



School Is In

Rural Schools

Why They're Important & Ways to Save Them



a BC Rural Centre Brief
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“We feel things that happen in our students’ and their families’ lives quickly — and deeply — in a small rural school.”

— **Dan Rude, Principal, JV Humphries School, Kaslo, BC**

Background: The Importance of Rural Schools

Schools are inarguably a crucially important part of any community. In urban centres, the overall quality of a particular neighbourhood is often judged by whether or not it has a school, and if so, the perceived quality of that school.

In small towns and rural regions, the importance of local schools takes on even greater importance.

Without a school, any rural community lacks a crucial feature needed to both retain young families and attract new ones. Rural school closures are often seen as a bellweather, sounding a significant warning regarding the community's ultimate viability.

In addition to providing young people with an education, rural schools can play a variety of additional roles. Often the community's largest building, they host local events, provide space for library and community social services, offer indoor recreational opportunities to local citizens, and generally serve as a rural community's physical and emotional focal point. This function of a rural school as a community services hub has historically not been formally recognized by government funders and districts, although this may be changing. In this BC Rural Centre brief, we will look at some of the factors that determine the importance and viability of rural schools, challenges they face, and examples of how rural communities are attempting to overcome them.

Why Do Rural Schools Close?

The simple answer is a combination of low enrolments and a failure to recognize the broader socioeconomic importance of rural schools.. For decades, rural school districts across North America have seen a steady decline in school numbers. In BC, for example, the cumulative loss in number of schools from 2002 to 2012, is 197; expressed as a percentage, the number of schools decreased by 11.01%, with rural schools hit particularly hard.

Examples of BC School Closures, 2001 to 2012

School District	Number of Schools Closed	Communities Affected
Cariboo-Chilcotin	9	Bridge Lake, Wildwood, 100 Mile House, Buffalo Creek, Glendale, Kwaleen, Poplar Glade, Chimney Creek, Williams Lake
Central Okanagan	4	Lakeview Heights, Westbank, Bellevue, Peachland
Coast Mountains	10	Terrace, Kitimat, Hazelton, Duncan, Thornhill, Parkside, Stewart
Gold Trail	8	Ashcroft, Clinton, Venables Valley, Spences Bridge, Big Bar, Mission Mountain, Ts Kw'aylaxw, Quesnel
Kootenay Columbia	11	Castlegar, Rossland, Beaver Valley, Montrose, Thrums, Trail, Blueberry Creek,
Prince George	22	Prince George, Dunster, Mackenzie, Salmon Valley, Shady Valley, Parksville, Bear Lake, Mcleod Lake, Nechako, Clinton

In Bridge Lake, a rural ranching community in the Cariboo, the school provided the regional library, Kidspace after-school and Meals on Wheels programs, hot meals for students, adult-education classes and Head Start preschool services — all were closed in the summer of 2016

Bridge Lake Elementary did not meet the criteria for the former BC government’s rural education-enhancement fund, due to extremely low enrolment – only eight pupils were signed up for the 2017 school year. This meant students would have to transfer to an elementary school that is a 40-minute drive away.

“This community is eventually going to disappear,” predicted Murray Helmer, president of the Cariboo Chilcotin Teachers' Association. Similarly, Jim Iker, who stepped down as president of the BC Teachers’ Federation had this to say about his home town in June of 2016: “The school in Topley was a beautiful little school, the centrepiece of our community, and it was closed in 2010.” By 2016, even the school’s playground had been removed because it was deemed a liability. “Absolutely, the community is in trouble, there aren’t people moving into the community with kids,” Iker added.

What Can Be Done?

Some argue many rural school closures are short-sighted, even from a purely economic point of view. Critics of rural closures point to the associated costs, ranging from increased student transportation charges to in some cases the need to continue paying for building maintenance.

The social costs are more difficult to quantify, but they can strike at the very heart and soul of a small community.

The Case of Malakwa

“The school is such an important gathering place for all rural communities — and Malakwa is no different.”

— **Rhona Martin, Director, Area E, Columbia Shuswap Regional District**



The school in the small community of Malakwa, located just off the Trans-Canada Highway east of Sicamous, had been in operation in some form or another for over 100 years. Seven years ago, School District 83 contacted the community and informed them it was considering closing the school, with its 34-student population.

The community rallied to the cause. Meetings were held with School District 83. Parents went to work, putting together research that suggested it would actually cost the school district more to close the school than keep it open. Costs would have included ongoing building maintenance, and the loss of rural school funding (half the affected families said they would not allow their children to be bussed).

