# Education on a human scale: Small rural schools in a modern context

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# Acknowledgements

The principal researchers in this project would like to thank the Municipality of Cumberland for providing us with an opportunity to do a study we have both wanted to do for a long time. Investigating the viability of small schools takes considerable time, energy and commitment and it is the kind of project that too few decision-makers are committed to seeing through.

Next we would like to acknowledge the people of Wentworth and River Hebert and surrounding areas who participated so graciously in our project. We are, after all, another group poking around in their schools and in their lives, asking them to justify themselves. Through our research we came to understand why these citizens so want to keep their schools alive. We also learned about the relentless and painful treadmill of the school closure process in small communities, a process we think needs to change.

It is difficult for community members who lack resources and expertise to do the work of defending their schools. Yet they do, in the face of being branded as nostalgic opponents of change and even of time itself. Even when citizens successfully defend their schools, the closure question is inevitably waiting around the corner for another year. People grow tired. They give up. Time eventually destroys many rural schools, not because these schools are ineffective or because there is something fundamentally better about bigger, centralized schools. Time wins because those who hold power know that if they push long and hard enough, people will cave in. As a result, many excellent small schools pass into history before their time, in many ways taking communities with them. When schools close and children are bussed up the road, families reorient their lives and find themselves spending more and more time driving to centralized activities away from home.

Finally, this work could not have been accomplished within our very tight time-frame without the support of a great research team.

Mike Corbett
Dennis Mulcahy
17 March 2006

# Part A
# Documentary Analysis

## Chapter One
## Introduction and methodology

### Opening words

There are some who cling, stubbornly, to the outdated view that bigger schools are necessarily better schools. Despite the fact that there is no research evidence to support this view, well meaning but misguided and ill-informed policy makers continue to pursue the closure and consolidation of small neighborhood and community schools. They pursue this agenda apparently unaware that the educational community has moved on from this mid-twentieth view to embrace the educational opportunities available to students in small schools. Despite paying lip-service to "evidence based decision making," some educational leaders seemingly ignore the growing body of evidence that clearly indicate that smaller schools are to be preferred over larger ones. One has to wonder if these folks can read!

As just one indication of how the rest of the world has moved on from the old way of thinking about schools, one has only to look to the small schools initiatives sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The executive director of the education division of that foundation, Tom Vander Ark (2006), insists that,

> Creating smaller, more personalized learning environments where every student is held to high expectations works. Students stay in school, are more motivated and achieve at higher levels.

Parents whose children currently attend small schools do not need scholars or billionaires to tell them they have a good thing going and that they should fight to preserve it. They know intuitively that small schools situated close to home are the best educational sites for their children's education. They do not need research evidence to convince them.

They know it because they feel it and they experience the benefits on a daily basis. They do not need research to tell them that closing their school and bussing their children down the road to a distant school will not be a good experience for most of them. They know their children as human beings and know that such an experience may be harmful and hurtful for many of them. They can imagine the difficulties bussing may create for students and their families; they can imagine the negative impact on the community; they

can imagine the potential deleterious effects on their children's education and their ability to participate fully in the life of the school.

Apparently, some policy makers lack this capacity to imagine and think through the consequences; but, then, they are not making decisions about their *own* children's lives and futures. It is not their children who will have to ride the bus. It is not their children and youth that will have to forfeit viable small schools and transfer to larger schools.

In the past, parents and other members of the community had to confront the attack on their community schools with little more than strong feelings and emotions. Today, we have an ever increasing literature on small schools that lends very strong support to their efforts to maintain their school in the community. Scholars and researchers have provided rural parents with irrefutable evidence to back up what they have known and felt all along about the value and academic viability of small community schools.

In a report entitled "Small School Might" the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2002) Kathleen Cotton reported that all over the country "staff members at large schools are making their institutions smaller and more friendly, [so that] students feel less alienated and teachers more empowered." The reasons they are do that is:

> In small-school environments, the studies show, all students—whatever their ethnicity or place on the socioeconomic ladder—tend to achieve at higher levels, have a greater sense of belonging, feel safer, are less likely to drop out, and are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and go on to college. Furthermore, parent involvement is higher in smaller schools, as is teachers' job satisfaction.

"In smaller groups," writes Cotton (2002) "students can feel more integral, and teachers can get to know students as individuals: what interests them, how well they understand an idea, what particular challenges they face, what their gifts are, and how they best learn."

We have been asked by the Municipality of the County of Cumberland to investigate viability of two schools slated for closure by the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board: Wentworth Consolidated Elementary Schools and River Hebert District High School. To accomplish this task we have conducted a thorough review of the relevant literature, analyzed various policy documents related to rural policy and rural development and conducted our own study into the educational effectiveness of the two schools under scrutiny.

The results these investigations are presented in this report. Based on the evidence that we have compiled we can say without reservation that these two schools are both viable and very valuable educational institutions. They serve the children and their communities very well.  In our considered view it would be a grave error to close these schools now or at any point in the future. To do so would be a backward step which is totally out of synch with the best current thinking in education in North America.  It may even

jeopardize the potential for success of many schools currently attending Wentworth and River Hebert.

In many places in Canada and the United States parents and educators are trying to get back to and re-create the scale of schooling that current exists in many parts of rural Nova Scotia. They are doing this because there is an overwhelming consensus that smaller schools work better than larger ones at a number of levels.

Noted scholar and educator Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University's School Re-Design Network provides a compelling overview of current educational thinking in North American on the smaller versus larger school debate:

> There is a growing consensus that schools must change in fundamental ways if they are to accomplish the goals we now have for them: teaching our very diverse student population for higher order thinking and deep understanding. The system we work in today was invented nearly 100 years ago for another time and another mission - the processing of large numbers of students for rote skills and the education of only a few for knowledge work. It was never designed to teach all children to high levels. Caring and dedicated teachers, administrators, and parents work hard every day within this system to educate our children for more ambitious thinking and performance skills - and yet their efforts are often stymied by *outmoded institutional structures*, most notably the large, impersonal, factory-model school (Darling Hammond, 2006).

A growing number of educators and policymakers believe that existing assembly-line schools that inhibit our students' and teachers' potential need to be replaced by *smaller schools which are better designed to support teaching and learning*. And we have *evidence that small schools are indeed better for our children*: All else equal, they produce higher achievement, lower dropout rates, greater attachment, and more participation in the curricular and extracurricular activities that prepare students for productive lives. There is real potential for the current small schools movement to transform the educational landscape in America [and Canada] for the better.

The challenge for those who continue to advocate the closure of small community schools such as Wentworth and River Hebert is to produce the evidence that such closures will benefit the children of those schools. Where is the evidence that larger schools are better for children? Furthermore, it is incumbent on those who wish to eliminate community based school to show why the people of Cumberland County should embrace an outmoded institutional structure, when rest of North American is trying to create what they already have. This makes no sense.

Darling Hammond concludes her remarks by warning parents and educators that "The process of creating better schools is hard work. There is no progress without struggle." She advises that those engaged in the struggle remember the words that Langston Hughes

used to describe our collective quest to build a better world: "Keep your hand to the plough. Hold on."

For the parents and educators of rural Nova Scotia who are struggling to keep the better schools they already have and create a better world for their children we say: "Keep your hand to the plough. Hold on."

## Methodology

In this chapter we explain the methodology employed in the small rural schools project. Here we outline the specific methods of inquiry used to answer the fundamental questions driving the research. This study sets out to answer four core questions:

1. What are the commonalities amongst various levels of government regarding rural communities and sustainability policy issues?
2. What are the goals of education according to the Public School Program?
3. What is the evidence that small rural schools are structurally adequate for achieving these goals?
4. Are the particular schools slated for closure meeting these goals?

To answer these questions we employ several specific research techniques including documentary policy analysis, a literature review of the viability of small rural schools, focus groups, interviews and a survey questionnaire. Our overall methodological position is that it is difficult to address a complex problem like the achievement of the broad goals of the Public School Program without utilizing a variety of research methods. We combine qualitative and quantitative analysis with the methods of documentary analysis to investigate the broad questions of the research from a number of perspectives. We believe that the important data and analysis that can be garnered from surveys and other forms of social research that involve qualitative analysis must be enriched by a focus on the understandings and voices of the multiple stakeholders in the process. In academic circles this form of research is multi-method or triangulated (Denzin, 2003) research and at this point it is considered to be the richest methodological form available for this kind of study.

At this point we will articulate a description of each research task involved in our analysis.

### Policy Analysis

The first two questions are handled in Chapter 2 which is an examination of the contemporary policy context in Canada and specifically in Nova Scotia. Our approach has been to examine what various levels of government have been saying about rural communities and about the institutions that are crucial to the sustainability of these communities. Obviously, community schools are key institutions in all communities.

The broad purpose of Chapter 2 is to present evidence of a growing policy convergence around rural communities and issues of sustainability which clearly include education.

Our analysis of the policy context investigates both the policy statements of governmental bodies whose responsibility includes the communities of rural Nova Scotia, as well as the general policy, restructuring and changes in governance that have marked the last decade and a half in most Canadian provinces. These changes have resulted in amalgamations and consolidations of health care and school governance structures and have been a part of a larger process of restructuring that was precipitated by cuts to social programs instituted in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, the challenge for "have-not" provinces like the provinces of Atlantic Canada and for municipal units and school boards has been to try and maintain an adequate level of services with diminished funds. Another recent challenge has been to rethink rural development in a way that recognizes and respects the diversity of Canada's rural communities, the fact that many of them will not disappear any time soon and that the people living in rural Canada must be consulted in governance issues because they know their specific communities best.

This policy analysis is undertaken of the basis of an analysis of documents from relevant governmental bodies beginning with the Canadian federal government, and moving on through the provincial government of Nova Scotia, the Municipality of the County of Cumberland, and the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. Here we pay particular attention to broad policy statements contained in mission and vision statements that frame the way that each level of government understands rural communities, rural development, rural sustainability and the place of education for rural communities generally.

The second question above concerns the broad goals of the Public School Program (PSP) of the Province of Nova Scotia. The PSP outlines in broad terms the kind of education the province's children and youth ought to receive. This document articulates a clear vision of a modern school system which balances inclusiveness, academic breadth, cultural and physical engagement, and a wide ranging focus on the preparation of young people for active citizenship, caring for themselves and others and for a positive orientation to critical problem-solving and lifelong learning. Focusing specifically on the opening sections of the PSP, we frame the broad goals in the context of both those students whose life trajectories take them into the various pathways available to youth today: i.e. post-secondary education, workforce participation, geographic mobility for education, employment and opportunity, and remaining in and around one's home community to make a life and a living there.

Our analysis of the PSP is also used in this research to inform the construction of focus group questions and specific items for the survey schedules we describe below.

**Analysis of the viability of small rural schools**

In this section of the report we report on an extensive literature review conducted into the question of the viability of small rural schools. This literature relies, for the most part on standard scholarly sources. In the literature review we attend specifically to the question as to whether or not there is some structural reason as to why small rural schools cannot provide children with a modern education or meet the broad goals and curriculum outcomes of the Public School Program of the province of Nova Scotia. We also address the corollary question concerning whether or not academic achievement is compromised in small rural schools. In other words, we address head-on the contention that more program offerings equal a higher quality of education.

Once upon a time rural parents and educators were more or less alone in their struggle with governments and school boards to maintain their small community schools. Educational authorities and policy makers seemed united in their view that bigger schools were better schools. If parents truly cared about their children and their education, they would agree to close their small schools and have their children bussed down the road to larger schools in distant community. It was assumed that the "authorities knew best" and they only wanted was best for the children.

For the most part parents trusted the authorities and went along with the closure and consolidation plans. Yet, in their hearts they knew something was wrong with what they were being told. They knew that their community schools were good schools; they knew that the children benefited in many ways by having their schools situated close to home. But those in authority consistently said otherwise. And in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the authorities had the power to impose their views.

That was then; this is now. Over the past thirty years there has developed a considerable body of evidence and a set of informed perspectives that confirm what rural parents and known and felt all alone. In Chapter 3 of this report we present the evidence that supports the viability and value of small rural schools such as River Herbert and Wentworth. We have conducted and extensive review of the literature that pertains to small schools and we provide an overview of what that literature has to say about small community schools That review has been informed and guided by extensive knowledge and experience in rural education studies.

If we are truly in an age of "evidence based decision making" then our literature review will demonstrate unequivocally that research and scholarly opinion supports maintaining and developing small schools such as River Herbert and Wentworth. Small schools are both viable and valuable sites for quality education. Joan Mc Robbie (2001) poses the question "Are small schools better?" in a policy brief published by the WestEd a policy group funded by the U.S Department of education. After reviewing the evidence she states "From the perspectives of both safety and academics, new studies and experience from the 1990s have strengthened an already notable consensus on school size: smaller is better." She concludes:

> Small schools are not a panacea, but they may be a key ingredient of a comprehensive approach to student success. Especially for high schools, which often seem impervious to change, small size is increasingly becoming part of any serious reform effort. Attention to size may be particularly important in turning around low performance and giving poor and minority students the extra boost that a community of caring, competence, and high expectations offers. Finally, a more-human scale is a potent antidote to student alienation. While impersonal bigness may actually provoke disruptive or violent behavior, small schools conducive to trust and respect tend to defuse it (McRobbie, 2001)

We challenge those who would advocate the destruction of community based school to produce the evidence that shows this is a good thing.


## The performance of RHDH and WCES

The final and perhaps most crucial part of our research from the point of view of the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board's decision-making process is an analysis of the two schools presently under study for closure.  There are a lot of myths about the measurement of educational performance.  It has become fashionable for lobby groups to rank schools in league table fashion.  In some jurisdictions educational authorities and various levels of government actually participate in school ratings and rankings.  In Nova Scotia, at the present time the Department of Education does only a limited number of standardized tests and so it is difficult for lobby groups attempting to produce league tables that are actually formulated on the basis of testing data.  So one myth is that the data currently exist from which can be assembled a simplistic yet valid numerical ranking of schools.  They do not.  The consequence in Atlantic Canada is the rather bizarre high school ranking efforts of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (Audas and Curtwill, 2006) that imagines education as a marketplace the same as any other.  It is not and the data which might make it appear so in Nova Scotia simply do not exist (Corbett, 2004).

A second myth is that educational performance is standard can be measured unproblematically.  In other words, many people believe that a body of core educational content can and should be encapsulated in test which has only right and wrong answers (typically in the form of multiple choice questions).  On the basis of this faulty and unsupported premise, it is easy to jump to the equally faulty conclusion that a simple compilation of "right" answers accurately measures learning.  The goals of the PSP and he structure of a modern curriculum is much more ambitious than having students learn to fill in the right circles on standardized multiple choice tests.  What is actually demanded of schools is that they produce capable, literate, caring, engaged life-long learners, not test taking robots.   The central idea here is that school ought to be preparation for full participation in a rich community life and satisfying employment, be it close to a child's home or anywhere in the world.   Such ambitious educational goals are not easily measured.

In this report we operate from the assumption that the only way to actually measure such broad educational outcome is to actually talk with people who have finished their public school experience. In our Life Outcomes Survey we asked a strong sample of graduates of RHDH and young adults who attended WCES for their elementary schooling. In this survey, based upon our reading of the broad goals of the PSP, we attempt to answer the question: are students leaving RHDH and WCES acquiring the skills and attitudes as prescribed by the Department of Education of the province of Nova Scotia. To answer this level of question we have employed four basic research techniques including the Life Outcomes Survey.

Our first technique has been a series of <u>informal interviews and observations</u> with school personnel and community members who consider themselves to be stakeholders in the life and fate of the schools. We have spoken to teachers, parents, students, grandparents, and business people in the course of this research which included site visits to each of the schools. Following these interviews and observations field notes were constructed by the research team and analyzed using standard qualitative research methods.

Our second technique was to conduct a series of three <u>community focus groups</u>, two in River Hebert and one in Wentworth. All teachers at the two schools participated in focus groups. The community-based focus group participants were selected on the basis of an availability sample. Parents, grandparents and other interested community members were notified of the date and time of the meeting and invited to join the conversation. In the case of the Wentworth focus group, parents and teachers were combined in a single discussion. In River Hebert, separate focus groups were conducted for parents and for the school staff. Guiding questions for the focus groups are included in Appendix A. In River Hebert a total of twenty-three people participated in focus groups. In Wentworth there were fourteen participants.

Our third technique was an <u>online focus group</u> conducted with a group of 8 current high school students at River Hebert District High School. This group was composed on the basis of an availability sample organized by one of the high school students. Members of this focus group "met" online in a discussion group and responded to a series of 5 questions and engaged in dialogue around the issues that arose from the questions. Online focus groups are an emerging research methodology (Markham, 2005; Denzin, 2003) which, given the nature of contemporary computer mediated communication, is a very powerful tool both for research as well as for activists working to promote rural education. Indeed, the facility with which this discussion group was formed and functioned in a very short time frame is in itself strong testimony to the potential of computer mediated learning in small rural schools.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Data from all focus groups were analyzed using *Atlas ti* qualitative analysis software on the basis of standard qualitative research procedures (Spradley, 1979).

Our final research technique was a ten-year <u>Life Outcomes Survey</u> of a sample of graduates or River Hebert District High School and a similar survey of students who left WCES. The survey instruments used can be found in Appendix B

The total numbers in the target population were 300 for River Hebert and 92 for Wentworth. In the River Hebert survey we selected a random sample of 21% of the students in the five most recent graduating classes, the classes of (N=63). The research team started the process with lists of students who graduated from RHDH between 1995 and 2005. Given that this study seeks to investigate the life and educational outcomes of the most recent graduates of RHDH, i.e. students who graduated under similar conditions to those with presently exist in the school, the sample is slightly weighted toward the younger graduates who left RHDH between 2000 and 2005 (N=44).

**Table 1-M   RHDH Life Outcomes Survey Sample**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 1995 | 5 | 7.9 |
| 1996 | 3 | 4.8 |
| 1997 | 3 | 4.8 |
| 1998 | 4 | 6.3 |
| 1999 | 4 | 6.3 |
| 2000 | 6 | 9.5 |
| 2001 | 4 | 6.3 |
| 2002 | 7 | 11.1 |
| 2003 | 8 | 12.7 |
| 2004 | 10 | 15.9 |
| 2005 | 9 | 14.3 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

From the Wentworth population we sampled from those people who left grade 6 at WCES between 1991 and 2005. The total sample size is 101 students, of which we were unable to acquire contact information for 28 making a total available sample of 73. Given that some families had more than one child, the total number of families in the sample was 48. We attempted to interview each of these families about the experience of their eldest child in the target population. We were able to complete 40 interviews. We chose these particular temporal parameters in order to Given that the Wentworth students left grade 6 and not grade 12, we focused on those students who left the elementary school between 1991 and 2000 (N=37). This represents young people between 18 and 27 years of age which is approximately equivalent to the young graduates we surveyed in River Hebert.

**Table 2-M   WCES Life Outcomes Survey Sample**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 1991 | 6 | 15.0 |
| 1992 | 4 | 10.0 |
| 1993 | 5 | 12.5 |
| 1994 | 4 | 10.0 |
| 1995 | 5 | 12.5 |
| 1996 | 3 | 7.5 |
| 1997 | 3 | 7.5 |
| 1998 | 3 | 5.0 |
| 1999 | 4 | 10.0 |
| 2000 | 1 | 2.5 |
| 2002 | 1 | 2.5 |
| 2004 | 1 | 2.5 |
| 2005 | 1 | 2.5 |
| Total | 40 | 100.0 |

These surveys were conducted by telephone between February 9 and March 2, 2006.

## Conclusion

Through the use of a variety of both qualitative and quantitative research methods we have attempted to answer the research questions both in a relatively objective way using standard statistical techniques as well as using interview methods.   This report combines documentary policy analysis, qualitative and qualitative analysis grounded in the research literature to provide a multifaceted examination of the study questions.

Throughout the report we make connections between the policy direction we find in key documents and statements, the consensus in the scholarly literature and our research findings.  While we quantify and analyze available statistical data and our own survey data we have also taken pains to use the words of participants in interviews and focus groups to illustrate the human dimensions of both school closure as an important community problem and the problem of measuring the broad goals of Nova Scotia's ambitious Public School Programs document.   It is our contention however, that in a democracy, what people say about their own lives, their competence and how their educations have turned out are the best measure we have of whether or not the public schools of the province or of these communities are doing a good job.  The real test of an education is life.  In this project we have asked people about their lives in the context of the broad goals of the Nova Scotia Public School Program.  Recent graduates of these two small rural schools have passed this test, with flying colors.

# Chapter 2
# The policy context

> Many rural educators have argued that the unique nature of small rural schools should be protected from the current national pressure to consolidate.  They have a point.  Academic achievement is influenced by the interaction of both school size and poverty level.  Small schools can reduce poverty's negative effects on achievement …Ironically, the recent trend to create schools within schools in many large school districts affirms the importance of small, intimate learning relationships such as those that existed previously in rural schools that have been forced to close (Truscott and Truscott, 2005: 126).

> Rural people generally appreciate the familiarity of place, land and kin associate with sparse population or small towns.  Maintaining good rural schools and communities means recognizing that being small can be a virtue and needs to be cultivated as such.  Unfortunately, such recognition is still not widespread (Howley and Eckman, 1997: 1).

As the CCRSB works toward making its decision about the fate of River Hebert District High School and Wentworth Consolidated Elementary School, it is important that it bear in mind the general policy direction taken by various government bodies.  We call this the policy context and in this chapter we refer to the kind of global vision for rural communities and for rural schooling articulated by various levels of government.  Indeed, this includes the CCRSB's own policy statements about educational delivery in the communities under its jurisdiction.

In this section we will discuss the congruence of the overall policy course with respect to rural education and rural community sustainability more generally.  To do this we will analyze the policy direction taken by various levels of government in published policy documents and public statements.  When we speak of congruence we are referring specifically to the general idea that various levels of government are taking seriously both community development in rural areas and associated questions concerning education that follow from a vision of sustainable rural communities.

We will begin at the federal level and a more general discussion of rural policy discourse.  Following this analysis, we move to the provincial level focusing more directly on education and policy directions taken by the Nova Scotia Department of Education.  From there we discuss the values articulated in the strategic planning policy framework of the Municipality of Cumberland County which returns us to a broad discussion of the ideas of rural development and community sustainability.  We conclude this section with a discussion of the mission statement of the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board which returns our analysis directly to the question of educational service delivery in rural communities.

## Federal Government

For many years, policy discourse around Canada's rural communities was framed in terms of large-scale, blanket solutions to the problem of rural development and institutional service delivery. This policy direction can be traced back at least to the Second World War and the rural industrialization directives of the four decades that followed. In a sense, it was thought that the "rural problem" (Cubberley, 1922) would be solved by history as industrialization and urbanization eventually rendered small rural communities redundant. Industry and population would concentrate in metropolitan growth centres and the traditional forms of rural employment and economic activity would be transformed by mechanization, concentration and corporatism. Small farms and small boats would be bought out by larger interests and people would move to the cities and large towns. Policy thinking in this context was geared toward putting in place the institutional mechanisms to ease the transition of people and economic activity from country to city.

There is no denying that this general scenario has played out in many parts of Canada to a considerable degree. Canada as a whole is more urban than the United States and in terms of standard demographic measures only about 20% of Canadians lives in rural settings. However, by the 1960s and 70s demographers began to notice that some rural areas were actually experiencing growth and that some urban-adjacent rural areas were actually growing faster than almost any other part of the country. In a sense the population seemed to be shifting out of the cities. Additionally, it has become apparent that some parts of Canada have remained predominantly rural. Large parts of Nova Scotia serve as an excellent example. Using Statistics Canada's definition of rurality, four of Nova Scotia's six health care regions were at least 59% rural in the 2001 census. The Rural Communities Impacting Policy Group (2003) make the point that with the exception of Halifax, industrial Cape Breton and a handful of towns, Nova Scotia is actually between 65 and 75% rural.

Suffice it to say that rural communities have not faded into the mist, nor does it appear that they ever will. By the 1990s the federal government began to change its thinking about rurality away from the idea that rural communities and people are in transition to modernity and an urban future, to a view that recognizes the importance of rural communities to the economic and social fabric of the country. The following quote from the federal Ministry of Agriculture and Agrifoods illustrates:

> *Many rural and remote communities have been built on other natural resource and primary sector activities, such as forestry, fishing, mining and energy, hunting and trapping. These sectors are major contributors to the national economy through resource extraction and value-added processing. Strong rural communities form much of the social fabric of the country and provide a solid foundation for all of Canada. For some time the federal government has been funding a number of agencies and umbrella groups designed to support rural communities. These organizations include the Canadian Rural Secretariat, The Canadian*

*Rural Partnership, The Advisory Committee on Rural Issues. (Ministry of Agriculture and Agrifoods Canada)*

In its 2004 report the Minister's Advisory Committee on Rural Issues cites Bruno Jean, Canada Research Chair in rural studies at the University of Quebec at Rimouski who defines ten conditions necessary for sustainable rural development

- **Mobilization of social capital**
- **Support for local capacity building**
- **The ability to earn income**
- **An educated and healthy population**
- **Institutions that support economic and social initiatives of the rural population**
- **Awareness that we can learn from rural communities**
- **Protection of the social diversity to which rural communities contribute**
- **Action to foster a sustainable approach to rural development**
- **Awareness of the multifunctional nature of the new rural economy**
- **Support for the emergence of a new type of grassroots rural governance**
- **Action to make rural-urban interdependence intelligible**
- **Implementation of an appropriate public policy**

What is instructive about this list is that current thinking about rural communities and the governance of rural communities has moved on from the traditional idea that rural places need to be shown how to transform themselves into modern places. The old idea that rural is backward, marginal and disappearing and that urban places are modern, central and the communities of the future has been replaced over the last twenty years as rural development thinking has begun to understand that rural communities are not the opposite of modern. Rural communities are being transformed by the same global economic and social forces that are transforming urban and suburban communities in Canada. Rural communities are no longer seen as broken places that need to be fixed or formerly functional communities that need to be cleared of excess people (Matthews, 1976).

Federal policy discourse is now marked by a distinct understanding that rural communities have survived on the basis of deep local knowledge and a powerful attachment to place which is strengthened by well-supported local institutions. The upshot is that it is now understood that governance is more productively understood as learning **from** rural people. After generations of paternalism and mismanagement, it is now generally accepted that in many (if not most) ways rural people understand their contexts, problems, challenges better than anyone else. Residents of rural communities have often worked very long and hard to establish community-based institutions and organizations like schools and small hospitals that are actually very well attuned not only to local circumstances, but also to larger global forces as well. After generations of mega projects, resettlement initiatives, and make-work schemes, the new policy orientation is to listen to rural people and to attempt to engage them as much as possible in issues of governance, development and institutional delivery. There is a growing understanding in

policy circles that rural people are in the best position to understand how to develop and sustain their communities because they are the people who have been doing exactly that for years anyhow, often in the face of downsizing, downloading, institution-stripping and other destabilizing trends.

Today it is also well understood in rural policy discourse that generic solutions and programs are typically not appropriate in rural contexts given the diversity and particularity of rural communities. Blanket solutions or solutions that are designed to meet the needs of all rural communities have tended to miss the mark. Rather, locally developed literacy and adult educational initiatives and other grass-roots projects have emerged within rural communities to engage citizens in the kind of education, training and economic and social development work that seeks to build on existing capacity, to strengthen social capital and to help people define and develop the new skills they need to build community.

The federal government is firmly committed to building strong rural communities that maintain an infrastructure necessary for sustainability, a reasonable level of services in a contemporary society and an acceptable standard of living. A concept called the "rural lens" is one way that the Canadian government is attempting to achieve these ends by working to understand the diversity of rural Canada and to understand how the deep local knowledge of rural people can be utilized to design relevant policy and governance (Rural Secretariat, 2004 http://www.rural.gc.ca/lens_e.phtml). The concept of the rural lens marks a recognition on the part of the federal government that the perspective of rural dwellers is essential if rural development policy is to be effective. The rural lens is introduced on the web page of the Canadian Rural Secretariat this way:

> *What is the Rural Lens? It is a way of viewing issues through the eyes of Canadians living in rural and remote areas. Federal departments and agencies are increasingly aware of the effects of their policies, programs and services on rural Canada. Consequently, when considering future initiatives, decision makers are making a concerted effort to understand the impact of new policies and programs on rural Canada.*

This quote illustrates how policy thinking is opening up to the perspective of rural citizens. This also marks a recognition that historically rural communities have been left out of the policy and decision-making loop, largely due to perceptions that rural people were insufficiently educated and knowledgeable to make good decisions in their own best interest. This essentially colonial mentality is something we believe ought to be left behind.


## The provincial government

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility. Educational policy, programming and curriculum have been provincial responsibilities virtually from the beginning of the evolution of public schooling in Nova Scotia. While this is true, public schools and

particularly rural schools received much of their funding from local funding sources in the early history of education in the province.  As the provincial educational system has evolved, responsibility for funding the public schools has shifted increasingly to the province.  Today municipal units contribute a relatively small proportion of school funding.

The public school system of the province of Nova Scotia serves a student population of 150 599 (2002-2003), down from 165 739 in 1990-91 and 185 585 in 1980-81 (NS Department of Education, 2004).  Enrolment projections estimate that student populations will decline to around 133 000 by 2006-2007.  While enrolment has been in decline since the late 1970s, gradation rates[1] have been on the increase moving from 52.8% in 1980-81, to 67% in 1990-91 to 80% in 2001-2002.  Through the 1990s, public K-12 education was beset by a number of challenges including declining enrolments and an increasingly tight fiscal regimen.  The number of teachers employed in public schools in the province declined from 10 684 in 1990-1991 to 9 592 in 2002-2003.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s educational policy was marked by a focus on multiple discourses of change at the level of funding, governance, curriculum, accountability, parental and "stakeholder" involvement, inclusion practices in the schools, the nature of teacher professionalism and teacher unionism.  The early 1990s saw a succession of province-wide consultations on educational reform beginning in 1991 with the Select Committee Hearings (essentially a Royal Commission), through a series of consultations through the 1990s on school governance (school board amalgamation), outcome based curriculum, school funding, and the promotion of educational change generally.

The policy shift that began in the mid 1990s has included a considerable revamping of curriculum, the adoption of a regional school board structure that pared twenty-one school boards down to seven (and eventually to eight when the Southwest Regional School board was split in two), an increased focus on inclusion, changes to school governance including the introduction of school advisory councils, the implementation of standardized testing and other accountability measures such as school accreditation (Corbett, 2006a), technology integration, an ongoing literacy initiative, implementation of new math curricula, among other things.  It has been a decade of considerable change.  More recently, the Department of Education has begun to focus on issues of equity in terms of raising standardized test scores, particularly scores of comparative national and international tests such as the OECD's Project for International Student Assessment (PISA), and a health promotion initiative (Nova Scotia, 2005)

The province's schools continue to be funded by a formula that combines provincial monies with contributions from municipal units.  Through the 1990s several municipalities withheld or threatened to withhold funds to school boards and system budgeting continued to be precarious as it was throughout the 1980s.  School Boards have begun to exploit alternative sources of revenue such as facility fees, continuing and

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[1] The Department of Education now calculated graduation rates by comparing the number of students enrolled in grade 9 in a given year with the number of students who graduate three years later.

adult education programming, the recruitment of foreign students and online programming.  Still, revenues from these sources amount to no more than 5% of total operating budgets (see Table 1 below).

| Table 1-P | School Board Funding by Source, Nova Scotia, 2002-2003[2] | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *Provincial* | *Municipal* | *Board Revenue* |
| Cape Breton-Victoria | 85.9% | 9.4% | 3.5% |
| Strait | 77.1% | 16% | 4.9% |
| Chignecto-Central | 80.7% | 13.6% | 2.7% |
| Halifax | 70.5% | 27.3% | 1.3% |
| Annapolis Valley | 79.2% | 15.4% | 3.5% |
| Southwest | 78.7% | 18.1% | 1.2% |
| CSAP (francophone) | 96.1% | 0 | 0.7% |

While the bulk of funding for the public K-12 education continues to flow from provincial coffers, Table 1 illustrates how school board funding structures continue to be markedly inequitable reflecting particularly the differential ability of municipal units to fund educational services.  For instance, the urban Halifax Regional board receives more than one quarter of its funding from municipal units with a healthy residential tax base[3] while the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Board received less than one-tenth of its funds form municipal contributions.  This illustrates how school funding continues to mirror the differential economic circumstances in different parts of the province.

