

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the issue of school closures, an issue that is “high profile, high impact, contentious and increasingly common in Ontario’s communities” (Irwin & Seasons, 2012, p.46). Between 2009 and 2012, 172 elementary and secondary schools in Ontario were closed, or recommended for closure and a further 163 schools were under review (People for Education, 2009). Despite the prevalence of the issue, however, there is a dearth of research on the impacts of school closures (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). This work aims to contribute to the existing research gap, and will analyze the potential of the Province of Ontario’s Community Hub Framework to remediate some of the impacts of closures experienced by Ontario communities.

In March 2015, the Province of Ontario published the *Community Hubs Strategic Framework*, which is intended to adapt existing public properties to become community hubs. Community hubs are a central access point for a range of needed health and social services, and act as gathering places to facilitate community growth. No two hubs are alike, as each provides a variety of services, programs and activities reflecting the needs of the immediate community. The goal of the *Strategic Framework* is to identify barriers to the implementation of hubs in Ontario, so that greater coordination can be achieved across government bodies and programs (2015). Additionally, the *Strategic Framework* works towards providing community-focused service delivery in places such as closed schools. After examining issues that arise from school closures, the community hub model was analyzed for its potential to address threats to neighbourhood livability that are experienced when a public school closes.

The report addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What scholarly evidence exists on the impacts of public school closures, and how have scholars framed the potential impacts of these closures?
- 2) How has the issue of public school closures been framed in newsprint media in Ontario?
- 3) What is the community hub model, and what are its prospects for addressing the impacts and issues raised in the literature and Ontario news media?

To answer the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Media content analysis was performed using quantitative methods to assess the most pressing concerns of Ontario residents who have opposed closures in their respective communities. Qualitative data was gathered through key informant interviews and policy analysis, in order to explore the community hub model in depth. The conceptual framework of livability was used to determine whether community hubs are able to address some of the issues associated with school closures brought forth from the literature review and media analysis.

The findings of the research demonstrate there are numerous potential impacts of public school closures, and scholars have framed these impacts of closures negatively. Scholars have argued that schools are key public assets that build community cohesion, and permanent closures of these institutions threaten this cohesion. Similarly, analysis of Ontario newspaper coverage demonstrated that the issue was framed predominately negatively between 2010 and 2015, with the most commonly cited concerns being threats to neighbourhood cohesion and social capital, potential for neighbourhood decline and disinvestment, and threats to student health and well-being.

The study also found that community hubs offer potential to address some of the impacts raised in the literature and news media, primarily by providing space to uphold social capital, and by preventing neighbourhood decline. A viable method to address the impacts of school closures, whilst attaining more coordinated service delivery, is to co-locate schools and hubs within the same building. A co-location model would take the onus of building operation and maintenance off of school boards, and would allow more small schools in Ontario to remain open. Furthermore, reimagining community hubs to include operational schools would make the publicly owned infrastructure inclusive and beneficial for all members of a community, rather than just for students. At this time, however, a lack of coordinated planning and policy makes the creation of hubs a difficult and timely process, and prevents closed or threatened schools from transforming efficiently into hubs. Until other frameworks or more concrete policy exist to support the conversion of school buildings into hubs, saving publicly owned assets for conversion into hubs remains a complex and challenging issue.

To conclude, the report offers five recommendations to offer guidance for the creation of community hubs in Ontario, as follows.

Recommendation 1: Create a Provincial Lead for Community Hubs

The siloed, fragmented nature of the provincial planning system is a major barrier to the creation of more community hubs in Ontario. As stated in the *Strategic Framework (2015)*, there needs to be a provincial lead in order for community hubs to be successful. The Lead would sit above and work across the ministries, to make planning for hubs more cohesive and less complicated. Structural realignment of resources and accountabilities would be required across ministries to ensure effectiveness of the role (Strategic Framework, 2015).

Recommendation 2: Move Towards Municipal Ownership of School Buildings (Model 2)

In the interviews, it became apparent that “there is no structure that makes saving a school and turning it into a community hub a choice” (Respondent 2). Furthermore, if a main reason for closing schools is surplus space, there should be a way in which school boards could continue to allow part of the building to be used as a school, and the other space be used as a community hub. To best facilitate efficient use of publicly owned space, Ontario municipalities should begin to assume ownership of closed schools, or schools slated for accommodation review, that are important for communities but too expensive to be maintained by the school board. This would facilitate greater integration of Model 2, where education delivery and community hub programming could be co-located in the same building.

Recommendation 3: Create a Framework to Measure the Socioeconomic Benefit of a School

Currently, there exists no framework to measure the socioeconomic benefit of schools for a local community. To ensure processes and planning are more reflective of the value of public properties to communities, there needs to be greater communication of existing properties that are underutilized or no longer needed for their original use (Strategic Framework, 2015). A framework that measures socioeconomic benefit could help decide when sale of a school at fair market value may not align best with public interests, and whether the economic and community benefits warrant an investment on the part of the government for property acquisition (Strategic Framework, 2015).

Recommendation 4: Retrofit Existing Schools to Protect Student Safety

A major barrier for the co-location of education and community hub services is student safety. If the province wants to maintain and upgrade their existing public infrastructure, attention and funding must be prioritized to upgrade existing schools with greater student safety measures (should the school and hub be co-locating in the same building). The province, local municipalities and school boards should re-evaluate their accountability and fiscal plans to provide funding to assist with retrofits, so existing building stock can be repurposed and maintained for community benefit.

Recommendation 5: Create Local Community Hub Committees

In order for community hubs to become a reality in more Ontario communities, it is recommended that local community hub committees be created in communities that are considering a hub. The Province could lead this initiative by classifying which Ontario municipalities are either in most need of a community hub, or areas that have an abundance of unused public infrastructure that could be transformed into a hub. The municipalities, in conjunction with the school boards, could scout local residents to act on a board of directors, who would be responsible for finding volunteers interested in contributing to the local community hub committee. The group could fundraise, find community partners interested in locating in the hub, educate other residents about the benefits and need for a hub in their locale, and establish friendships that could be upheld through use of the hub.