



Measuring
Rural Community
Vitality



NORTHERN BRUCE PENINSULA

SCHOOLS AS ANCHORS FOR
COMMUNITY VITALITY INITIATIVE

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RURAL ONTARIO
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I INTRODUCTION

Declining enrolment in schools is a phenomenon experienced across Canada, having greatest impact on rural communities (Thomson, 2016). Community hubs have emerged as a potential approach to address this issue. The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) chose the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, in partnership with the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE), as a community project site to participate in ROI's Measuring Rural Community Vitality (MRCV) initiative. Of the six MRCV projects from across rural Ontario, Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality was the only project focusing on education. This unique initiative allowed the community to conduct an assessment of the present and envisioned roles of schools serving not only young people, but the entire community, with a particular focus on rural community vitality (Thomson, 2016).

I NEEDS ADDRESSED

School closures in rural communities can cause anxiety and hardship, and many community members advocate against closing local schools. This project sought to clarify views expressed by community members about the importance of local schools and their value to rural communities, and to foster discussions about integrated service delivery models that look at all areas of wellbeing and education through community hubs. On a fundamental level, the study examined the assertion that schools are crucial to community vitality and economic development in rural areas.

To investigate this issue, measurable data was required to analyze the general sentiments of the community. Collective emotional responses alone would not be enough to demonstrate to local school board(s) and the Ministry of Education that school closures are a significant detriment to rural communities. Using the [Canadian Index of Well-Being \(CIW\)](#), this study bridged the divide between emotional responses and measurable data. It highlighted the link between schools and economically sustainable communities, and illustrated the importance of schools in relation to community vitality. Data literacy was an important component in the discussion; school boards, provincial ministries and municipalities often use different data sources to make decisions. This project identified the need for a uniform standard of reporting that allows for effective measurement and tracking of change. Not only have school boards lacked any measurable data beyond enrolment predictions, they often do not have the policy tools or resources to collaborate with other ministries, thus limiting their capacity to lead change outside of their direct mandate. This study was designed to address those gaps by coordinating with diverse stakeholders. Municipalities, partners and schools will have the opportunity to dialogue about innovative solutions and strategies to address school closures in rural communities. These processes help key stakeholders better understand the importance of this issue, and will serve as a basis on which higher-level decisions can be made.

| SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

In response to declining enrolment in schools, Premier Wynne has mandated four ministries, including the Ministry of Education, to investigate the development of community hubs as one possible alternative to school closures (Thomson, 2016). A community hub is a service delivery model that brings together service providers to offer a range of services that respond to demonstrated local needs and priorities.

The Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE) took the lead on the Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project. PACE is committed to quality education for all students in the Northern Bruce Peninsula, and seeks to explore alternatives and creative solutions to out-sourcing education. The main goals of this volunteer group are to invite, inform and influence others about the importance of keeping education local.

The funding for the Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project focuses on: a) developing a model for creating community hubs that enhance education opportunities for youth, and b) the means for assessing the effectiveness of initiatives resulting from the creation of these hubs. The project explored the characteristics of successful hubs, developing a greater understanding of the drivers needed to create effective and sustainable community hubs. The project also created links between schools and economic development and identified the role schools play in sustaining the viability of a community (Peninsula Action Committee for Education, 2016).

Several data collection methods were used:

Surveys

Surveys were developed to map assets, challenges and actions related to creating community hubs that reflect local needs; these focused on the education needs of the community and emphasized schools.

Two mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) surveys were developed: a community survey to assess the community hubs model led by PACE, and an online survey for former students to incorporate feedback on their experience in the local secondary school. The goal of the survey was to assess the role of the schools in the community, and to see if the community hubs model would appropriately cater to community needs and priorities. The community survey targeted all residents, both permanent and seasonal, in the municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula. To maximize accessibility, the community survey was distributed online, in the local free newspaper delivered to every mailbox and by telephone. The former student survey targeted all those who attended Bruce Peninsula District School for one or more years of secondary education between 2004 and 2016. This survey was only available online on the Interceptum web platform. Participants were asked about school experiences, such as student engagement, school culture and their feelings of safety at school, as well as the role schools played in building characteristics associated with community wellbeing.

Data regarding the role of the school in the community was analyzed through the Canadian Index of Wellbeing utilizing NVivo software. Both qualitative and quantitative data were compared to the domains of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. There are overlapping domains in the two frameworks (CIW and OMAFRA), but the reporting was eventually narrowed to the CIW as the conceptual framework for analysing the comments about the role of the schools in the community.

Workshops

Workshops are planned to discuss survey findings, as well as to work toward an action plan by stakeholders who will examine ways to integrate service delivery that includes education, as a means of supporting rural community vitality.

Model

Using information derived from survey findings, meetings and other feedback from stakeholders, a final report, including the survey template itself, are being shared with other communities to use in creating solutions such as community hubs in their rural schools. Document and meeting processes, assessment tools, action steps and feedback were gathered and documented as a resource for others interested in this topic.

