: Long Range Planning**  
Proposed Process



## Conclusion

Whether or not stakeholders believe the proposed recommendations are as bold as they desired, the Chair believes that they do respond in a proactive way to what was heard. The recommendations regarding long range planning and subsystem/family of schools reviews meaningfully address early engagement of stakeholders. In addition, clear criteria and verifiable information supported by facilitated dialogue sessions can address a lack of trust among key players of the process.

With respect to the broader considerations of the school's role in the community, some would have liked to have seen a recommendation for a new rural economic development strategy. What has been recommended is an open process that recognizes community capacity and leadership, innovative partnerships, and non-traditional operating models. It will be up to those innovative partnerships to find the solutions which support the preservation of an education program and/or a school building in a community. School boards should be a partner in these innovative solutions/approaches, but are not in a position to be the sole support for the initiative.

## Appendix A – Meeting Schedule and Community Representatives

<b>School Review Consultation Meeting Schedule and Community Representative</b>	
<p><b>Monday, January 6 - Sydney</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Sherwood Park Education Centre)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Sherwood Park Education Centre)</li> </ul>	<p>Ms. Eileen Lannon Oldford</p>
<p><b>Tuesday, January 7 – Port Hawkesbury</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Strait Area Education Recreation Centre)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Strait Area Education Recreation Centre)</li> </ul>	<p>Mr. Bob MacEachern</p>
<p><b>Thursday, January 9 – Truro</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Cobequid Education Centre)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Cobequid Education Centre)</li> </ul>	<p>Mr. Laurie Jennings</p>
<p><b>Monday, January 13 – Bridgewater</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Parkview Education Centre)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Parkview Education Centre)</li> </ul>	<p>Ms. Marg Forbes</p>
<p><b>Tuesday, January 14 – Yarmouth</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Yarmouth Consolidated High School)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Yarmouth Consolidated High School)</li> </ul>	<p>Mr. David Saxton</p>
<p>Wednesday, January 15 – Berwick</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Berwick and District School)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Berwick and District School)</li> </ul>	<p>Mr. Don Hyslop</p>
<p><b>Monday, January 20 – Amherst</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Amherst Regional High)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Amherst Regional High)</li> </ul>	<p>Mr. Michael Wilson</p>
<p><b>Tuesday, January 21 – Dartmouth</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff (School Board Office)</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives (Dartmouth High)</li> <li>• Public Meeting (Dartmouth High)</li> </ul>	<p>Dr. Henry Bishop</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, January 30 – Provincial French-language</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board members and senior staff</li> <li>• School Advisory Council Representatives</li> <li>• Public Meeting</li> </ul> <p>Meetings held via videoconference (École secondaire du Sommet; Centre scolaire de la Rive-Sud; École du Carrefour; École secondaire de Clare; École Rose-des-Vents; École secondaire de Par-en-Bas; École acadienne de Truro; École acadienne de Pomquet; École Beau-Port; École NDA; Centre scolaire Étoile de l'Acadie)</p>	<p>Mr. Gilles G. Le Blanc</p>

## **Appendix B – List of Stakeholder Meetings**

### Stakeholder Meetings Conducted:

- Nova Scotia School Boards Association
- School Board Operations Directors
- Council on Mi'kmaq Education
- Black Educators Association
- Pictou County Municipality (upon request)
- Municipality of the District of Lunenburg (upon request)
- Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative
- River John Community Association
- Interdepartmental committee supporting *Thrive! A plan for a healthier Nova Scotia*
- School Review Process Discussion Paper Committee
- Key Education and Early Childhood Development staff

## **Appendix C – Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (Resolutions)**

(<http://www.unsm.ca/resolutions.html>)

### **Resolutions--108<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**

**WESTIN NOVA SCOTIAN HOTEL  
HALIFAX, NS  
November 5-8, 2013**

Resolution 4C PROCEDURE FOR SURPLUS EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURES (PASSED)  
⇒Town of Yarmouth

WHEREAS there is no policy or procedure in place that provides assistance to Municipal Units that have an opportunity to acquire surplus buildings owned by the Province of Nova Scotia, more specifically the Department of Education; and

WHEREAS with declining enrolments in most rural nova Scotian communities, municipal governments are being approached to acquire school buildings that have become surplus; and

WHEREAS there is increased pressure on municipal governments to fund an increasing number of different services, projects and activities for the betterment of their respective communities; and

WHEREAS municipal governments, particularly in rural Nova Scotia, are facing declining opportunities for revenue generation; and

WHEREAS it should not be the intent of any order of government to place any financial burden onto another order of government;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the UNSM engage in discussions with the Department of Education and other appropriate government departments to set in place a process wherein when a surplus educational structure is turned over to a municipal unit, that there be sufficient funding to assist in the potential redevelopment or demolition of said building including environmental remediation costs; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that a process be included to address situations where a surplus educational structure is taken over by more than one municipal unit.

## **Resolutions Passed at the 107<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference & Responses**

### **WESTIN NOVA SCOTIAN HOTEL**

**HALIFAX, NS**

**September 18-21, 2012**

Resolution 3A SURPLUS SCHOOLS (PASSED)

⇒ District of Lunenburg

WHEREAS the Province of Nova Scotia, through the Department of Education, has undertaken or will be undertaking the Review of Schools, in which

The Review can either recommend investment in to the school to extend the life of the school, or the closure of a school; and

WHEREAS the Province, through the Department of Education has entered into Agreements with municipal units in the early to mid-1980's in which some municipal units retained ownership of schools and the province was responsible for maintenance and operation of the schools, and in other cases the province assumed the responsibility for ownership, maintenance and operation; and

WHEREAS in those instances where the Municipal Unit owns the lands and buildings, the province does not have to consider the closure costs, demolition costs or maintenance requirements of an abandoned building when deciding to close a school; rather these costs become the burden of the municipal tax payer enabling the Province to walk away from such liabilities; and

WHEREAS schools in the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg which have been closed have been inadequately maintained leaving municipal taxpayers to shoulder a significant costs to address maintenance issues in order to source alternate uses of the structures or the costs to demolish these structures; and

WHEREAS not all municipalities are under the same Agreements, and thus in some municipalities the Province of Nova Scotia is the owner and thus responsible for maintenance, operations and demolition of surplus schools. In such instances the Province of Nova Scotia must offer to transfer ownership of a surplus school to a municipality and the municipality may or may not accept the same, thus making the impact of such closures for a maintenance and operation cost liability to municipal tax payers inconsistent within Nova Scotia;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities write the Province of Nova Scotia recommending changes to the Education Act whereby the Provincial Government would assume full responsibility, at the election of the Municipality, for all existing public schools and surplus public schools regardless of the year in which they were constructed and that this process be retroactive from 2009; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that municipalities be notified when a school property is to become surplus to the needs of the school board in advance of the school board disposal process to determine if there is a municipal purpose for the property sufficient for the municipality to acquire the property from the school board; and



FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that this process require notice be given in consideration of a municipal interest such as maintaining playgrounds or other recreational facilities associated with the property; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that this process would not imply that the property be given to the municipality or that the municipality would compete for the property through a formal tender but would be determined based on agreement between the school board and the municipality (whereby the school board could decide to transfer it to the municipality at no cost).

Forwarded to:  
Minister of the Department of Education

RESPONSE:

The second municipal concern relates to Resolution 3A, which recommends changes to the Education Act to nullify agreements made between the Province and the municipal Units in the early to mid-1980s, related to ownership and responsibility for surplus schools. It is my understanding that there is currently a committee, with representatives from both the Province and the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, charged to discuss this matter in more detail.

In an effort to respect the current process and the mandate of the committee, I will take Resolution 3A under advisement until such time that the committee has completed its review.

