

EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

November 8, 2005

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: E. Schmidt, Acting Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: External Retrospective Review of the 2005 School Closure Process

ORIGINATOR: C. McCabe, Executive Director

RESOURCE
STAFF: Jenise Bidulock, Michael Ediger, Cory Sinclair, Cindy Skolski

INFORMATION

On September 13, 2005 the board of trustees received an administrative retrospective review of the 2004-2005 cluster study and school closure processes. The source of information for this review came from documents, letters, information and recommendations collected and submitted by parents, public, school staff, principals, central staff and other individuals involved in this process directly and indirectly.

In addition to the administrative retrospective review, a further external retrospective review on the school closure process was initiated. Magellan Research Inc. services were engaged and the results are attached. Survey interviews included a sample of the following groups:

- school council chairs from closed schools and receiving schools
- parents of closed schools
- parents from key communicators advisory committee
- principals of receiving schools and closed schools
- school staff previously employed at closed schools
- school staff of receiving schools
- superintendent's council

CS:cp

Attachment I Review Completed by Magellan Research Inc.

Edmonton Public Schools
Retrospective Review of School Closure Process

Submitted to: Edmonton Public Schools
Submitted by: Magellan Research Inc.
Date: October 27, 2005

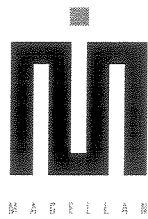


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Executive Summary

A retrospective review of the school closure process was undertaken to gather input from stakeholders in the Edmonton Public Schools district. Magellan Research Inc. was engaged to conduct this review. A total of 240 interviews were undertaken with Principals of closed and receiving schools, school council chairs from closed and receiving schools, staff of closed and receiving schools, parents of closed schools, members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee, and members of the Superintendent's Council.

Key Findings

- Overall knowledge of the school closure process as it pertained to North Edmonton, Strathearn, Terrace Heights and Wellington Schools was solid with 63.7% of all stakeholders rating their knowledge very good (25.8%) or good (37.9%). A further 17.5% said their knowledge was poor or very poor and 18.7% fair. According to stakeholders, knowledge of the school closure process could have been enhanced by earlier notification of the process and more time to digest the options, implications and information.
- When asked about their understanding of various actions taken during a school closure process, 96.6% of stakeholders are aware the school closure process includes public meetings, 84.2% letters to parents, 78.6% a public Board of Trustees meeting, and 64.1% the provision of demographic trends and programming information for specific schools and the district as a whole. Knowledge of the placement of newspaper and poster advertisements for public meetings about possible school closures was at 54.3% and 50.4%, respectively, while flyers dropped in affected neighbourhoods advertising public meetings was known by a minority (35.5%) of stakeholders.
 - Half (49.6%) of all stakeholders who were aware of the public meetings about possible school closure actually attended one of these meetings, while only 30.4% who were aware of the public Board of Trustees meeting attended.
 - Three-quarters (76%) of stakeholders who were aware of the demographic and programming information provided by the school board said this information was very or somewhat beneficial in helping them understand the possible closure of a school.
- According to stakeholders, the most effective ways to provide information about the school closure process is through public meetings, personalized letters/direct communication with parents and information provided through the media.
- Seventy percent (70%) of all stakeholders said they had a very good or good understanding of why the district was recommending school closures to the Board of Trustees. However, this ranged from a high of 100% among principals and school council chairs of receiving schools to a low of 25% among school council chairs of closed schools and 50% for parents of closed schools.
- A majority (72.8%) of all stakeholders felt they were given an opportunity to express their opinions about school closures. Again this ranged from a high of 100% among school council chairs of receiving schools to a low of 50% among school council chairs of closed schools and principals of closed schools.

Introduction

In addressing and managing surplus student learning space in the Edmonton Public Schools district, the district engaged in a series of cluster studies followed by the formal school closure process that resulted in the board approving the closure of North Edmonton, Strathearn, Terrace Heights and Wellington Schools in the spring of 2005. A retrospective review of the school closure process was undertaken to gather input from district stakeholders. Magellan Research Inc. was engaged by Edmonton Public Schools to conduct this review. The key findings of this retrospective review are provided in this report.

Review Process

The process undertaken was a telephone interview of district stakeholders. The interview consisted of structured questions, as well as open-ended questions for respondents to provide their comments. Stakeholders included in this review process included:

- Principals of closed and receiving schools;
- School Council Chairs from closed and receiving schools;
- Staff of closed and receiving schools;
- Parents of closed schools;
- Members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee; and
- Members of the Superintendent's Council.

A total of 240 stakeholders were interviewed. Table 1 shows the population sizes and number of interviews achieved for each stakeholder group. As shown, there is strong representation from each group. For staff of closed and receiving schools, a sample of 50 was taken from each population. For parents of closed schools, a sample of 100 was interviewed.

Table 1: Stakeholder Groups Interviewed

Stakeholder Group	Population Size (N)	Number Interviewed (n)
Principals Closed Schools	4	4
Principals Receiving Schools	9	8
School Chairs Receiving Schools	8	8
School Chairs Closed Schools	4	4
Staff Closed Schools	74	50
Staff Receiving Schools	308	50
Parents of Closed Schools	467	100
Superintendent's Council	14	8
Key Communicators Advisory Committee	11	8

The questions asked during this review are found in Appendix A. Data tables are provided separately.

Analysis of Findings

The following summarizes the key findings from the school closure process review.

Knowledge of the School Closure Process

Asked to rate their overall knowledge of the school closure process as it pertained to North Edmonton, Strathearn, Terrace Heights and Wellington schools in the spring of 2005, 63.7% of respondents overall said their knowledge was very good (25.8%) or good (37.9%), while 17.5% said it was poor or very poor and 18.7% fair.

Understanding of the school closure process is strongest among school principals and members of the Superintendent's Council (100% very good/good knowledge), and school council chairs of closed schools (75%). It is weakest among parents of closed schools (58% very good/good), staff of receiving schools (58%) and school council chairs of receiving schools (62.5%).