In the most recent analysis of school funding in Nova Scotia, Hogg (2004) recognizes to some extent the particular problems faced by regional school boards with regard to small schools.  Hogg actually recommends an additional property service allotment for schools with very small enrolments.  This is sound thinking that mirrors similar provincial initiatives in Quebec, British Columbia and in Ontario.  Nova Scotia remains largely a rural society.  In fact, one Nova Scotian rural policy group argues that there are really two Nova Scotias, Greater Halifax and the rest.  The "rest" is essentially rural.  Using this definition of rural and urban, over 75% of the provincial population live in a rural area (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2003: 7).  Four of Nova Scotia's Health Zones[4] are predominantly rural even using Statistics Canada's fairly conservative classification

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[2] In addition to provincial and municipal along with board revenues, boards receive monies from the federal government to fund things like HRDC sponsored initiatives, First Nations education and minority language programs.  Some boards also use monies from reserve funds to finance their operations.

[3] The Halifax Regional Board also benefits from supplementary finding provided by the Halifax Regional Municipality beyond the mandatory education tax rate levied on all municipal units.  No other Nova Scotian school boards receive supplementary funding.

[4] Health Zones are units of analysis used by Statistics Canada to analyze regional sub-provincial population trends.  The Health Zones correspond roughly to the regional school board structure originally set in place in 1997.

of what counts as rural. What is clear from these data is that large geographic sections of Nova Scotia continues to be composed of small towns and villages, most of which are experiencing population decline while the province's single urban centre has one of the fastest growth rates in Canada.

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**Table 2-P**
**Nova Scotia Health Zones- Percentage of the population living in rural areas (2001 Census)**

| Health Zone | Percentage Rural |
|---|---|
| Zone 1 - Southwest | 77.7% |
| Zone 2 - Annapolis Valley | 62.7% |
| Zone 3 - Cumberland-Colchester-East Hants | 59.2% |
| Zone 4 - Strait-Pictou-Guysbrough | 64.3% |
| Zone 5 - Cape Breton | 35.4% |
| Zone 6 - Halifax-West Hants | 23.8% |

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In terms of education, this demographic reality translates into a picture in which many communities struggle to maintain core institutions and services. The provincial Department of Education appears to understand something of the reality of the two Nova Scotias and demonstrates some understanding of the consequences of these demographics for the operation of schools. The report on school funding cited above also recommended a compensatory funding arrangement to support the integrity of programming in very small schools (defined as schools with enrolments of less than 100). While at this writing the Hogg Report is still under study by the provincial cabinet, these recommendations could have a powerful impact in the CCRSB. In changes to the funding formula in 2005, the small schools allotment for property service stand to net the CCRSB 1.6 million new dollars to support its very small schools. As Gillis pointed out, a logical extension of this property services allotment would be a corollary allotment for the maintenance of core programs to allow small schools to deliver a wider range of programming (2005: 31).

While the property service allotment is a good start and Gillis' call for similar program support funding makes good sense, the arbitrary choice of 100 as the cutoff point for supplementary property services funding is difficult to understand. How is a school that has an enrolment of 120 in a substantially different position than a school with an enrolment of 95? We would point out that with the Hogg Report now before the provincial cabinet, this is perhaps not the best time to be closing small rural schools that could receive considerable additional support should this part of the report be adopted. In fact, the Board could join with citizens in Wentworth and River Hebert to cooperatively lobby for this small school funding initiative.

After essentially ignoring rurality for many years, the Department of Education is finally recognizing the challenges of rural schools. In the Department's most recent policy

statement, rural schools have finally appeared (Nova Scotia, 2005). Much of the emphasis on small, isolated rural schools is focused on the potential of online learning to enhance offerings in rural communities. This would seem to indicate that the Department is committed to exploring information technology as a vehicle for delivering specialized programming, particularly at the secondary level to rural communities. An implication of this policy position is that the survival of schools in small, isolated rural communities is a priority for the department. In Learning for Life 2, the Department actually uses the language of long-term viability of small isolated rural schools in a statement under the umbrella concept of "closing the gap" between disadvantaged and advantaged student populations.

> Add resources to support the long term viability of isolated rural schools, including establishing minimum standards for delivering classroom and distance education (Nova Scotia, 2005: 31).

This is an indication that the Department now considers rurality to be an equity issue and we see this as a very positive step. People in rural communities and rural teachers have been arguing for years that there is a fundamental inequity in an education system that funds on the basis of student populations rather than programs. Therefore, we see this policy direction, if indeed it amounts to anything other than words, as being in keeping with federal government policy thinking that is finally beginning to take rural citizens seriously as taxpayers who deserve decent services like any other Canadian. We hope that this is the beginning of the end of the view that rural citizens are backward people who need to told what to do and "modernized" out of their communities; or if they do stay, have to drive long distances to get postal services, health care and have their children educated.


## The Municipality of Cumberland County

> Council identified and discussed the following as its core values as part of the process to determine its mission statement:
> - To protect and enhance the rural way of life …
>   (Cumberland County Municipality, 1997: 4)

In its long-range strategic plan, the Cumberland County Municipality sets out the idea of protection and enhancement of "the rural way of life" as its first core value. Other values include the importance of responsible use of tax dollars, responsiveness to citizens, encouraging public participation, ethical governance, a respect for diversity, and finally, consultation and cooperation with citizens and with other levels of government. In these value statements the municipal council demonstrates a clear commitment to similar sorts of goals as those articulated at the federal and provincial levels.

Within these value statements is the idea that rural communities and the rural way of life as the Council puts it, is valuable. There is also a commitment to democratic consultation and respect for rural citizens which underscores the idea that people living in rural

communities ought to be treated with dignity and respect. Their ideas, wishes, plans and desires concerning the use of the money they contribute through taxes should be taken seriously. The articulation of these values represents a grassroots initiative on the part of a rural community at its most local level of governance to highlight the importance of rural living. For rural municipalities it has, for many years, been difficult to make the case for support for community infrastructure in the face of population declines and the downloading of the fiscal burden from the federal level on down. Achieving the concrete results that might flow from a desire to protect and enhance the rural way of life is easier to say than do.

Protecting the values of rural community sustainability has been the core challenge for rural municipalities across Canada. The difficulties faced the Municipality of Cumberland County are not unique to this area. The fiscal and infrastructure deficits faced by urban municipalities have been very much in the news in recent years, but rural municipalities face equally difficult if not more daunting obstacles. Recently the Rural Advocacy Task force of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (2006) released a report calling for a federal ministry to help municipal units across rural Canada meet the multiple challenges they face including the challenge of retaining and attracting an educated workforce in the face of outmigration pressure.

Most rural Canadians have long understood that they represent an important part of the fabric of the nation and that they are the people involved in most of the primary production that supports the Canadian economy (Corbett, 2006b). The difficulty has been to convince other levels of government that rural communities are intimately connected with the natural resources upon which our nation has been built. Canadians both need to understand that the health and sustainability of rural communities is not just a nostalgic whim, it is an important part of a forward-looking strategy that involves stewardship over natural resources that is essential to our continued economic development as a nation.

It is rather obvious that the broad values of the Municipality of Cumberland County are very much consistent with those articulated by federal and provincial governments. The municipality, the province, and the Nova Scotia Department of Education are all in agreement when it comes to supporting rural communities as places that are worth building. It also seems rather obvious that an essential part of supporting and enhancing the rural way of life includes advocating for the maintenance and growth of services in all communities under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Council. This of course, includes schools. Communities need schools in order to be strong sustainable communities that are capable of any level of growth of the sort that both provincial and federal policy is beginning to articulate. In its commitment to democratic citizenship and public participation, the Municipality is fulfilling its mandate and acting on its values when it shows leadership and encourages citizens to stand up and demand equitable and local access to services enjoyed by most citizens in advanced democracies.

## The Chignecto-Central Regional School Board

> *The Chignecto-Central Regional School Board is a diverse, progressive, student-centered learning community. We are committed to developing creative, confident and responsible global citizens who take pride in their local community, culture and heritage. We will inspire our learning community by enriching the quality of educational opportunities in a safe and supportive learning environment with high expectations for all. (Chignecto-Central Regional School Board, 2006a)*

While it is not necessarily the school board's responsibility to sustain rural communities, there is a high level of agreement between the Board's published mission statement and the idea of the policy shift we are describing in this section. The board's mission statement indicates a focus on students and the general aim of creating community within its operations. The board's mission statement is very much consistent with the broad goals of the Public School Program of the Province of Nova Scotia in the sense that it orients the system toward the preparation of well-rounded citizens who will contribute to their communities. This is essentially what the PSP requires. A good school system is a strong service community and one that works well with local geographic communities. This is indeed a powerful value and one that is in keeping with federal government, provincial government and municipal government commitments to community and citizenship as we have shown above.

The importance of community is also enshrined in the Board's guiding principles. The second guiding principle set out by the Board is phrased this way: "to support the partnership of home, school and community in the development of students" (CCRSB, 2006b). In this principle there is recognition that real cooperation with parents is crucial to the provision of high quality educational services. It recognizes parents and community members generally as collaborators and allies. In order for education to work well, parents must be involved in the process. The idea of the partnership between school and community is further elaborated in another guiding principle, the idea that the Board seeks, "to actively promote and maintain a climate of mutual trust, confidence and respect throughout the organization and within the community of stakeholders." A climate of trust, confidence and respect is built through dialogue and exchanges of views in which all participants share a common goal, the improvement of education in the community.

Other guiding principles set out by the Board demonstrate an even deeper commitment to including community members. When schools are under study for closure, we see an opportunity for the board to give shape and credence to principles like the following:

- to encourage participation by all stakeholders in decision making processes
- to increase community support for, and emphasize involvement in, public education

In a sensitive decision making process like school closure such principles are put to the test.  If there is broad community support for a school, and if no evidence can be shown that the broad goals of the PSP and prescribed educational outcomes are not being met, then the decision to close that school against the will of the community is an arbitrary decision, or one made on the basis of financial considerations.  In fact, a school closure decision which is based essentially on financial considerations may actually be in contravention of the Education Act raising the possibility of legal action on the part of the community.

In real communities there is little need for litigation or divisive confrontation of this sort.  In community there is always space for dialogue.  In the two principles discussed above, we see again the importance assigned to the building of community and respect for the voices of all participants in the complex enterprise of educating youth in a modern society.  All levels of government articulate a commitment to conversation and dialogue that supports the knowledge and dignity of rural people.  As Gillis (2005) suggests the decision to close a school is very serious for the people involved.  It represents the loss of significant infrastructure for the community.  Community members' views are important in decisions that affect them so powerfully.

## Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that there is a lot of common ground shared by the various levels of government.  Each level of government articulates a similar vision of the community as a core concept.  As this is a rural area, the way each group thinks about development and education is infused with the idea of people living and working together.  Indeed, the mission statement of the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board uses the word "community" three times in a 58 word paragraph.  Most importantly, the Board claims to be committed to support students who "take pride in their local community, culture and heritage."

There is also a shared vision that rural people as community members ought to be treated as full citizens whose voices deserve to be heard and who should be included in the process of governance.  Rural citizens know their communities best and are typically deeply committed to making their communities sustainable and vibrant.  This is the concept of voice, or the idea that all citizens have the right to a place at the table in discussions of decisions that impact the future of communities.  We are, one would hope, emerging from the long dark nightmare of urban "experts" designing policy, and programs for the alleged betterment of people whose lives they do not understand and whose communities they have little stake in.

This is also a matter of what educators call inclusion.  The CCRSB and the Department of Education are openly committed to the principals of inclusion that have developed out of the civil rights movement and the social movements that have brought all children into the public schools.  Indeed, the construction of district high school in the 1940s, 50s and 60s was in itself a mechanism for finally including rural people in the public secondary

education system.  The inclusion project is now understood in much wider terms as school systems attempt to address multiple layers of disadvantage including gender, race and social class inequality.   An additional layer of disadvantage is geographic. Historically, rural citizens have been underserved and have watched institutions leave their communities with little rationalization of justification.  Each level of government seems to understand that this is wrong and that the historical power imbalance and failure to include rural people in decision making has not generally produced good outcomes.

Each level of governance also seems to share the vision that education is crucial to community building.   As we move forward into the coming decades the forces of globalization, the challenges of demographic changes and immigration, the stress on natural resources and the countryside will all generate new and unparalleled problems that will require an educated, engaged population to solve.  It is also becoming apparent that some rural communities, like urban communities are now facing labor shortages as the phenomenon of rural industrialization unfolds (Winson and Leach, 2002; Corbett, 2005).  While we have no real sense of what shape our future problems will take, there is broad agreement that education is crucial for preparing citizens to make good choices.

# Chapter 3
# The viability and value of small rural schools:
# A review of the literature

> It might happen, as it frequently does, that a school is already sufficiently large, active, and enthusiastic to make it inadvisable to give up its identity and become merged in the larger consolidated school. If there are twenty or thirty children and an efficient teacher we have the essential factors for a good school. (Kenney, 1914, p.64, cited in Howley, 1996).

> Research on school size points to several conclusions about the benefits of smaller schools. Smaller school size has been associated with higher achievement under certain conditions. Smaller schools promote substantially improved equity in achievement among all students, and smaller schools may be especially important for disadvantaged students (Howley, 2002).

The purpose of this review is to critically examine the scholarly literature that pertains to the viability and value of small rural schools. This literature consists of research reports and the considered and thoughtful views of both scholars and practitioners. There is much support in this literature for the claim that the quality of education available in small schools equals or in some instances exceeds that experienced in larger schools. The first issue we will explore in depth is academic viability. Do students learn as well in smaller schools as they do in larger schools? What does the evidence say? Quality education assumes, indeed, demands, that all students learn and achieve at appropriate and acceptable levels.

Regardless of what other virtues smaller schools may have, their viability must be determined, in the first instance, on their capacity to provide the students with equality of educational opportunity in terms of academic achievement. The organizational structure of the school cannot be an impediment to students' educational success.

Another issue that relates to quality education and academic performance is what is referred to in the literature is *achievement equity*. Achievement equity refers to the degree a particular school serves the academic needs of all its students in a fair and equitable fashion regardless of their socio-economic status. While the number of scholarships won and the outstanding performance of a few privileged individuals may bring honor and prestige to a school, a school's true worth has to be determined on the quality of education it provides to all its students. All parents have a right to expect that their children will be received by the school with the same interest and attention as any others.

A third indicator of quality education is the retention and drop-out rate. Good schools provide students with supportive and nurturing environments that encourage them to remain in school and complete their education through to graduation. The research

literature, as well as scholarly opinion, confirms that on all three measures of quality education, small schools equal or exceed their larger counterparts.

Although academic matters are of primary importance in accessing the viability and value of a school, other educational goals are also worthy of consideration. Educators have to be concerned with the holistic development of their students. This development can be fostered in many ways including: opportunities for leadership, engendering in students a sense of belonging and being needed, and opportunities to take part in extra-curricular opportunities. As we shall see, the research literature confirms that in terms of social and affective development, students excel in smaller schools.

Schools are fundamentally social institutions. Students, parents, teachers and other school staff interact on a daily basis. The quality of the relationships and the interactions make a very significant contribution to the quality of education experienced by the students. The size of the school and its proximity and connection to the students' home communities is a crucial factor in creating a quality school. That is why there is so much support in the current literature for neighborhood and community schools. Distance engenders indifference and alienation; proximity creates connectedness, involvement and commitment (Looker and MacKinnon, 1999; Newton, 1993).

Any discussion about small schools must deal with the issue of bussing. Part of the rationale for closing small community schools has always been the prospect and feasibility of bussing students from their home communities to larger schools situated in other communities. The persistent efforts of educational authorities to close and consolidate small schools and create ever larger schools has resulted in more and more students of all ages having to endure longer and longer bus rides.

Given that educational administrators have, in many cases and situations, held considerable power, school consolidation has often been achieved by over-riding public opinion on the basis of claims about the educational and financial benefits of larger schools. These alleged benefits are not supported by any significant evidence, and the more researchers have looked at the question of school size, the more clear it becomes that small schools are actually superior

Despite the increasing numbers of students being bussed and the enormous financial expenditures required to sustain it, the impact of bussing on students academic, social and psychological well being has rarely been examined critically. Most educational authorities appear to take it for granted that no harm is being done to students and whatever discomfort is experienced is a small price to pay for the purported benefits of attending larger schools. These illusory benefits are supported by a system of belief drawn from industrial production models and not from studies of educational achievement. So just as children "adjusted" to factory labor in the 19th century, they adapt to factory schooling today; and this, of course, is presented as progress.

Recently, however, researchers have begun to investigate bussing and the emergent findings should give pause to those who lightly advocate additional bussing for rural students.

> We need to understand the true cost of that ride, to the student, the family and the school system. How far is too far? That question touches every bus riding student. If we knew more about the effects of bussing we might make better choices about closing, maintaining or opening new schools in rural areas. Riding the bus should not just be a 12 year task that children endure, but one that makes sense as an integral part of their successful and fullest education (Zars, 1998).

Distance Education/Web-based Learning and multi-age pedagogy are considered to be cutting edge approaches to education in the 21st century. Both of these strategies have been pioneered in small rural schools. As part of this review we will explore how these two small school innovations make significant contributions to the viability and value of small rural schools.

The value of small schools to their communities is generally ignored by those who advocate consolidation and closure. When a school in a large city closes the event rarely concerns, or impacts on most of the city's residents. Except for those families in the neighborhood who are immediately impacted, the rest of the community hardly notices the event. However, the closure of a community school affects the whole community in many ways. Small schools play a significant and vital role in the communities they serve.

In the final analysis, decisions about sustaining or closing small rural schools come down to the question of human and educational values. We make decisions on the basis of those values. Small school advocates value a personalized learning environment where students, teachers and parents know each other really well and all students feel needed and wanted and have an equal chance of doing well. Rural parents value their community school for what it offers their children and their community. They value the fact that they have easy access to that school and feel comfortable and welcomed in that school where they are known by the teachers and other members of the school staff.

What is it that those who advocate the closure of small community schools value?


## School size and quality of education

> It appears that keeping schools relatively small might be more efficacious and may exhibit rare consensus as a goal of educators, the public, and those seeking equality of opportunity for students. (Fowler, W. & Walberg 1991 cited in Cotton, 1996)

> There is simply no excuse to ignore the most conclusive evidence in the field: small schools foster achievement by all (Tom Vander Ark, 2000)

For most of the twentieth century the "conventional wisdom" in education dictated the closure and consolidation of small community schools and the transportation to students to larger schools in distant communities. It was pretty well taken for granted by educational authorities that "bigger was better" and quality education could only be achieved in larger schools. Educational authorities, convinced that they were right, intimidated and informed parents that if they wished their children to have a quality education, they had to agree to close their small community school and have their children bussed to a larger school in a distant community. No additional evidence was necessary (Howley and Eckman, 1997; Truscott and Truscott, 2005, Theobald, 2005; Meier, 2002).

Small schools were identified as the major obstacle to any effort to improve the provision of education in rural communities. Rural education reform demanded that smaller schools be improved right out of existence.

> For most of the twentieth century, small size was considered to be an impediment to school improvement. Beginning with the rise of the railroads as large firms, the organization, per se, of an enterprise began to be understood as enhancing or detracting from productivity. Such efficiencies, the thinking ran then (as it still does), could be realized most immediately as economies of scale: the larger the firm (or school, or school district), the more opportunities existed for efficient organization and probable improvement in productivity (specialization, volume purchasing, supervision and staffing, and so forth). School and district consolidations were thus lynch-pins of the school improvement agenda of the first three-quarters of the 20th century (Howley and Howley, 2004: 4-5).

For many educational authorities there was no need for research to support this view. Most administrators and policy makers during this time period increasingly drew their educational models and metaphors from business and industry. Notions of economies of scale and the "cult of efficiency" (Callahan, 1964) provided all the "proof" needed to justify the consolidation and closure of small schools. For many it was simply a matter of common sense: if bigger factories are more productive than smaller ones then bigger schools must be better than smaller schools.

> Smith and DeYoung (1988) identify several factors driving this long-term consolidation trend. One has been the desire of school administrators to "demonstrate their commitment to the forces of science, progress, and modernization" by seeking to make schooling "'efficient,' a notion importantly borrowed from the private sector" (Cotton, 1996).

The research that was used to support and confirm the notion of bigger is better when it came to schooling was primarily based on what is referred to as "input" studies. Scriven writes that the use of "inputs" as a way of determining the value or worth of something is

"an undesirable practice of using quality of ingredients as an index of the quality of the output or evaluand" (1991: 194).

The inputs or "ingredients" focused in these early studies included programs and courses, teacher qualifications, learning resources, the existence of a libraries and science laboratories. These inputs became the criteria for judging the relative merits of schools of different sizes. The assumption was that a school that had the highest number and quality of inputs would also have the best outputs in terms of student achievement. This approach to evaluating the worth of schools is not unlike someone judging the quality of a cake on the ingredients alone and not on how the cake actually tastes after being cooked. Another metaphor we like, and will use again, it the restaurant analogy which is the idea that the best restaurant is the one with the largest number of items on the menu.

Not surprisingly, researchers using this approach concluded that larger schools were superior to smaller schools. The flaw in this approach was that the assumption was not confirmed by investigating how students actually achieved.

> Stemnock (1974) reviewed the literature on school size from 1924 to 1974. Of nearly 120 studies, a large majority focused on what are now known as "input variables" --staff specialization and credentials, costs, teaching styles, and course offerings. These are precisely the features of schooling that educators had traditionally thought would improve the quality of students' experience in large schools. In this period, studies that focused on curriculum overwhelmingly called for increases in school size. Studies that focused on other input variables generally reached the same conclusion (Howley, 1989).

As we shall see in this review, when researchers started to investigate "outputs," to actually examine how students perform academically in schools of different sizes, the administrative "big is best" logic does not hold up to critical scrutiny.

Historically, one of the most influential researchers in the school size debate was James Conant. In 1959 he published the findings and recommendations of his research in *The American High School Today*. He concluded that in order for a high school to offer a broad and rich enough curriculum to prepare students to attend university it had to have a graduating class of at least 100 students. Based on this recommendation, a four-year high school would have to have a minimum of 400 students. Many educational authorities used this study to justify the creation of larger schools that the size recommended, their thinking being if 400 are good than 800 is better and 1600 better again. This thinking lead to the disastrously mega schools of 3,000 – 5,000 students that now exist in some larger cites in North America.

Drawing on the work of Sher and Tompkins (1977), Tom Gregory (2000) offers a fascinating historical retrospective on Conant's work. Noting that Conant's size recommendations 400 -500 students were modest in light of subsequent developments in school size Gregory points out that:

Conant's data did not support even this modest claim for bigness. Conant studied 103 high schools, singling out 22 for detailed analysis. Only three of those 22 schools had graduating classes of 100 or fewer, an inadequate sample, Sher and Tompkins observe, from which to draw his central conclusion. Furthermore, Conant's three small high schools all ranked near or above the mean of all 22 schools on his overall index of performance. By his own account these were not inferior or substandard schools; they were average. Indeed, Sher and Tompkins even speculate that *Conant's central conclusion may well have been framed before he conducted the study!* (Emphasis added) (2000: 5).

This smacks a little of the old adage: "don't bother me with the facts, I have made up my mind" applied to educational decision making. It is hard not to conclude that those who still insist that bigger schools are better schools are simply not interested in the evidence to the contrary.

The first study to challenge the dominant educational ideology of "bigger is better" when it comes to schooling was published by Baker and Gump in 1964. In *Big School, Small School* they reported on their investigations into student participation and involvement in schools of different sizes. They discovered that there was a much higher percentage of students involved in extra curricular activities in smaller schools than in larger schools and there were many more opportunities for students to exercise leadership roles. Furthermore, students in smaller schools were more likely to fill important positions in those activities and thus gain greater satisfaction from participating.

> The Barker and Gump research shows that, in a small school, every student is needed to populate teams, offices, and clubs, and thus even marginal students are encouraged to participate and made to feel that they belong. As schools grow larger, opportunities for extracurricular participation also grow—but not proportionately. Typically, a twenty-fold increase in school population leads to only a five-fold increase in participation opportunities. Thus, in larger schools, a greater proportion of students are unneeded to fill participation slots—"redundant," as Barker and Gump put it. (Cotton, 1996)

This finding has been replicated many times since; furthermore a number of studies have made a connection between participation in the life of the school and dropout rates. The more students participate, the more likely they are to remain in school through to graduation. Smaller schools have been shown to have significantly lower dropout rates. They need everyone to participate to make the extra-curricular life of the school work. This includes student clubs and organizations and sports teams. These activities give students a sense of belonging and ownership; they feel needed and wanted.

Since Baker and Gump's landmark work, there has been a considerable sea change in educational thinking when it comes to the viability and value of smaller schools. In the past thirty years especially, a body of empirical research has emerged that challenges the conventional wisdom and taken for granted assumptions about the relationship between school size, student achievement and quality education. This change in thinking occurred when researchers began to investigate how well students actually do academically in schools of different sizes. (They tasted the cake!) For the most part scholarly opinion now favors smaller schools over large.

> A large and increasingly consistent body of research suggests that we should be moving, not toward larger high schools, but expeditiously toward smaller ones. Even the popular literature of the past few years has been sprinkled with articles extolling the virtues and successes of small schools (Gregory, 2000: 2).

As a result of this new research, it is imperative that educators and policy makers re-evaluate their beliefs and assumptions about the value and viability of small schools. Rather than continuing a policy of closure and consolidation of small community schools, they need to sustain and support such schools. Howley has characterized the research into school size and achievement over the last thirty years as falling into three phases or "episodes."

- Studies indicating that there is no significant differences in terms of achievement between smaller and larger schools.
- Studies indicating that there are smaller schools are somewhat superior to larger schools in terms of achievement
- Studies indicating that small schools are especially beneficial in mediating the effects of socio-economic status (SES) (1996: 6).

Cotton (1996) identified thirty-one (31) studies that fit into the first phase of research into the effects of school size on achievement. Sixteen (16) of these studies (Burke 1987; Caldas 1987; Edington and Gardner 1984; Fowler 1995; Gregory 1992; Haller, Monk, and Tien 1993; Howley 1996; Huang and Howley 1993; McGuire 1989; Melnick, et al. 1986; Smith and DeYoung 1988; Stockard and Mayberry 1992; Walberg 1992; Way 1985) reported "no difference" in academic performance between students attending large schools and those attending smaller schools.

Eight (8) studies (Bates 1993; Eberts, Kehoe, and Stone 1982; Eichenstein 1994; Fowler and Walberg 1991; Kershaw and Blank 1993; Miller, Ellsworth, and Howell 1986; Robinson-Lewis 1991; Walberg 1992) reported that academic achievement in small schools was superior to that in larger schools.

> None of the research finds large schools superior to small schools in their achievement effects. Consequently, we may safely say that student achievement in small schools is at least equal—and often superior—to student achievement in large schools. Achievement measures used in the

research include school grades, test scores, honour roll membership, subject-area achievement, and assessment of higher-order thinking skills (Cotton, 1996).

A very significant line of research, especially for those concerned with small rural schools, is a series of studies that has investigated the ways in which smaller schools mediate the effect of SES and enhances achievement equity (Berlin and Cienkus 1989; Eberts, Kehoe, and Stone 1982; Fowler 1995; Friedkin and Necochea 1988; Howley 1994, 1995; Huang and Howley 1993; Jewell 1989; Miller, Ellsworth, and Howell 1986; Rutter 1988; Stockard and Mayberry 1992). The work of Friedkin and Necochea (1988) is a very influential early example of this research. Their work made a strong case for the benefits of small schools in terms of achievement equity; they clearly demonstrated that smaller schools really benefit those who traditionally have difficulty with achievement such as the poor and ethnic minorities.

The research base supporting the effectiveness of small schools in providing students with equality of education opportunity continues to grow. In an aptly titled article "Anything But Research Based: State Initiatives to Consolidate Schools and Districts" published in *Rural Policy Matters* (Rural School and Community Trust, 2006) researchers with the Rural School and Community Trust write:

> Each year hundreds of communities face the closure of their local school State policies promoting consolidation have existed for most of the 20th and now 21st centuries.
>
> The research evidence supporting this widely implemented policy, however, is *virtually non-existent* (emphasis added). In fact, research on the effects of school size on student achievement and well-being is extensive, spans the political spectrum, and is unusually consistent in its findings. … Few educational issues are better documented than the effect of school size on student achievement and well-being, and the evidence overwhelmingly supports small schools and districts. When socio-economic factors are controlled, students who attend smaller schools are more likely to graduate and participate in a greater number and wider variety of extracurricular activities

The most authoritative scholar and researcher on the relationship between school size, SES, achievement and equity is Craig Howley. Howley, perhaps the most widely known and respected rural and small school scholar, is a researcher based at Ohio University. He has written extensively on a wide variety of questions related to small rural schools. For the past ten years he has focused much of his research on investigating the ways in which smaller schools mediate the effects of SES on achievement (Howley and Howley, 2004; Howley, C. 1995; Howley, C. 1996a; Howley, C. 1996b; Howley, C. 1999a; Howley, C. 1999b; Howley, C., & Bickel, R. 1999; Howley and Eckman, 1997; Howley, C. 2001; Howley, C. 2002; Huang, G., & Howley, C. 1993).

Howley's scholarly work is valuable because in addition to doing original empirical studies he has also provided very useful critiques of the history of size effects and achievement research. In one of his recent publications, co-authored with Aimee Howley, he offers these conclusions based on his own research and a comprehensive review of the literature:

- Smaller school size confers an achievement advantage on all but the highest-SES students
- Smaller size mediates the powerful association between SES and achievement
- The relationship between school size and achievement is predominantly linear
- Size effects are at least as robust in rural schools as compared with schools overall (Howley and Howley 2004: 26).

A persistent concern in the literature, especially for rural educators, has been the issue of whether a school can be too small to be considered academically viable. Howley & Howley note that "contrary to the assertion of Lee and Smith (1997), these results do not disclose any lower limits for school size" (2004: 26). In other words academically effective small schools may come in all sizes. Howley and Howley also note that, "contrary to our own previous work, this study suggests that larger size does *not* significantly improve performance among affluent students" (2004: 26).

