



School Review Impact Assessment Report Big Tancook Elementary School

May 1, 2009

On March 26, 2008, the South Shore Regional School Board decided that Big Tancook Island Elementary School should be taken through the formal School Review Process as set out in Sections 14-23 of the Ministerial Education Act Regulations. One requirement of the Regulations and the Board motion is that an Impact Assessment Report be submitted to the Board by May 31, 2009. The following information has been prepared to meet this requirement.

The option being assessed is to close Big Tancook Elementary School and transfer all students in Grades P-5 to Chester District Elementary School in Chester.

Part 1: School Information

School: Big Tancook Elementary School (BTES)

School Configuration: Grade P-5

Address: Big Tancook Island, N.S., B0J 3G0

Principal: Ms. Elizabeth Sutherland

Enrolment History and Projection:

As shown in the tables below, the enrolment of BTES dropped to a low of 3 in 2007/8 and is expected to be 5 to 8 over the next 5 years. Although the enrolment is extremely low, it appears to be fairly stable until 2014.

History

2000/1	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
9	9	6	7	6	4	4	3	5

Projection

2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
5	8	8	6	6

Another situation should be noted. Although the children have not been included in the projections above, the Principal and families of GES are aware of another family that is planning to move to the Island this year. They are looking into leasing a property. They have 2 children of pre-school age and another they are expecting another child soon.

Population patterns

Based on a discussion with the Principal of BTES and the parents of the students presently attending the school, there is no reason to expect a significant increase or decrease in the general population of Big Tancook Island in the foreseeable future. In checking with the Planning Department of the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, although no specific population trend data is available for the Island, no new developments or plans have been reported that might significantly alter the population.

A particular factor that has been discussed is relevant here. Big Tancook Island does not have high speed internet access yet, but residents of the Island are optimistic that it will be available within a few years. Some families on the mainland and some who are temporary residents during the summer have expressed an interest in taking up permanent residence on the Island when high speed internet becomes accessible.

Capital Construction Planning

The SSRSB capital request is to construct a new middle school (grade 6 to 8) to replace the present facility of South Queens Junior High School (SQJHS) in Liverpool. This request includes the reconfiguration of Liverpool Regional High School to include the Grade 9 students from SQJHS and a reconfiguration of Dr. John C. Wickwire Academy to transfer its Grade 6 students to SQJHS. Also related to this reconfiguration, Milton Centennial School is being considered for closure under the school review process. If it is closed by the Board, its students (Grade P-1) would attend Dr. John C. Wickwire Academy.

In September, 2008, North Queens Elementary and North Queens High School began operating as one facility or under the same roof. North Queens Elementary School was destroyed by fire in the fall of 2006, so a completely new facility was constructed and connected to North Queens High School, which received major renovations or upgrades at the same time.

Under a lease agreement between the Department of Education and the community of Greenfield, the construction of a new community facility was completed in 2008. This new facility now houses Greenfield Elementary School.

Physical condition of building

In October of 2003, the MacDonnell Group completed a "Building Condition Study" of Big Tancook School. As stated in the Conclusions and Recommendations, "The overall condition of the school is fair to good except for specific items identified". The report goes on to say that, "Generally, the building interior is durable and well maintained and can be expected to be serviceable for several years or indefinitely provided life-cycle maintenance items are addressed".

Since 2003, the Board has addressed the specific maintenance items and the building needs no major upgrades. Within the next 5 to 10 years, the exterior should be painted.

Building Use

Gross square footage: 1700 sq. ft.

The building, constructed in the early 1950's, contains 2 full-size classrooms, an office, 2 bathrooms and more than adequate storage space.

Both classrooms are used equally for instruction. In the one that contains the school library and arts materials, most of the language arts instruction occurs. The other classroom contains the computer centre (5 laptops, 2 desktops), LCD projector with screen, TV and math centre. Also, it contains the piano which volunteers use for music classes. A SMARTBOARD is being installed this spring.

There is a community recreation centre next to the school. It is used by the school for physical education classes and other activities which require a large floor space or the use of the kitchen facilities—e.g., the annual Christmas concert, Halloween party, etc.

The Principal has her own set of keys for the recreation centre and is able to use it anytime. The centre is not used by the community during school hours.

Part 2: Impact Analysis

Capability to Deliver the Public School Program (PSP)

From a Facility Perspective: Given that the enrolment is not expected to increase significantly, there are no facility-related issues with respect to the capability of Big Tancook School to deliver the PSP.

From an Educational Perspective: Big Tancook Island Elementary School is located offshore and is isolated from the community of Chester by a 50-minute ferry ride. The rationale that led to the Board's decision to take BTES through this school review process was explained in detail in the School Utilization Study Part 2—it is provided as Appendix A at the end of this document. As explained therein, the potential risk to the effective delivery of the educational program is directly related to the extremely small enrolment.

Since the writing of the initial report one year ago, further discussions about the potential risks and the options have been held with regional staff and with the Principal and the 4 families of BTES. Other than the fact that the enrolment now appears to be fairly stable for the next five years, the circumstances have not changed. The risks are real and the options are very limited.

