

Rural and Remote Schools:
A reality in search of a policy

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Developing Government Policies for Successful Rural Education in Canada

Introduction

The Rural School Problem and School Closure and Consolidation

In Canada education and schooling are primarily provincial matters. There is no national system of education or federal department of education. Each province has total control and jurisdiction over its education system. Therefore, education and schooling are somewhat unique in each part of the country.

My home province of Newfoundland and Labrador is Canada's newest province, the second smallest in terms of population and perhaps the most rural. The total population is around 500,000, the majority of which live in rural areas. The largest city, the capital St. John's has a population of around 100,000. Most other towns have less than 5,000 people and the majority considerably less than that.

Newfoundland and Labrador has always been and remains a province of small schools the majority of which are situated in rural areas. Although the number of schools over all has declined from a high of 1200 in the 1960's to less than 300 today in 2008, the scale of schooling remains small. The average enrolment of all schools in the province is only 257 while the average for the 179 rural schools is 163 students. 90 of the smallest of these rural schools are all grade or K-12

schools and are situated in the more remote and isolated regions of the province. Close to 25% of our schools have less than 100 students and 37 of these have less than 50.

For most of the twentieth century educational reformers in North America believed the problem with rural education was the scale of schooling. The schools were too small to provide quality education for rural children in a cost effective manner. The solution to this “problem” was obvious: institute a policy of closure and consolidation and eliminate as many small schools as possible. Rural students of all ages would be transported to distant communities where they could enjoy the purported educational advantages and opportunities only available in larger schools.

For most of the 20th century educational authorities in Canada (and the US) in the name of educational reform have pursued a consistent and at times ruthless policy of school closure and consolidation. Nowhere was this policy more “successful” than in Newfoundland and Labrador. Since 1966, 900 schools mostly small rural community schools have been closed. Parallel to the closure policy was a bussing policy that saw increasing numbers of students bussed for longer distances to larger schools further and further away from their home communities.

The general situation I have described in Newfoundland and Labrador is similar to most other Canadian provinces. Policies of consolidation, centralization and standardization have been relentlessly implemented.

The Current Situation

We are now at a point in my province and elsewhere in Canada where we have closed and consolidated the schools we can. Most of the small rural schools that remain are in remote and isolated rural places

where bussing is simply not an option. There is a limit to how far and how long we can expect students to endure riding a school bus. As long as these rural communities continue to exist, educational services will have to be provided to these communities.

These small rural schools share a number of characteristics, which create challenges for the provision of quality education.

Small enrolment

Most of these schools have an enrolment of less than 100 students. Many have as few as 10 to 20 students.

All Grade Schools

The majority of the small schools in remote and isolated places are all-grade, K-12 schools. However, there may be only two or three students at each of the 13 grade levels.

Multi-grading

All of these schools would be multi-graded for grades K-9. Most would have three or more grade levels combined in one classroom.

Multi-level/course teaching at the high school level

In most of these schools high school teachers would be responsible for providing instruction in two or more subjects or courses in the same instructional period.

Heavy reliance on web-based distance education

Most recently, these schools have relied increasingly on web based distance education for providing high school courses. The intent is, as teachers are cut from the system, their place will be taken by computer based distance learning. While this mode of learning works

well with highly motivated, independent learners, it is proving to be problematic with the average adolescent who lacks these attributes.

Declining enrolment and difficulties associated with recruiting and especially retaining teachers are also part of the picture when describing the challenges confronting these rural schools. As small as they are, current demographics indicate they will get even smaller. And it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain teachers in the areas of math, science and foreign language for these schools.

Finally, there is the issue of resource allocation – material and human. Historically, in Canada, policy has dictated that all schools be resourced equally based, primarily, on student enrolment. Educational authorities have maintained that such a policy is fair and equitable. The reality is that such policies clearly discriminate against smaller schools leaving them with less personnel and material resources than they need.

