

Communities left behind?

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

Last updated: 01/11/23

SSHRC Insight Grant - Project Summary

Project led by:

Dr. Patricia Collins

**Department of Geography and
Planning, Queen's University**

Kingston, Ontario

1-PAGE PROJECT SUMMARY

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

Investigators: Patricia Collins (Principal Investigator, Queen's), Mark Seasons (Waterloo), Jennifer Dean (Waterloo), Wayne Caldwell (Guelph), Bill Irwin (Western), Jeff Masuda (Victoria)

Funder: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Insight Grant

Timeline: April 2018 to March 2023

Public schools are essential for complete and liveable communities. And yet, they are being permanently closed across the country. Urban inner-city and rural settings have been disproportionately targeted for school closures in Ontario; a trend that has important implications for socio-spatial equity and environmental justice. Directing closure decisions in Ontario are the Ministry of Education's (MoE) Pupil Accommodation Review guidelines, which mandate that school boards assess the potential impacts of closures on two domains: student learning opportunities and boards' budgets. Meanwhile, the guidelines preclude boards from weighing the consequences of closures on surrounding communities, despite pleas from local stakeholders for more comprehensive analyses. Recognizing that the current approach is flawed and needs revamping, the MoE announced a moratorium on school closures in June 2017. This moratorium offers a critical opportunity to examine the shortcomings and consequences of the current approach, so that a more collaborative and comprehensive decision-making model can be developed and adopted.

We will conduct a mixed methods embedded comparative case study that is guided by three justice-informed objectives: (1) To verify the dynamics and shortcomings of existing PAR processes as employed by two school boards in Ontario; (2) To expose the consequences of these processes and resulting school closures in four communities in Ontario; and (3) To collectively interpret the implications of these processes and consequences, and collaboratively conceive of an improved decision-making model. The study will be administered sequentially in three phases that correspond to our three objectives. We will employ policy analysis, media analysis, and key informant interviews for Phase 1; household surveys and focus groups for Phase 2; and deliberative dialogue workshops for Phase 3.

The study will culminate with a set of evidence-based guidelines for school closure decisions in Ontario that are inclusive and collaborative, that consider the potential benefits and harms to community liveability, and that result in fair and equitable decisions about the location of public schools. By gathering scholars from healthy community planning, urban geography, rural development, and public administration, our study unites robust research programs on school closures, community liveability, health equity, and social justice. Each team member brings essential methodological expertise and access to high quality personnel that will enable us to successfully administer the project. Through our collective experiences mobilizing knowledge with diverse non-academic audiences and publication records in academic and professional journals on this and related topics, our team is uniquely positioned to advance a more collaborative and comprehensive school closure decision-making model.

PUBLISHED ARTICLES

Barber R, Hartt M, Collins P. School Closures in Shrinking Cities. *Municipal World*. December 2023 Issue.

An abstract for this article is not available.

Barber R, Hartt M, Collins PA. "Excessive Rightsizing? The Interdependence of Public School Closures and Population Shrinkage". *Canadian Geographies*. 2023.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cag.12870>

Abstract

Shrinking cities have, by definition, lost population. Rightsizing is a strategic planning approach to mitigate the challenges of population loss by adjusting a municipality's services, amenities, or even footprint to fit a new demographic reality. While studies have documented the unacceptability and ineptitude of municipality-driven rightsizing, public school closures have proliferated and quietly become a noteworthy material manifestation of population change. However, as public schools are widely considered to be a foundational component of community cohesion, identity, and prosperity, it begs the question of whether their closure may accelerate the decline feedback mechanisms already present in many shrinking cities. Our study examines public school closures in Ontario, Canada, from 2011 to 2016 to determine the relationship between municipal population trajectories and size and public school closures, and to explore the prevalence of school closures and the community context in shrinking Ontario municipalities. We find that public school closures occurred disproportionately in shrinking and smaller municipalities. Furthermore, public school closure prevalence is associated with low income, low ethnoracial diversity, and low educational attainment.