The Honourable Ramona Jennex  
Minister  
November 13, 2012

## **School Review Process Consultation Feedback Summary**

### **Theme: Long Range Planning and More Collaboration**

There was strong support for a long range planning approach that would provide a more holistic view of school/schools within the region and help the public understand “why” a school may close.

- A school cannot be looked at in isolation. Looking at a group of schools together allows a review of all the possible options and for a more integrated response.
- The planning process being undertaken will help to answer the question of “why” a school was chosen [Inward Looking].
- Schools should be reviewed/looked at on an ongoing basis. It shouldn't be a shock to a community that their school is being reviewed. Ongoing analysis would provide an earlier sign.
- School review should be looked at on a regional basis, not individual schools.
- The focus of resources should be on how to support small schools, not on how to close them. The school board needs to be open to accepting the solutions offered by the community.
- There needs to be an opportunity for back and forth dialogue. There is no chance for clarity or discussion between the SAC and the school board.
- There is a need for more long range planning for all schools in an area. Have a long term (10 year) plan for the high schools and their feeder schools. A more holistic approach.
- Don't move children to a school that also may close in a couple of years.
- Long range planning could be done at the provincial level – the school board boundaries are arbitrary.
- The process should look at family reviews with school closure as one part of the bigger review. School closure is one piece in a number of pieces that includes boundary, reconfigurations, and capital planning.
- Looking at individual schools comes up with an incomplete solution.
- There could be a different/better way of looking at the useful life of a school. For example, identify from the very beginning how long a school will be open for.
- When the community has the larger picture, they can also see the ‘future’ picture. Having that engagement prior to the review is much better.
- There needs to be a systems perspective, i.e. what are the provincial strategies that provide context for the school.
- School boards need to look at how we are going to deliver education on a smaller scale.
- Long range planning is a critical component. There is an opportunity for boards to be proactive and plan for the future. This effort should be ongoing.

- The department should require boards to complete long range planning exercises and provide the funding for this.
- Long range planning should be mandatory before you review a school.
- Long range planning will help with the public understanding of the process and influence how review reports are written. It should be clear that school boards have authority over the process and are the final decision makers. Long range planning has to take into account that kids shouldn't have to go through a review twice (i.e. moved to a school that could be up for closure as well).
- "Seldom does a challenge at one school get solved in isolation. If there was a comprehensive plan for all operational aspects of the board it would lead to better decisions and take into account a broader view."
- Education exists within a broader context.
- Reviews need to consider not just closure but other significant changes to the school (e.g. reconfiguration).
- School boards should be mandated to do long term planning.
- The Looking Inward process that the school board is undertaking has been very well accepted. It is helpful for the communities.
- It is difficult to make recommendations/decisions when not all the information is available to parents/community.
- "How can I make an informed, respectful decision, when you're not giving me all the information?"
- There is a need for longer range planning at the regional level.
- Long range planning will prevent situations which have arisen where children are sent to a new school after closure, only to face the threat of closure at that school.
- There needs to be more effort put into the transition phase if a school does close. The children from a school are sometimes divided among many other schools and this is very hard on the children and local community.
- School boards need to be open to different ways of doing things (e.g. municipal offers). There needs to be an effort to think innovatively, not just number crunch.
- Long range planning must be undertaken. Long range planning for schools needs to be in the context of municipal and community planning.
- Long range planning should look at a number of schools together. Have a plan for all the students in the area.
- There are many ripple effects of closure (on other schools). A long range plan would allow those impacts to be assessed and mitigated.
- There needs to be more informal discussion about options before the formal process (e.g. the principal could bring the issue to the SAC). There needs to be a more positive approach to the issue of building utilization.
- Identify services needed/wanted and then look for partnerships.
- Look at families of schools and the broader region. Reviews of individual schools should not be made in isolation of a larger strategic plan.

- Immediate opportunities need to be found, not waiting for strategic planning.
- Need to approach the question from positive view – development of partnerships. Energy needs to be focused on solutions not fighting closure.
- The parents/community need to know what is going to happen to the students when a school is closed.
- How do boundary reviews and other processes connect with school review?
- If a school is going to close, the parents/community need to know this sooner rather than later.
- The community should not be surprised by a review, or announcement of potential closure. The community needs to be part of the conversation earlier. There will be more buy-in by doing this.
- Long range planning will allow for a timeline of when schools may be up for review.
- There is an issue with engaging parents and communities in the discussion about the future of the school, unless closure is threatened. There needs to be a way of discussing options for the school outside of the review process.
- There are some schools that will likely never close simply because of their geographic location. There needs to be some long range planning done for these types of schools.
- Any long range planning should begin with an asset mapping exercise to determine the needs of the community.
- School boards have a responsibility to undertake long range planning for their region.
- “If we continue to make decisions in silos and allow the department and school boards to make all the decisions we are missing the opportunity to make better decisions.”
- There is only one tax-payer, we need to make decisions based on what’s best overall.
- There should be consultation with the community before you are ‘in’ the review process. More communication is required (e.g. Lockport is an example of pre-emptive communication about the future of a school). More opportunities to explore proactive solutions.
- Some school boards are making decisions in the absence of a long term plan. This results in students being moved from school to school (facing closure at multiple schools), and confusing communication due to changes to planning for schools.
- All options need to be explored – impacts to all schools in an area need to be studied.
- There needs to be an ‘exchange of ideas’.
- The process needs to allow for creative options to be explored.
- How could the conversation become about opportunity and not loss. The process currently makes it difficult to focus on the positives that would result from closure.
- There is a need for short and long term planning for the school board.
- More collaboration on outcomes and transitioning students is needed.
- There is great value in the more holistic approach of looking at a group of schools versus one school.
- The structure of the review puts the community in a position of fighting to overturn the decision, not working toward a solution. Have a report that identifies the challenges and invites participation in solutions.

- The identification report puts the community on the defensive and assumes closure. A process needs to preclude a predetermined outcome and provide opportunities for community generated ideas.

As part of long-range planning, more collaboration was seen as an essential element.

- Long range planning is an effective method of engaging the community sooner in discussions about the viability of schools.
- School boards need to be genuine in the process to allow people to participate. Engage all opinions and not just those that are most vocal.
- We need more coordination at all levels of government. Government needs to support school boards when they come up with scenarios they would like to implement and are able to make a valid case for their proposal.
- There may be different ways to engage communities and parents in long term planning for schools and school regions (e.g. Thought Stream). There are methods that can better capture the total voice of parents and communities. Some individuals are hesitant to speak out against vocal advocates.
- There is a lack of collaboration in the process as it is now.
- Partners (i.e. political partners such as municipalities and MLAs) need to be engaged in a more positive way so there isn't negative interference with the process.
- Politicians should be part of the process earlier and not become involved at the end of the process which can cause problems for a school board during the decision making process.
- The community needs to have more input into the scenarios, especially what happens to the children after a school closes.
- Long-range planning should include community participation and input into solutions.
- Municipalities need to be involved in the process, they have relevant information/experience.
- Education (school boards) needs to look at more creative partnerships. More consultation with community groups would improve the process.
- More effort needs to be made to break down the silos. There are opportunities with partners (e.g. HRM) where more effort could be made.
- There needs to be a broader perspective, from the community and municipalities. There would be better buy in if all local players were engaged from the beginning.
- There is currently limited engagement with the communities, especially prior to a review. The communities should have the opportunity to review the information and propose a scenario that they are happy with.
- There is a lot of mistrust between the community and school boards. The community needs to have a more active role in the review process.
- There is no opportunity for the community to provide input into the reports before they are provided to school board members and the public.
- The review process should be conducted by a larger group of people with representatives from stakeholder groups (municipalities, department, etc.)

