Interactive Webinar on School Closures in Ontario

Communities left behind? A timely examination of school closure controversies for justice-informed decision-making on the fate of public schools in Ontario

UNIVERSITY of GUELPH

IMPROVE LIFE.

SSHRC CRSH

Queen's UNIVERSITY

The University of Guelph resides on the ancestral lands of the **Attawandaron** people and the treaty lands and territory of the **Mississaugas of the Credit**. We uphold the significance of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant and the continuing relationship our Indigenous neighbours have with this land. We recognize that today this gathering place is home to many **First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples** and acknowledging them reminds us of our relationships to this land where we learn and work.
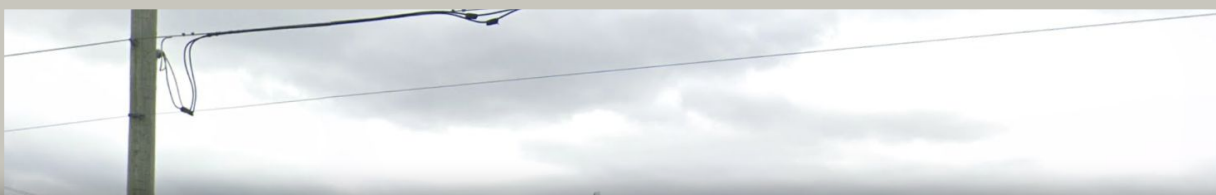
HOME

Acknowledging Indigenous peoples reminds us of our important connection and responsibility to this land and all of our relations…

Learn more about traditional land acknowledgements at https://vimeo.com/517181293

Purpose of Meeting

Sharing of information, applying this information to your contexts, gaining your perspectives on key inputs to inform future decisions about school closures.

Agenda

10:00 - 10:10 Introduction and opening comments
(Wayne Caldwell, Research Team)

10:10 - 10:20 Why do schools close?
(Jack Ammendolia, Watson & Associates Economists Ltd.)

10:20 - 10:30 Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) process today
(Jennifer Passy, Waterloo Catholic District School Board)

10:30 - 10:35 Community impacts of school closures
(Wayne Caldwell, Research Team)

10:35 - 11:00 Communities left behind research findings
(Patricia Collins, Research Team)

11:00 - 11:25 Key inputs to inform decisions about school closures
(Small group discussions)

11:25 - 11:50 Group debrief - key inputs to inform decisions about school closures
(Wayne Caldwell, Research Team)

11:50 -11:55 Wrap-up and reflection
(Patricia Collins, Research Team)

11:55 - 12:00 Concluding remarks
(Wayne Caldwell, Research Team)

Research Team

Patricia Collins (Principal Investigator, Queen's)

Mark Seasons (Waterloo)

Jennifer Dean (Waterloo)

Wayne Caldwell (Guelph)

Bill Irwin (Western)

Jeff Masuda (Victoria)

Introductions

Jack Ammendolia, is a managing partner and leads the School Board Accommodation Planning Practice at Watson & Associates Economists Ltd. His career spans over 20 years, with extensive experience in school board planning, education development charges and enrolment forecasting. Jack has worked for school boards, federal agencies, social service agencies and First Nations communities throughout Ontario and across Canada.

Jennifer Passy, is a Registered Professional Planner in Ontario with over 24 years of experience, including school board planning, and land development. Jennifer is currently the Manager of Planning for the Waterloo Catholic District School Board. Jennifer is involved in local stakeholder committees and provincial working groups representing the Waterloo Catholic District School Board and the broader school board administrative sector.

