

Report to the Minister on St. John School Closing, TBCDSB

January 7, 2009.

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne,
Minister of Education,
900 Bay Street,
Toronto, M7A 1L2

Re: Facilitator's Report on St. John School, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board

Dear Minister,

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with my findings as the facilitator of the administrative review of the accommodation review process undertaken by the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board (TBCDSB) regarding St. John School. I was appointed by your Ministry on October 23, 2008, to conduct this review.

Your Ministry received a request for an administrative review of the process that resulted in the approval of the TBCDSB to close St. John School no later than June 30, 2009. The request was filed by Silvana Cacciatore-Roy and Luigi Tassone on July 18, 2008. The Board has confirmed that 54 petitions were submitted. These petitions were from 43 households out of 130 families registered at the school. This represents 33% of eligible families and therefore, meets the requirements for an administrative review.

I was present in the TBCDSB from October 29 to October 31, 2008. During that time, I met with the Director of Education, senior school board officials, the Board of Trustees, the trustees who served on what TBCDSB calls the School Area Review Committee (SARC), the members of the SARC, the Principal and some staff members and students of St. John, Corpus Christi and St Pius X schools, and interested members of the school community.

I was ably assisted in my work by Susan Aris of the Thunder Bay Regional Office of the Ministry of Education. The parents, trustees, board officials, students and community members with whom I met were all very generous with their time and their perspective and our conversations were frank and productive. I appreciate their assistance.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The following terms of reference were established by your Ministry for my work as the Facilitator conducting this administrative review:

PRINCIPLES

- School boards, parents, communities and the government recognize that school boards have the legal right to close schools after following a board-approved pupil accommodation review process.

- The Ministry of Education released the new *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* on October 31, 2006. The guideline provides direction to school boards regarding pupil accommodation reviews undertaken to determine the future of a school or a group of schools.
- School boards are responsible for establishing and following their own accommodation review policies. School boards' accommodation review policies are to reflect the requirements of the Ministry's *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline*.
- Under the *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline*, schools are required to make school valuation the centre of board and community decision-making. School valuation requires school boards to consider the value of a school or schools, based on community consultation.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The independent facilitator shall be responsible for:

- Determining whether the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board followed its board-approved pupil accommodation review process in conducting the accommodation review;
- Reviewing formal documentation, interviewing relevant participants including Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) members, petitioners and board staff;
- Submitting a written report to the Minister of Education upon completion of the review.

REPORTING TO THE MINISTER

The report should be in the form of a letter to the Minister, indicating whether the accommodation review process followed the board's pupil accommodation review policy.

The Minister is responsible and will make the facilitator's findings available to the board and the public in a timely fashion.

BOARD PROFILE AND DESCRIPTION OF ST. JOHN SCHOOL AND CORPUS CHRISTI SCHOOL

The Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board provides elementary, secondary and alternative education programs to students within the District of Thunder Bay, Ontario, that covers 4960 square kilometres. The Board currently operates 16 elementary schools (JK to grade 6), 2 of which are dual track English/French immersion schools; 3 senior elementary schools (grade 7 and 8); and 2 secondary schools. The Mission Statement of the TBDCSB speaks to its commitment to "providing quality education

which combines academic excellence with a concern for the spiritual, moral, social, emotional, cultural and physical growth of the student.”

Efforts continue to deliver quality programs in buildings that are up-to-date. Over the past 5 years the Board has embarked on an aggressive Capital Plan that has seen significant improvements to many of the buildings it operates. Simultaneously, the Board closely monitors enrolment trends in an effort to maintain an optimal inventory of buildings.

During the last three years Board enrolment has declined from 8,961 students at September 30, 2005, to 8,620 students at September 30, 2008. During that time period, the elementary panel has declined by 458 students while the secondary panel rose by 117 for a net decline of 341 students.

Going forward, the elementary enrolment is projected to decline by a further 450 students by September 2012, while secondary enrolment is expected to decline by approximately 200 during the same time frame. Total enrolment by September 2012 is projected at approximately 7,980 students.