Partners

The project included communication with the **Bluewater District School Board, Community Schools Alliance, School Closure Policy Group from University of Western Ontario and University of Waterloo, Four County Labour Planning Board**, and the **Premier's Advisory Committee on Community Hubs**. Many local agencies and groups also pledged their support for this undertaking (Thomson, 2016). Survey results and plans for stakeholder involvement were shared with the Bluewater District School Board, municipal representatives and community members. Meetings to discuss possible future actions are planned for the fall of 2017.

Timeline

Actualizing project timelines was a challenge. As a key goal of the project was to involve community members in stakeholder meetings, finding mutually convenient meeting times was important and difficult. So, too, was covering the large geography involved in the catchment area of this study, a challenge typical of many rural areas.

The completion timeline for the project shifted from September 2016 to September 2017. Fluid timelines were required in light of challenges discussed. The project's actual milestones included:

- **January 18, 2016**
Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula announced the collaborative project led by the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE).
- **May 2016**
Survey development.
- **July – August 2016**
Survey distribution.
- **January – February 2017**
Presentation of preliminary results to the Bluewater District School Board, Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, and the community.
- **September 2017**
Publication of final report and articles.

Organizational Profiles

The **Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE)** is a group of concerned parents and community members committed to quality education for all students on the Northern Bruce Peninsula. PACE seeks a collaborative exploration of education possibilities, and is interested in pursuing partnerships to explore alternatives and creative solutions.

Northern Bruce Peninsula

The Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula (NBP) is the northern neighbouring community to the Town of South Bruce Peninsula. NBP covers an area of 781.51 square kilometers and has a permanent population of 3,850 year-round residents. It encompasses the former Townships of Eastnor, Lindsay, St. Edmunds and the Village of Lion's Head. Other hamlets within NBP are Tobermory, Stokes Bay, Pike Bay, Miller Lake, Barrow Bay, Ferndale, Dyers Bay and the Lindsay 20 Communities.

| COMMUNITY ASSETS

The following are some of the community assets that helped this project reach its desired outcomes:

Steering Committee

The Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project engaged different assets and skills within the community. The project's PACE steering committee comprised volunteers from many backgrounds; the diverse skills of these individuals were helpful in facilitating and moving the project forward. The project coordinator's school board experience contributed first-hand knowledge of the challenges that school boards face. As she was also a skilled researcher, an external research consultant was not required. Other committee members also offered critical expertise and skills in facilitating the project's goals.

The steering committee had originally planned to meet a total of three times; however, they met every second week throughout the course of the project. This changed perceptions of community members, who saw the possibility of real change from their constant fear of impending school closures.

Collaboration

The project aimed for a collaborative approach where community partners could work together toward a common goal. Stakeholders who supported the project included the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, the deputy mayor, who was part of the steering committee, and the County. Community members contributed many ideas and suggestions about the potential of schools in rural communities, and envisioned roles for community members. The project provided opportunities to learn about leadership in a rural setting, and was successful in fostering dialogue and communication among various community groups. Informal conversations were critical in developing trust and relationships in rural areas. First fostering informal relationships then building toward more formal relationship structures helped set the tone and dynamics of the project and its collaborative relationships.

The project also facilitated relationships with other key players in education and rural development, such as the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), **Community Schools Alliance**, and the School Closure Policy Research group. **Dr. Bill Irwin** of the Department of Economics and Business at Huron College was pivotal in providing external academic validation on the project, fulfilling a goal of developing a project that could be applied in other rural communities. Indeed, having the project's survey approved by the University Research Ethics Board added weight to how the research results would be received.

Developing relationships with these important education and rural development actors strengthened voices of the community so they could be better heard. Knowing that external influential voices were also pursuing this issue boosted the confidence of the community, not only validating their feelings that their concerns were relevant and important, but that their sentiments were supported by research. Parents and concerned community members were buoyed knowing that other people were working hard to address this issue.

The project survey taps into the knowledge and expertise of community members. The insights of parents and former students helped to inform this work. Communication and engagement were maximized by going out into the community and providing opportunities for people to contribute their perspective.

| RESULTS

Given the project data generated, people in Northern Bruce Peninsula seem to have felt heard and believe they have a stronger case to advocate against school closures. Residents seem to feel validated by the CIW's linkages between schools and the wellbeing of the community, which aligns with the expressed opinions of local community members. However, because the CIW incorporates statistics from across Canada, additional research was conducted to resonate more closely with lived experiences of Northern Bruce Peninsula residents. Questions were added to expand the educational attainment indicator in the CIW. For example:

- When people ask you what you liked/missed in your high school experience, what do you tell them?
- In general, how important are the following aspects of an elementary school experience?
Rated 1 to 4:
 - o Students have access to extracurricular activities
 - o Teachers know and care about their students
- The following characteristics have been identified when considering the roles schools play within a community. How would you rate these characteristics?
 - o The school fosters a sense of personal belonging to the community
 - o A school attracts young families

The survey was largely successful in its implementation and distribution, and included an assessment of the importance and relevance of municipal characteristics. Incorporating this component was intended to encourage involvement from the local economic development committee, with the hope they would be impacted by project insights and ultimately incorporate findings into their broader planning process.