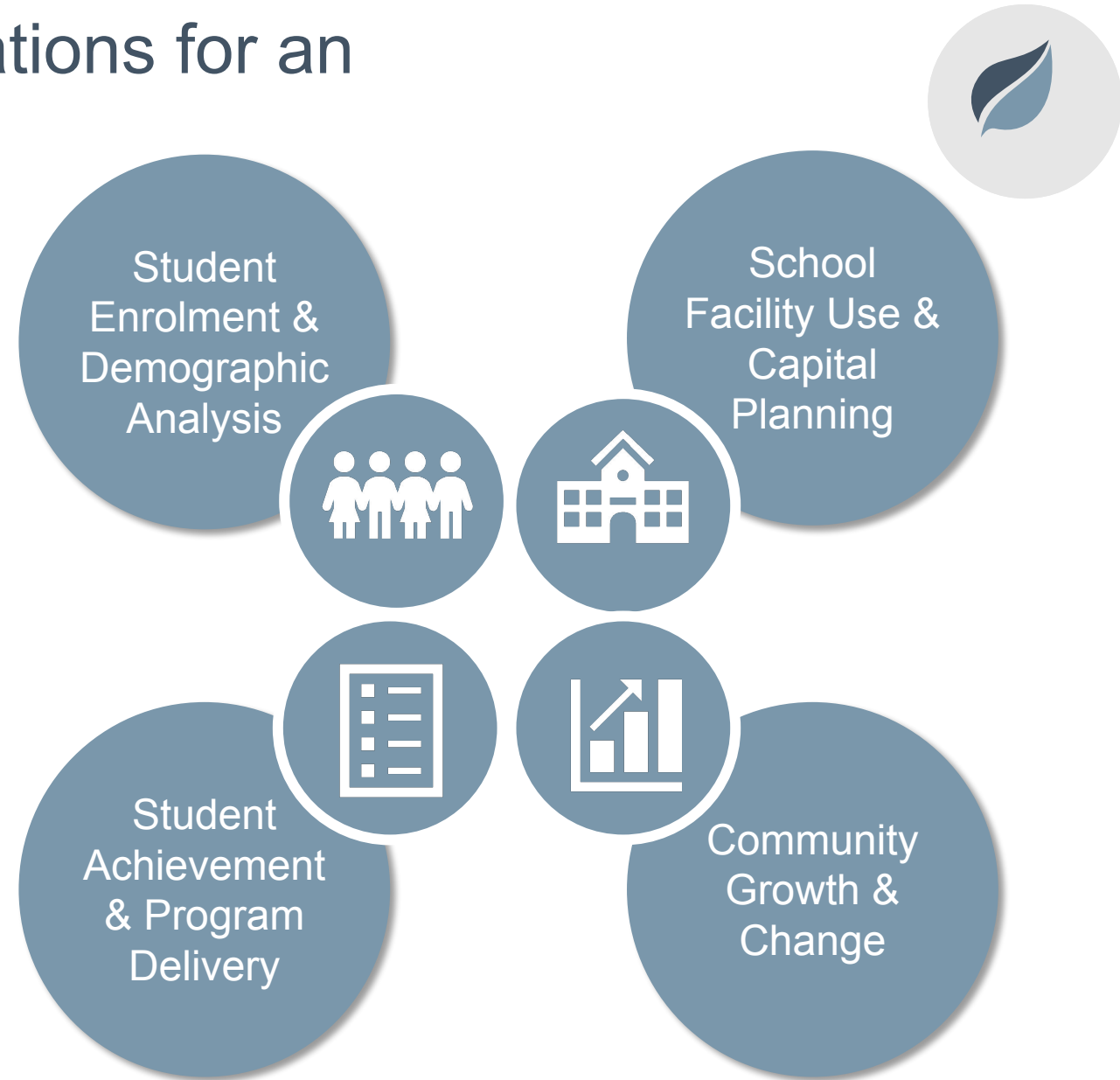**Why Do School Boards Consider Consolidation/Closure Of Schools?**

Jack Ammendolia, Managing Partner
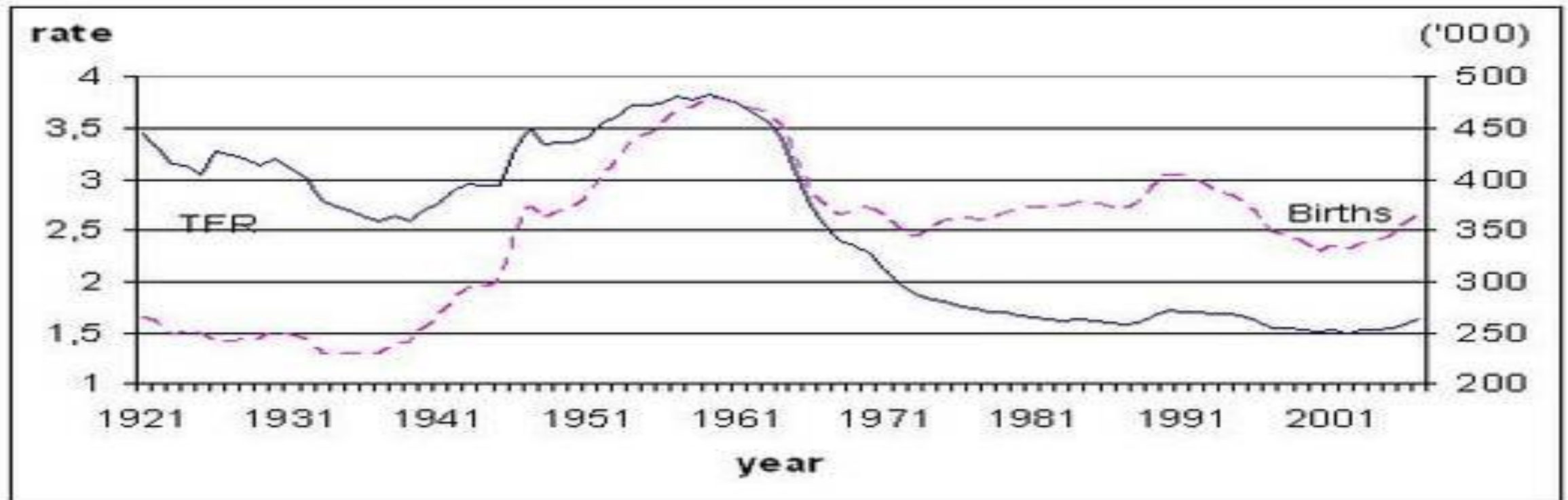
Watson & Associates Economists Ltd.

How do you make recommendations for an accommodation review?

School boards have large fixed assets (i.e. schools) of which the majority were built to service population and immigration patterns that developed after WWII.

School board accommodation planning is trying to figure out how to deal with ever changing migration and growth patterns while trying to maintain those fixed assets (schools) and determine which ones will continue to be viable both now and into the future.

