

**SCHOOL UTILIZATION STUDY
PART 2**

Prepared for
The South Shore Regional School Board

SCHOOL UTILIZATION STUDY PART 2

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SCHOOL UTILIZATION STUDY PART 2

Background

A “Program Review” was initiated by the South Shore Regional School Board in 2005 to assess the delivery of the educational program in the schools of the region. This assessment was to include a school utilization study to be carried out by an external consultant. This consultant began Part 1 of the study in the fall of 2007.

Part 1 of the School Utilization Study was the preparation of a public discussion paper which was released by the Board in November, 2007. Part 2, a consultation process to consider the contents of the discussion paper, was completed recently through January and into February, 2008.

The consultation process included public meetings for each of the 7 high school feeder systems and meetings between the consultant and the principals of individual schools that might be affected directly by the outcomes of this study. The meetings with the principals included a representative of the school advisory council and the staff. Also, the consultant met with the regional Student Development Team in the Programs and Student Services Department and with various other regional staff to gain their input into the preparation of the recommendations presented in this paper. Another avenue for public input was through written submissions, received mainly through e-mails.

As stated in the Part 1 discussion paper, the primary purpose of the school utilization study is to develop recommendations on how the schools of the South Shore Regional School Board may be used more efficiently to deliver the required or basic programs to all students. The following questions define the purpose more specifically:

1. What changes in school grade configurations and school boundaries would contribute positively to a more effective delivery of basic educational programs?
2. What schools should be considered formally for possible closure under the new, provincial “School Review” process?
3. How can student access to the Board’s special or alternate programs be made more equitable?
4. What are the financial implications of the recommendations to deliver programs more effectively and equitably?
5. What is a reasonable timeline for the implementation of the recommendations?

A Note to Those Who Submitted Their Concerns and Suggestions

As emphasized in the Part 1 discussion paper, the purpose of the consultation was not to debate the relative advantages and disadvantages of closing particular schools, but rather to gather input on the contents of the paper. Any in-depth consideration of whether or not a school should be closed would take place over the next year, through a formal, 12-month school review process for each individual school identified for review by the SSRSB as a result of the recommendations put forward in this paper.

Quite a number of public and private submissions spoke directly or at least indirectly to the issues and factors presented in the discussion paper. But understandably, many of the presentations made during the public meetings and most of the private submissions highlighted the advantages of individual small schools and spoke strongly against school closure. All submissions were considered as relevant in preparing this report, but those that addressed the possible closing of a school will be even more relevant if and when a school is formally identified

to go through the school review process. Because of their potential significance, all submissions have been filed for future reference.

Follow-up Notes from the Consultation Process

Many of the public meeting and e-mail submissions were thought-provoking, thus causing the consultant to see things differently or from another perspective. The comments in the remainder of this section are based on the public meeting and private input, discussions with individual principals and representatives of school advisory councils and staffs, and discussions with regional supervisory staff.

The first comment is a cautionary note about the use of numerical measures when assessing the ability of a school to deliver the educational program. In the discussion paper, optimal school sizes, Full-Time-Equivalent teacher positions per 100 students, and minimum school sizes for elementary, junior high or middle school and high school were put forward for discussion. Although a list of 9 factors which indicate when small school size may be causing problems was provided, it received less attention than the numerical measures, especially the teacher/student indices. There is a possible explanation.

Few numerical measures are available in assessing the ability of schools to deliver the educational program effectively, so when a number is used it may stand out more than it should. There may be a tendency to focus on numbers simply because they are perceived as being more objective. It should not be assumed that numerical measures are more objective than non-numerical factors when assessing the impact of school size on program delivery.

The meaning of "isolated" warrants a comment in follow-up to the public meetings. This term is very subjective. Whether or not a school and its community are isolated is most directly related to geographic distance, but even this is related to what students, families and community members are accustomed to. Two examples of other variables that help to define "isolated" are how far beyond the immediate neighborhood students and families must travel for other activities and what community services and resources are available locally. For the purposes of this school utilization study, geographic distance should be given the greatest weight while recognizing that all variables are quite subjective. Geographic distance must take into account not only the distance traveled on school buses but also distances traveled for extra-curricular activities, parent-teacher meetings and other activities at the school.

Another term drew considerable attention during the consultations. To quote from the discussion paper:

Overall or broadly speaking, one word categorizes the difficulties or disadvantages in a school that is too small. That word is inflexibility. Inflexibility is a formidable barrier to applying good practice in most operational or administrative activities; e.g., staffing, scheduling, assigning students to classes, setting up intra-mural and extra-curricular activities (page 7).

This "inflexibility" was discussed quite specifically during the private meetings at the small schools and with regional supervisory staff. Based on the opinions of professional educators, the potential problems caused by inflexibility should be taken seriously, with the acknowledgement that problems can be minimized. Some school administrators and staffs have been successful, to varying degrees, in overcoming the problems. Nevertheless, the risks and questions remain, especially as enrolments continue to decline and demographic variables within the teaching profession change. For example, will it be as easy to attract young teachers to settle in the communities of small schools with the intention of remaining there, and if not, will they be willing to travel the longer distances, given the rising costs of personal travel?

Related to overcoming the potential disadvantages of a small school, perhaps the most important general message for this consultant, from the consultation process, is about the relationship between a school and its community. It was helpful to be reminded of the very significant contribution that a community can make to a local school over the years and decades. The potential impact of the barriers to effective program delivery in a small school can be reduced when the school is strongly supported in tangible ways by its local community. A community's support and contribution to its school must be evaluated carefully and given weight.

