# Exploring the Link Between Rural Schools, Community Vitality, and Wellbeing

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## Abstract

This research project focused on the connection between a community and its schools, and the role that schools play in rural community vitality and wellbeing. It investigated both community members and former student experience with small schools in one rural area of Ontario, Canada. Responses indicate that rural schools play a considerable role in the wellbeing of community members beyond the current constructs of community vitality and are more fully expressed using all components of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. Discussion focuses on the gap between the role of schools in rural communities and the provincial policies that govern school accommodation reviews and how the findings suggest that new approaches to the challenges of small rural schools are in the best interests of both students and communities.

## Introduction

Rural communities are experiencing significant demographic change, both in Ontario and in other Canadian provinces. There is an increasingly large proportion of population over 50 years old in these regions, and a corresponding exodus of young people who move to more urban areas, seeking better educational or employment opportunities and outcomes (Malatest & Associates, 2002; Martin, 2013). Shrinking school populations have accompanied this pattern, and have led to many school closures. However, there has been little research on the connection between the presence of a school and the overall vitality and wellbeing experienced in the community. In the Canadian Senate report, *Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty* (Senate of Canada, 2008), it was noted that the theme of education:

> reverberated through every one of the committee's meetings, from
> Corner Brook, Newfoundland, to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories,
> through to Prince George, British Columbia, and all points in between.
> It proves one of those rare policy areas that people from all points
> along the political spectrum recognized as central, at least in principle,
> to halting, reversing, and eventually eliminating the poverty cycle. (p.
> 171)

Despite this pervasive view, economic planning and sustainable community models seldom include the role of a local school. For instance, neither the *Healthy Rural Communities Toolkit* (Caldwell, Kraehling, Kaptur, & Huff, 2015) nor the *Rural Scotland in Focus* Report (Skerratt, Atterton, McCracken, McMorran, & Thomson, 2016) address the issue of education close to home in their frameworks of healthy rural economies, despite available reports on the role of

appropriate education and training in the sustainability of rural communities (e.g., Lauzon & Leahy, 2000; People for Education, 2016; Rural Ontario Institute, 2014; Senate of Canada, 2008). At the time of these research studies, regulations governing Ontario school boards that were reviewing pupil accommodations before 2018 were obliged to include in their decision making two areas of data: value to the student and value to the school board (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 8). School policies did not consider communities in the same way that research on healthy communities did not often include schools. Current pupil accommodation review guidelines require school boards to address the impact of any closure or consolidation on: a) student programming, b) student wellbeing, c) school board resources, and d) the local community. There now appears to be clear recognition of the connection between the presence of a school and both student and community wellbeing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 9).

Although the decision making model has changed, the difficulty of developing data on both student and community wellbeing becomes apparent. As well, Irwin (2012) states that although arguments are made through the consideration of impact on school board resources to close or consolidate schools, these actions may also lead to other unaccounted or poorly understood long-term costs. Lauzon and Leahy (2000) point out that there is little evidence of savings from school consolidation. What remains is a new policy with an expanded framework for decision making that includes wellbeing, but at this point little consistent data for school boards to base those decisions on, and a limited view of community impact. Our study was designed to explore the gap between existing policy on school accommodation reviews and the components of rural community vitality by examining the link between schools and community.

This survey was sponsored by the Rural Ontario Institute's initiative on Measuring Rural Community Vitality. It is therefore the concept of community vitality that was the starting point of our research, although both the change in education policy and the results of our survey expanded that framework to encompass both student and community wellbeing.

## Components of Rural Community Vitality

It is now widely agreed upon that community vitality must be closely associated with notions of vibrancy, growth, and wellbeing (Downey, 2003; Irwin, 2012; Kearns, Lewis, McCreanor, & Witten, 2009; Miller, 1993). As Harmon and Schafft (2009) write on the relationship between rural schools and community development, the connection between these schools and the communities they serve is deeply intertwined. In Downey's 2003 report to the Government of Ontario, titled *Strengthening Education in Rural and Northern Ontario*, the author describes the integral role of schools to rural life:

> …it is generally acknowledged that, particularly in small towns and rural areas, the local school plays an important role in shaping community identity. In single school communities, the school is frequently the only public institution. It serves as a centre for entertainment, local activity, and political involvement, and its education achievements are a source of local pride (p. 7).

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing's (2016) definition of community vitality is closely related to both individual and community wellbeing, and points to local interdependencies that nurture that wellbeing:

> Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive
> relationships among people, private, public, and non-governmental
> organizations that foster individual and collective wellbeing. (p. 30)

It would appear from these sources that the role of schools goes beyond frameworks of community vitality to encompass the wider concept of wellbeing.

