

# Will the New Property Tax System Save Our Neighbourhood Schools?

By Tricia Bakken



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## **About the Author**

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# Introduction

Public interest in the school closures planned for the next eight years under the Regina School Board's *Renewing Regina Public Schools: A 10 Year Plan* has been waning. Three schools, Herchmer, Stewart Russell, and Robert Usher Collegiate shut their doors for the last time in June 2008. Only eight short months later, there is little media attention, and seemingly little concern for the neighbourhoods yet to lose their schools. According to the *10 Year Plan*, mergers and closures will affect more than 20 schools, almost all located in the core areas of the city.

The table below lists the affected schools and their target dates for merger or closure. The School Board's plan, if fully implemented, will have far ranging adverse impacts on Regina's core neighbourhoods.

This paper presents several arguments for retention of Regina's core area schools including the better learning outcomes associated with smaller schools, the inconsistency of small school closures with Regina Public School Board commitments, and the further marginalization of Aboriginal people in Regina.

## School Closures 2010 to 2017

### Program Based Closures

- 2010 Ken Jenkins merges with either Elsie Mironuk or Ruth M. Buck  
Dieppe merges with either McLurg or Walker  
Massey (English) merges with either Marion McVeety or Grant Road  
Athabasca merges with Argyle
- 2012 Haultain and Glen Elm merge, one will close
- 2013 Martin Collegiate closes
- 2014 M. J. Coldwell merges with Ruth Pawson  
Connaught and Davin merge, one will close
- 2015 Gladys MacDonald and Coronation Park merge, one will close
- 2016 Kitchener merges with either Albert, Wascana or Coronation Park/Gladys Macdonald
- 2017 Rosemont Merges with Walker, one will close

### Facility Based Closures

- 2011 Imperial and McDermid merge, one will close

\*Information retrieved from Regina Public Schools (2007) *Renewing Regina Public Schools: A Ten year Plan: Thinking Ahead*. [www.rbe.sk.ca](http://www.rbe.sk.ca)

See Map p. 10

# Research on School Size

Most of the research data for over twenty years supports one basic premise: that smaller schools are better learning environments, particularly for “students who traditionally struggle at school.”<sup>1</sup> The majority of the slated school closures are planned in neighbourhoods that are populated by middle to low-income families as well as disadvantaged and marginalized people. Fourteen of the school closures are to take place in areas where the Aboriginal population is 15 percent or more, and where 30 percent or more of the people live in low income households.<sup>2</sup>

Smaller school size is a relative term, and identifying a generalizable number is somewhat difficult. The Leithwood and Jantzi study, prepared for the Board of Education of the Regina School Division, suggests that “elementary schools serving student populations exclusively or largely from diverse and/or disadvantaged backgrounds should be limited in size to not more than about 300 students.”<sup>3</sup> Here there must be a distinction made between school size and class size. Both are important in academic achievement, and the literature can sometimes overlap when referring to school size and class size, as one tends to go hand in hand with the other. However, it has been stated that, given all other factors, school size is one of the most important factors for learning, community cohesion, and inclusiveness.<sup>4</sup> According to the Leithwood and Jantzi study, a school of 300 would allow for a class size in a K-8 school, of one class per grade, 33 students per class. This is a very high number, particularly for Regina, where the classes currently tend to serve about 24 students each.<sup>5</sup> The Leithwood and Jantzi study further states “students in small schools (fewer than 200) had significantly greater gains in achievement.”<sup>6</sup> Allowing for one class

per grade in a K-8 school, the class size would be approximately 25 students. Binger concurs stating that 25 students per grade are optimal.<sup>7</sup> Dr. John Conway, a Regina Public School Board trustee, and University of Regina professor of sociology, states further that “benefits show up as class sizes are reduced, but the strongest benefits begin with classes of 15.”<sup>8</sup> The Regina School Board, conversely, accepted the recommendations of a report that stated school size should be “in the range of about 300 to 500 students for elementary schools,”<sup>9</sup> Schools with 500 students would most likely result in an increase in class size as well. This begs the question as to whether the interests of students living in the core neighbourhoods will be well served by such large schools and whether achieving educational outcomes is the primary objective of these decisions.