St. John School is a JK to grade six school with a current enrolment of 156 students, 9 of whom are in a Community Living class that serves students with multiple exceptionalities. It is situated in an area of the city that is characterized by high transiency and a growing number of families who are of Aboriginal background. Currently, 61 of the students in attendance are of Aboriginal background as identified through a voluntary self-identification process. St. John is the smallest of 16 elementary schools in the system. Optimistic enrolment projections indicate that by 2013, the student population will be just over 140 students. This represents a 10% decline over the next 5 year period. Performance scores as measured by EQAO show that the school continues to perform well below both the Board average and the provincial average in both the grade three and six assessments.

The school was built in 1965 and is situated on a parcel of property where the Board does not have clear title. The school is a bi-level design presenting many challenges with respect to accessibility and safety. The main office does not have a sight line to any entrance to the building; the bus loading zone is on a significant slope; the library is limited; the school has no proper gymnasium. In addition, the RECAPP database indicates that an investment of approximately \$1.3 million would be needed to replace the roof, mechanical and electrical systems, as well as a full replacement of the existing, highly inefficient electrical heating system.

Despite the liabilities of the school outlined above, there is a warm community spirit in the school and the students and parents with whom I spoke feel very comfortable in the school and in their interactions with the school staff.

Corpus Christi, the proposed receiving school for St. John's students upon the closing of St. John, is a sound building constructed in 1951. The school is in a neighbourhood of homes built between 50 and 75 years ago and is situated on a property covering approximately 1.35 hectares. The school has seen fluctuations in student population as the demographics in the Northward of Thunder Bay have changed. Currently the school houses 172 full-time students. Every morning, there are an additional 8 students attending Corpus Christi in one of the Centres of Excellence for students identified with

significant learning disabilities. They are reintegrated into their home schools in the afternoon. At present, 10 of the students are identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry as reported through the voluntary self-identification process. Enrolment projections indicate that by 2013, the student population will be approximately 160 students, or about an 8% decline over this 5 year period. Performance scores as measured by EQAO show that the school consistently scores among the top schools of the Board and well above the Provincial average at both primary and junior levels

Through the Capital Plan process, the school was identified about three years ago as one where investments would be beneficial. The school has a gymnasium and a library that are both sub-standard; it is a bi-level design presenting challenges with respect to accessibility and safety; there is a lack of meeting spaces; and the main office does not have a sight line to the main entrance. In August of 2008, work began on a \$3 million renewal plan that will see the conversion of the existing gymnasium and library into classroom space, the creation of a new gymnasium, library, meeting spaces as well as the construction and relocation of the main office as part of the new main entrance for the school. A handicap lift will also be installed. The project will be completed by February of 2009. I also visited St. Pius X in order to see the finished renovations that are very much like what students from St. John will experience at Corpus Christi when the work is completed there.

SUMMARY OF THE BOARD PROCESS LEADING TO THE DECISION TO CLOSE ST. JOHN SCHOOL

On November 26, 2007, TBCDSB was presented with a report that outlined the Long Term Capital Plan support required "to sustain the delivery of quality educational programs for all students in effective and efficient learning environments." This report recommended that given the challenges listed above, it would be in the best interest of the overall system to study St. John for closure by no later than June 30, 2009. The Board appointed two trustees, (Romeo and O'Brien) to the School Area Review Committee.

The TBCDSB passed its *School Closure Study Policy # 305* on April 18, 2006. The Ministry of Education released new Guideline regarding pupil accommodation in October, 2006. The TBCDSB did not alter its policy after the release of the Ministry's policy as it was felt that the existing policy met the requirements of the Ministry's October 2006 document and had been used effectively with earlier school closure studies at St. Edward and St. Thomas schools.