The key is that schools must be small enough to foster the sort of learning community that can support the learning of disadvantaged children and youth. Actually, many large schools are now attempting to create this sense of community within a large school structure by creating "schools within schools." The school within the school movement essentially breaks large schools down into smaller internal schools or "houses" to create the conditions that are present in small schools. In other words, these large, typically urban schools are attempting to create the social conditions which exist naturally in rural schools, conditions which are ironically destroyed by consolidation.

The research of the last thirty years clearly justifies educational policies that support the creation of new small schools and, more importantly for rural areas, sustaining and supporting existing small community schools. There is little if any justification for closing small schools as a matter of policy. All fair minded people have to wonder given this research base:

> Why do so many states [and provinces] continue to develop consolidation policies that are anything but research-based? Why is this *irrational* and *failed* approach to educational improvement forced upon rural communities, despite their widespread and often vehement opposition? (Rural School and Community Trust, 2006)

To continue to pursue a policy of closure and consolidation in the face of the research evidence is to put the education of rural children and youth at risk.

Many rural areas in North American (including Atlantic Canada) face a number of challenges that impact on educational decision making. These include out-migration, declining birth rate, declining school enrolment, and economic challenges of various kinds. Closing and consolidation of small schools should not be seen as a solution to these challenges. The research would appear to indicate that small schools offer the children of these rural communities their best chance of success. Rather than closing such schools, educational leaders should be searching for ways to sustain and improve these important rural assets. Howley and Howley suggest that

> Policy makers can change the rules under which state [provincial] systems operate, from big-school to small-school norms. They might, in other words, un-rig the game that requires schools to be large. This study and others show that large size is not the criterion of "excellence" it was once thought to be. And smaller schools have now been shown to exert an evidently robust effect on equity. It is interesting to observe that at the time large-school norms were instantiated—the early and mid-twentieth century—few educators or legislators worried about equity. Such norms seem to have outlived their utility (2004: 27).

Howley and Howley conclude their most recent work with a number of practical recommendations for educators and policy makers concerned with making the most educationally sound decisions regarding small rural schools. They base these "considered judgments" on the current body of research on this topic as well as their own and others experiences working with rural communities:

- Sustain the smallest schools in the poorest communities.
- In communities that serve all social classes, do not build large schools.
- Keep elementary and middle schools proportionately smaller than high schools.
- When building new, keep schools everywhere smaller than recommended in the 20th century.
- Provide appropriate and adequate support to smaller schools: small size improves the odds of success, it does not guarantee it.
- Regard smaller school size and reform as distinct issues, but do not hesitate to innovate in smaller schools.
- ***Doubt that an educationally-relevant lower limit of school size exists***. (emphasis added) Much depends on context, and even in the contemporary world, dedicated parents educate very small groups of children with remarkable success at home (2004: 28-29).

The schools that are the focus of this study are small schools. From a national and international perspective they are very small schools. The body of research that has been amassed over the last thirty years confirms that small size is no impediment to academic performance. In fact for some groups of students a smaller school provides them with their best chance of academic success. To bus

them out of their home community to a larger distant school may put their academic lives at risk.

In forthcoming sections of this report we present the data on how well these students were served (educationally) by their schools. Their experiences in these very small schools prepared students quite well for their life choices after school. In Chapters 4 and 5 we investigate the extent to which this is the case for the schools in Wentworth and River Hebert.  These schools add support to the assertion by Howley and Howley, (2004) referenced above, that there is no lower limit in terms of enrolment on effective small schools.

## The curriculum issue

> It does not follow necessarily that more opportunities exist in larger schools (McGuire, 1989)

The criticism that smaller schools cannot offer as broad a program of studies as can larger schools has been around for a very long time; it is often used as a justification for closing smaller schools. Educational authorities, pursuing an agenda of school consolidation, point out the obvious: larger schools can offer a wider range of programs and more courses than can smaller schools. "Therefore, goes the argument, operating small schools with more limited curricula is unfair to the students who attend them" (Cotton, 1996).

However, as Cotton (1996) points out:

> While this has a certain common sense appeal, examination of the research reveals that there simply is no reliable relationship between school size and curriculum quality. For one thing, researchers have found that "it takes a lot of bigness to add a little variety"—that is, "on the average a 100% increase in enrolment yields only a 17% increase in variety of offerings" (Pittman and Haughwout, 1997). Moreover, "[t]he strength of the relationship between school size and curricular offerings diminishes as schools become larger.

This broader curriculum purportedly improves achievement, provides students with more choice in terms of courses and better prepares them for post secondary participation. This argument was first popularized fifty years ago with the publication of Conant's *The American High School Today* (1959) and it has been used ever since by those advocating consolidation.

The assumption that a broader curriculum somehow equates with a high level of student achievement does hold up to critical scrutiny. The research evidence presented earlier in this review clearly demonstrates that the number of courses offered in a school has no effect on overall student achievement. Students in smaller schools perform as well or better academically compared to students in larger schools regardless of the number of

programs and courses either set of schools offer. *The broader curriculum does not, necessarily, have a positive effect on student achievement.*

Research into this issue has called into question the claim that the larger school offers a more varied and richer curriculum (McGuire 1989; Monk 1992; Rogers 1987). What one tends to find in larger schools is not more advanced courses in key academic areas but more introductory courses in non core areas. (Many parents whose children attend larger schools are often amazed and dismayed at how little choice there is when they help their children pick out courses). Another relevant and interesting finding from the research is that "only five to twelve percent of the students in large schools avail themselves of the extra courses these schools typically offer" (Cotton, 1996).

The work of Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffin, and Moss (1990) is of particular relevance for those concerned with very small high schools. They found that it is possible for schools graduating as few as 25 students were able to offer a mathematics program equal to that of a much larger school. The notion that larger schools with the larger number of courses better prepare students for post-secondary participation has also been investigated by researchers. Again, the research has disproved this belief.

> Like the curriculum argument, the assertions about college readiness have been disproved by research. Six documents address the relative merits of large and small schools vis à vis college-related variables—entrance examination scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average, and completion. Five found small schools equal (Rogers 1987; Fowler 1992; Jewell 1989) or superior (Burke 1987; Swanson 1988) to large ones in their capacity to prepare students for college entrance and success (Cotton, 1996).

Whatever the perceived merits the dubious curriculum argument may have had in the past, current developments in distance education and web-based learning make any claim of program inadequacy in smaller schools totally irrelevant today. In the 21st century through the use of information and communication technologies access to a rich and varied curriculum is available to any student regardless of where they live or the size of the school they attend.

Students attending small community schools can have the best of both worlds. They can enjoy the many advantages that come with small scale learning communities *and* have access to any course or program to which they aspire. The common use of distance education in small rural schools has a long history. The availability of computer-based courses is at least fifteen years old. In 1996 Theodore Roellke wrote,

> Advances in computer and video technologies have permitted many rural school districts to electronically import courses otherwise unavailable in the school system at a cost of one third to one half of a resident teacher's salary (Smith, 1990). Computerized learning programs, interactive television, and Internet access are additional resources that can enhance

the curriculum of small high schools. Success has been reported in using these technologies to provide advanced placement and college credit courses as well as instructional services for students with special needs.

Indeed, the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board is a provincial leader in the area having established the province's first virtual high school to serve the needs of students in small, isolated high schools. This development is in keeping with similar cutting-edge rural education work in Saskatchewan and in Australia where online learning in small rural communities is now well established. Indeed, recent proceedings of the National Congress on Rural Education in Saskatchewan have been filled for the last several years by presentations that focus on online and other forms of distance learning. Given contemporary technology, synchronous, real time teaching and learning possibilities in small, isolated communities are opening up at a rate that is only constrained by our imaginations.

> Improved technological literacy and Internet access have enabled educators and governments to establish virtual schools as partial solutions to the problems of curriculum equity, changing demographics, shortages in specific teaching disciplines and the need to be cost-effective (Fury & Murphy, 2005).

In a policy brief entitled "The power and promise of distance learning in rural education" Hobbs states that, "A rapidly growing number of rural students are increasingly involved in some form of distance learning for all or part of the school day (or night)."

> Research shows that it (online distance learning) can be as effective as classroom learning in terms of student performance. It offers the opportunity for enhanced curriculum and advanced classes, as well as for students to participate in low-enrolment, high-cost classes such as physics, anatomy, chemistry, music theory, or calculus. Along with the academic advantages come economic ones: school size no longer determines the scope or breadth of curriculum offered. Schools of any size can offer a virtually unlimited curriculum without incurring the costs of hiring additional teachers. Savings increase even more if schools participate in distance learning consortiums to share master teachers, personnel and technology costs (2004: 5).

"Most importantly," says Hobbs, "distance learning can enable small schools to remain open and small—thereby embracing more than a half century of educational research showing that smaller schools offer a multitude of educational advantages for students over larger schools" (2004: 5).

Today distance education and web-based learning are essential features of all progressive education systems. Technology is used by both rural and urban schools as a way to supplement the programming offerings available to students. It is hard to believe that

educational authorities anywhere continue to use the curriculum inadequacy argument to make a case against small schools.

## What really counts?

A final point on the matter of curriculum needs to be made. The fact that a school can boast of a broad and varied curriculum may or may not mean that students in such a school are provided with a quality educational experience. There are often many gaps between the intended or official curriculum and that actually experienced by the students. Curriculum theorists now understand that the actual school curriculum is not limited to the taught program and that it also includes a much wider range of formal and informal educational experiences (Pinar, 2005, Portelli and Vibert, 2001). A school's program of studies says nothing about the actual delivery of such courses, the quality of the teaching or the extent to which students avail themselves of the cafeteria style curriculum menu of some larger schools. The presence of programs is no guarantee that students will be willing or allowed to take them.

What is more important than the number of courses and programs is the quality of the teaching and the degree of engagement and motivation engendered in the students in the pursuit of high achievement. Lee et. al. (1995, cited in Roellke, 1996) has identified three curricular features that ensure effective instruction. They can be a component of any school regardless of its size and are a greater guarantee of high levels of learning than any impressive list of courses:

> 1. A common academic curriculum. Student achievement gains were found in schools with a common academic curriculum, where ***course offerings are narrow and academic content is strong***. (Emphasis added)

> 2. High levels of academic press. This curriculum expectation centers on the notion that all students will meet high academic standards and devote considerable effort to academic endeavors.

> 3. Authentic instruction. Students are engaged in sustained, disciplined, and critical thought through a variety of instructional approaches, such as independent study, project-based learning, and real-world problem solving

## Why small schools work

> Why does smaller seem to work better?...people seem to learn, to change, and to grow in situations in which they feel that they have some control, some personal influence, some efficacy (Berlin & Cienkus, 1989, cited in Cotton, 1996)

> It appears that keeping schools relatively small might be more efficacious and may exhibit rare consensus as a goal of educators, the public, and those seeking equality of opportunity *for students* (Fowler and Walberg, 1991cited in Cotton, 1996)

The research evidence is quite clear and unequivocal: small schools are academically viable. Smaller schools can provide a learning environment that is at least as good as larger schools. For those students who may be considered at risk, small schools are especially supportive. Achievement equity is more often achieved in smaller schools.

Small schools have always been able to provide a program of studies that prepared its graduates to enter the work force or participate in further studies at post-secondary institutions. Testimony to this fact can be found in even the most casual review of graduates of small schools who have gone on to successful careers in whatever field of endeavor or academic program they may have chosen. Many famous Canadians received their education in small schools (e.g. Rick Hillier, Rex Murphy, E.J. Pratt).

Smaller schools offer their students much more than academic productivity, however. They provide a learning environment that is supportive and nurturing of a wide variety of desirable educational goals for all students. Why do small schools work so well? Why do they work academically? Why do they appear to do a better job of developing the whole person? These are the questions we want to try and answer in this section of the review. There is one note of caution, however. Just because a school is small is no guarantee that it is a good or effective school. Size alone is not the determinant of quality. To be an effective small school a school should exhibit these characteristics:

- Staff and students are focused on a few important goals.
- Staffs have high expectations for all students and a shared vision of good teaching.
- Staffs have time to collaborate to improve instruction and meet shared challenges.
- Instruction and promotion are based on demonstrated learning.
- Every student has an advocate at school.
- The school environment promotes respect and responsibility.
- Technology is used as an effective teaching and learning tool (Vander Ark, 2001).

Any school can strive to create these characteristics. However, desirable practices that are supportive of student learning are easier to implement in smaller schools because of their size:

> School size acts as a facilitating factor for other desirable practices. In other words, school characteristics that tend to promote increased student learning—such as collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability—are simply easier to implement in small schools (Toche, 2003 cited in Hylden, 2004: 18).

But, it still takes a core of dedicated and committed teachers to make those practices work. But getting the size right is the necessary first step:

> A good school is a work in progress: a place to tinker, fix, and sometimes even to throw out and start over. Creating such a school requires keeping in mind both visionary ideas and mundane daily details. A good school is never satisfied with itself. As a result, there's never enough time. But it turns out that everything is easier when we get the scale right. Getting the size right is the necessary, though not sufficient, first step (Meier, 1996: 14).

## A personalized learning environment

Small schools have fewer students and teachers and because of this students (and teachers) experience a personalized learning environment that is simply not possible in larger institutions. Students are known to each other and their teachers; there is less opportunity to fall through or hide in the cracks in a smaller school. There are no strangers in small community schools. In smaller schools:

> Teachers talk about how students are doing, and compare information across classes and over the years. All of the students know each other. If a student is having trouble, all the student's teachers can meet with the student and/or parents to talk about the problem and create a plan to help. (Wasley, et al, 2000).

This personalized environment serves to nurture some very important individual and social educational goals. Berlin and Cienkus (1989) claim that students "seem to learn, to change, and to grow in situations in which they feel that they have some control, some personal influence, some efficacy." That efficacy or feeling of empowerment is connected to feelings of belonging and feeling needed in small schools and the social opportunities that exist.

> Arguably, participation in a smaller enterprise enables a more sure-footed construction of self in the company of trusted others as well as a greater investment by all participants in the construction of common purpose (see e.g., Meier, 2003). (Howley and Howley, 2004: 27-28)

Writing in *Educational Leadership*, Deborah Meier argues that small schools enjoy advantages over larger schools along seven dimensions: governance, respect, simplicity, safety, parental involvement, and belonging:

> In small schools, the other 70 percent belong. Every kid is known every kid belongs to a community that includes adults. Relationships are cross-disciplinary, cross-generational, and cross-everything else. The good news is that kids like to be members of such cross-generational clubs. (Or at least most do, at least some of the time!) And, if parents are part of the process, they like to join, too—even part-time.

> In small schools, we're more likely to pass on to students the habits of heart and mind that define an educated person—not only formally, in lesson plans and pedagogical gimmicks, but in hallway exchanges, arguments about important matters, and resolutions of ordinary differences. We're more likely to show kids in our daily discourse that grown-ups—models outside their homes—use reasoning and evidence to resolve issues. We can teach them what it's like to be a grown-up—bring them into our culture, but only if we're part of a world that they find compelling, credible, and accessible (1996: 15).

Many researchers have formally studied the effects of school size on students feelings of belongingness and alienation (Burke 1987; Campbell, et al. 1981; Edington and Gardner 1984; Foster and Martinez 1985; Fowler and Walberg 1991; Gregory 1992; Gregory and Smith 1983, 1992, Howley 1994; Pittman and Haughwout 1987; Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981; Stockard and Mayberry 1992; Stolp 1995; Walberg 1992). After reviewing these studies, Cotton (1996) reports:

> It is not surprising that these investigators have found a much greater sense of belonging (sometimes expressed as a lower level of alienation) among students in small schools than in large ones.

Patricia Wasley argues, in an article entitled "Small Classes, Small Schools: The Time is Now" that the time is ripe for educators and policy makers to make the case for what the research suggests and what our experience has been telling us for years:

> Students do best in places where they can't slip through the cracks, where they are known by their teachers, and where their improved learning becomes the collective mission of a number of trusted adults. We have the resources to ensure that every student gets a good education, and we know

what conditions best support their success. It is time to do what is right (2002: 10).

Why do small schools work? A large part of the answer is situated in the feeling students have in small schools of being known, cared about, and where they possess a sense of belonging. The personal attention that is possible in a small school is the single most important feature that contributes to successful student learning. There is no mystery here. Perhaps Meier says it best:

> Small schools mean we can get to know a student's work, the way he or she thinks… This close knowledge helps us demand more of them; we can be tougher without being insensitive and humiliating. It also means we know their moods and styles—whom to touch in a comforting way and whom to offer distance and space in times of stress. It means that every school feels responsible for every kid and has insights that when shared can open up a seemingly intractable situation to new possibilities (1996: 12).

In other words, small schools offer more structural potential and more overall affordances that increase the likelihood that high-quality educational exchanges will occur and that a genuine, powerful and supported/supportive learning community will emerge. Small schools are also more accountable to their communities because the teachers are known to parents and to other community members (Shelton, 2005).

## Extra-curricular participation

> Small schools allow greater student participation in extracurricular activities (Kearney, 1994).

Earlier in this report, we made reference to the work of Baker and Gump (1964) and their pioneering investigation of extra-curricular participation in small schools versus large schools. As they noted, in small schools students are less likely to feel "redundant" and more likely to feel needed.

Many investigators since then have studied this issue and these findings confirm the conclusions of the original study: extra-curricular participation is much higher in smaller schools than larger ones ( see e.g. Burke 1987; Cawelti 1993; Foster and Martinez 1985; Fowler 1995; Fowler and Walberg 1991; Grabe 1981; Hamilton 1983; Holland and Andre 1991; Howley 1996; Kershaw and Blank 1993; Pittman and Haughwout 1987; Rogers 1987; Schoggen and Schoggen 1988; Smith and DeYoung 1988; Stockard and Mayberry 1992; Walberg 1992).

Significant findings include:

- Students in small schools are involved in a greater variety of activities and that they derive more satisfaction from their participation than students in large schools.
- Students in the large schools were more polarized, with a group of active participants at one end of the continuum and a large group of students who did not participate in any extracurricular activities at the other. In the small schools there were few students who did not participate in anything (Hamilton, 1993)
- The average large school student does not utilize these opportunities. Although the small school does not provide such a wealth of activities, the average student has a better experience as measured by the amount of involvement in the available activities (Schoggen and Schoggen, 1998)
- Findings about participation rates in smaller schools hold true regardless of setting and are most applicable to minority and low-SES students. Because research has identified important relationships between extracurricular participation and other desirable outcomes, such as positive attitudes and social behaviour, this finding is especially significant (Cotton, 1996).

Opportunities to participate and take on leadership roles in the social life of the school are crucial developmental and growth experiences for all students. As these and other researchers have found, small schools provide more of these opportunities for more students. There appears to be this recurring theme in the literature. While the larger school appears to have quantitatively more of everything to offer, only a small percentage of particular students benefit. On the other hand, the smaller school has less to offer, but most, if all students benefit. When it comes to quality education less seems to be more. What good is a comprehensive menu if only a few of the items are actually available to all patrons?

## Attitudes towards school

> Students in a small high school experience...an increasingly more positive
> attitude toward school (Gregory and Smith, 1987).

Given what small schools have to offer in terms of a personalized environment and participation opportunities, it is not surprising that attitudes are quite positive and students elect to stay in school to complete their education.

Student attitudes towards school have long been recognized as a key element in terms of staying in school and overall academic performance. Many studies have investigated the differences in attitude between students attending small and larger schools (see e.g. Aptekar 1983; Bates 1993; Edington and Gardner 1984; Fowler 1995; Fowler and Walberg 1991; Gregory 1992; Gregory and Smith 1983, 1987; Howley 1994, 1996;

Kershaw and Blank 1993; Miller, Ellsworth, and Howell 1986; Rutter 1988; Smith and DeYoung 1988; Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981; Walberg 1992)

The research is very consistent in finding that as far as attitude towards schooling is concerned students in small schools have a much more positive attitude towards school than do students in larger schools. Unlike large schools, in small schools, the more disadvantaged the students, the more positive are their attitudes. There is nothing surprising in these findings. If you feel wanted and needed, have good and productive social relationships with your peers and teachers, more than likely you are going to enjoy school and do well.  Related studies that investigate attendance and retention all favour the smaller school.

Virtually all educational research from every theoretical perspective, methodological orientation and disciplinary foundation over the last hundred years has confirmed that in order to be successful in school students must possess positive motivation

## Social behavior

> Behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is cancelled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment (Stockard and Mayberry, 1992).

Many teachers working in large schools report that they spend as much as 40% of their time dealing with behavior problems in their schools and classrooms. In smaller schools that percentage of disruptive time is minimal. Teachers in smaller schools are able to focus practically all of their energies on teaching and learning activities.  Cotton (1996) succinctly summarizes the research on school size and behavior:

> The research linking school size to social behaviour has investigated everything from truancy and classroom disruption to vandalism, aggressive behaviour, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation. This research shows that small schools have lower incidences of negative social behaviour, however measured, than do large schools (Burke 1987; Duke and Perry 1978; Gottfredson 1985; Gregory 1992; Kershaw and Blank 1993; Rutter 1988; Stockard and Mayberry 1992). The social behaviour of ethnic minority and low-SES students is even more positively impacted by small schools than that of other students.

Small schools are much safer places according to Deborah Meier (1996). They are safer because of their smaller scale which means people know and work closely with each other. Larger schools create anonymity, the breeding ground of anti-social and violent behaviour:

Anonymity breeds not only contempt and anger, but also physical danger. The data are clear that the smaller the school, the fewer the incidents of violence, as well as vandalism and just plain rudeness. Strangers are easily spotted, and teachers can respond quickly to a student who seems on the verge of exploding. Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for you (1996: 14).

Wasley et. al. (2000) reported on a two year study of Chicago's small schools conducted by the Bank Street College of Education. She and her colleagues found that Chicago's smaller schools to be safer because for the most part in smaller schools students feel a greater "sense of identify and community."

Small School researcher Michael Klonsky (2002) states that the "The difference between large and small schools, according to much of the research, lies not in the schools' concern for student safety but in their ability to implement effective strategies that produce desired outcomes."

Whereas large schools rely much more on external measures for controlling student behavior—metal detectors and security guards—smaller schools stress engagement of the faculty, school community, and students (Klonsky, 2002).

Writing in *Educational Leadership*, Klonsky (2002) in an article entitled "How Small Schools Prevent Violence" makes these additional points:

- Small schools create the opportunity for knowing students, for intervening as professionals before problems reach a crisis stage—before students resort to violence, suicide, or other forms of destructive behavior.
- In small schools, faculty can more readily share responsibility for recognizing and responding to troubled students and can designate the adults who will provide assistance.
- Simply stated, small schools obliterate anonymity—the handmaiden of many forms of youth violence—and create an environment where students are visible to those charged with their education and many aspects of their social and cultural development—their teachers (2002: 67).

## Parental involvement

Several generations of effective schools research have consistently found that one of the keys to high levels of student achievement is parental involvement in the school. There are two characteristics of schools that work against parents being involved with the schooling of their children. One is the size of the school and the other is the distance the school is from the home community of the family.

Meier (1996) addresses the issue of school size as an impediment to parental involvement. "Schools are intimidating places," she writes, "for many parents – parents feel like intruders, strangers, and outsiders."

> And nothing seems more foolish than going to parent night and seeing a slew of adults who don't know your kid, have very little investment in him or her, and whose opinions and advice make one feel less, not more, powerful. When kids reach high school, schools usually give up on parents entirely (except to scold them). But high school students don't need their parents any less, just differently.
>
> When the school is small enough, probably someone there knows your kid well enough, and maybe also likes him or her enough, to create a powerful alliance with you. Smallness doesn't guarantee such an alliance, but it makes it reasonable to put time into creating one (1996: 13).

When that larger school is in a distant community, that feeling of alienation for parents is intensified. In addition, travel distance and time become additional barriers for parents to be involved with the school and get to the school for special meetings. In some circumstances having access to transportation can be a problem for parents.

The very best way to facilitate parental involvement in a school is to maintain community and neighborhood schools. Small size works for parents as well as for students. They feel the same sense of belonging and connectedness with the school and the teachers. It is a personalized environment for them as well. When the school is located in the community, it is much easier and convenient for parents to visit the school and take an active role in a large variety of activities. In addition, there are opportunities for parents to encounter teachers outside the school where an informal and casual conversation can take place regarding their children.

Why do small schools work? As we have demonstrated there are many reasons, all made possible by the scale of the learning environment and the proximity of that environment to the homes of the students. The North West Regional Educational Laboratory's 2002 report, "Small School Might" offers a succinct answer to the question:

> In small-school environments, the studies show, all students—whatever their ethnicity or place on the socioeconomic ladder—tend to achieve at higher levels, have a greater sense of belonging, feel safer, are less likely to drop out, and are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities and go on to college. Furthermore, parent involvement is higher in smaller schools, as is teachers' job satisfaction

## Bussing

> Transportation of students to school has become a costly and socially questionable activity (Fox, 1996).

School bussing has been part of the reality of rural schooling in North America since the first school closure and consolidation campaigns were launched by educational authorities in the first decades of the twentieth century (Nachtigal, 1982). It wasn't until the middle of the century, however, that bussing became a reality for the majority of rural communities in Canada. Before that, the absence of a decent network of roads made bussing difficult. Since that time, however, more and more small community schools have been "improved out of existence" (Mulcahy, 1996) resulting in increasing numbers of rural children riding the bus.

Rural communities value their local schools for what they can offer the children and for what they mean to the life and vitality of the community. Rarely does the initiative for closure emanate from the community; few schools close without resistance and opposition from rural citizens. Nevertheless, in the name of educational reform educational authorities have demanded that rural communities give up their local schools and agree to have their children bussed to another community. "Because policy makers focused on the benefits of school consolidation, however, they tended to overlook its drawbacks" (Ramage and Howley, 2005).

> Historically, increased student transportation has been the by product of school consolidation, but the cost of transportation is the most understudied issue in the consolidation debate. Rural children are most affected. They are the ones who most often have had their community schools closed. … Some research and much anecdotal evidence suggest that long bus rides have negative effects on family life, the ability of students to perform well in school, and students' abilities to fully participate in the school experience (Spence, 2000)

In some instances, the bus ride is relatively short. In the majority of cases, however, restructuring the educational system has resulted in more students spending increasing amounts of time riding the school bus.

Although the issue has been all but ignored by governments and educational researchers, rural parents and educators are well aware of the impact of long distance bussing on students (Mulcahy, 1996). When given the opportunity to speak on the matter they readily describe their concerns regarding the impact of long bus rides on their children's lives and their education (Mulcahy, 1999).

While they may acknowledge parents' concerns, educational authorities tend to give these concern little credence or legitimacy. The consistent argument put forward by school board and government officials is that by closing small schools and implementing long distance bussing, rural children will have access to, "the increased educational

opportunities available only in larger schools." This purported advantage of larger schools supposedly compensates for all of the expressed concerns of the parents. But does it?

> Although every school administrator and transportation coordinator I spoke with expressed concern about the costs—both financial and human—of the present system, none had examined the effects of bussing on children and families or had looked for correlation between school achievement, parent participation, dropout rates or attendance with the length of the bus rides (Zars, 1998).

## The Research Literature on Student Transportation

Despite the fact that millions of students of all ages are bussed to and from school in North America everyday and the cost of providing this service consumes a very significant portion of every districts budget, there is very little research into bussing and its effects on students and their families. Consequently, we do not know with any certainty, from a research perspective the effects of bussing. One has to wonder, given the extent of bussing, why this issue has not been more thoroughly investigated. Is it that the educational community is not interested in this issue? Is it that they just assume that, despite the many expressed concerns of parents and teachers, there are no problems? Or, is it that policy makers fear what a more rigorous program of research might reveal?

Parents have a right to be concerned with the potential impact of bussing on the quality of education their children receive. When faced with the potential closure of their community schools and the prospect of having their children bussed to distant schools parents raise many legitimate and important questions. What impact, they ask, will having to ride the bus to school have on their children's academic achievement and their ability to participate fully in the social life of the school? Parents also express concerns about the health and safety of their children and their ability to fully participate in family and community life. Unfortunately, definitive answers to these questions are not available.

The most heavily cited study in the literature was one completed more than 30 years ago by Lu and Tweeten (1973). They investigated the impact of bussing on student achievement in rural Oklahoma. They compared the academic achievement of 440 bussed and non-bussed students and determined that there was some association between longer bus rides and lower academic achievement as measured by standardized tests.

Perhaps the second most referenced study was completed by a geographer, not an educator. Michael Fox is a professor of Geography at Mount Alison University in New Brunswick. In 1996, he investigated the effects of long-distance bussing on children and their families. The focus of his study was the constraints bus rides put on students' lives. In this study he asked students what they would or could do with the time that they now

spend on the bus. Fox reported that students considered, "time on the bus as empty time, with few possible activities to engage in." If they could reclaim the time from the bus rides they would sleep more, engage in social and recreation activities and work. According to Fox,

> As time on the bus increases, students participate in fewer non essential activities (those activities other than sleep, personal care, school and bus ride). The individuals with large average times on a bus report lower grades and poorer levels of fitness, poorer study habits, fewer social activities and overall loss of sleep time." (Fox, 1996: 23)

A number of researchers highlight the fatigue factor that results in students being less attentive in school and less willing to put in extra time on home work assignments. Spence (2000) notes that long bus rides can affect the academic choices students make:

> "There's a myth you get a better education here," said a Webster County student. But he and his classmates say they avoid higher level classes because they don't have time to do the required homework. "I'm just involved in the basic classes it takes to get out of high school."

> A parent who attended the same high school offered an explanation. "The more advanced classes you take in high school, the more homework you have that evening. So you bring home five or six courses of homework in the evening and you're getting home at 6 or 6:30 anyway, it kind of depresses you and you don't have that zeal the following year to go the next step."

The amount of time and the distance traveled affect students and their families in a wide variety of ways. Fox (1996) made the following points in his study "Rural School Transportation as a Daily Constraint in Students' Lives:"

- Bussing times and distances affect activities such as homework, recreational activities, employment (ability to have a part time job) and especially sleep.
- Students living farther away from school must drop non essential activities from the lives to compensate for the time spent on the bus.
- Bussing affects the life of other members of the student's family in a variety of ways. The greater the time/distance the greater impact on the family. Interaction among and between family members is affected.
- "In general, there was a feeling that the time devoted to riding a bus was a great waste of physical and intellectual time. Regardless of distance, most students suggested that hey tend to do less homework than they would if they could walk to school"(p. 25)
- "They also suggest that the time devoted to travel causes fatigue so that they are not as attentive in school, nor are they as willing to put the required time and effort into their home work assignments. These factors will ultimately have a negative effect on grades" (p. 26).

- When students are bussed there is a disconnect between family and community and the new school. Families tend not to identify with the new school in the same way they did with their community school.
- Participation in extra-curricular activities declines steadily with increased distance from a school.

Fox's study clearly demonstrated that bussing has "direct and indirect effects" students and their families. The "social costs" of bussing must be considered by policy makers when considering implementing transportation policies in the future they should be guided by _human_ (original double emphasis) perceptions and behaviours"(1996: 27)

Howley and Howley (2001) make a strong case that certain inferences concerning the effects of bussing on student achievement especially the achievement of low socioeconomic students can be made from the emerging body of research on school size and achievement reviewed in an earlier section of this report.

> Findings from this research are relevant because shorter bus rides have been found to be positively associated with smaller school size (Howley et al., 2001). Moreover, attention to the achievement of low-SES students makes particular sense in rural locales, where so many families' incomes fall below the national median (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1998).

