

Saving Inner-City Schools

Here are some strategies that municipalities can use to keep their downtown schools alive.

By Mark Holmes

Downtown schools are frequently older, more expensive to maintain, less appealing to teachers (who live in the suburbs), and less attractive than suburban schools. A vicious circle develops as housing becomes run down and schools deteriorate. School boards react rationally by closing schools that are expensive to maintain, unattractive to teachers, and losing enrolment. The final result is the death of another inner city.

The closing of inner-city elementary schools is the tacit acceptance that the community is abandoning its downtown, condemning the core to a declining population of those who have no other choice.

Just as school closure is one of many factors leading to the death of the inner city, so the rehabilitation of inner-city schools is one essential means of assuring recovery.

The re-establishment of a vibrant school community should be part of a plan that would include the development of the urban landscape, the improvement and safety of parks, a concerted plan to improve store fronts and to establish niche shopping districts, the development of the arts, and the renovation or construction of residential housing for a range of family incomes.

If the school is to be a part of the solution as opposed to a part of the problem, it cannot be the same as all the other public schools. It must be so appealing that it can attract students from outside its catchment area.

The most common magnet schools in Ontario are the French immersion schools, but in most cases this program will not rescue inner-city schools. For one thing, French immersion appeals to a very specific segment of the population. As well, it is becoming less popular overall. And lastly, high-income parents are disinclined to choose French immersion if it means busing their children away from the high-income zone of their neighbourhood school.

In Canada generally, the only magnet to exceed the draw of French immersion is the *academically-intensive* school. There are a few examples of academically-intensive schools that have been successful in drawing students to areas experiencing decline. Well-publicized cases of success are found in Montreal West, Edmonton, and several sites in British Columbia. In Ontario, York Region (Woodbridge and Thornhill), Peel-Dufferin Separate (Mississauga), and Toronto (North York and Scarborough) have also used this strategy.

School boards are usually reluctant to set up such schools, however. From the boards' point of view they are a lose-lose proposition. If the academic school fails, it is an administrative inconvenience. If the academic school succeeds, other parents will want the same option. As well, its success will reflect badly on the other schools. There are cases in Canada of successful magnets being abandoned despite (or because of?) their conspicuous success.

In addition, Ontario's funding formula encourages school boards to close their inner-city schools. On the one hand is an existing inner-city school requiring expensive maintenance and repairs while enrolment declines. On the other hand is a new suburban school in an area where affluent, vociferous, and influential parents are demanding it. In this context, it should be noted that the province picks up part of the cost of new schools. If you were on a school board, which would you choose?

Since school boards will be reluctant to entertain a plan to keep their inner-city schools open by making them academically-intensive schools, there are some other strategies that municipalities might like to consider. They are listed below in order of ease of implementation. As a generalization, the easier the model is to implement, the more unlikely its eventual success.

Municipal Partnership with Board

The municipality would set up a board of governors with delegated powers to negotiate with the school board and the province simultaneously. Issues to be negotiated would include funding, selection and hiring of staff, supervision, teaching materials, payroll, transportation, etc.

Municipal Ownership and Operation of a Public School

The municipality would purchase or lease the school for a nominal sum by means of negotiations with the province and the school board. It would then receive ongoing funds as per the provincial formula. The school would be an autonomous pilot school within the public system, subject to all provincial regulations.

Municipal Ownership and Operation of an Independent School

The municipality would purchase or lease the school by means of negotiations or expropriation. Its first major task would be to raise the money for the school's operation. Tuition fees would be required, and it would be essential to offer means-tested bursaries (including free tuition to parents in the lowest-income bracket); otherwise the central purpose of the school to help revive the downtown core would be lost.

Development of an Independent School with Municipal Cooperation

This model is basically the same as the previous one, except that a volunteer board of governors would accept final authority and responsibility.

Circumstances may well determine the model to be used, but the second is a sensible compromise. The more the model is tied to the status quo, the less room there will be for spontaneity and innovation; the more it is dependent on non-government funding, the more difficult it will be to get off the ground.

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