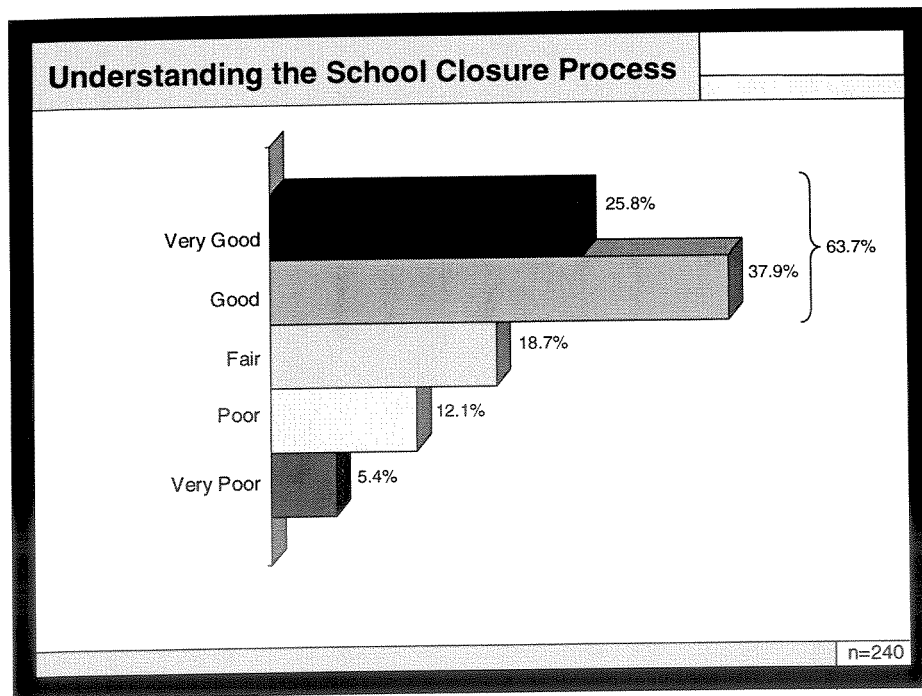
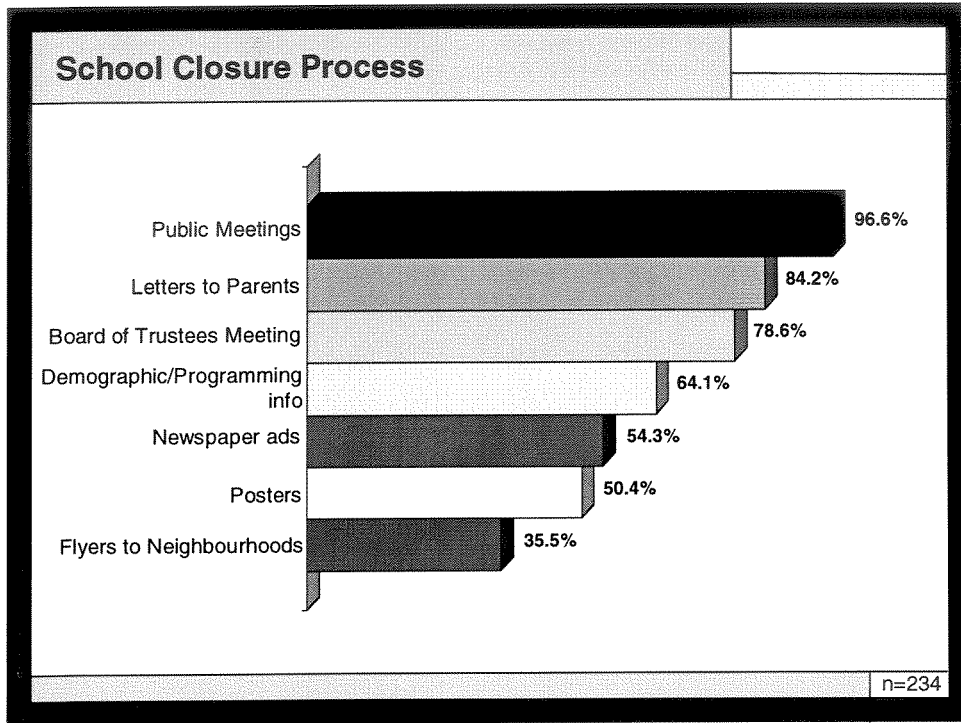


Table 2: Knowledge of School Closure Process

	Very good/Good	Fair	Poor/Very poor
TOTAL SAMPLE (n=240)	63.7%	18.7%	17.5%
Principals Closed Schools (n=4)	100.0%	-	-
Principals Receiving Schools (n=8)	100.0%	-	-
School Chairs Receiving Schools (n=8)	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%
School Chairs Closed Schools (n=4)	75.0%	25.0%	-
Staff Closed Schools (n=50)	72.0%	20.0%	8.0%
Staff Receiving Schools (n=50)	58.0%	28.0%	14.0%
Parents of Closed Schools (n=100)	58.0%	14.0%	28.0%
Superintendent's Council (n=8)	100.0%	-	-
Key Communicators Advisory Committee (n=8)	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%

How the School Closure Process Works

To gain further insight into stakeholders' understanding of how the school closure process works, participants in this review were asked if they were aware of a number of actions taken during the school closure process. Stakeholders' awareness of each action step is presented below.



Public Meetings

- Overall, 96.6% are aware the school closure process includes public meetings regarding the possible closure of a school.
 - All principals of closed and receiving schools, school council chairs of receiving schools, staff of closed schools, and members of the Superintendent's Council are aware that public meetings form part of the school closure process. Of the two members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee who were asked this question¹ both were aware of public meetings forming part of the school closure process.
 - Ninety-six (96%) percent of parents, 94% of staff of receiving schools and three out of four school council chairs of closed schools were aware public meetings made up part of the school closure process.

¹ Of the 8 members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee participating in this review, only 2 reported very good knowledge of the school closure process. Only these two people were asked follow up questions dealing with more specific details of the school closure process.

Letters to Parents

- Across all stakeholders included in this review, 84.2% were aware letters were sent to parents about the possible closure of a school.
 - Principals of closed and receiving schools and school council chairs of closed schools were all aware of letters to parents being part of the school closure process, as were 95% of parents and 94% of staff of closed schools.
 - Six out of eight members of the Superintendent's Council, five of the eight school council chairs of receiving schools and one of the two Key Communicators Advisory Committee members were aware of letters sent to parents about the possible closure of a school.
 - Awareness of letters sent to parents was lowest among staff of receiving schools. (54%).