Policy Initiatives for Successful Rural Education

In the first half of this paper I have attempted to provide you with a few historical and contextual notes regarding rural education in Canada with particular reference to Newfoundland and Labrador. I have noted that for most of the 20th century the dominant policy in effect was a persistent attempt to close and consolidate as many small rural schools as possible. Small schools were seen as educationally deficient and it was in the interest of students to travel any distance to a larger school so as to obtain a quality education. Smaller schools were largely ignored as far as supportive policy initiatives were concerned. General policies tended to discriminate against small schools. It was as if they were being punished for being small.

We are now at a point where the policy of closure and consolidation

has largely run its course. The small schools that could be reformed out of existence have been closed. There is an acceptance now that the small rural schools that remain will always be there as long as their communities continue to exist.

In the remainder of this paper, I am going to outline some policy initiatives that I believe are necessary for these schools to be successful¹.

Change in Attitude and Perception

Governments and educational authorities have to change their perception and attitude towards small rural schools. In Newfoundland and Labrador the term “necessarily existent” is used in reference to these schools. Implied here is the notion that the Government regrets the existence of these schools. I think this attitude is problematic and hinders true educational improvement.

The way forward, the path to enable these schools to achieve their educational potential has to start with new attitude that goes beyond acceptance to one that embraces and celebrates small schools as not only viable but also valuable to the communities they serve. This is qualitatively different than the reluctant acceptance of their existence as a necessary evil. These schools are important and vital to preserving our rural communities. Assuming that is what we wish to do!

Curriculum Policies

Of all the issues identified by my graduate students, who are mostly experienced rural teachers, the greatest challenge is programming policies. This is especially problematic at the high school level.

¹ The provision of an education that enables rural youth to make a living and a life in a place of their choosing.

School programs and graduation requirements are planned and developed for larger urban schools. Assumptions are made about student enrolment, the number of teachers (with specific qualifications) and resources in these schools. The problem is that none of these assumptions hold true for smaller rural schools. Yet, current policy dictates that even the smallest schools (e.g. all grade schools with just two teachers) have to conform to these programming policies. It is a classic case of forcing a square peg in a round hole and blindly adhering to a one size fits all approach to curriculum planning.

What is particularly irritating to the rural school principals is that they are not provided with any policy guidelines or advice as to how make the provincial program of studies work in their small schools. They are left to their own creative devices. However, they are held accountable for the decisions they do make. This is not an acceptable situation.

I believe an important change that would make rural education more successful would be for educational planners to design a curricular program for small rural schools. Instead of putting the responsibility on rural principals to find ways to make a program designed for larger schools work in smaller schools, have program planners at provincial and state levels design an appropriate program for smaller schools. This program must reflect small school realities. At the very least they need to develop a set of policy guidelines that provide advice and direction for rural principals as how to make the provincial curriculum fit their particular situations. ²

A second program issue that needs to be addressed at the policy level is finding ways of making the content of the curriculum more relevant to the rural context. Schools need more freedom and flexibility to

² Increasingly, small rural schools are relying on web-based distance learning to provide high school courses for their students. This has great potential for making rural schools more successful but there are a number of policy changes are needed. I will address this issue later in this paper.

create courses that reflect the local economy and environment and to adapt course material to take advantage of the resources readily available in the local context. Locally developed courses would increase rural students interest in school and contribute to their ability to make a living and a life in their home communities.

Resourcing Policies

In the name of equality, small rural schools have been resourced, primarily, on the same basis as larger schools - student enrolment. Teachers are allocated and instructional resources are provided according to student enrolment. This policy creates severe disadvantages for small rural schools. This situation is exacerbated when schools are experiencing a decline in enrolment as our rural schools are now.

It could be argued that these policies have remained in place as long as they have to act as a form of coercion to force rural communities to agree to close their small schools. (An educational scorched earth policy)

If educational authorities have indeed come to the point where they now accept the reality of small rural schools and acknowledge they will continue to exist, then a new resourcing policy is required. This new policy cannot be linked to student enrolment as has been in the past. It has to be linked to program provision.

Sufficient resources both material and human have to be committed to each school to enable that school, regardless of its size, to provide an acceptable level of basic programming for its students including in the case of all grade schools enabling students to meet high school graduation requirements.

