The Process and Impact of School Closures in Four Rural Nova Scotian Communities

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2002, Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) supported four summer student internships to examine policy issues facing rural Nova Scotia. RCIP is a three-year project (which has since been extended to five years), formed through a community-university partnership between the Coastal Communities Network and the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University. RCIP's goal is to increase the capacity of rural, community-based organizations to use social science research to influence policy that affects the health and sustainability of rural communities. One issue identified as of particular interest to the Coastal Communities Network is the impact of school closures in rural communities. As a result, a community-based internship was established in southwestern Cape Breton, where there have been a number of recent school closures. The goals of this internship were to examine: a) the process by which school closures came about, in particular the community's involvement in the decision-making process, and; b) the impact of the school closures and amalgamation on local communities.

METHODOLOGY

Information was gathered for this report through three sources: reviews of existing materials from media sources, key informant interviews, and observer/participant activities.

Review of Existing Material

There was considerable local media coverage of issues surrounding the school closures. Back issues of the local newspaper, the *Inverness Oran*, were reviewed for the years 1995-2002. The archives of the *Cape Breton Post* and the *Halifax Daily News* were also reviewed.

Key Informant Interviews

Nine key informant interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 minutes and two hours. Key informant interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, a student, and a senior citizen. Key informants included important players in the protests against school closures as well as community members who, though not directly involved in the process, were still able to provide a community perspective. Key informants came from all four of the communities examined in this study.

Field notes from these interviews were examined for emergent themes and key points related to the process of the school closures and their impacts on the community.

It should be noted that several people who were deeply involved in protests against the school closures refused to be interviewed, saying that they had moved on with their lives.

Observer/Participant Activities

The intern, Joyce MacDonald, lived and worked in the communities being studied. She attended Mabou Consolidated School from 1985 to 1997 and, therefore, was in the area to observe and take part in at least some of the amalgamation process.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING: AN INTRODUCTION TO JUDIQUE, MABOU, PORT HOOD, AND WHYCOCOMAGH

The four villages examined in this study are located in southwestern Cape Breton, in Inverness County. Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood are located on Route 19 on the Atlantic coast, while Whycocomagh sits at the southwestern tip of the Bras D'Or Lakes on the Trans-Canada Highway. The four villages form a catchment area of about 130 square kilometres. Most of the people of Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood are of Scots-Gaelic ancestry, though others are of Dutch, Irish, English, or French ancestry. Whycocomagh has two distinct parts – the Waycobah Mi'Kmaq First Nation and the off-reserve community. The Waycobah Mi'Kmaq First Nation provides its members with many of its

own services, including a health clinic and a school for students from Primary through Grade Twelve. Like the other three communities in this study, the Whycocomagh off-reserve community is of mainly Scots-Gaelic heritage.

The people of these four communities tend to work in primary industries such as farming, fishing, and logging. Others travel to work at the pulp mill in Port Hawkesbury, approximately 30 to 60 kilometres away. Tourism is also a big industry in the area, and many are employed in the trades and service sectors. Churches play a big role in the life of all four communities, with most people beingh members of either the Roman Catholic or United Church. Many of the communities' social events (dances, dinners, bingos, bazaars, concerts) are organized as church fund-raisers. Voluntary organizations, such as fire departments, historical societies, service clubs (for example, the Rotary and Lions Clubs), 4-H, and local community development associations, provide forums for community members to come together.

Although the focus of this report is on the four communities mentioned above, it would be a mistake to think of this area as made up of only these four. Within each community district pulled together by shared post offices, telephone exchanges, and (formerly) schools, are many other smaller communities centred around their own churches, community organizations, and general stores. The former Mabou school district, for example, contains the communities of Mabou Village, West Mabou, Southwest Mabou, Northeast Mabou, Mabou Coal Mines, Mabou Harbour, Rankinville, Mabou Ridge, Glencoe, Hillsboro, Brook Village, and West Lake Ainslie. These communities retain varying degrees of community identity. For example, Brook Village, a fifteen-minute drive from Mabou itself, has its own church, general store, ballfield, and 4-H Club.

