



Our Local Schools *Matter*

Ontario Alliance Against School Closures

AFTER THE SCHOOL CLOSES

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Post-Consolidation Experience Survey Report

Introduction

The Ontario Alliance Against School Closures (OAASC) undertook surveys to assess the experiences of parents and students who were directly affected by the revised [2015 PARG](#) (Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline). In our October 2016 letter to the Minister of Education, co-signed by approximately fifty parent groups and concerned organizations, we had asked for:

- i. a halt to school closures;
- ii. a new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG);
- iii. a study or survey to assess the impact of school closures on students, parents and communities.

While a moratorium on closures was declared in June of 2017 and a revised [2018 PARG](#) was released, no studies or surveys were undertaken by either Ministry or individual school boards in Ontario to determine the impact of school closures and consolidations on the students, families or communities they serve. It became apparent to us that such an undertaking was necessary as we encountered a flood of anxious concerns and complaints from parents and students during the pupil accommodation review process and after the consolidation.

In the OAASC Post Consolidation Experience surveys we asked questions to ascertain the success of the consolidation in terms of the affects on:

- i. student success;
- ii. emotional impact;
- iii. student adaptability;
- iv. normal routine.

One hundred and twenty-seven students and one hundred and eighty-seven parents responded to our survey. These respondents represent only the first and second wave of closures that occurred since the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) was revised in [2015](#).

Although we expected to see many negative responses from disappointed parents and students, we did not anticipate the extent of the unhappiness and difficulties experienced in adjusting to the changes caused by the closures.

Changes to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG)

The PARG document revised in 2015 stripped two key values from the [2009 document](#). "Value to the community" and "value to the local economy" were no longer aspects outlined for consideration in pupil accommodation reviews. The two remaining "values" to be considered and used as guidance in school closure deliberations were:

- i. Value to the student
- ii. Value to the school board

In the 2009 PARG document, the importance of students as central to school closure decision-making was clearly emphasized in the statement: ***"It is recognized that the school's value to the student takes priority over other considerations about the school."***

In the 2009 PARG the student focus was clarified with specific considerations:

Value to the Student

- i. the learning environment at the school;
- ii. student outcomes at the school;
- iii. course and program offerings;
- iv. extracurricular activities and extent of student participation;
- v. the ability of the school's physical space to support student learning;
- vi. the ability of the school's grounds to support healthy physical activity and extracurricular activities;
- vii. accessibility of the school for students with disabilities;
- viii. safety of the school;
- ix. proximity of the school to students/length of bus ride to school.

Following the 2015 revision, this guiding framework was removed from the PARG thereby leaving each school board free to interpret what "value to the student" meant.

Evaluation of the Student Survey Responses

Introduction

The questions asked in the [student survey](#) focused on the *"value to the student"* expectations expressed in the [2009 PARG](#) document. The survey focused on academic success, availability of programming, the learning environment, physical space, after-school activities, and the issue of bussing. In addition, the survey included questions focusing on students' mental well-being, their measure of happiness and their social adjustment.

Our survey sought to gather input from students and parents that have had a year or more to experience the new school environment in order to allow for a reasonable period of adjustment.

The Happiness Factor

The questions in the [student survey](#) focused on the emotional as well as the academic and physical aspects of adjustment to a new school environment.

A significant number of students expressed emotional upset at the expectation of the move, a feeling which did not change following the consolidation. That **89%** of students found the move difficult was, by some respondents, attributed to a hasty plan that did not involve an integration strategy to make students feel "at home" in their new environment.

Students spoke specifically about the feeling of leaving a school that felt like "home" and being sent to a school where they did not feel welcome or included. Many referred to feelings of alienation, loneliness and isolation and felt that the new school was tailored to the existing school population and that the incoming cohort represented an unwelcome incursion. This sentiment became apparent in questions about friendships, social interactions and extra-curricular involvement.

Students largely responded negatively to questions about mental health support at the receiving school. Almost **60%** of students indicated that they required mental health support in some form following the consolidation. Of those students, two-thirds said that it was unavailable. Of the one-third that did access help or counselling, three-quarters stated that it was unhelpful. The low degree of helpfulness and the high degree of need reveals that the stressfulness and resistance to the move was not sufficiently understood or prepared for. Many students complained that their feelings of depression or worry were not taken seriously and that no counselling was available to deal with their worries. The mental health written responses on the survey exposed a deep feeling of anxiety and alienation amongst students. Many felt alone, isolated and dreaded the daily

school routine. Their lunch-time habits further showed a lack of integration with many students eating alone in unoccupied classrooms or other isolated spaces.