Public Board of Trustees Meeting

- Over three-quarters (78.6%) of all stakeholders involved in this review are aware a public Board of Trustees meeting forms part of the school closure procedure.
 - There is 100% awareness of a public Board of Trustees meeting among principals of closed and receiving schools, school council chairs of closed schools, members of the Superintendent's Council, and for both members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee who responded to this question.
 - Awareness is lowest (63%) among parents of closed schools, followed by staff of receiving schools (80%). Seven out of eight school council chairs of receiving schools were aware the public Board of Trustees meeting is part of the school closure process.

Provision of Demographic Trends and Programming Information

- Overall nearly two-thirds (64.1%) of respondents were aware of the provision of demographic trends and programming information for specific schools and the district as a whole.
 - Awareness was highest among principals of closed schools (100%), members of the Superintendent's Council (100%), principals of receiving schools (87.5%), and staff of closed schools (82%).
 - Awareness of lowest among parents of closed schools and staff of receiving schools (54% each).
 - Five of eight school council chairs of receiving schools, three of four school council chairs of closed schools and one out of two members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee were aware of the provision of demographic trends and programming information for specific schools and for the district as a whole.

Advertisements in Local Newspapers

- Just over half (54.3%) of all stakeholders involved in this review said they were aware that placing advertisements in local newspapers for public meetings about the possible closure of schools was one action taken as part of the school closure process.
 - All four principals of closed schools and the two members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee who were asked this question were aware of the placement of advertisements for public meetings. Seven of the eight principals of receiving schools were aware of the advertisements for public meetings.
 - Awareness of newspaper advertisements in local newspapers was lowest among parents of closed schools (46% awareness), although only one of the four school council chairs of closed schools said they knew of these advertisements for public meetings.
 - Half of the school council chairs of receiving schools and 54% of staff of receiving schools said they were aware of the advertisements in local newspapers for the public meetings. Among staff of closed schools, 62% said they knew of these advertisements. A similar proportion (62.5%, or five out of eight) from the Superintendent's Council were aware of the newspaper advertisements.

Posters Advertising Public Meetings

- Half of all respondents were aware of the presence of posters advertising public meetings about the possible closure of a school.
 - Once again, all of the principals of closed schools knew of these posters, while seven of their eight counterparts in receiving schools knew likewise. While 70% of staff in closed schools was aware of the posters advertising public meetings about school closures, only 40% of staff in receiving schools was aware of these posters.
 - Less than half (44%) of parents of closed schools said they were aware of the existence of posters advertising public meetings.
 - Only one-in-four of the school council chairs of closed schools and one-half of school council chairs of receiving schools were aware of the posters.
 - Among the Superintendent's Council members, only two of eight people said they were aware of these posters. One of the two members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee knew of the posters advertising public meetings about possible school closures.

Flyers Advertising Public Meetings

- A minority (35.5%) of stakeholders included in this review said they knew flyers advertising public meetings about possible school closures were dropped into affected neighbourhoods.
 - Awareness of these flyers was relatively low across the board although strongest among members of the Superintendent's Council (62.5%), principals of closed schools (50%), parents of closed schools (41%) and staff of closed schools (40%).
 - There was no awareness of flyers advertising public meetings among school council chairs of receiving schools and for the two members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee. Awareness was similarly low among staff of receiving schools (24%), and principals and school council chairs of receiving schools (25% awareness each).

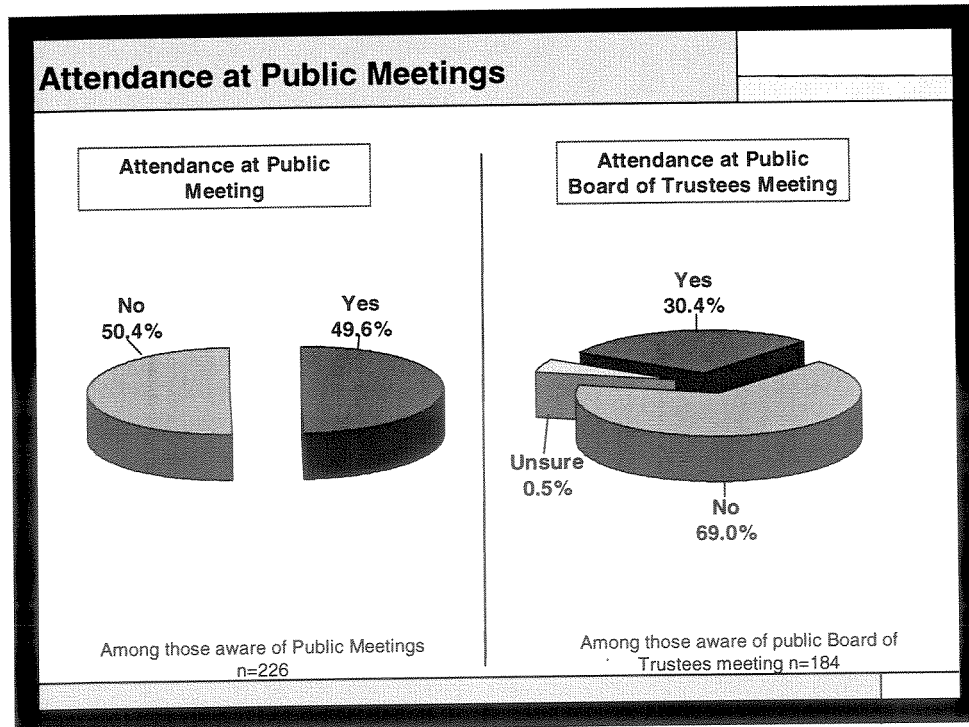
Attendance at Public Meetings About Possible School Closures

When asked if they had attended a public meeting regarding the possible closure of a school, almost half (49.6%) of all stakeholders included in this review responded affirmatively.

- Attendance was strongest (100%) among principals of closed schools, school council chairs of closed schools, and members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee (who answered this question). Three-quarters of the principals from receiving schools attended a public meeting, while 64% of staff from closed schools did likewise. Only half (52.1%) of parents of closed schools said they attended a public meeting about the possible closure of a school.

