

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Permanent closures and consolidations of public schools are becoming increasingly common in Ontario. This report explores this issue in-depth by examining the potential impacts of a recent decision to close a secondary school in Kingston Ontario, Kingston Collegiate Vocational Institute (KCVI), on the quality of life for residents and neighbourhood well-being and liveability. According to Irwin (2012), schools provide a sense of identity for communities, a source of pride, history, and a safe space for collaboration and community-based activities.

Neighbourhood schools where people can gather together and build stronger However, there is limited empirical evidence on the impacts of school closures on households and neighbourhoods. Current research tends to focus on the political decision-making processes behind closures, rather than the social impacts experienced by

- 3) Given the importance of public schools to building communities, how might the school closure decision-making process be modified so that the management of public school assets can reflect the interests and needs of a broader range of community stakeholders?

To answer the research questions, a multilevel case study was employed using a mixed methods approach to data collection. Using the impending closure of KCVI at the study case, households were surveyed to investigate the potential impacts of the closure at the household level, and key informants were interviewed to investigate the potential impacts at the neighbourhood level. The survey and interview questions were based upon two

that the current school closure process is flawed and does not reflect the values of residents or adequately consider the social well-being of neighbourhoods.

To conclude, the report offers five recommendations for maintaining neighbourhood well-being and liveability for communities faced with the threat of a school closure, as follows.

Recommendation 1: The Ministry of Education needs to re-evaluate the funding formula scheme to favour on-going maintenance of existing schools

The current funding formula does not consider the complexity of demographic shifts, favouring short-term economic gain over long-term investments in a community. As well, there is a disparity in available funding from the Ministry of Education to retrofit existing schools in comparison to new construction projects (Cranston, 2017). This causes schools such as KCVI to fall into deterioration. This contradicts promoting environmentally sustainability growth and development. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education re-evaluate the current funding formula to maintain neighbourhood schools to both meet Provincial sustainability polices and protect local neighbourhood schools from falling into decline.

Recommendation 2: Formalized relationships between the school board, the municipality, and the province should be established

All Ontario school closures are legally obligated to follow the Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) Ministry of Education, 2018). The school board is required to host public consultations, but municipal staff and residents have no authority in the decision-making process. This is problematic considering schools are valuable resources and public assets, yet this is not reflected in the policy process. It

Recommendation 4: The Accommodation Review Committee should include an equal number of school board representatives, municipal planners, and residents, and should be given greater decision-making authority

The current policy model does not provide ARC members with decision-making authority, and instead the ARC functions as conduits of information to the community (People for Education, 2018). While policy requires the ARC to include parents in the committee, school board representatives dominate the current ARC, frequently resulting in decisions guided by utilization rates and short-term economic benefits for the school board (Andres, 2013). It is recommended that the Pupil Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs) be restructured to represent the value that schools have within their community and to improve collaboration between the school board, the municipality, and residents. The Ministry of Education needs to provide guidelines for Ontario to have equal representation of different stakeholders on the ARC, supported by policy to ensure that the process remains transparent, fair, and is granted more decision-making authority

Recommendation 5: The school closure decision-making process should prioritize downtown schools to support sustainable, heterogeneous, vibrant downtown neighbourhoods

KCVI is currently the only public high school located in the downtown of Kingston. The case study has demonstrated that families congregate to neighbourhoods where schools are within walkable distance; removal of the local school reduces the liveability of the neighbourhood. The survey revealed that the impending closure of KCVI may have significantly negative implications for the neighbourhoods, as fewer families are expected to move to the area, and about one-quarter of respondents indicated they have considered moving to another neighbourhood. To keep downtown neighbourhoods vibrant, sustainable, and heterogeneous, schools need to be kept downtown and within walkable distance of where families reside. Indeed, a key priority to promote Provincial sustainability policies is to revitalize and support downtown communities, which allow for intensification, increased active transportation, reduced automobile usage, and less energy used per household. It is recommended that school boards prioritize maintaining downtown schools to support Provincial sustainability policy goals and foster complete communities.