In accordance with Board policy, a SARC was established. Its membership was:

- Two trustees (with Trustee Romeo as Chair)
- The Chair of the Catholic School Council
- Two parent representatives chosen by the CSC
- The School Superintendent
- The School Principal
- One representative from the school staff appointed by OECTA
- Other staff as required for recording purposes

The Board policy stipulates that the SARC meets **as often as required**. Two meetings were held on February 26, 2008, and March 25, 2008, respectively. The SARC reviewed

Policy # 305, discussed background information, and considered the school valuation form. On April 10, 2008, the SARC report was submitted to the Director of Education. On April 21, 2008, the Director's Report on the SARC was presented to the Board of Trustees. In accordance with Policy # 305, two occasions were provided for deputations to the Board with respect to the recommendations made by the SARC. The first of these opportunities was the regularly scheduled Board meeting of May 12, 2008, and the second was at the Board meeting of June 2, 2008. In advance of these meetings the SARC report was posted in the TBCDSB education centre. As well, notices were given for deputations through the Board website and The Chronicle Journal.

Three deputations were made to the Board on May 12, 2008. Four further deputations were made at the Board meeting of June 2, 2008. These deputations were made by the same parties who presented at the May 12 Board meeting. Two written submissions were received and two letters were received. All documents were included in the appendices of the Director's report to the Board.

There were a number of issues raised by the presenters to the Board and, as *School Closure Study Policy # 305* dictates, the Director addressed each of these in his report to the Board to ensure that the Board had all relevant information that was available before voting on the Director's recommendation.

On Monday June 23, 2008, the Director recommended the following to the Board:

1. That the Board of Trustees for TBCDSB close St. John school no later than June 30, 2009, and that the students from St. John School be relocated to Corpus Christi School effective September 1, 2009.
2. That a working group be established no later than September 22, 2008 to plan for the seamless transition of students from St John School to Corpus Christi School. This committee must be representative of both school staffs and parents from both schools and that additional resource personnel be made available to this committee as requested through the Director of Education.
3. That a comprehensive transition plan be presented to the Board of Trustees at the Board Meeting scheduled for November 24, 2008.

The Director's recommendation was passed unanimously.

PETITIONS

There were a number of issues with respect to the process, organization and decisions regarding the St. John School ARC raised by the petitioners. These issues were noted both in the formal letter requesting a review of the accommodation review process undertaken by the TBCDSB regarding St. John School and in the presentations made at the two Board meetings that were held to receive public input. In addition, several of these issues were raised in the public meeting which I held with the community and at the meeting I held with the SARC.

I will deal with these issues individually and comment first on the perspectives of the parents and community members. I will then outline the Board's responses to the identified issues.

ISSUE #1: NUMBER OF MEETINGS

The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* stipulates in Section 3.3 that “the SARC will meet as often as required. Meetings shall be open to the public and advertised in advance.”

PETITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVE:

Two meetings of the SARC were held on February 26, 2008, and March 25, 2008, respectively, and were recorded in minutes as required by Section 3.3.2 of the policy. The SARC reviewed Policy # 305, discussed background information, and considered the School Valuation Form. The petitioners and a number of other community members who attended the public meeting I held on Oct 30, stated that this was not a sufficient number of meetings and that further meetings were required. They further stated that they had been assured at the beginning of the first SARC meeting when the process was reviewed that there would be as many meetings as were required to satisfy the needs of the group for discussion and input. The petitioners acknowledge that while there were only two meetings of the SARC, the Board held two open public meetings on May 12 and June 2 which the petitioners attended. At the meeting I held with the SARC and again in the public meeting with the community, members of the SARC claimed that they left the second meeting expecting there would be a third meeting to review the completed valuation form and to receive further information. They asserted that they did not realize that a recommendation to close the school would go forward from the SARC to the Director of Education without the group seeing and discussing the report.

THE BOARD’S RESPONSE:

The Director of Education addressed this issue in his report to the Board dated April 10, 2008 as follows:

“Two meetings of the SARC were held...Presenters felt that this was not a sufficient number. Our Policy #305, section 3.3, does not stipulate a minimum or maximum number of meetings; rather, the reference is to meet as often as required. The Board followed the same process with the reviews of St. Edward and St. Thomas. In addition to these meetings of the SARC, the Board did provide two opportunities for input...”