PART I: LEAD-UP TO AMALGAMATION

Prior to the 1960s, many of the smaller communities mentioned above had their own small schools, but, with the arrival of better bussing systems, these one- and two-room schoolhouses were closed and four Primary-Grade Twelve consolidated schools were built. In the 1960s, residents were also concerned about the loss of these small community schools. One Port Hood resident who remembers moving from a one-room schoolhouse to the "big" school said, "People were opposed to community school closures then, too. But the communities were redefined. Instead of being from, say, Colindale, people are now from Port Hood." As time went on, the consolidated schools developed problems. It was rumoured that the builders had used plans meant for California schools without adapting them for Cape Breton winters. The flat roofs sagged under the weight of snow, and leaks were common.

Over time, enrollment at these "big schools" began to decline, largely due to the declining population in the area. Between 1991 and 2001, the population of Inverness County declined by almost four percent. Families became smaller and the average age of the population grew older. Before the 1970s, Cape Breton families tended to be large. Although many young adults would move away from Cape Breton in search of education and/or employment, others would stay to begin families of their own. However, as family size fell and young adults increasingly left Cape Breton, school enrollments fell. The impact of these most recent population changes on school enrollments can be seen in Table 1. Of particular note is the decline in Judique-Creignish and Mabou Consolidated Schools, which respectively lost 37 and 30 percent of their students over the ten-year period from 1990 to 2000. The problem of declining enrollment was not just a problem in Inverness County: it was characteristic of the entire Strait Regional School Board area, which includes Inverness, Richmond, Antigonish, and Guysborough Counties.

Table 1. Change in School Enrollment: Judique, Port Hood, Mabou, and Whycocomagh, 1990-2000.

School	Number of Students			Change During Period
	1990-91	1996-97	1999-2000	
Judique-Creignish Consolidated	383	324	240	- 143
Port Hood Consolidated	320	333	304	- 16
Mabou Consolidated	443	351	308	- 135
Whycocomagh Consolidated	309	342	320	+ 11

These declining school populations have a very large impact, because the provincial Department of Education allocates funds and teachers to each school primarily based on student enrollments. When enrollment drops, there is less money for upkeep, fewer course choices, overworked teachers, and larger class sizes due to the smaller number of teachers.

In the early 1990s, rumours of school closures began to circulate around Inverness County. At the end of 1995, the Inverness District School Board placed a one-year moratorium on the study of school closures. But, in 1996, this Board was amalgamated into the Strait Regional School Board, representing the four counties mentioned above. The new Regional School Board met for the first time in January of 1996, and by May of that year it had developed a document entitled "The Future is Now," which put forward a plan for school amalgamation. Over the next five years, the development and implementation of this plan was to be one of the hottest topics in Inverness County.

PART II: LOCAL RESPONSE TO THE PROCESS OF AMALGAMATION

The Strait Regional School Board provided several opportunities for public participation and input into the decision-making process surrounding amalgamation. Local school councils made presentations to the School Board, and public meetings were held so people could put their opinions and concerns directly to School Board members.

Refusing and Fearing Change

At the beginning of this process, many community members proclaimed that they wouldn't settle for anything less than the maintenance of their current school, while others demanded a new school in *their* community serve all four communities. The communities of Judique, Mabou, Port Hood, and Whycocomagh were clearly pitted against one another at the outset. Each community feared that its neighbours would "win," and at their expense. People in all these communities were afraid that, in the end, their children would simply be bussed to larger existing schools in Inverness or Port Hawkesbury.

Innovative Ideas from Local School Councils to Keep Their Schools Functional

In an attempt to save their community schools, local school councils developsed innovative plans to keep their schools running. Some of these proposed innovative ideas were tried in the late 1990s, and they included distance education using webcams, semestering of high school courses, dropping 200-level "general" courses, splitting classes in elementary schools (for instance, instead of having two Grade Two classes and two Grade Three classes, there would be one Grade Two class, one Grade Three class, and one mixed Grade Two and Grade Three class), corporate sponsorships, community mentoring, independent study by high school students, challenging for credit, and offering courses in alternate years (for example, Grade Eleven physics was offered in 1996 and Grade Twelve physics was offered in 1997).