After much research and discussion, a solution was forged by agreeing to contract with [SelfDesign Learning Community](#), a fully certified educational non-profit funded by the BC Ministry of Education. The new arrangement ensured the school would be saved, and with it a range of important community services housed in the same building (named the [Malakwa Community Learning Centre](#)), leased from the district for \$500/month. While student tuition is free, rent, hydro, custodial, a reserve fund, etc., costs \$55,000/year, an amount covered by the Columbia Shuswap Regional District’s Economic Opportunity Fund. Attempts are being made to move this funding to a more stable long-term platform, through a local tax levy.

Nova Scotia's 'Hub School' Approach

In an effort to stem the tide of school closures in Nova Scotia in 2014, rural school advocates proposed new legislation that would create something called Hub Schools. The idea was that schools in small, rural communities would be turned into multi-service centres, housing everything from a post office and social services to a library and local government offices — in addition to classrooms — much like the solution in Malakwa, BC.

This approach requires a strategic view, one that recognizes that rural schools can play a pivotal role in the overall operational health of rural communities. Implicit here is a recognition that since more than learning and instruction is taking place in a hub school, government funding should reflect this. Advocates argue that by centralizing local services in an already existing building, taxpayers can realize ongoing savings, on top of avoiding the socioeconomic costs associated with school closures.

In practice, at least to-date, this approach has not borne fruit. The central problem is that decisions on whether or not to approve a hub school proposal rest with local school boards. In the absence of provincial government support that recognizes the “strategic view” referenced above, boards have taken the position that they are only willing to say yes to a hub school if it can be demonstrated the district will save at least as much money as it would were the school to be shuttered.



[The situation in River John](#), a small fishing and logging town in Nova Scotia's Pictou County, illustrates the problem.

Local citizens worked for over two years to develop a plan to turn the River John school into a hub school — one that would house a café and art gallery, a North Shore scholarship education centre, a community hub garden, and an outdoor park. When the River John proposal was put to the Chignecto-Central regional school board for a vote, the motion was defeated, the result of an 8 to 8 tie. Why? Because proponents could not demonstrate the ability to offset the annual net savings the board would realize were they to close the school — \$173,123. The board also noted the proponents could not show how they were going to pay for the one-time cost of \$560,000 to repair the school's roof, parking lot, and look after other maintenance issues that had been ignored (by the district) for years. River John will be demolished in 2018.

Sun Peaks School

“I really like how they're incorporating the environment around them. The educational component is consistent across the board, but the way they're utilizing the surrounding area to achieve learning outcomes is unique.”

— **Deanne Brady, Principal, AE Perry Elementary School, Kamloops**

Located 45 minutes north of Kamloops, Sun Peaks is BC's second-largest ski area, a municipality with approximately 500 permanent residents. In 2009, locals were outraged when school district downsizing raised the spectre of two-hour bus commutes for Sun Peaks students.

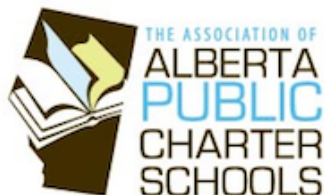
By May 2010, a group of concerned parents had formed the [Sun Peaks Education Society](#), with the goal of establishing a school in the community. After four months and \$90,000 raised, the Society opened a 21-student, K-5 classroom in a former ski instructors' cabin. Instruction occurred through the Kamloops-Thomson School District's @Kool distance learning program. In 2012, elementary classes were placed under direct school district jurisdiction, carrying with it public funding, employing three teachers, while curriculum delivery for older students continues to use @Kool, funded by the Society and the municipality.



As possibly the world's only ski-in, ski-out school, Sun Peaks takes full advantage of its surroundings. Most students spend hours on the slopes. Creative writing and art classes are inspired by the alpine environment. Ski jumping provides a basis for the study of physics and geometry, while mountain trails are the perfect basis for mapping and geography exercises.

Intriguingly, education so closely integrated with place — education so tightly aligned with the adjacent physical environment — appears to be paying off in the classroom. Sun Peaks kindergarten teacher Lynn Maartman notes, “The younger kids use the creeks in spring to make dams, bridges, and mud pies. In fall they use rocks and sticks to make forts or goal posts. They learn to work together, share and solve problems. All schools should have some natural materials on hand — not just concrete. The children are more focused. They need very little encouragement to get active. And they don't seem to have the behaviour problems I've experienced when teaching in a more urban setting.” Senator Nancy Greene (who is also Sun Peaks Director of Ski Operations) cites the school as a model of how an active learning environment helps students perform better. “Schools have a role to play in getting kids active and getting them to understand that if you're active all your life, you live a better life,” states Greene.

