Executive Summary

Schools are essential in creating healthy, sustainable and complete communities (Butler & Diaz, 2016). Despite the many ways communities benefit from schools, public schools are being closed in Ontario (People for Education, 2009). Closures have been found to have a range of negative impacts on communities, including lowered parental involvement and academic performance in students, reduced physical activity as a result of increased distance from school and more time commuting by bus or car, as well as diminished community vitality and capacity for growth (Valencia, 1984; Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Eyre and Finn, 2002; Witten et al., 2001; Lipman & Haines, 2007). The growing trend of school closures in Ontario have been thoroughly covered in the media however, there is currently no publicly available record detailing where and how many school closures are occurring in the province, making it impossible to validate these claims. This information gap is the basis of the main objectives of this research.

This study has two principal objectives. The first is to create a comprehensive, spatially-referenced Ontario public school closure dataset for the 2010 to 2018 timeframe. The second is to understand where closures are occurring in Ontario and equally, the socioeconomic and geographic characteristics of affected communities and how they compare to communities that have not been recently affected by closures.

Two achieve these objectives, this report addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the scope (i.e., how many, when, where) of school closures in Ontario since 2010?
2. How do closed schools differ from open schools in Ontario in terms of school board type and school language?

3. How do the geographic profiles of the communities in which closed schools are situated differ from those in which open schools are situated?

4. How do the deprivation profiles of the communities in which closed schools are situated differ from those in which open schools are situated?

5. To what extent can school closures in Ontario be predicted by school board type, school language, geographic profile, and deprivation profile?

A quantitative analysis approach was employed to answer the research questions. Data on open schools were acquired online, while a Freedom of information (FOI) request was filed for closed school data. The postal codes of both open and closed school data was processed through Postal Code Conversion File Plus (PCCF+) to be assigned dissemination area (DA) codes. Once the DAs for all closed and open school communities were identified, the dataset was then linked to an existing dataset on area-level deprivation. Once acquired and harmonized, data was analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression, and mapped using ArcGIS.

Analysis of school closures by year revealed that between 2010 and 2016, school closure rates have been relatively consistent, and that there is little difference in the proportions of open and closed schools by language or board type. Closed schools were, however, significantly more likely to be located in small and rural communities, and in deprived communities. Indeed, binary logistic regression revealed that of all independent variables, the strongest predictors of school closures were community type and 2006 deprivation index quintile (both material and social), respectively.

Given these findings as well as study limitations and points raised in the literature review, the report provides four policy considerations, as follows.

1. Increase community engagement and collaboration in school closure decision-making process;

2. Account for geography in the current funding formula;

3. Introduce community reliance on schools as a formal metric in accommodation reviews;

4. Consider the long-term, community-level impacts of school closures.