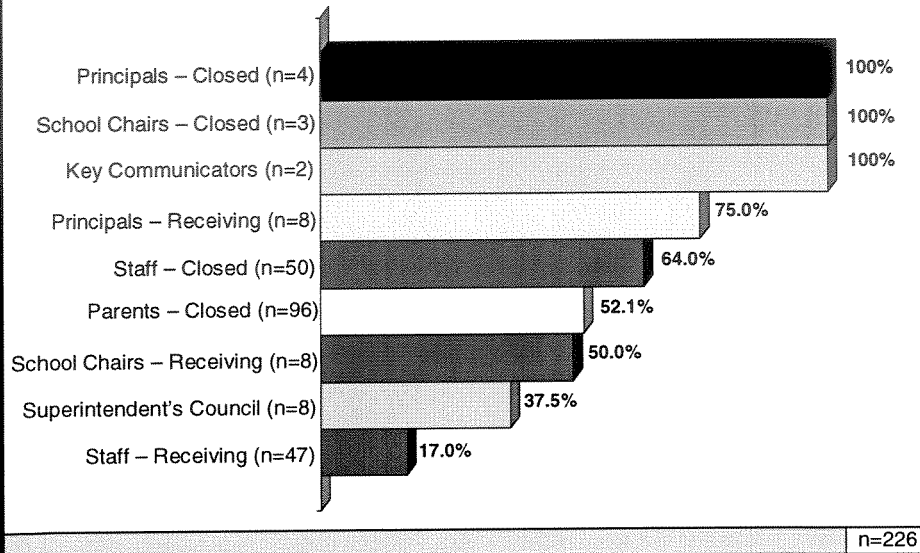
Asked about attendance at a public Board of Trustees meeting about the possible closure of a school, only three-in-ten respondents overall who were aware of this meeting attended.

- All principals (closed and receiving schools) and school council chairs of closed schools attended this meeting, as did 75% of the members of the Superintendent's Council. Only 27% of parents of closed schools and 25% of staff of closed schools who were aware of this meeting actually attended.



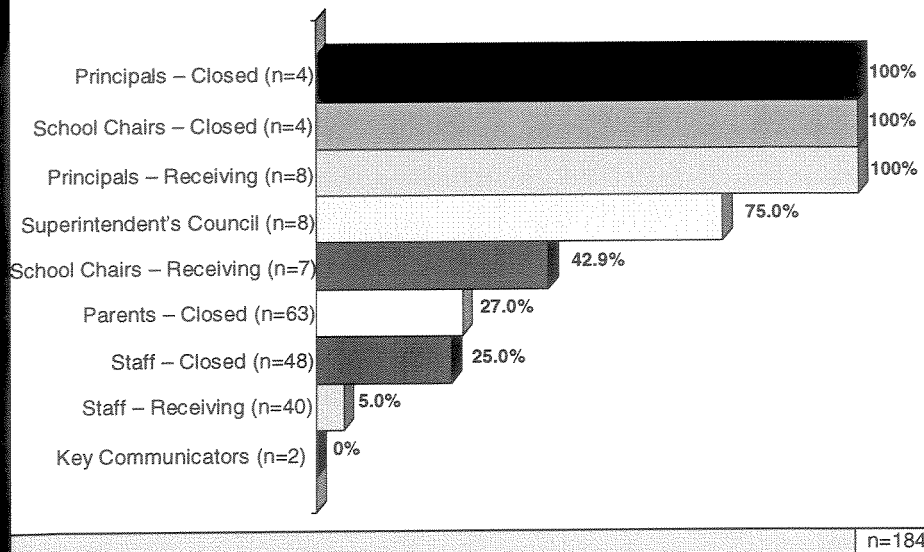
Attendance at Public Meeting

* Among those aware of the public meetings



Attendance at Public Board of Trustees Meeting

* Among those aware of the Public Board of Trustees meeting



Value of Demographic Trends and Programming Information

Stakeholders who were aware of the provision of demographic trends and programming information for specific schools and the district as a whole (n=150) were asked to assess the value of this information in terms of helping them to understand the possible closure of a school. Overall, 76% of these stakeholders said this information was very (38.7%) or somewhat (37.3%) beneficial. In comparison, 19.3% rated this information not very or not at all beneficial, while 4.7% said they were unsure.

- Highest ratings of this information (see Table 3) came from school council chairs of receiving schools (100% giving a rating of very or somewhat beneficial), one member of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee (100%, n=1), staff of receiving schools (92.6%) and members of the Superintendent’s Council (87.5%, n=8).
- Lowest ratings of this material came from school chairs of closed schools (33.3% rating it very or somewhat beneficial), principals of closed schools (50%) and parents of closed schools (61.1%).
- Key concerns about the demographic trends and programming information were the perceived inaccuracies and incompleteness of the material. It was felt the demographic information and “dollar costs of running a school and its programs” were inaccurate, out-of-date, incomplete and of questionable validity since it was perceived to contradict other available information.
- A small number of parents felt the information was deliberately slanted toward supporting school closures rather than being unbiased assessments of the situation. In this regard, parents felt school closures were a foregone conclusion.
- Another concern was the timing of the distribution of this information. Some stakeholders felt this information would have been more beneficial had it been provided up to a year in advance of the school closure process.