> As this literature shows, smaller size tends to improve the overall achievement of schools and districts serving large proportions of impoverished students (e.g., Bickel & Howley, 2000; Howley & Bickel, 1999). Although these studies use school- and district-level data, they do provide a reasonable basis for making inferences about how well low-income students who [are bussed so that they can] attend large, remote schools are likely to perform. _And this reasoning leads to the conclusion that such students' academic achievement is likely to suffer_ (Emphasis added).

## The voice of parents: The case of Newfoundland

Since 1996, rural community in Newfoundland and Labrador have faced constant pressures from the government and school districts to consolidate and close their small schools. Rural parents have had to deal with the continuing prospect of increased bussing and having their children spend increasing amounts of time riding the bus. Every year several more communities have to take up the battle their school.

During a series of public consultation sessions held in late 1996 and 1997, rural parents were given the opportunity to express their views and concerns about having their community schools closed and their children bussed to distant schools.

"Fighting to save their small schools was nothing new to the people of rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The history of rural education tells many stories of emotionally charged meetings where people expressed their feelings about losing their school. However, one very noticeable difference this time around was that feeling and emotion were supplemented with research data, critical questions, and well-argued and articulated positions. The rural schools the government was attempting to close produced a generation of parents very different from the previous one. There may have been less shouting and tears but there was a lot more facts, figures and informed opinion. They felt strongly about the issues as they have always done, but this time around their feelings were informed by facts, information and critical questions.

"In a government *Consultation Paper* (1996) there were two general proposals regarding student transportation: 1. More students will have to be bussed longer distances in the name of improved educational opportunities; 2. Existing bussing services for some students will be reduced in order to cut costs.

The "grass roots" perspective on student transportation was very different from that of government. The primary concerns of rural parents and educators focused on issues to do with safety and the negative impact of the current degree of bussing on children and their families. Their basic position was that too many students were now being bussed too far, and often on dangerous roads. They rejected the notion that increased bussing was necessarily the appropriate or the only way to improve educational opportunities for their children. They were critical of the proposed cuts to bussing services describing these as government's way of trying to save money by imposing hardships on rural children and their parents. Concerns raised by parents related to government's plans to increase bussing included issues to do with health and safety, broken promises about late and lunch time busses, impact on the students recreational opportunities, and students opportunities to take part in the social life of the school:

- A number of safety concerns were raised, including the lack of adult supervision on school buses and the need for seat belts and two-way radios. Many parents were concerned by the reduction in road maintenance and snow clearing they were noticing. The Department of Education should work closely with the Department of Works, Services and Transportation to ensure that bus routes are cleared of snow in the winter and that these routes are assigned priority for maintenance. Several presenters related examples of bus routes not being cleared in time for buses to reach schools before morning classes begin.
- In several areas of the province, over the last several years, school boards had promised to provide lunchtime bussing in order to get people to agree to close their community schools. This offer was made in the face of parental opposition based in part on the fact that the receiving school did not have proper lunch room facilities. Recent cuts in bussing provision had forced boards to renege on

lunchtime bussing. Several parents expressed their concerns about the safety and health of children eating at their desks. Many people felt that lunchrooms should be provided or lunch hour bussing be continued or re-established.

- There was concern expressed about younger children being so far from home. If they became ill, it might be difficult for parents to go and get them. Parents of children with special needs were especially concerned about the possibility of their children being bussed to distant communities. Several parents expressed the concern that mixed busloads of older and younger students had a negative impact on younger children. Older students often exposed younger children to ideas and language that their parents did not feel they were ready for.

- Bussed children do not have the option to linger after school to chat with a teacher or play with a friend. They do not have the opportunity to seek help from their teacher with something they are having difficulty with in one of their classes. Bussing negatively affects the quality of a child's life and the nature of his/her participation in the school. Because they are bussed, they may not be able to take part in the extra-curricular life of their new school. Sports teams, clubs and organizations, drama groups, and school choirs provide valuable educational experiences for our children. It is little wonder they lack a sense of belonging and ownership for the school.

- It was felt that longer bus rides would have a negative affect on student learning and, therefore, guidelines should be developed with the goal of keeping bus rides as short as possible. Many presenters noted that bussed students had reduced access to teachers and the fatigue factor from longer rides often inhibits their learning.

Rural citizens were generally critical of all government's proposed changes to the student transportation system. They saw them all for the most part as being primarily concerned with saving money for government at the cost of imposing hardship on students and their parents. Finally, several participants linked their concerns about bussing directly to their argument for maintaining small community schools. The more community schools we have and maintain the less need there is to bus children. Community schools enable children, especially younger children, to be educated close to home and not to have to endure long, tiresome and sometimes dangerous bus rides. Participants in this study encouraged authorities to spend money on resources for community schools not busses to take children away from the community (Mulcahy, 1999).

## Concerns about Safety

U.S. researcher Belle Zars (1998) notes that, "Statistics on school buses tend to focus on the health of the bus rather than the health of the students who ride them. Those statistics that are gathered focus on tragic accidents and only offer peripheral discussion of broader issues of safety. On average 41 children die each year in school bus related accidents. About three fourths of these children are hit by the bus while they are either entering or leaving" (Zars, 1998).

Transport Canada (2006) provides this data on school bus accidents over the 10-year period, 1988 to 1997:

- A total of 29,488 school buses were involved in 29,193 collisions – 177 fatal, 5,659 personal-injury and 23,357 property-damage collisions.
- School bus collisions have resulted in 204 fatalities and 10,480 injuries – an average of 20 fatalities and 1,048 injuries per year.
- Of the 204 total fatalities, eight were school bus occupants (less than 19 years old) – an average of one death per year. Five of these eight fatalities occurred between 1989 to 1991; the remaining three occurred in 1994.
- The 5,836 casualty-producing collisions (i.e. fatal and injury-producing) involving at least one school bus represent approximately 0.3 percent of the 1,734,244 casualty-producing collisions involving all vehicle types.

Just as we wrote these notes (March 6, 2006), we heard this disturbing news on CBC radio in St. John's:

A routine school bus ride for some Mount Pearl students turned into an unforgettable moment, when a fire quickly turned the bus into an inferno. The bus was on its way to O'Donel High School when smoke started coming from a heater. "When I got on my bus, it was already smoking, and it got to the point where we had to get off just a little ways up from my house," said student Danielle Verstege. Within five or 10 minutes, the bus turned into an inferno, stunning the students. Verstege felt the outcome might have been different. "We wouldn't even be here right now. It was kind of amazing," she said.

Darin King, the chief executive officer of the Eastern School District, said bus fires are rare, and is grateful everyone acted quickly.
"We're very lucky that the personnel involved here – the driver and those who helped from outside the bus – were very focused and very quick to focus on the safety of the children," King said.

Meanwhile, Denise Pike, the president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, said she was not surprised that a school bus caught fire. Pike said the federation has been expecting something like this to happen. "School bus safety hasn't been a priority in this province. For years, we've been buying up buses from other provinces that they've thrown out as garbage, [that] they've discarded," she said.

Imagine if this bus had been more crowded or had been full of younger children or if the fire had spread more quickly! We seem to be prepared to take some terrible risks with the lives of our children.

## Adult supervision

Another area of concern is the lack of supervision on the school bus. Children cannot be left alone in the classroom or in any other part of the school; they cannot be left alone on the playground. They must be escorted by an adult to and from the bus. However, there is no adult supervision on the bus other than the driver whose responsibility and total attention has to be, as it should, and on driving the bus. It is somewhat ironic and puzzling why this condition is permitted.

Several researchers have reported on the concerns expressed by parents and students regarding what happens, and what could happen in this largely unsupervised environment. Fox reports that in the view of parents bussing children different ages together "forces children into a very unnatural social group situation and parents worry about the development of children in such situations, with specific concerns over the use of drugs, violence and psycho-social maladjustments that may develop" (1997: 27). Anecdotal reports of sexual harassment abound. Other researchers report similar findings:

> And of course everywhere there is a plethora of stories about sex, sexual harassment, fires and violent fights on school buses. Obviously, bus drivers are not in a position to effectively supervise children while they are driving a 5-10 ton vehicle. Nor are they typically trained in classroom management strategies (Zars (1998).

> A Preston County high school student recounted incidents that put a bus load of students at risk. "I've seen people light fires on the bus, have matches and cigarette lighters. I've seen people cut seats on the bus, fight on the bus, and stick metal objects in the heater at the back of the bus. A lot of things happen on the bus that the bus driver doesn't realize (Spence, 2000).

Ramage and Howley (2005) reported that parents had particular concerns related to the fact that long bus rides exposed their young children to the unsuitable language and behavior of older students. The "lack of supervision made the bus an unruly place".

> Because younger children were required to ride the bus with older students for relatively long periods of time each day, parents were concerned about the influence the older students would have on the younger ones. As one parent noted, "there are too many other bad kids ... [and] not many good influences.

> Parents also reported that they were concerned about their younger children being exposed to the more "adult" topics discussed among the older children. They mentioned profanity and the sexual content of the language used by older children as the most objectionable behaviors of the older students. One parent explained that with "lack of supervision ... [her children] experienced sexual and physical harassment by many other

[students]." Another discussed the fact that her children had been exposed to "vulgar language" and explained that they routinely were "being picked on [and] called names." Ramage and Howley (2005: 16-17)

In recent years the issue of bullying has become prominent in educational discourse and practice. We have come to understand that bullying is no longer something that can be swept under the educational carpet and ignored. It is a problem which is fundamental to teaching and learning in schools. Children who come to school in fear suffer consequences that researchers are only beginning to understand. Recent cases such as the Columbine shootings, the shooting in Taber Alberta, the Reena Virk murder in Victoria BC all highlight the centrality of the problem of school bullying. Increasingly, the profile of the issue of unsupervised conditions on school busses has become important. School jurisdictions are beginning to understand that school busses are spaces in which a wide range of violent, abusive, dangerous and inappropriate behaviors can and do occur.

In research in rural southwestern Nova Scotia, several informants described the daily school bus ride to the regional secondary school as an experience that was significantly marked by intimidation, racism, sexism and ongoing bullying that led many students to drop out of school (Corbett, 2001). Even more extreme forms of violence have occurred such as a hostage taking in rural British Columbia. A case in point:

> In May 1996 in rural British Columbia, Canada, six Osoyoos Elementary School students and their bus driver were taken hostage by two gun-toting teens. It took more than three tense hours of negotiations - as the bus sped along the highway - for police to convince the hijackers to park and surrender (Careless, 2005: 6)

Many school jurisdictions now use video surveillance in busses to monitor student behavior and what this surveillance is uncovering in the mainstream media is predictably frightening. For example, in April of 2004, bus cameras caught a brutal beating of a fourteen year old Quebec student by a seventeen year old in which the younger boy sustained a concussion and a damaged eye socket after sustaining at least 27 blows (Montreal Gazette, April 24, 2004, p.A19).

Surveillance tools like the "digital chaperone," which is a black box hard drive video recorder are now sold to an increasingly ready marketplace (Anonymous, 2005). British Columbia technology company *Silent Wireless* marketed more than 100 000 digital chaperone systems in the North American market alone Canada NewsWire. Ottawa: May 6, 2002. pg. 1). By 2002 the use of video surveillance to curb bad behavior and bullying was widespread in British Columbia, Ontario and Alberta ([Final Edition], The Ottawa Citizen. Ottawa, Ont.: Jan 22, 2002. pg. C.6).

Given this level of concern it is indeed remarkable that there currently exists so little solid academic research into the experience of young people on school busses. What is undeniable is that safety issues and bullying are risk factors that are increased as the amount of time students spend on school busses.

## A barrier to full participation in the life of the school

School buses leave the school immediately at the end of the instructional day. Most are out of the parking lot within 10 minutes of the final bell. Unless students have an alternative way home, they must leave when the bus leaves. There are several serious consequences for students here. They cannot stay after school to seek extra help from teachers or attend after school tutorial sessions. They cannot avail themselves of the library and other learning resources that may be available at the school after the end of the school day. Both of these matters may have serious academic consequences for students. Most extra curricular activities and sport team practices take place either after school or before school starts in the morning. Unless students have their own transportation to and from school it is impossible for bussed students to take part in these activities.

It was noted in an earlier section of this report that the extracurricular opportunities afforded to students in a small school was a definite factor in their attitude towards school, their feeling of belonging and their willingness to stay in school. This in turn was a contributing factor in their academic achievement. Students who have to ride the bus to school have severe constraints placed on their opportunities to participate in the social life of the school. Ironically, most bussed students rarely get to benefit from the purported benefits of larger schools.

## Conclusion

There is one point made consistently in the literature: we do not know with certainty very much about impact of bussing on the quality of education or life of the students who ride the bus.

> Despite the fact that for more than half a century generations of rural children have been riding school buses, educators know very little about that experience from the perspective of communities, families, or students. Important questions, however, concern the length of rides experienced by rural students, the effects of those rides on school participation and academic achievement, and the impact of widespread school bussing on rural ways of life (Howley & Howley, 2001)

"Anecdotes abound and nearly everyone who has ridden a school bus has an opinion and a story to tell. But research is scarce and where it exists on school bussing in this country, insubstantial" (Zars, 1998).

Since the inception of bussing as an instrument of small school closure and consolidation most educational authorities and policy makers have taken it for granted that whatever hardship bussing imposes on students it is fair price to pay for the purported benefits that the larger school has to offer. However, these taken for granted assumptions have never been investigated. We have no proof that bussing improves educational matters for students.

On the other hand, in more recent times parents and rural education researchers are becoming increasingly aware how big a price students may have to pay by having to ride the bus. They also are questioning just what the benefits may actually turn out to be especially for those students who do not have alternative ways to or home from school. In the absence of clear evidence one way or the other regarding the effects of bussing educational authorities can make one of two decisions. They can continue to assume that bussing has no negative consequences for students and continue to close community schools and bus students to larger schools.

Alternatively, they could consider declaring a moratorium on any school closure that involves students having to spend any more than one hour (30 minutes each way) on a bus. While we do not know much about the impact of bussing, we do have solid evidence that small community schools are quite viable and valuable educational sites. Indeed they are the envy of many whose children attend larger impersonal institutions. Given these two points, the wiser and more enlightened decision, for the sake of the children, may be to stay with the status quo for now.

As we demonstrate in this chapter, apart from the issue of bussing, there are a number of good reasons to reconsider closing small schools on the basis of the additional program opportunities purported to be available in more distant and larger schools. As Gillis cautions (2005), closing a key institution (and often the last key institution) in an economically disadvantaged community is a decision that should not be taken lightly. School closure in a rural village is not the same as a school closure in a city or even in a large town in which other institutional supports remain close at hand.

The identification of school closures with progress, administrative efficiency and even with scientific advancement has been the principal justification for shutting down rural schools. This is not good enough, and, as we have shown, the transition from input studies to outcome analysis has shifted contemporary policy thinking about small schools in the last several decades. The actual evidence we have examined points clearly toward the advantages of small schools rather than their disadvantages for student achievement, social cohesion and generally accepted quality educational outcomes. It is our view then that educational decision-makers ought to be thinking about how to keep small rural schools open so that larger schools can learn from them.

We have reviewed the work of Howley and others who have demonstrated that in economically disadvantaged areas, small schools are one of the few structural mechanisms that have been proven to counteract the negative educational consequences of poverty. The argument that because a community is in economic decline, because it is experiencing outmigration, or because its residents have low levels of formal education themselves, is from our perspective, no reason for closing a school. We would argue exactly the opposite point. In a compassionate society that is committed to social justice, it makes sense to give the best institutional support to those who need it most. It makes no sense to deprive a struggling community of the institution that is the community's best hope for improvement.

We would like to end by amplifying a point made earlier in the chapter. While larger schools may offer more programs, only a small proportion of the student body actually benefit from many of these offerings. For instance, sports teams are more competitive in larger schools and popular academic and specialty courses fill up quickly and may not be open to all students. Small schools, on the other hand, may offer fewer programs in terms of quantity, but they tend to be much more inclusive and in many cases (if not most or even all cases) are open to all students. To return to our restaurant analogy, what good is a comprehensive menu if you can not get the dish you would like?

# Part B
# Analysis of data from two rural schools

> Schools and elevators matter in rural Alberta. They have mattered for a long time, much more than if they were merely facilities for the delivery of curriculum or grain. Schools and elevators have been central to traditions of local governance and cooperative enterprise. In different ways they have served as meeting places and as measures of a community's prospect. Their disappearance from the landscape in waves of efficiency-driven consolidation evokes deep fears of obsolescence in turn (Epp, 2001: 302).

> Demographic realities of sparcity require young people to be mobile to receive their education and frequently to move from a rural to an urban environment. Yet the lack of recognition of the different worlds of city and country can act as a barrier to learning. In the rural communities, with small primary and secondary schools, children are likely to experience school as an extension of family and village life, while the larger post 16 institution in an urban setting can appear a more impersonal experience (Ranson, 2000: 11).

## Introduction

The purpose of this section of the report is to present and analyze data from the survey, interviews and focus groups conducted at River Hebert District High School. In Chapter 1 we introduced the methodology used in this research which employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. In this chapter we will present and analyze the data from the surveys supplemented with focus group data.

In Chapter 2 we discussed the broad goals of the Public School Program of the province of Nova Scotia. In the PSP the Department of Education outlines the skills, orientations and attitudes that graduates ought to acquire. These are laid out in terms of six essential graduation learnings delineated in the curriculum framework documents of the Atlantic Provinces Educational Foundation, an umbrella group that works to foster cooperation between the education ministries of the Atlantic Provinces, to share resources and to work toward common curriculum and assessment.

The essential graduation learnings framework seeks to have the schools produce a particular kind of graduate, one who is prepared for full participation in an evolving society in Nova Scotia, and who is also prepared to take his or her place in any contemporary society. The public school program, in short, is dedicated to preparing all students for a "lifetime of learning" (PSP: A3). Rather than articulate some concrete

standard of achievement, the PSP recognizes that there are a variety of students in the public schools of Nova Scotia and that the future into which these students emerge at the end of a public school education is continually evolving.

This vision is inclusive and it assumes that different people will have different life courses. Logically, they will learn different things in the course of their lives and each of their individual lives will provide students with a curriculum that is rooted in the contexts toward which they gravitate. Put simply, the public school program seems to recognize and value multiple paths and multiple forms of learning. The vision of an educated person delineated in the PSP is an active, competent, engaged, lifelong learner.

> Our vision of an educated person is that of a competent, confident learner able to think critically and participate fully in a democratic society and a lifetime of meaningful work. A sound education provided in partnership with the home and the community forms the basis for students to become healthy and caring persons having respect for self and others and a desire to contribute to society as productive citizens (Nova Scotia, 2003: A3).

Our reading of the broad goals of the public school program conceptualizes a successful education as the accomplishment of a confident competence in a student's life context. This means that a successful education is one that results in an individual living successfully in a community, be it in a rural community, an urban or a suburban space, be it here in Nova Scotia, or in another part of the world. The vision of an educated person is inclusive in the sense that it can be accomplished by an individual who carries on learning in the "informal" community-based learning contexts of work and recreation, or in "formal" postsecondary contexts of higher education. A person does not need to go to university or community college to be considered an educated person in the broad vision of the PSP.

Given that the broad goals of the PSP articulate an educational experience that leads to a set of life practices, we have decided to focus on young people who have completed a formal education at each of the two schools under review for closure. Have the young people completing the prescribed educational program in each of these schools actually succeeded in achieving the broad goals of the PSP?

# Chapter 4
# River Hebert District High School

## The Composition and Educational/Employment Status of the Sample

Before elaborating the results of the life outcomes survey with respect to the goals of the PSP we will report on the composition of the survey sample. While there is a great deal of broad-brush demographic analysis of rural communities in terms of educational and employment outcomes of local populations, there has been relatively little close-up analysis of the educational, employment and migration patterns of youth who grew up in specific rural communities. Corbett (2005b, 2006a, forthcoming) argues that this creates the general impression that rural communities are in permanent decline and that the young people living in them are victims the relatively low levels of educational attainment in the communities in which they grow up (Alasia, 2003). For example, when Statistics Canada reports that 41% of rural Nova Scotians have not graduated high school (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2003: 38), or when the newly formed Canadian Council on Learning proclaims that dropout rates are higher and educational achievement is lower in rural areas (2006), it is easy to imagine that educational performance in rural communities is weak. The difficulty is that the catch-all category of "rural" is a statistical construction itself and one that contains a multitude of different kinds of communities, experience, opportunity structures, outmigration pressure, and educational performance.

What large statistical studies do not show is whether or not growing up in a particular rural community is necessarily an impediment to a young person's education. Many rural youth are highly motivated educationally and they use this motivation to leave their communities (Corbett 2001, 2004a, 2005a, 2006). Where do they go? How do they fair educationally and in terms of other important life outcomes? Few studies actually investigate the real educational trajectories of rural youth, either in terms of participation in higher education, or in employment outcomes. The only groups in a position to fund this level of research choose instead to publish British-style "league tables" of school rankings, based upon highly questionable data that provides a bizarre and simplistic picture of school performance (Curtwill and Audas, 2006; see Corbett 2004b for a critique of the AIMS school ranking project). Additionally, we can find no evidence that anyone has yet asked questions about how well student populations have faired in terms of achieving the broad goals of public school education. In this chapter we perform this level of analysis for River Hebert District High School (RHDH).

The River Hebert sample was randomly selected from the graduating classes of 1995 through 2005 (N=300). It was our intention to sample one-quarter of the target population (N=75). We were able to contact and conduct telephone interviews with 63 individuals. Table 1 shows the composition of the sample by year of graduation. We weighted the sample slightly in favor of more recent graduates of RHDH because the experience of these students would be more representative of current conditions in the school.

**Table 1-R**
**Sample by year of graduation**

|      | Frequency | Percent |
|------|-----------|---------|
| 1995 | 5         | 7.9     |
| 1996 | 3         | 4.8     |
| 1997 | 3         | 4.8     |
| 1998 | 4         | 6.3     |
| 1999 | 4         | 6.3     |
| 2000 | 6         | 9.5     |
| 2001 | 4         | 6.3     |
| 2002 | 7         | 11.1    |
| 2003 | 8         | 12.7    |
| 2004 | 10        | 15.9    |
| 2005 | 9         | 14.3    |
| Total| 63        | 100.0   |

**Table 2-R**
**Sample by sex**

|        | Frequency | Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| Female | 35        | 55.6    |
| Male   | 28        | 44.4    |
| Total  | 63        | 100.0   |

Although we controlled the sample for sex we were more successful finding and interviewing women.  Table 2-R shows the composition of the sample by sex.  Table 3-R shows the current employment and educational status of people in the sample.  Predictably, the majority are in the workforce, with a strong minority of younger more recent graduates still engaged in postsecondary studies.  Only one individual in the sample was unemployed which was unexpected given the level of youth unemployment both nationally and provincially.

**Table 3-R          Employment/educational status**

|                          | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Unemployed               | 1         | 1.6     |
| Attending post-secondary | 21        | 33.3    |
| In the workforce         | 41        | 65.1    |
| Total                    | 63        | 100.0   |

In terms of their present location, Table 4-R shows that a majority of individuals in the sample have remain with Cumberland County (57.1%) and a strong majority is still living in Nova Scotia (84.1%).  Given the age of these young people it is difficult to generalize very much form these findings.  Much of the sample is still pursuing postsecondary education and is in a transitional stage of life generally, this location profile could change considerably in the coming years.  What it does demonstrate though is that while the majority of youth in the River Hebert area leaves the community for employment and post secondary study, a large portion of this young population appears to be remaining fairly close to home.

**Table 4-R**          **Present location**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Within RHDH catchment area | 22 | 34.9 |
| Cumberland County | 14 | 22.2 |
| Other Nova Scotia | 17 | 27.0 |
| Atlantic Canada | 4 | 6.3 |
| Other Canada | 6 | 9.5 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

There are a considerable number of myths about postsecondary participation rates in Nova Scotia's schools.  There is little good data in Nova Scotia that tracks young people from secondary school through to work experience and the data that do exist on post secondary participation of Nova Scotia's graduates are haphazard and highly unreliable (Corbett, 2004b).  So while one "think tank" actually ranks postsecondary participation rates in the province's public schools (Audas and Curtwill, 2006), the data upon which these rankings are calculated are highly problematic.  We offer a close look at the actual postsecondary participation for our sample of RHDH graduates in the classes of 1995 through 2005. Table 5-R details the highest level of education achieved by members of the sample.  Nearly 80% of the sample has participated in some form of post-secondary education, a rate which considerably better than the national average.  Remarkably, 73% of the total sample has participated in traditional postsecondary education (university or community college).[5]

**Table 5-R**          **Highest level of educational participation**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| High school graduation | 13 | 20.6 |
| Private training | 4 | 6.3 |
| Community college | 24 | 38.1 |
| University | 22 | 34.9 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

When the sample is disaggregated to highlight the experience of the most recent graduates (RHDH classes of 2003, 2004, 2005 - the population roughly comparable to the 18-21 year old group analyzed by the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation Junior and Usher, 2004), we found that post secondary participation rates were more than double national and provincial averages (See Table 6-R).   63% of recent RHDH graduates in this sample are at present (February 2006) participating  in post secondary education compared to 33.9% of Canadian youth and 43.1% of Nova Scotian youth aged 18-21 (2002-2003).   In other words, even though Nova Scotia has the highest

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[5] While the calculation of "dropout" and graduation rates is fraught with difficulties, bad data, and inconsistencies in methods of calculation, it appears from the RHDH school closure study committee report that graduation rates for the school are comparable with CCRSB and provincial rates.

postsecondary participation rate in Canada, and even given that River Hebert is a relatively isolated rural community, our postsecondary participation rate data for the recent graduates of this high school show that these students are participating at a rate that is 46% higher than the provincial postsecondary participation rate and 86% higher than the national rate.

**Table 6-R**                   **Employment/educational status of recent graduates (2003-2005)**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Post secondary studies | 17 | 63.0 |
| In the workforce | 10 | 37.0 |
| Total | 27 | 100.0 |

There are, of course, many ways to explain this finding. It is probably that given the limited economic opportunities in the local area, many young people are compelled to move on to postsecondary study. What these data demonstrate though is that their high school preparation has certainly prepared a large proportion of these students to access higher education. These early stage life outcomes for graduates of RHDH are impressive.

In the next section we analyze the results of the life outcomes survey as they relate to the broad goals of the PSP. While we established in the previous section that graduates of RHDH over the past ten years have moved successfully into the workforce and have participated in postsecondary education at levels significantly about the provincial and national averages, the question remains as to whether or not these young people have met the broad goals of the PSP. It is conceivable that despite their educational and employment success, these youth encounter literacy difficulties, a deficit of life skills and difficulty interacting with others. The vision of education articulated in the PSP is much broader than simple success in education and in work.

## The Life Outcomes Survey and the Broad Goals of the Public School Program of Nova Scotia

The survey instrument we developed takes the values articulated in the broad goals of the PSP and operationalizes them into a 33 item questionnaire (See Appendix B). The first six questions ask former students about their current formal and informal educational attainment, educational goals and current employment status. The remaining 27 questionnaire items probe various values articulated in the broad goals of the public school program. These questions use a five point Likert scale to gauge attitudes. We have organized our analysis of these questions into the following seven thematic sections.

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1. **Caring for the self and meeting individual needs**
2. **Caring for immediate others – relationships**
3. **Caring for distant others – citizenship**
4. **Communication – math, language, aesthetic expression**
5. **A balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities**
6. **Problem solving and the application of appropriate techniques and technologies to these problems through the life course**
7. **A school that works well within its community**

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In this discussion we will link each theme with the specific survey questions that we used to access the specific attributes. The language for many of the questions was derived directly from the PSP itself.

## Caring for the self  and meeting individual needs
## (Survey questions: 4, 14, 15, 16, and 18)

> *Parent 1: It's the time that the teachers spend with them. They care about the kids and it shows. It's shown all through the years. When you say "teacher" that means something. And those kids are learning that teacher means feeling safe learning things and going to a person to ask questions. They've been taught that here.*
>
> *Parent 2: In Amherst when a kid has trouble they say, "go get a tutor." Well …*
>
> *Parent 3: Who can afford a tutor?  You know what I'm saying.*
>
> *Parent 1: Here we don't need tutors for our kids, we've got teachers who take the time.*

The PSP has at its core the idea that each student is an individual with specific needs. In the end, a public school education should provide each child with the ability to

understand who he or she is and be able to take this understanding and fashion a healthy life in the broadest sense of the term. This vision is consistent with some of the most powerful research in the philosophy of education and in educational theory. Nel Noddings (1984, 1992) makes the case that schools are fundamentally about teaching young people how to care and that all of our core social institutions actually rely upon the school's ability to teach caring. According to Noddings, the first level of caring is care for the self.

This may sound somewhat idealistic and ethereal, but in the Nova Scotia PSP, the values of caring are very prominent. This is how the PSP articulates as a broad goal the importance of care of the self.

> Fundamental … is the development of each child's self-esteem. Self-esteem is most effectively fostered by a learner centered school environment that provides opportunities for all students to experience success from a variety of achievements. This success should enable learners to build confidence regarding their abilities and competencies, and more importantly, foster an image of themselves as persons of dignity and value who deserve self-respect (PSP: A3).

We investigated the care for the self dimension through four specific questions. The first two of these address the experience of students in school. The PSP states that it is important that school personnel attempt to support the self-esteem and self-respect of the student. Table 7-R shows that majority of former students surveyed strongly agree that their self-esteem and self-respect were supported at RHDH. The vast majority of the sample (88.9%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that they were respected and that the development of their self-esteem was supported at RHDH

**Table 7-R          Self-esteem and self-respect**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 1.6     |
| Disagree                   | 2         | 3.2     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 4         | 6.3     |
| Agree                      | 17        | 27.0    |
| Strongly agree             | 39        | 61.9    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

Similarly, in response to the question concerning whether or not former students felt valued at school, an even stronger majority either strongly agreed or agreed (see Table 8-R). In fact, only three individuals in the entire sample (4.8%) indicated any negative feelings around this question. The PSP has as a broad goal the principle that learners will feel valued in a climate of respect (NS Government, 2004: A3). There is no question that this goal was met for the vast majority of RHDH graduates.

**Table 8-R**     **Feeling valued at school**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                   | 2         | 3.2     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2         | 3.2     |
| Agree                      | 22        | 34.9    |
| Strongly agree             | 37        | 58.7    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

Responses to the two questions above indicate that former students feel rather strongly that they were valued at school.  School was experienced by more than 90% of students as a place where they felt important.  This sentiment is supported by focus group data in which parents and students commented consistently and often about the way that teachers were able to meet individual needs and understand the deep community knowledge necessary to deliver effective education.

> *Parent 1: The teachers know that if there's anything they need, anything like with the teacher appreciation, Home and School Advisory Council, all they have to do is call and if that doesn't have it the next person will you know, or can lend a hand to do something.  I mean we're all friends; like that's basically what it is, everybody's friends.*
>
> *Parent 2: Well they know enough too if one of the children is having a bad day they know, well such and such might have happened this week and they would know that so they would take that into consideration.  You know maybe if they acted out one day instead of sending them automatically to the office or that they know what's going on in their lives to be able to adjust.*
>
> *Parent 3: Gauge their moods.*
>
> *Parent 2: Yes.*
>
> *Parent 1: I guess what we're saying is that kids just don't get lost in the crowd here.*
>
> *Parent 2: Yes.*

On the subject of individual needs, focus group members consistently reinforced the idea that meeting the needs of individuals is what really marks RHDH as special.  Rather than being a large impersonal institution, RHDH has a family-like atmosphere where teachers know students very well and work with them over a period of more than one year.  Because of strong community involvement on the part of teachers and strong involvement in school activities and projects on the part of community members and parents, teachers know a great deal about their students and the contexts in which these

students live.  Because of this deep knowledge, community members, students and teachers are in agreement that RHDH teachers are well positioned to deal effectively with the diverse needs of the students they teach.