Countering the evidence described above on the role schools play in this wellbeing is the reality that schools have not been funded to support community wellbeing. However, the Ontario government discussion paper on strengthening education in rural and remote communities (Government of Ontario, 2017) acknowledges the important role of schools, and states their commitment to "working with communities and school boards to explore options to support a rich learning experience in rural schools" (p. 9). The current *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018) include gathering information on the impact of school closure on the community, although at present it is limited to community use of school space. The question appears to be not whether there is a role for schools in rural community wellbeing, but rather how to begin a collaborative process to designing viable rural schools. Gathering appropriate local data would represent a useful beginning to this process.

There is extensive research demonstrating that small schools, often those in rural settings, make excellent learning environments for students, and contrary to popular belief, are more cost effective than the model of economy of scale would suggest (Irmsher, 1997; Lauzon & Leahy, 2000; Ares Abalde, 2014). For example, Irmsher points out that larger consolidated schools: a) have poorer attendance than smaller schools; b) dampen enthusiasm for involvement in school activities; c) have lower grade average and standardized scores; d) have higher dropout rates, and e) have more problems with violence, security, and drug abuse. Lauzon and Leahy's review of literature reached several conclusions regarding the relationship between small local schools and student achievement. They conclude that there exists a direct relationship between poverty and the extent to which school closure or consolidation may work against communities that are in most need of help. In particular, school consolidation creates greater distances between the school, students, parents, and the broader community. It is the close community connection that is inherent to small rural schools, and is also essential in alleviating poverty's effects on educational outcomes. This body of research on the value of small rural schools would indicate that they compare more favourably to larger schools than one would think. It appears that there is a trade-off between a broader range of academic program on the one hand, and student wellbeing on the other. We therefore sought out research on the concept of student wellbeing.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2016) has included wellbeing in its definition of student success. This document defines wellbeing as "that positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are met" (p. 1). As well, for the first time, the 2018 Ontario Ministry of Education *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* include student wellbeing in the criteria that must be considered in decision-making regarding school closures. This marks a considerable shift from the somewhat vague term, value to the student, found in previous editions of the guideline (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). So what is student wellbeing? Although the four domains identified by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2016) have been identified, an Ontario Teachers' Federation report (2018) suggests, "it is unclear whether feasible instruments currently exist to perform such measures in relation to

and within schooling contexts" (p. 8). So we are again left with a dilemma: student wellbeing is recognized as a factor in their success at school, but the concept remains difficult to define and measure.

## The Gap between Policy and Community Wellbeing

The gap between what we know about the importance of local schools to rural community wellbeing, and the policies and frameworks that support that knowledge is a difficult one to bridge. For instance, a recent webinar was conducted from Scotland, a country facing similar dilemmas regarding rural schools. The discussion was based on *Rural Scotland in Focus 2016: Informing Rural Policy in Scotland* (Skerrat, Atterton, McCracken, McMorran, & Thomson, 2016), and panelists were asked what role rural schools played in their rural policy. The response was that schools were essentially not a part of their policy (personal communication, 2017) even though the Scottish government (Government of Scotland, 2013) published the report of the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education recommending new approaches that would enhance rural vitality. Among their 33 recommendations were: a) wraparound care to support families; b) cooperation to widen curriculum provision, and c) cooperation among local authorities, health and community planning partners who "should consider rural education holistically . . . actively seeking solutions to enhance the viability for rural communities" (p. 8). However, that integrated approach is difficult to put into practice. In the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, Salm (2015) notes that the collaboration required to make such an inter-sectoral model work requires collaborative competency, and that provincial policy is not enough to ensure success.

Although the 2018 Ontario Ministry of Education *Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines* now include the requirement of studying the impact on the community, the document suggests only that current community use of space be measured. We are still confronted with a gap between a policy that respects community wellbeing, and limited measures with which to measure the role the school plays in that wellbeing. One possible framework for addressing this challenge is that of place-based approaches that use community resources to move from provincial policy to locally driven solutions.

