

**SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION
EXPERIENCE STUDY (SCES) 1
DURHAM DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
FINAL REPORT**

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School Consolidation Experience Study (SCES)

“We make our recommendations about school accommodation with program improvement for students as the primary driver.” (Senior Board Staff)

“Despite staff anxieties, everyone wanted to do what was in the best interest of students.” (Teacher)

Introduction or “Why A SCES?”

Elected school boards in Ontario are responsible for providing schools and facilities for their students and operating and maintaining these schools as effectively and efficiently as possible to foster student achievement and well-being.

The consolidation of existing schools is not a new phenomenon. As the student population in Ontario has changed over time, schools have opened, closed and/or consolidated to address issues such as declining enrolment in some communities and accommodation growth pressures in others. Needless to say, decisions that necessitate change and challenge long established traditions can elicit passionate response and sometimes create charged and intense public dialogue.

While the Ministry of Education (“the Ministry”) has received feedback over the years about the pros and cons of the Accommodation Review¹ (ARC) process itself, there is comparatively little information documented about how people are impacted during and after the transition process. Most importantly, there has been little focused investigation at the provincial level into how individuals and varying stakeholder groups in a district school board are affected by the creation of a new school community through a merger of existing schools. An examination of the perspectives of participants in the process in terms of the preliminary consultations, the consolidation experience itself and the post-implementation outcomes for students’ academic achievement and well-being is an essential lens through which to consider the efficacy of right-sizing a district school board in the best interests of the learners whom it serves.

The focus of this study is to document the positive and negative experiences of transition to a new, or reorganized, school in order to draw lessons learned that can form the basis of awareness of what works best. The information collected through this study will be used to enhance understanding of what contributes to a school district making the best possible use of the facilities and resources at their disposal. The non-negotiable focus of these accommodation decisions and transformations must be to foster excellent student achievement, ensure equity, enhance public confidence and address the well-being of students. It is anticipated that this study, with its exploration of what has worked well and what approaches need to be

¹ The Ministry has reviewed the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) through a separate process. The revised Guidelines were released in Spring 2015.

reconsidered, will inform decision-making and implementation processes in individual school districts and will support future policy development provincially.

Rationale for SCES

As a part of the long-term planning for making more efficient uses of school space, the Ministry of Education has committed to documenting the impact of school consolidation as part of its ongoing quest for improved practice and positive outcomes. **For the purposes of this study, school consolidation is defined as the closure of one or more school(s) and the subsequent amalgamation into one single school, either on an existing site, or, in an entirely newly constructed facility.**

To support this goal, the Ministry committed to gathering multiple perspectives on recent experiences of school consolidations across the province in order to describe the results of these experiences (both positive and negative).

The intent of this project is for the Ministry to supplement the data currently available by collecting information on district school boards' and stakeholders' experiences with consolidation of schools in order to identify successes and challenges and to help define best practices.

The overall objective of this SCES is to document the experiences and perspectives of people involved in the transition to a new school community in an existing, new or renovated facility. While the ARC process itself has generated robust discussion both in individual district school boards and provincially, there has been comparatively little information documented about how the wide range of stakeholders are impacted during and after the transition process. It is hoped that telling the stories of specific school closure and consolidation experiences through the eyes of those most affected will shed light on the most productive processes and strategies that district school boards can employ prior to, during and after decisions have been made around school closure and consolidation.

The focus of this SCES is to determine the impact of a school consolidation of secondary schools in the Durham District School Board ("DDSB") which resulted in the recently consolidated Eastdale Collegiate and Vocational Institute on specific stakeholders. Discussions were held with specific stakeholders including students, parents, community members, school administrators, teaching and support staff, school board administration, and thought leaders from the affected schools' broader communities. The selection of this particular case study will provide an urban perspective on a secondary school consolidation experience in Ontario.

To summarize, the outcomes of this case study and its findings will:

- Provide a description of an Ontario example of school consolidation from multiple perspectives
- Support Ministry of Education evaluation of the outcomes and impact of these initiatives over time

- Identify policy issues arising from school consolidation
- Inform school boards on implementation of effective practices related to school consolidation initiatives.

Methodology

The project was approached using a traditional case study methodology that involved attempting to understand the school consolidation experience through systematic gathering of empirical data. The data collection methodology is grounded in a qualitative and ethnographic framework which includes individual interviews and focus group interviews with key stakeholders, documentation (e.g. school, board and community documents), observations and site visits.

Emphasis was on ensuring that the research evidence reflected the wide range of stakeholders and that the reporting of their experience was synthesized in perspectives in an authentic manner that was inclusive of diverse stakeholders' views. This exploratory case study approach aimed at understanding what happened within a case by looking beyond descriptive features and studying the surrounding context along with the interactions of significant players.

The personal interaction with students, staff and stakeholders was invaluable in determining the real dynamics that underscored the consolidation impacts. While reviewing documents and analysing data were also helpful, there is no doubt that the discussions conducted with affected parties and the site visits revealed the true nature of the consolidation experience.