The input regarding multi-age classes in elementary schools was quite consistent. Parents and staff indicated that there was some level of concern initially when multi-age classes were introduced but this concern turned to support because of the successful implementation. In other words, general support for multi-age classes was expressed and no opposition was forthcoming. Although concerns were not expressed publicly, it is not uncommon to hear concerns from parents and, to a lesser degree, teachers. Expressions of concern will likely continue as enrolments decline, as more multi-age classes are required and as more grade levels have to be combined in one classroom.

A more general comment is based on this consultant's professional experience in going through numerous public sessions on school boundary changes and possible closures. Understandably and expectedly, family members, community leaders and school staff members come forward and speak passionately about their school when it is under review for major change, while those who have concerns about a school being or becoming too small rarely express their concerns openly. Their concerns are expressed most often in private conversations or through their requests to transfer to a neighboring school which they perceive to have more or better curricular and extra-curricular programs.

Regarding the support expressed so passionately for individual small schools during the consultation process, a second comment seems important from a broader perspective. Most of the schools under the jurisdiction of the SSRSB are small, rural community schools. When staff, family and community members are defending and promoting the advantages of their small school and the support from the community, it may create the perception that the neighboring schools do not have the same advantages and the same level of community support. It is important to keep in mind that most, if not all, school communities, whether rural or urban, are proud of what their school has to offer and of its close relationship with the community.

In the interest of being open and "up front", another observation, based on experience, has been confirmed during this consultation process. Those advocating for their own school argue consistently that school closure will cause a further loss of families moving to the community. This argument is valid for some families who give high value to having a small school situated nearby in the community. It is equally valid to recognize that some families who are searching to locate in an area will avoid certain communities because they perceive the school to be too small. In other words, the population of some rural communities does not grow as it might because some families are attracted to an area served by a larger school. Both arguments have merit.

Following on the previous comment, a certain perception is quite commonly expressed, one which may be confirmed later with demographic data. It is becoming more and more difficult for young families to locate along the shore in Lunenburg County and Queens County because of the high costs of property. Several of the schools showing significant enrolment decline are

situated in shoreline communities. The high costs of shore properties coupled with the increasing costs of travel from rural areas to the industrial or commercial employment centres will likely cause some enrolment declines to continue. The property and travel costs may also be a deterrent to attracting and keeping young teachers in the schools. This matter should be studied in more detail in consultation with municipal planners.

The following observations are listed to summarize the comments above:

- Numerical measures should not be given greater weight necessarily than non-numerical measures---they may be equally subjective.
- The degree of isolation of a school is defined primarily by geographic distance, recognizing that this can be quite subjective.
- The barriers or risks to effective program delivery in very small schools, defined generally as inflexibility, should be taken seriously with an acknowledgement that the negative impact may be minimized under certain circumstances.
- Strong, sustained community support is an important factor in minimizing the negative impact of the barriers to effective program delivery in a very small school.
- Although concerns were not expressed publicly about multi-age classes, it is not uncommon to hear concerns from parents and, to a lesser degree, teachers. Expressions of concern will likely continue as enrolments decline, as more multi-age classes are required and as more grade levels have to be combined in one classroom.
- Although family and staff members do not express publicly their concern about the disadvantages of their small school, they do so in private conversations or through requests for student transfers.
- Most if not all schools, small or larger, and their communities are proud of what their school has to offer and of its close relationship with the community.
- While some families are attracted to locate in areas served by small schools, others avoid these same areas because of the size of the school.
- The high property values and increasing travel costs likely will continue to prevent some young families from settling along the shores of the region.

This list summarizes the main points drawn from the consultation process which most directly contribute to evaluating the contents of the Part 1 discussion paper. Another conclusion, not listed, is noteworthy and is based on the consultant's experience. The barriers or risks that generally define inflexibility tend to be more of a problem in very small high schools than in very small elementary schools. For example, matching unique teacher qualifications to teaching assignment, having a reasonable number of students to offer a course, matching course assignments to student requests, and building a flexible school schedule can create more serious problems in a small high school than in a small elementary.

These conclusions, taken together with the premises in the discussion paper, underlie the recommendations put forward in the remainder of this paper.

Factors to Consider When Identifying Schools for Review

The most immediate question, because of school/community concerns and time limits, is question #2 in the original purpose of this study: "What schools should be considered formally for possible closure under the new, provincial "School Review" process.

The provincial "School Review" process requires that the following factors be considered when identifying schools for review:

- 1) Enrolment, including current, historical patterns, and projections

- 2) General population patterns and projection
- 3) Ability of existing school to deliver the public school program
- 4) School facility operations, including physical condition of the building, building operating costs, deferred maintenance costs, facility utilization and anticipated capital requirements.

It must be made clear that these factors are only for identifying schools for review. The list of factors which must be considered when a school is under review is more extensive and takes the analysis into greater detail. Under the requirements of the review process, more specific information must be prepared by the school board for each individual school study committee before it can begin its work.

Also, it must be made clear “that school closure is only one possible outcome of a school review”, as stated in Recommendation 1 of the January 2007 School Closure Process Review Committee Report. Other possibilities include space reconfiguration, consolidation, school boundary reviews, alternate use of school areas, and confirmation of the current situation.