## Place-based Approaches

Place-based approaches to policy and program development are collaborative means for addressing complex issues that are specific to a particular geographic area. (Policy Horizons Canada, 2011). These approaches are characterized by local design, collaborative decision-making, engagement of participants from a diverse range of sectors, an evolving process with adaptive learning, and shared ownership. Using a place-based approach to determine local education strengths, priorities and challenges would represent a change of direction in the focus of the pupil accommodation review process from policy-based to local needs based. Currently in Ontario, social concerns, including employment, welfare, health and education are addressed separately and on an individual basis. However, our services are delivered in places; our governance occurs in places; our identities are formed and reinforced in places (Reimer & Markey, 2008). A place-based approach to the issues of the role schools play in community vitality would acknowledge that reality. That local involvement would be a logical application of

the Canadian Index of Wellbeing's definition of community vitality: cultivating and marshalling relationships in order to create, adapt and thrive (p. 30).

The *State of Rural Canada* Report (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2015) characterizes rural Ontario as:

> five types of rural regions/ communities: urban fringe communities, agriculture communities, cottage country communities, the mining and mill towns of northern Ontario, and Aboriginal communities. Each of these regions/communities has their own socio-economic trajectory and are characterized by diverse cultural milieux and varying degrees of dependence on the performance of key economic sectors. Hence to make broad generalizations about the state of rural Ontario is problematic. (p. 39)

So where can rural communities go from here? This study was initiated by a citizens' group, the Peninsula Action Committee for Education, through the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula (MNBP), and funded by the Rural Ontario Institute. It is intended as an initial stepping stone in a process of inter-governmental, inter-agency, and community collaboration through municipal governments to develop a new vision of viable schools in rural communities. The survey first explored the community's perceptions of importance of various aspects of the three schools in MNBP, and how they compare to their lived experience with the schools. The survey then explored what roles the schools play in the community. How are the elementary and secondary schools perceived generally in the community? How have parents experienced the schools in the community? What roles do the schools play within the community? How do former students perceive their experience at the small secondary school in the community?

## Method

To address these issues, two surveys were created, one for residents (see Appendix A) and one for former students (see Appendix B), which explore how this rural community views its schools, and the role of those schools in the community. The study took place in the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula (MNBP), a municipality of 3800 permanent and seasonal residents, approximately 270 kilometers northwest of Toronto, located on the Bruce Peninsula. The term community is being used to refer to the municipality. It is categorized by Census Canada definitions as 100% rural and by Statistics Canada as moderately remote (Alasia, Bédard, Bélanger, Guimond, & Penny, 2017); it covers an area of 784 sq. kilometres, and has a population density of 5.1 people per square kilometre. It shares the characteristics of many rural communities: a tourism driven economy, a higher than average proportion of seniors, and 70% of residents being seasonal. There are three schools in the municipality: one elementary school at the northern tip of the peninsula, which includes JK - Gr. 3 for 21 students, and one building located centrally on the peninsula containing both an elementary school with 142 students, and a secondary school with 58 students.

## Community Survey

***Perception and experience of schools***. The community survey consisted of questions that asked respondents to rate the importance of various aspects of the local elementary school, and if

applicable, their experience of those aspects as a parent. A second set of questions explored secondary school aspects and experience. There were specific places provided for comments with these questions. The survey was distributed in the local newspaper that is delivered free to every active mailbox in the MNBP. It was repeated two more times in subsequent editions of the paper over a six week period in the summer of 2016. It was also available online, with the website given in the same newspaper, on locally placed posters, and on the website of the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE). As well, respondents could phone a local number, leave a message and have their call returned by a research assistant living in another area of the province.

Items concerning the two elementary schools and the one secondary school in the community were developed from three sources: a) research literature on school engagement (e.g., Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Cavendish, 2013; Gietz & McIntosh, 2014; Libbey, 2004; Whitcock, 2006; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011); b) components of Ontario Ministry of Education 2015 policy, and c) consultation with parents during the design phase of the project. Resulting items addressed engagement, academic support, safety, parent connection, and wellbeing. All respondents were given the opportunity to rate, using a four-point Likert scale, the importance of aspects of elementary and secondary school experiences, and if they had a child who attends or has attended, they rated their experience of those aspects of the school as a parent; these responses were used to produce a detailed picture of community perceptions of the schools. Parents were then asked to rate their experience of those aspects on the same scales.

***Role of the school in the community.*** The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) 2016 report on the community vitality component of wellbeing addresses a number of variables such as sense of belonging, trust in others, and sense of safety. Our survey sought other measures of quality of life and wellbeing that are related to the presence of schools, taken from other CIW aspects of wellbeing such as lifelong learning, community participation, and living standards. As well, other issues were identified by the project steering committee, all of whom were parents or former students. Those issues centered around social interaction between school and community as well as academic needs.