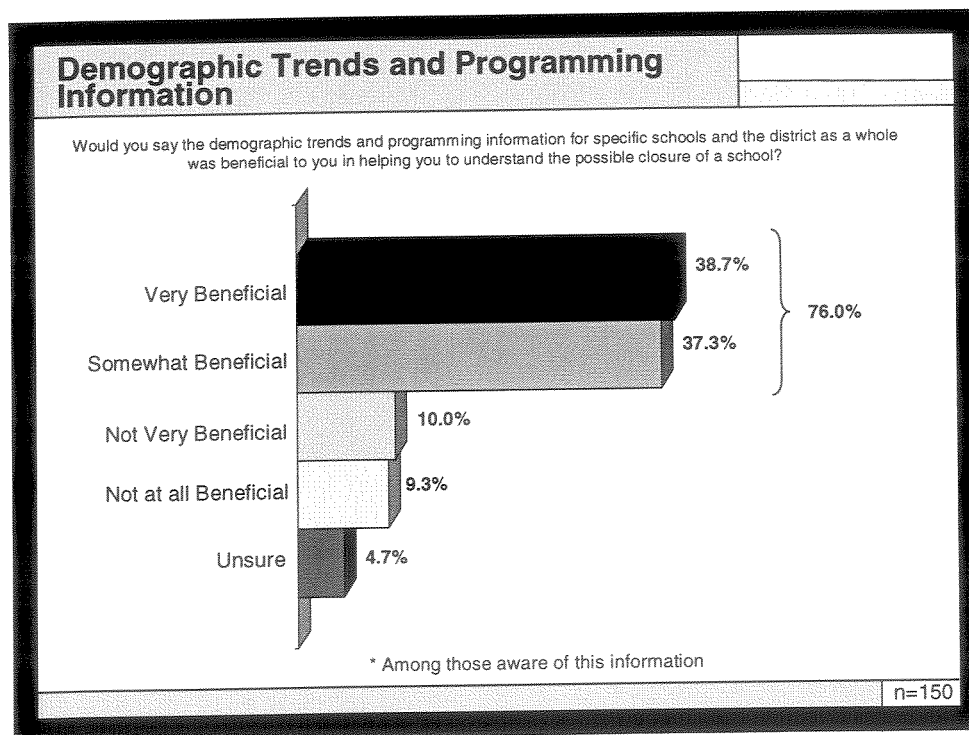


Table 3: Value of Demographic Trends and Programming Information

	Very/Somewhat Beneficial	Not Very/Not at all Beneficial	Unsure
TOTAL SAMPLE (n=150)	76.0%	19.3%	4.7%
School Chairs Receiving Schools (n=5)	100%	-	-
Key Communicators Advisory Committee (n=1)	100%	-	-
Staff Receiving Schools (n=27)	92.6%	7.4%	-
Superintendent's Council (n=8)	87.5%	12.5%	-
Principals Receiving Schools (n=7)	85.7%	25%	25.0%
Staff Closed Schools (n=41)	82.9%	12.2%	4.9%
Parents of Closed Schools (n=54)	61.1%	33.3%	5.6%
Principals Closed Schools (n=4)	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
School Chairs Closed Schools (n=3)	33.3%	66.7%	-

Providing Information about the School Closure Process

Asked what they consider to be the most effective ways to provide information about the school closure process, the top two methods mentioned first by stakeholders were public meetings (25.8%) and letters or direct correspondence with parents (24.6%). Following these were using the media (either news or TV/radio spots – 12.9%) and newspaper advertisements of public meetings (9.6%).

Considering all mentions, public meetings and personalized/direct communication with parents ranked first and second with approximately one-third of all stakeholders considering these to be the most effective ways to provide information about the school closure process.

Table 4: Most Effective Ways to Provide Information About School Closure Process

	First mention	Total Mentions
TOTAL SAMPLE (n=240)		
Public Meetings	25.8%	33.3%
Personalized Letters/ Direct Communication with parents	24.6%	32.9%
Media/News	12.9%	18.3%
Newspaper/newspaper advertisements	9.6%	15.8%
School newsletter	6.7%	9.6%
Community letters/flyers	4.2%	10.4%
Direct meetings (Phone calls/Door-to-door) with parents	3.7%	7.9%
Information directly from school principal	2.1%	2.9%
Email/letters to teachers	0.8%	0.8%
Email	0.8%	2.9%
Posters in Schools	0.8%	2.1%
School Internet	-	0.8%
Other	7.9%	11.7%

Top 3 Means of Providing Information about the School Closure Process

- Parents of closed schools ranked personalized letters to parents ahead of public meetings and the media as the most effective way to provide information about the school closure process.

- Public meetings were ranked number one by staff of closed schools ahead of personalized letters to parents. In contrast, newspaper advertising of public meetings and personalized letters to parents ranked first and second overall for staff of receiving schools.
- Among principals of closed and receiving schools, members of the Key Communicators Advisory Committee and members of the Superintendent’s Council, public meetings ranked first overall as the most effective means of communicating about the school closure process.
- Public meetings and personalized letters to parents were considered equally important by school council chairs of closed and receiving schools.

Table 5: Top 3 Ways to Provide Information About School Closure Process (Ranking)

	TOTAL SAMPLE (n=240)	Parents (n=100)	Staff Closed (n=50)	Staff Receiving (n=50)
1	Public Meetings (33.3%)	Personalized Letters to parents (37.0%)	Public Meetings (50.0%)	Newspaper ads (32.0%)
2	Personalized Letters to parents (32.9%)	2=Public Meetings (21.0%) 2=Media/News (21.0%)	Personalized Letters to parents (30.0%)	Personalized Letters to parents (28.0%)
3	Media/News (18.3%)		Media/News and Newspaper ads (14.0% each)	Media/News (22.0%)

Enhancing Understanding of the School Closure Process

Participants in this review process were asked to suggest information that could have been provided or actions that could have been taken to help better understand the process of closing a school. The number one response across all stakeholder groups (44.6% overall) was “nothing” because many felt they understood the process well enough.

“I think it was excellent. Everything that needed to have been done was.” (Staff, Receiving School).

“I think what they did was great. The information they provided to parents and the community was done very well.” (Parent, Closed School).

A core group of stakeholders (13.3%) felt the process could have been started earlier allowing more time to review the situation.

“When they start looking at schools having to close, they should give a year’s notice and not just to the schools themselves but also to the parents of the students involved.” (School Chair, Closed School)

“They did a pretty good job but it should have started earlier. Everyone should have known what was going on before the last possible minute.” (Staff, Closed School).

“They need to allow more time for the process. It seemed like the process was rushed.” (Staff, Receiving School)

Table 6: Information/Actions to Enhance Understanding of the School Closure Process

TOTAL SAMPLE	(n=240)
Nothing/ Process well understood	44.6%
More time for the process/Begin earlier	13.3%
More information on the reasons for closure	6.7%
More information through the mail/internet	5.8%
Genuine consultation process with input considered	5.0%
Better explanation of the process	4.6%
Honest communications with accurate information	3.3%
Outcomes were predetermined	3.3%
More information from schools/school board	2.1%
Consultation with and involving staff	2.1%
More public meetings	2.1%
Discussions with staff and parents before information released to the media	2.1%
More information on the television	1.2%
Better exploration of viable alternatives to closure	0.8%
Unsure	9.6%

Principals, and Superintendent's Council

For the most part, principals and members of the Superintendent's Council were intimately involved in or privy to the process and quite clearly knew the steps to be taken (even though some principals mentioned disagreement with the rationale for closing a school). If anything could be improved it is the timing of the process. Several principals mentioned how late it was in the year to close a school and that the process should have been started earlier in the year.