Academic Results and Programming

Respondents revealed that they experienced a worsening academic outcome since the amalgamation.

Sixty-six percent of students expressed that their academics had declined since the move. Many stated that the stress and unhappiness attributed to the consolidation was directly responsible for their lower grades and inability to focus on learning or enjoy school. The connection between student academic success and emotional well-being appears to be a direct correlation.

Further affecting academic success is the availability of course selections. While the increased availability of additional options has been used as a justification for school closures, students who completed this [survey](#) stated the contrary - **52%** responded that some options were not available. The reasons for the lack of availability was stated as either:

- i. options offered at former school not offered at the receiving school;
- ii. too many students, not enough course sections.

Only 17% of responding students said that they found "much or a little better choice" available.

These responses run counter to school board claims that consolidations provide increased opportunities for academic course selections.

Physical Space and a Larger Student Population

A concerning **90%** of students stated that the school was over-crowded. A common complaint from students was that the receiving school was congested and the halls difficult to navigate during busy times of the day. Students complained of smelly portables, crowded hallways, lunchrooms and classrooms. Respondents state that these conditions affected their relationship with fellow students and teachers. Many expressed anxieties about the lack of space and, in a related context, expressed a feeling that they didn't matter to the teachers because there were too many students, and that the principal and guidance counsellors didn't have time for them. A response from many was that they felt unimportant and lost in the size of the school and the number of students.

Extra-curricular Activities & the Bussing Connection

The reduction in extra-curricular activities, post-school work opportunities and social interaction time was discussed by respondents. Of the students surveyed, **75%** stated that they were "less active" or "no longer active" in extra-curricular activities. Although some respondents may have reduced their involvement regardless of school relocation, comments suggest that the closure played a significant role in reduced activity.

Students complained that receiving school athletes had a built-in advantage for securing spots on school teams, as coaches knew those students better, they were already established team members and more students were now competing for fewer spots.

Many expressed a hopelessness and feeling of depression at the difficulty of continuing to compete on a school team. The consolidating of schools generally forces the reduction of the number of schools and consequently, reduces the number of students able to continue to play school team sports by half as well.

Students indicated that bussing created an additional obstacle to participation. Students who previously walked to school or had shorter bus trips were now prevented from participating as a result of overly long bus rides. Many spoke of daily bus rides that took one to one and a half hours each way. Some said that previously, parents were able to provide transportation home from after-school activities but now parents were not as available for long distance commutes.

Summary

The shift in focus away from the student and to that of the economics of the facility became clear in the [2015 revised PARG](#). As a result of the facility-first focus, concerns and care of the student were of lesser importance to the school closure decision-making body. That no school board appears to have taken measures to assess student adjustment is a failing in caring for the children affected by these circumstances.

Evaluation of the Parent/Guardian Survey Responses

Introduction

[Parent/Guardian Survey](#) questions focused on how the closing of the schools have affected travel time to school, the child's ability to take part in after-school activities, social interactions, academic results and general adjustment. Additionally, parents were asked about the validity of the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process, and the effects of the school closure on the community.

Effects on the Student and Family

Bus Travel

Parents commented on the effects of the extended bus travel time to and from school. Parents spoke of the disadvantage experienced by their children who were affected by the bullying behavior on the bus, limited ability or lack of ability to participate in after-school activities, and a loss of place socially.

The longer bus time has increased family stress. Of parents surveyed, **75%** stated that their student faced a "longer to much longer " time travelling to and from school.

Parents complained of no "down time", a stressful pace of the day, the difficulty in making after-school travel arrangements that interfere with work, and a resulting decline in after-school participation and enthusiasm for school.

For rural families, the loss of a local school has increased hardships for completing farm chores before and after school, has made it difficult or no longer possible for parents to participate in school activities as volunteers or to support a student's participation in after-school events or sports.

Bus travel was one of the most frequent complaints cited as a major disruptor to family life.

Social Well-being & Academic Success

The two most significant measures of the academic success and social well-being are reflected in the students' comfort and happiness in the school environment.