All respondents were given a survey question rating eight possible roles of schools within the community. A similar four point Likert scale was used for the survey items, with "1" being "not at all important", and "4" being "very important". Responses from parents and non-parents were analyzed separately; however, since there was no significant difference between the two groups, results are reported for the sample as a whole. Parent responses to their experiences were rated on a similar four point scale, with 1 being "strongly disagree", and 4 being "strongly agree". Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, a statistical analysis software program.

As well, three opportunities for free form responses were given; Because of varied and overlapping themes that emerged from these opportunities for comments, responses to all three items were analyzed together using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, comparing them to all of the aspects of wellbeing in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing as a conceptual framework. These areas include education, health, community vitality, democratic engagement, living standards, time use, environment, and leisure and culture.

The data collected in this study apply to the particular community in which the study took place. Findings are not intended to be applicable to all rural and/or remote communities, although the survey itself may provide an appropriate template for gathering comparable data.

## Former Student Survey

The survey of former students who had attended the local secondary school between 2001 and 2016 addressed their secondary school experiences; it was developed from research on student success and student engagement (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Cavendish, 2013; Gietz & McIntosh, 2014; Libbey, 2004; Whitcock, 2006; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2010). Items addressed program, opportunities to participate in activities, relationship with teachers, comfort/safety/belonging at school, access to counselling, and educational support. Items asked respondents to rate their experience of these characteristics in the local secondary school on a Likert scale; three items asked for free form comment about their secondary school experience based on Wilms' system for monitoring student engagement and wellness (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). The survey was distributed online only. The website was advertised in the local free newspaper, on the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE) website, and distributed through Facebook among former students of the local secondary school. Results of the qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software that organized responses by theme; rated survey items were analyzed using SPSS.

## Results

### Ratings of Aspects of and Experience with Local Schools by the Community
Of the permanent population of the Northern Bruce Peninsula, the survey response rate of 279 to the survey represented more than 7% of the population over 15 years of age. Responses were received from 14, or .6 %, of the seasonal residents/ratepayers. Therefore, results were analyzed for permanent residents only. Rated survey items were analyzed using SPSS; comments were analyzed using NVivo using the CIW as an analysis framework.

*Elementary schools*. The ten items in the survey question rating importance of aspects of the elementary schools and the corresponding items in the question about experience of the schools were grouped into three categories: a) parent/school relationships, b) student opportunities including academic needs, and c) student wellbeing and engagement. Both parents and non-parents rated all three categories as important aspects of elementary schools. Non-parent and parent ratings of the importance of the three aspects of elementary school experience were similar; both ratings had little variability. When these responses are analyzed according to themes, several patterns emerged. Student wellbeing and engagement were the highest in importance by both groups. Table 1 outlines the ratings by each group according to the three themes. When parents rated their experience with the local schools, the same picture emerged. The most positive experience concerned student wellbeing and engagement, and least experienced were student opportunities, including academic needs being met. Both their high ratings of importance and the positive experience of student wellbeing and engagement reflect an association with the research cited above as critical factors relating to student success.

Table 1
**Importance and Experience of Aspects of Elementary Schools**

| Theme | Survey Items | Importance to Non-Parents | Importance to Parents | Parent Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parent School Relations | -Parents feel welcome to discuss their child's progress<br>-The principal and vice-principal are approachable<br>-Teachers are approachable<br>-Parents are welcomed as volunteers in the school | 3.64 | 3.85 | 3.68 |
| Student Opportunities | -Students' academic needs are met<br>-Students have access to extracurricular activities<br>-The school offers informal activities outside of classroom hours | 3.49 | 3.71 | 3.49 |
| Student Wellbeing/ Engagement | Kids feel safe<br>Teachers engage students | 3.78 | 3.94 | 3.71 |

*Secondary schools*. There was a similarity in the average ratings by both parents and non-parents of their sense of importance of the different aspects of the secondary school in the community. The two individual items rated as most important by non-parents were that teachers engage students and that students feel safe. The two individual aspects rated most important by parents were that courses were available for chosen career paths and that teachers engage students. The least important item for both groups was the availability of elective courses. The eleven items in the survey question about importance of aspects of the secondary schools and the corresponding items in the question about experience of the schools were grouped into three categories: a) program, b) student opportunities, and c) student wellbeing and engagement (see Table 2). Rated most important by both groups was student wellbeing and engagement. Program was least important for non-parents, and opportunities were least important for parents. Figure 1 compares ratings of importance by non-parents and parents, and experience by parents.

