

**School District 63 Saanich**  
**Report on Educational and Operational Viability of Small Schools**

**Prepared by Keven Elder, Assistant Superintendent, August 2003**

This report has been prepared as a brief overview of the literature regarding the educational and operational viability of small schools. While not a full scientific review or study, this report attempts to capture the central elements of two key documents, those being *Enhancing Rural Learning – the Report of the Task Force on Rural Education* (2003), and an in-depth viability study done by a Saanich-comparable district, School District 72 Campbell River. Those findings are described in a document entitled *Elementary School Task Force Report to the Board of School Trustees* (2001).

Also incorporated into this report are findings from five research analyses and meta-analyses as listed in the reference section at the end of this report. From a more immediate financial/operational efficiency perspective, this report also provides an estimate of costs which could be saved by amalgamating smaller schools in Saanich.

**Synopsis: Enhancing Rural Learning**

The Rural Education Task Force was commissioned in 2003 by Education Minister Christy Clark to study rural education and to make recommendations for a provincial rural education strategy. Its mandate was to study the realities, challenges and opportunities surrounding education in small, remote, and shrinking communities, many of which have very small schools hundreds of miles from other schools. As such, the majority of the report deals with the means by which quality education can be provided in circumstances that do not apply to the relatively dense population base of Saanich School District. At the same time, there are some useful insights.

Overall, the report indicates that unless finances make it impossible to do so, it is advisable to keep small, remote schools open despite their costing considerably more per pupil to operate. One reason for this is that for many small centres the school is considered the heart of the community, the gathering place, the hub of activity. Another is that without the local school, students would have to be bused for up to three hours per day to larger, practically foreign communities. Also, parents spoke of the small school, despite having educational and operational challenges, having a rural culture which matched the rural community.

But what of the educational and operational challenges? Educationally, despite there being some real appeal to smallness, including comfort, familiarity and closeness, there are difficulties common to many small rural schools. Multi-aged, multi-grade classrooms (3 or more grades) have proven difficult to manage given the curricular and student diversity challenges evident in this era. Also, the IRPs are not designed to support such an approach, especially for young and relatively inexperienced teachers who often staff small, rural, isolated schools. Further, with very small teaching staffs comes little expertise in areas such as library, learning assistance,

special needs support and technology. Operationally, fixed costs such as maintenance, hydro, property taxes and building overhead make the per pupil operating cost far exceed the per pupil funding. These additional costs have to be covered at the expense of services to students elsewhere in the district.

With all of that in mind, it is interesting to see what the report cites as “small” in terms of school population. While acknowledging that there are very remote schools with as few as 8 students, a small school for Ministry funding purposes is considered to be any with a population of fewer than 250 students. The report also suggests that the Ministry find ways to provide operational flexibility options to very small remote schools with fewer than 100 students.

### **Synopsis: Elementary School Task Force (School District 72)**

In February 2001, the Campbell River Elementary School Task Force tabled a report which provided recommendations related to school closures/amalgamations in the face of declining enrolment district-wide. The need for this analysis arose out of the findings of a Board Budgetary Efficiencies Committee which concluded that “declining enrolment patterns have negative impacts on educational service delivery, as well as on the District’s operating budget and on capital expenditures.” While recognizing that schools have value to their neighbourhoods, the Board was looking to enhance educational well-being of students by optimizing school size based on educational and fiscal rationale.

Through broad consultation with schools, PACs and communities, and through considerable analysis of research, the task force recommended that elementary schools should be structured to have between 250 and 400 students, and in no instance should they be below 150 students. These numbers arose out of thousands of collective hours of collaboration and research over six months, all in review of educational and financial viability of schools. It should also be noted that the Task Force recommended excluding from those guidelines the district’s truly remote schools including Surge Narrows, Sayward and Cortes Island.

Following are some excerpts from the report:

- Research indicates that an effective size for an elementary school is in the range of 300 to 400 students. Small schools were generally those defined as having fewer than 300 students, with 200 being the lower limit.
- In B.C., the average size of an elementary school is 254 students. For medium sized districts the average is 213. For urban districts it is 311.
- The arguments in favour of small schools (including very small schools) centred on the family atmosphere and staff familiarity with students.
- Parents and staff spoke of challenges associated with multi-aged classes, especially when schools were in danger of having three grade combinations, and of problems experienced when peer groups remained together for several years.

- Staff of smaller schools said very clearly that they were concerned about being able to keep up with the demands on them. Although few in number, staffs in small schools want to, and feel they are expected to, provide all the extra-curricular and curricular opportunities provided to students in larger schools. The workload on staff is onerous.
- Larger schools are much more likely to provide students with a range of extra-curricular activities and more programs in general (including library services, learning assistance, etc.).
- In larger schools it is more feasible to meet needs of individual students by matching learning styles with teaching styles, by changing peer groupings, and by carefully arranging grade configurations.
- District staffing reports indicate that smaller schools are (necessarily) staffed at a higher teacher to student ratio than larger schools. Small schools are subsidized by funds that could be used across the system.
- In some cases, subsidizing smaller schools in rural areas is a social necessity (e.g. Sayward, Cortes, and Surge Narrows).