Teacher Education

I am not aware of any University or Faculty of Education in Canada that has a pre-service program dedicated to the preparation of rural teachers. A generic approach to teacher education predominates based on the belief that teaching is teaching regardless of the context. What this generally means is that teachers are prepared for large urban schools. Some faculties may offer one or two elective courses that focus on rural issues. Memorial University of Newfoundland, for example, offers an elective course (Education 4901) that focuses on multi-grade and multiage classrooms.

I believe that rural education would be more successful in Canada if Faculties of Education did a better job of preparing teachers for the particular and unique challenges characteristic of small rural schools. This preparation must address the pedagogical and curricular challenges associated with small all-grade schools as well as the challenges inherent in living in remote and isolated places.

One innovation that has been recently implemented at Memorial University is a second field experience that places student teachers in the most remote and isolated schools for a period of two weeks. All pre-service teachers complete a mandatory thirteen-week field placement as part of their undergraduate program. In the final semester of the program students may opt to take part in this additional field experience.³ The intent of the program is to provide students with the opportunity to live and work in the most isolated areas of the province. This experience should enable them to make more informed decisions as to whether teaching in a small school and living in a remote location is something they could or could not do.⁴

³ Students participating in this program have all their expenses covered and receive an honorarium.

⁴ Ongoing research on this innovation is demonstrating that the intent of the program

I believe we would improve our efforts at recruiting and especially retaining teachers in rural schools if we did a better job with their initial preparation. Most often new teachers accept positions in small rural schools but have very little if any idea about such schools or how they work. Nor do they know if they would be able to adjust to living in a remote and isolated community.

Professional Development

The continuing professional development of rural teachers is essential in any effort to make rural schools more successful in providing quality education for students. However, there are two concerns that have to be addressed at the level of policy. One is relevance and the other is accessibility.

The issue of relevance concerns the fact that many professional development activities fail to acknowledge and address the unique circumstances of small rural schools. The approach most often taken is to focus on specific grade level curricula, e.g. fourth grade math. Rarely will there be professional development for those teachers who work with two or three grade levels in the same classroom. If multi-grade teachers ask P.D. presenters to suggest how they might implement new curricula in their classrooms quite often they are met with blank stares.

Teachers working in remote and isolated schools also have problems attending professional development activities. Educational authorities often fail to appreciate the travel time required to get from the rural community to the location where the P.D. is occurring. Remote teachers often need two or three extra leave and travel days more than their colleagues who work and live close to the P.D. site.

When professional development is being planned it must be a matter of policy that the particular circumstances of rural schools are included in the agenda and the travel needs of remote teachers are considered.

Web-based Distance Education

Increasingly, small rural schools in Newfoundland and Labrador and elsewhere in Canada are relying on web-based distance education to provide their high school students with access to the programs and courses they need to graduate. As enrolment continues to decline and site based teachers are cut from schools the reliance on distance learning will increase.

Distance education has the potential to make the size and location of a rural school irrelevant in terms of its ability to provide students access via the Internet to any program or course they may need or wish to take. However, certain aspects of the existing model must be changed if all students are to have an equal chance of succeeding in this mode of learning.

In its original conception in Newfoundland and Labrador (1987), distance education was intended to provide supplementary programming to small rural schools. The intended cliental were the top academic students in the school who were interested and capable of

working in a self-directed and independent way. The first courses offered by distance in the province were in fact advanced placement university equivalent courses.

Since 1992, the province has experienced a dramatic decline in student enrolment. Hardest hit have been small rural schools. As a consequence of this decline increasing numbers of teaching positions have been eliminated from the system. The ability of small rural schools to offer even minimum programs and courses on site has become increasingly problematic. In addition, in recent years it has gotten increasingly difficult to staff the more remote and isolated small schools with specialists in the areas of math, science and foreign language.

The Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) was established (2000) to increase the provision of high school programs and courses to small schools via the Internet. CDLI is charged with the responsibility of providing rural students with the courses that are not available in their schools because of their small size. Each year since 2001 CDLI has increased the number of courses available online. In remote and isolated schools all students must take one or more distance courses in order to graduate.