Collins PA, Barber R, Masuda JR, Snow G. "Socio-spatial dimensions of school closures and neighbourhood change in Ontario: An environmental injustice?" *Well-Being, Space, & Society*. 2023. 4, 100138. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266655812300012X>

Abstract

In addition to their educational purposes, public schools and their surrounding properties are essential to community liveability, as they enrich the daily lives of children, parents, and nearby residents. Yet, decisions are being made to close schools in Ontario, Canada based on declining enrolments, without due consideration of these benefits. Since 2011, over 400 public schools have been closed in Ontario, causing communities across the

province to lose essential hubs. In a province where significant socio-spatial inequities persist, public school closures could worsen the conditions of daily living for residents in neighbourhoods that have already been deprived of resources and opportunities through failed public policy. The objectives of this study were to document the spatial scope of public school closures in Ontario, to understand the population change profiles in communities where closures happened, and to elucidate how these closures temporally relate to structural vulnerabilities of the communities in which these closures took place. Using Census-derived deprivation index scores geo-coded dataset to both currently open and recently closed public schools in Ontario, our analysis revealed three key findings. First, school closures have occurred disproportionately in small to mid-sized cities and rural communities. Second, there is no evidence of significantly declining child populations prior to school closures, in communities where schools closed. And third, closures were more common in higher deprivation communities in small to mid-sized cities. Taken together, these findings offer critical insights on the challenges that many communities face due to insufficient and inequitable policies that govern school closure decisions in Ontario. The study signals an urgent need for a more collaborative, forward-thinking, and equity-oriented school closure decision-making model that supports residents and protects communities from losing a vital public asset.

Leger S, Dean J, Thompson C, Collins PA. ““Nothing in my years of community organizing has affected me as deeply as this closure did”: Resident perceptions of the school closure process and impacts in Ontario, Canada.” Canadian Planning and Policy. 2023.
<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/cpp/article/view/15714>

Abstract

Public schools are more than educational institutions; they are public assets that have long proven essential parts of healthy, sustainable, and complete communities. Yet, public elementary schools are being permanently closed across Canada, particularly within urban and rural settings in Ontario; a trend that has important implications for socio-spatial equity and environmental justice in planned communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceived impacts of elementary public-school closures for residents and communities using a mixed-methods approach including household surveys and in-depth interviews. The results indicated that, overwhelmingly, residents did not feel that they had the chance to meaningfully participate in the school closure process and that their voice was not heard throughout the engagement process. Further, the findings illuminated the lasting impacts of the school closure decision on the communities with physical, social, political, and economic outcomes in local neighbourhoods. The study illuminates the critical issue of responsible planning practice in understanding both the value of local community schools and local community input in ongoing pupil accommodation review processes.

Collins PA, Allman L, Irwin B. "The consequences of permanent public school closures for household quality of life and neighbourhood liveability: A survey of high school catchment area residents in a mid-sized Canadian city." *Local Environment*. 2019. 24 (8): 678-695.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13549839.2019.1631774>

Abstract

Public schools are more than educational institutions; they are essential to creating liveable neighbourhoods. Despite their importance, public schools are being permanently closed across North America, and particularly in the Canadian province of Ontario. In 2015, one of Ontario's public school boards made the decision to permanently close the province's oldest public high school, located in the urban core of the historic mid-sized city of Kingston. While the school is not scheduled to close until late 2019, the established fate of this prominent public asset has important consequences for the liveability of Kingston's urban core. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to document residents' perceived impacts of the decision to close to Kingston Collegiate Vocational Institute (KCVI) on liveability in the school's catchment area. We observed widespread dissatisfaction with the decision to close KCVI (85%), with large proportions of respondents (above 40%) anticipating KCVI's closure to negatively impact neighbourhood liveability in various ways in the future. Approximately one-quarter of respondents indicated that they have considered moving as a result of the decision, and among these, concerns about negative impacts to household-level well-being were particularly acute. Given the socio-demographic profile of respondents who have considered moving, these findings suggest that the closure of KCVI could have a destabilising effect on the neighbourhoods within the KCVI catchment area by driving families out of the city's urban core. Our findings suggest that policies to address concerns of under-enrolment are short-sighted and undermine efforts of other sectors to promote liveable communities.

Cranston S, Collins P. Can community hubs fill the voids left by closed public schools? Four recommendations for Ontario. Plan Canada. Fall 2017. <https://viurrspace.ca/handle/10613/8721>

Abstract

Public schools across Ontario are being permanently closed at unprecedented rates. While the impacts of school closures on communities have not been comprehensively studied in Canada, the loss of a public school undoubtedly leaves a void in the community left behind. Co-locating schools with community hubs is a novel strategy for helping school boards overcome the costs of their 'surplus space', whilst ensuring that these assets stay in the public domain. For such a strategy to be viable however, greater support is needed from the provincial government. We offer four recommendations for supporting the creation of community hubs in Ontario.

