

Spoken Remarks – Presentation to the Regina Public School Board, Sept. 20, 2011. Response to the Biennial Review

Speaker: Trish Elliott

- School parent
- Designated spokesperson for RealRenewal

Many of our recommendations tonight relate to the process by which decisions are made.

Why? Because of complaints we have heard consistently since the beginning of the 10 Year Plan

- that the process is not genuine
- that communications seemed designed to minimize public input
- that not enough information is provided for informed discussion
- and that what people have to say doesn't matter in the end.

Whether you think these complaints are justified or not is up to you. But they are consistent and widespread, and therefore deserve your attention as real problem.

Our recommendations:

1. Extend the period for public response to Biennial Reviews.
 - Dropping the period from 36 days to 7 days was extreme.
 - This occurred during first week of Sept. when community organizations and SCCs haven't had their first meetings yet.
 - It is already hard enough for the public to participate
2. Provide a glossary of terms in the next Biennial Review and other planning documents, that translates jargon into plain English.
3. Committees of review
 - We recommend that you get away from the 'us versus them' scenario by instituting committees of review that are arms-length from the board, and that are representative of affected communities.
 - There is a precedent already in the Education Act for rural schools. We doubt the province will extend this to urban schools, because they are not that interested in urban schools.
 - But there is nothing stopping Regina Public from instituting community-based committees of review. You could do it if you had the will.

- Within this process, the school's value to students and community should be held as more important than numbers. Budgets and staffing assignments can be revised and redirected – a school closure is in almost all cases forever.

Communications

- Communications is an ongoing problem. Especially in the recent case of Athabasca School, it was unclear to people what was going on.
- For example, there were Lakeview parents who said the closure discussions weren't their concern because the students were all going to Argyle. In the end, 63 per cent went to Lakeview.
- We've also heard from the Save Athabasca School Committee that when they went door to door, people had no idea the school was closing – including many parents of pre-school-aged children, who had a direct stake in its future.
- We have provided an example of a good communication from Vancouver Public. It is simple and clear, and was widely distributed.
- We recommend that parents be encouraged and enlisted to help spread the word in their neighbourhood and through social media, and in the schools.
- There should not be barriers and controls on spreading information about upcoming meetings.
- Communication doesn't have to cost you a lot of money and what little you spend is well invested.

Information

- Meaningful public participation requires information.
- We have attached an example of a good piece of information – Regina Public's enrolment data.
- In the case of Athabasca School, you can see it very clearly spells out how many children were in each grade and program. Having this in peoples' hands would have saved a lot of debate and confusion.
- It makes no sense to treat something as basic as enrolment like a state secret with 'do not disseminate' stamped across it. In the Eastview presentation, you will note the frustration around being denied enrolment counts.
- Here is a facility audit, which we were provided a copy of at the time of the Herchmer closure. It is 32 pages long and contains everything you would want to

know about the condition of the building. This is another example of good, detailed information that people should have in their hands.

- The reason we raise this is because when it came time for trustees to cast their votes, factors were cited that were never put on the table for public scrutiny.
- If you are going to say the choice had to do with economics, then people need all the budgetary information that was considered – in advance.
- You've got to stop talking about the real issues behind closed doors.
- We have provided you with a list of documents that could be provided to public meeting participants. It is by no means an exhaustive list.
- **This brings us to the question of costed alternatives.**
- Placing the full onus on school communities to come up with alternatives to closure is an unfair burden.
- We recommend in future you provide more than one scenario for people to consider, including the estimated cost, student outcomes, transportation impact and so on. People have a right to comparative data.

Program inclusion

- During the Athabasca consultation, many people were upset that FIAP students and families were not included in the discussion. In a school community that practices inclusion, where students of all abilities and interests support one another, the practice of treating programs as if they are separate and unrelated schools makes no sense whatsoever from a community standpoint.
- We recommend that in future deliberations, school communities should be approached as whole units, not as a collection of separate programs.