Between November 2014 and January 2015 a research team visited the Durham District School Board and conducted twenty-three interviews with various stakeholders. The aim of these discussions was to ascertain the views of this broad spectrum of stakeholders who were involved in the consolidation of Dr. FJ Donevan Collegiate Institute (henceforth "Donevan") and Eastdale Collegiate Vocational Institute (henceforth "Eastdale") in 2010. Discussions with various individuals and groups were focused on capturing the experiences of these stakeholders once the consolidation decision was made and processes to relocate students and staffs in an existing and renovated facility were underway.

Interviewees included school board administrators, teaching and non-teaching staff (teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and vice-principals) from the sending and receiving schools (Donevan and Eastdale), current and former supervisory officers, current trustees, current and former parents, current and former students from both schools, as well as community and municipal representatives to learn about their experiences during and after the school closure and consolidation process. During the study, questions probed stakeholder observations regarding the Board's accommodation review process leading up to the final decision approved by the Board. These data were sought in order to provide background information for the central purpose of the study, which was to explore the impact of approaches to school consolidation, as well as student and staff transition in order to identify best practices.

All stakeholders were asked a series of open questions (see interview guide in the appendix at the end of this report) in order to assure validity and consistency of data generated through the

fieldwork. Interviewees were also given the opportunity to elaborate on key areas of concern to them. In addition, the research team had the opportunity to visit the newly consolidated Eastdale, where a number of interviews with staff and students also took place.

The study generated data in several areas. **The following themes emerged and will be considered from different stakeholder perspectives:**

- Communication
- Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions
- Benefits to Student (including program offerings and co-curricular opportunities)
- Student Engagement with Community
- Travel Time and Zoning
- Student/Staff Relationships
- Parental Engagement

In each of the conversations with stakeholders around their experiences, individuals were asked to comment on the “lessons learned” through their consolidation experience. Their observations about what they would reinforce, what they would initiate and what they would discontinue if they were to be involved in the school closure and consolidation experience again were documented. This report is informed by the insights and observations of many people who were generous with their time and their reflections of their personal involvement as Donevan students and staff moved to Eastdale. **The “Lessons Learned” will be articulated in the following areas:**

- Communication
- Transition Planning and Implementation
- Program Offerings, Co-Curricular Options and School Culture

The goal of the research was to capture peoples’ perspectives and stories, in order to better understand the impact that school closings and consolidations have had on students, staff, families and communities. The advantage of a case study approach of this nature is that it enables the painting of a detailed and in-depth picture of a variety of people’s viewpoints and experiences.

Extensive notes were taken by the research team during the interviews, which were then analyzed for common themes. The research team made site visits to the newly consolidated school and conducted meetings with senior officials at the school board offices. For additional context, several sources of documentation intended for internal and external distribution were also examined. The analysis in this report is based on these multiple data sources. All identifying participant information is suppressed or modified to protect confidentiality.

Description of the DDSB Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) Process

“We made every effort to hear every concern from students and parents and by the time the process was over, people felt much more positively because they didn’t realize how much more they would be getting in the new school.” (Supervisory Officer)

The DDSB engages in a regular review and updating of its Accommodation Review Policy and takes stakeholder and community views into account in terms of determining the most effective way to communicate with parents and other stakeholders when considering right-sizing of the system through school consolidation, construction or closure. The Board believes that using the Ministry accommodation review guidelines as a backdrop and reviewing their own experiences and policies has created a generally clear and informative process that engages the public in important input regarding school consolidation/closures. The DDSB policy has been reviewed and revised formally four times between 2007 and 2014. The Board has reviewed other Boards’ approaches to this process looking for best practices and is confident that its “homegrown” approach allows for high community engagement. Its details are shared widely and featured on the DDSB website. The Board produces an annual “Trends and Opportunities” report that looks ahead several years at the Board’s accommodation needs to create the optimal learning environments for students. While the ARC that resulted in the newly consolidated Eastdale focused on only two schools, to the consternation of some community members, the Board had analyzed the enrolment patterns and needs of all the schools in the in the area before naming Eastdale and Donevan as the schools under review. This report reflects the conviction that long range planning is integral to the Board’s success in meeting students’ needs.

The senior officials of the Board who were interviewed for the preparation of this case study asserted that their recommendations to the trustees for decision-making regarding school accommodation are fundamentally rooted in program enhancements for students. Optimal learning opportunities are the primary drivers for facility and accommodation decisions. Of course, financial factors weighed in when allocating scarce resources to buildings, but the consistent focus was maximizing positive program experiences for students. There is a firm conviction that when this program commitment is clearly and consistently articulated to the community, the credibility of the Board’s planning and intentions is strengthened.