Enrolment Data

Some SSRSB enrolment data from the Department of Education were provided in the Part 1 discussion paper. More current data were prepared for this report by the Board’s Human Resources Department and are presented in Table 1, Appendix A.

The original Part 1 data showed that the elementary enrolment of the school system will decrease by 18% by 2016 and the high school enrolment will decrease by 28%. The more recent and more detailed data in Table 1 confirms that the total system enrolment declined by 16% between 2000 and 2007. It has been decreasing by about 3% annually over the past 4 years. Also, it demonstrates considerable variability in the rate of decline among the schools. These data are referenced in subsequent sections of this paper when discussing schools individually.

As a reminder, some background information about the Part 1 enrolment projections should be emphasized. The enrolment data were reviewed by staff in the municipal planning departments of the County of Lunenburg, the District of Chester and the County of Queens. The consistent message from all three departments is that no major shifts in local community populations are expected, thus the enrolment projections are reasonable.

Schools Considered But Not Recommended for Review

Some schools were considered for possible identification for review because of their low and decreasing enrolments, but are not recommended for review for reasons given below.

Gold River-Western Shore School: The enrolment (113) of Gold River-Western Shore School declined by 17% between 2000 and 2004, but has shown no decline over the past 4 years. Given that the present enrolment is stable, while the system enrolment continues to decline annually, and given that the building needs no major, urgent repairs, this school is not being recommended for review.

North Queens Schools: The enrolment (114) of North Queens Elementary School is approaching the minimum limits and the enrolment (151) of North Queens Rural High School is very small. Within the standards being used in this study, the High School should be recommended for review, but it is not because of its geographic isolation. Specifically, it is quite isolated by the size of its total catchment area and its distance from Liverpool Regional High School and New Germany Rural High School.

The enrolment of North Queens Rural High is particularly small in light of the fact that it includes Grade 7-12. If the enrolment declines more, the administration and staff will have to continue their efforts to provide as wide a range of program options as possible, within the growing inflexibility. They are experienced already in meeting the challenges of a small school. This experience and their past success will help to ensure success in finding new ways providing program options for their students.

It is important that families and the boarder school community are made aware of the challenges which may be aggravated by an ongoing enrolment decline. As demonstrated at the public meeting with a large turnout of staff and families, a strong school support base with a long history does exist in North Queens. It is a matter of maintaining this support base and keeping the channels of 2-way communication open.

Pentz Elementary School and Petite Riviere Elementary School: These two schools are discussed together because they have so much in common and their futures should not be considered independently. They are feeder schools into Hebbville Academy, have similar enrolments and enrolment histories, are located side-side-by side, and have similar facilities.

Both facilities are over 50 years old and in need of capital renovations or upgrades over the next few years. They are single storey wood frame buildings with a gross floor area of approximately 11,000 square feet. The main difference in the two facilities is that Pentz Elementary has a gymnasium and stage and Petite Riviere Elementary has a multi-purpose room.

Given that their enrolments have decreased by over 40% since 1995-96 to the point of being questionably small and given the capital cost to upgrade the facilities, it is reasonable to ask if not all students from both Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary could be accommodated at Hebbville Academy, the same school they will attend in Grade 7-9.

Hebbville Academy can accommodate a total enrolment of 800 in its two separate facilities on the same site. The enrolment in 2000-01 was 796 and it has decreased by 18% to 652. This is not to say that all students from Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary could be easily accommodated at Hebbville Academy, without causing major, internal organizational changes. Since 2000, the total Hebbville enrolment for Grade P-9 has decreased by 144 but the total of 175 for Pentz and Petite Riviere includes only Grade P-5. The preferred site-level configurations that distinguish the elementary and middle school programs could not be maintained in separate facilities at Hebbville Academy.

According to the data in Appendix A, the enrolment of Pentz Elementary School (103) decreased by 35% since 2000 and reached its lowest point of 90 in 2005-06. It has increased by 14% since over the past 2 years. In comparison, the total enrolment of the school system has steadily declined (by 16%) since 2000 and this decline is expected to continue. There are 14 students in Grade Primary this year and the recent pre-registration figure is 15 for next year-- 2 students were born after October 1.

The enrolment of Petite Riviere Elementary School (83) decreased by 13% since 2000 and reached its lowest point of 72 in 2004-05. It has increased by 15 % over the past 2 years. There are 14 students in Grade Primary this year and the recent pre-registration figure is 17 for next year---3 students were born after October 1.

These recent enrolment histories raise the question of whether or not the enrolment of each school reached a minimum level two years ago and is now either stable or increasing. This

question is very significant given the fact that the enrolments are at or close to the level of being too small. Granted, the enrolment of Petite Riviere Elementary is 20 less than that of Pentz, but the position put forward earlier in this paper is that the numerical measures are subjective and must be weighed along with other non-numerical factors. Based on the conclusions drawn through this whole process and assessment, the enrolment difference alone should not place one school above and the other below a somewhat arbitrary line of being too small.

Regarding the other challenges or risks of small school size, the administration and staff of both schools, with strong community support, are making every effort to address them constructively and there is no evidence to suggest that they have not been successful. A continuing enrolment decline would or should raise questions over the next few years about being able to meet the greater challenges successfully, while a stable or increasing enrolment would provide a heightened sense of security.