**“One of the most effective ways of judging the quality and maturity of a society or educational community is to study how it treats its most vulnerable citizens, students with special needs.”**

School leaver rates are significantly lower in smaller high schools<sup>10</sup>, decreasing the total cost per graduated student. Studies also support the idea that large schools produce superior academic achievement level based on the availability of specialized classes and more learning materials. This claim can be challenged on two levels. First, to the extent that modern Internet technologies and specialized resources can be increasingly shared, and specialized classes could



potentially be addressed through the mobility of teachers instructing the courses. Thus, there is less need to merge schools to create improved learning. Secondly, these studies reflecting higher achievement in larger schools often lack attention to leaver rates, which may undermine their credibility.<sup>11</sup> A variety of researchers have found that “small schools are actually more cost effective on a per capita student basis than larger schools.”<sup>12,13</sup> This is encouraging because “the small schools served a higher percentage of poor students and part-time special education students than did the large schools.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore the closure of Martin Collegiate, for example, with students being dispersed to other high schools, may result in higher leaver rates. This closure will leave a huge segment of the city, without a public high school, affecting families in more than ten neighbourhoods.

Another highly important factor for school districts to maintain smaller schools is community cohesion. “Sociologists widely accept that there is a decline in social interactions in our society. We are becoming increasingly disconnected from family, friends, and neighbours.”<sup>15</sup> Dr. Roger Petry, a professor at Luther College, University of Regina states “closing local schools eliminates community networks that have built up over years that are key to community competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy.”<sup>16</sup> Lee and Smith, in Bingle, add that the fragmented human contact associated with larger schools elevates the importance of formal rules and the environment becomes less responsive to individual needs and circumstances as a result.<sup>17</sup> Four in ten dropouts cite school-related factors, including counterproductive policies, as reasons for dropping out.<sup>18</sup>

# School Board Promises and Responsibilities

The Regina Public School Board has responsibilities to uphold, as spelled out in the Education Act, and has made commitments with regard to its own plans, as well as how such plans will affect the people whom they serve. The Education Act outlines the following requirements for: better education for children; parental involvement; community involvement; and school closure policy. The Act, however, has loopholes available to school boards. If the school community council, made up of parents, community members, and other stakeholders, disagrees with a decision of the School Board to close a school, there is recourse the School Board can take.

Key criteria to be considered when closing a school, as stated in The Regina Public School Board policy 15 are: quality of education; demographic trends; the number of classrooms and schools required to efficiently accommodate students; facility costs; per student costs; current and potential facility utilization; requirements for space; condition of the facility; location of all schools in the planning area; distances that students would have to travel; and possible student transportation implications and costs.<sup>19</sup> The Board is supposed to group threatened schools into a planning area, look at the number of available classroom seats in that area, the potential transportation costs and what alternatives could be considered. When carrying out the first closures in 2008, it did not follow this policy, only providing isolated information about the maintenance costs and enrolment for each school. No planning area information and no information about the quality of education was provided to the affected families. Details about facilities-related system-wide costs were released only at the very

end of the consultation period, and only after repeated requests from parents.<sup>20</sup>

The Regina Public School Board states that one of their division challenges includes “meeting the needs of a growing Metis and First Nation population, addressing the impact of poverty on student learning, and maintaining strong parental and community involvement in schools.”<sup>21</sup> Removing schools from communities with a high number of Aboriginal and disadvantaged people, however, does not address any of these challenges, and represents poor-decision making. Transportation challenges for these groups are increased. As Petry states “with climate change clearly linked to burning fossil fuels, it is hypocritical for the school system to knowingly increase its dependence in this way ... the added [travel] costs [for the parents] undermines the equality and fairness of our public system.”<sup>22</sup> It is also ecologically irresponsible as increased bussing results in increased green house gas emissions.

These decisions are also detrimental to our children’s health. The school board has reduced physical education time, and the fact that Canada has an alarming rate of childhood obesity, taking away the physical activity of walking to and from school is only contributing to the problem. As well, extra-curricular participation decreases as school size increase, exacerbating this issue.<sup>23</sup>

Two additional Regina Public School Board priorities are “higher literacy and achievement (and) equitable opportunities and outcomes for all.”<sup>24</sup> School closures demonstrate a serious failure in achieving these goals. The educational opportunities offered to marginalized groups are reduced rather than being made equitable.

# Marginalization of Aboriginal People

It is not necessary to revisit the history of how Aboriginal people in Canada have been treated; we need only look at the persistent poverty and health issues that face this population. Aboriginal people in western cities tend to have lower educational levels, labour participation rates, and income, and higher unemployment rates.<sup>25</sup> Although “most Canadians believe that colonization and racism are issues of the past” they are still, in fact, one of “the biggest challenges within the system of education today.”<sup>26</sup>

In Canada’s major western cities, Aboriginal people comprise upwards of 8 percent of the population, and an estimated 15 percent in Regina.<sup>27</sup> Yet, in these areas fewer than 1 percent speaks their native language at home.<sup>28</sup> A loss of language, combined with feelings of alienation, a history of political challenge, lack of parental and community involvement, and racist attitudes of others are some of the factors that cause Aboriginal students to have lower success rates.<sup>29</sup> With the Aboriginal population growing nearly three times faster than other Canadians,<sup>30</sup> it is of the utmost importance to address these concerns.