In my discussions with Board officials, Associate Director Tom Mustapic and the Superintendent Joan Powell, who co-ordinated the school closure study, stated that they believed that by the end of the second meeting all participants had been heard and in the group had “exhausted all arguments.” It was acknowledged that the parent participants in the SARC had requested further information about school comparators and clarity around the valuation form. The Board stated that at the conclusion of the second meeting, commitments had been given to provide both of these pieces of information and clarification. The Board representatives at the meeting said there was not a request for a third meeting: rather, there was a request for further information.

ISSUE # 2: SCHOOL VALUATION FORM

The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* stipulates in Section 3:4:2 that “the SARC will prepare a report using the school valuation form (Appendix B).”

PETITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVE:

The petitioners and other members of the SARC who met with me on October 30 claim that the group did not understand the valuation form. Several members of the SARC expressed frustration with the form and felt there was miscommunication about its meaning and intent. One member of the SARC stated that the meetings were marred by “a failure to communicate because of emotional upset” and another member of the SARC felt that “both SARC meetings were out of control and off task.” Several pointed out that the form only had three parts and failed to include the section on value to students. The minutes of the March 25 SARC meeting reflect that Superintendent Powell and Principal Heringer reported that “they had investigated the genesis of the Valuation Form and found that the form is provided to Boards from the Ministry of Education. Further information regarding the definitions of terms is not available.”

THE BOARD’S RESPONSE:

The Director stated that the TBCDSB school valuation form “is consistent with the format suggested by the Ministry: it is not a prescribed document.” He observed that this is the same form used by the Board in other school closure studies. He acknowledged that “concerns were raised as to the timing of the distribution of the form and questions that the form left unanswered.” One of the trustee representatives on the SARC stated that, although the form did not include a section about value to the students, that concept was part of the discussion implicitly. The Director stated that “the Board may wish to consider revisions to the school valuation form in the future.”

ISSUE # 3 STARTING TIME OF PUBLIC MEETINGS:

THE PETITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVE:

There was a concern expressed by two of the petitioners and another member of the SARC that the starting times for the public meetings were changed from the announced time of 7:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. with the result that the petitioners felt they arrived late and were at a disadvantage.

THE BOARD’S RESPONSE:

The Trustees and Senior Staff of the Board indicated there had been a miscommunication about the starting time at the public meeting and that this was remedied by a reordering of the agenda to begin the deputations at 7:30 p.m. The Board dealt with other matters until the community presenters arrived.

ISSUE # 4 GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS

PETITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE:

Members of the SARC expressed concern about access to information in a timely way. It was claimed that some of the information requested was never provided regarding comparative financial data for the whole system. Members of the SARC and community members at the community meeting I held stated that they did not receive pertinent information about the program and environment of the receiving school Corpus Christi where students from St. John would be transferred. Some community members claimed that there was a lack of information about the public meetings.

THE BOARD'S RESPONSE:

The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* stipulates in Section 3:4:1 that:

“the SARC shall receive an information package which will contain such data as capacity of each school, actual and projected enrolments, special programs within each school, portable data, pupil distribution data, transportation service data, relevant financial data, area maps, parish boundary data/map, site and floor plans, tenant information/agreements and other relevant data.”

The first detail to clarify is with respect to the information that the petitioners claim they did not receive. The Senior Officials assert that the information requested was presented to the SARC at the second meeting held on March 25, 2008. The meeting minutes reflect that the pertinent comparative data for Corpus Christi and St. John were given to members of the SARC. In addition, they stated that they provided one other school's data, that of St. Jude as another comparator. They contend that all data germane to the issue at St. John was provided and that they are not in a position to disclose sensitive information that is protected by FOI limitations.

The minutes of the March 25 meeting of the SARC record that it was indicated to the parent members of the SARC that the School Superintendent would be providing detailed information about every school that went beyond the types of information outlined in the TBCDSB Policy # 305. The Board's interpretation of Section 3.4.1 is that the information is specific to the schools under review. A determination was made that the request would have involved providing sensitive financial information that was privileged and would have required extrapolating sensitive data. It was further determined that this would not have been possible in the timelines required by the Policy, nor was it germane to the decision being made about St. John. Unfortunately, this was not communicated back to the parent members of the SARC and the Director of Education does acknowledge that it would have been advantageous to the process if we would have communicated that decision in writing to the SARC.