Pentz Elementary was built in 1965. According to a 2003 building assessment by the MacDonnell Group, "The overall condition of the school is good for a building of its age." The assessment indicates that "the school is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation, plumbing, sprinkler protection and accessibility" and recommends some health and safety improvements and life-cycle maintenance items. Quoting directly from the 2003 report, "These items are expected to cost in the order of \$20 per square foot and, together with the routine maintenance, may extend the usable life of the building by, say, 20 years". In comparison, the report indicates a replacement cost of \$125 per square foot.

Petite Riviere Elementary School was built in 1961. The MacDonnell Group assessment concluded that "the overall condition is fair to poor". The assessment indicates that "the school is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation, sprinkler protection, plumbing and accessibility" and recommends various health and safety improvements and life-cycle items. Quoting directly from the 2003 report, "These items are expected to cost in the order of \$35 per square foot and, together with routine maintenance, may extend the usable life of the building by, say, 15 years".

Hebbsville Academy is comprised of two buildings. The larger building which presently houses Grade 5-9 was constructed in 1998. Hebbsville Elementary houses Grade P-4 and was built in 1965. Because the Hebbsville Elementary can also be viewed as one of the feeder schools for Hebbsville Academy, albeit on the same site, its physical condition should be taken in account along with the other schools. According to the MacDonnell Group study, the overall condition of Hebbsville Elementary is "fair to good", but "the school is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation, plumbing, sprinkler protection and accessibility". As with the others, the study recommends some health and safety improvements and life-cycle maintenance items. Quoting directly from the 2003 report, "These items are expected to cost in the order of \$16 per square foot and, together with the routine maintenance, may extend the usable life of the building by 15 years".

From a recent assessment from the Board's Operations Department, the estimated total cost of the capital upgrades is about \$125,000 for Pentz Elementary and about \$175,000 for Petite Riviere Elementary. Both schools should have a new PA system installed (\$12,000 each) and the fire safety upgrades (\$5000 each) completed right away. The most costly immediate concern is that Petite Riviere Elementary School needs new windows with an estimated cost of approximately \$100,000. The other capital improvements recommended for both schools by the MacDonnell Group should be completed over the next 3 to 5 years.

The facility assessment by the MacDonnell Group was completed 5 years ago. Based on almost 20 years of overseeing school capital replacement and renovation projects, in the role of a superintendent of schools, this consultant questions the long-term value of trying to bring these schools up to current new construction codes. The buildings are over 55 years old with wood frames. To extend their life by 15 to 20 years may not be the best long-term investment.

In summary, the following observations or facts form the basis for some recommendations:

The enrolments of Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary are in the range of what has been defined as a lower limit for an elementary school, but they have increased by 14% and 15%, respectively, over the past 2 years---while the school system enrolment has declined. In another 2 or 3 years, the stability of the enrolment may be more certain.

At present, all students cannot be accommodated reasonably at Hebbville Academy, but the Hebbville enrolment is showing continuous decline---time will tell. If the Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere enrolments and the Hebbville enrolment all decline over the next 2 or 3 years, then the justification for school review becomes more obvious.

The 5-year-old facility assessment by the MacDonnell Group could be given greater weight if backed up by a supportive second opinion from another engineering/architectural firm.

If a new professional facility assessment does not back up the 2003 study and if the enrolments do not decline, then new school construction to replace 2 or 3 old elementary school facilities may be the best long-term option.

Based on the analysis above, the following conclusion is drawn:

It is not timely to identify Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary for the school review process under the present circumstances. It may be timely to do so in the next 2 or 3 years, depending upon the enrolment trend for each of the 3 schools involved.

If this conclusion is accepted by the South Shore Regional School Board, then the most urgent facility upgrades will have to be completed as required at Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary. Independent of this recommendation, the facility upgrades will have to be completed at Hebbville Elementary.

To gain an updated affirmation of the 2003 facility study, or a different proposal altogether, the following recommendation is put forward:

That a new facility assessment be carried out by an engineering/architectural firm for the Hebbville Elementary facility at Hebbville Academy, Pentz Elementary School and Petite Riviere Elementary School to compare the viability of major renovations with new construction.

Depending on the outcome of the facility assessment and depending on future enrolments, the construction of a single new school to replace Hebbville Elementary, Pentz Elementary and Petite Riviere Elementary could be an option. Two other options could be to have all students attend Hebbville Academy or to renovate either Pentz Elementary or Petite Riviere Elementary. These and other options could be considered through the school review process, if and when more definite enrolment information is known and with a second opinion on the facility improvements.

New School Construction Recommendation for Centre and Lunenburg Area

Lunenburg Academy, Lunenburg Junior-Senior High School and Centre Consolidated School have operated within relatively close proximity (10 Kms.) of each other for many years. The total Grade P-9 population of these 3 schools is 657 and the Grade 10-12 enrolment of the high school in Lunenburg is 90. The proximity of these schools and their significantly declining enrolment prompts a question about the possibility of school consolidation for Grades P-9. The total P-5 enrolment of Centre School and the Lunenburg schools is 327, the total Grade 6-8 enrolment is 252, and the Grade 9 total is 81. A new P-9 school to include all students would have a total enrolment of 660 which would continue to decline over at least the next decade, according to present expectations.

The question about constructing a new school to replace three is prompted also by the physical condition of the facilities.