Table 2
**Aspects of Secondary School**

| Theme | Survey Items |
|---|---|
| Program | -Courses available for chosen career paths after high school<br>-A large selection of elective courses |
| Student Opportunities | -A variety of opportunities for completing volunteer hours<br>-A variety of co-op placements<br>-Other alternative learning available<br>-The opportunity to participate in activities outside of |

| | class<br>-Bus transportation that supports participation outside school hours |
|---|---|
| Student Wellbeing/Engagement | -Positive relationships with teachers<br>-Teachers engage students<br>-Feeling safe at school<br>-Having a sense of belonging |

Ratings of experience by parents indicated that having a safe school and a sense of belonging were the most positive aspects of their child's experience. Course electives and bus transportation were the biggest challenges. Figure 1 compares importance of various factors to parents with their experience of each factor at the local secondary school.
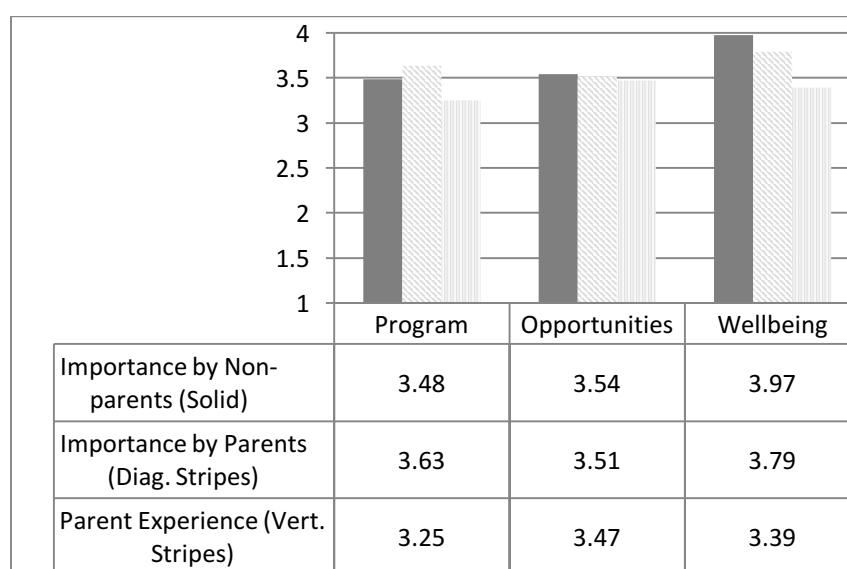


| | Program | Opportunities | Wellbeing |
|---|---|---|---|
| Importance by Non-parents (Solid) | 3.48 | 3.54 | 3.97 |
| Importance by Parents (Diag. Stripes) | 3.63 | 3.51 | 3.79 |
| Parent Experience (Vert. Stripes) | 3.25 | 3.47 | 3.39 |

*Figure 1*. Importance and Experience of Aspects of the Local Secondary School

**Views on the Local Secondary School by Former Students**
*Rated survey items*. The online survey of former students received 78 responses; this number or responses constitutes approximately 30% of those who attended the local secondary school education between 2004 and 2016. All respondents indicated that they went on to college, university or apprenticeships after leaving secondary school. Neither school boards nor the Ontario Ministry of Education record the percentage of graduates going to any post-secondary programs. However, teachers at the local secondary school provided an anecdotal five-year picture of that data. On average approximately 83% of graduates between 2012 and 2016 continued directly to post-secondary programs. This does present some limitation to the survey data; however, it does provide a picture of how graduates going on to postsecondary perceived their secondary school experience.

Individual items in the survey addressed program issues and general experience separately. These responses were analyzed relative to the years that the student attended. Since enrolment has declined over the period being studied, one would expect that as the school enrolment declined, program and opportunities would become more of a challenge. However, the only

significant correlation between year of leaving school and program and opportunity issues was that completing volunteer hours became easier over time (r=.238, p ≤05).

Survey items were grouped into three themes similar to the community survey: program, opportunities, and engagement/wellbeing. Results confirm what the community survey responses indicate: program choices, in particular elective courses, were considered more of a challenge than opportunities that are supported by the community, i.e., volunteering and outside of class experiences. Table 3 summarizes former student responses to the three themes of their experiences in the local secondary school, compared to parent responses. The ratings of secondary school experience on these three themes were then compared to parent ratings of their experiences as a parent. The indications of engagement and wellbeing were clear, as were the program challenges typical of smaller schools.