School Council Chairs

A core group of school council chairs (receiving and closed schools) understood the process of school closure and were satisfied with the information they received. In terms of suggestions, school chairs thought more information could have been provided about the rationale for closing a school. In addition, school council chairs felt this information could have been provided to parents by principals, school board members, and trustees. Several school chairs expressed frustration at trustees not personally visiting the affected schools or responding to questions. A suggestion was also made to widen the distribution of information beyond immediate neighbourhoods of affected schools so people outside of these areas could keep abreast of developments in their district.

Staff - Closed and Receiving Schools

Over half (56%) of staff from closed schools and 44% from receiving schools said they felt well informed and knowledgeable about the school closure process and could make no suggestions for improvement. However, several staff said they would have liked a clearer idea of the criteria used to decide if a school is a candidate for closure and the process that is followed to make the final decision. Staff also noted a desire to have been genuinely consulted and their opinions taken into consideration during the process.

A few staff suggested more advance notice of the school closure and some felt it would have been appropriate to consult with staff first before information was provided to the media.

"...have the Board actually listen. I felt that they came to the meeting and already had an agenda. It was like everything was predetermined already, like they had already decided to close the school before coming to the meeting." (Staff, Closed School).

"We should have been told beforehand, in a detailed way, what the process was going to be, what the issues would be, and how the process would be moving along. We should have been notified much earlier on, before the decision had been finalized. Before getting to the point of an official closure, parents and staff should have been given information detailing what may come, warning them about it and telling them how the decision would be made." (Staff, Receiving School)

One staff person noted that it was very beneficial to have been provided with flyers to distribute to the public.

Parents - Closed Schools

Just over one-third (35%) of parents of closed schools said they understood the process of closing a school and could not make any suggestions about information or actions that could have been taken to enhance this understanding. However, 20% said they would have liked more advance notice of a school closure and greater time for the process to run its course.

"At the very beginning, parents should have been given more reasons why the school board wanted to do what they were doing. There were a lot of frustrated parents."

"There needs to be more time committed to the study of the closure. The whole process needs to be given more time. The process is kind of a sham because they have already decided what they are going to do before the meetings start. They did not take any of the recommendations the parents gave. They did not listen to the community. It is inequitable in the school board which schools get certain programs and which ones do not."

With respect to information provided, parents made the following suggestions:

- Provide more information, and earlier;
- Outline why schools are being considered for closure and what the process is to come to the point of a decision whether or not to close a school ("Provide a written description at the beginning of the process so parents have more opportunities to get involved.");

- Use a range of distribution mechanisms for this information – direct letters to parents, post it on school websites, email it (if possible), print it in school newsletters or provide succinct (bullet-point) handouts;
- Ensure the information is sufficiently detailed but communicated in plain English; and
- Make certain the information provided is accurate and truthful.

“A letter could have been sent out outlining the whole process from step one to when the school was going to close. We did not know the process until it went to court. Once the parents opposed it, there was much more information.”

“The Board of Trustees needs to understand they are talking to people of different educational backgrounds and they were speaking amongst their peers as opposed to the people. They were using government talk and nothing that the people could understand.”

Understanding Why the District Was Recommending School Closures

Asked if they understood why the district was recommending the closure of a school to the Board of Trustees, 70% of all stakeholders participating in this review said they had a very good (42.9%) or good (27.1%) understanding of the rationale (even if they did not agree with closing a school). Almost two-in-ten (19.2%) said they had a poor or very poor understanding while 11.3% had a fair understanding of why the district was recommending the closure of a school.

- Principals and school council chairs of receiving schools had the strongest knowledge (100%) of why the option to close schools was being recommended, followed by members of the Superintendent's Council (87.5%), staff of closed (86%) and receiving (80%) schools.
- Only 25% of school council chairs of closed schools and 53% of parents of closed schools said they had a good or very good understanding of why the school closure option was being recommended by the district to the Board of Trustees.