Centre Consolidated School was built in 1957 with a major addition in 1974. According to the 2003 building assessment by the MacDonnell Group, "the overall condition of the facility is fair for a building of its age", but it is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation and accessibility. The assessment report recommends health and safety improvements and life-cycle maintenance, some of which should be completed very soon. Since the MacDonnell Group assessment, a high level of concern from the school and its community has escalated because of the physical condition of Centre Consolidated School. Also, the School Board and regional staff are very aware of the need to upgrade this facility.

Regarding the future of Centre Consolidated School and based on the professional experience of the consultant in renovating and replacing old school facilities (in the role of superintendent of schools), it is not the best use of scarce capital funding to add new, up-to-code infrastructures and systems to a building such as Centre Consolidated.

As a facility, Lunenburg Academy is one the most unique and perhaps famous facilities in North America. Built in 1895, it is registered as a historic property by the federal, provincial and municipal governments. Nevertheless, there are deficiencies that must be addressed in the near future. The building condition assessment by the MacDonnell Group concluded that "the school has been well maintained over the years", but it is sub-standard by current codes for new construction and that health and safety improvements and life-cycle maintenance improvements are required.

The Lunenburg Junior-Senior High School was built in 1965. Because it has no gymnasium, it is connected to the adjacent town recreational centre by a heated corridor. Also, the school includes an annex building to house the technology (industrial arts) and family studies classrooms. The annex was built in 1883 and is designated as a historical building. According to the MacDonnell Group assessment, "the overall condition of the school is fair to good", except for some recommended health and safety improvements and life-cycle maintenance items. Also, the school is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation, plumbing, sprinkler protection and accessibility.

The student enrolments, the age and condition of the 3 school facilities, the relatively close proximity of the schools and their catchment areas, and the demographic circumstances of the Centre and Lunenburg communities, all considered together, underlie the following recommendation:

That a comprehensive study be carried out to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of constructing a new Grade P-9 school to replace Centre Consolidated School, Lunenburg Academy and Lunenburg Junior High School.

To be consistent with the research literature on preferred grade configurations, this new school could be designed to house a Grade P-5 elementary school, a Grade 6-8 middle school and a Grade 9 area where a transitional program could be offered.

Meanwhile, it is not being recommended that Lunenburg Academy be identified for immediate school review. The enrolment (106) of Lunenburg Academy has decreased by 26% since 2000 and there is no evidence that the decline will cease. If the enrolment decline continues, a school review process may be warranted in a few years time. Presently, there is every reason to believe that the educational program is being delivered as it should be because of the commitment and expertise of the school administration and staff, with very strong support from the school community. Taking the time to consider new school construction will also give time to gather more definite information on enrolment trends.

Regarding Lunenburg Academy as a wonderfully unique school, architecturally and historically, this consultant recognizes what the school has contributed to the Town of Lunenburg and the very close relationship between the school and the town. But, from the perspective of students, teachers and families looking into the future for the next few decades, this facility should be viewed as no longer appropriate as a modern educational facility. Lunenburg Academy will be maintained as a valuable historic property of the Town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, and Canada, if not all of North America. It should be maintained as such, but it should not be maintained as public school. If a new school is to be constructed to serve the present school communities of Centre and Lunenburg, it is reasonable to expect that most students and families will want to be included.

Grade Re-Configuration Recommended for Lunenburg Junior-Senior High School

The total enrolment of Lunenburg Junior-Senior High School (LJSHS) decreased from 244 in 2000 to 173 in 2007/8, a decrease of 29%. The Grade 10-12 enrolment is 90 this year and is predicted to drop to about 65 over the next 3 years. This senior high enrolment is extremely small by any standard of effective program delivery, but a 30% decline over 3 years increases the potential for problems exponentially. With only 60-70 students in Grade 10-12, it becomes even more difficult to deliver a suitable range of courses, to match teacher qualifications to course load, and to give students their compulsory and elective courses.

It is to the credit of the administration and staff of LJSHS, that they have been able to deliver the program which is in place for the senior high students. Their high level of commitment and their professional expertise has ensured that the obstacles caused by the very small, declining enrolment have been minimized. It is also to the credit of the school families and the citizens of Lunenburg that such strong, loyal support for the school continues year after year. Nevertheless, the obstacles will be a challenge annually and will be accentuated as the enrolment declines.

While acknowledging the commitment and success of the school administration and staff with family support, this consultant feels obliged to express strongly a professional opinion based on experience and on the premises of the Part 1 discussion paper. The high school enrolment (Grade 10-12) for LJSHS is too small now and it will be too small in the extreme 3 years from now. No school administrator and staff should be expected to deliver the educational program

to such a small number of high school students, if it can be avoided at all. The situation can be avoided in this case.

The catchment area of LJSHS sits well within the catchment area of Park View Education Centre. Students from areas to the east and south of Lunenburg travel through the Town to attend Park View. Furthermore, the enrolment of Park View is such that all Grade 10-12 students from Lunenburg can be accommodated. Its enrolment decreased from 948 in 2000 to 845 in 2007, a decrease of 103 (11%). It is expected to continue declining, so accommodating less than 90 additional students is not a problem.

