



What You Can Do When The School Board Threatens to Close Your Community School

Changing demographics coupled with increasing funding pressures are causing many school boards to look at closing community schools. Sometimes, for example if the school building is in bad condition and alternatives are relatively close by, closing a school is the best decision — but it is never a decision that should be made lightly. Unfortunately, school boards often make school closing decisions on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information. This document is intended to provide parents and other community members with guidelines for working with their school boards to ensure that school closing decisions are sound. It also provides information about an alternative arrangement that bypasses the constraints and some of the overhead costs of school board governance.

What can school communities do when their board threatens to close their school? There are three good strategies:

1. rational arguments;
2. buying time; and
3. going freelance.

1. Rational Arguments

The first strategy is to try to convince the school board trustees that it is not in their best interests to close the school. The trustees will be most receptive to arguments that address the financial considerations, and it will be necessary to spend a great deal of time examining the board's documentation. The best chance is to show the trustees that they have their facts wrong and that closing the school will cost more, not less.

It is very common for there to be factual or arithmetical mistakes in the board's financial projections. For example, a common omission is the additional transportation costs that will be incurred if the school is closed. This amount should be deducted from the savings that the board is projecting as a result of closing the school.

As well, there may be ways to reduce the school's expenses and/or increase the school's revenues.

- The trustees may have overlooked some possible **cost-cutting measures** such as a half-time principal, organizing students' instruction more efficiently, using volunteers for certain jobs, or making the decision not to hire expensive itinerant teachers.
- Perhaps the school's enrolment can be increased by **rejigging boundaries** or adding a special program such as the International Baccalaureate.
- It may be possible to use **surplus space** to generate revenue by, for example, renting it out to the municipality for use as a library or daycare centre.

The reason why schools are targeted for closure is usually that they are more expensive to run than other schools. Many small schools, for example, have more teachers than the board formula allows. The first question to address, therefore, is whether the parents are willing to work within the board formula.

Suppose a small school has six teachers and the formula permits only five. Are the parents willing to work with five teachers, perhaps losing a specialist music teacher? Maybe they will be asked to accept more cross-grade groupings and larger class sizes than they are used to. Are there ways to reduce janitorial time and other maintenance costs, by, for example, sending a second pair of shoes for children's inside use? Are the parents prepared to contribute voluntary labour, perhaps as lunchroom supervisors?

The point is that sacrifices will have to be made if the school is to operate within a budget that the school board can live with. Demonstrations as to how much the parents love their school are unlikely to influence the trustees; a willingness to make compromises and sacrifices may have a chance.

If the school is expensive to operate because it is very old and/or needs extensive repairs or renovations, then it may be best to raze the building and build a new one in its place. Possible sources of funding might include the municipal and regional governments, charitable institutions, corporate donors and the community at large.

It may be possible to solicit voluntary labour from within the community, perhaps a 'bee,' and/or donations of or reduced prices on materials. It should be possible to build a modest school for well under one million dollars. Obviously, this initiative should not be attempted without an extremely competent, credible, and committed group behind it.

It may be useful to form a coalition with other groups who are also opposed to the closure of a particular school — for example, municipal officials or service groups who are working to revitalize the inner city. These groups may be able to contribute legal, financial, and architectural expertise.

In lobbying the school board, it is important to have well-researched documentation, a professional appearance, and a reasonable manner. Letters should be constructive, polite and short, and contain firm and clear requests for action. One-on-one meetings with individual trustees in advance of key board meetings are worthwhile, as are large turnouts and extensive media coverage.

It is worth noting, however, that some schools are going to be closed no matter what, and for every school community that wins a reprieve, there is another school community that loses its school. Lobbying sometimes works, but it's always at the expense of another school or the taxpayer or important losses to the system. Furthermore, schools that manage to escape closure one year tend to turn up on closure lists a year or two later.

Urban Elementary School Closures

Urban neighbourhoods are a special case, as they go through life cycles. As families age, a cohort of children work their way through the local schools, but they are not replaced quickly enough to prevent a significant drop in the local school-age population. By the time, however, that the authorities have got around to closing this local school, often there are already signs of rejuvenation as younger families start moving in at accelerating rates. A better solution would be to explore ways to keep these schools operating with lower costs through the "trough" years until a new generation of students makes its appearance.

Parts of the solution for urban schools during the trough years:

- Multi-grade classrooms
- Attracting younger (and cheaper) teachers
- Leveraging the efforts of fewer teachers by using more EA's
- Part-time administration
- "Lead" teachers to run the place in the absence of administrators.
- Contracting out of maintenance and janitorial services
- Reduction of the reliance on board resources (and especially superintendents, etc.) by granting the schools more autonomy

2. Buying Time

When rational arguments fail, it may be possible to stave off closure by taking the school board to court. Many jurisdictions required school boards to have in place a school closure policy. If there is a possibility that a school board has not complied with the requirements, it may be worthwhile to take legal action. This is what the citizens of Seaforth, Ontario did on May 19, 2000, when the Supreme Court of Ontario found that their school board had not met its duty of procedural fairness in deciding to close Seaforth Public School. This ruling staved off the school's closure for one year (although the school was closed after that).

3. Going Freelance

Both the rational arguments and buying time strategies are usually only stopgap measures. At the same time as they are being pursued, it would be wise to undertake a third strategy, one that involves a change in the school's status. This avenue should be explored only if the community has a core group that is very determined and skillful, as well as a competent principal.

The idea is to petition the minister of education to allow the school to opt out of its school board and become a "freelance school," one that receives its share of funds directly from the provincial government. As such, it would not be subject to its former school board's control, and it would be granted some leeway as to how it spends its available funds.

Until recently, several hundred New Zealand schools enjoyed freelance status (called 'bulk funded schools' there). Hundreds of English schools are semi-autonomous (formerly 'grant-maintained schools'), as are 13 charter schools in Alberta and approximately 3000 charter schools in the US. These schools find that their freedom from school board rules and regulations allows them to operate more efficiently and effectively.

More information on charter schools is available at www.charterschools.ca.