Student Enrolment & Demographic Analysis

School Facility Use & Capital Planning

Student Achievement & Program Delivery

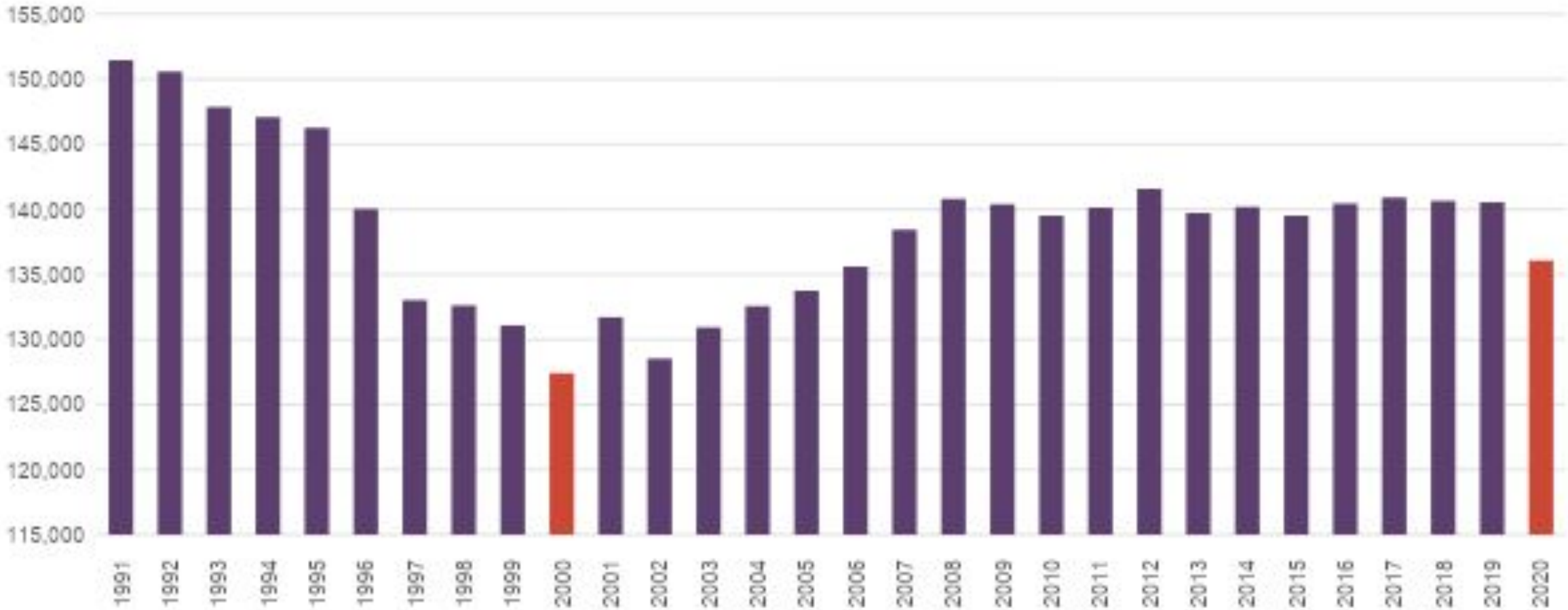Community Growth & Change

The Baby Boom

Ontario Births

What Happened?

Ontario Live Births

What data is relevant when considering a consolidation?

- Demographics & Enrolment Trends

- Facility Condition

- Long-term Growth Prospects

- Transportation Impact (Travel times, walkability)

- Community Engagement/Feedback

- Ministry Policies

- *FUNDING*

Today: Another Period of Significant Change

Global Pandemic

Demographic Shifts/Religion Participation

Public Policy Changes

Population Migration & Mobility

Resource Constraints

Urban Challenges

Population Data	2001 Census	Share Of Total	2006 Census	Share Of Total	2011 Census	Share Of Total	2016 Census	Share Of Total	2021 Census	Share Of Total
Total Population	**7,035**		**23,175**		**48,174**		**56,865**		**62,233**	
Pre-School Population (0-3)	542	7.7%	2,079	9.0%	3,969	8.2%	3,367	5.9%	2,451	3.9%
Elementary School Population (4-13)	1,059	15.1%	3,627	15.7%	7,928	16.5%	10,241	21.3%	10,000	20.8%
Secondary School Population (14-18)	427	6.1%	1,488	6.4%	3,046	6.3%	3,778	7.8%	4,883	10.1%
Population Over 18 Years of Age	5,007	71.2%	15,981	69.0%	33,231	69.0%	39,479	82.0%	44,899	93.2%
Females Aged 25-44	1,457	20.7%	4,688	20.2%	9,109	18.9%	9,048	18.8%	8,728	18.1%

2001-2006			2006-2011			2011-2016			2016-2021		
Absolute Change	% Change	Share Change	Absolute Change	% Change	Share Change	Absolute Change	% Change	Share Change	Absolute Change	% Change	Share Change
16,140	229.4%		24,999	107.9%		8,691	18.0%		5,368	9.4%	
1,537	283.6%	1.3%	1,890	90.9%	-0.7%	-602	-15.2%	-2.3%	-916	-27.2%	-2.0%
2,568	242.5%	0.6%	4,301	118.6%	0.8%	2,313	29.2%	4.8%	-241	-2.4%	-0.5%
1,061	248.5%	0.4%	1,558	104.7%	-0.1%	732	24.0%	1.5%	1,105	29.2%	2.3%
10,974	219.2%	-2.2%	17,250	107.9%	0.0%	6,248	18.8%	13.0%	5,420	13.7%	11.3%
3,231	221.8%	-0.5%	4,421	94.3%	-1.3%	-61	-0.7%	-0.1%	-320	-3.5%	-0.7%