One observation made a few times during the public meetings is noteworthy to this discussion. The observation may be posed most accurately in the form of a question: Why should Bridgewater continue to have 2 high schools? In response, it is the opinion of this consultant and others in the school system that "Bridgewater does not have 2 high schools". Bridgewater Junior-Senior High School serves the Town of Bridgewater and Park View Education Centre serves a very large portion of Lunenburg County---it happens to be located on the outer edge of Bridgewater. Many families and communities in Lunenburg County perceive that Park View is their school and their loyalty and commitment is just as strong as that of any other school. This consultant takes the view that Park View does indeed serve a broad school community, taking in many local communities from the Chester District boundary line on the east to the Queens County boundary line on the west.

Understandably, it was noted during the public meetings and many times in private submissions that students beyond the Town of Lunenburg boundary should be encouraged or required to attend one of the Lunenburg schools. For many years, the Grade 9 students of Centre Consolidated School have been given the choice of attending Park View Education Centre or LJSHS. Although some students used to choose LJSHS because of the semester program, this is no longer the case. In recent years, most have decided to attend Park View. There are opportunities for students to attend high school in Lunenburg, either through simply making the choice after Grade 9 at Centre Consolidated or through the student transfer process. Students and families are not exercising these two options.

Based on what has been said about the barriers to effective program delivery faced by very small schools and based on the serious enrolment decline which is expected to continue for Grade 10-12 at LJSHS, it seems necessary and important that the whole matter be evaluated comprehensively with direct input from the schools involved, the school staffs, students, families and the school communities.

Therefore, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Lunenburg Junior Senior High School be re-configured to become a Grade 6-9 school and that the senior high students attend Park View Education Centre.

The financial implications of this recommendation are not significant, negatively or positively, in terms of facility upgrades or student transportation adjustments.

Change Recommended for Newcombeville Elementary School

When Hebbville Academy opened as a new school in 1998, the Grade 5 and Grade 6 classes in Newcombeville Elementary School were transferred to Hebbville Academy, thus reducing the overcrowding problems.

Since 2000, the Newcombeville Elementary enrolment has declined from 174 to 149, a decline of 25 (14%) and the decline is expected to continue.

This consultant was invited to attend a public meeting of the Newcombeville School Advisory Council. A large number of families and staff were present during this meeting to give strong, unanimous support to having the Grade 4 students remain at Newcombeville Elementary in Grade 5 next year. They would begin attending Hebbville Academy in Grade 6. The Principal reported at the meeting that the 32 Grade 4 students could be accommodated in the facility next year with some relatively minor organizational changes.

A recent review of the educational research on grade configuration by this consultant confirmed that one of the preferred configurations is Grade P-5 for elementary schools and Grade 6-8 for middle schools. Based on this finding and the strong support from the school and its families, the following recommendation is put forward:

That the Grade 4 students remain at Newcombeville Elementary School during the next school year to attend Grade 5 and then transfer to Hebbville Academy for Grade 6.

If this recommendation is approved, an inherent advantage for Hebbville Academy is a consequence. It may be possible within the next few years, if not right away, to have all Grade P-5 students housed in the elementary building and all Grade 6-9 in the main facility.

Schools Recommended for School Review

This section provides recommendations for individual schools to be identified for review, by the South Shore Regional School Board, under the provincial school review process.

Greenfield Elementary School: In terms of the small school issues raised in this study, the enrolment of Greenfield Elementary School is definitely below what it should be. The greater concern is that the recent decline is extreme. Hopefully it is only temporary.

The table in Appendix A shows that the enrolment of Greenfield Elementary dropped by 38% since 2000. Looking more closely, this drop has really occurred over the past 2 years. To go from 40 students to 25 students in 2 years is extreme---and alarming if the trend continues. What if it drops by another 15 students in the next 2 years? Hopefully this will not be the case, but one can not say “surely” without a thorough study of the demographics for the Greenfield community. It is prudent to anticipate and prepare for the potential challenges ahead, rather than wait.

A commitment was made recently by the Department of Education to support the Greenfield community in the construction of a recreation centre which will also serve as a school. Nevertheless, the future impact on the educational program delivery of an extreme drop in enrolment over the next few years should be assessed formally.

With an acknowledgment that the timing of this recommendation will cause concern, in light of the commitment between the Greenfield community and the Department of Education, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Greenfield Elementary School be identified for school review.

Even if it is too late to consider school closure as an option during a review process, an in-depth and comprehensive study can focus on constructive ways to ensure the delivery of a sound educational program and, as required in the review process, the school staff and its families will

be involved in the study. For many years, the Greenfield community has been very committed and active in supporting its school. As witnessed during the recent public meeting at North Queens Rural High School, this commitment is as strong and as active as ever before. The school review process will provide an opportunity for this commitment to be harnessed positively in finding long-term solutions to a problem that may become even more challenging over the next 2 or 3 years.

Milton Centennial School and Mill Village Consolidated School: The students from these two schools and Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy eventually attend South Queens Junior High School and Liverpool Regional High School. These “South Queens” schools were the focus of a comprehensive school utilization study initiated in July, 2001, and completed in February, 2002.

On July 31, 2001, the South Shore Regional School Board formed an ad hoc committee to develop an action plan in relation to a study, “Utilization of Facilities of Queens County Schools”, prepared by Jost Architects Limited. This ad hoc committee submitted its recommendations to the Board on October, 24, 2001. Two of the recommendations were that Mill Village Consolidated School and Milton Centennial School be considered for permanent closure, so a school closure study committee was formed---as required by provincial legislation at that time. The original recommendations of the Board’s ad hoc committee are attached as Appendix C to this report.

