

Democracy Betrayed

Arrogant school board officials are closing rural schools despite the devastating effects.

By Andrew Nikiforuk

Linda Lee, the mother of two school-aged boys, has just had a common public school experience in Wasa, BC. Last spring, Rocky Mountain District #6 closed her sons' school (33 students) as well as six other rural centres of learning in the southeast Kootnays.

Although more than 400 people in the community of 450 farmers, loggers, and tourist operators, lobbied to keep their K-5 school open, their appeal fell on deaf ears. The district replied that a dollar saved is a dollar earned.

Lee and other parents had presented district administrators with loads of first-rate research on the academic and social value of small rural schools. It says that closing small schools doesn't make any educational or economic sense. But officials went ahead and closed Wasa anyway.

Lee now home-schools her two boys. "I couldn't put them on a bus. It's an abhorrent waste of a child's time."

Some local children now have a bus ride as long as two hours and 20 minutes every day. Wasa Elementary, of course, sits empty or, as Lee puts it, a target for vandalism. The locals can't even use the gym.

You'll find the same story throughout the district. In fact, you'll find it throughout the country. From Newfoundland to British Columbia, Canadian educators are closing small rural schools with a vengeance.

Although tight funding and declining enrolments are usually cited as the cause, school boards rarely produce any academic research to justify the closings. Nor do they bother to monitor the impacts.

According to Dr. Allan Lauzon, director of the Rural Studies Program at the University of Guelph, it's a typical case of no one wanting to know about the really bad educational consequences of some really bad economic decisions.

There has been a total disregard for everything we know about schools and economics. Ever since the 1960s, educators have regarded small schools with a clear bias. Most just feel that they are backward institutions that can't offer a diversity of courses.

Yet school research clearly shows that few students take full advantage of the broader curriculum offered by large schools (400 students or more).

Moreover, big schools engage only about 20% of a school population in their academic and athletic programs — a fact that leaves the majority of students marginal participants without much meaningful adult interaction. This alarming trend may explain the growing violence and alienation in schools as they get bigger.

A rural school is much more than a collection of classrooms. It is often the hub of a community, home for town meetings and a variety of athletic and social clubs. Rural parents compare a school closure to ripping the heart out of a community.

In a 1996 review of 103 studies on the effects of school size on student performance, US researcher Kathleen Cotton found that smaller is better and for obvious reasons.

When everyone knows everyone in a school, communication is just clearer and more effective. As a result, Cotton found that academic achievement in small schools is equal or superior to that of big schools. Small schools also boast more positive attitudes, less bullying, lower drop-out rates, fewer behavioural problems, and higher graduation rates.

Although school boards typically claim there are big savings to be had in school closures, the research says it's a myth, notes Lauzon.

In fact, consolidation usually results in higher administration costs, a net loss of students (often to home-schooling or small private schools), as well as hefty transportation bills.

There are other impacts as well. Consider the closure of Riverside Elementary by Wolf Creek School Board in Ponoka, AB. Despite a high-achieving population of 105 normal and special-needs students, a new provincial funding formula declared the school to be "non-viable".

Now the town's other elementary school is packed to the gills with the result that many of the special-needs students are lost, says 41-year-old mother Shawna Pearman, whose girls can no longer walk home for lunch.

To accommodate the fallout from years of consolidation, the board also operates an outreach program for 200 troubled or failing students. People are angry.

That's the reality right across the country. According to Lauzon, "There are no success stories I know of. In most cases, the parents often knew the educational research better than board staff. Yet it was totally disregarded. There is a condescending and paternalistic attitude towards community groups."

Governments need to examine some of the sensible solutions offered by parents. Restoring small rural schools to community control, which was the successful model for the one-room schoolhouse after all, would be an obvious one.

That, however, would require flexible funding formulas that respected the realities of rural schools. Legislation permitting charter schools or public schools governed by citizens instead of boards might also help.

If governments and boards were required to document the impacts of consolidation on academic achievement and community health, the educational system might also begin to respect small school research instead of ignoring it.

(Adapted with permission from Canadian Family Magazine. Mr. Nikiforuk is the author of School's Out.)