Transportation

If BTES was closed, the students would travel with the Grade 6-12 students to Chester, on the Tancook Island Ferry. One significant barrier to making the transportation convenient for all students is that the school start and dismissal times for Chester District Elementary School are not compatible with the ferry schedule. The ferry schedule was recently revised to accommodate a change of start and dismissal times for Chester and Area Middle School (CAMS) and Forest Heights Community School (FHCS) where the Grade 7-12 students from Tancook Island attend their secondary grades.

In order for the elementary students to get to CDES on time (8:05 a.m.), they would have to leave on the first ferry which leaves at 6:00 a.m. The secondary students going to CAMS and FHCS travel on the 8:00 a.m. ferry and get to Chester at about 8:50 a.m.

The ferry leaves Chester at 3:40 p.m. Because CDES dismisses at 2:00 p.m. the elementary students would have a long wait at the end of the day. They would arrive at Big Tancook at 4:15 p.m. From 6:00 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. makes a long day for young children.

From a preliminary analysis, it would be difficult to integrate the ferry schedule with the schedules for CDES, CAMS and FHCS.

Extra-curricular Activities

Understandably, many of the traditional extra-curricular activities found in larger schools are not available at BTES. They do participate in some individual or small group activities at lunch time, there are outdoor activities in winter (e.g., cross country skiing), and there is hiking and beach combing in the spring and fall.

Property Service, Staff Allocation and Operational Efficiencies

The closure of Big Tancook Island School would result in financial savings in terms of not having to operate the facility and pay staff salaries, but these would be offset by the loss of revenue for operating a small school. In other words, no financial efficiencies on the operational side should be expected by the closure.

Likewise, no capital savings should be expected over the next 5 years or so because the facility is in good shape.

Impact on the Communities

The impact on the community depends very much on one's perspective. Only 4 families presently have children attending the school, but most families have a long historical, personal connection to the school. The school has served several generations of many of the Island's families, so the School is very much a part of their heritage and annual community traditions. There would be a real sense of loss, as there is in any community when the school is closed.

Having to travel to school events at CDES would be a significant inconvenience for families of the elementary students. For example, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and neighbors like to attend the school concert at Christmas time and other events during the year. The 50-minute ferry ride can only be viewed as an added inconvenience.

From a more general perspective of the Island community, the closure of the School need not translate into the loss of access to the facility, if it might have uses for the community. Because there is a recreation centre on the same property, the school facility might not be needed.

Part 3. Proposed Receiving School Information

School: Chester District Elementary School (CDES)

Address: PO Box 368, Chester, N.S., B0J1J0

Principal: Ms. Denise Dodge-Baker

Chester District Elementary School houses Grade P-5 and has an enrolment of 230 this year.

Because the closure of Big Tancook Island School would transfer less than 10 students, no educational, operational or financial impact should be expected, with one possible exception, noted in an earlier section--the possibility that the school schedule might have to be changed to fit better with the ferry schedule and the schedules of CAMS and FHCS.

Part 4. Conclusion

The arguments presented a year ago in the School Utilization Study Part 2, and reported below in Appendix A, remain valid. The only change is that the enrolment now appears to be fairly stable for the next five years. Nevertheless, because there are only a few students and families, the possibility that the circumstances could change quickly and significantly remains and should not be forgotten.

The second conclusion drawn last year (see Appendix A) was “that other options should be evaluated carefully so that it is not necessary to operate the existing facility for such a small enrolment.” Now, after more analysis and discussion, continuing to operate the school facility for a small number of students is not an issue. The building requires no capital upgrades and the operating costs are covered fully by the revenue from the Department of Education. The only questions remaining are about the capability to deliver the educational program.

As noted above, discussions have been held over the past 2 months with regional staff and with the families and Principal of BTES. There is no evidence to be concerned about the educational program that is being offered now because the students do very well when they go on to Chester and Area Middle School. The recent discussions have been about the possible scenarios, the “what ifs”, that might unfold in the future.

In trying to anticipate various scenarios or “what ifs”, the main conclusion is that problems can be solved if and when they arise. For example, consider the following scenarios:

- What if only 2 families on the Island have children of elementary school age and one of the families wants to send their child to Chester District Elementary School?
- What if a completely new set of families agree that hiring an adult supervisor to travel with the young children on the ferry to CDES is the better option?
- What if another principal-teacher has to be recruited and no one qualified to teach French, Music and the other specialists programs can be found?

If one of these or other scenarios arise, the Board and the families can get together to find a solution. Closing the school might be the preferred option under the new circumstances, whereas it seems unnecessary under the present circumstances.

Perhaps the main lesson learned in the preparation of this report is related to the fact that Big Tancook Island School involves a very small number of students, 1 teaching principal and 4 or 5 families. Trying to find solutions to whatever problems may arise is a very different exercise than in a school that has a much larger number of students, staff members and families. The circumstances may change immediately and more significantly for a school like BTES, but the opportunity to bring all the players together, literally and figuratively, is a great advantage.

In summary, the educational program is being delivered as it should be, there are no operational or financial advantages to closing, and if a significant problem arises it can be solved at that time.