Pupil Accommodation Review Process Today

Jennifer Passy, BES, MCIP, RPP

Manager of Planning

Waterloo Catholic District School Board

Original Impetus for PARG

- Amalgamation of school boards in 1998 coupled with new centralized per pupil funding.
- No longer did boards have local taxation.
- Many boards needed to close schools to reduce surplus / excess capacity.
- Few provincial rules existed to guide school closures.
- Legal authority: Education Act
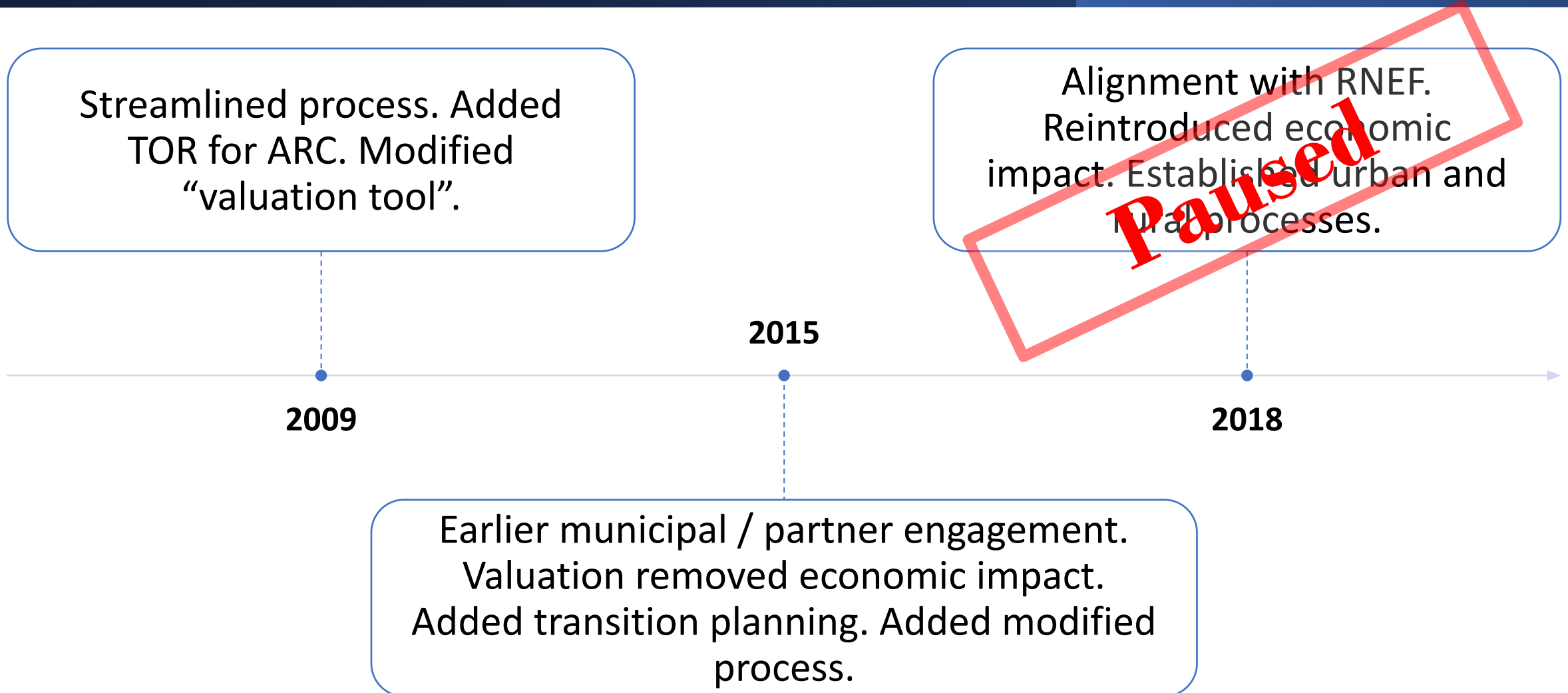
  171(1) A board may…

  schools and attendance areas

  7. determine the number and kind of schools to be established and maintained and the attendance area for each school, and close schools in accordance with policies established by the board from guidelines issued by the Minister; R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2, s. 171 (1), par. 7.

Introduction of the PARG

- Formal guideline introduced in 2006.
- Process focused on assessment of:
  - Value to the Students
  - Value to the Community
  - Value to the School board
  - Value to the Local economy
- Boards developed a generic School Valuation Framework to assess each of the four considerations.
- Process was lengthy and pitted communities against one another, as schools continued to close.

PARG Over Time

Streamlined process. Added TOR for ARC. Modified "valuation tool".

Alignment with RNEF. Reintroduced economic impact. Established urban and rural processes.

Paused

2015

2009

2018

Earlier municipal / partner engagement. Valuation removed economic impact. Added transition planning. Added modified process.

Current Pressures

- Principles of 1998 funding model have not changed.

- The pandemic shifts in enrolment
  - Mobility of children has increased
  - Exodus of school aged children from Toronto and inner ring GTA areas
    - "drive till you qualify" home buying
  - Increased immigration has added pressure in some areas

- Some areas which historically would have been considering closures may be in a better position today.

- Other boards with established urban areas, little intensification and lower overall birth rates / family size, or cultural makeup shifts may be faced with too many schools.