The Campbell River School District report recommended the closure of a number of small schools where there is capacity in neighbouring schools to absorb all of the students. The task force heard clearly from parents and communities that any changes must be carefully planned, but even more importantly, clearly explained to all concerned. Factors in planning and phasing in of changes should include: consideration of families; timing of changes including possible phased changes with grandfathering; consultation with those affected, and; consideration of unique aspects of each school affected.

### **Key Findings from Research**

Throughout the articles cited at the end of this document (Barker, Cole, Howley, Irmsher and Raywid – all ERIC Digest research syntheses), there is a common set of themes which emerge regarding educational and financial viability of small schools. These include:

- Although disagreement exists over what enrolment figures should be used to determine “small,” the figure most commonly accepted is 300 or fewer students (Barker).
- The recent Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform set the upper limit for small schools at 350 students for elementary, with the idea of how small is too small being driven by context such as remoteness (Raywid).
- The lurking issue of upper and lower limits has usually tended to resolve itself in the search for optimal school size: What is the one-best size or range for elementary, junior and senior schools? In recent decades some researchers have dismissed the search for optimal size as naïve or misdirected. In their view, the most suitable size for a school is likely to vary from place to place. Small schools are found to provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students, but not for affluent students, who may fare better in

larger schools. Additional evidence suggests that expenditures (per pupil to overall) exhibit a U-shaped association with size, with the largest and smallest schools showing diseconomies of scale (Howley).

- Research has not yet revealed an “optimum” school or district size. A smaller school (under 300 in comparison to schools of one thousand or more) offers benefits in several areas: personal relationships; student morale, behaviour and leadership; teachers’ knowledge of students and colleagues; manageability and ease of administration, and; learner-centred curriculum and instruction (Barker).
- There exists in small schools a sense of pride, and an attitude and sense of personal possession and involvement on the part of students, parents, teachers, administrators and community residents. To a great degree, the school is the community centre in many small towns and rural areas (Barker).
- Surprisingly, even in the most industrialized countries, small rural schools are still the rule rather than the exception. These schools usually employ a faculty of three or fewer, and student enrolment usually falls somewhere below 100. They tend to be less specialized and less well-equipped. Over the years, most small schools have survived out of necessity. Usually, there have been no schools nearby with which to consolidate.

The net effect of these considerations is that the research suggests that where school districts have the capability to do so they should organize for elementary schools of 300 to 400 students, and for educational and financial reasons should avoid schools of 150 or fewer students.

An exception would be where the school is a cultural or operational centerpiece of a small community and where commuting distances to a neighbouring school would be prohibitive or travel conditions would be unsafe. In such cases, districts should be willing to subsidize operations of small schools by reducing funding for students and schools elsewhere in the district. Better yet, governments should adjust funding to accommodate retention of schools in remote communities in order to redress inequities which might occur with subsidization of some students in rural areas at the expense of others in urban areas.

### **Budgetary Implications for Small School Amalgamation**

In our own school district, an analysis was completed during the 2003-2004 budget deliberations regarding costs which could potentially be saved through the closure of Durrance Elementary School (with students moving primarily to Brentwood Elementary) and Sansbury Elementary School (with students moving to McTavish). While these were considerations for future budget years, 2004-2005 and beyond, it is instructional to review those analyses at this time.

Durrance Elementary School: Savings which would be realized came about primarily through the larger school, Brentwood, being able to “absorb” a sizeable amount of staffing currently assigned to Durrance, including administrative,

learning assistance, library, clerical and custodial time. These staff savings, with plans being to serve the same number of students in one facility rather than two, were expected to be in the range of \$258,000. Additionally, there would be savings in operating and maintenance costs of \$8,000 for a total projected savings of \$266,000 achieved through moving 86 students into a 340-student school nearby.

Sansbury Elementary School: Savings through a Sansbury/McTavish amalgamation would accrue in much the same way as for Durrance/Brentwood. The savings would not be as dramatic since McTavish does not have the same large-school capacity to absorb the neighbouring school. This is because McTavish is smaller than Brentwood and Sansbury is larger than Durrance. Also, the administration of Sansbury and McTavish was already amalgamated in 2002. Still, the staff savings for this amalgamation would be an estimated \$121,000. Operational savings would be expected to be \$6,000 for a total projected savings of \$127,000 achieved through moving 122 students into a 98-student school nearby. A proposed capital expansion of McTavish would also be required.

### **In Summary . . .**

The research, our own in-house analysis of challenges related to declining elementary enrolment, and a review of a similar district's in-depth analysis of a similar challenge, makes our dilemma increasingly clear. While very small schools (under 150) provide for many positive experiences for students, parents, staffs and communities, they do so at a substantially higher cost per pupil than in neighbouring larger schools during a time of enormous financial pressures in public education. Fortunately, it has been our experience in Saanich that the benefits found in smaller schools exist in all of our schools. This is at least partly because none of our elementary schools would be considered particularly large in the research into school size. Also, in Saanich, because of the proximity and manageable size of other schools, many of the identified benefits associated with small schools would continue to be available to students relocating to other local area schools.

If we were to design the system from the ground up, searching for optimal educational and financial value, we would be well advised to design elementary schools of 250 to 400 students each. Of course, to make such a change overnight would be both inadvisable, given the value, culture and history of our smaller schools, and logistically impossible. However, the district should continue to be strategic, thoughtful and thoroughly consultative in examining affordability of schools based on FTE student enrolment, and should do so in the knowledge that educational and financial viability are both optimized in the 250 to 400 student range.

## References

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