Teacher input

- No one's input is more important to parents than that of the people who work directly with our children – the teachers and staff.
- Yet we consistently hear from your employees that they can't say anything about problems they see – the reason being that there are a hundred ways for the board office to make one's life miserable if you speak out.
- It concerns us that some employees have said they are even afraid to talk to their elected trustees.

- To that I will add that parents, especially parents of children receiving support services, also worry about the repercussions of speaking out.
- Fear is a blight on the system.
- We recommend that mechanisms be put in place to ensure employees can have input in a safe, secure manner.
- From what we have heard, fear is part of the workplace culture. This needs to be addressed by a third party intervener.
- As well, the public should know what teachers and staff are saying in stakeholder meetings.
- If, for example, there were questions raised about the program model of recommended school sizes, then that discussion should be on the public record.
- The public has a right to know. When this plan was being launched, we couldn't even get a list of who the stakeholders were.
- With a few rare exceptions, secrecy and closed-door discussions have no place in a democratically elected institution. It should not be the norm.

Public record

This leads to our recommendations about the public record.

- I attended the Athabasca School public meeting. I don't recall any voice speaking in favour of school closure. I recall many voices giving valid reasons why the school should remain. But where is the record of this?
- The absence of a public record gives rise to conflicting accounts about that school community's acceptance of school closure.
- In the attached example of notes from a public meeting, you can see that even the slogans on people's protest signs were recorded. Tears and applause were also noted.
- In the upcoming consultation meetings, we want all aspects of the process to be properly recorded and placed on the public record for review and scrutiny – that's the other aspect, that people should have a chance to say, "That's not what I said" or "that's not what I meant."
- All forms of input should be noted, codified and placed on the public record.

School size

- From the beginning, we have said this Plan is a recipe for schools that are too large. We commend the board for flagging this issue.
- In the first year of the 10 Year Plan there were just 5 elementary schools of more than 400 students. This is now projected to rise to 13, including 7 with over 500 students.
- This is a dramatic and unacceptable increase in school size.
- I'd also like to note that the plus or minus 30 per cent at the upper end of enrolment represents the margin of error in the projections, not a recommended school size. It doesn't mean it's okay for elementary schools to have 520 students, and those are the only ones that should be flagged.
- Every effort should be made to keep schools under 400, which is what the plan was sold to the public on.
- The trend toward larger schools should not be exacerbated by further school closures.

Consideration for community schools

- We note that neither the 10 Year Plan nor its subsequent reviews do not make any distinction between community schools and other schools.
- Community schools are often in older buildings in relatively compact inner city neighbourhoods.
- As a result, when the plan came out, the closure list looked like the community school list – a full 12 out of 14 elementary community schools were impacted by closures, as well as one community high school.
- I will quote from the 10 Year Plan:

“Elementary schools serving student populations exclusively or largely from diverse and/or disadvantaged backgrounds should be limited in size to no more than 300 students.”
- Our best measure of which school serve such students is the community school designation.
- At the beginning of the 10 Year Plan there were no community schools over 300. Connaught and Wascana were close.

- In 2010 there were 3 schools over the mark, and 3 sitting very close to 300.
- By 2018 five community schools are now anticipated to go above 300, six counting the proposed Imperial-McDermid merger. As well, Albert is sitting very near 300 in the projections.
- We recommend that in this and future plan reviews, targeted, careful consideration be given to community schools.
- Every effort should be made to ensure they remain open and able to serve their surrounding communities.
- Lower enrolment should be treated as a potential asset, not a detriment.

NOTE: At this point, the speaker was asked to conclude remarks because 10 minutes were up. She concluded by stating that Dieppe and Haultain should not be cited for closure, and that the motion to delay dispersal of the Athabasca School property should be supported.

What follows are the remainder of the speaking notes:

- School serving vulnerable populations should not be regularly targeted for closure, nor have closure threats hanging over their heads, as this is a deterrent to investing needed resources in our community schools.
- Community schools should not be merged if it will take the enrolment over 300.

