

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, public schools in Ontario have been permanently closing at alarming rates. From 2010 to 2016, the total number of school closures was 354 which was related to the 2009 and 2015 revisions of the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (Snow, 2019). Additionally, in 2017 decisions were made to close 58 schools with decisions pending for another 52 (Collins, Allman, & Irwin, 2019). These closures not only result in the loss of educational facilities, but also the loss of valuable community spaces from respective neighbourhoods (Cranston, 2017). While the controversies surrounding these school closures have been the subject of scholarly inquiry (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012), what is less understood is how these properties are repurposed following the permanent closures of the schools. Given the importance of public schools as community assets, the objective of this research was to examine the opportunities and challenges to adaptively reusing former public schools in Ontario as spaces for community use and benefit. Adaptive reuse is “the practice of identifying, acquiring, renovating or placing back into service a building or similar structure for a purpose different that for which it was originally designed” (Rosenbaum, Kim, Ramirez, Orejuela, & Park, 2019). It can provide various economic, environmental and social benefits to a community including retaining a ‘sense of place’ (Bullen & Love, 2011). This report explored how adaptive reuse of former school buildings has been leveraged to support deprived neighbourhoods in three contrasting Ontario cities: North Bay, Owen Sound, and Windsor.

This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the extent of social and material deprivation experienced by the neighbourhoods where the former school buildings are located?
2. How are the closed public schools currently being used in each of the study sites, and what were the processes and conditions that enabled the repurposing of the closed schools for their current use?
3. What constraints and opportunities did the current occupants encounter in adapting the school buildings and properties for their current use?
4. What benefits, if any, do the current occupants feel the new use is offering to the broader community?
5. How has the new use been received by the surrounding local community?

To answer the research questions, an exploratory comparative case study approach was employed. Demographic analyses were performed using the 2016 Census Data to understand the residential profile of the neighbourhoods where the former school buildings were located. Policy analyses was used to assess the conditions that enabled or deterred community uses from being located within the former school building. And key informants from each site provided their perspectives on the benefits of the new use and how the surrounding community perceived the new use.

The demographic analyses revealed high levels of deprivation in each study neighbourhood, with the greatest deprivation levels in the Windsor neighbourhood. The policy analysis demonstrated the ability for new community uses to be located within the former school buildings without Zoning By-law Amendments or other planning approvals. From the interviews, it was apparent that only one of these sites could be considered a true community hub. In two cases, privacy fencing has been erected to deter residents from using the space, while the targeted nature of the services provided by the new occupant limits the clientele who use the space. In all three sites, however, participants noted that the new use is addressing a clear need within their community. From this study, three recommendations emerged:

1. Municipalities should provide financial incentives to support non-profit organizations to allow for the purchase of former school buildings.
2. Municipalities should collaborate with school boards to better facilitate the process of selling former school buildings.
3. Municipalities should recognize and promote successful adaptive reuse projects of former school buildings within their community that have maintained the space as a community hub.