Searching for a Compromise

Community members from Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood formed a committee to develop a compromise. In September of 1996, they asked the School Board for a new Grade Nine-Twelve school, which would integrate local history, culture, and the environment into the curriculum. In the fall of 1996, the School Board held public meetings throughout the district. Residents of Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood reluctantly considered amalgamation of their senior grades, while the community of Whycocomagh refused to entertain the very idea of school closure. Instead, Whycocomagh proposed to turn its school into an environmental school. This proposal involved special, hands-on programs to teach students about the natural history of the Whycocomagh area (for example, local geology, wildlife, and river systems). Concerned citizens began to determine the feasibility of such a program.

Protest and Resistance

In December of 1996, seven students at Judique-Creignish Consolidated protesting the proposed closure of their school conducted a one-day occupation of the school, chaining the doors shut from the inside. Allegedly, the School Board responded by cutting power to the school. The students' protest, together with several similar occupations at other schools in the Strait Regional School District, drew widespread attention in the provincial media.

Twelve communities from the Strait District came together to form the Rural Education Coalition. This group questioned the legality of the Board's vote on "The Future is Now" document. It had been approved by a margin of 20-10, but the Rural Education Coalition suspected that an unreleased second draft of the document had already existed at the time of the vote. The Strait School Board responded by asking St. Francis Xavier University's Extension Department, which was facilitating the Coalition, to withdraw its support. According to the *Inverness Oran*, the university was also "ordered" to get out, but the article doesn't say who did the ordering.

Toward Amalgamation

In February of 1997 the Strait Regional School Board released "Education for a New Century: Finding Solutions." This document promised no school closures in the 1997-98 school year, but it did not contain any assurances that students would not be moved from their existing school to a school in another community. At this point, the Board divided its district into nine regions. The communities in each region were asked to agree on a plan. Focus groups, facilitated by independent parties, met to come up with solutions.

Judique, Mabou, Port Hood, and Whycocomagh were grouped together in one region. According to someone who was involved at the meetings for this region, "At the end of a lot of meetings, we came to an agreement, which was that Whycocomagh would remain a Primary-Twelve school. Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood would have a common high school, which would probably be in Port Hood. Mabou and Judique would have Primary-Eight schools." This person then added, "The School Board hadn't expected that the communities would come to an agreement, so when that proposal was brought before the School Board, they had security guards, it was such a large meeting." This meeting, held in April of 1997, saw presentations from all nine regions, but only two of the regions had reached consensus.

A report by Ati Consultants on the implementation of "The Future is Now" suggested that Grades Nine-Twelve should be moved from Whycocomagh and sent to a new school to be built in Southwest Mabou. This school was provisionally called an "international academy" because there was a plan to promote it globally and so draw international students. The School Board decided that there was enough community support to go ahead with building it. However, rumours flew around Inverness County that there would be no money for new school construction, something the School Board denied. Then, in June of 1997 it was revealed that the School Board had drafted a document showing how they

would move students if the province refused to pay for new schools. Under this plan, Port Hood was slated to lose its school entirely. People there held an angry public meeting and vowed that none of their students would be bussed from Port Hood until a new school was built there for at least some grades.

The following week, the School Board voted on twelve recommendations concerning school amalgamations. Though they hired security guards and RCMP officers, the meeting was peaceful. The Board voted in favour of all twelve recommendations, which included the construction of an international academy in Mabou, a Primary-Eight school in Port Hood, and the retrofitting of the Whycocomagh School for use as a Primary-Eight school. The vote, however, did not end the protests or the work of community groups. In June of 1998, ratepayers in Whycocomagh voted 177-2 in favour of keeping their children home from school for a day to protest the loss of the local high school.