The Board posted notice of the public meetings on the Board website and in the local newspaper, The Chronicle Journal. There was some indication by the Board that in the future, the information could be sent home through the school councils as well.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE SARC

1. Some SARC members expressed frustration with the way the SARC meetings ended and stated that it was their expectation that the SARC group would be reconvened before any report to the Director and the Board was submitted on behalf of the SARC. They said they believed two meetings did not provide sufficient time to determine “if a school of history should be closed.”
2. Members of the SARC felt that information that they had presented to the Board regarding programs that could be introduced to benefit the school were not seriously considered because no board officials or trustees raised any questions after their presentations at the public meetings.
3. There was general frustration with the discussion of the school valuation form. Some felt they did not understand its purpose and there was no satisfactory explanation of its terms and meaning. Others felt the questions were misleading. It was also asserted by some SARC members that the form used by TBCDSB only addressed three of the four components of school valuation: from their perspective, “value to the student” was not directly discussed. One of the trustees who was a member of the SARC agreed that this component had not been dealt with in a discrete discussion but stated that the value of the school to students was an implicit part of all the SARC discussions. Some parents raised concerns about the special needs students in the Community Living class and felt their positive impact on the other students and their well-being and ultimate placement was not discussed adequately during the SARC process.
4. There was also a complaint raised about confusion over the timing of the public presentations to the Board by members of the SARC and the public.
5. Parents expressed concern about what they considered to be delayed responses to their request for specific comparative information.
6. Some members of the SARC expressed concern that the best interests of the student population of the school which is 43% identified as Aboriginal/First Nation were not taken into account in the decision to send students from St. John to Corpus Christi which has a smaller First Nations population.
7. Several members of the SARC, including the two petitioners who requested a review of the process, stated that they had been assured that they would see the final report of the SARC before it was submitted to the Director with their names on it, but this did not happen.
8. Several members of the SARC said that the meetings were “off task and were marked by a failure to communicate constructively due to conflict and emotional confusion.”
9. Some SARC members felt the review should have focussed on Corpus Christi as well, given the Ministry’s *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* states, “wherever possible, accommodation reviews should focus on a group of schools within a Board’s planning area rather than examine a single school.”

10. One parent who was not a member of the SARC but very interested in the process, stated that the TBCDSB Policy # 305 was written before the government Guideline was released and that it has not been revised. She further stated that the SARC had a limited membership and did not involve anyone from the broader community.
11. One parent expressed the view that the public meetings were not accessible for parents in the St. John community because most of them walked to their destinations and did not have access to transportation.
12. Two parents claimed they had not been informed of the June 23 meeting where the decision would be made.

FACILITATOR'S OBSERVATIONS:

1. The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* stipulates in Section 3.3 .2 that “the SARC will meet as often as required. Meetings shall be open to the public and advertised in advance.” Board officials and trustees who attended the SARC stated that although the parents were not all happy with the outcome, “it was their belief that the group was moving forward and had exhausted all arguments.” They believed that the policy’s expectations had been met with the two ARC meetings especially given they provided two opportunities for further public input to the Board on May 12, 2008, and June 2, 2008. There is no doubt in my mind that a third meeting to present and discuss the report of the SARC after it was finalized would have been helpful for transparency and clarity purposes, although it is likely that consensus on this issue would not have been reached even if there had been more meetings of the SARC. However, even if agreement on the outcome couldn’t be reached, the SARC members had every reason to feel mistrust and confusion as a result of not being allowed to discuss the final report which outlined the process in which they had been highly invested. Clearly, the decision about what constitutes “the required number of meetings” is a matter of contention between the Board and the community. In previous school closure studies in the TBCDSB, the SARC reached a conclusion after one or two meetings. These experiences may have influenced the views of board officials and trustees who served on the SARC for St. John. This issue represents a difference of opinion regarding the intent of the policy rather than a violation of it as it is now written. The Board may wish to re-examine this component of the policy, among others, in light of this experience.
2. There is no evidence to suggest that the ideas of the parents about new programming for St. John were ignored. Rather, there seems to be a difference of opinion regarding the practicality and efficacy of the suggestions. I think that it was felt by senior officials of the Board that several of the suggestions would not deliver the increase in enrolment that was needed to keep the school viable.
3. The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* stipulates in Section 3.3.2 that “The SARC will prepare a report using the school valuation form (Appendix B).” The SARC did engage in discussions using a school valuation form. However, there is no doubt that the discussions were not focussed nor were the terms well enough understood by the whole group to ensure a useful and informative