- The process needs to involve more collaboration with the community on all available scenarios, and the impacts of the various options (all impacts must be considered, including social). The community needs to know what the plan is for the students should a school close and have the opportunity to participate in decisions about the transition.
- Communities need information about the school and it should be done before the process begins in order to provide more opportunity for partnerships to form solutions.
- Clear communication and collaboration between partners and stakeholders is key.
- Should be very open and transparent with more community involvement and engagement. There can be misconceptions about the process.
- Meaningful information sharing would be helpful to the process, earlier.
- Successful collaboration is when all parties come to the table and know that they have a role to play. E.g. Municipalities want to maintain a school in order to continue offering certain programs, but that is not a school board responsibility.
- There is a need to engage communities earlier, and outside of the context of closure. The process starts the work off in a controversial atmosphere. Communities are leery and distrustful.
- The role/mandate of SACs needs to be re-energized. Their role is to represent the community in the planning process for a school. The SACs need to connect more within the families of schools. This is then linked to the broader strategic direction of the school board.
- The school board needs to be connecting more and better with SACs.
- Other systems (levels of government) must be considered in the planning so that we are working toward sustainable communities. There should be a better connection with municipalities. This relationship is usually reactive to a problem not proactive.
- Municipalities are essential to long term planning.
- Engage all partners (municipality, city, province, etc.) in generating solutions. Develop a solid proposal backed up with action.
- There is a risk to earlier engagement, e.g. student transfers go up.
- We need to capitalize on partnerships – planning for libraries, municipal buildings, etc. Government departments need to work together.
- Municipalities need to have a role. They know about growth, development, and potential growth in the area. They have a vested interest in the community and the school as part of the community.
- There is a lack of communication between stakeholders (communities, school boards, municipal and provincial government).
- There needs to be more collaboration and communications with municipal governments.
- There is a need for better communication and collaboration. Use of a school should be discussed before it is slated for closure.
- Engage all partners earlier in the process, including other government departments. Once your school is identified the process does not allow the time needed to change the circumstances. The school board needs to be a more willing partner when communities bring ideas to them.
- The department should be taking a leadership position to foster opportunities and partnerships for school buildings (with other government departments).

- The municipalities are a valuable planning partner and should be engaged earlier.
- The community needs to be engaged earlier to find out what they want to see with their school and community.
- Communities need more information and input into the options when a school is being considered for closure. There would be better acceptance of the outcome if there was more involvement from the beginning.
- More coordination is needed between levels of government and between government departments to promote initiatives underway (e.g. HRM walking communities).
- Work with municipalities to further common goals – align planning strategies.
- All partners should be part of these discussions and collaboration between all partners (municipalities, school boards, community) needs to occur.
- Parents and communities don't want to proactively approach the board because they are scared it will bring attention to their school and result in closure.
- There is a need to involve municipalities in the process of school review. They are a valuable partner. The economic viability of the community needs to be tied to the review process – this requires municipal involvement. Municipalities are a partner in a hub model.
- There needs to be a rural economic development strategy and there needs to be partnerships to support this strategy, including schools.
- All partners need to be engaged earlier, including schools. All stakeholders should be working together and on the same page. The impact of closure on all schools involved needs to be considered.
- There needs to be more collaboration with school boards. More openness in responding to requests from the community.
- Municipalities need to be more involved in community engagement (e.g. seeking out what people need to stay in a community), under the leadership of the province. This is larger than education.
- There needs to be more collaboration with municipalities about school buildings that are closing/closed.
- There needs to be more collaboration with the board. There is no chance for discussion between the board and the community.
- All stakeholders need to be at the table, including municipalities, to work on solutions for a region.
- Municipalities invest infrastructure around a school (e.g. sidewalks, water, sewer) but have no formal say in the planning/future of schools.
- Teachers need a voice in the review process. They understand the school the best.
- The priority is education and all partners should be working together more. Early indicators would allow conversations to begin earlier. More innovative approaches to schooling need to be considered.
- There needs to be more interdepartmental collaboration about the long term plan for the province. School boards and the department focus on education but so much impacts other areas (transportation and environmental initiatives).

- Involve the community and use a ‘fact base’ to guide the conversation. Allow the community to see the realities faced by boards. Allow discussion on solutions.
- Communities need to be thinking proactively about their school and what opportunities exist for the school building. You want to make it unattractive for the school board to consider for closure.
- Let the parents become more involved in the solutions for a school or group of schools.

Some of the suggestions provided during the consultation were suggestions for specific process improvements or more general comments about planning/collaboration.

- Having an idea (or ideas) for the community to respond to is helpful in the process.
- Even with long range planning, there needs to be a formal process if closure is being considered. There needs to be a sufficient link between the long range plan and what happens at the individual school (long periods of time can elapse).
- There is a need to consider the individual school even if a regional process was undertaken – depending on the outcome of the regional review (i.e. if further consideration was required for an individual school).
- The cost of long range planning needs to be acknowledged.
- More coordination/connection to the capital spending process is needed. When capital requests are supported by long-range planning, the government needs to be willing to support that.
- There are P3 schools in the region. The province needs to inform school boards about plans for these schools so that school boards can make appropriate plans/decisions.
- Long range planning is difficult to do for a school board when you don’t control the variables needed to develop a strategic plan. When you articulate a plan you build expectations, but school boards cannot always implement the plan.
- There will always be a need for a legislated review process but this may look very different if there was a broader/family of schools review coming before it (condensed).
- There needs to be dedicated resources to long range planning and school review.
- There should be a review of all schools in Nova Scotia before any more schools are closed. Boards are not all equal in the amount of work they done in this area. Some boards should be mandated to complete the reviews that are required.
- Better long range planning would support government’s capital process.
- The department needs to take a more active role in longer term planning by school boards.
- A lot of time passes between talking about what might happen and the action – lots can change in that time. It needs to be a living document/process.
- There should be a better connection between planning at the local level and capital requests/approvals.
- Schools should be built with future considerations in mind, e.g. population changes. We need to “right-size” school buildings.
- There could be a model of third party management when a school is in danger of closing.
- School closure should be considered only as a last resort.



- Reconfiguration/boundary changes need to be considered in the process.
- There needs to be a willingness to overcome policy, legislation, collective agreements, etc. to take advantage of opportunities.
- There is an example of a joint use facility in Mulgrave. This arrangement is allowing the school to survive and allowing the younger children to stay in their local community.
- A commission could be appointed to have an ongoing conversation about schools – where they are and where they should be.
- Government needs to be prepared to support school boards and communities when innovative approaches are being considered.
- There is research that could inform the review process which we are not responding to (e.g. small school research).
- Creativity in communities needs to be recognized and taken advantage of. For example, International students program, designated group to manage multiple schools, innovative school buildings.
- More education/information should be provided about the actual costs facing school boards in the context of their budgets. This will provide the bigger picture for communities about the decisions boards are making.
- There needs to be more effort put into the school receiving students when there is a closure.
- There are examples of schools not being ready to accept the new students. This is very hard on the students and families.
- If a school is going to close, there needs to be work put into the transition for the students.
- There was a good experience with transition and parents/teachers are now happy with the arrangement at the new school.
- The onus should be on the school board to prove there is a case to close the school.
- There is not enough time in the process to consider all the available options for a school. This needs to happen long before a review process takes place.
- Transition of students after a school has been reviewed should be mandated and funded.
- Preparation and planning should be done over a longer period and should happen before a closure process is initiated.
- Schools should be reviewed on a regular basis.
- A regional consultation is more effective than school by school.

