

Dieppe School Community Council

Presentation to RPS regarding the Biennial Review & Specifically the Recommended Closure of Dieppe School *September 20, 2011*

I will bring forward three main points on behalf of Dieppe School Community Council:

- School closure decisions are being based primarily on outdated consultations focussed on enrolment numbers and school size.
- There are other options to school closures – RPS can take a leadership role as did the Vancouver Board of Education.
- There is strong research that supports small schools as a positive learning environment and others are moving in this direction. This research is well documented and readily available.

1. School closure decisions are being based primarily on outdated consultations focussed on enrolment numbers and school size.

The current Renewal Plan is based on consultations held by RPS in 2007, and the consultations spent much time discussing school size with the resulting recommendations very focussed on enrolment numbers.

There was very little attention and leadership, if any, on alternatives to closing schools and how we could work to keep schools open, rather than find supporting information to close schools.

The end result of the process was a report heavily weighted to using enrolment numbers to determine a school's future.

In the fall of 2009, it was recommended that due to low enrolment numbers based on RPS projections, that Dieppe School be closed. However, the projections were not accurate and in September the enrolment was at the minimum number, determined by RPS, for a school to stay open.

Therefore, the trustees did not vote to close the school. It was a numbers decision.

Since 2009, families have been aware that Dieppe School could possibly close at the end of this current school year. If our enrolment held, we'd be okay, otherwise closure would happen.

It's important to note, that since the initial Renewal Plan in 2007, there has been no leadership by RPS to find possible ways to keep Dieppe and other school facing decreased enrolment open. There have been no efforts to look at other possibilities and instead the onus was left on the community to find ways to attract more students to the school. We were told by RPS that unless more students enrolled in the school, it would close.

Certainly not a proactive approach to keep schools open, rather a do nothing approach.

It's obvious that it is very difficult to attract students and families to a community and a school, if there is a possibility of closure – a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So, here we are today, in the same position we were in 2009 except this time we've had a big closure shadow looming over the school for two years. Is it surprising that enrolment numbers are down at Dieppe and we are facing closure?

If families knew that efforts were being made to find ways to keep the school open, we know that enrolment numbers would be different. People in the community have told us that they don't want to start their children in a school that might be closing and if they can get settled elsewhere, why attend Dieppe School. It's hard to get people to join you on a sinking ship.

We strongly urge RPS to introduce school closure guidelines that indicate that schools may only be recommended for closure once in a five-year period. This would greatly increase the willingness of students to attend a school that is in danger of closing and would likely have resulted in the enrolment at Dieppe remaining steady, and us not being here today.

Enrolment projections in the Biennial Review indicate that elementary enrolments began to increase in 2009/10 (the year Dieppe was to close), and that projections to 2018 show a modest increase.

I think we can safely project that if people weren't concerned about the possible closure of Dieppe School, and therefore feel confident sending their children to the school, and if we factor in the "modest increase" projected for enrolment in Regina Public Schools, Dieppe student numbers would be above the minimum enrolment number needed to stay open.

It's also important to note that Dieppe School, like others, is also used extensively in the evening for community programming, which is a huge part of children's broader learning and development. If you take this evening, community, opportunity away, what these children do – they are out looking for something else to do. Not all children have the opportunity to participate in activities other than those offered by the community association in the school.

Evening and after school activities have a huge impact on development and behaviour, and how children then learn during the daytime in school.

We are therefore urging the new Director and the new trustees to not base the future of RPS on the 2007 consultations and the focus on enrolment. We encourage the new Director to spend more time at Dieppe and other small schools. We also urge all trustees to do so as well. Take the time to gain a better understanding of the impact a neighbourhood school has on students and on the community.

2. There are other alternatives to school closures – RPS can take a leadership role as did the Vancouver Board of Education.

We would also like to ensure that trustees and the administration are aware of and have reviewed the tremendous amount of work done by the Vancouver Board of Education in their report entitled: *Administrative Report Public Consultation on School Closures and Recommendations to the Vancouver Board of Education 2010* <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/school-closures>

This report was prepared by the administration and approved by the Board after extensive consultations were held with communities on the future of schools.

It is very important to note the major themes that were expressed throughout the 10 public meetings and attended by over 1600 people in Vancouver were:

- Do not close our school
- Our school is at the heart of the community
- Trustees are in a tough position
- It's a done deal
- Stand by us; we'll stand by you
- Impacts on students and families of closing a school

The consultations were held with the community and other partners, and focused on how everyone could work together to keep schools open, and in the community, rather than coming up with some numbers to base decisions on.

In addition to concerns and impacts about the potential school closures, people also provided ideas that could be undertaken to generate additional revenue or funding for schools.

Again, something that RPS could do – examine alternate uses and revenue to keep schools open in communities rather than continue with the status quo of saying, your school is too small, not enough students, your educational programming isn't what we think it should be, the school must close.

We think it is time to think broader, look at the bigger picture of more and better partnerships with the community - with the City, with the Separate School System as RPS has done at Jack MacKenzie School, and find different ways of keeping our schools open.