Rationale for the Establishment of the East Oshawa Secondary School ARC

“A clear analysis of the impacts and frank conversation with people on the ARC helps the Board make good decisions.” (Trustee)

According to the DDSB², the use of the accommodation review process was initiated in order to deal with the declining rate of occupancy in East Oshawa’s secondary panel. Based on projections, Donevan and Eastdale were schools that were likely to experience continual declines in enrolment. The schools were located within 1.6 km of each other, and a consideration of the possible consolidation of these two secondary schools could ensure a more efficient use of facilities and resources, as well as the viability of a full complement of secondary programs for the student populations of both schools.

Profile of Each School Involved in this Consolidation

Donevan Collegiate Institute

In 2009, Donevan had the capacity to hold 840 secondary students. It was a two-story facility which housed 39 classrooms, a gymnasium, and a library. The original structure was built in 1957 and had subsequent additions as well as continued regular maintenance. In 2009, there were two portable classrooms on site. In October 2008, the school had an enrolment of 690 students, and this number was projected to decline over the next three years and beyond due to various factors including the aging demographic of the immediate neighborhood, the slow and low yield regeneration process and the changes in the boundaries for the nearby Maxwell Heights Secondary School (permitting many Donevan students to attend this school).

Eastdale Collegiate and Vocational Institute

The former Eastdale had the capacity to hold 1056 secondary students. The school, built in 1967, is a two-story facility with 48 classrooms, a large gymnasium and exercise room, a theatre and stage, as well as automotive technology and electrical technology shops. In 2009, there were 22 portables being utilized. During the 2009/2010 school year, the enrolment dropped from 1593 students to approximately 953 students in grades 9, 10, and 11 due to the opening of the nearby Maxwell Heights Secondary School. The projection was that the enrolment at Eastdale would continue to decline over subsequent years.

² Source: DDSB Administrative Report on Potential Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) Establishment – East Oshawa Secondary Schools (Dr. FJ Donevan CI and Eastale CVI), May 19, 2009, pages 5-6.

Part II: Themes Emerging From Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

From the analysis of the data generated through this case study, the research team identified a number of factors that defined the experience that stakeholders had prior to, during and after the consolidation process.

1. Communication

“Specific Board personnel devoted to the ARC and the transition process as well as a dedicated section of the website were very important to good communications.”
(Trustee)

The first area explored during the interviews involved the communication efforts made to ensure that all parties had timely and accurate information about the ARC process and the implementation of the School Board’s decisions regarding the consolidation and the closure of Donevan. At the opening of the discussion, each participant in this study was asked about when and how they learned about the ARC and how they were kept informed as the process unfolded and the students and staff of Donevan were moved to Eastdale.

Once the decision to commence an ARC was made, the Board’s communication strategies were generally regarded as effective and thorough. Public awareness was achieved through the letters and notices sent home with students in the affected schools, media notices, local newspapers, community flyer drops and updates on the Board’s website. The Board also dedicated staff to a hotline that was established to field questions and to provide feedback with respect to the accommodation review process. The principals of the two schools were seen as central to effective communication through their work with school councils and their sharing of available information with staff and students. Senior Board superintendents who served as Chair and Secretary to the ARC made every effort to respond to the concerns of every parent and student who had a question or an anxiety about the consolidation, and working with the principals of the two schools, provided information and guidance as required to all who raised issues and questions.

“Because of the uncertainty in the face of rumours over a couple of years some teachers who could have helped in the transition sought other opportunities and left Donevan prior to the consolidation.” (School Administrator)

Generally, stakeholders who were interviewed reported that there were clear messages to students, staff and the public regarding the formal initiation of the ARC, its timetable of meetings and process for the Board to make its final decision on the consolidation. Similarly, everyone involved in the process felt that any requests for clarification or further information about the Board’s documents or rationale for the consolidation were generally met with timely and satisfactory responses. Nonetheless, the Board officials interviewed cited communications as an

area where they have been committed to further efforts to ensure enhanced timeliness of response to any inquiries.

“Everyone knew there was declining enrolment. At first the grapevine was very active but once the ARC was established the rules were clear and the staff was well organized.” (Parent)

As is often the case when enrolment declines in a school area, resulting in challenges to the capacity to meet students’ learning needs, there were many rumours in the community about the possibility of a school closure or consolidation well in advance of the announcement of the ARC. In this study, several people interviewed commented on the rumour mill that was very active prior to the official establishment of this ARC. Staff, students and community members reported that they anticipated that some kind of consolidation would occur long before the ARC was established and that there was very widespread speculation about possible scenarios. This uncertainty clearly caused some anxiety in the communities affected. Some staff expressed concern that they felt “kept in the dark” until after the ARC’s deliberations. All the former Donevan staff who were interviewed for this study described the stress of the physical transition to the newly consolidated setting as very challenging. There was only a six week period of time (during much of which students were still completing their academic year and final evaluations at Donevan) available to accomplish all associated tasks and move the staff, students, equipment and teaching resources to the new site. There was a feeling among some staff that the communication regarding the move was minimal and there was a huge pressure to make it happen in a very truncated timeline.