discussion for all participants. When members of the SARC asked for clarification of the meaning of the form and its component parts, they were given limited information and, according to the minutes of the March 25, 2008, meeting of the SARC, Superintendent Powell “reviewed the information that was provided at the February 26, 2008 meeting for the School Valuation Form. The Committee provided some additional information to be recorded on the form.” However, with respect to clarification of members’ questions about the form, the minutes record that “Ms. Powell (Superintendent) and Ms. Heringer (Principal) reported that they had investigated the genesis of the Valuation Form and found that the form is provided to boards from the Ministry of Education. Further information regarding definitions of terms is not available.” This response certainly didn’t help the members come to terms with the expectations of the form or ease their concerns that it created a negative impression of the school. It was recognized by the whole group that the school valuation activity was central to the process in which they were engaging. I believe strongly that more discussion and explanations were required to ensure that the tool was useful and contributed to greater understanding rather than frustration. That said, the valuation form was used as required by the Board’s policy, albeit not as effectively as it might have been.

The valuation form which the Board employed is very close to the one suggested by the Ministry except that it lacked a specific section on “value to the student.” This in itself does not constitute a violation of the Board’s policy as several participants said ‘value to the student’ was a central, implicit part of the discussion.

Concerns about the special needs students in the Community Living Class will be dealt with in the Board’s transition plan and parents will be involved in these decisions. This was of particular and understandable concern to the parents of children in this class and the parents of children who benefitted from interaction with these students with exceptional needs. However, I am satisfied the Board is and was committed to engaging in a productive dialogue with all concerned with this issue as a part of the process for creating a smooth transition for all the students.

4. A complaint was raised about confusion over the timing of the public presentations to the Board by members of the SARC and the public. I am satisfied that this was simply a communication misunderstanding and that the Board reordered its agenda to deal with other matters and waited until 7:30 for the deputants to arrive before beginning the discussion on the accommodation review. This did not represent a violation of the policy.
5. The Board position regarding the provision of requested comparative information is that it was presented to the SARC at the second meeting held on March 25, 2008. The meeting minutes reflect that the pertinent comparative data for Corpus Christi and St. John were given to members of the SARC. In addition, data for one other school, St. Jude, was provided as another comparator. The Board contends that all data germane to the issue of the St. John school closure review was provided. There is no doubt that further information was requested regarding comparators for the whole system at the last SARC. A determination was made that the request would have involved providing sensitive financial information that was privileged. It was further determined that this would not have been possible

in the timelines required by Policy # 305, nor was it germane to the decision being made about St. John. Unfortunately, this decision was not communicated back to the parent members of the SARC as it should have been.

6. The concern about the needs of First Nations students is a substantive matter considered in the decision itself rather than a process question. The assertion that the well-being of First Nations students was not taken into account is a matter of a difference of opinion rather than a violation of the policy. In his response to this concern, the Director stated that the traditions and values that are being celebrated at St. John School do not represent a unique situation. He stated that he was confident that the students' needs and cultural traditions would be met at the receiving school and that the transition process would ensure that all appropriate supports were in place to make this a reality.

“The latest census data released by Statistics Canada indicate a 26% increase in First Nation populations moving to urban centres. We have a growing number of schools that show increases in registration from our First Nation communities. I believe that the growing number of initiatives that we continue to implement and support with respect to Aboriginal education will meet the demands that this will place on all schools, not just St. John.”