Impact of closure citations

- In addition to deterring resource investment, closure citations place a dark cloud over schools. I can say in my own neighbourhood, we still hear of parents who will not send their kids to Connaught because “the school is closing.”
- We recommend that when considering a school’s future viability, the impact the closure cloud has had on enrolment should be taken into consideration. The question should be asked: What would happen if that cloud were removed?
- As well, once a school is taken off the closure list – as in the case of Dieppe – it should remain off for a minimum of five years, to allow time for recovery from the stigma of being a closure school.

Urban development

- Many people remark how the 10 Year Plan for larger schools in fewer neighbourhoods seems to be at odds with the City of Regina’s call for inner city revitalization and compact, walkable neighbourhoods.

- The political tradition of school boards and civic governments operating separately must end.
- We recommend that the next Biennial Review contain an evaluation of how the plan fits into the City of Regina's stated goal of revitalization of inner city neighbourhoods, and that a working relationship be established with the city's planning department.
- Further: Put closures on hold until Regina finishes its Official Community Plan process.

Finances

- At the outset, we said you couldn't afford the 10 year capital plan. Today, you are even less able to afford it.
- The board can no longer set the mill rate, and the province is of the opinion that urban schools have too much of the pie already.
- This becomes a problem if repairs and maintenance are put on hold while you wait for money that may never materialize.
- It's good that Imperial and McDermid will remain open until funding is available. But it will be bad if nothing is done for these schools based on the increasingly faint hope that they will be replaced by a new facility.
- We recommend you move forward with repairs as they are needed.
- We recommend that money spent on design charrets for schools that may never exist be redirected to supporting the schools we have.

Athabasca

- We always thought the Plan was written for a different era – a time of declining enrolment and stagnant population growth.
- Schools are now coming off the closure list, but for some it is too late.
- We are particularly saddened by the lost opportunity of Athabasca School. We commend the Athabasca School community for doing what the board should have done – namely, looking for ways to keep this vital community public asset from disappearing.

- The Athabasca group is proposing a community hub that is on a human, doable scale.
- Their concept doesn't cost tens of millions or require high level partnerships. It has raised some interest in the neighbourhood and the city.
- There is still an opportunity for you to get on board as a partner. The alternative is further privatization and fragmentation of the school system.
- At the very least, we urge you not to squash this momentum by selling off the building to the highest bidder without regard to community aspirations.
- We support the call for a one-year moratorium.

Highschools

- We are pleased there is a proposed review of highschoools. We need to smooth out the unhealthy bulges in the system by putting popular programs into lower enrolment schools
- We further recommend that that the first priority should be to support and improve existing highschoools before launching new highschoools.

Dieppe and Eastview

- Finally, an all-out effort should be made to ensure Dieppe and Eastview are not deprived of their neighbourhood schools.
- With the city's Official Community Plan in the works, and with rising enrolment, this is not the time to be closing schools. It will not cause great harm to hold off.
- We call on you to not cite these schools for closure tonight.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, we find it ironic that ambitious construction is being sold in the midst of a period of restraint on the program side.
- We see the loss of schools, the overcrowding of schools, the loss of frontline staff and the general exhaustion of teachers as connected events.
- If you step back from the jargon and the fancy drawings, the wider picture is not a picture of renewal. It is a picture of economic restraint. Ultimately, it is finances – not a program model – that leads to school closures.

- If at any time the trustees want to push back against the province about the chronic underfunding of education – and this being an election year is a good time – you can rest assured parents will stand behind you.

Thank you.

Response from the board:

Tim Stobbs – Thanks, many ideas to consider.

Katherine Gagne – Asked about RealRenewal's membership – meetings, how many people at AGM, how the “anecdotes” are gathered. Elliott responded with information about RealRenewal's meetings and public forums, and the process by which qualitative data is gathered from the public.