“The news of our school being shut down spread like wildfire. The fear of starting at the bottom of the food chain filled us all. However, I was very optimistic about this change; I thought it would be a great opportunity to meet new people.” (Student)

It is very clear that the Board was between a rock and a hard place with the timing of the decision coming in late May after the deliberations of the ARC were complete to consolidate the two schools for September in the same year. The Board was not able to communicate definitively with staff and students about transition strategies and plans until the Board had followed its accommodation review process and heard the input from stakeholders and affected communities. Had even tentative plans been put in place earlier, the Board would have been vulnerable to criticism for coming to a decision before consultation was concluded. While staff generally understood the requirements of the process, it was suggested that communication with affected staff and students would have been more successful if it had been possible to postpone the date of the consolidation for one academic year after the decision was made. This would have allowed greater time for dialogue between the sending and receiving principals, the staffs in corresponding subject areas in the two schools, and more opportunity for the students to be brought together through extra-curricular and facilitated social events prior to the actual move of the Donevan school community into Eastdale.

There was one instructive observation made by several participants in the study that is connected to how communication happened throughout the process and during the implementation of the consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale. This concerned the communication with staff about the pending consolidation and its impact on staff placement and particularly, the decisions regarding positions of responsibility. It was reported by a few observers that there was resistance to the consolidation from some staff who felt that there was insufficient time to adapt to a larger school environment prior to the actual transition.

2. Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions

“Early transition planning with students, staff and the community is essential for successful consolidation of schools.” (Senior Board Staff)

All stakeholders commented on the significance of strong transition planning and the implementation of those action plans as vital to the success of the consolidation effort. Over time and with experience acquired through subsequent school consolidations and closures, the transition planning efforts of the DDSB have been steadily enhanced. In the case of the consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale, the stakeholders interviewed expressed a range of opinions about the transition planning and its impact on the consolidation experience.

There was general agreement that there were strong efforts made to ensure the students who were moving from Donevan to Eastdale had appropriate support from school administration and the guidance staff regarding course selection and program opportunities in the consolidated school. While there was anxiety among Donevan students and parents that Donevan students might be at a disadvantage regarding course enrolment in the consolidated environment, in fact, there appeared to be a fair opportunity for all students from both schools to access the courses they needed and the counselling they required for the determination of their academic programming.

Activities such as holding a ‘grade eight’ style open house for Donevan students and an evening to familiarize their parents with the program offerings and co-curricular experiences that would be available in the new school were seen as very helpful. Eastdale guidance counsellors went to Donevan and outlined the opportunities at the newly consolidated school and also presented a slide show to special needs students and their special education staff to familiarize them with the building and routines. Staff from Eastdale also conducted special education reviews for students with exceptionalities prior to their arrival at the consolidated school in order to facilitate their smooth transition. Staff members currently at Eastdale who were interviewed for this study observed that bringing the vice- principal and the heads of guidance and special education from Donevan to the newly consolidated Eastdale made a big difference in the successful transition of students at risk.

“Support staff and special education assistants who transferred to the new school made a big difference for students identified with special needs.” (School Administrator)

Several participants in the interviews emphasized the importance of transition planning and recalled the difficulty that the timelines imposed in terms of putting some of the transition plans in place. There is no doubt that had there been more time between the Board’s consolidation decision and the start of the school year, the strategies envisioned in the transition planning would have been more effective. In particular, more time between the decision and the end of the school year would have allowed for structured school visits for the transferring Donevan students at Eastdale prior to their actual enrolment in the consolidated school in September. As there was a perceived rivalry and even antagonism between some segments of the student bodies of the two schools, this early and more informal exposure and acclimatization might have eased the tension of the first year of the consolidation. That said, it is interesting to note that almost everyone interviewed for this study observed that the students generally experienced less difficulty with the transition to a new or altered school environment than the adults working with them seemed to experience.

“There was no fast-tracking for affected teachers to allow special arrangements for the transfer of staff from the closing school. Many people who had been heads of department or key staff at Donevan didn’t get interviews for positions of responsibility in the new Eastdale.” (Teacher)

There were some concerns expressed by some staff and parents about the transition strategies for staff. Because the final decision to consolidate the schools was made late in May, there was uncertainty among the staff about their teaching assignments for the next year and about what would need to be done to ensure all the necessary transfers of resources and equipment from Donevan to Eastdale. Several staff members and parents who were interviewed commented on their belief that it would have been beneficial to have more communication among and between the staff of the two schools in advance of the transfer of Donevan staff and students to Eastdale. Some of those who were interviewed observed that more structured opportunities for the two staffs who would be working together to interact both professionally and socially prior to the consolidation would have contributed to a more positive climate at the beginning of the new Eastdale experience. There was an attempt to bring the two staffs together through a barbeque dinner. In retrospect, some have observed that more events like this would have been useful to afford time and opportunity to break down some of the tensions and mistrust between the two staffs. This was desirable especially since there were more Eastdale staff than staff members from Donevan forming the new staff in the consolidated school and most of the positions of responsibility were held by former Eastdale staff.