Three New Schools

As a result of amalgamation, three new schools were built. Two were Primary-Eight schools built privately and leased to the province. One of these is Bayview Education Centre in Port Hood, which draws students from Judique, Mabou, and Port Hood. Enrollment in 2000-2001 was 495 students, and in 2001-2002, 453 students. The second is Whycocomagh Education Centre. Parents in Whycocomagh look upon this new school as a triumph for their community. Enrollment in 2001-2002 was 191 students The third new school was the publicly built Dalbrae Academy in Mabou, a Nine-Twelve high school that takes students from all four communities. It includes a 500-seat theatre known as Strathspey Place. Enrollment in 2000-2001 was 418 students, and in 2001-2002, 413 students.

PART III: COMMUNITY REACTION TO AMALGAMATION

Feelings in Central Inverness County

Although the Strait Regional School Board did offer opportunities – through meetings and two rounds of focus groups – for public input around the issue of school closures and amalgamation, many people who took part in this process were not satisfied with it. Today, there is still a strong feeling of disillusionment toward, and distrust of, the School Board. This distrust led parents in Judique to call for a forensic audit of the Board in 1997, though the School Board dismissed this request. One parent remembers a School Board official saying at a public meeting at the time, “You people wouldn’t know what ‘forensic’ meant!” A forensic audit performed in 2001 found that $2.5 million went missing from School Board coffers between 1996 and 2000, the period coinciding with the amalgamations. The audit also implicated top School Board officials and led to a lengthy RCMP investigation.

Needless to say, the results of the 2001 forensic audit have not served to lessen the lingering ill feelings in central Inverness County toward the School Board. For example, one parent said she suspects the School Board deliberately underfunded schools in order to make amalgamation seem more necessary. Another says, “I think the rot that was there in the School Board goes right through to the Department of Education. I’m totally convinced that everyone right up to the highest levels of the Department of Education knew what was going on but weren’t doing anything about it.” Many people feel they were powerless to stop the school closures, as reflected in the comments of one person who said, “I don’t feel they listened to our point of view. They’d made up their minds before. Our School Board representative had no desire to listen to our concerns.” Others simply said there was an unpleasant odour surrounding the whole process.

Benefits of Amalgamation

Despite the protests and other actions taken against amalgamation, parents and students have also indicated that they can see some benefits from the process. Old, run-down school buildings have been replaced by new, modern schools. “Dalbrae is bright, not like the old school,” noted one student. The

new and improved physical facilities include new buildings, new computers, new sports facilities, new books, and a theatre – Strathspey Place. The larger schools allow for more class choices, including art and music programs in both elementary and high school. "My daughter had a wonderful year at Bayview. Amalgamation wasn't as bad as we thought," said one parent who had been actively involved in the fight against school closures.

Many parents were worried that amalgamation would increase fighting in the new schools, as students from rival communities were forced into one building. However, that hasn't happened. In fact, it appears the opposite has occurred, as the larger student body has allowed for new friendships to flourish. As one student noted, "It was only four small communities where everyone knew everyone else, or if they didn't, they knew someone who knew you. Everyone blended. Our class was a pretty tight-knit group, but when we went up to Dalbrae, everyone found a new group of friends, even though we were still friends with each other."

Issues and Problems Associated with Amalgamation

Quality of Physical Structures

Despite the benefits noted with the opening of the new schools, there were also problems with them. As mentioned earlier, two of the new schools were built by the private sector and leased to the province for twenty years, under a system known as P-3 (Public-Private Partnership). There are complaints that relations between the province and the private investment firm involved in the two schools, Ashford Investments, has not worked out well. "If [Bayview] wasn't a P-3 school, it would be better," said one resident of Port Hood. There are complaints that Ashford used shoddy construction methods: for example, the walls are very thin and are easily damaged. Some facilities outside the two schools remain underdeveloped. The soccer field at Dalbrae is not finished and the track at Bayview has not been surfaced. There have been complaints about the poor quality of the playground at Bayview. "They were required to provide a fully equipped playground, and according to them, one piece completes their requirement," claimed one parent. Elementary classes have to take turns using the red plastic slide and jungle gym. Students are still fundraising to add more playground equipment.