Key Findings from

Communities left behind?
A timely examination of school closure controversies for justice-informed decision-making on the fate of public schools in Ontario

Principal Investigator: Dr. Patricia Collins, Queen's University

Interactive Webinar: November 9, 2023

SSHRC CRSH

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Research Team

- Queen's: Dr. Patricia Collins
  - Gabrielle Snow, Carling Fraser, Faith Ford, Rachel Barber, Carise Thompson

- Guelph: Dr. Wayne Caldwell
  - Regan Zink

- Waterloo: Drs. Jennifer Dean and Mark Seasons
  - Robert Bruce, Samantha Leger, Keely Stenberg

- Western: Dr. Bill Irwin
  - Sara Hennessy

- Victoria: Dr. Jeff Masuda

Value of Schools to Communities

- Publicly funded schools essential for complete communities

- Community benefits beyond education
    - Infrastructure for play and recreation
    - Gathering place for socialization and connection
    - Amenities and services, like childcare, libraries
    - Programs for populations in need
    - Cultural heritage, connection to place
    - Economic stability and growth

School Closure Trends in Ontario

- Growing number of school closures since early 2000s

- Concerns that closures concentrated in inner-city, rural settings

- Implications for socio-spatial equity and environmental justice

School Closure Framework

- Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) guidelines

- Source of intense critique, moratorium

- Opportunity to study closures to inform changes to decision-making model

Study Objectives

(1) To document the characteristics of communities where schools closed and the fate of closed school sites;

(2) To verify the dynamics and shortcomings of existing PAR processes as employed by two school boards in Ontario;

(3) To expose the consequences of these processes and resulting school closures in four communities in Ontario; and

(4) To collectively interpret the implications of these processes and consequences, and collaboratively conceive of an improved decision-making model.

Study Design and Site Selection

- Mixed methods embedded comparative case study design

- Two school board districts in Ontario with mix of urban and rural settings

- One urban and one rural community in each district with closures since 2016

Study Methods

Obj 1: Develop and analyze closed school database

Obj 2: Key informant interviews

Obj 3: Household surveys and resident interviews

Obj 4: Interactive webinar and deliberative workshop

Obj 1: Characteristics of communities where schools closed

- 404 publicly funded schools closed in Ontario between 2011 and 2021

- Closures occurred disproportionately in small to mid-sized cities and rural communities

- Closures were more common in more materially and socially deprived communities

- No evidence of significantly declining child populations prior to school closures in communities where schools closed

Collins, Barber, Masuda & Snow. (2023). *Well-being, Space, & Society.*

Obj 1: Fate of closed school sites

- 247 closed school properties (61%) had been repurposed as of 2022
  - Educational reuses were more common in large metropolitan centres
  - Commercial reuses were more common in rural communities
  - 16% of reuses serve populations with high deprivation, 41% serve the general public, 44% serve populations with low deprivation

- 155 properties (39%) remained vacant
  - School boards retained ownership for 57% of sites in metropolitan centres
  - Private ownership was most common in small/mid-sized (63%) and rural (61%) communities

Barber, Collins, & Masuda. (Under Review). *Community Development.*

34

Obj 2: Dynamics & Shortcomings of PARs

- Interviews with 30 key informants across two districts
  - School board trustees and staff, municipal councilors and staff, school advocates (parents, residents, retired staff, etc.)

- Questions:
  - What is your perspective on how the PAR process unfolded for school X?
  - What concerns did you hear from residents prior to the closure of X?
  - How do you think the closure of X has impacted the community?
  - What changes do you feel are necessary to the school closure decision-making process in Ontario after the moratorium is lifted?

- OECD framework for trust in public institutions
  - Responsiveness, reliability, harmony, openness, integrity, fairness

Obj 2: Dynamics & Shortcomings of PARs

Responsiveness: lack of coordination between school boards and municipalities

- *"We're trying to coordinate where growth is occurring in [PLACE] and it seems that there's been a disconnect between…where growth occurs and where school boards decide to build a school."* (Municipal staff)

Reliability: questionable parameters used to evaluate schools that were under review

- *"Our school in [town name], Watson reported as having a facility condition index of [X]. The government inspection said it was [Y]. And the Ameresco puts it at [Z]. This pattern continues throughout every school in [township]…How can this pattern be explained? These variations in the facility condition index alone should have merited further investigation by the [school board]."* (School advocate)

Harmony: structure of PAR meetings created friction between school communities

- *"So basically it tore the heart out of the community, it put them into a fight that went on far too long. It pitted neighbour against neighbour, community against community, because one school was going to stay open and this one was going to be closed. So it was actually a gruesome time…"* (School board trustee)

Thompson, Collins, & Dean. (Under Review). *Public Administration.*

Obj 2: Dynamics & Shortcomings of PARs

Openness: design of public consultation meetings did not reflect purpose to engage community stakeholders

- *"I think it was a very prescribed process, very predetermined…things were laid out in such a way as to draw only one conclusion. Trustees were discouraged—publicly…from speaking with members of the community. You go to the meetings and you listen. So, in that sense, it wasn't an open process."* (School advocate)

Integrity: compromised by power structure of school board governing how decisions were made

