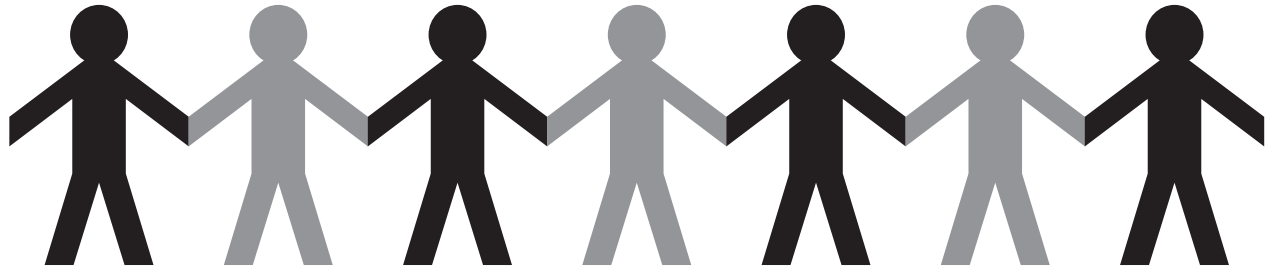




# WHAT SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO?

BY MATTHEW GREEN



**W**hen I was growing up in the city of Hamilton, the first question we would always ask when meeting someone new was never “where do you live?” It was always “what school did you go to?” While this question may not have been only Hamilton-specific, I suspect it grew from the fact that most of our communities were built following the urban planning principle that neighbourhoods and public space, and in particular parks, were always planned in conjunction with neighbourhood public schools.

In elementary school we were granted the freedom to roam our neighbourhood — only until the streetlights came on — which was clearly defined by the four square blocks surrounding our local school park. From JK to grade 5, I and all of the neighbourhood kids would spend our formative years connected to and connecting with our neighbourhood and each other. These were the kids I went to school with, played at recess with shared birthday parties with, and, most importantly, became childhood friends with.

There were subtle differences between some neighbourhoods in that not every elementary school went from JK through to 8th grade. For example, my school, Ridgemount Elementary stopped at grade 5 which meant moving on to Westview Middle

School for grades 6-8 on the west end of the Hamilton ‘Mountain’. While this meant new friendships in new communities, it was also the first time I recognized slight differences in class and income.

The wartime bungalows of the central mountain neighbourhood where I grew up had a very working class status, with most families within relatively the same

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income bracket. The more-recently built upper-middle income West End housed many of the upper city social housing developments, which meant some kids had slightly more money than others. But, for the most part, I remember us all getting along because what connected us, and what we shared in common, was the school

we attended and the collective identity we formed together.

That sense of school community belonging extended past these formative years, into high school ; something I would carry with me into adulthood. And, indeed, when Hamiltonians are asked “what school did you go to?” invariably we respond with our high school. It tells a story. In many ways it says who we are.

So a little over five years ago, when the provincial government undertook the ‘school accommodation review process’ to decide which schools they felt were worth keeping open, it highlighted another, related story: which communities were most vulnerable to the decades of neglected capital reinvestment.

Many of the schools built in the 1950s and 60s are coming to the end of their capital life cycle due to decades of deferred capital reinvestment and maintenance, along with the use of materials like asbestos. This resulted in an actuarial approach to determine the remediation and renovation costs versus the cost to consolidate and build new schools. Quick studies on enrollment trends and future neighbourhood population growth projections were supposed to translate into evidence-based decisions about which schools to close next. The process quickly

became perceived as deeply politicized, rooted in calculations as to which neighbourhoods were worth more, or less.

Within this actuarial mindset, the rich community tapestry of class, religion, ethnicity, race, graduation rates, and future education and employment prospects was reduced to and predetermined by the high school you graduated from. And it became clear, based on these and other social determinants, which schools would be closed and which students would be bused elsewhere.

Although elected during the municipal election cycle and represented by a parallel ward system, and even taxed alongside property tax assessment, the school board is still very much a child of the provincial government from which it receives its educational mandate and, most importantly, its funding formula. And regardless of the fact that trustees are elected as non-partisan and outside the provincial election cycle, decisions like school closures can still be very much motivated by partisan interest, or personal bias and class-based assumptions, or non-education-related concerns like market land values.