> *Well, the student teacher ratio I mean it's usually one teacher to twenty students.  That gives us an opportunity to check in individually with each student.  At least you know every day you can have a  short discussion about homework, procedures in class, anything that they're not understanding.  So on the front line you get a good gauge as to how things are a generally going and what kind of grasp they a have on the curriculum … (I) also give little in-house quizzes, you know, little sound bits to gauge the class … you can kind of tailor the program for those kids if there are students with special needs. (Teacher)*

This is a theme that will be repeated in later sections and generally makes the case that personalized relationships are possible because of the size of the school and the traditions of education and extracurricular involvement at RHDH.  Table 8A-R shows that nearly 90% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that their individual needs were met at RHDH.  This indicates that a small rural high school may actually be able to meet individual needs better than a large program-rich and specialist-filled town, urban or suburban school.  This ought to caution the Board around something that people in rural communities have known for years and that is: it takes a village to raise a child and not a few extra programs.

**Table 8A-R          I feel as though my individual needs as a learner
                   were met at RHDH**

|                              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree            | 2         | 3.2     |
| Disagree                     | 1         | 1.6     |
| Neither agree nor disagree   | 5         | 7.9     |
| Agree                        | 22        | 34.9    |
| Strongly agree               | 33        | 52.4    |
| Total                        | 63        | 100.0   |

Contemporary education systems have become increasingly concerned with the physical and mental health of children and youth.  Work in the field of population health has demonstrated that not only is a healthy society essential to the creation of a strong workforce, but also that educated people tend to make healthier lifestyle choices (Canadian Health Network, 2005).  This linkage has not been lost on the administrators of the province's schools.  The province has recently launched a series of health promotion initiatives outlined in the Department of Education's most recent policy direction statement under the major theme: "Developing Healthy and Active Learners" (Nova Scotia, 2005: 16-20).

**Table 9-R**  **Knowledge and ability to maintain health**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1         | 1.6     |
| Agree                      | 17        | 27.0    |
| Strongly agree             | 45        | 71.4    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

Table 9-R indicates that virtually all former graduates feel as though they have acquired the knowledge and ability to maintain their personal health, a core component of any conception of care for the self. Given the small size of the school and the close relationships between students, teachers and the community at large this is strong support for the link between care for the self and the quality and depth of the school and community relationships described in focus groups.

> *The kids here are encouraged to keep on trying and keep on going versus in a large school they're a number…its like: "Well OK, that one dropped out." Here if there's that threat the teachers are: "Well OK now we can work on this and we'll help you and you know you can always come back too." I've heard the principal say that a lot of times, "You can always come back. You know you can always come back to it and do it again." You know there's a lot of encouragement here from the community and from the families and from the teachers to keep on trying versus be forgotten about. (Parent)*

**Table 10-R**  **I am knowledgeable enough to make good life decisions**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1         | 1.6     |
| Agree                      | 14        | 22.2    |
| Strongly agree             | 48        | 76.2    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

Perhaps the most ambitious broad goal of the PSP is the idea that students will leave school with the knowledge they need to make good quality decisions in their lives. The ability to achieve this is obviously a challenge for each of us, but it is the intention of the PSP to give students the kind of school experiences that will allow them to make good decisions in their lives. Once again our data reveal in Table 10-R that virtually all respondents regardless of their individual educational trajectories feel as though they have satisfied this ambitious goal of the PSP.

*Personally I think the school has done wonders for me, myself. I am originally from xxxx (Atlantic Canadian city), so I had the experience of a bigger school, and the transition to the smaller school. I found it a lot easier to learn in the small school. There are a lot smaller classrooms, and a lot more one-on-one with your teachers as opposed to being a number. So I personally valued the small class as opposed to the bigger one. I didn't do as well in the bigger school as I did in the smaller one. So all in all I think it definitely prepared me. (Graduate)*

*I only went to River Hebert my last two years, like grade 11 and 12. I went to ARHS until then, and there was a huge difference. I didn't do well in Amherst, in school. The teachers didn't seem to have the time or the patience or the knowledge to intervene and just know that you were having problems with your school work. They didn't really seem to care whether or not you were having problems with your school work. And when I went to River Hebert the teachers just knew, and they took an active role in making sure that you know they stayed after class with you if you needed to get the extra help. It was just a huge difference. And I think that when you go to a small school it is easier to learn because you do have smaller classes and the teachers do have more time to sit with you and help you. The values are just better in a smaller school. It was probably the best thing, in my life, for me to go there. (Graduate)*

## Caring for immediate others
## (Survey questions: 9, 10 and 21)

*It was a smaller school so you had a lot of interaction with people ... If you're in a small environment you get to meet more people. Actually it's kind of like here (Atlantic university), because it's a small university and you meet a lot of people and I thought it just prepares you more for life like interaction-wise. (Graduate)*

A second global theme in the broad goals of the PSP is the idea that a successfully educated person will leave school possessing the ability and the inclination to care for immediate others. Not only do young people need to be educated to position themselves in society as individuals who feel good about themselves and who are capable of achieving their own goals, they also need to understand that they live in the world amongst others and that this implies responsibility beyond simple care for the self. The PSP recognizes that a well-rounded education is one that is fundamentally social. Experiences in school ought to help young people acquire the ability and desire to interact with and care for those people they encounter on a day to day basis. These are our "immediate others."

**Table 11-R          Ability to work effectively and cooperatively with others**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2 | 3.2 |
| Agree | 20 | 31.7 |
| Agree Strongly | 41 | 65.1 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

When we asked this question to members of the sample, virtually all respondents reported that they were capable of working effectively and cooperatively with people in their lives. None of the respondents disagreed with the statement, indicating that this group as a whole has learned to function in immediate relationships. "Working with other" though might imply an emphasis on the more anonymous human relationships in institutions or in work situations.   We also asked more specifically about caring in intimate relationships.  Table 12-R shows results that are identical to those in question 11.  It appears from these data that young people have indeed learned to deal quite effectively with their intimate relationships.

**Table 12-R          I consider myself to be a caring person**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2 | 3.2 |
| Agree | 20 | 31.7 |
| Agree strongly | 41 | 65.1 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

To answer questions such as the ones reported in Tables 11-R and 12-R is one thing, but to really understand how schooling has contributed to the development of a caring way of being in the world is more difficult to establish.  In the focus groups and open-ended responses to the survey there was strong support for the contribution that life at RHDH has made to the development of caring people.

Caring for intimate others and getting along in institutions and at work are important to meeting the broad goals of the PSP, but something more is demanded.  This is articulated this way in the PSP: "Students need well-developed organizational and interpersonal skills, which include working collaboratively with other and developing leadership skills" (Nova Scotia Government, 2004: A3).  Leaders are often difficult to find in communities and the PSP is typically ambitious in the expectation that the public schools ought to help all students develop leadership skills.  Table 13-R demonstrates that a strong majority of graduates of RHDH have taken on leadership roles in their communities.  Only 8% or five individuals report that they have not taken on leadership roles in their adult lives.

**Table 13-R          I have taken leadership roles in my community**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 2 | 3.2 |
| Disagree | 3 | 4.8 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 13 | 20.6 |
| Agree | 22 | 34.9 |
| Agree strongly | 23 | 36.5 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

But how does this translate into actual social commitments in the context of community, and how can it be shown that this level of civic participation has resulted from educational experiences?  Comments from focus groups and open-ended survey questions support the conclusion that RHDH actually provides most youth with leadership and participation opportunities that would be unavailable in a larger school.  It is probable that school size is powerfully correlated with opportunities for leadership.  RHDH teachers, students, parents and grandparents are unanimous in their belief that students will have less opportunity for participation in  wide range of extracurricular activities should they be bussed out of their communities for high school.

> *Now I've been here twenty-five years and I've coached basketball for twenty–five years.   That's hard to believe (laughter) and what I'm saying is that in twenty-five years I've never turned a kid away.  Never.  They don't know what it feels like not to make a team.  And they travel you know and it's just different altogether than what (pause) people don't understand that.  You know I heard in town (Amherst) last year someone said to me, "You know my kid didn't play last year, they sat on the bench, they were the twelfth person on the team.  They get turned off and all of a sudden what's going to happen here, you've got that plus you've got the fact that they have to travel there and get somebody to pick them up and all of that on the other side (pause) I don't know what's going to happen. (Teacher)*

The community-based infrastructure of activity that operates out of RHDH is a crucible of leadership training and volunteer experience for young people and a venue for elders to pass on their own commitments to community.  We believe that it is safe to say that RHDH is the place that established and continues to maintain the institutional structure upon with civil society in River Hebert is built.[6]  There is no question that leadership

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[6] The institution of the rural high school itself is an important historical landmark.  It should be noted that RHDH, which was constructed in 1947, was the first district rural high school in the province.  One important aspect of the history of the modernization of rural Nova Scotia in the two decades after World War 2 lives on in the building and in the work done in this school.  High School construction along with paved roads, social security and modern hospitals formed the institutional bedrock that transformed the province into a modern society.  We believe there is a case for making the school a provincial heritage site, a point which we address in the concluding chapter.

opportunities will be seriously diminished and we encountered numerous eloquent testimonies to the importance of intergenerational collaboration and the way that school sports, cadets, and other community-school activities provide the youth of River Hebert with opportunities for caring for and supporting immediate others in their school community. The importance of one-on-one attention was echoed consistently by teachers, students and parents alike.

> *Well, I would say they prepared me because in a small school you get definitely much more one-on-one with teachers. They definitely do- the teachers that I had going there- they definitely make you feel very valued. They try to let you find yourself and discover what you would do best in. They are very supportive. I don't know. To me, River Hebert High School was just one of the best high schools out there. That's only my opinion. But then again I only know friends who went to other schools, I never went to another school for high school. (Graduate)*

## Caring for distant others
## (Survey questions 17, 22, and 23)

> *I am more of an involved person because of it (attending RHDH). Knowing everybody helps a lot. You would feel more timid and not very confident. There is a lot of intimidation around a bigger school, such as the city. It's hard to say, I haven't gone to school in the city, but living in the city and living in the country (pause) two totally different experiences. I'm not saying the kids are better in either area, because everywhere has their bad apple; but I guess it's that I feel as though the kids are not as polite in the city. I've been in the city since 1998, and would get chills when I was driving on the Metro and I would hear kids my age and younger cursing and swearing with elders around. Its two different lifestyles; I think River Hebert taught me to know better. (Graduate)*

In addition to caring for the self and for immediate others, the PSP has a component of broader civic engagement. We call this caring for distant others and it involves political engagements, supporting and getting involved in democratic process and thinking about the world beyond your immediate surroundings. Often rural schools are criticized for being too focused upon the locale and insufficiently connected to the wider world. As one member of the parents' focus group commented, living in River Hebert is no longer an impediment to accessing information form anywhere in the world.

Following from the section above, the first level of broader civic participation we derive from the broad goals of the PSP is the general idea of volunteerism. The most basic form of reaching out to others is the desire to volunteer and actually going out of your way to do something for a cause in which you believe. We see this as a higher level of engagement than simply going out to vote or being competent in intimate and work relationships. We asked the question in such a way that respondents were encouraged to

think of the regular course of events in their lives.  It is one thing to have take on leadership roles in the past for instance, but it is something else to say that "I volunteer" indicating an ongoing engagement in pro-social activity.

**Table 14-R**             **I volunteer**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree           | 5         | 7.9     |
| Disagree                    | 9         | 14.3    |
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 7         | 11.1    |
| Agree                       | 22        | 34.9    |
| Agree strongly              | 20        | 31.7    |
| Total                       | 63        | 100.0   |

Table 14-R shows that fully two-thirds of the sample see themselves as volunteers indicating a high level of regular participation in the activity of caring.  The focus group transcripts demonstrate clearly that longstanding traditions of volunteerism in the community and in the school support this finding.  In River Hebert, volunteering seems to be a multi-generational tradition that allows this very small school to continue to field inclusive competitive sports teams and maintain a remarkable variety of school based activities.  This exchange in the parent's focus group highlights the importance of school sports in the community.

> *Parent 1: That's (sports) a huge part of the community.  Again it's that part of that well-rounded individual right?  It's a huge part and the whole community gets together.  I remember when we won the soccer champs that there were ribbons everywhere, on the telephone poles all the way into the community to celebrate.  It's a community celebration it's just not the soccer team or the volleyball team or whatever, it's the community celebrating the successes of these children.*

> *Parent 2: And I mean the coaches are mixed (teachers and community members) because we have teachers that take their week-ends and their after-schools and they fund-raise with these kids, they coach these kids and we have parents that do that also.*

> *Parent 1: If you want to play you pretty much play and that contributes to the overall well-being of the child because they're healthy, they're out there exercising and participating in team sports.  They're filled with school spirit, I mean even if they lose a game everybody's still all there cheering them on; I think there's a lot of parents at those games.*

*Parent 3: Yes, or grandparents or aunts or uncles. And that's always the way it's been.*

School-based fund raising is one powerful example of how the community supports youth activities in the school and also how young people come to understand that it is their responsibility to organize and carry out fundraising efforts.

*Every year for the last fifteen years we have run bottle drives. Kids go around to the houses and knock on the door and say, "we're the soccer team, senior boy's soccer team and it's our turn to go around collecting plastic and beer bottles and pop bottles," and they get donations all over. They do it four times a year. Basketball does it, softball does it they do it twice during soccer season. Each time they get fourteen hundred dollars or better. Every time they do it! Now there's fifty-six hundred dollars that people are just giving them to do this. (Teacher)*

One important concern both in the PSP and in Canadian society generally is the problem of what has been called civic engagement. This is the idea that a large number of Canadians and particularly Canadian youth are becoming disengaged not only form volunteering and community processes but also from political processes, choosing to retreat into a world and a lifestyle that is increasingly narcissistic. Demographer Michael Adams and head of the survey research company Environics (1998, 2004) has written several books in recent years that document changes in Canadian values and civic engagement and the slide toward individualistic and even narcissistic value positions that characterize those of American youth. In fact, Adams (2005) most recent book about civic engagement in the United States argues that the real divide in that country is not between the conservative red states and the liberal blue states, it is between politically engaged citizens and the nearly half of the American population who are disengaged. While our voting rates are considerably higher than those in the United States, there is no denying that the culture of disengagement, particularly among youth is a concern for education and for the society as a whole. In August of 2005 Decima Research released the results of a civic engagement survey that showed that Canadian youth are much less politically engaged than were previous generations.

Table 15-R demonstrates however, that among this population, there is considerable interest in democratic processes which we defined in our question prompts as voting, local political issues and environmental issues. Close to 80% of graduates expressed an interest in these political question which indicates that these students are, for the most part not politically disengaged and individualistic. In fact, in the focus groups it was often mentioned that students themselves were deeply involved in the local school closure study committee and that their engagement in this process amazed their parents and other community members.

**Table 15-R          Interest in democratic processes**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 1.6     |
| Disagree                   | 2         | 3.2     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 10        | 15.9    |
| Agree                      | 22        | 34.9    |
| Agree strongly             | 28        | 44.4    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

> *We got up a petition and we took it around with the kids.  Well, it*
> *was cold that day and well, I just sat in the car with the heater on.*
> *And those kids they wanted to stay out there and get the job done.*
> *You know, I was fed up and I wanted to go home and I was just*
> *sitting there.  If they want something, they'll go after it.  That's the*
> *way the kids here are.  And they're learning that from this small*
> *school.  They work together and they get things done.  That's how*
> *it is.  (Parent)*

These youth obviously took the political process seriously and felt as though their own participation in that process could make a difference.  The results of the Board's deliberations on the question of school closure will give these young people a very powerful answer to the question concerning whether this level of democratic engagement is indeed worthwhile.  Table 16-R shows that recent graduates of RHDH have a high degree of interest in contributing to their society.  It is our view that there is a clear link between the level of democratic engagement and training for participation in political processes at the community level that appears to equip these young people for participation in their communities and in the broader society.

**Table 16-R          I want to contribute to my society**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2         | 3.2     |
| Agree                      | 18        | 28.6    |
| Agree strongly             | 43        | 68.3    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

We question whether the infrastructure of volunteerism and the sense of being able to make a difference and get things done organizationally will be well supported if the young people of River Hebert are bussed into a school where their extracurricular participation will be inhibited by competitive sports teams populated by elite athletes from a large student body.  These theoretically available extracurricular activities will probably not be directly supported River Hebert community elders as they are now.  The theoretical availability of a wider variety of formal and informal school programs does

not necessarily mean that in practice young people will be willing or able to access them. What we do know is that at RHDH, extracurricular participation and programming are very strong and that this appears to translate into a general sense of civic engagement.

This is contrasted both by fear for the future and actual evidence that elders in River Hebert see in larger school environments in the CCRSB. Understandably they are frustrated and bewildered about the benefits offered to them by the closure of a school they know and love and that they know is effective and safe.

> *They talk about that rural schools are…some of them say that rural schools are kind of obsolete and that we're not producing but it's not out kids that are out there in the streets. Like OK, we lose a few but they're not the ones who are hanging around Main Street when they are supposed to be in school. They are not the ones that are being tazered at school dances. They're not the ones that are being video-taped by the police in the big drug busts. (Parent)*

Teachers make a similar point. The more deeply the problems of civic engagement and even basic safety are researched, the more difficult it is to make the case that RHDH is anything less than exemplary around issues of student safety.

> *The figures are not out yet but when the school closure (study) group did their study, all the research that comes out of the States and out or OISE basically saying that about sixty-five percent of students (nationally) feel comfortable going to school. They don't feel threatened. And that's about the number right across the board. When they did here with a hundred and nineteen, ninety-two percent of the kids basically said they felt comfortable coming to school here. (Teacher)*

## Communication
## (Survey questions 11, 12, 13)

One of the core ideas in the PSP is the broad concept that young people should leave school in possession of a wide range of communicative competencies. These competencies range form the traditional forms of linguistic communication (i.e. reading and writing and speaking) to other forms of symbolic communication (i.e. mathematics, scientific literacy, ) as well as competence with a variety of traditional and emerging technologies that are used for the purpose of communication (i.e. information technologies, multiliteracies).

Communication is a broad field that spans all school disciplines and it is articulated in its most general terms in the essential graduation learnings.

> Graduates will be able to use the listening, viewing, speaking, reading and writing modes of language(s) and mathematical and scientific concepts to think learn and communicate effectively (Nova Scotia Government, 2004: A4)

While the ability of any group of graduates and adults can be queried and tested, typically, once a person has left school communicative competence is something that one possesses and uses within the communities of practice in which one lives (Wenger, 1998; Bailey, Hughes and Moore, 2004; Livingstone, D. 2004; Rose, 2004; Weis, 2004). Often a person's grades on standardized or other forms of school tests have little bearing on whether or not that person is a confident, competent communicator. Indeed sociologists of language have shown how communicative competence is very different in diverse social class, racial and ethnic and regional communities (Heath, 1986; Bernstein, 1997, 2000; Bourdieu, 1983, 1984, 1990; Delpitt and Dowdy, 2002).

We are interested then in people's perceptions of how well they are able to communicate in their daily lives and particularly how competent they feel themselves to be in the key areas of literacy and numeracy. Table 17-R shows results for our most general question about communication. All but four respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they are clear communicators.

**Table 17-R      I communicate clearly with others**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 1.6 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 | 4.8 |
| Agree | 29 | 46.0 |
| Agree strongly | 30 | 47.6 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

We then broke the idea of communication down into two more specific questions about reading/writing and mathematics. These questions probed the experience of our respondents in their daily lives. One problem with the OECD adult literacy survey and other literacy tests for adults is that they are decontextualized and present people with literacy tasks that may or may not be similar to the literacy tasks they encounter in their daily lives. In fact literacy theorists have discovered that when we actually investigate the real-life literate practices of ordinary people that there is little which is standard about the way that people use print (Heath, 1986; Fagan, 1997; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton and Hamilton, 2001; Delpitt and Dowdy, 2002). Yet only relatively few studies (some of which are cited in the previous sentence) have investigated the actual literate practices of ordinary adults.

For these reasons we decided to ask people directly about their own experience with literacy and mathematics in the context of their lives. It appears from the data in Table 18-R that graduates of RHDH have acquired sufficient literacy skills to operate

confidently in the lives available to them.  As Tables 3-R, 4-R, and 5-R demonstrate, the range of life experiences encountered by these young people so far has included participation in the local work force, participation in provincial and national work forces and for a significant number of the people in the sample, participation in postsecondary education.   Only one individual reports encountering difficulty with traditional print literacy challenges in daily life.

**Table 18-R          I feel confident reading and writing in my daily life**

|                           | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                  | 1         | 1.6     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1        | 1.6     |
| Agree                     | 14        | 22.2    |
| Agree strongly            | 47        | 74.6    |
| Total                     | 63        | 100.0   |

In the case of mathematics in daily life, the results are similar, albeit not quite as strong. Over 90% of all graduates surveyed reported that they are comfortable with the level of mathematical skill they currently possess.

**Table 19-R          My mathematical skills are adequate for
                      what I have to do in life**

|                           | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                  | 2         | 3.2     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 4        | 6.3     |
| Agree                     | 21        | 33.3    |
| Agree strongly            | 36        | 57.1    |
| Total                     | 63        | 100.0   |

These findings may contradict commonly held perceptions that rural schools and schools in general are turning out large numbers of youth who are not able to function in modern life.  This work, typically based on standardized test scores, makes the conceptual leap from test performance to actual life outcomes.  A fifty year research tradition in educational research had confirmed that this correlation is far from simple (Riordan, 2005).  This is common sense and most people understand that while success in school is crucial, it is not the only indicator of success in life (Smyth and Hattam, 2004).  Young people leave school and integrate into communities and lives that are available to them given their particular economic, social and cultural resources (Willis, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2003; Weis, 2004; Rose, 2004; Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004).   The important questions about literacy and numeracy concern whether or not young people leave school prepared for the lives they actually construct.  Few studies have actually asked young people about their concrete experiences with literate demands in daily life in the workplace or in higher education.  What we can say with confidence is that the

overwhelming majority this particular group of high school graduates from this particular school do not report encountering significant communication problems, problems that might result from inadequate preparation.

In the focus groups when we asked about the students' communicative competence we were met at first with laughter and cryptic indications that these young people not only know how to organize themselves and act in their own interest as we demonstrated above in the section on democratic process, they also know how to communicate using a variety of means.

> *Communication. (laughter) Yes, they communicate with each other and with adults all the time. They get their ideas across and plan for things and I see a lot of kids here who work well together if (inaudible) what they want to do as far as extracurricular activities and they plan well together and they organize things so I think they learn very well how to communicate and organize. (Parent)*

We were impressed with the level of discourse in the online focus group with high school students from RHDH. We offer the eloquence of the statement below from a high school student as one piece of evidence in support of the contention that these young people are powerful communicators who believe that their powers of communication can, in large part, be attributed to the quality of education they receive at RHDH. We discovered that school and community are not so easily separated in a rural village. What is also remarkable is the level of public-spirited social consciousness these students exhibit. Unlike so many young people, they actually care about their community and they actually do something about this sentiment including volunteering and participating in political processes like the school closure process.

> *I enjoy River Hebert, but I know that if the school was to be closed, the area would be obsolete and have little advantages for any individual. I enjoy a short bus ride of about 10 minutes; I cannot imagine having that amount at least 4x longer. It is time that everybody recognizes collective values, and more importantly individual values. There are approximately 120 students in RHDH and I feel that everyone would have a personal value and reason to stay in RHDH. Whether it be the student-teacher interactions or family/personal reasons. One of the main advantages to have RHDH open is the opportunity that I have to remain active in the Joggins Volunteer Fire Department. This role is an "apprenticeship" in my continuing education towards my goal which is to become a Paramedic. While getting my grade 12 diploma is vital, the opportunity available to be in the vicinity and being able to respond to the calls due to the close proximity and the understanding teachers is just as important to get experience. If the school was taken away the societal impact and personal*

*student impact would not necessarily limit education, but it will certainly impact extra-curricular and volunteer services in the area. (Student)*

## A balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities (Survey questions: 1, 2, 3, 19, and 25)

> *Well, I guess, if you go to small school like River Hebert the benefits are huge. For the reasons, like, I was big into extra-curricular stuff and if you go into any sports there was no way you would get rejected from any teams. Our school was focused around a lot of extra-curricular activities and we had a good balance of academic and extra-curriculars. Even though there weren't a lot of extra-curricular activities, you always made the team and you got to travel out of the area and experience new things and meet new people and that improved your social aspect and that extends into your academics as well. If you're happy outside of the school (activities extending from your school) you should do better academically. (Graduate)*

As the CCRSB deliberates on the question of whether or not to close RHDH a prominent concern seems to be the ability of the school as it is currently constituted to provide a wide enough variety of programming to give students a well balanced educational experience. The ideas of quality programming and variety are clearly indicated in the PSP.

> Quality in education is demonstrated by the excellence of individual courses, programs and shared experiences. Quality is also demonstrated by the diversity of educational experiences in which students are actively involved … (Nova Scotia Government, 2004: A3)

It is in this area that the "more is better" or "big is better" arguments might be said to find a home in the PSP. Communities can argue that the quality of their programming, teaching, relationships, and community involvement is high, but there are still some critics who will argue that a big school offering more programs is a better school. Indeed, as we have shown in the previous chapter, this is essentially the argument that has been used to justify school consolidations historically. It is an argument of administrative efficiency and it has considerable face value in a culture and society that is fixated on size and measurability and an idea of growth and centralization at all costs. When quality is simplistically defined in terms of the size of a school's program offerings or even the size of the school building itself there is no way to argue a contrary position.

We argued in the last chapter that the "big is better" claim is a bill of goods that has been sold or foisted upon rural people for generations in the absence of evidence. In this section we will document the way graduates of RHDH experienced educational balance in their schooling.

The first question we address is that of general quality of courses. One of the most powerful ways to counter the argument that more is better is to raise questions about the quality of offerings. A relatively small roster of good quality courses will obviously stand a young person in better stead than a large menu of mediocre ones. The best restaurant is not necessarily the one with the most items on the menu. Table 20-R shows that more than 80% of the sample agreed that the courses they took at RHDH were of high quality. Only a tiny minority disagreed.

**Table 20-R          The courses I took at RHDH were of high quality**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 1.6     |
| Disagree                   | 1         | 1.6     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 10        | 15.9    |
| Agree                      | 36        | 57.1    |
| Agree strongly             | 15        | 23.8    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

Courses however are not the only elements of a quality school program. Some people will argue that the real benefit that is offered by a larger school with a wider range of offerings is the variety of extra and co-curricular activities available to students. As students who experienced their schooling in a relatively small rural high school it might be expected that graduates of RHDH would wish they had been able to access more after-school activities for instance. Table 21-R shows the responses to the probe we used to answer this question about the overall quality of experiences at RHDH. Over 84% of students at this rural high school agreed that the overall experience of schooling at RHDH was of high quality.

**Table 21-R          The quality of all experiences I had at RHDH were of high**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                   | 1         | 1.6     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 9         | 14.3    |
| Agree                      | 26        | 41.3    |
| Agree strongly             | 27        | 42.9    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

There was also clear indication in the focus groups and in open-ended questioning that the teachers at RHDH have (for many years) gone well out of their way to provide support for additional programming in the school. This is a tradition that was established by older staff members and which is continued by younger staff that has come to the school in more recent years. This remarkable story makes the point. A group of young people in trouble in a nearby community chose to call their teachers for help before anyone else.

*We were sitting at home watching a movie. We get a phone call, I said hello, "Hi Mr. xxxxx?" I said "Yes" and "We're in trouble and I'm thinking ok and I said 'Who's this?' Oh this is xxxxx and we locked our keys in our car", at the Tim Horton's in Springhill. "Is there any way you can come and help us?" Anyway, xxxx and these people (pointing to the other young teachers in the room) and myself and my wife-to-be we all teach here, we all happened to be there and we said, "You know what? Let's all drive down." So we all show up in this little caravan and the fact of the matter was that they couldn't afford to get … well I tried but would have scraped the car to pieces. After that we actually hired someone. We paid for it and they couldn't believe that we were paying for it but they felt comfortable enough when they were stranded with their keys in their car to call the house. (Teacher)*

In 2005 the school operated eleven varsity sports teams which were equally available to both girls and boys. It is a point of considerable community pride that these sports teams represent the community and offer youth a chance to learn teamwork and sportsmanship. The school gymnasium is festooned with 9 regional championship banners and 6 six provincial championship banners dating from 1994-2005. Yet, sports at RHDH do not appear to be about elite athletics.

*The social environment worked well in River Hebert. There was a great student to teacher ratio which gave us a lot of one on one time and made learning easier and was a better quality of learning because the teachers had more time. There were lots of opportunities for everyone to play sports and be a part of something rather than at a large school where you're kind of numbered out if you're not one of the perfect ones at the school. Everyone had the right to equal education. (Graduate)*

It is also a point of community pride that River Hebert's school athletic teams are inclusive and that anyone who wants to play makes the varsity team. Parents, teachers and students all share a wonderfully inclusive philosophy around athletics from which we believe larger schools that fund elite teams could stand to learn. One graduate put things in very plain language.

*Heck! If I had been bussed to Amherst every day I would have been so mentally and physically tired I wouldn't have gotten on sports teams. And to get on further sports teams, you would have to practice and keep up that level of intensity to move on. If I hadn't had that, I wouldn't be able to play for the city of xxxx (Ontario city). So I think that helps a lot and I think playing sports helps you in the classroom it helps you focus. I wouldn't have gotten the attention I deserved in Amherst because the classrooms were a lot*

*bigger. I think the exhaustion part is huge, because I mean if you're exhausted going to and from school every day then you're not going to be able to learn as well as you should be able to. And winters are just terrible. (Graduate)*

The much publicized epidemic of childhood obesity and general youth inactivity did not appear to be a problem in this school and the inclusiveness of athletic programming undoubtedly contributes to this situation. Given the Department of Education's new inclusive healthy living initiative, RHDH could actually be used as a model of participation, spirit and pride to counter the exclusive athletic school culture that can be the source of a lack of both physical and mental health among the province's secondary school population.

In addition, the school operated a number of clubs, a student council and hosts an army cadet corps with a membership of over 30 young people. On the curricular front, the school has a strong vocational education program including what is reputed locally to be the only functional school metal shop left in Nova Scotia.

*We have our Army Cadets that run in this school. We have a lot a people that are in the Armed Forces, a lot of people that have gone directly right into the Armed Forces and have made a very good living there. Without the cadet program (pause) and it's run by people that used to go our cadet program. We've had colonels from this corps …A lady from here in the armed forces is going to receive a (inaudible) this year. There's only thirty of them being given out in Canada this year and this is the second one she's going to receive. She received one out of the Balkans and she's going to receive one out of Afghanistan. (Teacher)*

**Table 22-R**      **I feel that the school provided me with a good balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities.**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 1.6     |
| Disagree                   | 5         | 7.9     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 11        | 17.5    |
| Agree                      | 23        | 36.5    |
| Agree strongly             | 23        | 36.5    |
| Total                      | 63        | 100.0   |

When we asked the question about program balance directly, more than 70% of students agreed that RHDH, despite its size, provided a good balance of programs. In light of the fact that a large percentage of these young people went on to postsecondary education it is remarkable that so many of them saw the programming at their small rural high school as balanced. Even though the young adults we sampled for this survey are, for the most

part, in their 20s and engaged in higher education, early career development and decision-making and starting families, Table 23-R shows that 65% still manage to participate in sports. This indicates that the experience of having access to sport translates into active lifestyle outcomes for the majority of students.