- *"[T]he balance of power should be that the director serves at the pleasure of the board. And currently, it's that the board serves at the pleasure of the director. So whatever the director or senior staff…whatever their wishes are, they control the agenda at that board meeting...When trustees hear something from a public source, and they think 'You know what? That has validity. We should really consider this.' Whether it hits the agenda or not is driven by very few people."* (School advocate)

Fairness: system-wide approach taken by school boards fails to recognize the uniqueness of communities

- *"what we are faced with is a provincial policy that does not recognize the uniqueness of all of our communities...And we have a one size fits all approach that I don't believe achieves success for urban centres, nor does it achieve success in our rural centres."* (School board trustee)

Thompson, Collins, & Dean. (Under Review). *Public Administration.*

Obj 3: Community-Level Consequences of Closures

Agreement with Statements about Impacts of School Closure on Students
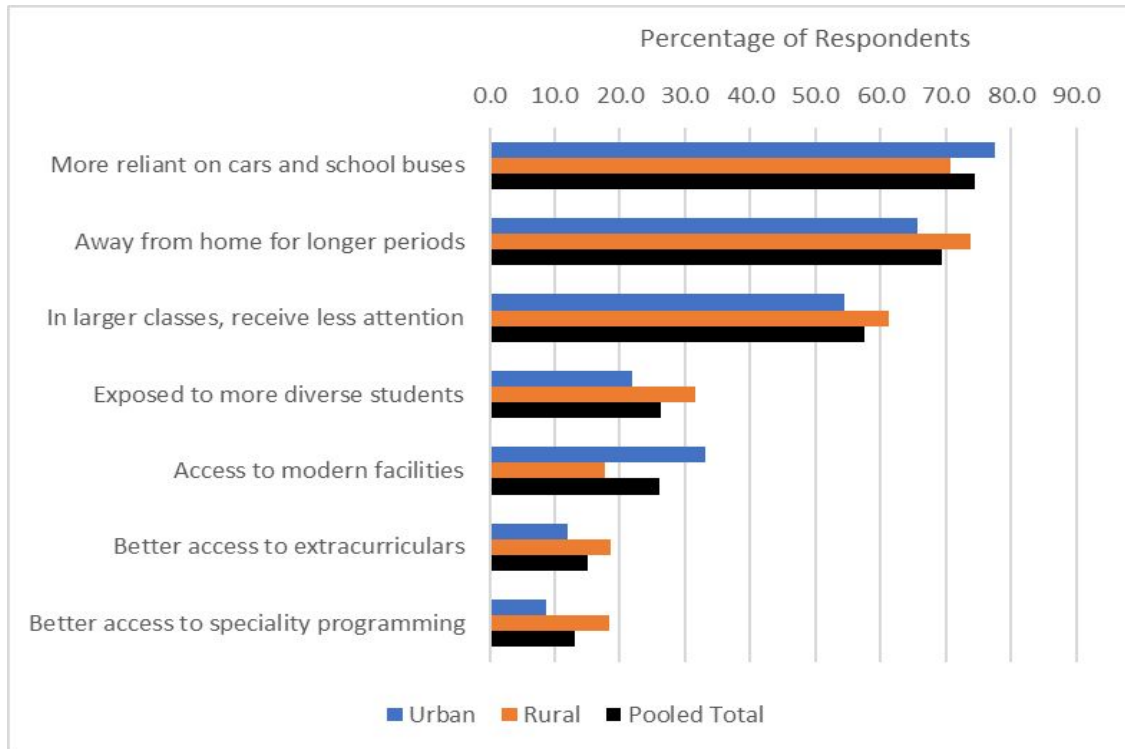
Agreement with Statements about Impacts of School Closure on Wider Community
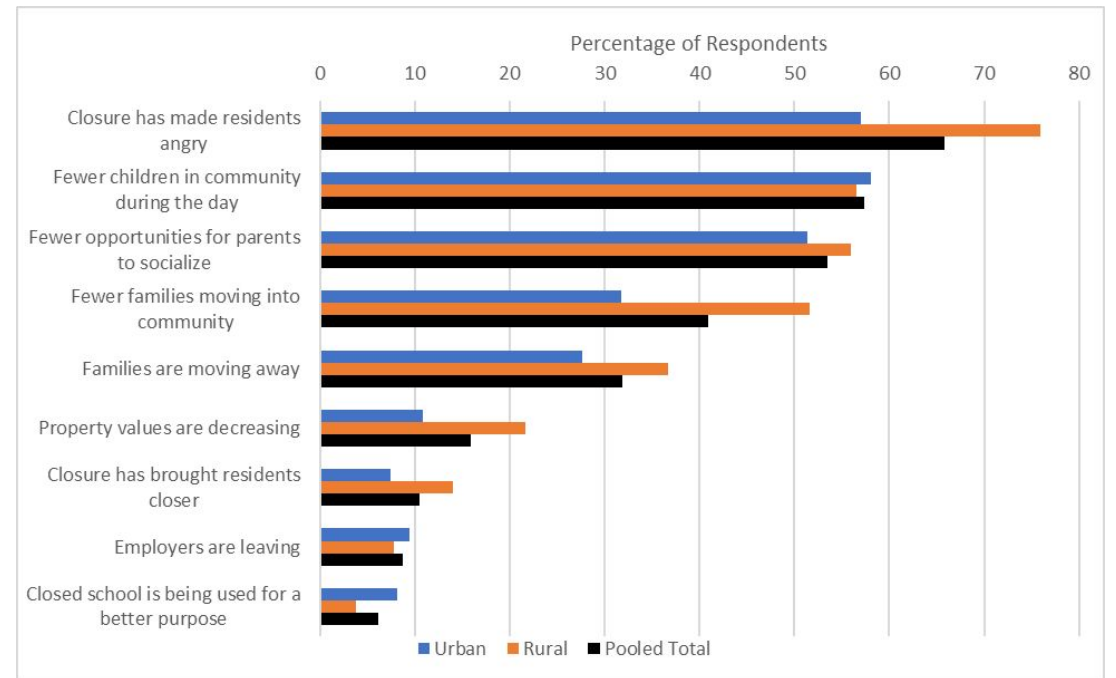
Obj 3: Community-Level Consequences of Closures