Table 3
**Former Student Experiences at the Local Secondary School**

| Theme | Average Parent Response | Average Former Student Response |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Program | 3.25 | 2.8 |
| Opportunities | 3.47 | 3.3 |
| Wellbeing and Engagement | 3.39 | 3.2 |

***Comments from former students***. Three items on the former student survey solicited free form responses: a) what you liked about your high school experience, b) what you feel you missed in your high school experience, and c) any further comments. Several themes emerged from these qualitative responses. Of the 101 responses to what they liked about their secondary school experience, the most frequent response (n=38), given by 49% of former students, was their teachers and the accessibility of those teachers. As one respondent wrote, "They care about each individual and make sure they help you understand what they're teaching". The second most frequent response (n= 27) was the sense of community both within the school and with the broader community. "Not until I left did I realize our school's bullying problem was small, we all had each other's back if we needed to." The opportunities for extracurricular and co-curricular involvement, especially Outers, a curriculum-driven, outdoor and environmental education program, were named by 20 respondents.

When asked about what they missed in their high school experience, the most frequent responses (n = 23) were sports/extracurricular opportunities, and courses/electives (n = 23). Since there were approximately the same number of responses about extracurricular activities in the question about what they liked about their experience (n = 27), it would appear that if the activities matched the interests of the students, the response was more positive than if their interest lay in, for instance, team sports. Of the sample, 23% (n = 17) said there was nothing they felt they missed.

# The Role of the School in the Community

The community survey included a section on the role of the school in the community that included items rated on the same scale of importance, and freeform comments.
**Rated items**. Respondents (n=253) were asked to rate the importance of a number of roles that schools play within a community. As well, two items asked for comments on their perceptions of the schools and the impact of school closure. Both quantitative and qualitative responses were clear in their belief that the local schools play an important role in both community vitality and in areas of wellbeing. Table 4 summarizes the ratings of importance of various roles of the school by the community.

Table 4
**The Roles of Schools Within the Community**

| Roles of schools within the community: | Mean importance | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| The school contributes directly to the success of students | 3.79 | .687 |
| The school fosters a sense of personal belonging to the community | 3.77 | .753 |
| The school provides the community with a sense of identity | 3.64 | .820 |
| A school attracts young families | 3.77 | .771 |
| It provides economic benefits | 3.42 | 1.05 |
| It enables opportunities for social interaction and engagement between youth and other community members | 3.67 | .814 |
| It provides opportunities for lifelong learning | 3.64 | .798 |
| It provides opportunities for adults to engage with others | 3.41 | .937 |

**Comments about the role of schools in the community**.
The 297 responses to the survey contained 547 comments. Because they covered a broader range than the rated questions, qualitative responses were analyzed against the entire framework of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (2016). The CIW is based on quantitative data that identifies eight areas of wellbeing: healthy populations, democratic engagement, community vitality, environment, leisure and culture, time use, education, and living standards. Freeform responses in this community survey were related to these areas but did not answer the specific measures of the CIW. Of the 547 comments, almost one-third of them (31%) fell under the area of community vitality.
*Education.* (53 comments) Approximately one quarter of parents responded that they would have to either home school or move if there were no schools in the community, either in response

to employment needs or health concerns over long bus rides. One participant wrote, "It is a great school for all ages! It offers a variety of learning experiences and outdoor education experiences."

***Healthy Populations.*** (96 comments) The CIW measures the percentage of Canadians with a regular medical doctor. Most of the comments about health in this community survey reflected the concern about the difficulty of attracting medical personnel to the area, and that this difficulty would be exacerbated by the absence of a school. As well, there was a considerable concern over the impact on children's health of having to sit on a bus for almost four hours a day.

***Community Vitality.*** (176 comments) Many comments expressed the concern over the aging demographic of the community; the loss of age diversity would produce "a grey ghetto". As one respondent said, "local schools add a vibrancy to the community and excitement, especially when students are active in community events". Several responses pointed out a connection between a local school and a sense of belonging. One respondent said "In a small community, the presence of the school enables the concept of 'it takes a village to raise a child'; the students feel at home in their community and the community feels welcome and important in contributing to the kids' education and growth".

***Democratic Engagement.*** (85 comments) The CIW measures the percentage of population that volunteers for a law, advocacy, or political group. The comments in this community survey addressed the engagement of youth in the community and community issues, which, according to several sources (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Pasek, Feldman, Romer, & Jamieson, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002) is related to later engagement in the democratic process. Activities that promote civic involvement and connections lead to democratic involvement at as adults. This connection with the community was clearly noted by respondents. "The school is very engaged in the community." "Any area without engaged young people is poorer. The local schools have raised children that are engaged and aware of where they live."

