

Written Presentation to the Board of Trustees
Regina Public Schools

Submitted by
École Connaught Community School Council
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INTRODUCTION

The École Connaught Community School Council thanks the Regina Board of Education for the opportunity to comment on the potential closure of Athabasca School. As a designated receiving school, this closure will impact our school population and the surrounding community.

As members of the Connaught school community, we know first hand the value that neighbourhood schools bring to the well-being of our children and to the quality of life in our city. We deeply appreciate Athabasca's presence among our school communities. Athabasca provides Connaught students with a gym for volleyball and basketball games, and teams to compete with. It provides our parents with school choice, for those who prefer a smaller school or for whom the location works better with family circumstances. In a time of rapid demographic change, it is an important safety valve, helping ensure our schools don't suddenly find themselves over-capacity. By all reports, Athabasca delivers a first-rate education in a familiar home-like environment. It is also the reason many young families have recently moved to River Heights and Normandy Heights, in the expectation that there will be a school there when their children are old enough.

With this in mind, we respectfully make the following comments and observations.

REGINA IS GROWING

Regina is growing – the city grew by 6.3 per cent between 2003 and 2009. This was the most significant and sustained continuous population growth for the city since the early 1980s and it is a pattern that does not appear to be abating. The City of Regina's moderate growth projections anticipate a city of just under 300,000 by 2035, with a high growth scenario of 340,000 (Derek Murray Consulting 2010, 3, 4).

Regina experienced overall employment growth of 1.8 per cent in 2009, and 1.9 per cent in the first three quarters of 2010 (CMHC Winter 2010, 4). Job creation in our city outperformed that of the province as well as of Canada as a whole. There are large amounts of investment in new and on-going capital projects, such as the refinery expansion and the global transportation hub, and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation anticipates continued employment expansion in 2010 and 2011 (CMHC Spring 2010, 5). The strong economic conditions over the past several years have meant an increase in the number of people moving to Regina, as well as greater retention of young people (Derek Murray Consulting 2010, 4-5).

In-migration has a compounding effect on population growth. People in their prime years of fertility are also of the highest mobility. This is a likely contributing factor

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to a recent spike in fertility rates leading to a baby boom. The boom is consistent with national trends, but is more pronounced in Regina with a 17 per cent increase in births over six years (Derek Murray Consulting 2010, 4-5). The trend appears to be continuing and

accelerating as we speak: in October 2010, Regina General handled 351 births compared to 309 deliveries in October 2009, a 14 per cent increase in one year (Cowan 2010, A1).

In particular, our First Nations and Métis population is growing. From 1996 to 2006, the Aboriginal population in the city grew by an average of 2.2 per cent per year compared with an average decline of 0.3 per cent per year in the non-Aboriginal population over the same period. Aboriginal people make up 8 per cent of the population, but 19 per cent of children under age 5, and 16 per cent of children aged 5 to 19 (Elliott 2009, 73, 75).

Immigration into Saskatchewan is also increasing. In 2009, there was record net migration into Regina of 3,200 people (CMHC Spring 2010). The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation reports that

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Saskatchewan continued to attract elevated numbers of migrants into the province this year; total net migration to the end of June 2010 outpaced last year's heightened pace of migration by 16 per cent. International arrivals again accounted for the majority of migrants into Saskatchewan at 60 per cent of the total (CMHC Winter 2010, 4). Today about one-quarter of Saskatchewan students were born outside Canada and this proportion is increasing under the province's immigration strategy. The province projected 10,000 more newcomers under the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program in 2010, many of them families with school-aged children (Government of Saskatchewan 2009).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR SCHOOLS?

No matter where growth appears in the city, the overall effect impacts our schools. In the case of École Connaught Community School, the enrolment turn-around has been dramatic. In the Renewing Regina Public Schools 10-Year Plan, the enrolment projections for Connaught, based on 2006-2007 numbers, showed an expected decrease in student numbers through to 2018 (Regina Public Schools 2007, *Renewing*, Appendix C). The actual enrolment for 2008 was higher than the projection by 66 students. Projections were then revised. Our school is now

anticipated to have 379 students by 2018, compared with 202 based on the 2006-2007 numbers (Regina Public Schools 2009, 23). This is a difference of 177 students, a staggering 88 per cent more than originally projected. This change was supposed to happen over a decade, yet current enrolment is unofficially approx. 344 students, already higher than the revised projection of 341 for 2013.