**Table 23-R**                 **I participate in sports**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree           | 5         | 7.9     |
| Disagree                    | 7         | 11.1    |
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 10        | 15.9    |
| Agree                       | 13        | 20.6    |
| Agree strongly              | 28        | 44.4    |
| Total                       | 63        | 100.0   |

Finally, in this section we asked graduates if they thought that a small rural secondary school like RHDH can provide young people with a modern education. This question investigates the extent to which they think the education they received has positioned them adequately in the context of contemporary Canada. Disagreement on this question would seem to indicate that graduates feel that a small rural school could not adequately prepare the youth today of for the rigors of globalization, diversity and change. Once again, the vast majority agree with the idea that small rural schools, with the programming they are able to offer, can provide good quality education. According to our data, they experienced this quality in their own educations and apparently see no reason why current students cannot acquire an equally good quality of education at RHDH or in other similar small schools.

**Table 24-R**          **I think that a small rural high school like RHDH can provide youth with a good quality education in the modern world**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                    | 2         | 3.2     |
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 6         | 9.5     |
| Agree                       | 13        | 20.6    |
| Agree strongly              | 42        | 66.7    |
| Total                       | 63        | 100.0   |

The question of program quality seemed to be the most prevalent concern for parents and students in this community and in focus groups they are grateful for the work that the teachers do to provide this quality. In an important sense, this is real accountability. In this kind of a teaching environment expectations for teachers are high. RHDH shows how at least in the case of this small rural high school, teachers have risen to meet the challenge of stakeholder accountability for many years, and they continue to do so. It bears repeating that a wide variety of programs is no guarantee of quality. These data

show how an involved school community can help provide excellence in programming, accountability and quality.  In fact the deep community knowledge that the teaching staff acquire in a small, rural school is the core of both educational accountability and teaching effectiveness.

> *It's a small community and (mentioning four other teachers in the group) we've all grown up here, so if you've got a problem with a kid you just get on the "one eight-hundred number" because you know everybody in the community.  It's different than being in a larger community where you wouldn't know where to phone them up; you may never have met them.  (Here) you know exactly and you know the history of where the kids are coming from, and you have to understand a lot about what's going on at home.  You know what's going on in a small community so you can gauge. Eighty percent of behavior has something to do with what's going on at home and you have to take a lot of that stuff into account in small schools.  I've heard somebody saying, "how many suspensions has the principal written up this year?"  I don't know how many he wrote up this year but I know the percentage is so low it scares you.  We try to look at things in-house.  Then you look at a bigger school.  They're rifling kids left and right you know. (Teacher)*

## Problem solving and the application of appropriate techniques and technologies to these problems through the life course
## (Survey questions: 5, 6, 7, 8)

> *Everyone loves opportunities to do different things. Everyone loves technology. However, how much do you have to sacrifice to get it? I feel that after touring ARHS that they have sufficient technology and resources, so why isn't the money being allocated to small rural schools that need it? River Hebert has actually proven to be 1% or less of the School Board's budget! How sickening is that? They tell us we aren't equipped, but they are the ones who are supposed to give us the money to BE equipped!*

> *When one looks at a school such as ours, one realizes how much we depend on that small rural school atmosphere to lead our education …I need to be in a welcoming place were I am accepted in one form or another with or without technology. (Student RHDH)*

The PSP calls for an educational experience that lasts a lifetime.  It is now well understood that we are immersed in the kind of society in which knowledge itself is an important currency (Hargreaves, 2003).  In this educational context we are all encouraged to keep on learning throughout the life course and the PSP articulates this broad goal. This is of course, something that is easy to say, but which is much harder to do and

perhaps even harder to evaluate. Given that people live their lives under the radar of the kind of assessment that occurs in school; once most people have left school they solve the life problems that confront them life outside the range of standardized assessments.

Some studies have investigated life outcomes of Canadian rural high school graduates including the work of Looker (1993); Looker and Dwyer (1998); Looker and Andres (2001); Looker and Theissen (1999); Dupuis, Meyer and Morissette, (2000), Frenette (2003), Andres and Licker (2005), and Finnie, Lascelles and Sweetman, (2005). Only a handful of studies however have looked at the educational and life outcomes from a qualitative perspective (Andres and Licker, 2005; Corbett, 2001; 2004b) so it is very difficult to know how the actual experience of lifelong learning has unfolded. This makes it easy to misunderstand large surveys of "rural" communities or of the educational outcomes of "rural youth." Because rural youth in general are less likely to access higher education, this does not mean that particular populations of individuals who have attended particular schools are in this position. Our data have demonstrated above how RHDH has a very high rate of postsecondary participation despite being very rural, being a very small secondary school in a community that is relatively disadvantaged economically by provincial and by national standards.[7]

There is little disagreement that we live in a world that is rife with change and that this chronic change has challenged citizens living in rural communities. Our first problem in this section about lifelong learning was to ask graduates about their perceived ability to cope with change in their everyday lives. Table 25-R shows that more than 95% of the sample feels confident dealing with change, one of the broad goals of the public school program. It is often claimed that rural children are living outside modernity in a certain sense and that their communities are backward zones in which change occurs only slowly if at all. This is clearly rubbish, and a myth that deserves to be set aside once and for all (Williams, 1973; Popkewitz, 1998; Winson and Leach, 2002). Rural communities are changed by the same forces that are shaping urban communities.

**Table 25-R** **I have learned to deal effectively with change in my everyday life**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 | 4.8 |
| Agree | 19 | 30.2 |
| Agree strongly | 41 | 65.1 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

Simply living and attending school in a rural place does not render a young person any less likely to be able to deal with change. Developmental psychologists have shown us for years that the young people best able to deal with change are those who grow up in warm, caring communities where they feel valued as persons. As Shelton (2005),

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[7] 2001 national census data show that the community of River Hebert has an average household income of $35 706 compared to the provincial average of $48 457. See the concluding chapter for an elaboration.

Theobald (1997), and Howley and Eckman (1997) point out, this is precisely what happens in good rural schools and precisely what is so difficult to find in large urban schools (Meier, 2002).

Our second question in this section probes the idea of problem-solving. The PSP sets out the broad goal that all students will leave school in possession of the ability to solve the problems they encounter in life. This is once again an ambitious and worthy goal and one that we might expect many young people would have difficulty achieving in the face of a fast-changing social environment that includes multiple media images and manipulations of all sorts (Kincheloe, 1997; Postman, 1983; Buckingham, 2000). The problems faced by contemporary youth are complex and multifaceted. Our data again show that more than 95% of the respondents in this sample feel themselves to be capable of solving the problems they encounter in the context of their lives.

**Table 26-R          I feel capable of solving the problems I encounter in life**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Disagree                    | 1         | 1.6     |
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 2         | 3.2     |
| Agree                       | 21        | 33.3    |
| Agree strongly              | 39        | 61.9    |
| Total                       | 63        | 100.0   |

These data clearly show that the graduates of RHDH are prepared for the change and the problem-solving challenges that the world throws at them. But are these graduates lifelong learners? Pervious data would seem to suggest that they might be. Table 27-R shows that all but one of the respondents considers him or herself to be a lifelong learner. It is possible to raise the criticism that this is simply one person's perception of their situation. Our response is to ask: who then is better situated to assess lifelong learning? The typical way of measuring lifelong learning is to document the range of learning activities, particularly credentialed activities. We have done this in the survey and the list of different kinds of lifelong learning in which this sample is engaged is considerable.

**Table 27-R          I consider myself to be a lifelong learner**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 1         | 1.6     |
| Agree                       | 24        | 38.1    |
| Agree strongly              | 38        | 60.3    |
| Total                       | 63        | 100.0   |

## A school that works well within its community
## (Survey question 24)

> *It's like they're trying to take something that we have, one of the last things we have, to keep our community alive. It's like we're second-class citizens and our community isn't important any more. And people say well, "every time you talk about school you talk you talk about keeping the community alive." What's wrong with that? That's what it is. This is the focal point so the community has to try to stay intact and this is a big part of it, the school. (Teacher)*

The above data show strong support for the claim that RHDH is a crucial community-based institution which works remarkably well within its community. As a small relatively isolated rural school working in a low SES area, we would expect to find considerable disaffection, low levels of postsecondary participation, and general community ambivalence about school and schooling. In other words, the educational sociologists would predict that this school ought to produce very uninspiring educational outcomes. Instead we found virtually universal support for the school and a firm belief that the school does a good job, that schooling is important, and that it has paid off in innumerable ways for the graduates of RHDH. The staff understands the community and its challenges and they have learned to work in this particular situation. They worry that if the school is closed that it will be difficult for teachers in the larger high school to accommodate and understand the majority of River Hebert youth.

> *I'd bet you seventy-five percent of the people in River Hebert work in primary industry, I bet we're still seventy-five to eighty percent still working primary industry here so you know what kind of education their parents have. They've graduated out of a grade twelve general program twenty years ago and basically those kids are still here because here because their parents live in the community. There's not a massive amount of money. And that's the one thing that the Department of Education does not get. They cannot judge our kids against kids at the academic level at Saint Pat's. We may have two kids out of thirty, they may have ten percent of their kids … but ten percent of three hundred is thirty kids so their thirty top kids are real top kids and have every opportunity in the world. What about the other two hundred and eighty kids, we never hear about those. The same thing happens in schools like CEC … we always hear, 'oh yes' they've got the best kids going, and that and, yes they've got the best top class but what about the other kids? They're surviving just like the rest of us I believe. We work with every single kids. (Teacher)*

It is our sense that school and community are in a powerful partnership at RHDH and that this partnership is exemplary and might be shared as a model for schooling in economically disadvantaged rural communities (and in non-rural communities as well).

All students get individual attention, all students who want to play make the team, teachers know the families of their students and the families know, trust and support the school.  This is precisely what the PSP calls for in a school.  The PSP states:

> A sound education provided in partnership with the home and the community forms the basis for students to become healthy and caring persons … All partners must work together to provide a stimulating and supportive environment to assist individuals in reaching their full potential (A3)

Like so many rural people, the citizens of River Hebert understand that this is exactly the way their school has been working for generations.   They have proven it time and again in closure study after closure study and they are understandably frustrated to have to do it once again.

We can understand this frustration, but nevertheless, we must ask the question of the graduates themselves.  In the end, this question is simply the perception of individuals who have graduated from RHDH about the quality of the relationship between the school and its community, a relationship that is central to the broad goals of the PSP.

**Table 28-R**      **I think the secondary school and the community work well together in River Hebert**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 1.6 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 4 | 6.3 |
| Agree | 23 | 36.5 |
| Agree strongly | 35 | 55.6 |
| Total | 63 | 100.0 |

What indeed is community these days?  When the people or River Hebert fight to save their schools they know that they are hanging on to their community with both hands and that if their high school is closed, the heart of their community will be gone.  While it is not the mandate of the regional school board to protect communities, it is the mandate of the Board to uphold the PSP and insure that the conditions for its achievement are present for all young people living within its jurisdiction.  It is the mandate of the Board to insure that it provides an environment where the community partnerships that make schooling work are in place.  They are clearly in place in RHDH.

> *The community is dedicated to the school.  The community's dedicated to the progress of teachers.  I'm a small town boy I went to Halifax and taught for a while and didn't feel the connection I had in my own high school or the connections I wanted to make with students so I returned for that.  The key underlying factor isn't (pause) kids aren't scared about courses, the work, the technology. Now this is speaking for them but you tend to pick a lot of things*

*out, that underlying fear for them is losing the connection between teacher and student. It's not (pause) we don't have anything that's unorthodox here but we have (pause) I can tell you everything about my students, every one I have … Maybe that's why the enrollment stays up because of the environment we provide. We're a pretty good alternative. (Teacher)*

It is difficult to imagine how the closure of RHDH will improve the relationship between this community and its school. How will this broad goal of the PSP be met by moving young people out of their community and away from a school that seems to us to be a model for community-school relationships? Table 28-R shows that one person in a sample of sixty-three showed any level of disagreement with the idea that the school and the community work well together. The argument that a stronger community school partnership will be formed by bussing these young people to Amherst will be one that the Board will be hard-pressed to make.

# Chapter 5
# Wentworth Consolidated Elementary School

## The Composition and Educational/Employment Status of the Sample

The sample composition for the Wentworth target population is constructed differently from the River Hebert sample analyzed in the previous chapter. Since Wentworth is an elementary school, the school itself produces no "graduates"[8] per se. For this reason we chose to focus on the groups of students that left or "graduated" grade 6 at Wentworth Consolidated Elementary School between 1991 and 2000. This population represents the potential high school graduating classes of 1997 through to 2006.

We also surveyed a small number of children (N=3) who are presently attending high school (see Table 1-W). The total sample size is forty individuals. We decided not to include data from the three children who are currently attending high school leaving a total sample of thirty-seven. We initially decided to survey a larger number of very recent WCES graduates about their secondary school experience. We abandoned this part of the project for two reasons. First of all, it became clear that the sample would not be consistent with the one we used in River Hebert. Secondly, our questions about whether the broad goals of the PSP had been achieved were problematic for young people who were still in secondary school. Unlike the RHDH interview team, the WCES interview team was given instructions to interview either the individual or parents of that individual. Sixteen of the thirty-seven interviews were done with a parent of the individual rather than the individual him or herself using a slightly modified questionnaire.

The total population of young people that left WCES between 1991 and 2000 is 101. Of this population we were unable to find contact information for 28 individual students. The Wentworth population appears to be more mobile than that of River Hebert through this time period. The remaining 73 individuals for whom we were able to acquire contact information were members of 48 families still living in the Wentworth area. We decided to interview only one member of each family to insure maximum coverage of the population. In families with more than one child we interviewed the eldest child because this individual would probably have the most educational, employment and life experience. We attempted to survey each family and were successful in reaching 37 families, which represents 77.1% of the ideal sample given our contact information.

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[8] We will use the term "graduates" to describe the young people who left grade 6 at WCES. Not all of these young people have gone on to actually graduate high school as our data will show. However, we have no other way of referring to the process of leaving and elementary school at the end of grade 6. It is interesting how this key transition has no single concept to describe it other than generic terms like "transition" and "leaving."

**Table 1-W**
**Sample by year of leaving WCES**

|        | Frequency | Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| 1991   | 6         | 16.2    |
| 1992   | 3         | 8.1     |
| 1993   | 5         | 13.5    |
| 1994   | 4         | 10.8    |
| 1995   | 5         | 13.5    |
| 1996   | 3         | 8.1     |
| 1997   | 3         | 8.1     |
| 1998   | 3         | 8.1     |
| 1999   | 4         | 10.8    |
| 2000   | 1         | 2.7     |
| Total  | 37        | 100.0   |

**Table 2-W**
**Sample by sex**

|        | Frequency | Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| Female | 16        | 43.2    |
| Male   | 21        | 56.8    |
| Total  | 37        | 100.0   |

Table 2-W shows that in terms of sex, males are slightly over-represented in the Wentworth sample, perhaps because of our method of sample construction. Whereas in River Hebert we selected a random sample of 25% of 300 students who graduated between 1995 and 2005, the smaller numbers in Wentworth allowed us to attempt to survey a much larger proportion of the total population. The Wentworth sample is then a more detailed look at a smaller population, representing approximately 36% of the total population of 101 students who left the school between 1991 and 2000.

Research in rural education both in Canada and in Australia has shown that in rural communities, women tend to be much more mobile than men (Alston, 2001; Corbett, 2001, forthcoming b). This conclusion is actually supported by our data on the present location of members of the sample. Table 3-W shows that only 40% of the sample has remained within Cumberland County compared to approximately 57% of the River Hebert sample in which slightly more males are present. Alston (2001) and Corbett (2001) also found that women's educational attainment and postsecondary participation rates were much higher than those of men in the rural communities they studied. We found no correlation between sex and educational participation in this study.[9]

In terms of present employment, slightly more than two-thirds of the sample is currently in the workforce (see Table 4-W). Slightly more than a quarter of the sample is currently involved in post-secondary education. Two members of the sample are currently unemployed, but it should be noted that one of these individual has become disabled while the other has a new baby. Essentially, the entire sample is either employed or

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[9] In the River Hebert sample there was also no significant correlation between sex and educational participation. This suggests that both schools have produced educational outcomes that are relatively equitable in terms of sex. Given the data on the inclusive nature of RHDH in the previous chapter and the similarly inclusive nature of the WCES educational community that we will document in this chapter, this finding comes as no surprise.

**Table 3-W          Present location**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| WCES catchment area | 12 | 32.4 |
| Cumberland County | 3 | 8.1 |
| Other Nova Scotia | 11 | 29.7 |
| Atlantic Canada | 1 | 2.7 |
| Other Canada | 10 | 27.0 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

attending a post-secondary institution.  This sample is also considerably more mobile that was the sample in River Hebert.  There are a number of ways to explain this higher rate of mobility.  While it is considerably below the provincial average household income, Wentworth is a more economically prosperous community than is River Hebert with an average household income of $40 905.  This relative economic advantage may allow young people in Wentworth to be more mobile than young people in river Hebert. Another explanation could be proximity to more than one community college, to Halifax and to a wider variety of postsecondary options.  Community traditions may also play a role.  Considerably more young adults in the Wentworth sample are pursuing university studies outside Atlantic Canada than are River Hebert graduates who tend to gravitate toward Nova Scotia universities.

**Table 4-W          Employment**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Unemployed | 2 | 5.4 |
| Attending post-secondary | 10 | 27.0 |
| In the workforce | 25 | 67.6 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

The educational participation of the sample is detailed in Table 5-W.  62.1% of the sample have participated or are currently participating in post secondary education.  As was the case with the River Hebert sample, this is considerably higher than provincial and national postsecondary participation rates for this age group.  Because this sample tracked individuals from grade 6 it also includes two individuals who did not finish secondary studies.  Both are gainfully employed full-time in the community.

It is clear form these data that the students who left WCES have, for the most part, made the transition to secondary studies and then on to postsecondary education and successful workforce participation.  This is a population that is more mobile than the River Hebert population but slightly less likely to participate in postsecondary education.   This is probably due to the fact that the Wentworth sample was not a sample of high school graduates.   This said, the postsecondary participation rate in the Wentworth sample is considerably above provincial and national averages.

**Table 5-W              Highest level of educational participation**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Less than high school graduation | 2 | 5.4 |
| High school graduation | 8 | 21.6 |
| Private training | 3 | 8.1 |
| Community college | 11 | 29.7 |
| University | 12 | 32.4 |
| Still in high school | 1 | 2.7 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

## The Life Outcomes Survey and the Broad Goals of the Public School Program of Nova Scotia

The survey instrument we developed takes the values articulated in the broad goals of the PSP and operationalizes them into a 33 item questionnaire (See Appendix B). The first six questions ask former students about their current formal and informal educational attainment, educational goals and current employment status. The remaining 27 questionnaire items probe various values articulated in the broad goals of the public school program. These questions use a five point Likert scale to gauge attitudes. We have organized our analysis of these questions into the following seven thematic sections.

1. **Caring for the self and meeting individual needs**
2. **Caring for immediate others – relationships**
3. **Caring for distant others – citizenship**
4. **Communication – math, language, aesthetic expression**
5. **A balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities**
6. **Problem solving and the application of appropriate techniques and technologies to these problems through the life course**
7. **A school that works well within its community**

In this discussion we will link each theme with the specific survey questions that we used to access the specific attributes. The language for many of the questions was derived directly from the PSP itself.

## Caring for the self and meeting individual needs
## (Survey questions: 4, 14, 15, 16, and 18)

> *I've seen Wentworth at work and there a re a lot of caring people to take care of just one person. Every person is special there. (High School teacher)*

> *Well, for xxxx's problem, she was a slow student and if it wasn't for Wentworth School finding the problem that she had, I don't think she would have made it as far as she is right now. (Parent)*

Perhaps the most important feature of a good elementary school is the extent to which it is able to help children establish a firm foundation of personal dignity and a sense of empowerment as an individual. Throughout the elementary school curriculum in Nova Scotia there are repeated references to ideas that relate to the establishment of a set of core skills, attitudes and values that support children through developmental processes in the first years of their educational careers. While the curriculum sets out benchmark outcomes, there is also clear recognition that learning is about much more than the achievement of key stage outcomes. Most psychologists and sociologists argue that the foundation that is laid in elementary school will exert profound influence over ultimate educational and career trajectories. Much of this foundation is rooted in the emotional content of the early learning experiences of a child in school.

This section deals with questions of what is commonly called self-esteem and the broader notion of self-respect. Additionally in this section, we take up the question of individual needs which is at the centre of much of the elementary school curriculum and the PSP more generally. The PSP balances the need for skills and knowledge with the view that learning is developmental and that not all children learn at the same rate. There is something of a contradiction between this idea and the concept of grade level outcomes. As every good teacher and every wise parent knows, each child is an individual and all individual children learn at different rates. The challenge of balancing careful attention to the achievement of educational outcomes and meeting individual student needs is a central preoccupation at WCES. As community members point out, multiage grouping is one way of achieving a balance between meeting the needs of individual learners and fostering a climate of achievement. In the focus groups, this idea is well understood in the Wentworth elementary school community.

> *Teacher: I think at elementary level with the learning outcomes that are there and the trend in education is that this is how learning is to be done. Take language arts for example, we're looking at the levels of readers whether they be emergent, early transitional, fluent or what have you; I don't care where you are or if you're in the middle of the big city, if you take a group of 12 year olds and put them all in one room they're not all going to be on the same level and you're going to have emergent, early, transitional and fluent readers even within that streamlined group.*

*Today every teacher is expected to meet the needs of the student and adjust their programming so that it can be done, including the special needs children. No matter what their age level, you're encouraged to keep them with their peer age group. So I can't see how they're thinking when they say that a bigger building with all the chronological ages the same in one room is any different story. You've still got that wide gamut of ability levels and the teacher is still expected to address those ability levels within their classroom, regardless of age.*

In recent years a considerable literature has developed around the concept of multiage teaching as a way to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population (Pratt, 1986; Goodlad and Anderson, 1987; Kasten, 1998; Kasten and Lolli, 1998; Howley and Eckman, 1997; Kyle, McIntyre and Moore, 2001; Gerard, 2005). There are a lot of myths about multiage teaching including the idea that it is a vestige of another era when the "split-grade" class or the "one room schoolhouse" were the predominant school models dispersed rural populations. Multiage grouping is no longer only used as a way to cope with declining enrolment or in very small schools. In fact, many large urban and suburban schools now use multiage grouping as a way to promote achievement (Holloway, 2001; Hoffman, 2003; Gerard, 2005). The state of Kentucky has actually mandated multiage and multi-ability elementary classrooms since 1990.

The multiage approach is a powerful way to help older children in the group children learn to take responsibility for themselves, to care for other children who are younger than they are, and to build a school community that is more reflective of the diversity that children encounter in other facets of their lives where single age groupings are rare unless they are organized deliberately to function that way. For younger children the benefits include being exposed to the more complex work done by older children, the scaffolding that the mentorship of an older child can provide, and as is the case with older children, the necessity that children take more responsibility for their own learning. The multiage classroom also lessens the effects of transitional problems as one teacher pointed out in the focus group.

*We use a different philosophy than a straight-graded classroom or a traditional split grade class. We teach based on the understanding that all children learn at different stages and at a different rate and we take that into consideration. And so when we're delivering programs, we're thinking of our students as individuals and not as a block of students that we have for one year. And by having students for more than one year we avoid all those transition periods in September and June because we start right up in the New Year because we do know our students.*

Critics of the multiage classroom contend that in a standards-driven education system, multiage teaching is not sufficiently focused on particular grade-level standards. They also argue that multiage teaching is very difficult for beginning teachers who do not have

the ability to manage diverse learners.  Neither criticism appears to be a problem in the case of WCES where the professional teaching staff and many of the school's regular volunteers have worked in multi-grade schools for many years.   We were able to find evidence that educational standards are being met at WCES.  Parents are familiar and comfortable with the multiage approach and feel that their children benefit from it.

> *Parent: I have no problem with multiage.  My child just turned five when she went into primary.  Academically she was very ready to go, but very shy.  I believe that if she had been put into a school further away with bigger classes and a big class of just primaries, she would have just shied back into a corner.  She wouldn't have been one to be vocal and I don't think the teacher would have had the time to pick up on her and to work with her at her level … But she excels in reading, she excels in math and she's blossomed into her own little individual and she wouldn't have done that if she had been in a school that was focused with 20 or more of her own age.*

In the focus group both teachers and parents commented on the necessity of careful staffing in a small rural school.  Teachers must possess multiple skills and as the critics point out, not every teacher is capable of doing the job.  However, in the case of WCES this does not appear to be a problem at all.  The teachers relish the challenge of multi-grade teaching.

**Table 6-W      I feel as though my individual needs as a learner were met at WCES**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2         | 5.4     |
| Agree                      | 12        | 32.4    |
| Strongly agree             | 23        | 62.2    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

The debate about multiage grouping is interesting in the sense that the literature seems to suggest that a multiage structure actually seems to promote the individualization of instruction by providing more space for teachers and students to work collaboratively and cooperatively.  Table 6-W shows that no respondent in the sample disagreed with the idea that their individual needs as a learner were met at WCES.  In fact, a sizeable majority actually felt strongly that their individual needs had been met in the course of their schooling.  One parent who had experience with children in a larger elementary school put it this way:

> *Parent: Since we moved from xxxxx (a western city) three years ago and my kids moved from what was a normal big school out there, I find that since we've moved there are definitely things that the teachers have picked up on that have helped.  Both my kids have, without a doubt, become better adjusted at writing and at*

*math, but his (elder child's) reading in the last year has just blown me away, how far he's come alone. And even my little girl who has just turned 7, she's reading stuff and putting stuff together that's really good I think. I would say that in the bigger school there is a lot better chance of them getting missed or overlooked when there are problems. When they spend the whole day with the same teacher, they just see these things.*

One important aspect of multiage teaching is the extent to which it can help children establish a strong sense of themselves. While we cannot answer questions concerning the relative merits of multiage and single grade classrooms in the context of this study, we can shed light on the way former students of WCES have understood the results of their own education. Table 7-W details responses to a direct question concerning self-esteem and self respect. With the exception of a small number of outliers, the respondents in this sample agreed or strongly agreed that their dignity was supported through their elementary school experience.

**Table 7-W    I feel as though my self-esteem and self respect were supported at WCES**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree           | 2         | 5.4     |
| Disagree                    | 1         | 2.7     |
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 2         | 5.4     |
| Agree                       | 12        | 32.4    |
| Strongly agree              | 20        | 54.1    |
| Total                       | 37        | 100.0   |

In the areas of self-esteem and individual needs, it appears that WCES students have met the requirements of the broad goals of the PSP with the vast majority of students. It is also notable that such a high percentage of respondents actually feel very strongly about the way that the school community supported them as individuals getting started in life. While the questions we asked were the same as those we asked of respondents in River Hebert, the difference here is that the Wentworth respondents were asked to think about their experience as young children and in the case of these questions, to reflect on how they were treated as children.

The PSP expects that young people will experience a school environment in which they felt valued as persons. Table 8-W shows that nearly 90% of respondents felt valued as individuals in their elementary school experience.

The above discussion has focused on the traditional emphasis of elementary education which is to provide young people with the tools to establish themselves as psychologically healthy, established learners who feel that they are worthwhile people and capable learners. In addition to the promotion of self-esteem and self respect, the

**Table 8-W          I felt valued as a person at WCES**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 2.7     |
| Disagree                   | 3         | 8.1     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1         | 2.7     |
| Agree                      | 11        | 29.7    |
| Strongly agree             | 21        | 56.8    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

broad PSP goal set that we have called "care of self" also involves the sense that young people acquire in the course of their educational experience, the knowledge they require to care for themselves physically, economically, spiritually, and in other pragmatic ways. It is one thing to feel good about oneself, but it may be something else again to be competent and able in a diverse and changing world.

Table 9-W presents data from the question we asked relating to general health and the knowledge and ability that individuals possess to maintain health. The answer to this question was unanimous agreement, which is somewhat surprising given the multitude of threats to health at large in today's world. For those who know the school best, this comes as no surprise. The small school is an active place and one of the full time teachers has a background in physical education. The vast majority in this sample feel strongly that they possess the knowledge they require to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

**Table 9-W          I have the knowledge and ability to maintain my health**

|                | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Agree          | 7         | 18.9    |
| Strongly agree | 30        | 81.1    |
| Total          | 37        | 100.0   |

In addition to the basic information on the survey, we asked respondents about their informal learning. The responses to this question from the Wentworth groups were particularly diverse including individuals in training for national and international level competitive sports, participation in skiing[10], mountain-biking, karate[11], skating and a wide variety of sports, a number of types of musical learning, numerous "adult education" and professional development courses relating to recreation as well as to employment, computer training, to name a few. In the focus group also it was very clear that Wentworth is an outdoor-oriented community in which young people have access to a range of informal learning opportunities that obviously promote health.

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[10] We were informed that all WCES students are given free ski passes by Ski Wentworth.

[11] The school hosts an active club that we surmise includes at least 4 home-grown black-belt members.

*Parent: I think he was well prepared, the self-confidence that was built because … For example, for a small school they entered every type of competition there was, be it the French speaking competition or whatever and they were always encouraged whether they were the best in the class or whatever. They were exposed to quite a few different cultural…if there was a Neptune play that was in the area where it was feasible for them to do. Recreation was definitely a big part of it. Being encouraged to ski. So, in those general life broadening events, he was. And he did receive a lot of encouragement.*

Parents and grandparents are rightly concerned that if the school is removed from the community that there will be less opportunity for this diversity of learning experiences in the community and the infrastructure to support it. Additional time on busses will also curtail students' ability to participate in sports and other community-based activities, crowding already busy schedules. Casual observers of rural schools and communities can jump to the inaccurate conclusion that there is not much for young people to do in rural places. Yet, parents in the focus group described a schedule of sports engagements and lessons that should ring familiar to middle class families anywhere.

*How can forty-five minute bus drive be beneficial to a five year old? They'd get on a bus at twenty minute after seven in the morning; they're tired, and I mean it's just not beneficial. And there's no home life. They get home an hour later (in the afternoon); there's no time for homework, there's no time for family life, there's no time for supper. I enjoy taking my kids to piano lessons and that may not be an option for me if my kids had to spend another hour on the bus. And they say, well they're gonna' have more chance of being in sports teams and extra-curricular activities but I can't … they can't stay after school and fit all those extra things in … You don't get a family life, you don't get home life, there's no time.*

Our final question in this section relates to life decisions more generally. As we commented in the last chapter, perhaps one of the most ambitious goals of the PSP is to provide young people with the foundation for becoming a competent and confident decision-maker. Of course, every life contains its own particular set of crucial decisions and fundamental to the notion of care for the self is the ability to act decisively in one's own life. Again, with the exception of a couple of outliers, our respondents were in broad agreement that this aspect of the goals of the PSP have been satisfied in their lives.