Alberta's Charter Schools



As of 1994, Alberta became [the only province in Canada to allow charter schools](#). The general idea behind a charter school — which is a public, non-profit, non-denominational school — is to allow a group of parents, teachers, or community members to create a school that provides students with an educational experience different than that provided by a “normal” public school.

“Different” usually means that parents and students have an increased opportunity to choose an education that best suits a student’s needs. Having said this, charter schools must adhere to the Alberta curriculum, cannot deny access if sufficient space and resources are available, and must enter into an agreement with the Ministry of Education that fully describes the unique educational experience the school will provide, how the school will operate, and the student outcomes it intends to achieve.

The movement toward charter schools, which began in the US, was based on the assumption that the demand for the sorts of choices charter schools would provide would cause non-charter public schools to fight for similar flexibility — thus ultimately strengthening the public school system. Critics worry that leaving school choice to parents might undermine the overall system, leading to an increasing imbalance in the overall quality of education.

Charter schools in Alberta are eligible for the same per-student provincial funding as any other public school. Charter schools are independent, in that they operate outside the aegis of a school district. They are governed by a board in accordance with Alberta’s School Act. Like all public schools, they must hire certified teachers — but the Alberta Teachers Association will not permit charter school teachers to belong to the Association, fearing a movement to the charter model will ultimately undermine the public system.

To-date, few of Alberta’s charter schools could be viewed as offering truly innovative programs. However, they do appear to be applying a variety of educational approaches in novel combinations (e.g., differentiated instruction, project-based learning, individual program plans for each student, and instruction in foreign students’ first languages). They also provide appropriate programs for students who appear to be under-served within the larger education system (i.e., gifted students, street youth, and students in need of English as a Second Language instruction). Today there are 13 charter schools in Alberta, occupying 23 buildings, with 20 of these in Edmonton or Calgary — they appear to not have caught on in rural communities.

The Sun West Distance Learning Centre

Ten years ago, the school in Kenaston, Saskatchewan (pop. 350) was in danger of closure. Declining enrolment — the result of a general trend of rural de-population in the province — threatened the existence of the community’s school, and with it, the future of the town itself.

Schools throughout the Sun West School Division were under similar threat — of the 24 schools in the district, most had fewer than 100 students. How to keep them alive?

At the same time, the provincial distance education centre in Regina was closed, in part because the poor for-credit completion rate among participating students — in the 35% to 40% range. The task of providing distance education was handed over to individual school districts.

Saskatoon created a distance learning operation, but few in rural Saskatchewan seized the opportunity.

Enter Sun West’s Kenaston School.

Led by local teacher Darren Gasper, Kenaston made a case to the district for placing a distance learning centre in the small school, arguing that its relative proximity to Saskatoon (1.5 hours to the west) and its pool of technology-savvy teachers, and Gasper’s M.Ed. in Distance Education made Kenaston a logical distance learning hub.



The district agreed, and the [Sun West Distance Learning Centre](#) (“DLC”) was formed. Gasper was soon joined by three staff members, initially focusing on math and science courses delivered via teleconferencing.

As the program’s offerings became more popular, the district realized this was an opportunity to provide educational equity, a chance to save programs at all its schools. As a result, offerings grew to include electives. As technologies changed and bandwidth slowly become available in rural settings, the number of courses climbed to over 150, with most of the content developed “in house.” Today over 55 teachers offer instruction and support to over 6,500 registered students throughout Saskatchewan, across Canada, and around the world.

Boosted by new and emerging technologies, the DLC has made it possible for rural students to take course in digital animation through a collaboration with the Vancouver Animation School. Students working on agriculture and animal husbandry-related courses regularly record their work on mobile phones and upload the results to Dropbox where they can be reviewed by instructors. Digital video is used for everything from student and staff profiles — breaking down the anonymity of online activity — to showcasing the often-remote communities where students live.

Two years ago the DLC moved into its own, high-tech building next to Kenaston School, featuring green screen recording rooms and everything else needed to provide quality online, interactive instruction.