I have watched the fallout of these decisions recently play out in the neighbourhood where we chose to raise our family, and where I was elected to proudly serve as city councillor in the heart of Hamilton Centre's Ward 3.

In many ways Ward 3 is to Hamilton what Hamilton is to the rest of the country. In the industrial boom of the 60's and 70's our community forged the steel that built this nation. And when times got tough in the 80's and 90's they got really bad for the blue collar folks living in our neighbourhoods. Yet high schools like Delta, Scott Park, Sir John A MacDonald and Parkview remained anchors of place and public space, as well as communities of identity and belonging for youth and their families facing the precariousness of a post-industrial rust belt economy.

In my ward it was Parkview in particular that drew my attention because it offered special education, vocational pathways and, most importantly, a community for students disenfranchised by mainstream schools and left out of meaningful classroom inclusion. At Parkview, these students found an exceptional principal

who understood the complexities of their vulnerabilities as well as the importance of authentic opportunities for leadership and community engagement. It was here that I first met Jordan, the school council president and host of the daily morning announcements. For Jordan and his peers, Parkview was an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and value in their contribution to our neighbourhood.

## **UPROOTING STUDENTS GOES WELL BEYOND THE BRICKS-AND-MORTAR-RELATED ISSUES OF DEMOLISHING OLD BUILDINGS IN FAVOUR OF NEW ONES. IT REACHES INTO AND DISRUPTS THE CORE EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE FINDING THEIR PLACE OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY.**

So when Parkview became one of the first Hamilton schools slated for closure, we rallied together to fight — not simply to keep the school open, but to keep the community of students there together. Jordan led the charge and we followed. What ensued was two years of half-hearted community consults, student walk-outs, rallies, and school board protests. These kids, many in their senior year, were not fighting for themselves — they were fighting the countless other vulnerable kids following behind them.

Sadly, we ultimately lost that fight for Parkview, along with the three other inner-city schools listed above. In their place, a new North Hamilton High School is currently under construction — the charming prospect of a new mega school with students being bused in from all across the inner city.

But what else have we lost?

The safe and supported transition of one stage of schooling to the next

provides kids with a sense of certainty, and assurance that your community is valued and worth keeping together. This is why uprooting students goes well beyond the bricks-and-mortar-related issues of demolishing old buildings in favour of new ones. It reaches into and disrupts the core experience of education and its impact on young people finding their place of belonging and identity.

I can't help but note that those of us making these decisions today to close schools and bus students out of their communities were never disrupted by similar debates while we were growing up. And I think about that privilege — the freedom to explore my neighbourhood before the streetlights came on, and my evolving awareness that, as I grew, my world would gradually grow and extend beyond those few square city blocks — so many of us had in our formative years, leading up to these recent school closures.

I think about Jordan and about all the kids forced to leave the community schools that recognized their uniqueness and helped create for them a sense of belonging and appreciation of their strengths; the kids being sent back to the mainstream schools and classrooms (or to a new “mega school” replacement) that had originally failed them.

I wonder when they are older and are asked “what school did you go to?” how they will answer? ●

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Councillor **MATTHEW GREEN** was born in Hamilton. He is a graduate of Political Science from Acadia University, attended McMaster University and received a certificate of Executive Education and Governance for Non-Profits from Harvard. Matthew was elected to City Council in 2014. He has championed workers' rights, dignified housing, has strongly opposed carding and racial profiling, and has made Hamilton the first City in Ontario to regulate and licence payday lenders. Matthew is proud to live in the community he serves with his spouse Jayde and the joy of his life, his son Langston.

### **ENDNOTES**

1. <http://www.chch.com/hamilton-students-rally-around-former-parkview-principal/>
2. <https://www.thespec.com/news-story/4578595-parkview-secondary-calls-it-a-day-a-sad-day/>
3. <https://raisethehammer.org/article/2190/the-parkview-institute-defining-hamiltons-schools-as-community-hubs-model>