298 residents responded by survey, and preliminary results were shared with stakeholders. The geographic distribution of respondents included the hamlets of Barrow Bay, Dyers Bay, Lion's Head, Miller Lake, Pike Bay, Stokes Bay and Tobermory, with Tobermory having the most participants with 31% of respondents. The community survey had 17 questions, including eight questions that provided an opportunity for written comments. Over 600 comments were received. Overall, survey results aligned with the project's anticipated outcomes, and survey responses demonstrated that the Canadian Index of Wellbeing has significant application on the issue of school closures. It was evident in the responses that schools play an important part in creating sustainable wellbeing in rural communities. Study findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the benefits of having education close to the homes of families in the community.

The project also identified insight as to the effectiveness of data gathering and reporting. The data sets used by school boards and ministries are not compatible with that used by municipalities. For example, school reports on projected enrolments are different from the projected enrolments of the County. Discussions ensued regarding developing workshops on data literacy, with an objective of standardizing measurements to track change. Improving data literacy will improve understanding and the identification of solutions, helping to create templates for what needs to be measured and how to measure it, and better developing data integration processes.

The social return on investment for this project remains unmeasured. People still fear school closures and the long commutes to distant schools that would result. The project has spurred many conversations and partnerships between community members and groups. A significant value from the project is that discussions can now be backed with researched data.

Expenditures for this project included publishing the survey in the local paper, conducting literature reviews, promotion through various media sources, hiring individuals for quantitative statistical analysis, printing of posters and surveys and purchasing refreshments. An unexpected cost was the development of the website. Community partners contributed in various ways to cover costs. For example, the municipality offered space to hold meetings and presentations, community members volunteered their time to present at meetings and programs, and advertising costs were mitigated using advertising space in grocery store bulletin boards. The project was carried in large measure by the commitment of community volunteers, whose interest in preserving local schools was manifestly clear throughout.

LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

Several members of the PACE steering committee documented their reflections on the project. These include:

- Although momentum can create change, it is also important to be respectful of the organic nature and pace of how things happen.
- It is recommended to have a partner who can receive, hold and dispense the funds for a project, with a process to receive budget updates (e.g., PACE asked the NBP municipality to submit an application for this project on their behalf). Finances need to be accounted and outlined in the budget.
- Communicate creatively and establish a strong presence to keep the project on everybody's agenda and radar. Seek opportunities for informal networking and participate in other rural events. Be aware that different demographic groups require different methods of engagement.
- A project such as this needs both a small steering committee to ensure that project meets its goals, and a larger representative advisory committee to test the effectiveness and impact of each step of the project.
- Be flexible and adaptive with project timelines as needs arise during the endeavour. Be prepared to spend many hours on survey development, communications, presentations, website management and process decision-making.
- Identification of target audience, survey distribution and a follow-up plan are useful to ensure a meaningful return rate, and all steps require separate planning. Data collection methods such as post-paid mail and advertising require extra time and money.
- Ensure diverse committee membership that reflects community makeup (e.g., academics, parents, long-term residents, etc.). Recognize the expertise and availability of volunteer staff and consider hiring out skills and tasks (e.g., hiring a research assistant for literature review and statistical data analysis, website photographer, etc.). Work may require more than simply the perseverance of volunteer members, and having this type of infrastructure will increase efficiency and effectiveness.
- Effective project management requires a clear outline of the tasks to be accomplished, identifiable milestones, and a way to measure progress towards the achievement of those milestones. This helps identify necessary additional tasks and needed course corrections.

| CONCLUSION

The Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project aimed to address and explore the difficult and pressing issue of school closure in the Northern Bruce Peninsula. Survey results validated the feelings and knowledge of community members, and demonstrated the importance of schools to community vitality. The project expanded the way rural community vitality is measured, and identified useful data processes and language for topics that are hard to express verbally. The tools developed through this project will benefit other communities interested in pursuing similar projects, assuming they tailor and adapt the tools for their area.

This project shed light on the political processes and pitfalls concerning rural education and development. It has generated momentum and insight, impacting strategy and service delivery and the county level. The project engaged a diverse cross section of community stakeholders, fostering many productive discussions and cultivating important relationships. These have contributed to greater awareness and action on the issue and impact of rural school closures. This is an important legacy, and other communities would do well to modify the project and its tools in their own setting.

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| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?
It may work well if your county/organization...

- ☒ Can call forth a dedicated volunteer committee with hired staff support, who can contribute significant time and effort.
- ☒ Is willing to invest in advertisement and awareness building to develop strong community engagement.
- ☒ Has the capacity to foster strong partnerships with multiple stakeholders across key disciplines (school boards, research institutions, municipalities).

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The Rural Ontario Institute provided information gathered and summarized by Dr Suzanne Ainley of Ainley Consulting to Platinum Leadership to describe the community projects. All such descriptions have been reviewed and approved by the relevant community contacts.

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