“More specific activities to bring students together from the two schools to build relationships would have reduced anxiety and conflict.” (Student)

Several staff members and parents referred particularly to their perception that more Donevan staff in positions of responsibility in the consolidated school would have ensured that staff members who could be supportive of the student transition were in place in the new school. It appears that there was no formal plan for the interaction of the two principals regarding staffing decisions. In some people’s minds, this disconnect resulted in the perception that there was insufficient reflection on which staff could best meet the particular needs of the students and staff in various leadership roles in the consolidated school. Also, the majority of the staff who transferred with the students was assigned to meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities or specialty programs. As well, by and large, the coaches who worked with Donevan students did not transfer to the new arrangement, resulting in a perceived lack of sufficient male role models for the boys who transferred from Donevan to the newly consolidated Eastdale.

“There was information available throughout the process but the consolidation decision was made too late in the school year to avoid an exodus of key staff.” (Teacher)

Clearly, there were established system-wide staffing procedures agreed to by the teachers’ federation and management that had to be respected; that said, there was some concern that many of the Donevan staff who might have assisted students in orienting to a new environment did not go to the consolidated school. Of course, Eastdale’s enrolment was also declining, reducing the number of positions available at Eastdale. There were two primary reasons for this situation. First of all, when Donevan’s enrolment declined, limiting program offerings and extra-curricular opportunities, there was widespread speculation that the school would close, so some experienced staff transferred to other schools in advance of the ARC’s deliberations. Secondly, several Donevan staff members who applied for positions of responsibility at the consolidated Eastdale were not successful in securing permanent leadership positions and hence, went elsewhere in the staffing process. On a positive note, the Donevan vice-principal did transfer to the consolidated school along with the students, and the former principal of Donevan was able to join the consolidated school as principal in its second year of operation.

Several interviewees observed that the burden on the vice principal who transferred with the Donevan staff and students was heavy due to short timelines and minimal capacity to commence the transition processes before the middle of May. It was suggested by some that additional support or guidance from the leadership team of Donevan would have been beneficial given the principal was going to a new assignment and was not transitioning with the students and staff, although he did come to the consolidated school as principal a year later.

“More focus on consistency between the efforts of the leadership of the two schools was needed. Minimally, at least one administrator from the closing school should go to the consolidated school.” (Teacher)

It is interesting to note that five years later, there is no significant perception among the current students of Eastdale of a lack of connection of staff with students. Initially some of the Donevan students who were interviewed and who were in their graduating year at the time of consolidation experienced a sense of loss due to the fact that there was a limited number of Donevan staff who transferred to the new Eastdale. There is no doubt that there was a higher proportion of the student population of Donevan which was struggling or was identified as being at risk than at the former Eastdale. There was an effort to assist the consolidated staff at Eastdale in their professional learning to meet the diverse learning needs of students progressing at a variety of levels of proficiency. Ironically, Eastdale’s student population was undergoing changes and a decline in numbers prior to the consolidation as a result of the opening of another academic high school, Maxwell Heights, in the area. Given this situation, Eastdale’s culture and demography would have naturally evolved in a new direction even without the consolidation with Donevan.

“The initial resistance from parents mirrored that of their kids.” (Teacher)

As mentioned above, overall, it was observed that the students generally made the transition more easily and earlier than the adults (both teaching and support staffs), were able to, at least initially.

“While I was not one of them, many Donevan students felt that because there was no change in the name of the school, they felt like guests.” (Student)

“The discussion around the preservation of Donevan memorabilia which took place at the SCC as well as with staff and students did not result in the creation of the promised Donevan wall or display case at the new Eastdale.” (School Administrator)

“There was a promise that certain aspects of Donevan’s history would be brought to the new Eastdale such as the photograph of the graduating class of 2010 but this did not happen.” (Student)

“A new school name would have levelled the playing field.” (Student)

During the transition process, there was discussion about renaming the consolidated school to have a fresh start for both student bodies and staff. This idea was ultimately not pursued as there was no general consensus as to whether a new name would be beneficial. Some believed

that renaming the school would “keep the wound open” and others believed it would provide a fresh start. Also, there was a commitment made to ensure a commemoration of Donevan memorabilia in a designated place in the consolidated school. To this day, that has not occurred. Students who were interviewed who graduated as the consolidation occurred are still bothered by the fact that the graduating class photograph of Donevan students was not displayed in the consolidated Eastdale, and believe that the Eastdale graduates’ accomplishments were celebrated in a way theirs were not. There is some lingering resentment in the minds of some Donevan staff and students who were graduating the year of consolidation that, in particular, the athletic successes of Donevan students were relatively unacknowledged. That said, there was a last graduation exercise held at Donevan for the students graduating the year of the consolidation, and in the first year of consolidation, the valedictorian of the graduating class at the new Eastdale was a former student from Donevan.

Some of the graduated students from Donevan who were interviewed for this study observed that some of the Donevan students didn’t embrace opportunities which were offered to them in the first year of consolidation because they didn’t feel a part of the student body. The suggestion made to remedy this was to introduce structured experiences for both student bodies to get to know each other in social or leadership contexts prior to the consolidation, much the same advice that was offered regarding the successful amalgamation of the two staffs.