Thus, *the final conclusions of this Impact Assessment Report are:*

- 1. The consideration of closing Big Tancook Island School need not proceed at this time under the requirements of the School Review Process.*
- 2. If the capability of the school to deliver the educational program appears to be at risk and/or the school's families at the time express an interest in assessing other schooling options, then the identification of BTES to go through School Review process should to be considered again and quickly.*

The second conclusion is put forward in the interest of being open with the staff, families and community of Big Tancook Elementary School. It is hoped that the "what ifs" articulated in the report remain only that for years to come, but it is prudent to be watchful and prepared to take action if necessary.

APPENDIX A

Rationale to Take BTES through the School Review Process (from the School Utilization Study Part 2, February, 2008)

Big Tancook Island Elementary is unique in Nova Scotia because of its circumstances. The enrolment is down to 4 this year and is expected to be 5, including 2 in Grade Primary, for the next school year. The school has remained in operation because it is located fifty minutes off-shore by ferry. Surely, "isolation" must have considerable weight as a mitigating factor in considering the school for possible review, but just as surely, it is a fair question to ask whether or not there are modern day alternatives to operating a 2-classroom school for 6 students or less.

Recently this consultant traveled to Big Tancook Elementary on the same ferry used by the Grade 6-12 students who attend school in Chester and Area Middle School and Forest Heights Community School. During a meeting with the parents and community members, the challenges of continuing to operate the school and the disadvantages of closing the school were discussed openly and frankly.

The challenges (or risks) in keeping this very small school open are more significant potentially when looking to the future. Relatively speaking, there is a reasonable level of security presently because the teacher/principal has served the school for 26 years and because she has been and is able to meet the needs of all students. The potential future challenges are related to the extremely small enrolment, the possibility that another teacher/principal will have to be hired in a few years, and the possibility that there may be a unique situation when the special needs of all students cannot be addressed adequately. In a worst case scenario, the Board could be trying to find a suitably-experienced and qualified teacher/principal for a school with an enrolment of 1 or 2 students and the student or students might have very special needs. In this worst case, an alternative to operating the school would have to be found and perhaps found quickly. For example, if one or two families moved away unexpectedly during the spring or summer, leaving only one or two students, the year-long school review process would not be suitable in trying to find a solution quickly.

This potential for problems in the future is noteworthy to accentuate how the effective delivery of the educational program at Big Tancook Island Elementary School is at risk, but this risk must be weighed against another significant factor, the real and perceived disadvantages of transporting early elementary age children on the Big Tancook Island Ferry.

The ferry transports both passengers and freight regularly. The freight must be loaded by crane while passengers are boarding—access to the passenger area is at the middle of the ferry and at the edge of the open cargo deck. Taking into account the level of activity on the dock and on the ferry prior to departure and the openness of the vessel for passengers while en route, early elementary age children would have to have full-time adult supervision while traveling to and from school by ferry. This would require a full-time student supervisor, hired by the school board, to travel with the students at all times.

Another concern about having young children travel to school on the ferry must be taken into account. Sea sickness would be a matter of fact for some children in spending 50 minutes or

more on the open water on a windy day in a vessel of this size, just as it is for adults who are seasoned travelers on the ferry. Young children should not be placed in this situation as they enter their first few years of school, if it can be avoided through reasonable measures.

Also, the concerns or worries of the parents in this unique situation should not be taken lightly. Only those who have lived on an island, quite a distance from the mainland and who make their living on the sea can really appreciate the risks. Can those of us who do not have the same experience appreciate the level of concern of parents who might be asked to place their 5-year old child in another adult's care to travel by ferry to school, knowing that they cannot reach their child if there is an accident or unexpected illness? As several parents advised during the consultation, a few years are preferred to teach young children about traveling safely on the ferry. It is one matter to prepare children to travel off Big Tancook to attend school in Grade 6; it is a different matter to prepare them to do so for Grade Primary, Grade 1 or Grade 2.

Given this assessment of the circumstances and the potential for difficulties in the future, two conclusions are drawn. The first conclusion is that the children in early elementary should not have to travel by ferry to attend school. They should be able to complete at least their first few years of school on Big Tancook Island. The second conclusion is that other options should be evaluated carefully so that it is not necessary to operate the existing facility for such a small enrolment. What if the enrolment drops to 1 or 2? The question is this: Are there other ways and other spaces to enable a teacher to deliver the full educational program to a very small number of students while remaining on Big Tancook Island? Another way of asking the same question may be more direct: How can a teacher provide the educational program on Big Tancook to a few children without a full school facility in daily operation?

Several logistical issues could be raised, but at this point in the process, one seems noteworthy because of its significance. The ferry schedule and the school start and end times for Chester and Area Middle School and Forest Heights Community School cause no problems now for the students to attend all classes. The present ferry schedule would not allow students to attend all classes at Chester District Elementary.

A formal discussion which involves the school board, the families and the Department of Education needs to occur soon to anticipate and prepare for what may well occur within the next few years. This discussion can occur through the school review process.

Based on the points made above, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Big Tancook Island Elementary School be identified for school review.

This recommendation is put forward with the expressed opinion that the children in early elementary school should not have to travel off Big Tancook Island by ferry to attend school.