The overall plan proposed in 2002 was that the South Queens Junior High School (SQJHS) facility would receive significant capital upgrades and Liverpool Regional High School (LRHS) would have 4 classrooms added. These capital upgrades would make it possible to reconfigure Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy to include Grades P-5, SQJHS to be a Grade 6-8 middle school and LRHS to add Grade 9. Milton Centennial School and Mill Village Consolidated School would be considered for closure.

Subsequently, the South Queens Junior High School capital renovation project received approval from the Department of Education and is scheduled to get underway during this school year. The addition of classes to Liverpool High School has not been approved and needs to be re-assessed in light of the declining enrolments. Four additional classrooms may no longer be necessary.

As a consequence of the South Queens schools recommendations, the South Shore Regional School Board considered two motions at the regular board meeting on April 10, 2002. The motion “that Mill Village Consolidated School be permanently closed at the conclusion of the 2001/2002 school year” was defeated. The motion “that Milton Centennial School be permanently closed at the conclusion of the 2004/2005 school year, conditional upon both the completion of a major renovation of South Queens Junior High School and the addition of four classrooms to Liverpool Regional High School” was passed (April 10, 2002 board minutes).

Thus, only 5 years ago, school utilization and school closure studies were carried out for the South Queens schools and decisions were made by the SSRSB. The opinion of this consultant is that the overall school utilization plan developed in 2001-2002 for the South Queens schools remains sound and valid, with a question regarding the need to add 4 classrooms to LRHS. Much work by two separate committees resulted in a thorough, comprehensive review and steps have been taken to implement what was recommended. Granted, the timeline has been extended, but not because of opposition to or concerns about the plan. The general understanding among the South Queens schools and their communities is that the

reconfigurations of the junior high, senior high and Dr. J. C. Wickwire Academy will happen when the construction is completed and Milton School will be closed. There is much more of a question about the future of Mill Village Consolidated.

The recommendations below are based on the consultant's opinion that the 2001-2002 plan remains sound and valid and on the arguments put forward in the Part 1 discussion paper---with the acknowledgement that strong community and staff support was expressed during this round of consultations to keep Mill Village Consolidated open.

Milton Centennial School: One could argue that a decision has been made already regarding the future of this school, given that the SSRSB motion of April 10, 2002 to close the school was passed by the Board. On the other hand, that motion was conditional and the deadline for closure in 2004/05 is past. Because the 2004/05 deadline was missed almost 4 years ago, it is reasonable to consider the whole question formally again through the new school review process. Therefore, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Milton Centennial School be identified for school review and furthermore, that it be closed when all its students can be transferred to Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy.

Mill Village Consolidated School: The Mill Village enrolment has decreased from 89 to 46 since 2000, a decrease of 48%, and there is no reason to predict that it will increase in the near future.

According to the Connor Architects and Planners 2002 Report, the facility is in fair to poor condition and requires specific repairs and upgrades, including a gymnasium.

During this consultation process, the school staff and families have argued strongly in support of their school and keeping it in their community. One of the major concerns about their school closing is the length of time that young children would have to travel to get to school. During the previous school closure debates, the travel time for some students was reported to be as much as 75 minutes to get to Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy. But this maximum travel time for a few students from the East Medway area included transfer/wait times at Mill Village and in Milton. With both of these schools closed, buses could travel directly to Dr. J.C. Wickwire with no transfer/wait times. All students would be able to get to school within an hour.

Attending 3 schools in 7 years is an issue for some students during the transition in closing this school, if it does not close at the same time as Milton Centennial---a Grade Primary student from Mill Village would spend 1 year at Milton before going on to Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy in Grade 2. This is one noteworthy disadvantage of not closing Mill Village Consolidated at the same time as Milton Centennial.

Based on the circumstances described above, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Mill Village Consolidated School be identified for school review and furthermore, that it be closed when all its students can be transferred to Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy.

Again for emphasis, Milton Centennial and Mill Village Consolidated should continue to operate until all students from both schools can be accommodated at Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy. Several problems, including long bus runs, would be avoided.

Riverport and District Elementary School: According to the data in Appendix A, the enrolment of Riverport Elementary School has decreased steadily from 100 in 2000 to 59 this

year, a decrease of 41%. There are 7 students in Grade Primary this year and the recent pre-registration figure is 5 for next year---no students arriving in September were born after October 1. There is no reason to expect the enrolment to stop declining in the next few years.

It is to the credit of the school administration and staff that the educational program is being delivered as it is, with strong support from the school families and community. Nevertheless, the challenges are formidable and have the potential to cause problems from year-to-year. A school principal and staff should not have to face these ever-present challenges over the long term, if they can be reasonably avoided.

Regarding Riverport and District School as a facility, it was built in 1968. The 2003 MacDonnell Group assessment concluded that “the overall condition of the school is fair for a building of its age”. However, it is substandard by current codes for new construction in the areas of ventilation, sprinkler protection, plumbing and accessibility and health and safety and life-cycle improvements are recommended. In particular, the report recommended that “window and roof replacements proceed immediately and other life-cycle maintenance items be implemented within 2-3 years”.

According to a recent assessment by staff in the Board’s Operations Department, some facility maintenance items are urgent and significant. The septic system needs to be replaced immediately (\$110,000), the windows should be replaced within the next few years (\$90,000) and, with some repair, the roof may last another 5 years (\$125,000).