Rappolt R, Seasons M, Irwin B. Evaluating school closures through a rural lens. Plan Canada. Fall 2017. <https://viurrspace.ca/handle/10613/8721>

Abstract

Rural school closures are a perennial policy challenge for many communities across Canada. Against a backdrop of fiscal prudence and declining enrolments, school boards are increasingly closing and consolidating rural schools in an effort to balance the fiscal books. This is an alarming trend given the inherent role of schools to the vitality of rural communities, and because these decisions are being rendered in the absence of evidence-based research on both the acute and long-term implications of these decisions. In this article, the authors draw upon the Southwestern Ontario experience to present a discussion on this highly-charged issue through a distinctly rural planning lens; a perspective that is unique to a topic that otherwise has a significant dearth of associated research. It is argued that greater support for rural school is urgently required through more context-appropriate policy that is both people- and place-based. This includes greater flexibility not only in how schools share space and are supported by the community at large, but also through continued advocacy from rural planners and municipalities highlighting the irreplaceable role of schools to the long-term overall wellbeing of rural communities across Canada.

ARTICLES UNDER REVIEW OR IN DEVELOPMENT

Barber R, Collins PA, Masuda JR. The Fate of Closed Schools: Documenting the Relationships Between Community Profiles and School Property Reuses in Ontario, Canada. Community Development. UNDER REVIEW.

Abstract

Public schools play a pivotal role in successful community development. Yet, with school closures on the rise across North America, there is limited knowledge on the outcomes of closed school properties. The objectives of this study were to document the current uses of closed school properties in Ontario, Canada, identify their potential beneficiaries, and assess the prevalence of property vacancies. Using a dataset of over 400 schools closed between 2011 and 2021, we determined that the proportion of school properties in each reuse category varied by degree of urbanicity. A comparison of school property reuses according to deprivation levels of surrounding neighborhoods revealed that property reuses often mirror the level of deprivation of nearby residents. Finally, we determined that a third of closed schools remained vacant at the time of study. The findings reflect the need for additional consideration of the future uses of school properties prior to their closures.

Thompson C, Collins PA, Dean J. “It just galls me, as a taxpayer”: Trust implications of school closure decision-making in Ontario. Public Administration. SUBMITTED FOR REVIEW.

Abstract

More than 400 publicly funded schools in Ontario, Canada permanently closed between 2006 and 2018. While the decision-making processes that guide these closures have been the subject of scorn, little scholarly attention has been paid to the implications of these processes on trust. Guided by the OECD competence-values framework for citizens' trust in public institutions, the objective of this study was to investigate how Ontario's school closure decision-making processes have undermined trust in the province's public education system. Key informants were interviewed from two school board districts where multiple school closures have occurred, and the findings were analyzed deductively using the OECD framework. Factors impacting trust included: timing and format of public consultations; accessibility and reliability of data informing closure recommendations; silencing of community concerns; timeliness of government coordination; asset management horizons; and system-wide approaches to planning. This study underscores the need for an alternative school-closure decision-making model for Ontario.

Stenberg K, Dean J, Collins PA. Healthy community implications of public school closures. IN DEVELOPMENT.

Abstract

Beyond their primary purpose of educating students, public schools function as important pieces of physical and social infrastructure for communities where, for example, childcare, settlement, and vaccination services are delivered. Despite the importance of schools for their broader communities, closure decisions are made by regional school boards that prioritize economic and short-term demographic factors rather than the health of communities left behind. A small body of literature has explored the impact of school closures on community vitality (Collins et al., 2019) but limited research examines impacts on community health. This study begins to fill that gap by exploring the breadth of ways school closures impact the overall health of communities.

To understand the broader impacts of school closures on community health, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents (n = 20) and key informants (n = 30) associated with two Ontario school districts where two schools had recently closed. Gale et al.'s (2013) framework analysis process was used as a guide for analyzing the interviews, and codes were iteratively created using Corburn's (2009) Healthy City Planning framework, academic literature, and qualitative participant data.

The results of this work highlight the health-promoting capabilities of schools as sites for social interaction, sense of community, service delivery, and resource sharing. Participants emphasized the impact of fraught decision-making processes and outcomes on the social cohesion within and between communities. Participants acknowledged that closed schools could still be of benefit to the community if the sites were repurposed to address community needs. The discussion highlights the role of public schools as important physical and social infrastructure that impact community health. The paper concludes by providing recommendations for the inclusion of these assets within healthy community planning and public health advocacy, as well as the reconsideration of how and by whom school closure decisions are made.