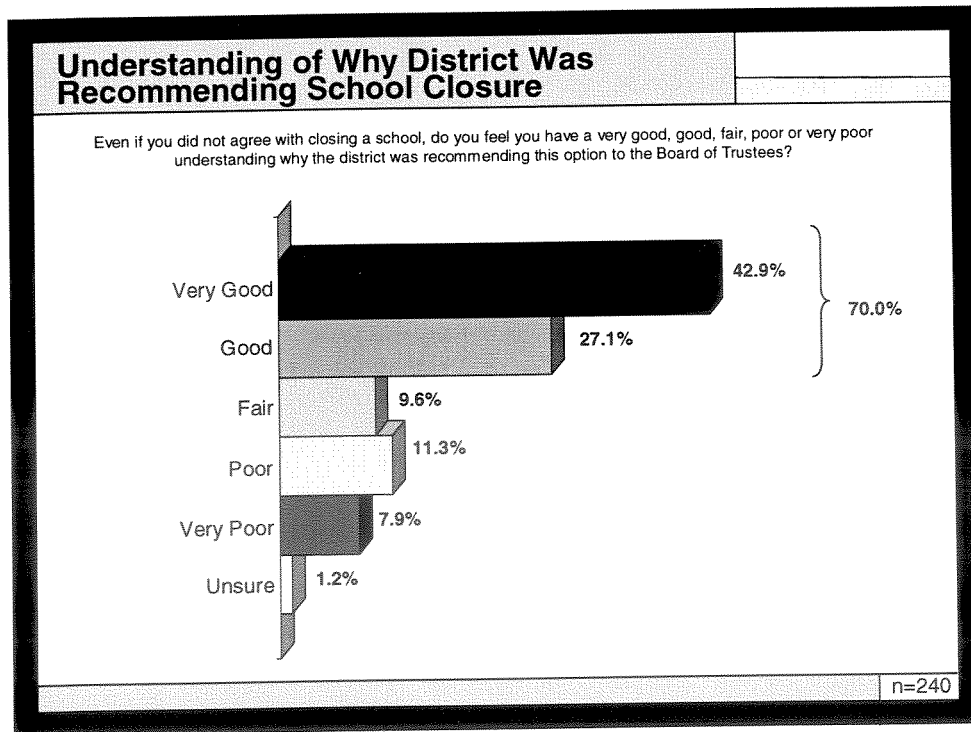


Table 7: Understanding of Recommending School Closure

	Very good/Good	Fair	Poor/Very poor	Unsure
TOTAL SAMPLE (n=240)	70.0%	9.6%	19.2%	-
Principals Receiving Schools (n=8)	100.0%	-	-	-
School Chairs Receiving Schools (n=8)	100.0%	-	-	-
Superintendent’s Council (n=8)	87.5%	-	-	12.5%
Staff Closed Schools (n=50)	86.0%	8.0%	6.0%	-
Staff Receiving Schools (n=50)	80.0%	12.0%	6.0%	2.0%
Principals Closed Schools (n=4)	75.0%	-	25.0%	-
Key Communicators Advisory Com. (n=8)	62.5%	25.0%	12.5%	-
Parents of Closed Schools (n=100)	53.0%	11.0%	36.0%	-
School Chairs Closed Schools (n=4)	25.0%	-	50.0%	25.0%

Superintendent’s Council and Key Communicators Advisory Committee

Members of the Superintendent’s Council and Key Communicators Advisory Council were further asked what they considered to be the main reasons why North Edmonton, Strathearn, Terrace Heights and Wellington Schools were closed. Three key reasons were provided:

- Low or declining enrollment (68.8%);
- Low utilization rates (25.0%); and
- An inability to provide high quality programs (18.7%).

“The changing population in Edmonton in terms of where people live and the number of people – period. Also, there was pressure from the provincial government for us to deal with an unoccupied space issue.”

“Low student enrollment which leads to the impossibility of high quality programs due to the lack of resources.”

“Programming for small schools is difficult. Schools that have a small enrollment make it a problem to provide quality options for kids because they do not receive the same kind of money that a larger school would get.”

When asked what they consider to be the main challenges in the school closure process, members of the Superintendent’s Council and Key Communicators Advisory Council identified these challenges as:

- Educating the public, parents and children about the reasons for closures;
- Effectively transitioning children to new schools;
- Working with communities to help them understand the reason for closures;
- Parental concerns and resentment about school closures;
- Effectively planning for closures and implementing the plan;
- Managing expectations of parents and the community at large; and
- Providing accurate, fair and truthful information to parents.

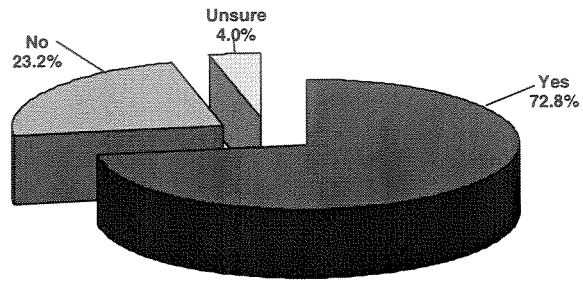
“Competing needs and wishes. Helping staff and the community understand the complexity of the issue, the different ways of looking at it and helping people understand that ultimately a decision needs to be made.”

Opportunities to Express an Opinion

When asked if they felt they were given an opportunity to express their opinions, overall 72.8% of all stakeholders included in this review responded affirmatively. This ranged from a high of 100% among school council chairs of receiving schools to 50% for principals and school chairs of closed schools. Seventy percent (70%) of parents of closed schools felt they were provided an opportunity to express their opinions.

Opportunity to Express Your Opinion

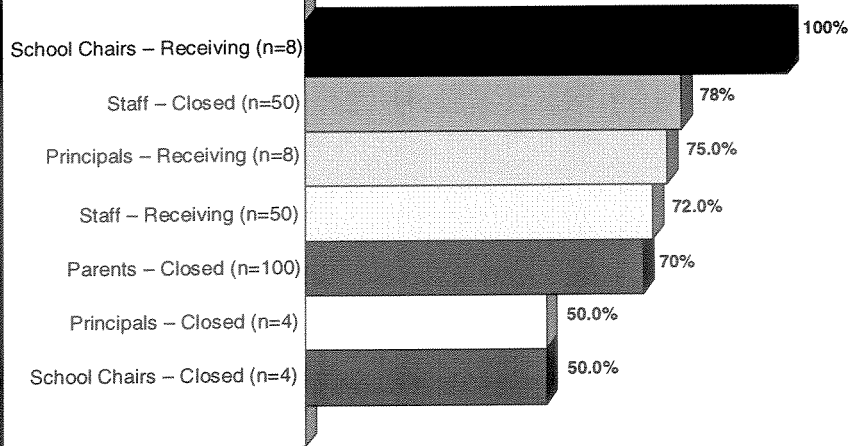
Even if you did not agree with closing a school, do you feel you were given an opportunity to express your opinion?



n=224

Opportunity to Express Opinions

"Yes" Response



n=224

Among those who felt they were not given an opportunity to express their opinions during the school closure process (n=52), the main concerns were:

- Their opinions were not being listened to (25%);
- Not being given enough opportunities to voice their concerns (21.2%);
- Principals and staff not being provided an avenue to voice opinions (17.3%);
- The feeling that the decision regarding school closures had already been made and the process was a fait accompli (15.4%);
- Insufficient notification of school closures (13.5%);
- The desire for more personal and direct communications (9.6%); and
- The need for advance notification of public meetings (5.8%; 10.7% among parents of closed schools).

Additional Opportunities to Participate in School Closure Process

Stakeholders were asked to provide thoughts and suggestions on any additional actions they feel could have been taken by Edmonton Public Schools to provide additional opportunities to participate in the school closure process.

A majority of stakeholders offered no suggestions because they felt opportunities were provided to participate in the school closure process. However, 10% of participants recommended beginning the process earlier to allow more time. Some believed the outcome was predetermined making any opportunity to participate in the school closure process moot. Greater opportunities for staff to input in the process were noted by 5.4% of stakeholders.