## **Theme: Decision Making**

Many participants felt strongly that school boards should remain decision makers

- This is part of the school board's responsibility. They are elected to do this and need to have control because they are responsible for the budget.
- The school board is best positioned to consider what is in the best interests of all students involved, while communities are more focused on their own experiences.

- The decision needs to be made ‘close to the ground’ at the school board level.
- Decision making needs to be left at the local level. This is why school boards are elected.
- Decision making should stay with the school boards. This decision should be made at the local level, not centralized (i.e. not made in Halifax).
- School board members need to participate more in the process. They need to read what is prepared by the Study Committee and visit the schools. Maybe they need to sit in on the Study Committee meetings to appreciate the work being done.
- The decision making power around school closure should remain with the school boards.
- The province can set the criteria that a decision needs to be based on so it is consistent across the province, but the decision should remain with the boards.
- “I don’t want someone from Halifax making the decision about my local school”
- School boards need to maintain this responsibility.
- The school board has the expertise, and they are the ones in the communities representing the residents. This should not be done in Halifax or Sydney.
- If school boards have the authority to make this decision, there shouldn’t be any political interference in the process. School boards are willing to take responsibility for the decision but other levels of government need to become partners.
- There needs to be some ‘checks and balances’ for the school board.
- School board members need to familiarize themselves with the school before making a decision about closure (visit the school, talk to the community, etc.)
- School boards should retain the decision making authority. There needs to be some improvements to the accountabilities, but removing this responsibility would be a failure of the system.
- The decision maker should be the school board, as those elected to represent the community.
- The information that is provided by staff is reviewed by school board members and is taken to heart.
- The decision around school closure should remain with the elected school board.
- School boards are making the best decisions they can based on the information available.
- Hiring/involving an outside agency to conduct a school review did not work. The democratic process needs to be respected.
- School boards should retain decision making authority. They are best positioned to understand all factors that need to be considered in a closure decision. Politics must stay out of the process.
- Board members need to familiarize themselves with the school before making a decision (e.g. visit the school).

Aside from school boards, some other suggestions were provided

- Communities are partners in the decision making by bringing forward ideas and solutions.
- If community members were part of the decision making, they would be more engaged in the process.
- There needs to be more of a role for municipalities, community, and parents in decision making.

- Communities need more involvement in the decision making process, they know the community best.
- Decisions about school closure are bigger than the school boards. All government departments should be involved. The Minister [of Education and Early Childhood Development] could review the final decision of the board before it was implemented.
- The school board and the Minister need to be involved in the review process decision.
- The department could have a role in mediating between the governance of the process by school boards and the community.
- Decision making could be placed at the provincial level. The province has a larger mandate than just education. They would be able to bring those other perspectives to the review process (e.g. economic development).
- School boards need to know that once they make a decision the province will support them in it (e.g. capital planning). School boards currently don't have any control over the funding required to implement their decisions. There is a role for the province in the review process.
- The same body should be making decisions with respect to closure and new school construction/renovations. Knowing about a new school can make a difference to the community and the school board currently has no control over that aspect.
- Parents should be part of the decision making process. Parents can inform what is needed for the education of students.
- The decision could be made by a panel of representatives from the community, etc.
- There could be an independent third-party to hear the school board and community arguments and make a decision. If the decision is to leave the school open, additional funding would be provided to the board for that purpose.
- There could be a committee comprised of a variety of stakeholders (community, department staff, etc.)
- Make the decision makers a broader group of people (not just the school board).
- Establish an oversight committee, not associated with the school board or the schools involved, an objective committee is needed.

#### Other Comments about Decision Making

- This is a very difficult process for school boards. They care for school communities and the people.
- There is a big issue of trust between the community and the school board. The community cannot always see the decision making process of the school board. What they see is the vote without the benefit of any meaningful discussion.
- School board members need to review the material prepared by the Study Committee prior to decision making. There was a perception that the decision was already made. School board members need to be more involved with the process, especially the member representing the local area.
- School boards have taken on a corporate model – no one is representing the 'local' community anymore.
- There are no accountabilities or discipline for school boards and their decisions.

- School boards need more capacity building in the area of governance. There is too much influence by school board staff in this process.
- There is a need for transparency in the school board's decisions – no horse-trading or protecting one region over another. Politics needs to stay out of this process.
- School boards don't make their decision with the view that schools are community assets.
- Parents are not always engaged in the process because they feel the decision has already been made.
- There is a perception that the decision to close is already made once a school is identified for review.
- It is difficult for boards to make decisions about closure when they are unsure of the outcome, for example, they vote to close a school on speculation that a new school may be built.
- The provincial government politicians need to support school boards when boards are making decisions which are consistent with the direction coming from the government.
- Other levels of government (e.g. MLAs) need to engage in the process in a more positive way, how the process can encourage political partners to participate without alienating the process.
- Political interference in the process is an issue. Government MLAs and others need to respect the school boards in their decision making process.
- There needs to be a mechanism for appeal if the community feels they have been mistreated.
- There is no recourse after a decision has been made to close a school. There should be an appeal mechanism.

## **Theme: Flexibility**

Many comments asked for more flexibility in when a review process is implemented or for an abridged review process under certain circumstances

- The process needs to be flexible when the community is generally okay with the direction being proposed (e.g. closure). The focus should then be more about informing the transition and/or implementation.
- There may be circumstances where the process can be abridged (e.g. community agreement).
- There needs to be more flexibility in the process. If the community develops a solution (or agrees to a solution) school boards should be able to implement this without a full review process.
- There should be an ability to implement a solution that has the support of the community without going through the formal review process.
- If a community is in agreement with a decision then the school board should be able to implement it. Going through the process, when the community agrees with the proposed scenario is time consuming and pointless.
- You shouldn't have to go through a school review if the community and school board are in agreement about what the solution is and they agree to close the school.
- If a community agrees to a scenario/solution, the need for a review should be questioned. There would be a significant cost savings if we can avoid the formal process.

- The work of a committee could focus more on transitioning students and implementation of a decision, if there is agreement on a solution.
- The review process should be more flexible to accommodate unique circumstance (e.g. little/no students left in the school).

#### Other comments focused more on flexibility within the process itself

- One model does not fit all in this process. The process needs to reflect the unique circumstances of each school in the province.
- There is not enough time in the process for the Study Committee to complete their work.
- There should be an option for community generated solutions, not just the status quo or closure.
- The process needs to be moved away from calendar dates and milestones.
- The process impacts many other decisions and there needs to be more flexibility.
- Consideration needs to be given to the school board election cycle. There is a challenge for a new school board that is picking up the review process mid-way through.
- The review process needs to be extended to allow more time for community involvement.
- The review process is too rigid. There is no opportunity for communication between the school board and school community.
- There is no opportunity for dialogue about the school review. This is perceived as a lack of interest by school board members.

### **Theme: School Ownership**

- This issue is impacting the review process. The schools should be a provincial responsibility.
- Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (UNSM) resolutions should be implemented.
- Municipalities would like the choice, and accept the challenge, of using these buildings for community purposes.
- The practice of returning old schools to municipalities needs to be considered. This is creating a significant financial hardship for some municipalities.
- A building that is returned should have funding provided to offset any necessary costs of repurposing, remediation, etc.
- There needs to be more coordination between the various levels of government, e.g. municipalities and school boards.
- Municipalities have the interest and investment (commitment) to local schools.
- There needs to be more cooperation between municipalities and school boards when considering the future of a school building.
- The reasons for schools closures should be valid and not around what should be done with the building.

## **Theme: Innovation / Keeping Schools in the Community**

There were many suggestions and comments provided about the keeping a school in the community, the value to doing so, and ideas of how this might work.