Fifty-eight percent of parents remarked on a decline in the social interactions and friendships of their child.

Bullying and alienation were factors affecting a happy transition with many parents commenting on their child's feelings of depression, loneliness and inability to fit in.

Although some students may have these feelings at the home school, survey questions were specifically applied to the school closure as the affecting factor.

Of the respondents, **45%** of parents noted a decline in academic results that were attributed in part to the move.

Although the link between school closures and lower grades may not be conclusive, many of the reasons for the decline stated by parents were:

- i. larger class size resulting in less personal interaction with the teacher;
- ii. lack of available extra help in class or after class;
- iii. decreased interest in school.

Attitude Towards School

Some of the decline in academic success may be attributed to the apathy and antipathy that many students felt about the new school. As noted in the [survey](#), **78%** of respondents reported an "unhappier to somewhat unhappier" attitude of their children to school. Many students used the word "hate" to describe their feelings towards school.

Such unhappy attitudes may account, at least in part, for the decline in academic success. Fear of bullying, alienation and loneliness also accounted for a changed attitude towards school for many students.

Parental Concerns Prior to Consolidation

Parents expressed wide-ranging concerns prior to the move concerning their child's ability to adjust to the changes. Many worried about bussing concerns, size of the new school, loss of heritage and history with the closing of the school. Many expressed worries that their children needed a safe familiar environment and were concerned that they would not adapt well.

Following the move, **75%** of parents expressed that their worries had not been alleviated. Some comments described a feeling of depression and despondency among students. A few parents commented on concerns of suicide, students feeling helpless and powerless, and a lack of support services.

Several parents eventually removed their student from the school and moved to a different school or board. The overall sense was one of dissatisfaction with how the move was handled by the schools and school board and in how parents' concerns were/were not addressed.

The School Board and the Community

Parents were asked to describe the effect of public input on the Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) process. Largely, the process was described as flawed and "a sham". More than **80%** felt that public input had little to no effect on the outcome. [Survey](#) respondents who served on the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) complained that the exercise was a waste of time and the decision seemed predetermined.

They also stated that the process was for public optics and that diverging opinions were not considered. Repeatedly people responded that the decision had been made in advance of the process and the ARC was only a way of creating the impression of public engagement.

Eighty-five percent of respondents said that the school board decision to close a school had dealt a serious blow to the community. Many noted that the school was central to the community, that villages and small towns need their schools in order to remain viable. People also stated that any concerns or pleas on behalf of the history or heritage value of the school were dismissed as irrelevant.

Summary

The Human Factor

In summary, the most significant flaw in the school closure decision-making process has been to dismiss and disregard the **human cost** of such decisions.

At some point in the process, questions must be asked, such as:

- i. Can the community survive and thrive without its school?
- ii. Can the students adapt happily and successfully?

Conclusions

The outcome of the survey revealed an overall dissatisfaction with how school closure decisions were made under the [2015 PARG](#), and the consequent drastic effects that have occurred for students, parents and communities.

Parents, and accommodation review committee (ARC) members who responded to the survey stated that the review process was an artificial and dishonest exercise that gave only an appearance of inclusion; most respondents indicated that their concerns were not heard, or alternative options were not considered. The result was the creation of a great chasm between the boards of education/trustees and the public, a lack of trust and confidence that continues to this day.

The erosion of faith in the process can, in large part, be attributed to changes made to the [2015 PARG](#) that no longer included "value of the school to the community" and "value to the local economy" in the revised document.

In the [2009 guideline](#), school considerations were couched in language that focused on the "value" of a school to the students, the community, to the local economy and to the school board. It contained neutral language that allowed for considering either why a school should remain open or should be closed. Importantly, it stated that, "it is recognized that the school's value to the student takes priority over other considerations about the school".

The most recent revision to the guideline in [2018](#) is void of any reference to values. No longer is the pupil accommodation review (PAR) purposed to consider the "value" of a school. With all values excluded from the [2018 guideline](#), the new language has created a manual that focuses on the impact of planned closures and is no longer an effective tool for a pupil accommodation review.

To restore an accountable working relationship in the accommodation review process, it is necessary to apply a detailed and specific guideline that creates regulations, where necessary, and expresses clear expectations or outcomes.

A new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline must be developed that includes those "values" that were excised from the [2009 document](#) and that restores a working relationship with the public based on trust, fairness and transparency.