Table 8: Additional Opportunities to Participate in the School Closure Process

TOTAL SAMPLE	(n=224)
No suggestions/Opportunities were available	57.1%
Begin the process earlier	10.3%
Outcomes were predetermined	6.7%
More meetings and input from staff	5.4%
More information about meetings	3.1%
Question and answer sessions with Trustees	2.7%
Genuine listening of opinions expressed	2.2%
Present alternatives to school closures	1.8%
Other	6.7%
Don't Know	3.1%

Principals – Closed and Receiving Schools

Principals of closed schools generally felt Edmonton Public Schools were good about providing information and involving them in the process. Suggestions made by this group were to:

- Allow greater involvement by staff in the school closure process;
- Ensure information provided is accurate and factually correct;
- Develop a plan for the entire area to benefit the area as a whole;
- Start the process earlier; and
- Bring “closure” to closed schools.

“They could have a meeting with just the staff and fill us in a little bit more. Perhaps they could do this before having a public meeting.” (Principal, Closed School)

“They should have all the schools in the area come to the meetings and come up with a long term plan to benefit the area as a whole.” (Principal, Closed School)

“We have to do a better job of disposing of resources and planning for the transition of families to another school. Start the process earlier in the school year to ensure there are places for all of the kids to go to. There was no closure for the school. People that have a vested interest in these historic schools were not given a chance to have a closing ceremony or anything like that. It is as if these schools just disappeared.” (Principal, Receiving School)

“No, if anything there were possibly too many opportunities. The venues sometimes got pretty heated. Some people felt that if their opinions were not taken, it makes them feel like they are not being heard.” (Principal, Receiving School)

School Council Chairs – Closed and Receiving Schools

School council chairs from closed and receiving schools made the following suggestions about additional opportunities to participate in the school closure process:

- Better educate parents and staff on the process of school closure by using of seminars or other mechanisms;
- Continue to involve stakeholders after a school has been closed on ‘what next’ for the school;
- Distribute posters about school closures to public libraries;
- Provide question and answer forums with the Board of Trustees; and
- Involve parents early on in the process.

“Better communication with the communities. An open dialogue with the Trustees. The school board kept saying that there was debate over the issue even though we were not allowed to debate. The school board needs to answer the questions the parents have.”

“The meetings with trustees were for information only. You could not ask them questions. It would have been more effective if they could have answered questions.”

“We need to understand what happens now that the school is closed...”

Staff – Closed and Receiving Schools

Seventy-four (74%) percent of staff of receiving schools and 70% of staff of closed schools provided no suggestions regarding additional opportunities to participate in the school closure process. Many felt they were provided sufficient opportunities to participate. Suggestions that were made included:

- Allocating more time for the process and advance notification of the closure;
- Providing more staff information meetings about placements for the following year;
- Providing opportunities for staff to meet individually with Edmonton Public Schools to express their opinions;
- Providing opportunities for parents to meet with staff;
- Better prepping staff on how to handle parents and respond to their queries;
- Involving staff in the actual closing of the school;
- Allowing greater involvement by the community at large; and
- Providing a mechanism for staff to provide written submissions of their opinions on possible school closures;

“Meet with staff individually. Give the parents the chance to meet with the staff. Make the meetings more accommodating for people who do not drive. Have more chances for meetings so that as many people as possible can get involved.” (Staff, Closed School)

“Include the staff more in some of the finalization about how to close the school. When the school closed there were things that didn’t get done and still aren’t done to this date.” (Staff, Closed School)

“Get the community involved in the process when the school closures are still being considered. If everyone is involved at an earlier stage, they would have a better appreciation for where the process is going, why it is going one and the realities of cost and demographics. They could have made people on school councils and parent councils part of the process and have them attend key meetings and report back to the community.”

Parents – Closed Schools

Just under half (45%) of parents said they could not provide any additional ideas on opportunities to participate in the process of school closures. Among those who did provide a suggestion for additional participation opportunities, the suggestions included:

- Providing an opportunity to say “goodbye” to teachers and the school;
- Sending out additional letters to parents to ensure awareness of the public meetings;
- Allowing more time for the process by starting it earlier;
- Offering public meeting times or information meetings during the day for parents who work nights;
- Involving community members in the process;
- Allowing for better two way communication; and
- Working with the community to devise a plan for the school post-closure.

“Maybe they could have more than one meeting for each school. They could have a couple of different dates for meetings, that way more parents could attend.”

“Involving parents more. There could have been more meetings and more newsletters.”

“The process was symbolic as they had already decided on what they were going to do. It was not a two-way process. They did not engage with us at all. It was totally one way.”

“More information with advance warning would have helped, then I could have attended meetings or given more suggestions, and the parents could have gotten together.”

“...they should have worked with the community on a plan for the school after it was closed.”

Concluding Comments

The purpose of this review was to seek input from a number of district stakeholders on the past school closure process with a view to determining if and in what ways the process can be fine tuned. The results suggest that the process used for the closures of North Edmonton, Strathearn, Terrace Heights and Wellington Schools was generally well understood, even if the outcome was not always palatable.

Most stakeholders had a good sense of some, but not all, actions taken during a school closure process even if they did not always avail themselves of the various mechanisms offered to provide their input or receive information. Ironically, public meetings were rated as the most effective method of providing information about the school closure process and yet attendance at these meetings was not stellar from all but principals, and school council chairs of closed schools. Perhaps this can be explained, in part, by the sense stakeholders had that the decision to close particular schools was made long before the meetings were held. The perceived “lateness” to the start of the closure process and the speed which things appeared to happen seems to have triggered this perception. Conceivably more time might have alleviated some concerns but most likely not all.

Overall, a majority of stakeholders understood why the district recommended the closure of the aforementioned schools. Understandably, parents and school council chairs of affected schools had the most difficulty understanding this recommendation. Some of these stakeholders wanted more time to digest the information, assess alternative solutions and generally look for other ways of saving their school. The demographic and programming information provided was considered beneficial by stakeholders but again, those most impacted by a possible school closure (school council chairs, principals, parents of closed schools) were less enamoured with this material. More information about the school closure process is desired, especially the criteria upon which school closure is judged.

One aspect that became apparent in talking to stakeholders is their perception that the process has not yet come to its rightful conclusion – an “official” school closure ceremony. There is a sense the school closure process has left people dangling – wondering what is to become of their school. But more than this, there is a sense of sadness there has been no opportunity to say goodbye to the school and to the people that made a set of buildings a school.