



RURAL SCHOOLS, RURAL FUTURES

Why Rural Schools Matter & How to Save Them



A RURAL COMMUNITY without a school is an endangered species — particularly if that community is not only rural, but remote. Remote rural schools in small communities play a much larger role than simply providing local children with an educational opportunity — they often serve as *de facto* community centres, places where residents gather for recreational, cultural, and health-related activities in the absence of any

other appropriate facilities. Closing a remote rural school does more than cause upset among families whose children must now be bussed, sometimes for long distances over often dangerous roads. It strikes at the very existence of places often already reeling from loss of major employers and an accompanying exodus of young families.

HUB SCHOOLS — A GOOD IDEA?

[Nova Scotia's Hub School initiative](#), a model based on the logic of formally incorporating a range of community services into an existing school building, thus making it easier to justify keeping open schools whose student populations might otherwise dictate closure, seemed a good idea to many rural Nova Scotians. Unfortunately, at least to-date, practice has not matched promise.

The problem is districts have applied a narrow fiscal view on hub school proposals, such as that put forward several years ago by the residents of River John. Because hub school proponents were not able to match the annual savings (\$173,123) that would accrue to the district if it shuttered the school, their proposal was rejected. The school is now poised for imminent demolition.

WHAT ABOUT RURAL BC?

After intense lobbying by concerned citizens, in the summer of 2016, the former provincial government announced the Rural Education Enhancement Fund (REEF), which set aside monies to allow nine rural schools facing closure to remain open. The government also launched a “rural education conversation,” intended to solicit ideas on how to structure future rural educational funding.

Today, the new government’s position appears to be one of strengthening REEF, moving toward a more robust funding formula in the 2019 Budget that reflects the unique challenges faced by rural and remote schools.

“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**



IN THE MEANTIME, citizens in rural communities like Malakwa, located just off the Trans-Canada Highway east of Sicamous, are forced to think outside the box if they are to retain their local school.

In Malakwa, [the answer lay in establishing an independent school](#) — in BC, almost a third of all independent schools (privately run, with partial provincial funding) are found in rural towns and regions. Working with SelfDesign Learning Community, the new arrangement ensured the school would be saved, and with it a range of important community services housed in the same building.

RURAL EDUCATION: THE GOOD NEWS

- Smaller classes
- Greater individual attention
- Better behaviour
- Civic participation fostered
- Safe & nurturing environment
- School as ‘community heart’
- Sense of community within school
- Strong student relationships
- Innovative teaching strategies
- Low teacher-pupil ratio
- Improved student achievement
- Increased attendance & graduation
- Elevated teacher satisfaction
- Increased parent involvement

RURAL EDUCATION: THE BAD NEWS

ACCORDING TO THE Canadian Council on Learning, Canada has the worst rural-urban gap with respect to levels of education in the workforce among OECD countries.

Canada's rural areas are 'experiencing outmigration, higher unemployment and lower incomes.' A well-educated workforce is a necessary pre-condition to a region's economic growth. Therefore, it is crucial for rural communities, and Canada as a whole, to find ways to narrow the rural-urban gap in education.

— **Canadian Council on Learning**, The rural-urban gap in education



WANT TO KNOW more about the successes & challenges facing rural education? See the BC Rural Centre brief, SCHOOL IS IN: Rural Schools — Successes & Challenges.



www.bcruralcentre.org