“The institutional nature of Canadian culture, particularly in education, has divided language, knowledge, learning, and skill development into compartments.”<sup>31</sup> This undermines First Nation knowledge and belief systems that are holistically integrated. It also continues to “unreflectively re-infect the wounds of the past.”<sup>32</sup>

The Public Health Agency of Canada states that in 2001, 6 percent of children enrolled in the Aboriginal Head Start program across Canada

## Fast Facts

**While Aboriginal Educational outcomes are gradually improving, much is left to be done.**

- **First Nations students are 28 years from parity with the rest of Canada.**
- **51 percent of First Nations and 31 percent of all Canadians have less than grade 12.**
- **23 percent of First Nations and 38 percent of all Canadian adults hold some form of post-secondary certificate.**
- **48 percent of Registered Indians (both on and off reserve), 53 percent of Registered Indians on-reserve, and 37 percent of all Canadians between 15 and 24 are not in school.**

Preceding information obtained from: Battiste, M. and McLean, S. (2005). *State of First Nations Learning*. Prepared for Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), Ottawa, Ontario. September 15, 2005.

were diagnosed with a special need, another 9 percent were identified by staff,<sup>33</sup> compared with 12 percent of children overall.<sup>34</sup> Although the percentage may differ only slightly, this may be a low estimate, as it is reasonable to predict that those from healthier families are more likely to be enrolled in these programs. Education of special needs children is quickly becoming a high priority. More specifically, educational programs

related to “Fetal Alcohol Spectral Disorder (FASD) are needed to help children and youth deal with the demands of the classroom”. These programs utilize “small classroom settings, decrease stimulation and provide individualized learning strategies.”<sup>35</sup> Addressing this need is contrary to the Regina Public School Board’s *10 Year Plan*. Closing

smaller community schools is likely to compound the learning issues that have already been identified by First Nations people. Transporting children out of their neighbourhoods to larger elementary and high schools will most certainly increase alienation and decrease attendance and success rates. Furthermore it will increase the total cost of educating fewer graduates.

# School Board Plans and The Future of Learning

Parents who have set foot inside of a Regina public school in recent years have probably seen this statement written somewhere on the wall “I belong, I want to know, I am responsible, and I respect.” These values are important and need to be taught widely. Moreover, they need to be adhered to by the School Board itself. The recommendations that were provided to the Board in Conway’s report *Rationale for Opposing the 10 Year Plan* were to maintain elementary schools of no more than 300 students. The Board has overridden this advice and stated, as a guideline, on their website that “peak enrolment for a K-8 attendance area is to be no less than 500 students.”<sup>36</sup>

The School Board’s new position on enrolment will certainly have detrimental effects on academic achievement, particularly for students who already struggle with learning. Another contentious result from this policy shift is increased student/teacher ratios. For example the population projections for 2013 are approximately 570

students for Henry Janzen and Jack Mackenzie schools, which are not slated for closure. Yet the Board uses comparison rates for a school of approximately 400 students when estimating the number of teachers and programs required.<sup>37</sup> The student/teacher ratio will therefore be increased by one third.

Several policy recommendations to reduce the negative effects that potential school closures will have on our neighbourhoods, our families, and the future of our children have been presented. According to Dr. John Conway, Regina Public Schools would best serve the public by:

- adopt a comprehensive “small schools” policy;
- “shelter” existing small schools from closure, particularly those serving socially and economically disadvantaged students.;
- adopt a comprehensive “small class size” policy, and develop a 10 year implementation strategy; and



- begin immediate implementation of class size policy in those schools serving socially and economically disadvantaged students.”<sup>38</sup>

