

Schools as Hubs for their Community

Judith Bishop March 2005

From time to time new social policies occur which will have significant implications, but are not heralded when they are announced.

One such happened recently. On Thursday February 17th the Ontario government announced a new initiative “Good Places to Learn: Renewing Ontario’s schools”. Most attention was placed on how schools are to receive funding to improve building conditions and catch up with large arrears in maintenance. However, the report indicates some important social policy changes.

There is an assumption that boards of education have difficulties with their funding because they have not closed schools where there is empty space. Certainly the closure of old, inefficient schools in poor structural condition, to be replaced by more modern buildings, creates efficiencies. But the argument is made that if schools are closed and other schools are running at capacity, sufficient savings would be made to ameliorate the lack of funding in other areas. The report instead states, “ The fixed cost of local school administration and maintenance is 16% of the total school expenditure. While certainly significant, this always needs to be put in context of how well the other 84 per cent of expenditures is best deployed and what is accomplished in terms of student success.” (Page 3 Good Places to Learn). In other words savings in the operations of schools could only ever affect 16% of the total schools’ budgets.

A new key component of school renewal is that “the education program needs of students must lead decisions concerning buildings and grounds. Too often, in the recent past, it has been the other way around.” (Page 3 Good Places to Learn). The previous way funding was provided to build new schools led to students having to be in crowded conditions, sometimes in portables, before new schools could be built. To obtain funding for the building of needed new schools in the suburbs, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, under supervision, embarked on an aggressive closure campaign that was all about filling schools to capacity and often little to do with program. Nine schools became JK to 6 schools rather than Jk to 5 schools, even though earlier it had been agreed that this was educationally undesirable, resulting in only two years, rather than three, in another school for grades 7 and 8. This has had implications for the provision of specialty science, art, and music programs. At the same time valued special education classes were disrupted and displaced. A key component of Good Places to Learn is that “Student program needs to drive facilities planning.”

The document also contained a new focus on the importance of the school to the community. Under the previous government, school boards were penalized for using school space for community purposes, as the space was counted as empty and so did not contribute to grants for school renewal. So Family Services, which provided valuable programs for families and children within King George School, had to leave the school. Robert Land, although full of programs for families, children and youth, has been closed, leaving the Keith neighborhood with no community centre.

Numerous documents have pointed to the importance of the school in the provision of children's services. Laurier Lapierre first reminded policy makers that schools had been built with public money and were purpose-built for children. It seemed redundant to build other public buildings to provide children's services. (Laurier Lapierre: To Herald A Child: the Commission of Enquiry into the Education of the Young Child" 1981.) Other studies since have suggested a similar policy direction: Report of the Early Primary Education Project, 1985, Children First:1990, Premier's Council on Children's Well Being and Health, The Royal Commission on Learning 1994, and The Early Years Report 1999, reconfirmed in the second Early Years Study August 2002. The System Linked Research Unit at McMaster University has demonstrated the need "to sew children's services together". The concept of a seamless service for children, based on the school, was basic to these reports.

These concepts are now embraced in the need for schools to provide space for early learning and child-care spaces through the Best Start plan, and the use of schools for the expansion of education-related not-for-profit-programs. And this Friday March 11, a provincial pilot program to examine the implications of seamless service for families and young children, based on the school as a hub, was announced in Hamilton.

In the past, the value of schools to their communities was not considered relevant to the school closure process. Communities protested but went unheard. Whole communities turned out to see the closure of their local schools, such as Lynden and Woodburn, where the school caretaker led the local annual village parade, and community members had made some of the bookcases. In future, school evaluation committees, with parent, educators, business and municipal leaders as members, will determine the educational and economic value of schools within the system before any school can be closed.

The school as a centre and hub for their communities has now been given some policy support. Hopefully a future government will not overturn this direction.