

Can we keep Parkside open?

We have now an over-supply in the West ARC of about 700 student places. By 2020, if projections hold, we will have an over-supply of 1400 places. Obviously, there are no ways of being accurate in this projection: birth rates, migration patterns within the area, programs offered, etc. all affect the numbers of students.

Parkside represents 770 places, so seems to be the obvious place to close. This has in fact been the accepted option from the start (in fact, judging by the amount of moneys - 3% - spent on upkeep over the past ten years, it has always been the preferred option.)

There are two problems with this option:

The first is that Parkside is the only "downtown" campus among the four in the West ARC area. It is within three blocks of a commercial centre, allowing for easy placement of students for their co-ops, as well as allowing students access to commercial areas for lunches, after-school activities, and so on. Students contribute financially back to the community in which they are supported (and the business folks contribute more on a per-building basis than do home-owners).

Secondly, Parkside benefits significantly from a "public-public partnership" between the City of Hamilton and the HWDSB, whereby the City manages the areas involved in the sports fields for a paltry amount of yearly funds: something which continues to be at the advantage of the HWDSB.

We also know as well that a large number of the students at Westdale (the only over-subscribed site in the ARC) are there from out-of-catchment because of the availability of French Immersion and may well move back to Dundas or Ancaster if FI were available in those areas.

The ARC has already stated publicly that they would consider "right-sizing" Ancaster High, bringing its size down from the current 1356 to around 900. If this can be done, then it would also be possible to down-size Westdale to something like 1000, and Highland to something like 750, leaving about 600 at Parkside. This would give a total capacity, in 2020, of 3250, and allow for almost 90% occupancy at that time.

Advantage of this proposal:

The School Board already has the land; it already has the buildings. At this point, the HWDSB seems to feel that Parkside is in better physical shape than is Highland, judging by the FCI. In fact, according to your statistics, all the schools in our ARC are cheaper to repair than to replace. (This will change, you feel, by the year 2020.) And money spent on rehabilitating favours local smaller contractors, rather than the larger companies which are often from outside the area.

For the students, old social relationships built up with the community are maintained: the wheel is not needing to be re-invented. Existing school cultures are enhanced. While some programs will have to be rationed to particular schools, many can be portable among schools, with the teachers perhaps moving to teach at the school where they are needed. Students could remain mostly at their school of choice and get the programming they desire.

Students with special needs would have the close bond with the entire school which comes from a smaller school body. these students can get lost in larger schools.

For the community, the benefits would come from a more varied community life. The area would include young as well as old, new families as well as established families and grand-parent families. This would flow back to the school in the form of the civilizing force on students from dealing with a more varied age grouping. And of course, the commercial interests would benefit from the money spent in their communities.

For the School Board, it gives a higher degree of adaptability to future changes in population. The schools are somewhat spread through the West End, so can grow or shrink to some extent according to population moves. And the cost of bussing would be lessened (compared with the other options) by reducing the number of students needing to be transported to a minimum.

There are clearly advantages to a brand new, larger school. Maintenance costs would be much less, for the first ten years or so anyways. Probably HVAC costs would be cheaper on an ongoing basis. Planning could take into account the needs known in 2011 (although not those for 2020 and beyond). Programming would be simpler for the administrators in a large modern school.

In Summary:

However, I would challenge the ARC, and through them, the trustees, to look at a more creative solution than they seem to have done thus far. The HWDSB has a responsibility not just to the Ministry of Education, but also to the communities in which it operates and from which it derives its moneys. That responsibility does not include wasting money on unused space, but does include spending it appropriately in the betterment of the community of students and citizens. This does not mean closing the community schools we have enjoyed for the last century, as many of the parents affected have told you.

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