

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Permanent closures and consolidations of public schools are becoming increasingly common in Ontario. This report explores this issue in-depth by examining the potential impacts of a recent decision to close a secondary school in Kingston Ontario, Kingston Collegiate Vocational Institute (KCVI), on the quality of life for residents and neighbourhood well-being and liveability. According to Irwin (2012), schools provide a sense of identity for communities, a source of pride, history, and a safe space for collaboration and community-based activities. Neighbourhood schools are community focal points “where people can gather together and build stronger neighbourhoods” (Social Planning Toronto, 2013, p.3). However, there is limited empirical evidence on the impacts of school closures on households and neighbourhoods. Current research tends to focus on the political decision-making processes behind closures, rather than the social impacts experienced by residents who lose their local school (Irwin, 2012; Cranston, 2017). This report contributes to the gap in research by exposing social impacts experienced by residents currently dealing with the impending closure of their local secondary school, providing an important contribution to the discussion on what considerations should be investigated when determining a school’s future. Further, this report investigates how school asset management can be improved by incorporating more effective collaboration into the decision-making process, reflecting the values and priorities of residents.

Funding for Ontario public schools is based on a per-pupil basis, meaning that schools with a higher enrolment rate receive a larger budget (Irwin, 2012). This inherently favours ‘mega-schools’ and disadvantages rural and neighbourhood schools (Andres, 2013). When a school does not have sufficient enrolment, it is deemed under-utilized and considered a financial strain on the board, which triggers a Pupil Accommodation Review to assess the fate of the facility (Ministry of Education, 2016). The Ministry of Education grants school boards jurisdiction in deciding the future of not only under-utilized facilities, but inevitably the communities that they serve as well. The lack of jurisdiction given to the municipality and community residents fuels discontent, because residents often perceive themselves as the real owners of schools (Cranston, 2017; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005).

The report addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How has the decision to close KCVI impacted permanent residents living within the KCVI catchment area, and how do these residents anticipate that KCVI’s closure will impact their lives in the future?
- 2) To what extent have the neighbourhoods served by KCVI been impacted socially by the decision to close the school, and what are the opportunities and threats to these neighbourhoods for the future?

- 3) Given the importance of public schools to building communities, how might the school closure decision-making process be modified so that the management of public school assets can reflect the interests and needs of a broader range of community stakeholders?

To answer the research questions, a multilevel case study was employed using a mixed methods approach to data collection. Using the impending closure of KCVI at the study case, households within the school's catchment area were surveyed to investigate the potential impacts of the closure at the household level, and key informants were interviewed to investigate the potential impacts at the neighbourhood level. The survey and interview questions were based upon two frameworks: the Canadian Index of Well-Being (University of Waterloo, 2016) and the United Way of Greater Toronto's framework on neighbourhood well-being and stability (Public Interest, 2015). Literature and policy reviews were also conducted to inform and enrich the analysis.

The study findings demonstrate significant concerns about neighbourhood and household well-being and liveability upon the impending closure of KCVI. The interviewees perceived neighbourhood schools as a local amenity that instills community attachment, and felt that the lack of collaboration between key stakeholders in the school closure decision-making process poses a barrier to effective school asset management and community planning. The interviewees also described how the school-closure process pitted neighbourhoods against each other, and lacked coordination with municipal planning.

The household surveys revealed that the many residents are dissatisfied with the decision to close KCVI, and this dissatisfaction was observed regardless of household composition, income, age, neighbourhood of residence, personal connections to KCVI, and level of involvement in the closure process. Survey respondents were concerned about potential negative impacts to their household's finances and environmental footprint, the willingness of families to stay in their neighbourhood, and increased conversion of family homes to student housing. Perceived negative impacts at the neighbourhood-level was also associated with an increased willingness to move among respondents, which has important implications for the future stability of the area.

The decision to close KCVI highlighted three main planning-related conflicts: conflicts with Provincial sustainability policies that place high priority on sustainable land use and development practices to reduce carbon emissions, make efficient use of public infrastructure, and ultimately support the health and well-being of future generations; conflicts with municipality, in terms of missed opportunities to work collaboratively to develop a cohesive plan for the future of the community; and conflicts with the values and priorities of the public, thereby fostering distrust and resentment among residents with the LDSB. The findings strongly indicate

that the current school closure process is flawed and does not reflect the values of residents or adequately consider the social well-being of neighbourhoods.