Theme 1: Perceived consequences of the school closure

- **Commute times:** *"The school bus ride is 10 times what it used to be. They used to be on the bus less than five minutes and now they're on the bus for 45 to 50 [minutes]." (Parent 1, Rural School)*

- **Community vibrancy:** *"It would just be a whole lot more vibrant... The people that live here would stay in the community, they'd be able to walk to community events, and there wouldn't be a big push to have cars to go over to events...And there'd be a whole lot less buses….And so, it would be a whole lot more active." (Volunteer 1, Urban School)*

- **Community connection:** *"Well, we just don't seem to have the same kind of connection, because most of the children that come to the school now aren't residents of [community]. " (Parent 4, Rural School)*
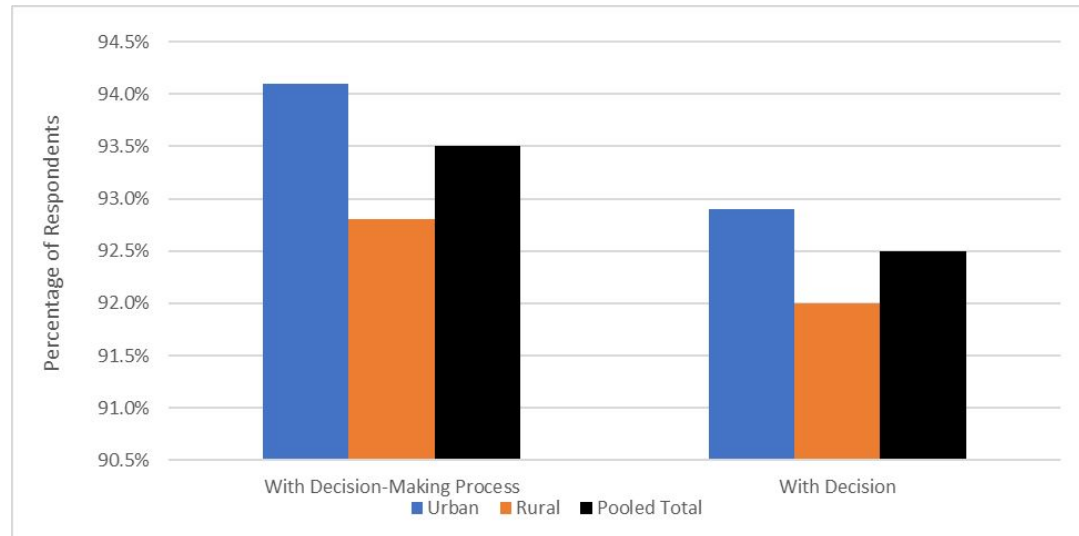
Obj 3: Community-Level Consequences of Closures

**Theme 2: The fight against closures**

- **Political engagement:** *"The parent committee worked with both of the local MP [elected member of federal parliament] and their local MPP [elected member of provincial parliament], and there were newsletters sent out. They did such an amazing job to keep people engaged in the process." (Parent 4, Rural School)*

- **Due diligence:** *"Ultimately, we didn't feel that we'd left anything unturned, that we came at it from every possible angle: from a heritage angle, from an economics angle…" (Volunteer 2, Urban School)*

- **Broader impact:** *"Well, I think that because of the strong voice of our parent group and their constant follow up…with members of parliament was instrumental in having the Ministry look at rural school closures and what that does to communities." (Parent 4, Rural School)*

Obj 3: Community-Level Consequences of Closures

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Dissatisfaction with Process & Decision

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Decreased in Trust for Various Stakeholders