Overall, this section provides strong support for the conclusion that the general climate of the small elementary school in Wentworth with its multi-grade structure is an excellent example of what can be achieved in a strong family-like, community supported educational environment. More difficult to quantify is the confidence, cooperative

**Table 10-W**          **I am knowledgeable enough to make good decisions
in my own life**

|                           | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2         | 5.4     |
| Agree                     | 7         | 18.9    |
| Strongly agree            | 28        | 75.7    |
| Total                     | 37        | 100.0   |

demeanor and general good humor of the children we met during site visits. It was obvious to us that these children are being taught by their teachers and in their community to respect diversity and difference, to care about themselves, to see themselves as individual learners and not just as part of an age-segregated "class," and to care for the other children around them.  It is to this issue that we turn in the next section.

## Caring for immediate others
## (Survey questions 9, 10 and 21)

> *Well, as you know, those are your learning years of finding out who you are and learning how to treat others.  I felt that they made me who I am today.  By the time I got into high school, attitude and stuff changed.  But from where I stand now, I am really happy that I got to attend such a small school.  I guess it gives you that one-on-one advantage whereas some school you don't. (Student)*

In recent years there has been a powerful groundswell of interest in the question of school size.  This literature has consistently shown that learning outcomes are improved in small schools where young people can feel as though they are part of an authentic community. Meier puts it powerfully when she comments that knowledge about what makes a good school is clear: they are humane places in character, size and scale that allow for self-governance and authentic choice (2002).  The bureaucratic impulse toward a business model of efficiency and the unsupported "big is better" mantra is simply wrong.  Meier identifies 3 characteristics of good schools, the first of which is school size.  We think Meier is worth quoting at length here:

> The schools that work best are small.  Within them people are not anonymous and interchangeable.  Even in big schools, the kids that do best belong to small, intimate subschools with a strong culture of specialness.  They hang out with "their teachers," "their clubs," and "their classmates."  Feedback isn't bureaucratic, but directed and frequent, and everyone feels (and is) safer.  It's harder not to know what's going on (2002:159).

The same argument holds true for small class sizes. In a recent letter to the editor one commentator to the Toronto Globe and Mail remarked that he will buy the Fraser Institute's argument that small schools and small class do not matter when he sees elite private schools advertising auditorium-sized classes as an inducement to attract students. In other words, it is common sense that the rich have understood for many years. A key finding in the small school literature we cited in Chapter 3 is that in economically disadvantaged places, small schools and small class size are one of the few structural mechanisms that can counteract the well documented negative educational impact of low socioeconomic status. In other words, small schools and small class sizes in low SES areas give ordinary young people the advantages the wealthy have always enjoyed, and as a result they prosper educationally.

There is also considerable literature that shows how large urban schools are disaggregating into smaller schools-within-a-school essentially attempting to reproduce the kinds of conditions that are found in good small rural schools. This research all points to the importance of what American social researchers James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (2000) have called "social capital." Social capital a concept used to describe the informal human networks of cooperation and mutual aid that allow people to achieve their common goals and actually build wealth within communities. Drawing on his famous "bowling alone" analogy in which he shows how Americans actually bowl more than ever before, not in leagues as they once did, Putnam argues that the fabric of community has been dealt a series of powerful blows by forces of consumer capitalism, urbanization, mass media infiltration and other well known social forces. He and Coleman argue that this shift has actually amounted to a loss of wealth and capacity in the society at large. In essence, these researchers call for institutional responses that support a rebuilding of social capital networks.

We think that social capital is a powerful concept for understanding the work of the two small rural schools under study in this project. Young people learn to work cooperatively and to experience community in the first instance in their families and neighborhoods and then in their elementary schools. In fact, as the Board deliberates on these school closures, we feel that the loss of social capital ought to be a part of the calculus used to weigh the costs and benefits of various options. The PSP contains a strong expectation that young people will develop the ability to work with others in their immediate environments as we have outlined in the previous chapter. We think the fundamental basis of this ability is the capacity to work cooperatively. Table 11-W presents data on this dimension of caring for others and more than 90% of the sample either agree or strongly agree that they have acquired this ability.

**Table 11-W**         **I am able to work effectively and cooperatively with others**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 | 8.1 |
| Agree | 6 | 16.2 |
| Strongly agree | 28 | 75.7 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

Our school observations and the transcripts from focus groups have highlighted for us the importance of cooperation, teamwork and mutual aid in the everyday work of children, teachers and volunteers in the school.

> *The incidents that I deal with are very minor. I keep a binder and I only have to show you that I can flip through the pages and there are only about a half a dozen single incidences this year on the playground. My husband teaches at a middle school in grade 7 and his students … they've had police searching lockers. That's only a one year difference. The incidents in our school are so minute compared to the incidents in larger schools. We don't have fist fights on the playground. Maybe once a year there is an incident with inappropriate language. There is a little bit of pushing, rough play, but the incidents are very minimal and not severe. (Teacher)*

Parents and teachers clearly believe that the community and familial atmosphere and the approach at WCES promote the building of community. As the teacher pointed out in the above quote, school discipline is relatively minor compared to the kinds of disciplinary incidents that are common in larger, less community-focused schools. This relative calm and cohesive atmosphere represents the foundation of social capital formation. Logically, the fact that teachers are required to spend less time on discipline issues also allows them to focus more on academic matters contributing to general educational quality in the school.

**Table 12-W**         **I consider myself to be a caring person**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Agree | 6 | 16.2 |
| Strongly agree | 31 | 83.8 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

The long-term general effects of having been a part of a "tight-knit" caring community in terms of the broad goals of the PSP are undoubtedly very important. To produce the kind of graduate demanded by the PSP the overall school experience should be one of learning to care and not one of drifting off into the narcissistic social spaces that are claiming so

many of North America's youth (Putnam, 2000; Adams, 2004). Table 12-W shows that a very strong majority of the "graduates" of WCES chose to position themselves in strong agreement with the question we asked. It is, of course difficult to measure caring or to know whether people's accounts of their own behavior are accurate. However, when we look at this data in conjunction with qualitative material from observations, open-ended questions and the focus group, it is obvious to us that caring and building social capital are what WCES is all about.

Beyond the idea of caring for the self and others and the participatory dimension of cooperating with others in work and in social affairs, the idea of leadership is also featured in the PSP. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, leadership is difficult to define and it is probable that in most places, a large percentage of citizens seldom or never take on any significant leadership roles. One feature of a small, rural school though is the multitude of opportunities for leadership that a small institution can provide.

**Table 13-W**        **I have taken leadership roles in my community**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 2.7     |
| Disagree                   | 5         | 13.5    |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 9         | 24.3    |
| Agree                      | 7         | 18.9    |
| Strongly agree             | 15        | 40.5    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

Table 13-W shows that even in this more challenging dimension of care for immediate others that graduates of WCES see themselves as having taken on leadership in their communities. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, this is remarkable given the stage in life in which these young people find themselves. They are completing postsecondary education, having children and establishing careers and yet nearly 60% agree or strongly agree that they have taken on community leadership roles. As we pointed out above regarding physical activity, we were impressed with the range of volunteer engagements respondents reported in open-ended questioning. This involvement varied with the different circumstances of individuals. University and college bound young people tended to volunteer in sport and cultural activities, while locally focused youth whose educational trajectories were located in the immediate community were volunteering in institutions like the school and in the fire department. This focus group exchange illustrates:

> *Parent: There are quite a few who have gone off to do computer technology through the community college. We have some that have gone into home care through community college who are working in the county, let's say. And there are some young men who are members of the fire department who have stayed in the*

*community. These young people have settled now and they're having families*

*Interviewer: Are you having trouble keeping the fire department going?*

*Parent 2: No. We have 27 members and we have 3 new young members. As far as older ones … they're probably outnumbered by the younger ones because even our fire chief, well he just turned 40. Well, he's been a fireman for 14 years*

*Parent 3: But you're thinking in terms of young graduates. I'm thinking of xxxx and xxxx who must be 19, 20, 21. And they're now members of the fire department.*

We conclude from this data that the young people who have experienced their elementary education at WCES have learned to care for immediate others. The school and the community are in fact so well integrated that school work and the development of social capital seem to occur rather naturally. Robert Putnam would undoubtedly see WCES as the kind of social environment that provides young people with the basis for the kind of adult civic engagement that strengthens societies and builds democracy. We now analyze data that deals more specifically with broader questions of caring for distant others.

## Caring for distant others
## (Survey questions: 17, 22, and 23)

*He has all the skills he needs in high school; he is doing very well. Wentworth helped him with his sense of community. He is a very caring individual and volunteers within the community. There's a difference with a larger school versus a smaller one. For example, I've worked in larger schools and larger ones have raised 600$ for the Terry Fox run whereas Wentworth which is smaller raised 800$ on its own. (Parent)*

*Teaching them that all people are equal is what this school does. It teaches them that all people are equal; all people have self worth and have a reason to be where they are. (Student)*

While caring for the self and immediate others is crucial to the educational development of children, the idea of seeing oneself as part of a larger social whole is embedded in the PSP. This has been the traditional purview of the social studies and the established school subjects of history, geography and civics. Some analysts claim this project has been a failure (Granatstein, 1999; Bliss, 2002). Our attempts to help young people become more civic-minded have run afoul of an individualistic, predominantly American mass media invasion as well as a loosening sense of a coherent narrative about what our country represents as we become more diverse and multicultural. Others argue that

Canada has changed so profoundly that the old stories can no longer keep up with the new realities of globalization, new media, cultural hybridity, and other well known change forces (Stanley, 2000; Sexias, 2002, Hargreaves, 2003).

Regardless of one's position on these questions, it is undeniable that young people are more politically disengaged and skeptical about the idea that they can make a difference and that they ought to participate in social processes beyond their immediate locales (Adams, 2004; Decima, 2005). Yet, the PSP calls for schools to foster a sense of democratic engagement and citizenship. We place this segment of the broad goals of the PSP under the umbrella of caring for distant others.

Our questions in this section investigate attitudes and engagements of graduates of WCES in questions of democratic participation and citizenship. At the attitudinal level, most youth claim to want to make a difference in society. In fact Decima research found recently that approximately 75% of Canadian young people between the ages of and 34 have a desire to "be involved in things" going on around them (2005). The young people from WCES were actually unanimous in terms of expressing a desire to take part in their society.

**Table 14-W**          **I want to contribute to my society**

|                | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------|-----------|---------|
| Agree          | 9         | 24.3    |
| Strongly agree | 28        | 75.7    |
| Total          | 37        | 100.0   |

Decima (2005) found that despite finding that young people have a desire to participate in causes and social activities of a voluntary nature, relatively few of them actually did anything about this desire. This was particularly true of individuals in lower income groups and especially for those with lower educational levels. It is clear then that schools and postsecondary education do make a difference in civic engagement. We suggested in the previous section that small rural schools may actually be crucibles for the inculcation of high levels of social capital. But will the experience of civic engagement in an elementary school community lead to pragmatic participation like volunteer work and other forms of democratic involvement?

While a small minority of individuals in this sample define themselves as non-volunteers, a strong majority (62.1%) see themselves as active volunteers. This is an important indicator, but volunteering can occur at a number of levels and it does not necessarily signal participation at the level of actual democratic engagement. We therefore asked

**Table 15-W          I volunteer**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 4         | 10.8    |
| Disagree                   | 2         | 5.4     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 8         | 21.6    |
| Agree                      | 5         | 13.5    |
| Strongly agree             | 18        | 48.6    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

respondents about their engagement in democratic process giving them example cues if they were unable to answer the question immediately.  We chose to locate this question specifically "in my community" because the community is always the primary level of democratic participation.  One can be democratically engaged by sitting on a committee or a board, by pitching-in at church, working with an international relief effort or a food bank, by building social capital locally through coaching or in informal teaching.  Again, a small minority saw themselves outside the frame of this level of engagement, but 64.8% agreed or strongly agreed that they do participate.

**Table 16-W          I participate in democratic processes in my community**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 2.7     |
| Disagree                   | 3         | 8.1     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 9         | 24.3    |
| Agree                      | 14        | 37.8    |
| Strongly agree             | 10        | 27.0    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

In the end, it is always difficult to know to what extent any school has accomplished the broad goals of the PSP in the matter of civic engagement and democratic participation.  What we have seen in the course of our research is a community that is very much aware of itself and which provided a kind of school experience that gives young people a range of opportunities for a variety of civic responsibility.  In the focus groups it became clear to us that the multi-grade structure of the school did indeed provide students with opportunities for taking responsibility for their own learning, caring for one another, and for seeing the school community as a space in which young people's efforts and  activity make a difference.

## Communication
## (Survey questions: 11, 12, 13)

> *Well I have a son. He's in grade nine this year, and he had to be there presenting these projects to the other grade nine class … I said I don't know how well he'll do, he's pretty shy like in front of a lot of people; and actually, I spoke to her (teacher) after he had done another project and she said, "You're not going to tell me that", (laughter) she said he did fine, got up and did his stuff and no problem at all. In the multiage and in the smaller class they gain the confidence to do that without being under pressure. (Parent)*

As was the case in River Hebert, in the focus group when we asked whether the young people who attend WCES are "good communicators" we were met with laughter. One teacher commented that anyone who spends five minutes in the school will be well award of the children's communication skills. In an elementary school, a young child's communication skills are enhanced through a range of interactions that include instruction in language, math and other curriculum areas as well as through the more "informal" mechanisms of play situations, cooperative projects, etc.

On one of our visits in late January, the teachers were setting up the large fish tank with a refrigeration unit in which salmon were being raised for release into the wild in the spring. The children were amazed by this project and asked excellent questions about the process. The Principal later commented that she was about to install and incubator for hatching chicks as part of a science unit. The school itself is bright and cheerful even in mid winter and filled with a well organized and well cared-for, books, information technology, and manipulative learning materials of all sorts. The school library now doubles as a community CAP site providing internet and computer access to people in the community. Regular volunteers staff the CAP site/library, several of whom are former teachers and librarians. In short, WCES is a public, multi-service educational site for all community members. The school is a modern communication centre for children but also for the community at large.

While we might at this point elaborate on the importance of WCES to the community, we think it ought to be obvious. The community would lose a great deal more than a few classrooms for children if this school were closed. This is an active multi-service community resource, one which is clearly important to young children, their parents and to seniors in the community. This exchange from the focus group makes the point.

> *Parent: I don't think we should overlook the importance of the building itself. Our community CAP site is there and community school programs are run out of there. There is a library which is open year round and then there is the playground which people use all year round. So quite apart from all of the things related to the education within the school, the building itself is of significant importance to the community.*

*Teacher: When the students see elections held in the school they know that democracy is important. Similarly, defensive driving courses are held in the school and things like that … first aid courses have been offered out of the building and I know it speaks well of the community school. This is one of the few community schools that really has been maintained and kept going and is able to offer these programs. Some of these are during the day for school-aged children and preschoolers and then in the evenings … and in the summer … for all ages. The students see this.*

*Parent: This is community.*

The question we ask in this section concerns communication and whether students who came through WCES seem to be functioning as competent communicators. Having communication resources in the local elementary school does not necessarily mean that students will become comfortable and effective communicators. The levels of postsecondary participation are one indicator that would suggest that many young people at WCES seem to grow up to develop communicative capacity that allows them to move into postsecondary education.

The most generic of our questions in this section concerns the perception that one is a clear communicator. With the exception of a single outlier, members of this sample felt as though they were clear communicators, with a majority in strong agreement with the statement. This data show that in their daily lives, the overwhelming majority of the young people who came through WCES appear to be confident in their general ability to communicate.

**Table 15-W          I communicate clearly with others**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 2.7 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 | 8.1 |
| Agree | 11 | 29.7 |
| Strongly agree | 22 | 59.5 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

Looking more specifically at the particular kinds of communication detailed in the PSP, we focused specifically on traditional literacy and mathematics. With respect to literacy, we have already elaborated on the many myths around people's actual literate activity and the measurement of literacy in standardized testing. Therefore, we asked our sample about their confidence in the literate tasks that they face in the lives their everyday lives. We believe that this is the most appropriate way to actually get a sense of whether or not a person's literacy skills are adequate. We do, of course understand that literacy also

includes dealing with a variety of new kinds of text and technologies, but reading and writing remain fundamental to many forms of learning.

Table 16-W shows that not a single individual in the sample reported disagreement with the question we asked about reading and writing. All but one individual either agrees or strongly agrees that they are confident reading and writing in their daily lives. Since

**Table 16-W          I feel confident reading and writing in my daily life**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 1         | 2.7     |
| Agree                       | 11        | 29.7    |
| Strongly agree              | 25        | 67.6    |
| Total                       | 37        | 100.0   |

every literacy theorist and practitioner would probably agree that early educational experience is foundational to the establishment of reading and writing skills, these data provide strong evidence that this school has laid the groundwork for adult literacy in this community.

In the area of mathematics the data are not as strong but they do point in a similar direction to that of the literacy question (see Table 17-W). A slim majority are in strong agreement with the idea that they have the math skills they need to meet the challenges of daily living. Nearly 92% either agree or strongly agree that their math skills are adequate

**Table 17-W          My mathematical skills are adequate for what I have to do in life**

|                             | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree  | 3         | 8.1     |
| Agree                       | 15        | 40.5    |
| Strongly agree              | 19        | 51.4    |
| Total                       | 37        | 100.0   |

for the lives they are currently living. As was the case in River Hebert there is evidence that number of these individuals have been challenged to do mathematics at a very high level. It should be kept in mind that more than 60% of this survey population has had experience in postsecondary education. Additionally, several respondents have completed or are currently pursuing graduate level university degrees. It is also important to note that the vast majority of individuals currently living in the local area also consider their mathematical skills sufficient and not hampering them in the conduct of their lives.

## A balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities (Survey questions: 1, 2, 3, and 25)

> *You know, the teacher took an interest in a lot of things … they got us interested in a lot of things, sports, trips to the city. It was more than just the basics. (Student)*

The question of overall program quality is one that is often asked about small rural schools. Many people who have never spent much time in a small rural school simply assume that they will lack certain of the amenities and choices available in a larger school. In the focus group it was very clear that the parents and grandparents of the children who attend WCES have no reservations about the quality of educational programming in the school and actually fear that their children stand to lose a good deal of both quality and quantity should their schools. For instance, in the area of technology, parents are concerned that their children will have less computer access than they currently enjoy should the school close.

> *I would beg to differ that they will have better computer access in another school. When they get to high school they don't even have as much time on a computer they do in the lower elementary schools. With the large number of students and the booking of computer labs and that kind of thing … I don't think they have as much access to it at the high school level as they have at the elementary levels.*

In fact, community elders are hard-pressed to understand how this argument could be used in the case of their school. However, given that many of the graduates of WCES have gone on to live in urban centres and in places far from where they were raised it is possible that some of them may, in retrospect, see their small school experience as being of lesser quality. Thus, we asked graduates about program balance. In this section we will very briefly report on this data. Table 18-W reports data from a direct question about the quality of courses at WCES and Table 19-W addresses the overall quality of the educational experience at WCES. Predictably, a small minority appears to have reservations about the quality of education they received from the retrospective viewpoint of young adulthood, but a large majority agrees that the quality of programming was high at this school.

**Table 18-W          The quality of courses I took at WCES was high**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Neither agree nor disagree | 5         | 13.5    |
| Agree                      | 12        | 32.4    |
| Strongly agree             | 20        | 54.1    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

**Table 19-W**          **The quality of all experiences I had at WCES was high**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 2 | 5.4 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 4 | 10.8 |
| Agree | 10 | 27.0 |
| Strongly agree | 21 | 56.8 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

On the question of balance, more than 75% of respondents agreed at some level that the school provided a good balance of programs. This is remarkable given the very small size of this school and it serves as a testament to the energy and commitment of the teachers. Essentially fewer than 3 full-time equivalent teaching staff delivers the educational programming at the school with the support of Board specialists and a committed core group of volunteers from the community.

> *We get as much service as the Board offers. We have a music specialist, we have a phys ed specialist, we have a speech specialist who comes in, we have a psychometrist, we have a psychologist We use a different philosophy than in a straight-grade classroom or a split-grade teacher may use, but we have access to all of the services that the Board offers and we get as much service as any school in the county. We also have a "Cares" program for children at risk who aren't experiencing success. We have a choir within our school this year. I really feel strongly that we are meeting all of the curriculum outcomes and providing more above and beyond the basic curriculum outcomes. (Teacher)*

**Table 20-W**          **I feel that the school provide me with a good balance of academic, vocational, cultural and physical opportunities.**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 4 | 10.8 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 5 | 13.5 |
| Agree | 10 | 27.0 |
| Strongly agree | 18 | 48.6 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

It is the community itself though that helps to provide the balance. Teachers understand that volunteer and parental involvement is what makes the school work as well as it does. There are those who would argue that this is a problem and that the only people who work with children or who support them in their education ought to be trained teachers, ideally specializing in one grade. This however, does not necessarily provide young people with a balanced program, in fact, it may do quite the opposite. Children who are

placed in large classes taught be a single teacher without the support of a local community may well be a less rich experience for children than a multi-aged classroom full of children with different abilities and interests taught in the context of a community school. The multiage classroom may actually be a more balanced experience overall. We believe that in both of these schools, this case could easily be made. The question of balance, preparation for further studies, and preparation for life in general was addressed this way by one of the respondents:

> *It (WCES) has excellent teachers and excellent courses. In small schools they (students) are more known by their teachers. In a small school if there are any problems up through, the teachers know them all and by the time they finish grade 6 they are very well rounded and have a lot of opportunities to go places and see things which may not be readily available here. They take them places like on field trips or provide them with cultural experiences like bringing in Maritime Marionettes or things like that so they were subject to that type of thing. Then they have after school programs in the community school which provided programs like bike rodeos, ski lessons, youth groups, craft groups, swimming lessons all kinds of things. They say it takes a community to raise a child and the school is a central part of that. (Parent)*

Like the parents of River Hebert, Wentworth parents really cannot understand the perspective of those who argue that there is a problem with their school. They are committed to community-based education and strongly support the presence of the school in their community. They understand only too well what would be lost with the termination of the school. So the final question concerning whether or not the school can provide young people with a quality education in the modern world is something of a "no-brainer" for them. Of course it can (in their view), and nearly 80% of respondents strongly agree with the positive statement to this effect.

**Table 21-W        I think that a small rural high school like RHDH can provide youth with a good quality education in the modern world**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 2.7     |
| Disagree                   | 2         | 5.4     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2         | 5.4     |
| Agree                      | 3         | 8.1     |
| Strongly agree             | 29        | 78.4    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

Wentworth parents and graduates in this sample appear to have benefited from a diverse differentiated program that is well balanced and tailored to the individual needs of students at WCES. In fact, like the citizens of River Hebert, they are very tired of being

asked the same questions time and again. They have answered these questions before and they have provided evidence before. What we have shown here is that a representative sample of former graduates of the school agrees that their school experience was of high quality and was balanced across the curriculum and beyond.


## Problem solving and the application of appropriate techniques and technologies to these problems through the life course
## (Survey questions: 5, 6, 7)

> *I don't think kids today anywhere are suffering from not being exposed to technology. I'm thinking of television, video games, computers and all of the violence and other things they find there. That's why I think this small community school is so important because they're seeing the good parts of society and the good parts of society are being constantly modeled for them. (Parent)*

Technology is important to any educational experience in any era. A child's experience with the technologies of his or her time ought to be rich and schools - at their best - are places where all children are engaged in high quality activities that allow them to create and learn. For many young people, school is the only significant place in their lives where they have access to information technologies and even significant collections of books the work space and the supplies a student requires to do something as basic as read and write.

Technologies are the tools that we bring to bear on our most pressing problems as well as those we use to learn and reach out to others. The PSP makes numerous references to technology including a foundational essential graduation learning called "technological competence" which makes an explicit link between using technologies and solving problems.

> Graduates will be able to use a variety of technologies, demonstrate an understanding of technological applications and apply appropriate technologies for solving problems (Nova Scotia Government, 2004: A-5).

As we pointed out in the previous section, youth in rural communities can have access to a wide world of knowledge through contemporary information technologies no matter how remote their communities happen to be. All levels of government have committed to "wiring" (and more recently "wirelessing") as much of their jurisdictions as possible. Programs like the federal government Community Access Program (CAP) program and the technology initiatives of the Department of Education have created the infrastructure in most of Nova Scotia's schools to allow for multiple educational possibilities that educators are only beginning to explore. Some critics argue that children will be better served in technology rich centralized schools, but many rural schools in relatively isolated communities have for many years been internet hubs for the community. WCES

is such a community and the school serves as host to the local CAP site offering a dozen wired computers which are available to WCES students during school hours.

Parents and other elders are rightly concerned that if the school is closed, they will lose an important technological resource within their community. The PSP also expects schools to produce individuals who are confident lifelong learners. Lifelong learning will be much more difficult to do in Wentworth if the local school is closed. Many of the people who use the CAP centre on a regular basis would have no computer access otherwise so the school and its computer centre are an accessible community pipeline to the information highway. As such, the school is a lifelong learning centre where young people begin their educations and where the community's senior members come to interact with young people and to connect to the multitude of opportunities and knowledges available to them through information technologies.

**Table 22-W          I consider myself to be a confident lifelong learner**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 2.7 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2 | 5.4 |
| Agree | 8 | 21.6 |
| Strongly agree | 26 | 70.3 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

But the question remains concerning whether or not the graduates of WCES have grown to become lifelong learners. Table 22-W illustrates over 90% of this sample see themselves as lifelong learners. This is no surprise given the level of engagement we documented earlier in this chapter. Lifelong learning is part of the way that members of this community seem to understand themselves, which is a large part of the reason why they do not wish their school to be closed.

This exchange between parents and teachers in the focus group illustrates the range of postsecondary achievement in which this group of graduates has been, and continues to be engaged.

> *Parent1:   Well xxxxx is over in Europe.   xxxxx is down in the States.   We've got a number in Halifax.*

> *Parent 2: xxxxx went to UBC and has her master's in biology.   She just graduated last year with her master's and spent the following year traveling all over Asia.*

> *Parent 1: xxxxx is in Halifax and Tammy's in Ontario.   xxxxx is out in BC.*

*Parent 3: xxxxx is out in Calgary; she took criminology. She graduated from University in Fredericton and now she's moved out to Calgary.*

*Parent 1: Oh, we've got one who graduated with his bachelor of science and he's working locally in the construction industry because he loves it*

*Teacher:   A few weeks ago xxxxx visited the school and she graduated back around 89. She has a degree in archeology and is now attending the University of Arizona. She's worked all over the world.*

*Parent 3: And then we have xxxxx that's over in Hong Kong, teaching there.*

*Teacher: Yes. She completed a degree in kinesiology and then went into education. She worked here in the summers with the rec. department running summer programs and now she's traveling world-wide to teach.*

*Parent 4: xxxxx's living in Canmore. She graduated from Queens School of Business and she's in training trying to make the Canadian Olympic cross-country ski team for the 2010 Olympics. I also have a daughter in her 3$^{rd}$ year in Carleton and my youngest in is his first year at Queens. And xxxxx is in Austria trying to make the Canadian mountain biking team going to New Zealand this summer.*

*Parent 3: And Connors is a helicopter pilot, but he lives locally. He works at the ski hill and he built his house here. He's a big promoter of the bike stuff.*

*Parent 2: And isn't xxxxx at McGill?*

*Parent 1: Yes she is and her sister is studying art and graphic design at NASCAD*

*Parent 2: Any of the students are not intimidated by going out and branching out and doing anything they want.*

**Table 23-W**     **I feel that I am capable of solving the problems I encounter in daily life**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 2.7 |
| Agree | 10 | 27.0 |
| Strongly agree | 26 | 70.3 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

As for the dimension of problem-solving itself, with the exception of a single individual, there is unanimous agreement among respondents in terms of their capability to solve daily problems. One of the most significant forms of problem solving in a modern society is the ability to deal effectively with change. Change, it is said, is the only constant in the contemporary world and curriculum documents from the time of John Dewey (i.e. over the last century) have striven to prepare youth to deal with a world in which change is a chronic feature. For generations educators have tended to think about educational success less as the mastery of a body of content than the extent to which a student is taught to think his or her way through problems. The PSP puts it this way:

> The challenge of education is to offer a school experience that will provide students with opportunities to develop the understanding, skills, and attitudes necessary to become lifelong learners capable of identifying and solving problems and dealing effectively with change (Nova Scotia Government, 2004: A3)

Achieving this broad goal of the PSP is a challenge for each of us and for all of us collectively. Change is our friend, our enemy, our amusement and our nemesis. Preparing children for this changing world presents us with particular problems in elementary school because the adult world for which we are preparing 5 and 6 year-olds is still a long way in the future. Our best strategy is to give children a strong local and accessible learning community and the best tools we have. When we asked former students of WCES about their ability to deal with change they felt as though they were prepared for dealing with change in their lives (see Table 24-W). Parents too had little doubt that their children are well prepared for globalized modernity and technological change.

**Table 24-W**     **I have learned to deal effectively with change in my daily life**

|  | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Disagree | 1 | 2.7 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 1 | 2.7 |
| Agree | 12 | 32.4 |
| Strongly agree | 23 | 62.2 |
| Total | 37 | 100.0 |

And perhaps this is one of the most important long term legacies of attending a small rural school like WCES. These children have been exposed to difference (different ages and different abilities) and diversity within their mixed grade classes. Neither teachers nor students can fall complacently into a routine of grade-level worksheets or other destructive pedagogical devices allegedly designed to provide just the right instruction to the child of a given age. These teachers, parents and students understand that it is the individual that matters and that each of us is unique as an individual. The world is not simple and formulas do not generally suffice. What better preparation for complexity and change than this multiage life lesson?

## A school that works well within its community
## (Survey question 24)

> *I hate to say this but think about the residential schools. I mean that's an issue that still is haunting Canadian society, and that is the prime example of kids being taken out of their own communities and put somewhere else to be educated. We're still paying the consequences and we're still paying the dollars for that kind of thing. Now that is one group of people, our Native people, but the same thing happens to people on a smaller scale. I don't think that anybody has ever taken the time or even thought about measuring the consequences of or the effects of taking small people out of their own community and taking them somewhere else to be educated, It's the same thing but on a smaller scale. (Parent)*

It is our conclusion based on this analysis of the data that the school and community work very well together in Wentworth and in the feeder villages that send children to WCES. We have no way of knowing the long-term community and individual consequences of rural school closures made on the basis of faulty categorical notions about school size and educational quality. The quote above raises additional questions about how we might go about calculating the cost of school closure in terms of disrupted, diminished and even damaged lives.

Table 25-W presents data from the specific question we asked toward the end of the interview schedule specifically relating to graduates' perceptions of the community-school fit. It comes as no surprise at this point in the analysis that the vast majority of graduates are in agreement with the idea that the school is working well with its community. If this community had the power and authority to make the decision about the fate of its school, there is no doubt that the school would stay open. Community members see their school as a highly effective and deeply loved foundational institution. Neither the Board nor anyone else has given them reason to believe that their children would receive a better education in another school. Members of the community have embraced the multiage structure of the school and the philosophy upon which it has been built and see its benefits for their children.