- There is an appreciation of the value of a school to economic development in a community. Education cannot take the lead on this.
- There needs to be a conversation about community economic development and role of the school in this.
- There is an understanding about the pressures caused by declining populations and reduced funding. Communities need to get more engaged in the local school if they want to keep it.
- There is only one tax payer. When we make decisions about school closure the costs are simply realized elsewhere. We need more overlapped thinking in government.
- There needs to be a special consideration for younger children. There is more flexibility with respect to physical building requirements for the younger grades. It is important for younger children to be able to go to school closer to home.
- We have a responsibility not to centralize everything. Our small communities are losing their schools and the Province has a responsibility to balance this in some way.
- The government needs to make a commitment that we are going to keep these smaller schools open and provide the funding that is needed to do this.
- More clarity is required on the 'hub' model. This is not in the mandate of school boards. If school boards are to lead this initiative, the mandate will need to change.
- There is a safety concern when considering a hub model for schools. Children's safety is the number one priority.
- We need to start with the premise that the first goal is for every community to keep their school at the elementary level.
- The community needs support in initiatives to keep schools active and relevant.
- Children will get educated no matter what school they are in, but it would be good to have them in a nicer school.
- "Presumption against closure" – school boards should be required to build a case for closure.
- Small rural schools should be looked at through a separate lens through this process. There is a direction from rural to urban and that's not fair.
- It is important to keep the integrity of small schools while keeping an open mind about what we can afford. The board's perspective on this issue has been shifting to place more value on these smaller schools.
- Small schools are important and need to be protected.
- There are more difficulties in some of those larger schools now. The same issues do not occur in smaller schools (e.g. bullying).
- The first option should be to look at communities with several schools before we close a school in a community with only one. Some schools, because of geography will need to stay open.
- We are not considering the social impacts of losing a school in the local community.

- There are differences between a town that is amalgamating schools versus a community that is losing the only school they have.
- This is more than just real estate and money. There is a need to look at education and the quality of education.
- There are broader considerations to school review that are not currently considered. For example, impacts on students with special needs and/or minorities, increased crime and bullying in larger schools, dropout rates, etc.
- We need to make sure we are not replacing our small schools with larger amalgamated schools just because we have too many buildings and we're trying to reduce space.
- We should be looking at smaller and more innovative schools.
- The money being used for big capital projects would be better used to keep our smaller schools open.
- Small communities value having an education in their area and the CSAP is concerned that closing a school would result in students in going to the English school closer to their home.
- Isolated regions with a minority population should examine what can be done to create better school-community involvement so that the school becomes the centre of the community. Saving money should not be the only factor in making decisions. Broadening boundaries does not help small communities.
- The school plays a big role in keeping the vibrancy in the community.
- Community should have access to our beautiful schools. Use by everyone for everyone. 12 hours a day every day
- Recreation departments cost-share with schools and share the expense.
- We need to look at hub schools as a way of keeping schools open.
- Any model that is developed around the concept of a 'hub' must be flexible to the needs of the community.
- There have been conditions put on the closure of some of the schools in the area (i.e. they can stay open if the community is able to demonstrate viability through a hub model or increased revenue). The community now needs support in order to meet those conditions but it is not available.
- How do we/can we quantify the non-tangible benefits of a community school (i.e. having a school in the local community).

## **Theme: Consistent Criteria, Clear Information, Factors to Consider in a Review Process**

Consultation participants were clear that quality education is a number one priority.

- Benefits to quality of education need to be clear.
- School boards cannot run a deficit – this means they have to make decisions about programming and if programming can be delivered in smaller schools. The school board is already directing additional funding to smaller schools in order to provide the (minimum) public

school program. This takes away from other program options which may benefit students greatly.

- Education is being ruled by efficiency because of budget constraints. Efficient education does not necessarily mean quality education.
- Parents are very proud of their schools and happy with the quality of education their children are receiving. They are happy with the assessment results and feel they are comparable to other (larger) schools.
- These schools are targeted because of the numbers but the education quality is not considered.
- There are communities who are willing to accept 'less' than what our standards (i.e. for buildings) are in order to keep their school. This is not acceptable. If there is a decision to leave a school open we have an obligation to bring that school to acceptable standards.
- As school boards struggle with shrinking budgets the focus becomes money and not the educational benefits and/or value of the school.
- "We don't send our students to school to be one line of a government budget."
- Education quality needs to be the number one priority of our school system.
- Why don't we look at standardized test scores as part of the review process?
- "How students start their schooling experience has an impact on the rest of their learning experience."
- The quality of education for our students needs to be placed above the bricks and mortar of a building.
- Small schools can sometime offer a quality of education that larger schools can. For example, when you consider children with special needs, sometime the small environment is what they need to be successful in school.
- There hasn't been a curriculum review in many years. The curriculum has an impact on what our schools needs to be/have. Without a review of the curriculum and a sense of what that will look like in the future, we can't talk about what our schools should look like.
- There is a threshold when education quality suffers in a smaller school. There are examples where combining smaller schools would offer a much better education for students.
- There needs to be a quality education provided to every student, regardless of where they live. People accept that they don't always get an education experience that is equitable to another (larger) area but it still needs to meet a certain quality standard.
- "Those people who choose to live in a rural setting don't expect equality in education but they do expect a quality education. "
- We should be supporting community schools but only if they are meeting the educational needs of the students. We don't want to keep a school open if the students aren't achieving.
- "The dynamic of what a school is has changed significantly. We need to decide what a school is and then fund it for that."
- There is currently no connection to assessments for the school in the review process. This is an indicator of education quality.
- There needs to be consideration given to the changing curriculum and how this will impact infrastructure in the future.



- This process is only about money and not about the quality of education that children are receiving.
- Decisions cannot be made based on money. Student achievement is the number one strategic goal of the school board. Decisions need to be focused on how things can be done better for student achievement.
- There is a perception that if students are sent to a larger school they will get a better quality of education. However, having students on buses for a good portion of the day is not contributing to the quality of their education.
- Students should still be getting a quality education in a rural school.
- “We need to make these decisions so that the students have the supports they need with the resources that we have available.”
- Engaging the students in the process may be helpful. They may have opinions about the solution and things that would make the decision more appealing for them.
- Parents should have more say in how we educate our children.
- Consideration could be given to separating the function of providing educational services from the management of building and buses. Then parents could have a direct conversation with school boards about education programming without the added issues of buildings and transportation. The concern with this model, however, is that it could have impacts on the board’s ability to deliver services.
- There are many students who transfer out of smaller schools for reasons other than education, e.g. sports. This hurts the small schools. More innovative approaches should be considered to keep those students and still allow them to have those experiences (e.g. allowing students from smaller schools to play on sports teams at a larger schools in the area).
- There is very little information provided from the province on student outcomes. Provincial assessments are one piece of the puzzle for student outcomes.
- It is difficult to articulate program quality in schools.
- There needs to be more focus on the increase in education quality as a result of closure.
- The review process could look at general health indicators (e.g. Community Counts).
- Focus on the benefits to students in the case of school closure. What is the value to students if a school is closed and they are attending a new/different school?
- School boards have a responsibility to provide an equitable education across the region.
- There are a wide variety of challenges facing children. The role of education has changed significantly. This puts a strain on the school board resources.
- There needs to be a balance between quality and fiscal realities. Programming and operating costs are integrated. You can’t have one with the other.
- Smaller schools need to be considered for younger children. The early years are critical for future learning.
- Smaller schools enable children to get more personalized attention.
- It is harder to provide high school courses in smaller areas. More innovation is required in this area.

- Students and families should be a priority in the review criteria. There is too much focus on money.