Leger, Thompson, Collins, & Dean. (2023). *Canadian Planning & Policy.*
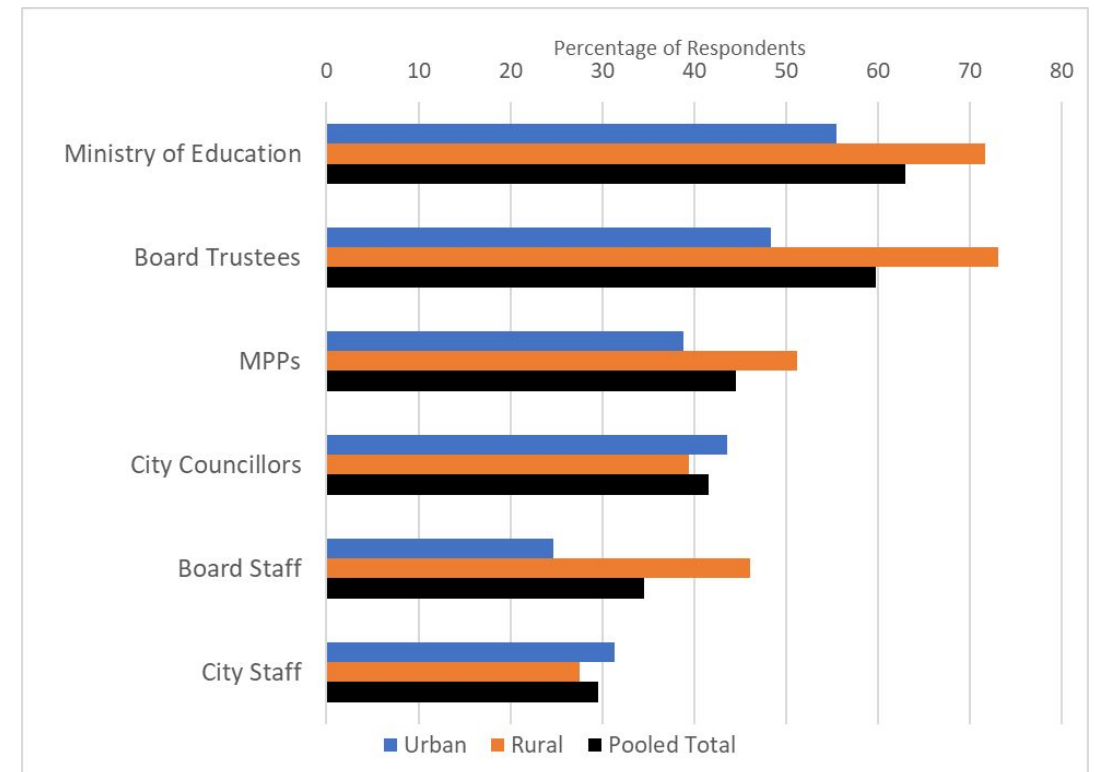
Obj 3: Community-Level Consequences of Closures

Theme 3: Connecting PAR processes with closure decisions

- **Questionable logic:** *"It was a school with a capacity for eight hundred students and it had less than four hundred students. So that meant it needed to be closed. But that was an unfair measurement…there was no empty space in the school…all the square footage of the school was accounted for and the school board wasn't losing money, like they were collecting rent for the space that didn't have students. The math was bad." (Parent 1, Urban School)*

- **Communities as targets:** *"And I would venture to say that many of these decisions and decisions like this are an injustice that's inflicted on a community, you know, communities that can't fight for themselves for whatever reasons, it could be economically stressed or socially stressed...because they're easy targets." (Volunteer 4, Urban School)*

- **Disillusionment:** *"It was exhausting, but it felt like no matter even if we put together the golden egg of solution, it didn't seem to matter and it all fell on deaf ears, which was so frustrating." (Parent 3, Rural School)*

Leger, Thompson, Collins, & Dean. (2023). *Canadian Planning & Policy.*

Findings Synthesis: Objectives 1 and 2
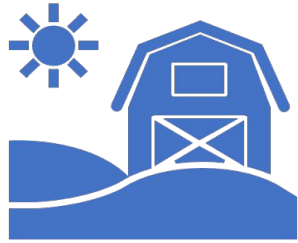
Objective 1:

Closures happened predominantly in small to mid-sized CMAs and rural areas, and more deprived communities, in the absence of child population decline

Nearly 40% of closed schools remain vacant, and sites repurposed for education are more likely to be in large metropolitan centres; fewer than one-fifth of sites serve deprived populations

Objective 2:

School closure decision-making process has compromised trust

Perceived lack of coordination between school boards and municipalities; questionable metrics used to inform decisions; communities pitted against each other; public meetings that lack transparency; and a one-size-fits-all approach to school asset management

Findings Synthesis: Objective 3

Benefits from closures, such as access to modern facilities and better programming, were acknowledged by a small minority

Vast majority identified increased reliance on automobiles, resident anger, and decreased community vibrancy and cohesion as costs of closures

Residents fought hard to avoid closure, including engaging in considerable outreach with politicians at various levels and background research to present alternatives

Widespread dissatisfaction and declines in trust in various stakeholders, fed by perceptions that decisions had already been made and that certain communities were targets for closures

What Now?

- Objective 4: To collectively interpret the implications of these processes and consequences, and collaboratively conceive of an improved decision-making model.

- Fiscal pressures facing Ontario's school boards have not gone away, pressure on province to lift moratorium

- Given what you already knew and have just learned about the scope, processes, and consequences of school closures in Ontario, how can the decision-making model be amended to maximize benefits and minimize harms to communities?

Small group discussion

Drawing upon your personal knowledge and the research findings, what should be the key inputs to inform decisions about school closures?

Instructions

- You will be placed in small groups (7-8 people) to discuss the question: *What should be the key inputs to inform decisions about school closures?*

- After taking a couple of minutes to introduce yourselves, identify one person in the group to serve as facilitator (keep the discussion on topic and make sure you identify some key points). This person won't be asked to report back on behalf of the group 😊.

- You have 25 minutes in total, and each group will record up to 5 key points in Slido. The Slido will open when 10 minutes remain. We will broadcast a message to inform you when 5 minutes and 1 minute remain.

- When the 25 minutes is up, the groups will be automatically closed and you'll return to the plenary group for further discussion on this topic.

Plenary Discussion

Building on the results from the small group discussion what do you think are the most important considerations that should be captured and profiled within our research?