Although you may be trustees and educators for RPS, you must think and act broader if your work is to benefit the students in RPS. You must think about education in our city, how partnerships with others outside RPS could benefit our students, how we can work together as a city of educators, and not as RPS alone.

Everyone is continually facing resources pressures; however, with more collaboration during the planning processes, we will find new resources, new ideas, and ways to keep our schools in the community. It is time to think seriously think beyond RPS.

I see on tonight's agenda there is an item regarding a joint meeting with Regina Catholic School Board. It doesn't indicate what it's about but hopefully this is the start of some new thinking.

This new thinking could include some of the ideas generated at the consultations held with Vancouver communities.

Some of the suggestions brought forward in Vancouver to keep schools in communities and seek additional revenue or funding included:

School programming

- Establish the annex as a flagship school for the Smart Board technology
- Create the Edible School Yard program (www.edibleschoolyard.org)
- Tagalog immersion
- Add Montessori programs
- Incorporate "Ready, Set, Learn," "Mother Goose," and seniors' programs

- programming to increase funding

Other ideas:

- Market the public system to help promote our school
- Community services/partnerships
- Establish relationships with community partners
- Use empty classrooms for adult education and other programs to generate revenue
- Open a day care which will help alleviate waitlist issues and throughout the school closure process, calls for quality childcare were heard not only as attractive additions to schools, but as essential parts of stimulating vibrant communities. This is part of bigger picture thinking.
- Partner with Multicultural Helping House to become a centre for new refugees and immigrants.
- Develop Neighbourhood Learning Centre – centres that promote strong school-community partnerships that use school facilities to better meet the needs of children, youth, families and the whole communities.

I don't know what all of these ideas refer to but the point is that the Vancouver Board led and encouraged the community to think bigger, and look beyond the use of the school as simply a daytime learning facility for the curriculum.

I know RPS has done some innovative projects but there is certainly room for so much more.

The Vancouver report concluded that:

“Without question, throughout the public consultation process, the Vancouver Board of Education heard loud and clear that schools are central to each neighbourhood. ***Schools are the heart of the community and soul of the neighbourhood.*** Closing a school would be seen by many as a major blow to the community.”

In response to the extensive consultations in Vancouver, the Vancouver Board of Education administration made several recommendations to the trustees that were approved, and some additional motions were added by the trustees at the at Dec. 2010 meeting.

I will read these motions because they are applicable to us in Regina:

- 1) That the Vancouver Board of Education not proceed with further closure discussions with respect to the five schools under consideration of potential closure planned for June 30, 2011.
- 2) That the Vancouver Board of Education place a moratorium on proceeding with any school closure process until March 1, 2012.
- 3) That the Vancouver Board of Education direct staff to immediately initiate a process to develop a comprehensive plan for sectoral reviews across the school district.
- 4) That the Vancouver Board of Education convene a meeting with the City of Vancouver and other agencies to develop strategic public partnerships to broaden the community and school use of district facilities.
- 5) That the Vancouver Board of Education direct staff to determine the feasibility of offering child care spaces within Vancouver schools at no cost to the provider.

- 6) That the Vancouver Board of Education direct staff to work with the Carleton community to create a Neighbourhood Learning Centre.
- 7) That the Vancouver Board of Education direct staff to work with the Queen Alexandra school community to strengthen and further develop a project-based multi-cultural Fine Arts focus at the school.
- 8) That the Vancouver Board of Education seek a meeting with key Ministry of Education staff to explore further possibilities for Neighbourhood Learning Centres.
- 10) That the Vancouver Board of Education develop a long-term school strategy in order to encourage neighbourhood attendance at local schools. The strategy will be developed in consultation with school communities.
- 11) That in developing this strategy that the VSB investigate the possible roles of independent schools, demographic shifts, catchment boundary changes, school choice, the placement of District (magnet) programs, and systemic discrimination (such as racism) in the variation in enrolment between schools.
- 12) That the Vancouver Board of Education send the "Administrative Report: Public Consultation on School Closures" with accompanying letter emphasizing the specific concerns (i.e. provincial funding shortfall, neighbourhood schools should be the hub of the community and support for Aboriginal and vulnerable students) that were heard from the parents and school communities to the Minister of Education, candidates for the leader of the Opposition Party, Opposition Education critic, Liberal leadership candidates, and all Vancouver area MLAs. Further, that the Board invite them to provide a reaction to the parent and community concerns.

It is clear that the Vancouver trustees decided to take a strong leadership role, they were open to exploring other options, and they were determined to broaden the discussion with other possible partners in education.

You might be thinking that how can we use Vancouver as an example, they faced a deficit situation.

I did speak to a trustee on the Vancouver Board twice about their process and the report; he said that deficits are the norm given the way their funding process works. He said by law the Board must operate a balanced budget so they handled their deficits.

The point we are making here is that the Vancouver Board of Education was willing to look at other options to closing schools in communities, and the Board led some very challenging and difficult consultations, and spent much time on the issue.