***Living Standards.*** (84 comments) Although these data are qualitative and in that way did not measure the same variables as the CIW, e.g., after-tax income and labour force employed used to measure living standards, comments from the community survey made clear the association between their quality of life and the presence of education close to home. Many comments reflected a concern over the availability of services, the ability to attract professionals, and the likelihood of young people staying in the community. Several comments linked the presence of a school with economic development. One respondent commented that they could expect "loss of essential services because young families move out, and even more serious labour shortage (skilled trades, scientists, medical professionals). Possible closure of local library, peninsula family health team…the prospect of a ghost town except in summer when workers come in for minimum wages jobs in the hospitality industry".

***Time Use.*** (20 comments) The most frequent comment concerning time use addressed the bus ride that students would have to endure. "My child would have to travel or I would have to move to a new locality - suitable to work and her schedule." Several comments indicated that the time spent in travel would detract significantly from family life.

***Environment.*** (10 comments) Comments concerning the environment were essentially in support of the attention that is paid in the school to the natural environment that is one of the strengths of the community. "We can use the beauty, science and nature around us to engage our young people."

***Leisure and Culture.*** (23 comments) Several comments reflected the current use of schools as "hubs for arts and sports". As well, the role of the school in opportunities for lifelong learning and as a location of community involvement was addressed by almost a third of the respondents.

## Discussion

An OECD literature review (Ares Abalde, 2014) on school size policies concluded that "researchers and policy-makers should substitute the predominant question of 'What size is best?' by the alternative 'Best size for whom, and under what conditions?' (p. 37); in addition, "there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution in school size policies" (p. 43). These two conclusions imply the need for solutions that are developed locally and that serve the community in which they are located. Rappolt (2015) suggests a) a policy approach that is grounded in communicative and collaborative planning theory; b) implementation that fosters local engagement; c) meaningful participation in policy development and implementation, and d) informed stakeholders. There is an interplay suggested here between community, as residents, and municipality, as a governing body. Both, it would seem, have a role to play in the collaboration needed to sustain small rural schools.

In its 2016 Report, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing addresses the role of schools in communities:

> Education is a key determinant for health, living standards, participation in democracy    and cultural activity. Positive impacts of education are also felt in the individual's family – often for generations. Further, when schools become a community hub offering  programs before and after school, undertaking community partnerships and hosting  events, the positive effects are amplified in community belonging and vitality. Health, culture and recreation are also enhanced. (p. 71)

The implication of such a community hub model appears to be a positive place-based way forward. However, the model of collaboration and inter-ministry cooperation is not entrenched in our political landscape. On the contrary, it is likely to be a challenge for those involved at the municipal, county, school board, teacher unions and provincial government levels. This research project is intended to provide a framework for common measurement of strengths and needs, both in terms of education and of integrated local services. Since rural communities differ from one to the other, any tool used in making local decisions on how schooling can be structured to best suit the community needs to be based on locally relevant data and action.

Clearly, students and parents report positive experiences in a small rural school, and clearly the community recognizes the role of the school in their lives. What appears to be needed, then, are frameworks that bridge the gap between policy silos and the reality of rural community needs. Collaboration on solutions needs to begin not with a specific solution, but rather with open conversations among local stakeholders and a willingness to examine and change existing policies and procedures that, although entrenched in the system, may be appropriate for one rural community but not another.

The State of Rural Canada report (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2015) indicates a need for commitment to change that involves both provincial government in steering policy change and rural communities themselves in participating in the design of their own futures (p.

101). The Ontario Minister of Infrastructures said "we need to remove provincial barriers, and provide the tools and information they need to innovate and meet evolving community needs" (Government of Ontario, 2017). Both give the message that the time has come for collaborative place-based approaches to rural community wellbeing that go beyond current concepts of community vitality and include local schools.

Rural communities are left with a considerable challenge, but not an insurmountable one. It will require leadership from all components, imagination, and participation with resolution and open minds. But then, significant social change always does.

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Appendix A

We Want to Hear from YOU
A Survey on the Role of our Schools in Community WellBeing
WHY?
- To get a picture of the relationship between our local schools and the wider community
- To support quality education and community wellbeing
- To negotiate will all levels of government with a high survey response rate

Section A:  School Experiences

Elementary Experience:

a.  In general, how important are the following aspects of elementary school experience?  (1= *not at all important*, 4 = *very important*)

b.  If you have a child who attends or has attended an elementary school in Northern Bruce Peninsula since 1990, please indicate to what degree you agree that the following aspects are present.