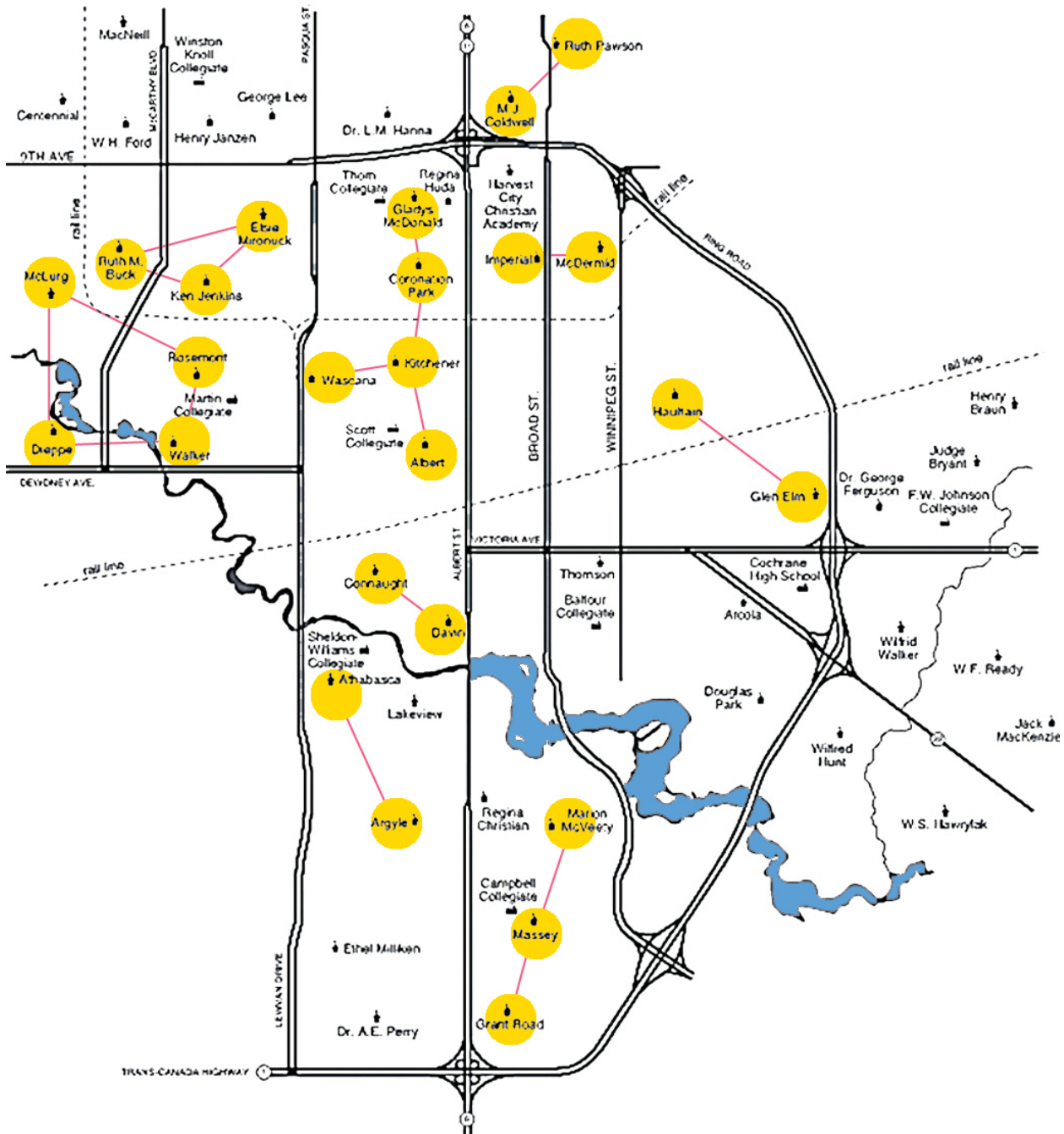
Setting out school closures over a ten year period could prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Parents will then make choices to enrol their children in schools they anticipating not closing. This further exacerbates the low-enrolment issue in the schools already scheduled for closure. Rather, a long-term commitment by the Regina School Board, to maintain local schools would allow parents and communities to devise long-term strategies to maintain the viability of these community owned assets, rather than leading to irreversible decisions as these schools are closed and the property sold to private developers.

If the Regina School Board’s school closure policy is not primarily based on achieving educational outcomes, one needs to look at other motivations. One possible motivation is simply an effort to minimize expenditures thereby limiting taxation of residents. This assumes, however, that the policy decisions made to date will actually reduce expenditures, an assumption that could be questioned, especially over the long term. Furthermore, a lack of focus on achieving educational outcomes undermines the value provided

to citizens in relation to their tax expenditure on education. A current Board focus on limiting expenditures might be tied to problems associated with the Province of Saskatchewan’s education funding policy.

For decades Saskatchewan has failed to reform its education funding policy, which is heavily reliant on property taxes. MLA Jim Reiter has undertaken the Education Property Tax Review, which was released to the public in the provincial budget March 18, 2009.<sup>39</sup> There were more than 40 submissions from the public, along with submissions from stakeholders such as The Chamber of Commerce and The Saskatchewan School Board Association in joint effort with the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation (STF), the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents (LEADS) and the Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials.<sup>40</sup> Prior to this new taxation system education funding had been split between the province and property taxes about equally. Hopefully the new system proposed in Reiter’s Education Property Tax review will provide a sufficient injection of additional funding to the Regina School Board to save our neighbourhood schools.

# Ten Year Plan School Closures



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