This is a very significant change in the purpose for CDLI and distance education in the province. Whereas before they were providing a service of choice for an elite and selective group of students, they are now operating as a necessary mode of curriculum delivery for even the most academically challenged and immature adolescents. The significance of this cannot be overestimated: students must master the demands of distance learning or compromise their future life chances.

For those adolescents who possess the necessary attributes⁵ to

⁵ A successful online learner needs to be disciplined and have the initiative to study

succeed in this virtual environment, CDLI provides them with access to a wide range of courses that they would not otherwise be able to take. For those lacking these attributes, online learning is problematic.

Policy Change Needed

The existing policy of CDLI maintains that students taking distance courses do not need academic support and supervision from school based teachers. They, purportedly, receive all the academic support they need from their online instructors.

However, as the range of students enrolling in distance courses has expanded it has become clear that some students need a great deal more school-based support and supervision than that envisioned in the current CDLI model. Many of these students lack both motivation and self-direction. Left unsupervised they will spend their time chatting with friends on MSN or Facebook, downloading music and playing computer games rather than attending to their online lessons. Many others are lacking in academic ability and find it very difficult to complete their work without teacher support. While there is academic tutoring available on-line many lack the confidence to initiate contact with their e-teachers.

The few teachers working on site in the remote and isolated schools do as much as they can for these students but their school-based workload is intense. In some situations teachers have to take time away from their existing teaching duties in order to assist an online student. This means they have to interrupt and disrupt their school based classes to provide the needed assistance. This is unfair to the

in a flexible environment without the constraints and supervision of a traditional classroom. Important attributes include: the ability to be organized, motivated and self-directed. Although they can study and attend class at their leisure, online learners typically do not procrastinate. They set a pace that enables them to comfortably get their work done. They are usually very committed to their online high school classes.

school based students. In other situations the help has to be provided at recess, lunch time or after school. Rural teachers have to volunteer their precious free time to work with online students. Neither of these situations is pedagogically sound or acceptable. Distance students cannot be dependent on the volunteerism and good will of overworked rural teachers. Nor can their educational needs be defined as an add on for a teacher who already has a full and demanding teaching load.

A modification to the existing CDLI model is appropriate and needed. There especially has to be some provision for increased support and supervision in the school for students taking distance courses. There is a need for someone who would have dedicated time away from other duties and responsibilities to work with a school's CDLI students. This support person would not be primarily academic. CDLI has excellent teachers who make themselves, for the most part, readily available to their students. The academic expertise is in place. The real need is for a person who would monitor and supervise students while they engage in their online courses. This person would act as a liaison between the student, the online teacher, the parents and the school's personnel. They would help students keep track of their assignments and tests, assist with technical problems and facilitate contact between students and their online instructor.

This change in policy would ameliorate many of the serious concerns raised by rural teachers, parents and students. There is no question that more and more students are going to have to rely on distance education provided by CDLI to graduate from high school. If students are going to graduate with an academic qualification, depending on the size of the school they attend, most will have to take a significant

portion of their program online. If the right supports are in place more students will avail of the academic programs and more importantly have a better chance to succeed.

Conclusion

For most of the 20th century a policy of closure and consolidation dominated educational reform efforts. Small schools were judged to be educationally ineffective and inefficient. The way to improve the quality of education in rural areas was to reform as many small schools out of existence as possible.

In the first decade of the 21st century governments and educational authorities have begun to accept the fact that the small rural schools that remain in remote and isolated places cannot be closed because it is not feasible to transport students from their home communities.

The challenge for educational authorities at this point in time is developing policies that would provide these schools with the support they need to be successful. In this paper I have suggested that policy changes are needed in the areas of programming, resource provision, teacher education, professional development and distance learning.

I have also suggested that an important first step is that governments and educational authorities must go beyond the mere acceptance of the remaining small schools as a necessary if regrettable reality. They must embrace and celebrate these small schools as not only viable but as valuable resources for the sustainability and development of the communities they serve.

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