“The enhanced programming at the new Eastdale offered more shops and applied courses for students and this was an improvement for Eastdale students as well who, in recent years, were seeking such options in greater numbers.” (School Administrator)

“The much larger range of extracurricular options was made available by a much larger population base and more teachers to lead and coach.” (School Administrator)

Two current grade 12 Eastdale students who are student leaders in the school commented that while they personally didn’t favour renaming the consolidated school with an entirely new name, they did believe that, in retrospect, the transition planning should have focused on ensuring that the Donevan memorabilia were given a place of honour in the consolidated school. They also stated that some of the awards given in athletics should have been named in honour of Donevan and its traditions in order to ‘level the playing field’ in terms of the perceptions of the accomplishments of the entire student body. There was also advice that a concerted effort should be made to augment co-curricular activities, to ensure that no opportunities experienced by students in the legacy schools were lost in the new context. Similarly, they recommended that every course offering from the originating schools be maintained in the consolidated school so there was no sense of missed experience among the students of either school. This may have been impossible due to staffing considerations, but at the very least, formally addressing the issue with students and their parents and explaining where there were challenges in some course offerings would have been helpful. The students observed that it may have been especially difficult for Donevan students in their grade 12 year to accept different course

offerings or extra-curricular offerings that were not inclusive of all they had experienced in their time at Donevan.

“There was no overarching sense of monitoring the transition through an action plan. The burden of the transition and implementation fell to one or two administrators who would have benefited from more direction and support.” (School Administrator)

One suggestion that was offered repeatedly by several of those interviewed was to initiate a monitoring committee to follow up on the transition process and make recommendations in areas where there seemed to be issues or roadblocks. It was also suggested retroactively that there be some mechanism to ensure the sending and receiving principals had a clearly defined collaborative role as the consolidation progressed. This suggestion was offered by both teaching and administrative staff from both schools. Had this been the case, some of the staffing issues and divisions between staffs might have been ameliorated, or at least recognized as detrimental, early in the consolidation process. As it unfolded, these issues were addressed gradually and over time, and there are still some residual feelings of separation between the two staffs.

“Despite staff anxieties, everyone wanted to do what was in the best interest of students.” (Teacher)

Generally, all those interviewed (with the exception of the municipal representatives, who were focused on city use of space rather than student achievement or engagement) felt strongly that where there was consistent execution of the transition plans, it made a very significant difference in the capacity of students, staff and community members to embrace the change and make the necessary adjustments to a new and largely improved learning environment for students in the consolidated school. Also, clearly when commitments made during the ARC process and by school administration were transparently honoured, credibility of the process and thus, the Board, was enhanced in the school communities and tarnished when promises were perceived to slow to be met or remained unfulfilled.

3. Benefits to Students

“It was soon clear that the new Eastdale offered much wider program choice and many more co-curricular options than were available at Donevan as the enrolment declined.” (Parent)

a. Program Offerings

A shift in population to the North of the District School Board resulted in a decline in the number of secondary school students needing accommodation in South Oshawa.

Donevan was seen as in need of significant repair in order to effectively accommodate students and their learning needs. The number of students projected for the future of the school didn't come close to warranting the kind of investment that would have been required to bring the school up to standard and create the appropriate facilities for a rich course offering. Eastdale, on the other hand, was a larger school, had a good physical plant, and with some substantive facility improvement, could provide a significantly enhanced student body (over double the size of either school at the time of consolidation) with a vibrant learning environment.

Those interviewed largely believed that the desired outcomes for the newly consolidated Eastdale were achieved over the five years since the consolidation. At one of the final meetings of the ARC, there were recommendations made for about \$29 million in renovations, and Board staff made the commitment to ensure that the newly consolidated school was up to standard. There was a perception among staff that the fulfillment of the promised renovations and improvements to Eastdale required persistent monitoring and advocacy by the principal to bring the school to the level anticipated by stakeholders during the consolidation discussions and the transition process. The new state of the art theatre, the renovated library as a hub in the school, the enhanced facilities for food services, and the fully accessible school, all contributed to a sense of satisfaction with the physical plant that was expressed by almost all interviewed for this study.

There was a suggestion by school administrators that having the funds earmarked publicly to the communities at the beginning of the consolidation exercise would have been helpful in building trust and lessening opposition to the closing of Donevan. Board administrators echoed this sentiment and observed that having to approach the ARC discussions with these funds still somewhat 'in the air' made their task more difficult. It was suggested that some certainty about the availability of these funds would have been reassuring to communities and made collective envisioning of program possibilities for the newly consolidated school more realizable.