> 1. Parents feel welcome to discuss their child's progress.
> 2. The principal and vice-principal are approachable.
> 3. Teachers are approachable.
> 4. Parents are welcomed as volunteers in the school.
> 5. Students have access to extracurricular activities.
> 6. Kids feel safe.
> 7. Teachers know and care about their students.
> 8. Teachers engage students
> 9. The school offers informal activities outside of classroom hours.
> 10.  Students' academic needs are met.

c. Are there any other aspects of elementary school experience that are important to you?

Secondary School Experience:

a. In general, how important are the following aspects of a secondary school experience?

b. If you have a child who attends or has attended secondary school in Northern Bruce Peninsula since 2000, please indicate to what degree you agree that the following aspects are present.

> 1. Courses available for chosen career paths after high school.
> 2. A large selection of elective courses
> 3. A variety of opportunities for completing volunteer hours
> 4. A variety of co-op placements
> 5. Other alternative learning available
> 6. The opportunity to participate in activities outside of class

7. Positive relationships with teachers
8. Teachers engage students
9. Bus transportation that supports participation outside school hours
10. Feeling safe at school
11. Having a sense of belonging

c. Are there any other aspects of secondary school experience that are important to you?

Section B: Schools and the Community

a. If someone asked you to describe the school(s) in your community, how would you respond?
b. How would you rate the following characteristics when considering the roles schools play within a community?
1. The school contributes directly to the success of students
2. The school fosters a sense of personal belonging to the community.
3. The school provides the community with a sense of identity.
4. A school attracts young families.
5. It provides economic benefits.
6. It enables opportunities for social interaction and engagement between youth and community members
7. It provides opportunities for lifelong learning.
8. It provides opportunities for adults to engage with others.

c. If you can think of other potential impacts of local schools, please identify them here.

d. Describe how the closure of an elementary or secondary school would have an impact on your life.

Appendix B

Former Student Survey (Online)
This survey has been created to get a clearer picture of student experiences in secondary school at Bruce Peninsula District School.  You have received this survey because you attended BPDS - Secondary between the years 2004 and 2016.
We are trying to capture your perception of the overall quality of your secondary school experience. We will use your answers to guide us as we investigate ways to enhance access to education in Northern Bruce Peninsula.
You responses will be anonymous, and no one fro he Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula will have access to your individual responses.
If you are willing to complete the survey, just continue. If you are not, then you can just exit this site. You can exit the site at any time during the survey if you don't wish to continue.
1. Where did you attend elementary school?
        a) St. Edmunds Public School
        b) BPDS elementary
        c) Other   _____

2. Grade(s) you attended BPDS secondary :

3. If you left BPDS and attended a different school for any of these years, the reason for that was:
       a) Course selection
           Details:
       b) Family reasons (for example, family moved
       c) Extra-curricular activities
           Details:
       d) Other
           Details:

4.  Last year at BPDS:

5. Gender

6. After high school, did you (check all that apply
       a) Full time employment
       b) Part time employment
       c) University
       d) College
       e) Apprenticeship
       f) Other (please specify)

7. This section explores your experience in you high school program at BPDS
       (Not my experience at all/Sometimes my experience/Frequently my experience/Always my experience

a) I was able to take courses that were required for my chosen path after high school

b) I was able to take the elective courses I wanted

c) Completing my volunteer hours was easy

d) I had the opportunity to get co-op or alternative learning experience(s) that matched my interests

e) I had the opportunity to participate in activities outside of class (e.g. sports team, clubs, school trips

(If your answer to 6a) was 1 or 2, what courses would you have wanted to take?

8. How did you get to secondary school and back, and how long did it take you? (You might have more than one answer if, for instance, you took the school bus sometimes and drove/were driven at other times

| Transportation | Time |
|---|---|
| School bus | ___ |
| Walking | ___ |
| Car | ___ |

8. This section explores your experience at BPDS in general

(Not my experience at all/Sometimes my experience/Frequently my experience/Always my experience)

a) I developed positive relationships with my teachers

b) Bus transportation issues limited my participation in activities outside of regular class hours

c) I felt comfortable at the school

d) I had access to career and/or mental health counselling

e) I felt bored in classes

f) I felt safe at school

g) I was given access to educational and teaching support when needed

h) I had a sense of belonging

9. When people ask you what you liked about your high school experience at Bruce Peninsula District School - Secondary, what do you tell them?

10. When people ask you what you feel you missed in your high school experience at Bruce Peninsula District School - Secondary, what do you tell them?

11. Is there anything else you want us to know about?