

How to save a school

A few pointers from a community that refuted the case for closure

by Janet Wallace

Riverside Consolidated School (RCS) is a beautiful wooden building erected in 1905 – four stories high, with 10 classrooms. In the 2014-2015 school year, it had 46 students from kindergarten to grade five, comprising four classes (K/one, two, three/four, and five). The school is at the edge of the Village of Riverside-Albert, New Brunswick, population 320), about an hour's drive from Moncton.

The region depends on tourism and fishing for its survival, and many of the young people have left to work in cities or out west. Over the years, as surrounding schools have closed, the catchment area for RCS has grown. Some elementary students are already spending 55-65 minutes on the bus to get to school. Students from grade six to 12 go to Caledonia Regional High School in Hillsborough, 30 kilometers away. For those from Alma, where there is no school, that means traveling about 60 kilometers, although the distance by school bus is longer due to routing on side roads.

In late February 2015, the Anglophone East District Education Council (DEC) stated that it was conducting a sustainability study on Riverside Consolidated School, triggered by low enrolment and underutilized space. The DEC (the province's DEC's are similar to school boards) considered closing



As members of the 2015-16 kindergarten class fidgeted at the front of the room, the mother of one of the children told meeting attendants how long a bus ride each child would have if the school closed. (Janet Wallace photos)

the school and sending students to Hillsborough Elementary. If this happened, children from K-12 would be bussed together, some for more than 1.5 hours each way.

The DEC presented its sustainability study in March, and the community then had 33 days to present its rebuttal. Two weeks after that, the announcement was made: a unanimous decision by the DEC to keep the school doors open. Members of the council seemed appalled by the prospect of elementary

students spending three hours a day on the bus. Apparently some were shocked that four-year-olds are already taking hour-long bus rides, due to the closure of the elementary school in Alma several years ago.

The school is safe for at least a couple years, but the threat of closure always looms over small rural schools. In Riverside-Albert, a compelling case was made for keeping the school open. The following strategies, used effectively by this community, may prove useful to others facing the same fight.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Put a face to the cost-cutting measure. It's one thing to change school policy and adopt a cost-cutting measure; it's another thing to look into the eyes of a small child who will be spending three hours a day on the bus.

In Riverside-Albert, when the community had the opportunity to present its case for keeping the school open, at least 350 people attended the meeting. There were presentations from parents, mayors, politicians, and representatives of the tourist association, food



Two public meetings to discuss the fate of Riverside Consolidated School brought out hundreds of people. Last year the century-old school in Riverside-Albert, N.B., had 46 students from kindergarten to grade 5.

security group, fishermen’s association, food bank, and other community organizations.

Between talks of scientific studies and economic impacts, three mothers led the kindergarten class of 2015-2016 to the front of the auditorium. Each child wore a sign that stated a consequence of the long bus ride, such as “No bathrooms: I need to pee,” and “Less family time,” and “I sit and listen to high school students,” and “Less playtime.” While the children fidgeted, the speaker showed close-up pictures of the 11 children. For each, she stated the student’s name, age, favorite activities, and the length of time that child would have to spend on the bus if Riverside Consolidated were closed.

STAR POWER

If you can find a well-known and highly regarded person to embrace your cause, go for it. Sheree Fitch, perhaps best known for her children’s books and poetry, is on the front lines of the fight to save River John Consolidated School in Nova Scotia. Late in the River John campaign, the community organizers pulled out all the stops and got a letter of support from literary titan Margaret Atwood, generating fresh media coverage.

“When a community loses its school it loses its centre of gravity,” wrote Atwood in her letter to the Chignecto-Central

Regional School Board. Which leads to the next point.

A school can become a community hub – a multi-use space that will be available to outside groups, provided their activities are compatible with the school’s central purpose. The concept has been championed by Paul Bennett, co-founder of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative. For example, residents of Maitland, N.S., have recom-

mended leasing unused parts of their school for continuing education courses, an arts festival group, and the Scouts.

SCRUTINIZE THE DATA

Take a critical look at the information and formulae that are being used to justify a proposed school closure. Check the data used by authorities in their projections of future enrollment, the economic costs of maintaining a school,



All along the proposed bus route, kids and parents held signs.



On the day of the simulated school bus trip, parents and students came out to show their opposition to closing Riverside Consolidated.

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and the impact of school closure.

In the case of Riverside Consolidated, general province-wide data were used for some calculations, while local trends and considerations were ignored. The authorities did not factor in a small baby boom that occurred locally over the past couple years. They also failed to consider the fact that more people are expected to move to the region and fewer leave due to the planned opening of the Fundy Trail Parkway in 2018, bringing a projected sixfold increase in tourists, which is expected to provide 750 jobs in the area from St. Martins to Hopewell Rocks.

Some numbers cited by the DEC were simply inaccurate. At the meeting, members of the audience, particularly the bus drivers, laughed at the bus times that were provided, because the figures were considerably low-balled.

MOMENTUM

Another strategy is to attract more families to move into the area. School closures follow rural depopulation, but the trend can be reversed. In the Riverside Consolidated catchment area, there is a movement afoot to attract more people not just to visit, but to move to the community.

Just a week after learning that their school had been spared, the local activists met again. The work has just started. The DEC voted to keep the school open for at least the next two years. By then, something will need to change – enrolment will need to increase, the cost of maintaining the school needs to drop, or other revenue will need to be generated. Local residents need to work together to find creative solutions.

Building on the momentum of the recent struggle, an open house is planned on June 4, 6-8pm. The agenda includes identifying this region's assets and brainstorming strategies, but first and foremost, the gathering is a party. After all the tension and struggle over the past few months, the community will join together in a "We Saved Our School" celebration.

(Janet Wallace lives in New Horton, N.B.)

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