Based on the very small, declining enrolment and the capital maintenance requirements, the future operation of the school must be considered more thoroughly and formally. Therefore, the following recommendation is put forward:

That Riverport and District Elementary School be identified for school review.

One obvious option exists to be evaluated. The students of Riverport and District Elementary move on to Centre Consolidated School for Grades 6-9. It is possible that they could be accommodated in Grades P-6 given that the enrolment of Centre Consolidated has decreased by 152 since 2000. Another option might be that some students could attend Centre Consolidated and some could attend Lunenburg Academy.

Other Options for Big Tancook Island Elementary School: 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.

Concluding Comments

One of the specific tasks in Part 2 of this study was to answer the question, "How can student access to the Board's special or alternate programs be made more equitable?". This question has not been addressed in this paper because of insufficient time. A supplementary report will be completed within the next month.

Regarding a reasonable timeline for the implementation of the recommendations (Question 5), the Superintendent of Schools and the South Shore Regional School Board are in the best position to set up an implementation schedule. Some recommendations have been framed as being more urgent and others are dependent on information that is forthcoming. School reviews require a heavy commitment of time and resources for a school board staff and for board members. This must be taken into account by those who will have to make the commitments.

Finally, the contribution of regional staff to the preparation of this report is very much appreciated. The directors and staff members in their departments were called upon many times to prepare background information and data, sometimes with very little time to respond. Also, an added responsibility in the area of communications was required to manage the public meetings, a record of consultation input and correspondence. A big, heart-felt "Thank you!" is extended to all who took on the extra work in their already busy schedule.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Gunn, Ph.D.
Consultant

Enrolment Decline 2000-2007 - Appendix A

	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	Decrease 2000-07	% Decrease
Aspotogan	172	160	140	155	155	159	150	159	13	7.6%
Bayview	523	499	480	481	471	463	462	461	62	11.9%
Big Tancook	9	9	6	7	6	4	4	3	6	66.7%
Bridgewater Elem.	536	535	530	542	516	513	483	475	61	11.4%
Bridgewater High	607	584	557	529	500	449	455	456	151	24.9%
Centre	613	586	573	551	533	513	489	461	152	24.8%
Chester Area Middle	449	451	445	450	460	420	380	366	83	18.5%
Chester Dist.	275	265	250	231	224	224	218	210	65	23.6%
Dr. J.C. Wickwire	523	491	477	476	463	452	432	419	104	19.9%
Forest Heights	405	399	429	393	411	415	428	403	2	0.5%
Gold River/W. Shore	136	129	128	133	113	112	114	113	23	16.9%
Greenfield	40	44	37	37	35	40	35	25	15	37.5%
Hebbsville	796	774	764	756	721	687	678	652	144	18.1%
Liverpool Reg.	359	367	377	361	354	355	358	335	24	6.7%
Lunenburg Acad.	144	139	143	123	116	119	117	106	38	26.4%
Lunenburg High	244	240	201	203	185	175	174	173	71	29.1%
Mill Village	89	75	73	57	61	54	44	46	43	48.3%
Milton	77	85	178	175	154	142	163	138	-61	-79.2%
New Germany Elem.	302	285	252	242	271	260	248	222	80	26.5%
New Germany High	462	453	504	505	474	463	438	428	34	7.4%
New Ross	215	205	198	199	190	183	176	161	54	25.1%
Newcombville	174	155	175	164	165	160	145	149	25	14.4%
North Queens Elem.	144	137	131	132	130	125	115	125	19	13.2%
North Queens High	169	158	143	150	146	153	157	149	20	11.8%
Park View	948	959	958	941	908	875	869	845	103	10.9%
Pentz	159	151	122	114	96	90	102	103	56	35.2%
Petite Riviere	95	93	84	77	72	72	76	83	12	12.6%
Riverport	100	101	91	88	82	76	63	59	41	41.0%
South Queens	353	356	385	376	354	328	308	315	38	10.8%
West Northfield	204	208	212	203	192	173	178	178	26	12.7%
TOTAL	9322	9093	9043	8851	8558	8254	8059	7818	1504	16.1%

**APPENDIX B: Recommendations from the Utilization of Facilities of Queens
County Ad Hoc School Board Committee, 2001**

1. That Mill Village Elementary School be considered for permanent closure at the conclusion of the 2001-2002 school year, with a change in school boundaries such that Primary and Grade One students attend Milton Centennial School and Grades Two to Six students attend Dr. J. C. Wickwire Academy.
2. That Gorham Memorial Elementary School be considered for permanent closure at the conclusion of the 2001-2002 school year, with a change in school boundaries such that Primary and Grade One students attend Milton Centennial School.
3. That the South Shore District School Board recommend to the Nova Scotia Department of Education, through the Southwest Regional School Board, that four classrooms be added to Liverpool Regional High School in order to accommodate the Grade Nine students who are currently in the catchment area of South Queens Junior High School.
4. That Milton Centennial School be considered for permanent closure at the conclusion of the 2004-2005 school year conditional upon the completion of renovations at South Queens Junior High School and the addition of classrooms at Liverpool Regional High School, with a change in school boundaries such that the catchment area of Milton Centennial School is included in that of Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy.
5. That with the closure of Milton Centennial School, reorganization takes place such that Dr. J.C. Wickwire Academy contains Grades Primary to Five, South Queens Junior High School contains Grades Six to Eight and Liverpool Regional High School contains Grades Nine to Twelve.