The importance of accurate and available data was a key theme in consultation comments

- There should be special consideration if the school is the only school in the community.
- Decisions need to be based on up-to-date data. There needs to be a well-defined process around data so school boards know how to identify schools.
- Reports need to be accurate.
- The public needs to have access to all the same information the school board is using to base a decision on. There needs to be lots of time for back and forth.
- There should be a common data set.
- Information needs to be specific to the school, not averages/trends across the board.
- An outside agency could be utilized to develop the reports, with support from the school board.
- The information provided in the reports is not always specific to the school, they are averages based on similar sized schools. How can decisions be made on this type of information?
- It feels like the criteria are stacked so the school board can build a case against the school. It is unclear what the costs are based on that the school board produces.
- There is a need to clear, consistent criteria for reviewing a school. Although this criteria needs to be consistent across the province, it needs to be flexible enough to account for regional and other differences between school boards.
- There is a need to focus more on the positive outcomes of closure, and the benefits to students.
- There is a lack of information available to parents and the community (e.g. transportation data). Communities/parents should be involved in the preparation of the reports for school review and the information contained in them should be available to the community.
- It is extremely challenging to get information from the school board. Municipalities and communities both had to submit a request under FOIPOP for information. This is not acceptable.
- There is no transparency about how the school board develops the data used in the reports (e.g. cost estimates). This information should be available to the community.
- Transparency is needed - all data needs to be sourced. Access to the raw data sources should be provided.
- The information provided in the reports needs to be accurate. Board members need to base their decision on accurate information. The province should vet the reports before they are public.
- There is a need for transparency. The public has a perception that there is something else going on behind the process.
- There needs to be more openness and more transparency. The school board needs to be open to responding to the SAC/community.
- The reports were not accurate. There is no consistency in the reports (from board to board, or school to school).

- The reports prepared for the process are of very poor quality. There are problems with the accuracy of the information provided in them. Data needs to be audited by a third party. There needs to be more consistency, independence of data/information (i.e. away from board).
- There is an issue of trust between the school board and the community.
- There needs to be clear indicators that apply to each school board. Provincial standards. Data needs to be collected and publically maintained and available.
- Key indicators would create a proactive approach. Early indicators would allow school boards and communities to work on solutions earlier.
- There was a lot of incorrect information in the school review reports. There is a perception that the boards are building a case for closure. There is no accountability for what is contained in the reports.
- There are problems with the quality of the reports and there is a culture of secrecy around information for the school review process. This is a concern.
- The community is distrustful of the information provided. This is difficult because there is competent staff doing this work.
- There is a distrust of the numbers produced for the review. The board needs to be more transparent about where these numbers come from. There is a quality issue with the reports.
- The reports need to be consistent in the information presented. More clarity and information are required.
- The report information needs to be written/presented at a level that everyone can understand.
- There are concerns about the accuracy and quality of the reports prepared. There is no accountability for what is presented in the reports.

There were many suggestions provided with respect to what criteria should be considered during a review process (i.e. what lenses need to be applied) and what are appropriate data sources.

- There should be provincially set criteria, including standardized enrollment projections.
- The demographics of an area (re: combining student populations) is an important consideration. The social impacts of a scenario/decision need to be considered.
- There needs to be more focus on the education program and what opportunity exists with consolidations.
- There needs to be more information about what happens if the school closes. This would ensure less anxiety for parents and students.
- Consolidations should be considered in the process. The receiving school should be considered in the process.
- A complete financial analysis needs to be undertaken as part of the review (all costs considered).
- Geographically isolated schools need to be given consideration in the process.
- When a school is identified for review, a number of issues are raised (i.e. maintenance requirements). These issues should not be allowed to be included in a future review. The school board is identifying these issues and then not doing anything about them (deferred

maintenance). That's not the school's fault – they don't have control, and are not allowed to try to improve the school.

- The receiving school needs to be considered in the review process, the impacts on class sizes and the quality of education available at the receiving school should be part of the evaluation.
- There needs to be consistent criteria across the province. Standardization in the information used for school review.
- There needs to be heavy weighting on education quality in the criteria.
- Younger age groups need special consideration in the decision to close. There are educational benefits of smaller schools at the younger grades, e.g. less time on a bus, more community involvement. Building limitations are also less of a concern at the lower grades (e.g. no lab requirements)
- There should be special consideration in the process if the school being considered for closure is the only school in the community.
- A variety of information needs to be included in the process reports, not just items about the building and square footage. Academic indicators (e.g. assessments) should be included in the review process information.
- Some of the report requirements outlined in the regulations are optional – these should all be mandatory. They are important criteria and should be considered.
- There needs to be more consideration throughout the process about the impact on the community and the children as a result of closure, including the impact on children at the receiving school. Communities are not comfortable sending the students into the unknown.
- The reports are too negative. There is nothing positive said about the school.
- There needs to be some consideration of the social impacts of amalgamating student populations, e.g. rival schools. Splitting students from a community to go to different schools hurts the ability to grow those children to be active citizens in the community.
- Clear indicators are needed for the review process. There needs to be transparency.
- The mandate of a school review needs to be broader, schools as part of the community.
- There should be an onus on the school board to explain/prove that the school needs to be closed.
- The report needs to consider the impact of closure on the community and most importantly on the students. The reports are very negative. There is no consideration of the uniqueness of the school and community.
- Younger children, elementary schools, need to be given special consideration.
- The Impact Assessment Report should be enhanced and be written in an understandable way for the community. The report currently talks about facilities and enrollment, which means the conversation with the public centres on those issues and not the 'real' issues around closure.
- There should be more emphasis on what happens when a school closes, more options for the parents (e.g. more flexibility in where the children can attend.) and more work done to transition students into the new school.
- The process is silent with respect to the receiving school(s). This needs to be considered.
- Need to capture the positives/advantages of the school.

- Better evaluation needed of the options – pros and cons to the students of each scenario.
- Parents/communities in all areas need an equal voice. Consideration needs to be given to the socio-economic impact of closure and impacts on families that may be marginalized (low income, etc.)
- More consideration needs to be given to the receiving school and the transition of the students. Sometimes the school that is receiving the students is not a better choice. Consider what happens when you divide a community among other schools.
- The reports take a data approach, process needs to balance data with community needs. All impacts need to be considered – loss of jobs in community, stress, increased travel, etc.
- There is an issue with the criteria used for the review.
- The criteria needs to consider factors related to community use of the facility. There is no space in the process to consider factors outside of 'education'. How can we consider all of the key players in the process?
- The province should develop criteria for use in the review process. These criteria need to be clear, reasonable and detailed. This should be consistent across the province with some flexibility to account for differences among boards/regions. (for example, boards use the term operating costs but what each board counts as operating costs may be different).
- Equity in programming should be factor in the school review criteria.
- It's difficult to find data on the programming side. Maintenance factors are easy to find but it is hard to quantify a good education. This is a complex issue that would be hard to include in a review process.
- There is too much focus on the physical condition of the building. The focus of the review needs to be on the best interests of students.
- The impacts of closure need to be further developed in the reports prepared for the review.
- There is an education piece around the information provided in reports. The public base their response on their personal experience and not on the realities of working in a school board setting (e.g. collective bargaining requirements, safety/building standards).
- The information and criteria used for this process needs to be consistent across the province. Consideration could be given to a third party reviewing the reports and confirm the information.
- The rationale for a review needs to be clearly stated in the reports. The options/solutions presented need to make sense. The community should have input into the solutions.
- The school board needs to be upfront about the limitations they are facing.
- School boards use school closure to balance budgets. All costs of closure should be considered, not just those that impact the school board budget.
- The Impact Assessment Report does not reflect the reality of the school (e.g. school condition).
- Triggers for review need to be clear and consistent across the province.
- Have a report template that parents can understand.

There was a concern with schools being repeatedly identified for review.