"Looking back, I think that the consolidation brought broader options and bigger choices." (Parent)

"There is something for everyone in this school." (Student)

"In the new school, I had the great opportunity to take a High Skills Major, HEAL, a specialized health and wellness course. This gave me the opportunity to do two different co-op experiences. Without this opportunity I would not have known I wanted to become a nurse." (Student)

The consolidation of the two schools and the augmented student population which resulted made a robust and diverse course offering possible at the new Eastdale. It dramatically altered the program landscape for Donevan students, some of whom had been taking seventy-five percent of their courses at Donevan and twenty-five percent of their studies at Eastdale in order to have access to a full complement of course choices. The consolidation removed this

necessity. Students at Donevan had also been taking some of their courses in multiple grade classes. The fear that some original transferring Donevan students had that they might be 'at the bottom of the food chain' in the new school largely evaporated once the consolidation year was completed. Course options doubled and there were more technical and applied level courses available to meet the needs of both Donevan students and the students at Eastdale for whom they had been previously unavailable.

"It was soon clear that the new Eastdale offered much wider program choice and many more extracurricular options than were available at Donevan as the enrolment declined." (Parent)

Some teachers who were at Donevan at the time of the consolidation and moved to the new school with the students reported that in the first year of adjustment, a small number of students struggled who had not been at risk previously. These students had received a great deal of personal attention in smaller classes that were not sustainable in the long run at Donevan or in any secondary school. It is understandable that these students experienced a bit of culture shock as they moved to classes of average size but, as noted earlier, the needs of students with exceptionalities and students at risk were taken very seriously in the new Eastdale. Most students made a relatively smooth transition within a few months.

While there was significant anxiety in the minds of some Donevan students and parents at the time of consolidation regarding program accessibility for students in the new school, it is very clear that, five years later, students, parents, teachers and system administrators are all very satisfied with the enhanced program offerings that the consolidation made possible for students from both schools. In fact, even those who had been most opposed to the consolidation and felt that more could have been done to smooth the transition, acknowledged that academic programming for students was significantly improved as a result of the merging of the two schools. Senior officials of the Board reported that a few months into the consolidation, parents and students who had been negative at the outset went out of their way to thank the officials for what they perceived to be a much improved learning environment, and commented that they had not really realized what the advantages of the merging of the two schools would be until they experienced it.

"There was academic support and assistance for transitioning students to help kids who were struggling. Even more academic assessment and intervention would be helpful." (Parent)

"It is vital to ensure that there is no 'loser mentality' in either of the consolidating schools." (Senior Staff)

b. Co-curricular opportunities

“Donevan students didn’t embrace all opportunities because they didn’t feel like they were part of the new school at the beginning.” (Student)

Both schools involved in this consolidation had experienced increasing difficulty in providing a full range of co-curricular offerings once the enrolment began to dramatically decline in their respective schools. From the Board’s perspective, there is a fair bit of confidence that, particularly for Donevan students, the increase in the number of options for involvement in sports or arts-based co-curricular activities increased substantially through the consolidation. Certainly, the enhancements to the facilities at Eastdale provided better equipped and designed physical spaces for co-curricular activities. Of course, the increase in enrolment and consequently, staffing, in the consolidated school greatly augmented the number of co-curricular activities which could be supervised by teachers and coaches and thus enriched the choices for students substantially.

Some coaching staff from Donevan did point out that a few programs like lacrosse and volleyball, which were very popular with some Donevan students, lost strength or disappeared with the consolidation. This was seen to be a result of a heavier emphasis on sports like football and rugby, which were a well-established part of Eastdale’s traditions. Those who were concerned about these losses in Donevan’s sports once the consolidation happened believed that the senior students who transferred from Donevan to Eastdale felt that some of their time-honoured traditions which were central to their identity as Donevan students were diminished. That said, it was widely recognized that students in the new setting had more opportunities than in their previous high school co-curricular experience. It is also true that these concerns disappeared as students who had begun high school at Donevan graduated. Currently, there is a generally held belief by the students who were interviewed for this study that there is a robust and exciting array of co-curricular activities available to today’s Eastdale students. Some of these co-curricular activities are now offered in different ways, such as the annual musical which is now offered as a course and not as a co-curricular activity.

4. Student engagement with community

“Connections with community remain largely the same in the consolidated school because the two schools were located in the same general geographic area.” (Teacher)

When interviewees were asked about general student engagement with the community and how it had been impacted by the consolidation, the over-arching response was that there was little change in how students connected to the local community. It is probably true that the augmented numbers at the new Eastdale may have created some additional opportunities for student involvement in local community initiatives. It was speculated that this may be true because the facilitation of this engagement is housed in one school instead of two.