There was a concern that the socio-economic impact of moving to the Corpus Christi area on the parents of the St John community was not taken into account in the decision making. This issue was raised during the ARC discussions and in the public presentations process and again it is a matter of differing perspectives on this question rather than a matter of alignment of the process to the Board's Policy #305. The Director addressed this issue as well in his report to the Board and indicated that parents would not have to consider relocating to a more expensive area of the city as “the Board is assuming full responsibility transporting of the students to another school which is 1.3 kilometres to the north-west.” The Director also indicated that the breakfast program which was raised as a concern during the community discussion would continue. In summary, these issues, while important, do not give rise to a misalignment of the process to the Board's *School Closure Study Policy # 305*.

7. Members of the SARC said that they had been assured that they would see the final report of the SARC before it was submitted to the Director with their names on it but this did not happen. In the minutes of the March 25, 2008 meeting of the SARC, it is stated that, “The week of March 31, Ms. Powell will provide a copy of the report to the SARC members. Feedback to Ms Powell will be received the week of April 7. The report will be presented to the Director of Education by April 11.” While the report was posted on the Board website in advance of its presentation to the Board of Trustees, it was not specifically made available to or discussed with the SARC. Given that the members of the SARC had been assured that the report would be shared with them as their names were attached to it, it is understandable that that they felt frustrated that it was broadly available but they had not discussed it as a group. There is no question that the failure to have this culminating discussion contributed to a climate of mistrust.

8. As outlined in Point # 4 above, there is no doubt that the SARC deliberations were impeded by emotional exchanges and a lack of focus and clarity about the valuation tool. However, this does not constitute a violation of the policy: rather, it points to a weakness in how the process unfolded in terms of interpretation of terms and the nature of the interactions on the SARC.
9. It was suggested that the policy was violated because the review focussed on a single school rather than following the Ministry's *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* which states that "accommodation reviews should to focus on a group of schools within a Board's planning area rather than examine a single school." However, the Guidelines states "wherever possible". The TBCDSB *School Closure Study Policy # 305* states, "the mandate of the SARC is to review the impact of a potential school closure, provide the board with a report which analyzes the relevant issues and make recommendations on the preferred alternative accommodation." This policy does not refer to reviewing schools in groups for closure as the Ministry Guideline does. So, there is clearly no violation of the Board's own policy in looking at St. John singly. In addition, it would not have been reasonable to consider Corpus Christi for closure in this accommodation review study as a capital improvement plan which required significant investment in Corpus Christi was near completion when this study began. These improvements (which I saw during my tour of the schools) well equip Corpus Christi to receive the students from St. John in a newly refurbished, expanded and much improved facility.
10. The fact that TBCDSB has not revised its *School Closure Study Policy # 305* since the Ministry Guideline was released accounts for why there are some discrepancies between the TBCDSB policy and the Ministry Guideline. In discussion with the senior officials of the Board and the trustees, it was acknowledged that the policy should be revised to address issues raised in this school accommodation study and to improve the quality of community engagement in the process. In this way, issues like the membership of the SARC could be addressed to include members of the broader community which the current policy does not stipulate. Although a letter was sent out to the community inviting broader participation, no responses were received from individuals outside the parent group.
11. The meetings of the SARC were held at St. John School. The two public consultation meetings were held at the Board offices during scheduled meetings of the Board. Some parents from the St. John community said that they found travel to the Board office for these meetings difficult as they did not own cars.
12. The community was informed of the June 23 meeting in several ways. This date and the fact that the decision on St. John would be made at that time was announced on the Board's website and at the conclusion of the second public meeting that was held on June 2, 2008 to hear community input . At that time the Chair announced the June 23 date and invited all interested parties to attend.