- There are many schools in this area that have come up for review over and over. The community sees closure as inevitable.

- The community feels targeted by the school board.
- These schools are easy financial targets because of the cost savings from closure.
- There have been several cases where schools have been identified for review over and over again. There should be an exemption or a reprieve for these schools after they have been reviewed and left open.
- Some communities/schools are consistently targeted for school closure.
- If the decision is made to keep a school open, then there should be some effort put into that school to support it staying open.
- Once a school has been reviewed and reprieved they should not be eligible for review again for a period of time or until some other condition is met (i.e. enrollment drops below a certain point).
- Don't review schools over and over. Harmful to the school community.
- "I feel like I have to spend their [my children's] whole school career fighting to keep the school open."
- Some schools are reviewed over and over. There needs to be a way to stop putting communities through the process multiple times.
- Schools should not be reviewed multiple times.

## **Theme: School Advisory Councils as the Study Committee**

- The SACs should be engaged more and earlier.
- The SAC should be involved earlier in the preparation of the reports for the review. This would provide an opportunity for discussion and clarification before they are finalized.
- There is a conflict of interest for principals serving on the SAC.
- The school boards have the resources to complete their reports. The parents and members of the Study Committee have to do it on their own. The Study Committee needs secretarial support, at the very least.
- The members of the Study Committee are very wary of the school board and staff.
- The abilities of the group vary significantly.
- Acting as the study committee for a review is a huge task for the volunteers who participate in the SAC. They are not always aware that this is part of their responsibility as an SAC member and it can be a shock.
- This is a very difficult task for SACs and there is little to no support in their duties (e.g. secretarial support, expertise). Volunteers do not 'sign up' for this task.
- There is a perception that the school board does not value the work done the Study Committee.
- This process takes away all the positive aspects of being part of the SAC.
- There is a conflict of interest for school staff that participate on the Study Committee. This puts these individuals in a very difficult position.

- There are concerns about the ability and capacity of some SACs to fulfill the role required of them as a Study Committee responding to a report prepared by school board staff.
- There is a significant burden placed on SACs throughout this process and there is little to no support provided. There is no budget for SACs to do this work.
- The principal is in a conflict of interest with participation on the study committee.
- Resources are needed to support the SAC. There is a wide range of skills, abilities with this group of volunteers. There is a need for guidance.
- There should be a process document produced to support the SAC in their role. More education is needed for SACs about what is and isn't involved in the process.
- The SAC is made up of volunteers, meaning there is a range of abilities. There should be resources provided to ensure all SACs have an equal opportunity to respond to the reports.
- Practical resources need to be provided to SACs (e.g. meeting space).
- This is a very stressful role for the SACs. The parents and other who signed up for the SAC did not sign up to act as the Study Committee. There are losses of volunteers at the school because of this.
- There is a significant amount of work required to respond to the report. There can also be a significant financial burden placed on parents who have to do their work with no support. Loss of time with their families.
- SACs overall do not have the capacity or resources to fulfill this role.
- There is no communication between the SACs and the school board during the process. SACs are looking for an ally. Someone to work with them and figure out solutions.
- The Study committee needs more support and resources to fulfill its role (e.g. unbiased consultant).
- There needs to be equality in the resources provided to the SAC for their role in the process.
- The role of the principal on the Study Committee places an undue hardship on them. Principals are the instructional leaders for the school, and the process takes them away from this role and hurts education quality at the school.
- The process is challenging for volunteers with limited time and resources.
- SACs are a resource for the school boards. There needs to be a strengthening/renewal of the SAC mandate.
- School Advisory Councils are an established mechanism for parent/community involvement at a school. However, the mandate of SACs is not being fulfilled. There needs to be more capacity building to allow SACs to fulfill their role and be a resource for school planning processes.

## **Theme: Value of a Local School/Transportation**

There was a strong emphasis placed on the value of a school to a community.

- There is a value of a school to economic development in a community. Education cannot take the lead on this.

- There is an understanding about the pressures caused by declining populations and reduced funding. Communities need to get more engaged in the local school if they want to keep it.
- We need to start with the premise that the first goal is for every community to keep their school at the elementary level.
- The community needs support in initiatives to keep schools active and relevant.
- There needs to be a conversation about community economic development and role of the school in this.
- “Presumption against closure” – school boards should be required to build a case for closure.
- There is only one tax payer. When we make decisions about school closure the costs are simply realized elsewhere. We need more overlapped thinking in government.
- Small rural schools should be looked at through a separate lens through this process. There is a direction from rural to urban and that’s not fair.
- It is important to keep the integrity of small schools while keeping an open mind about what we can afford. The board’s perspective on this issue has been shifting to place more value on these smaller schools.
- Small schools are important and need to be protected.
- There are more difficulties in some of those larger schools now. The same issues do not occur in smaller schools (e.g. bullying).
- The first option should be to look at communities with several schools before we close a school in a community with only one. Some schools, because of geography will need to stay open.
- We are not considering the social impacts of losing a school in the local community.
- Considering the geography of Cape Breton, we have a responsibility not to centralize everything. Our small communities are losing their schools and the Province has a responsibility to balance this in some way.
- There are differences between a town that is amalgamating schools versus a community that is losing the only school they have.
- This is more than just real estate and money. There is a need to look at education and the quality of education.
- There are broader considerations to school review that are not currently considered. For example, impacts on students with special needs and/or minorities, increased crime and bullying in larger schools, dropout rates, etc.
- We need to make sure we are not replacing our small schools with larger amalgamated schools just because we have too many buildings and we’re trying to reduce space.
- We should be looking at smaller and more innovative schools.
- The money being used for big capital projects would be better used to keep our smaller schools open.
- The government needs to make a commitment that we are going to keep these smaller schools open and provide the funding that is needed to do this.
- Small communities value having an education in their area and the CSAP is concerned that closing a school would result in students in going to the English school closer to their home.



- Isolated regions with a minority population should examine what can be done to create better school-community involvement so that the school becomes the centre of the community. Saving money should not be the only factor in making decisions. Broadening boundaries does not help small communities.
- The school plays a big role in keeping the vibrancy in the community.
- Community should have access to our beautiful schools. Use by everyone for everyone. 12 hours a day every day
- Recreation departments cost-share with schools and share the expense.

Transportation was a significant issue for consultation participants, specifically long bus rides for small children.

- We need to take into account how much time a child will be on a bus. There is an impact on the educational experience of kids with long bus rides, especially for elementary students.
- There is a need to look at where students are coming from not where the school is. This could mean that children are on a bus for a very long time.
- There needs to be consideration given to the extraordinary bus times that some students may need to travel.
- Younger children travelling on buses needs to be considered in this process.
- Bussing children has an impact on their ability to participate in extracurricular activities (e.g. sports).
- Many in our remaining population are from low income households. Their ability to support their children is already limited, long commute times (on a bus) to school becomes another barrier for these families.
- People don't fight school closure just to keep the building open; it's also about busing and how long children spend on a bus each day.
- If there aren't any yet, there needs to be transportation standards set with respect to how long students should be on busses each day.
- The length of time spent on the bus each day is of a particular concern for those younger students in the elementary grades.
- We need absolute standards on bussing times. This may mean that additional money may be needed from the province for this. Money would have to accompany the standards.
- Transportation times and the impact on children is a significant issue when considering the closure of a rural school. Weather and road conditions contribute to safety concerns around long bus rides for children.
- Having younger children traveling on a bus with much older children is a concern for parents.
- There needs to be standards around transportation times, i.e. busing of students.
- Transportation is a significant issue when a school is closing. There are a number of back roads and long drives for children. Especially problematic for the younger children.
- Transportation impacts the bigger picture and needs to be taken into consideration.
- There are concerns with sending younger children on the bus with older kids.