Impact on Students

Some students now have to spend up to two hours per day on busses. This limits their after-school time, presenting a barrier to participation in extracurricular activities. This issue was brought to light through a survey conducted by Whycocomagh parents in 2001: it found that, with the exception of hockey, no Whycocomagh students (all of whom have one-way bus rides longer than 30 minutes) were taking part in team sports.

Indeed, sports is a significant issue. Where there used to be four teams, there is now only one. For example, as many as 70 students try out for the hockey team. On one hand, this means sports teams are of better quality, as reflected, for example, in Dalbrae Academy winning both the boys' and girls' provincial hockey titles in 2002. On the other hand, many students who may have had the chance to take part in team sports before amalgamation now find they can't "make the cut."

Impact on the Community

Each community feels the loss of its local school. With the old schools, most teachers lived in the same community they taught in. Almost all parents knew someone who worked at the school. This helped to make the school more accessible to the community, as it was easier to know the right person to approach with concerns. The new schools have not yet drawn the community involvement the old schools enjoyed. Parents feel somewhat alienated by the size of the new schools, by the unknown administrators, and in some cases, by the very distance to the school.

In Judique, as other communities, small businesses have been affected by the school closures. For example, the local hair salon and other businesses have had to extend their evening hours to

accommodate teachers and students who arrive home almost an hour later than they used to. Judique residents are also concerned about the loss of business experienced by the local convenience store and the local garage. The buildings that housed the former schools have been sold to the municipality and are expected to be torn down. Communities have lost places where they were formerly able to hold evening classes and group meetings.

In Port Hood, a convenience store next to the old school is now across the village and on the other side of the Trans-Canada Highway from the new school. In Mabou, the arena has lost considerable business because the Dalbrae teams play at the newer facility in Port Hood. The arena was located next door to the old school and used to rent the rink for elementary children to go skating every week. Also, the children could easily walk to the rink for hockey practice or figure skating after school. But now, such activities must wait for the busses to arrive from Port Hood, so the arena loses revenues from at least an hour of practice time on school days.

In Whycocomagh, residents regret the loss of energy and talent that high school students used to bring to community efforts and events. In all four communities, local students used to organize events such as concerts, and volunteer to help with litter campaigns, community gardens, and other such activities. Senior citizens say they miss seeing the children walking to school and playing in the schoolyard.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

The biggest benefit of amalgamation is a new spirit of cooperation and tolerance among the people of the four communities. Children now have friends from four communities instead of just one. Parents from all the communities are brought together by school events. “We as a people are being called upon to redefine community. It’s no longer just Judique, just Port Hood, just Mabou, just Whycocomagh,” observed one person. Many people see the new schools, especially Dalbrae Academy, as growing focal points for new, larger feelings of community. Parents say more contact with children from other communities gives their own children a wider perspective on the world.

There are also fears, however, of what the future may bring. Enrollment is still declining in the Strait area, causing one parent to say, “I think this is only the first amalgamation because enrollment is still down. I think that’s why [the Town of] Inverness was growling, because I suspect they think they’re going to be shunted down here to fill up the school at some stage.” Another woman summed up her perspective on the situation by saying, “I think losing a school doesn’t cause the community to die. It’s a sign that the community is already dying.”

There is a feeling that both the government and urban citizens seem not to value rural citizens, as reflected in the comments of one woman who said, “Someone has to live in rural areas. You have to have people fishing and farming... but it’s as if someone says, ‘You people in rural areas, there’s not very many of you, you don’t really count.’ And so we have to travel further for services.” The funding formula for schools, tying funding to student enrollment is problematic for rural areas experiencing population decline. “We have to find a better way than basing the number of teachers on the number of students because we’re always going to lose out and have the same problem,” observed one resident.