SUGGESTIONS

At the meeting I held with the SARC, and at the public meeting that followed, community members made several valuable comments about the process in which they participated. These observations are noted in the presentations made by the petitioners and in the written deputations made at the two public meetings held to hear community concerns. The Board may wish to take these suggestions under serious consideration. I have several suggestions that I have constructively discussed with senior officials of the Board, trustees and community members about them:

1. The TBCDSB Policy #305 was developed before the Provincial Guideline for accommodation reviews was released in October, 2006. Although the policy worked effectively for the school closure study of two other TBCDSB schools, St Edward and St.Thomas, I believe it would be timely and helpful for the Board to revisit its policy in light of this experience and the Provincial Guideline and in consultation with community members to create a workable policy which provides for full community discussion and the consideration of diverse perspectives before a decision is made to close a school.
2. Although the Board policy stipulates that the SARC will hold “as many meetings as required”, it is very difficult to reach agreement on what constitutes “as may be required.” I believe that the SARC should meet formally at least four times as the Provincial Guideline recommends. At the very least, there should be a culminating meeting where the final recommendations of the SARC are thoroughly discussed even if consensus cannot be reached.
3. The school valuation instrument employed in this process needs to explicitly include a section on “value to the student.” While I accept that this concept was an implicit part of the deliberations of the SARC, focussed discussion of this component would be helpful and reassuring to parents. Also, there should be guided discussion and clear explanations of the meaning of the valuation instrument before members of the SARC are asked to complete it.
4. If the policy is revisited and revised, it would be advisable to reconsider the membership of the SARC to include members of the broader community to provide a wide range of viewpoints on the impact of the decision on the community at large.
5. There was a concern raised by several community members about a lack of available information for the St. John parent body regarding the facility, environment and programs of the proposed receiving school, Corpus Christi. The Board officials indicated that the transition plan for the successful transfer of the students is already underway and parents input would be actively sought to ensure the students’ smooth transition to their new school. I believe more information about the proposed receiving school at the time the SARC report was being finalized would have eased parental concerns and reduced anxiety, particularly for parents of students with special needs. Overall, more communication with the affected parents regarding the decision-making processes and likely outcomes and accommodations for their children should be in place in future school closure studies and would be in the best interests of all concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Minister, I appreciated the opportunity to conduct this review and offer my advice. I was responsible for determining whether the TBCDSB followed its Board approved pupil accommodation review process in conducting the accommodation review of St. John School. I believe that the senior officials of the Board and the trustees who voted to accept the recommendation to close St. John School, sought community input and placed their decisions in the context of the overarching mission of the Board to provide "quality education which combines academic excellence with a concern for the spiritual, moral, emotional, cultural and physical growth of the student." I also believe that the process employed by the Board was closely aligned to their Board approved *School Closure Study Policy # 305*.

That said, as I have pointed out earlier in this report, this policy was written prior to the release of the new *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* (October, 2006). As officials and trustees of TBCDSB acknowledged in my discussions with them, it is time to review their policy and address three issues particularly:

- the number of meetings of the SARC
- the format and explanation of the school valuation form and
- improved and timely communication about the proposed receiving school and the transition plan to ensure successful transfer of the students to their new school

When this review and reconsideration of the TBCDSB Policy # 305 is completed, many of the areas of contention in this review will be avoided in the future. The Director of Education, John De Faveri, had stated that the Board will strive to improve their processes and is committed to learning from this review:

“We are on a journey from good to great. This review has provided us with another learning opportunity to help us meet this outcome. We are by no means a perfect organization, but we are committed to getting there! We can only achieve this by engaging all of our partners in Catholic education. We know how delicate a school closure process is for everyone, but especially the parents and the students of the school. We have tried to do our best to engage, to validate and to value and honour our entire community. We see room for improvement. It was never our intent, individually or collectively, to make a decision that was rushed or secretive. We are committed to improving our processes.”

School consolidation and the decisions regarding the wise use of public resources to provide the best possible education for all students present many difficult challenges for the board and for affected families and community members. After visiting both the closing and receiving school, I feel certain that the children of St. John will be very well served in their new school which has the advantage of new and updated facilities and expanded program opportunities.

I was greatly assisted in my task by the candour and commitment of the petitioners and community members who met with me and shared their views so openly and clearly.

Their concern for their children's well-being and success is apparent. The Board officials and trustees also approached our discussions with integrity and a genuine interest in learning how their process might be improved.

Based on my review of the process, documentation and the consultations I conducted, I have concluded that the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board followed their own policy. It is clear that this policy needs revision to be as effective a tool as possible in making difficult school closure decisions which meaningfully involve the community.

Joan Green
Facilitator