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As population pressures rise throughout the city, and since the attendance barriers have been removed, Connaught has benefited from a healthy and growing immigration to the school. This is one of the most important roles a smaller school can

play – to take act as a safety valve in times of population bulge. With a specialized French Immersion program and a strong Aboriginal education focus, Connaught has become an attractive option for families in Central Regina. The growth of our English program has been especially significant (Regina Public Schools 2010, *School Profile: Connaught*), signalling that we are doubtless relieving the pressure from surrounding English schools in very high population growth areas. Without Connaught's presence, schools such as Albert School would likely be facing some very serious challenges right now in keeping their enrolment down at acceptable levels for an inner city Community School.

Connaught is a very good example of how open boundaries and programming approaches that address area needs – in this case, French education and Aboriginal education – can relieve bottlenecks and help neighbourhood schools thrive rather than falter.

RECEIVING SCHOOL ISSUES

If the proposed attendance merger goes ahead, parents are to be given the choice of sending their children to Lakeview, Connaught or Argyle. The 10 Year Renewal Plan

originally indicated a decrease in the student population at two of the three potential receiving schools. However the surrounding landscape has changed since the plan was devised. Revisions based on 2008-2009 data now indicate growth is to be expected at all three receiving schools (Regina Public Schools 2009, 23).

Regarding Connaught, although there are just 6 Athabasca students living in the surrounding Cathedral neighbourhood, there are some 30 former McNab students for whom Connaught will be the closest school (Baldwin 2010, personal conversation). As proximity is a prime motivator of parental school choice (Hastings, et. al. 2005) one might expect an Athabasca closure to therefore have a noticeable impact on Connaught enrolment. With continued population growth and the addition of Athabasca students, we could plausibly reach our 2018 enrolment projection by this time next year. Added to this are potential ‘dual track families’ arriving from Massey English if that program should close. This raises questions about our capacity as a receiving school. While we do have one potentially available classroom, the growth will be spread across grades, so we realize this is not a definitive answer. More importantly, when it comes to a vulnerable student population, the word ‘capacity’ means more than the number of available desks and classrooms. There is physical capacity, and then there is social capacity.

While we are glad Connaught School is thriving, many of our parents have begun to ask the question: How big is too big?

The Regina Board of Education has provided some of the answers in a 2007 literature review it commissioned on school size effects. The Leithwood Report recommended that schools

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serving vulnerable school populations should have no more than 300 students, and cited a number of studies that suggested the size should ideally be even smaller than that (Leithwood and Jantzi 2007). With a highly diverse student body, including

many socially and economically vulnerable students, Connaught falls into this realm. As previously noted, Connaught is already above the 300 mark and is projected to rise over 400, which is the stated maximum for non-disadvantaged elementary students under the 10 Year Plan. Obviously this is a concern for our school community.

Among the findings of the RBE's Leithwood study:

- **Academic achievement:** “the weight of evidence in our review is tilted decidedly in favor of smaller elementary schools producing greater academic achievement on the part of their students” (Leithwood and Jantzi 2007, 4); this includes increased learning in math, reading, science and social sciences (9).
- **Equitable distribution of learning:** “school size has a larger impact on the learning of disadvantaged and/or low SES [socio-economic status] students than on the learning of advantaged or high SES students...Disadvantaged or struggling students benefit most from the care and the attention they receive in such [small school] environments (9).
- **Attendance and retention:** “significantly better” in smaller schools (11).
- **Participation, identification and connection:** “the results of all studies indicate significantly stronger student engagement in smaller as compared with larger schools” (12).
- **Extra-curricular activity:** high levels of such activity are “positively associated with smaller schools” (15-17); all available studies supported the finding that “each increase in school size was associated with an equal decrease in the predicted extracurricular participation of a student” (16).
- **Self-esteem, physical safety, and social behaviour:** small schools tend to be associated with higher self-esteem, greater safety, and less bullying behaviour (17-19).