**Table 25- W          I think the school and the community work well together in Wentworth**

|                            | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Strongly disagree          | 1         | 2.7     |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 5         | 13.5    |
| Agree                      | 7         | 18.9    |
| Strongly agree             | 24        | 64.9    |
| Total                      | 37        | 100.0   |

Teachers, children, parents and grandparents see no advantage in bussing children to schools where they could be placed in single grade classrooms.  The benefits are unproven to them and the costs to the community and to the children are too high.

> *My education would have turned out differently if I had been bussed out for elementary school.  Certainly.  It's such a rural, small community: you know everybody, you're friends with everybody. I just feel that it's intimidating for some kids to be bussed away just to get education.  I think it's good that we stayed in our little community.  Yeah, I'm happy we did. (Student)*

Like the community of River Hebert, the people of Wentworth feel besieged by repeated calls for them to justify the quality of education in an institution that has proven too many times that it deserves to exist.  They know their school is a good one.  For the people of Wentworth there is no question.  The contrary evidence has not been shown.  Their very young children stand to spend hours daily on busses should this consolidation go ahead and they are concerned.  Parents articulate this fear in the context of their own experience with bussing and they do not want very young children experiencing the educational disadvantage that additional bussing brings.  This parent, for example, makes an explicit comparison between her situation in an isolated rural community and that of a parent in an urban centre.

> *Well, she (daughter) was bussed out of the community as soon as she left grade six … She was on the bus 7:30 in the morning, never came home until 4 o'clock.  As a five year old kid, I don't think … It's just where we lived; we lived way out in the middle of nowhere.*

In the age of the internet, geography need not be an educational disadvantage.  Small multiage schools like WCES can and do work well.  To the people of Wentworth there is no evidence that a better alternative exists in another community some kilometers of broken secondary roads away.  There is no evidence to support the closure of an institution that is the heart of their community.  There is no evidence of any problem with the educational quality in the school or with the educational and life outcomes of its graduates.  On this latter point we believe that our research only strengthens the case that community members make and we are in general agreement that WCES meets and exceeds the broad goal expectations of the PSP on every count for virtually every student.

The CCRSB will need to mount a powerful case to justify the closure of this school on educational grounds. We believe that this school, like the small high school in River Hebert, ought to be held up as an exemplar for multiage practice at the elementary level. It is a school that is scaled for its community and this is why it works.

# Chapter 6
# Conclusion

> The trend to close schools was intensified by a culturally popular assumption … schools need to be big to be good. In fact, for many decades of the 20th century, school consolidation was considered synonymous with school improvement, despite the fact that there was virtually no evidence to support the assumption. While naïve views related to consolidation still exist, and the practice continues to be one of the first cost-cutting measures examined when states face serious fiscal difficulties, we have at last reached the point where consolidation advocates are forced to submit evidence for claims of greater efficiency and improved instruction (Theobald, 2005: 121).

> *Why do they think that rural schools don't teach the students as well as bigger schools? What do they think big schools have that rural schools don't have to teach the children how to handle problems or how to deal with certain things? Why are they assuming that in our little country school the children are not getting the appropriate education that a city school would have? (Wentworth Parent)*

## Evidence and the educational argument for closure

Through the course of this research project we have been struck by the frustration felt by the people living in Wentworth and in River Hebert. The general sentiment is that they are being ignored by the school board and that they are being sold a bill of goods that they know is false. We are reminded of Wotherspoon's (1998) cautions and Porter's (1996) claims about how school administrators often have something very different in mind when they speak of educational quality than the images of educational quality in the minds of most citizens living in rural communities. They speak, it seems different languages and it is very difficult to translate between the two.

The quote above from Theobald makes two fundamental points. First of all, he repeats what small school and rural community school scholars have been demonstrating for more than forty years, i.e. that there is no evidence to support the contention that big is better or that better educational quality follows necessarily from greater program offerings. A recent study form Iowa, using state mandated standardized tests demonstrates that even when academic achievement is defined in the narrow terms of standardized testing, that the **size of the school** and the **number of program offerings** in the school have **no impact** on student achievement.

> There is no relationship between the number of high school credits offered and the proficiency levels of 11th grade students on Iowa's state-mandated tests in reading and math. These findings refute

assertions by some policy leaders in Iowa that small high schools cannot offer a broad enough curriculum for students to achieve at high levels and should, therefore, be consolidated (Rural School and Community Trust, 2006: 1)

We found nothing in the literature, in our primary research, or in provincial data to support the claim that additional program offerings are related to better educational quality unless educational quality is simply defined as more programs. **The argument is circular**. As we have shown in Chapter 3, this argument is simply not supported in the literature, nor is it supported in the experience of people like the citizens of Wentworth and River Hebert. These citizens have repeatedly called for clear evidence that consolidation and closure of their schools will improve the quality of education that their children receive. This evidence they have not received.

Theobald's second point is that in the United States and in Canada as well, a higher standard of evidence is now required to justify crucial decisions that are made with public money. We are now in the age of evidence-based decision making and accountability. Theobald speaks to the passing of the time when a group of people can set themselves up as experts and make decisions on the basis of unjustified and unsubstantiated judgment calls. Our question is whether or not this is indeed the case in Nova Scotia at the present moment. Is it true that evidence is required to justify the decision to close a core institution that will have significant repercussions for a community and the families who live there? If this is true, unsupported administrative mantras like "big is better" or "program offerings equal better quality education" are no longer sufficient justification for school closure.

Words are cheap, but the consequences for communities and the children and youth are not As Gillis (2005) cautioned the CCRSB in his facilities report, referring specifically to the option to close River Hebert District High School:

It is a simple matter to enumerate the *perceived benefits* (our emphasis) River Hebert students would derive from transferring to E.B. Chandler Junior High and Amherst Regional High; it is quite another matter to create the positive environment that will provide the students with the fullest opportunity to enjoy them (2005: 71).

Gillis does not characterize any alleged benefits as actual or even as benefits that could be reasonably anticipated given the support of evidence; these are **perceived** benefits. Perceived by whom, and upon what basis? Why do these perceptions override the well-supported "perceptions" of community members, students and teachers who are still waiting to be shown any evidence to support the conclusion that there are educationally sound reasons to move their children to educational facilities in other communities and that their children's schools should be closed. The frustration of these communities is well justified and their persistent lingering questions deserve an answer.

Gillis' point is that if the closure option is chosen, then it will be incumbent upon the Board to ease the transition of students through unknown potential problems into the environment of a large secondary school environment, a transition which is justified on the basis of perception and not solid research.

It is ironic under the current legislation in many jurisdictions that when a school is slated for closure it is not the school board that is required to justify, on the basis of evidence, that a different school, additional bussing and consolidation will result in higher educational quality for the students. Rather it is put upon community groups to mount the case for their schools. But why is the burden of proof placed on the community? Why do community members have to be put through a process time and again to justify that they deserve a service to which most Canadians would agree citizens ought to have a right, the right to have a community school. An additional irony is that school boards possess the educational expertise to provide solid evidence that big is better and that program opportunities do indeed improve educational quality. But saying "big" and "more" over and over again does not constitute proof and the Board ought to be able to do better.

What we do know from the research evidence essentially supports the position of the parents. The evidence is conclusive. Small schools do a better job of educating children in general and particularly those children who live in conditions of economic disadvantage. The communities of River Hebert and Wentworth certainly qualify as economically disadvantaged places. Average family income levels are reported in Figures 1-C and 2-C. This economic disadvantage is particularly the case for River Hebert where average family income in the community is 73.7% of the provincial average and approximately 59% of the national average.

**Figure 1-C Average household income River Hebert, 2001**

Nova Scotia Average: $48,457

River Hebert
$35,706
Source: Nova Scotia Community Counts.

**Figure 2-C Average household income Mahoney's Corner (Wentworth), 2001**

Nova Scotia Average: $48,457
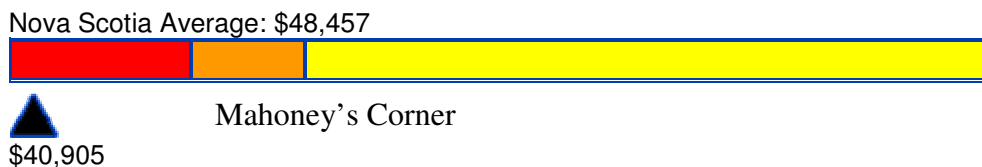
Mahoney's Corner
$40,905
Source: Nova Scotia Community Counts.

The consistent message from parents, teachers and students alike has been that educational access will very probably diminish should RHDH close. River Hebert is a community that has produced remarkable educational results as we have shown in

Chapter 4, results which are all the more commendable given the educational level present in the community itself. RHDH has done nothing short of a remarkable job of placing its graduates in post secondary institutions. In the Wentworth area the economics and educational attainment levels are slightly stronger, but this too is a relatively disadvantaged community.

Citizens in these communities understand intuitively what the research literature is saying: they know that their schools are crucial to providing quality education to their children. They know that if these schools are closed, their community's existing disadvantages will be exacerbated. As DeYoung points out, "schools are not the cause of economic decline in rural places. Rather, they are the institutions that have to live and work with the consequences of such decline" (1994: 249). Removing a school from a rural community is not a legitimate way to improve its fortunes, nor is it a sound way to improved educational quality as our research and the literature we have reviewed demonstrates.

**Table 1-C      Highest Level of Educational Attainment, River Hebert**

|  | 1991 Census | | 1996 Census | | 2001 Census | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| **Total Reporting** | 1,232 | 100.0 | 1,280 | 100.0 | 1,157 | 100.0 |
| **Less than High School** | 787 | 63.9 | 831 | 64.9 | 630 | 54.5 |
| Less than Grade 9 | 349 | 28.3 | 326 | 25.5 | 290 | 25.1 |
| Without secondary school graduation certificate | 438 | 35.6 | 506 | 39.5 | 341 | 29.5 |
| **High School Graduation Certificate** | 138 | 11.2 | 107 | 8.4 | 160 | 13.8 |
| **Some Post-Secondary Education** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| College | 37 | 3.0 | 25 | 2.0 | 49 | 4.2 |
| University | 26 | 2.1 | 31 | 2.4 | 40 | 3.5 |
| **Post-Secondary Certificate or Diploma** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| College | 185 | 15.0 | 212 | 16.6 | 232 | 20.1 |
| University | 62 | 5.0 | 47 | 3.7 | 10 | 0.9 |
| **University Degree - Bachelor's or Higher** | 2 | 0.2 | 27 | 2.1 | 45 | 3.9 |

Source: Nova Scotia Community Counts.

It is well known and well established in the sociological literature that family income is the single best predictor of educational performance for children (Riordan, 2004; Berliner, 2005). Yet, our evidence shows that despite its economic disadvantage, RHDH in particular is producing remarkable results confirming the emerging scholarly consensus about the power of small schools to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children. This is something that parents have always known and several Nova Scotia researchers have found that like the parents of River Hebert and Wentworth understand the nuances of the quality of education in their small community schools (Newton, 1993; Small Rural Schools Task Force, 1993; Looker and MacKinnon, 1999).

It appears as though these parents and other small school advocates know something after all and that these "sentiments" are not simply rooted in nostalgia.


**Table 2-C      Highest Level of Educational Attainment, Mahoney's Corner (Wentworth)**

|  | 1991 Census | | 1996 Census | | 2001 Census | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| **Total Reporting** | 1,118 | 100.0 | 1,107 | 100.0 | 1,061 | 100.0 |
| **Less than High School** | 517 | 46.2 | 567 | 51.2 | 411 | 38.7 |
| Less than Grade 9 | 157 | 14.0 | 170 | 15.4 | 94 | 8.9 |
| Without secondary school graduation certificate | 362 | 32.4 | 398 | 36.0 | 317 | 29.9 |
| **High School Graduation Certificate** | 163 | 14.6 | 110 | 9.9 | 126 | 11.9 |
| **Some Post-Secondary Education** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| College | 21 | 1.9 | 47 | 4.2 | 40 | 3.8 |
| University | 22 | 2.0 | 61 | 5.5 | 30 | 2.8 |
| **Post-Secondary Certificate or Diploma** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| College | 251 | 22.5 | 210 | 19.0 | 345 | 32.5 |
| University | 69 | 6.2 | 54 | 4.9 | 37 | 3.5 |
| **University Degree - Bachelor's or Higher** | 52 | 4.7 | 52 | 4.7 | 67 | 6.3 |

Source: Nova Scotia Community Counts.


The turn toward small schools is not just a phenomenon that is restricted to small communities.  As we noted in earlier chapters, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently donated $51 million dollars to fund the creation of small schools which have been shown time and again to improve educational performance in disadvantaged communities (Gates Foundation, 2006).  Large urban and suburban schools are being refashioned into small schools.  In fact, the current trend is to disaggregate large schools into smaller sub-units which create the less institutional, less bureaucratic, less factory-like human conditions that allow for the best teaching and learning.  As Theobald (1997) suggests, we ought to be moving away from the model of the large factory school toward school structures that resemble the successful small rural school.  The small rural school is precisely the model and scale of schooling that can actually help us humanize and improve schools everywhere.   In a recent edition of Phi Delta Kappan, one of the most respected and widely circulated educational journals in the world Truscott and Truscott wrote:

> Many rural educators have argued that the unique nature of small rural schools should be protected from the current national pressure to consolidate.  They have a point.  Academic achievement is influenced by the interaction of both school size and poverty level.  Small schools can reduce poverty's negative effects on achievement … Ironically, the recent trend to create schools within schools' in many large school districts affirms the importance of small, intimate learning relationships such as

those that existed previously in rural schools that have been forced to close (Truscott and Truscott, 2005: 126).

It is, in fact, the strength of small schools that supports young people to make their way in a tough post-school environment in which many must leave home in order to make a living. This has been a reality in many parts of rural Nova Scotia and rural Canada more generally for many years. People in rural communities understand that many of their children will have to leave and go on to higher education and employment away from home. They do not cling to their schools because of nostalgia or because they want to shelter their young form the reality of the challenges their communities face. Rather, they understand that the best way to prepare their children for the world outside their communities is to give them a strong educational foundation and the best education possible. They know from experience that a small school in which their children are known and where programming is sensitive to who they are as learners and where school and community work together is the best educational environment available. They know that education is a community shared responsibility.

At the local level, this position has been backed up time and again by the reports of successive school study committees in each of the two schools currently under study. The people in River Hebert and Wentworth are frustrated because they have proven, time and again what the literature shows, that their particular schools are effective, community supported institutions of learning that do meet the goals of the public school program and satisfy the outcomes prescribed in the provincial curriculum. Public frustration and the sense that they are up against a predetermined political agenda is understandable given this history. These people believe, that no matter what evidence they provide to the Board and no matter what evidence others can present to the Board, the ultimate decision will be made on the basis of power and not on the basis of the facts.

What we found in these schools is precisely the qualities that Deborah Meier has identified as the hallmarks of good schools. These three characteristics are small size, a sense of self-governance, and choice. In effective schools everyone involved feels a part of a community built on authentic relationships. We can only conclude from our interactions in both of these schools that they are indeed the kind of schools that Meier describes and which she has run successfully in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Like Theobald (1997), Howley and Eckman, (1997); Haas and Nachtigal (1998); Bowers, (2000, 2003); Basile (2004), Shelton (2005), Grunenwald (2003, 2002) and others, Meier sees the small school modeled on the template of the best of our rural schools as the best hope for public education.

It is ironic that the CCRSB is actually considering the closure of two small schools that could actually serve as models of a kind of educational structure that clearly works. We believe that our policy analysis, literature review, and research efforts have established this conclusion sufficiently to convince the Board that these two small schools do much more than meet the broad goals of the PSP. They are much more than disposable institutional service sites that can be closed and replaced a few miles up the road in a more centralized location. It has been said many times in our engagements in both

communities but it bears saying again: these schools are the heart of their communities. They are not in need of surgery. They possess the best qualities of small schools Meier describes.

We have been told by community members and teachers that the buildings are in good structural condition and with timely regular maintenance they will last well into the future. We have seen or heard nothing to contradict this view. In the case of River Hebert, maintenance has been placed on hold for many years as study after closure study has wound its course. The citizens of this community are justifiably frustrated and feel as though they have been treated as second-class citizens whose voices are routinely ignored. Citizens in both villages fear that the institution which is one of the few last remaining communal places where everyone comes together for a period of their young lives will be removed by a decision made by distant politicians who have little interest in defending their interests or attending to the consistent evidence of educational quality that the community has generated.

Let us be clear, it is not progress, technology or time that kills a small rural school or any school for that matter. Small schools often do not fit the standardized mould and they cause difficulties for administrators. And so, the very qualities that make these schools work and that their students and communities love about them are actually used as justification for their closure. These schools work because they are nonstandard and responsive to real communities.

> Contrary to the mythology, exceptional schools do not die off, most are killed by intentional acts, not by the inevitable forces of nature. In nature, variation, messiness, and chaos are not unnatural or unproductive forms of organization. In fact, as biologists would remind us, they are essential features of growth. When school people forbid such messiness, or view it as a burden, we undermine the possibility of proliferation … Many good schools die an early unnatural death because the policies that govern our public systems cut short their natural growth … the people who operate the present system do not see themselves in the business of trying to maintain idiosyncratic practice …they've been trained to seek, first and foremost, ways to solve problems by rule. If it's not good for everyone, it's not good for anyone. To make exceptions smacks of favoritism and inefficiency. (Meier, 2002: 156-157)

The strange notion of fairness (in the sense that because we have lost our schools, you should too) and just desserts is sadly a powerful motivator of school closures. So many communities have lost school in past decades, so why should others be allowed to keep theirs? But what an odd and petty rationale for closing a core community institution; yet schools continue to be closed on the basis of this bizarre rationale of past mistakes.

What is missing here is the feeling of self-governance that Meier shows is the second core characteristic of a good school. If there is evidence that closure is educationally

sound and if there is evidence that closure of schools like RHDH and WCES is consistent with the Board's own policy, the broad goals of the PSP, or policy concerning the sustainability of rural communities at any level of government, the people of these communities have not seen it. It is our view that placing the onus on rural communities to defend the existence of their schools is backward.

Oklahoma State Senator Jay Paul Gumm has recently tabled legislation that would require any school governance body to prove to citizens that a rural school should be closed before any closure can take place (Tyree, 2006). We would agree that the burden of proof should be taken off the shoulders of citizens in local communities and placed on the Department of Education or the school board to prove to citizens that a better education is available outside their communities. This would certainly change the dynamics of the school closure process. The Board would then be faced with the fact that unless citizens could be convinced otherwise, there would be a school in the community and through established and emerging curricular and pedagogical techniques such as multiage teaching and internet delivery, school would be available in communities where schools are presently established. Rural community schools have developed out of longstanding traditions of local control that can be seen today in the strong relationships between parents and teachers, between teachers and students and it is these relationships that provide the foundation for educational quality that in practice refutes the idea that big is better.

## The financial argument

If the board is unable to provide clear educational evidence to support the contention that additional program offerings will necessarily improve educational quality for the children of these two communities, then the case rests on questions of financial expediency. If this is true, then the board should openly make the case from this premise and admit that these schools are under consideration for financial and not for educational reasons. This is perfectly understandable. School boards and other local level governance bodies have clearly been squeezed for many years by downloading of fiscal problems from the federal government, through the provincial government and on to municipal units, health authorities and school boards. School boards are in a difficult position and must make tough choices to balance the books. But will small school closures help to do this?

There is evidence in the literature that school closures and other consolidation efforts do not actually result in financial savings. No detailed accounting has ever been done on whether or not the school board restructuring efforts of the early 1980s (post- Walker Commission) or the subsequent consolidation move to seven regional school boards in the mid 1990s actually saved the province any money. What we do know is that Nova Scotia had the lowest per-student funding level of all Canadian provinces from the mid 1996-97 (the year the most recent school board consolidation was put into effect) until 2002-2003 the last year for which there are good comparative statistics (Nault, 2004: 26). So Nova Scotia has had the lowest level of student funding, but has this money gone into

building upkeep and other capital expenditures?  We also know that know that per-student capital expenditures in Nova Scotian schools dropped from approximately 80% of the national average in 1996-97 (which is not particularly impressive), to less than 10% of the national average in 2002-03 (Nault, 2004: 30).  It is clear from this data that the school consolidations of the mid 1990s did not result in more money for the public schools.

It is our view that in the face of the province's dismal record of funding its public schools that the Board ought to be supported in efforts to convince the provincial government that it is high time to fund schools at appropriate levels.  In the case of River Hebert, the Gillis Report (2005) makes the claim that the Board will save considerable money by closing the secondary school in the community and bussing the students to Amherst.  We believe this accounting to be questionable and support the findings of the River Hebert Study Committee.  Yet, regardless of whether or not the accounting is reasonable, we will have reached new low in our educational history when a community is deprived of a school for lack of funds or because someone in power happens to believe that children are better educated far from home.

We recognize that funding is a central problem for any governance body and we understand that the CCRSB is challenged to deliver school programs in rural communities like River Hebert and Wentworth.  We would like to conclude on a positive note with three specific recommendations that might represent an opportunity for the CCRSB to use the considerable community energy that exists in River Hebert and Wentworth in support of local schools to lobby for better funding and sustainability.  One recommendation refers more to WCES, while another makes specific reference to RHDH.  The third speaks to the two schools together.  We want to suggest that rather than taking an adversarial approach that the Board take seriously its principles concerning working with communities and building partnerships with parents and lobby provincial and federal levels of government

Our first recommendation is that the Board and community groups go forward and lobby the provincial cabinet to adopt the small school property service allotment as part of the funding formula for 2006-2007 and beyond.  Hogg recommends a lump sum of $150 000 for each school with enrolment of less than 100 students. We think this figure is arbitrary and that it rather obviously excludes RHDH with an enrolment of slightly more than 100 students.  WCES, on the other hand would stand to benefit (or to benefit the Board by virtue of its existence) from this additional funding.

Our second recommendation is that the board and the community work to have RHDH recognized as a provincial or a national heritage site as the first district high school in Nova Scotia.  This could be a way to raise funds to support the refurbishment of the building, but one which would preserve the architecture of the building itself.  Rather than closing the school, we think a case can be made for actually enhancing and renewing this building that stands as a landmark to the education of rural youth throughout the province, built at a moment in history when a great social project was set in motion.  This grand social project was the idea that young people in rural Nova Scotia had just as much

right to a high school education as children in the towns and cities.  It will be a sad day when we forget this historical lesson.

Our final recommendation is that rather than closing these schools, they should be used by the Board, by the Department of Education and possibly more widely as exemplary schools.  WCES is a small elementary school with very low enrolment that utilizes multi-age instruction in an exemplary fashion.  This school should be celebrated as an example of what is possible with hard work and flexible organization.  WCES can show rural school administrators how it is possible operate an excellent elementary school with a very limited staff.  RHDH could serve the province as a model in its recent emphasis on "closing the gap" which is the language that is currently utilized to conceptualize the persistent educational inequality generated by social class and race (Nova Scotia, 2005).  RHDH is exactly the kind of school that typically produces the worst educational outcomes.  It is in an economically disadvantaged area and the adults in the community have very low levels of formal education. These are factors that typically predict widespread educational failure and an undisciplined school climate.  And yet, RHDH produces large numbers of graduates who are disciplined, motivated and successful in their lives, even if this means that most of them have to leave home following high school.  There are many schools both rural and urban communities in this province and beyond that could learn from this example.  What is going on in these schools needs to be shared, not terminated.

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# Appendix A

## Focus Group Structure and Questions

**Achieving the Goals of Public Education**

**Introductory Remarks**

*A. The research team*

*B.  Focus Group Process*
- We will try to keep things as relaxed and conversational as possible.
- It is important that we remain focused on the question
- We are particularly (but not exclusively) interested in the group of youth who left RHDH within the last 10 years
- Everyone will be given an opportunity to address each question
- Please identify yourself before speaking

*C.  The PSP: The focus of the questions*
The Public School Program (PSP) outlines the broad goal of preparing students for a lifetime of learning as demonstrated by the excellence of individual courses, programs and shared experiences.  The questions we will explore in this focus group relate to the school and these broad educational goals.

**Questions**

1) Could you tell us about some individuals who have "graduated" from River Herbert District High who are considered successful by community standards.

2) Could you give examples of how **individual student needs** are met at River Herbert District High school?

3) The public school program states that "a sound education provided in **partnership with the home and community** forms the basis for students to become healthy and caring persons, having respect for self and others."  Can you tell us about the partnership between the homes in this community and the school?

**4)** One challenge of education is to help students become **lifelong learners and critical problem solvers**. How can you convince people who don't know your school that River Hebert District High accomplishes this goal?

**5)** Those interested in closing RHDH might argue that students from small rural schools might be less able to deal with a **fast-changing global society and contemporary technology**. How would you respond to this criticism?

**6)** Are the children at RHDH **competent communicators** in your view? (reading, writing, speaking and math)

**7)** Do you think that having a school in the community is important for young people's **self esteem, confidence, sense of personal worth** and mental health?

**8)** The PSP describes an educated person as someone who can participate fully in a democratic society. What role do you think the school plays in strengthening **citizenship and democracy**?

**9)** Some people would say that such a **small school can't provide** children with enough options and programs for a modern education. What do you think of this criticism?

**Final words**

**THINGS YOU WISH WE HAD ASKED ABOUT …**

# Appendix B
# Survey Schedules

# Small rural schools project
# River Hebert survey schedule

## Part 1

**Read preamble and get recorded consent.**

## Part 2

Name: _____

Present location: _____

Year of graduation from RHS: _____

Employment: _____

Sex: _____

---

**Employment and education** *(take notes in point form)*

Tell me about any formal (e.g. correspondence courses, community college or university) education that you have undertaken since graduation:

Tell me about any informal education (e.g. guitar, sports, cooking lessons, etc.) that you have undertaken since graduation:

What are your plans for formal and informal education for the next five years?

What work have you done since graduation?

What are your employment goals for the next five years?

---

# Part 3

**I will read a number of statements and I would like you to rate each of them on a scale of 1-5.**

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Agree strongly

*Words in boldface can be used as prompts or clarification*

1. The courses I took at River Hebert District High School were of high quality …… ☐

2. Generally the quality of all the experiences I had at River Hebert District High School was of high quality ………………………………………………… ☐

3. I feel that school provided me with a good balance of academic, vocational cultural and physical opportunities ………………………………………… ☐

4. I feel as though my individual needs as a learner were met at River Hebert District High School ……………………………………………………………….. ☐

5. I consider myself a confident, lifelong learner ……………………………………. ☐

6. Generally, I feel capable of solving the problems I encounter in my daily life …… ☐

7. Generally, I feel that I can deal effectively with change in my daily life …………. ☐

8. I am well organized ………………………………………………………………... ☐

9. I am able to work effectively and cooperatively with others …………………….. ☐

10. I have taken leadership roles in my work, and in community life (**e.g. coaching, church, organizations, committees, clubs, etc.**) ………………………………… ☐

11. I communicate clearly with others ……………………………………………… ☐

12. I feel confident reading and writing in my daily life …………………………… ☐

13. My mathematical skills are adequate for what I have to do in life ……………... ☐

14. I feel knowledgeable enough to make good decisions in my life ………………. ☐

15. I feel as though my self esteem and self respect were supported at RHS …………. ☐

16. I felt valued as a person at River Hebert District High School …………………….. ☐

17. I participate in democratic processes in my community (**e.g. voting, community organizations, committees, activism, home and school etc.)** …………………. ☐

18. I have the knowledge and ability I need to maintain my health …………………... ☐

19. I participate in sports on a regular basis ……………………………………………. ☐

20. I participate in the cultural activities available to me in my community ………….. ☐

21. I consider myself to be a caring person …………………………………………… ☐

22. I want to contribute to my society ………………………………………………… ☐

23. I volunteer ………………………………………………………………………. ☐

24. I feel that the secondary school and the community work well together in River Hebert …………………………………………………………………………… ☐

25. I think that a small rural high school like River Hebert District High School can provide youth with a good quality education in the modern world ……………….. ☐

**Mark recorder timeline:** _____

# Part 3  Open-ended Questions

**Now I have two open-ended questions that I'd like for you to answer**

26. *Please comment on how you think River Hebert District High School prepared you for the work you do and the life you live.*

27. *Do you think your education might have turned out differently if you had been bussed to Amherst from grade 7 through 12?*

# Small rural schools project
# Wentworth survey schedule (parent)

## Part 1

**Read preamble and get recorded consent.**


## Part 2

Name: _____

Present location: _____

Year of leaving WES: _____

Employment: _____

Sex: _____

---

**Employment and education** *(take notes in point form)*

What formal education has your child completed since leaving Wentworth Elementary?


Tell me about any informal education (e.g. guitar, sports, cooking lessons, etc.) that your child has undertaken since leaving Wentworth Elementary:


What are your child's plans for formal and informal education for the next five years?


What paid work has your child done since leaving Wentworth Elementary?


What are your child's employment goals?

---

## Part 2

**I will read a number of statements and I would like you to rate each of them on a scale of 1-5.**

1. Disagree strongly
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Agree strongly

*Words in boldface can be used as prompts or clarification*

28. The courses my child took at Wentworth Elementary were of high quality ……… ☐

29. Generally the quality of all the experiences my child had at Wentworth Elementary were of high quality ……………………………………………….. ☐

30. I feel that school provided my child with a good balance of academic, vocational cultural and physical opportunities ………………………………………………... ☐

31. I feel as though my child's individual needs as a learner were met at Wentworth Elementary ……………………………………………………………………….. ☐

32. I consider my child to be a confident, lifelong learner …………………………… ☐

33. Generally, I feel my child is capable of solving the problems she/he encounters in daily life ………………………………………………………………………… ☐

34. Generally, I feel that my child has learned to deal effectively with change in his/her daily life …………………………………………………………………… ☐

35. My child has learned to be well organized …………………………………….. ☐

36. My child is able to work effectively and cooperatively with others ……………… ☐

37. My child has taken leadership roles **(e.g. coaching, church, organizations, committees, clubs, formal or informal teaching, etc.)** ………………………... ☐

38. My child communicates clearly with others ……………………………………… ☐

39. My child feels confident reading and writing in her/his daily life ……………….. ☐

40. My child's mathematical skills are adequate for what he/she has to do in life …… ☐

41. Generally think my child is knowledgeable enough to make good decisions in life ☐

42. I feel as though my child's self-esteem and self-respect were supported at WES ☐

43. My child felt valued as a person at WES ………………………………………. ☐

44. My child is interested in democratic processes in his/her community **(e.g. interest in things like elections, local political issues, environmental issues, etc)** ……... ☐

45. My child has the knowledge and ability he/she need to maintain his/her health ….. ☐

46. My child participates in sports ………………………………………………….. ☐

47. My child participates in the recreational and cultural activities available in the community **(e.g. clubs, church groups, 4H, Cubs and Guides, hunting and fishing, etc.)** ………………………………………………………………… ☐

48. I consider my child to be a caring person ……………………………………..... ☐

49. I think my child wants to contribute to her/his society ……………………………. ☐

50. My child volunteers ………………………………………………..................... ☐

51. I feel that the secondary school and the community work well together in Wentworth…………………………………………………………………………… ☐

52. I think that a small rural elementary school like Wentworth Elementary can provide youth with a good quality education in the modern world ……………….. ☐

**Mark recorder timeline:** _____

# Part 3 Open-ended Questions

**Now I have two open-ended questions that I'd like for you to answer**

*53. Please comment on how you think Wentworth Elementary prepared your child for secondary school and life beyond.*

*54. Do you think your child's education might have turned out differently if your child had been bussed out of the community?*