Accessing adequate bandwidth remains a challenge for many rural schools, of course — this is certainly the case in Saskatchewan. Things are getting better as both the provincial and federal governments place added emphasis on rural connectivity. Download speeds of less than 25 Mbs present users with challenges, a real issue in some parts of the province.

And what of Kenaston itself? Local reaction to the DLC has been very positive. Some teachers with families have moved to town, both increasing enrolment at Kenaston School and providing a boost to the local economy. Today the DLC is the town’s largest employer.

The BC Situation

“My experience working with the community of Osoyoos made it real for me about how important a school is to a community like that.”

— BC Minister of Education Rob Fleming

On June 15, 2016, then-Premier Christy Clark announced the creation of the Rural Education Enhancement Fund (REEF), with initial dollars made available to allow a stay of execution for nine rural schools slated for closure. Among the schools saved from the chopping block were Meadow Creek’s tiny Jewett Elementary, and Osoyoos Secondary, which received \$390,00 two- year funding, plus an additional \$100,000 to cover maintenance that had been neglected given the school’s imminent closure.

Other Okanagan schools, including those in West Bench and Trout Creek, were also given a reprieve by REEF. Penticton MLA Dan Ashton said at the time, *“My phone has been ringing off the hook. This was an exercise in democracy. When people speak, people like myself listen and governments listen, and that’s something these kids need to realize is that democracy does work.”*

The new Minister of Education, Rob Fleming, has stated he believes the future for Osoyoos Secondary, and for rural schools generally across the province, looks positive. The current government is committed to retaining REEF, at least until the 2019 budget, one that will include a new provincial school funding formula that will consider issues such as the differing needs and interests of urban and rural education. *“It will provide a better system for communities across BC, but very importantly, rural communities,”* said Minister Fleming.

In 2002, the government moved to a complex per-pupil funding model that precipitated school closures across BC, particularly in rural towns and areas where student populations tend to be lower. *“A blunt instrument,”* according to Fleming, who has stated the government intends to make a significant funding infusion into the provincial school system. *“We’re looking forward to a relationship where school districts can rely on working collaboratively with the province on meeting the expectations of parents, kids, and the resource needs of their districts,”* added Fleming.

Summary

There can be little doubt that schools play a crucial role in the livability, in the very survivability of small rural communities. Decreasing enrolments are a sure sign young families with children are either leaving, are not being attracted to town — or both.

In this brief report we've highlighted several different approaches to tackling the challenge of retaining rural schools.

Malakwa chose to engage with a non-profit educational provider, and in the process both managed to save its school and provide the community with a range of important services. Nova Scotia's experiment with "hub" schools is similar in that it is based on the premise that existing school buildings in small towns may be turned into multi-use facilities, in the process allowing continued school operations. In the case of Sun Peaks, a community faced with the prospect of long bus commutes for its children, turned a modest existing facility into a school, situated directly on a ski slope, then created a curriculum that takes full advantage of the school's unique physical setting. Alberta's charter school approach, while controversial, may hold some lessons that could be applied in rural settings — in fact, the Sun Peaks school reflects some of the charter school precepts in its emphasis on the integration of nature and outdoor activities throughout its educational offerings. And in the case of Kenaston, by embracing new and emerging technologies a small school was saved, and a new, web-centric learning centre has been created, an operation that provides thousands of rural students with enhanced educational opportunities, increases the viability of other small rural schools, and has served as both a demographic and economic boost to the town and surrounding region.

Looking forward, there is some reason for optimism here in British Columbia, given the current Minister's understanding of the real differences and needs between urban and rural communities, and in particular the crucial roles schools play in the rural communities where they are found.



Appendix

[BC Ministry of Education](#)

[BC Rural & Multigrade Teachers Association](#)

[BC school closures: a cure worse than the disease?](#)

[BC Teachers' Federation](#)

[Could rural PEI schools be saved by turning them into 'community hubs'?](#)

[How rural school closures are 'ripping the heart out of the community'](#)

[Enrolment up in BC schools after 20-year decline](#)

[How a small town in Iowa is saving their town with theater](#)

[How Malakwa saved its school: a podcast interview with regional district director, Rhona Martin](#)

[How to save Ontario's small schools](#)

[More schools in rural British Columbia set to be shut down](#)

[NDP to keep fund that saved Osoyoos high school](#)

[One small school making big dreams come true](#)

[River John vows to continue fight for school](#)

[Rural parents rally to save schools across Ontario](#)

[Rural schools are vital: a podcast interview with BC principal, Dan Rude](#)