It must be noted that the aforementioned factors are highly important to our school community and to student achievement. A teaching formula that allows for smaller groupings is an innovative concept, for the purposes of literacy and numeracy instruction, however this is just one small piece in the total social fabric of a school and its students. *If an overly rigid adherence to this model drives the system toward progressively larger schools, the existing inherent advantages of small school environments – which are much more broad-ranging – may soon be lost.*

BUILDING A FUTURE FOR ATHABASCA

Athabasca has enjoyed many small school advantages, including a highly engaged community and a close and caring environment not easily duplicated at larger schools. These are important things. While the school has struggled to meet the enrolment targets set down by the RBE's program model of the moment, it has excelled in providing a quality neighbourhood school-based learning environment.

As the population bulge works its way outward from the centre, it seems very likely that Athabasca School will also feel the ripple of Regina's population growth. As Connaught's enrolment grows larger, it's not unreasonable to surmise that Cathedral Area

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parents may begin looking at Athabasca as a small-school alternative. There are also a number of new homes being built on the other side of the Lewvan Expressway, where there is no school. Added to this is the fact that the River Heights/Normandy

Heights area is growing on its own. As retirees move out, the area's relatively affordable housing is highly attractive to young families. **The number of children aged 1 to 13 in the Athabasca school area is expected to grow by 26 per cent by 2014** (Regina Public Schools 2010, *School Profile: Athabasca*). This stands in sharp contrast to the 11 per

cent *decrease* in school-aged children that was projected back in 2007, when the 10 Year Plan was devised (Regina Public Schools 2007, *School Profile: Athabasca*).

Twenty-six per cent is very significant growth. It is growth that should be carefully examined and capitalized on.

Programming Opportunities

As in the case of Connaught, the provision of programs that respond to obvious needs is an important success factor. During the community consultation, parents noted that a number of children are travelling to Massey for ESL learning. As the future of Massey English appears to be in doubt, this is a good opportunity to explore how these students might be better served at Athabasca. For international students, a neighbourhood small-school environment would provide obvious advantages for adjusting to Canadian life.

Athabasca has also distinguished itself as a caring, inclusive environment for special needs students; as indicated at the public forum, parents and students appear to be happy with the setting. The proximity to the highschool was noted as an exceptional bonus for students who need additional supports, as they move through the system. The relationship to the staff and students at Sheldon Williams is a gem that cannot be duplicated elsewhere.

The presence of a Discovery Preschool, Ukrainian education and the FIAP classrooms provide a good foundation for a school that meets a wide range of community and student needs. This could be built on. Athabasca could offer a full menu of daycare, after school programs, ESL, and adult learning opportunities. It could become a good place to pilot a 'school as community hub' concept, an approach that has gained ground in other cities and provinces.

Recognizing Strengths

Even without these initiatives, there is reason to believe Athabasca has a future. This year's enrolment includes 7 students in Grade 2, 9 students in Grade 1, 13 in kindergarten, and 22 in preschool (Regina Public Schools 2010, *Enrolment*). This is not the sign of a dying school. Athabasca's official enrolment is 142; unofficial reports place it mostly around the 147 mark since September, with up to 149 on some days. **An enrolment of above 140 places Athabasca above the board's 'confidence band' of 200 students plus or minus 30 per cent.**

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The board's position has traditionally been that the school's 20 special needs students should not be counted. However, at the public consultation, parents of special needs students made it very clear that they consider their children to be part of the

school. Their position is supported both by common sense and by current provincial policy on counting core enrolment. In any case, no matter how you count it, including special needs or not, 2010 enrolment is on par with or exceeding levels not expected until 2014 (Regina Public Schools 2010, *School Profile: Athabasca*).

This is the very type of trend that prompted the removal of several schools from the closure list during the last biennial review. Indeed, if there were a biennial review this year, it seems highly likely Athabasca would also be removed from the list. In the absence of a biennial review, we urge trustees to be very cautious about considering the closure of this school, which, once gone, will be nearly impossible to replace.

In closing, it's interesting to note that the Saskatoon Public School Board is actively seeking opportunities and programs to shore up smaller neighbourhood schools – along the lines of the suggestions offered in this presentation – rather than closing them. It would be a breath of fresh air if the Regina Public School Board also took a

serious look at how to nurture and grow our neighbourhood schools, which serve our communities so well.

Thank you.

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