The trustee I spoke to said it was hard work, not easy, very demanding but positive, and worth it.

He said they heard the message loud and clear from the community that schools were not to be closed, and that there had to be other ways to deal with the financial issues. He said the Board then decided that they could move forward with confidence knowing that the community wanted to look at options other than school closures, so the Board voted NOT to close schools and passed the motions that I read.

In RPS we now have a new Director (who is likely familiar with Vancouver having come from BC), several new trustees and a window of an opportunity to change the course of direction.

We urge you not to accept the old information from 2007 and from a process that was mostly about numbers. Be innovative, be creative, engage the community, look at other options, think broader.

Don't settle for the status quo that says enrolment is down, we need money, programming is at risk, close neighbourhood schools.

3. There is strong research that supports small schools as a positive learning environment and that others are moving in this direction. This research is well documented and readily available.

Research clearly demonstrates that smaller learning environments, like community-centered schools, provide high-quality education.

Several studies show that students in small schools improve their grades, test scores, attendance, and graduation rates. Moreover, small schools reduce the effect of poverty on achievement.

According to a recent U.S. Department of Education study, "a higher percentage of students, across all socioeconomic levels, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities"

A 2009 study on children and urban sprawl released by the Vanier Institute on the Family says "Neighbourhood schools where children can walk or bike independently offer many of the features children want in a high quality living environment."

Research done in Washington – 2008 offers multiple strategies for local governments and schools to bring their respective planning efforts together to take a more community-oriented approach to schools and reach multiple community goals--educational, environmental, economic, social, and fiscal.

Chicago Public Schools have undertaken a major project to promote small schools. Their website is full of information and research that details the advantages of neighbourhood schools.

The Oregon transportation board and school boards are working together to bring schools back to neighbourhoods. Smaller parking lots, bigger green spaces and close neighbours and parents are the new goal.

A 2007 study - Cohesive Communities, Improved Outcomes: The Case for Small Schools from the University of Victoria and Simon Fraser University, represents a Canadian view on American research.

So we say to the RPS Administration, that as educators and to you trustees as decision makers, you need to seriously consider the strong body of research that supports small neighbourhood schools. The evidence is there.

In summary:

Neighbourhood public schools like Dieppe and Haultain, play a significant role in communities serving children, youth and families, providing public space, offering programs, hosting events, building social connections, and providing a hub for many facets of community life. Schools are key in developing community connections and pride in the accomplishments of community members.

Too often decision makers align school closures with economic savings, although it should not be taken for granted that this is so. Any examination of the cost of keeping schools open should be balanced against the broader costs to children, families, and the communities of closing schools.

When students are displaced because of a school closure, they often face longer days, travelling by bus or family vehicle to a school outside the community rather than walking to the neighbourhood school. The transportation schedules for these students present obstacles to both extra-curricular activities at their new schools and to programs in their home communities.

After-school play with classmates becomes more difficult to arrange as well. While the government and school boards often encourage walking to school as a form of healthy exercise and an environmentally responsible choice, school closures remove that option for many children.

With their children attending school away from their home community or neighbourhood, it is often more difficult for parents to volunteer at school, attend events, and connect with their child's teachers.

The loss of a school has significant implications for the broader community as well. In addition to the impact of losing the public space and social connections provided by the school, school closures present a significant deterrent to families staying in the community or moving to it. School closures affect property values, businesses, and community viability overall.

In trying to reach a sensible and credible solution that balances the needs of the larger community, and those of the local school and neighbourhood, the either/or scenario may not be the answer. In seeking an alternative to closing a school due to finances and decreased enrolment, there may be a third way forward that provides middle ground for a resolution.

This alternate way comes down to communication, dialogue and a willingness to not settle for the status quo. It is a compromise and it takes time. In the short term, it potentially creates great frustration and further uncertainty. It requires RPS to initiate new conversations and discussion among all members of the community.

We propose that there be a hold on *all* school closures for an interim period.

We are calling on RPS to engage in a thorough and comprehensive exploration, examination and analysis of alternatives to keep neighbourhood schools open. We are calling for a complete review in collaboration with city planners, provincial partners, community members and all RPS staff, including teachers.

The goal would be to align student program and space needs with facility resources, look at options for other uses of the school, and further align and co-locate other city-wide community resources in these same facilities.

We encourage and urge the Board to take a long view of what our public education system could become not, what it currently is.

We urge you to think broader, think beyond the status quo of closing schools due to low enrolment, take a leadership role among other partners in the city, truly try and make a difference rather than just follow along with a process that is no longer valid.

Create your own plan and base it on new information, new conversations, new ideas and new thinking.

There is no doubt that it will be hard work, but we will help you.

Before you vote to close Dieppe School, Haultain School and any other schools - think of the future - the future of our students, the future of our neighbourhood schools, the future of our communities, the future of our City.

Ask yourselves, do you want to support the status quo and close schools, or do you want to be part of a future that works to keep schools open?

We know which one we would choose.

Thank you.

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