- Communities do not want long drives on buses for the younger children.
- Small children should not be on the bus for long periods of time to get to and from their school.
- Long distances on a school bus are difficult for younger children.
- Transportation issues have kept schools open in the past.
- We need to look at innovative solutions around transportation (e.g. express busing).
- Transportation is an important issue. The reports need to have accurate information about transportation.
- Busing children, especially the younger children, is not what's in their best interests from an education perspective.
- Opportunities for extracurricular are reduced with long bus rides.
- Transporting children on a bus is dangerous, the longer bus rides increase this risk.
- "Our education system is being run by transportation."
- Geography and transportation are a major issue.
- Transportation impacts of closure need to be clearly addressed. There are significant financial and social impacts (e.g. socio-economic) to transportation.
- When the closing process is initiated, money should be invested back in transportation to minimize travel time and decrease the impact on transportation.

## **Theme: Funding/Capital Investments**

How school boards are funded and how the money is used were topics brought forward during the consultation.

- There is too much emphasis on money and buildings - "In the end everyone wants what's best for our children. The closure process is about funding issues, triggered by enrollment and aging facility issues. In this process, it is those that are tasked with facilities management that make significant decisions, but they know the least about the educational programming for children."
- The review process is based on money, not on what's best for students.
- More direction should be given on how to balance the best interests of students with fiscal realities. The board has to make decisions based on money because they have no options left.
- Parents are upset because we can't offer the programs that they want for their children, however the pot is so small there is only so much that can be done.
- Funding needs to be different for small rural schools. The things that are done in larger centres simply can't be done in smaller areas because of funding.
- There needs to be some funding provided to allow school boards the opportunity to 'right-size' schools on their own.
- The small school supplement is a problem. It pits schools against each other.
- Population/enrollment is not a valid way of determining funding. Even though our population is shrinking, our geography is not changing.

- Government does not consider budgets as a whole, they don't consider the 'other' costs and implications of school closure. For example, if larger schools result in increased crime rates for youth that cost to the justice system is not taken into consideration.
- We need to keep the small school supplement, it means our school costs nothing to operate.
- The funding formula needs to be looked at. Currently it is not fair.
- When a formula is based mainly on student population/enrollment, some areas (i.e. Cape Breton) are disadvantaged because they don't have the population base. This in turn impacts the programs that can be offered in these areas.
- There is a decline in our population but the geography is not changing.
- There is a bigger picture perspective to school review/closure. Money can't be taken out of the classroom to subsidize these smaller schools but maybe there are other options related to economic development where additional funding could be provided.
- The funding formula does not support small rural schools, especially when it comes to transportation implications.
- If school boards were funded properly the conversations around schools, and school closures would focus on the quality of education, and can a quality education be provided in the school versus costs of the building.
- There is consideration of the money that is lost if a small school closes (e.g. small, isolated schools grant) during the review process.
- The schools can be used for life-long learning.
- The choices to be made are based on a pot of money, this should be upfront.
- The province/department need to fund rural schools differently.
- There is a cost to keeping some of these small schools open. Who bears the costs when a school remains open?
- Community angst would be lessened if there was a clearer picture of implementation of the decision to close a school. For example, if the discussion around closure could be in the context of new construction or renovations versus uncertainty.
- The school boards have, and are prepared to do the work required to keep small schools open (e.g. making the community/municipal connections), however when this is not supported by the government it is difficult for the community.
- There may be opportunities available, where funding for non-education programs and activities in a school comes from somewhere outside the education budget.
- Funding by enrollment must be changed. Some school boards cover a large geographic region with shrinking populations. The pressures on school boards are only going to increase.
- School closures are the result of decisions around funding made at levels of government higher than the school board.
- There is a significant issue of declining enrolment in the local schools. Student transfers contribute to this issue. This impacts funding to schools.
- The roles of Government and school boards meet when you consider how education fits within the broader discussion of the Nova Scotia economy. Once the school board can't fund the

school properly, in some cases other areas need to be considered to augment the school (e.g. Health, Economic and Rural Development).

- Declining enrollment means a decline in funding to school boards. School boards are faced with a choice of maintaining programs or maintaining schools.
- If a school is to be used for something outside education, the funding needs to come from outside of education for that purpose.
- Funding needs to reflect the realities of educating in rural areas of the province.
- The provincial capital process does not always support the solution/scenario agreed to by communities and the school board.
- School boards are in a difficult situation. Even if they agree with the community, they are unable to support the community approach because of funding realities.
- Decisions always come down to money and not education benefits for children.
- Schools boards have discretion over only a small amount of the total budget. Funding is tied to enrollment and this does not have a positive outlook for the province.
- School boards are faced with taking money from operations to keep the programming. Communities feel that the board is letting the school fall into disrepair so it can be closed, but in reality it's a decision about programming. Costs of property remediation should be borne by the Province.
- The same entity (i.e. school boards) should be opening and closing schools to allow for better response to the needs of the community.
- Everything in the review process is about money. Rural areas need to be considered through a different lens.
- Rural areas need special consideration in the funding formula.
- Focus shouldn't be on money although we need to be aware of the fiscal situation, but we need to think about what is the best overall solution for students.

There were many comments about school buildings, funding for maintenance, and capital spending.

- How does an announcement for capital projects impact the review process? (e.g. when a new school is announced is a review process still required?)
- There are problems with the school buildings – they don't have the infrastructure to support technology requirements.
- The province needs to fulfill commitments made (re: capital). This breaks the trust with the public.
- A better review process could support a long term capital program.
- There is a problem with deferred maintenance. Taking money from operations to go into buildings does not help the system.
- "In lieu of the big announcement of capital spending, let's do something else. Let's take that money and use it for our existing schools."
- We need to consider our existing infrastructure before we build new schools in their place.

- More forward planning would allow for better use of a school building (e.g. use part of the building for another purpose.)
- The school board needs control over funding for infrastructure (capital) in order to implement their long term strategic plan.
- Consider a hybrid model where the school board is more involved in the capital process. The school board can't implement elements of their long term plan. When this happens the community loses trust in the school board.
- There is a disconnection between the capital process and what happens at the school board level. The school board is making a contingent decision. This could be changed so that the province makes a decision contingent on the outcome of the review process. If a new school is contingent on other schools closing, school boards should be able to be upfront about this.
- The costs of disposing of the building are not factored in. This should be part of the analysis.
- Deferred maintenance is an issue. We should be investing in our current infrastructure not building all these new schools.
- Invest in our current infrastructure. School boards have to choice about maintenance of the buildings because they are being underfunded.
- Buildings need to support student achievement.
- Need transparency in the capital planning process. Need long term capital planning.
- P3 schools create an issue in some areas. The school boards are committed to these schools through agreements the province has. When these schools have excess capacity, there are limited options for the board.
- There needs to be more connection between the capital planning process and the processes of school boards. Government needs to support (through capital) decisions made by school boards with respect to schools, especially when the proposal has the support of the community (e.g. Petite Rivere and Pentz schools).
- Deferred maintenance is an issue for school and for the school boards. Capital funding can't be turned off to these schools.
- School boards are not responsible for building schools (i.e. the money does not come out of school board budgets) so there is a major incentive for school boards to close schools. There is a disconnect between capital and operating funds.
- There is a disconnect between the capital spending program and school board planning processes. The boards can't make commitments to the community. There have been examples of long periods of time elapsing before a request is approved.
- There needs to be more transparency in the capital process.
- Deferred maintenance is a significant issue for schools. Existing schools need to be taken care of.
- The practice of provincial government determining capital projects should be stopped. This creates pressure for the school boards and is too political.