To conclude, the report offers five recommendations for maintaining neighbourhood well-being and liveability for communities faced with the threat of a school closure, as follows.

Recommendation 1: The Ministry of Education needs to re-evaluate the funding formula scheme to favour on-going maintenance of existing schools

The current funding formula does not consider the complexity of demographic shifts, favouring short-term economic gain over long-term investments in a community. As well, there is a disparity in available funding from the Ministry of Education to retrofit existing schools in comparison to new construction projects (Cranston, 2017). This causes schools such as KCVI to fall into deterioration. This contradicts Ontario's Ministry of Municipal Affairs priority of promoting environmentally sustainability growth and development. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education re-evaluate the current funding formula to maintain neighbourhood schools to both meet Provincial sustainability polices and protect local neighbourhood schools from falling into decline.

Recommendation 2: Formalized relationships between the school board, the municipality, and the province should be established

All Ontario school closures are legally obligated to follow the Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) guidelines, which are "completely within the school board's jurisdiction" (Ministry of Education, 2018). The school board is required to host public consultations, but municipal staff and residents have no authority in the decision-making process. This is problematic considering schools are valuable resources and public assets, yet this is not reflected in the policy process. It is recommended that Ministry of Municipal Affairs, the Ministry of Education should develop policy guidelines that require formalized relationships between the district school board and local municipalities to promote equal representation and effective collaboration.

Recommendation 3: The Pupil Accommodation Review should reassess the decision-making process to require planning and support for neighbourhood well-being

The current PAR model fails to enable school boards to consider how school closures might impact the broader communities served by those schools. It does not accurately measure the full benefits of a local school, which disrupts the well-being and liveability of communities. The PAR needs to include measurements of the social benefits that schools provide for the community (i.e. indicators used in the Neighbourhood Vitality Index and Canadian Index of Well-Being frameworks reviewed in the Literature Review) and should prioritize long-term neighbourhood well-being over short-term fiscal gain. Additionally, the PAR does not include regulations for long-term planning and support for neighbourhoods that experience a school closure. It is recommended that policy requirements be made for the PAR to accurately measure the social benefits of school and their potential impact upon closure.

Recommendation 4: The Accommodation Review Committee should include an equal number of school board representatives, municipal planners, and residents, and should be given greater decision-making authority

The current policy model does not provide ARC members with decision-making authority, and instead the ARC functions as conduits of information to the community (People for Education, 2018). While policy requires the ARC to include parents in the committee, school board representatives dominate the current ARC, frequently resulting in decisions guided by utilization rates and short-term economic benefits for the school board (Andres, 2013). It is recommended that the Pupil Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs) be restructured to represent the value that schools have within their community and to improve collaboration between the school board, the municipality, and residents. The Ministry of Education needs to provide guidelines for Ontario to have equal representation of different stakeholders on the ARC, supported by policy to ensure that the process remains transparent, fair, and is granted more decision-making authority

Recommendation 5: The school closure decision-making process should prioritize downtown schools to support sustainable, heterogeneous, vibrant downtown neighbourhoods

KCVI is currently the only public high school located in the downtown of Kingston. The case study has demonstrated that families congregate to neighbourhoods where schools are within walkable distance; removal of the local school reduces the liveability of the neighbourhood. The survey revealed that the impending closure of KCVI may have significantly negative implications for the neighbourhoods, as fewer families are expected to move to the area, and about one-quarter of respondents indicated they have considered moving to another neighbourhood. To keep downtown neighbourhoods vibrant, sustainable, and heterogeneous, schools need to be kept downtown and within walkable distance of where families reside. Indeed, a key priority to promote Provincial sustainability policies is to revitalize and support downtown communities, which allow for intensification, increased active transportation, reduced automobile usage, and less energy used per household. It is recommended that school boards prioritize maintaining downtown schools to support Provincial sustainability policy goals and foster complete communities.