5. Travel Time and Zoning

“While provisional transportation supports were put in place, the consolidation resulted in some of the most disadvantaged families having to pay bus fare send kids up to four kilometres once the provisional bussing supports were removed.” (School Administrator)

“In order to assess the impact of changes in travel time for students and to assess if enrolment changes are as projected, two years after the consolidation a boundary review and an enrolment review should be built into the process.” (School Administrator)

If there is one sticking point in this consolidation, it is centred on issues related to bussing, particularly for students who had walked to Donevan and now had to travel an extra mile to attend the new Eastdale. In order to ease the concerns in this area, the Board offered subsidized bussing to existing Donevan students at the time of consolidation, and eased out this offering and returned to regular Board regulations regarding transportation distances when the original Donevan students graduated. Because Eastdale is one kilometre further north, there was some change in travel time for students who would have attended the old Donevan from the South East quadrant of the city. The travel issue was raised with ward trustees and Board officials. While problematic in the minds of some students and parents prior to the consolidation, and in the first few months after the consolidation, there are few vocal concerns regarding travel times for students in the current Eastdale community. The Board’s time limited intervention in the early days of the merging of the two schools seems to have addressed the issues that were raised at the beginning. However, some staff members who were interviewed for this study indicated that they believe that there is a greater number of students in the new Eastdale who have to travel more than two kilometres than in other secondary schools in the Board, and suggested that a boundary review should be built in to be conducted two years after a consolidation to see how travel patterns for students have changed. The poverty factor is something that many feel needs to be taken into consideration with respect to travel requirements. The financial strain of transportation costs on some families with limited income and multiple children may be a hardship issue that was addressed by the Board’s temporary policy in the first few years of the consolidation, but is no longer a cushion for low socioeconomic status families.

6. Student/Staff Relationships

“Programming was better for the kids who were interested but some kids initially really missed their relationships with the Donevan teachers who did not transfer to the new school.” (Student)

“Some students coming from Donevan where there had been smaller classes and teachers supported kids who were struggling had trouble adjusting in the first year.” (Student)

Generally speaking, students, staff, and parents interviewed for this study believed that student/staff relationships are strong in the consolidated school. As mentioned earlier, several students observed that positive relationships between staff from the original two schools are less well established than the relationships between students and staff. Some need for adjustment, particularly for students from Donevan, in the first year of the consolidation was reported. This is not surprising for two reasons: first, only a limited number of Donevan staff joined the faculty of the consolidated school and few did so in headship positions. Secondly, the initial transferring students from Donevan were accustomed to much smaller class sizes than the norm in most secondary schools due to the need to augment staffing to ensure basic program integrity in the years of the school’s declining enrolment. This situation, while perhaps supportive for some students, was not sustainable; it was predictable that students who had enjoyed very small class sizes might have found the transition to a normal pupil-teacher ratio somewhat initially challenging. This may have had an impact on student success rates for at-risk students in that first year. That said, the current students who were interviewed for this study spoke very positively about student/teacher relationships in today’s Eastdale. It is also worthy to note that a larger student body in the consolidated Eastdale generates more student support services than would have been available in either of the schools in the years just prior to the consolidation, when declining enrolment would have had an impact on support staffing for services such as psychology and social work. In addition, the consolidation of the two schools resulted in less travel time for the support staff providing services to at-risk students.

Prior to the consolidation, there was considerable concern voiced to the administration and trustees about issues at Donevan, including programming and disciplinary issues at Donevan. After the consolidation, there was a significant decrease in the reporting of issues in these areas to trustees.

“Students who were at risk were more jeopardized by the transition and strong teacher-student relationships helped these students be resilient during the change.” (Teacher)

7. Parental Engagement

“The SCC at the closing school was strong although general parental engagement was not strong. This is an area where the new school continued to focus attention to increase parental engagement.” (School Administrator)

Most interviewed for this study observed that similar strategies to engage parents in their children’s learning are in place in the consolidated Eastdale as were in place in the original two schools. The strong role of the leaders of the two school councils during the ARC process, and after, when the schools’ parent communities were invited to work together was mentioned by several interviewees.

“The parents from the School Community Council were involved and felt they were heard and were supported by the principal.” (Parent)

It was clear that some parents from the Donevan community had concerns about their children attending Eastdale that mirrored the concerns the children had themselves initially. It is also true that there was a perception in the Donavan community that there was less facilitated learning at Eastdale and students were expected to manage their learning issues and challenges more independently. The close guidance and support provided to students in the Donevan community was something students and parents expressed hope would continue in the consolidated school. Staff reported a period of adjustment to a larger student body with more diverse needs. It is fair to say that outreach to parents and engagement of parents in their children’s learning continued to be priorities in the new Eastdale and there is an ongoing commitment to exploring a variety of approaches to enhancing parental engagement.

“There was an effort to engage Donevan parents in discussions about the transition although a relatively small number of parents participated.” (Community Member)

Part III: Lessons Learned

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of a wide range of stakeholders directly involved in the consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale in order to glean from their observations and insights the impact such consolidations have on students and communities. It is hoped that, as with all human experience, that we learn as we go. The rich commentary provided by interviewees for this study provides a window on a complex and often emotionally charged process and the subsequent changes and new directions it creates for students, staff and communities. Having had the benefit of individuals' understandings and perspectives on this consolidation, it is possible to draw some conclusions from their experiences and advice. The "lessons learned" that are captured here reflect the thinking and considered experience of the students, staff, administrators, parents, community members and trustees who were interviewed for this study. The advice has been synthesized according to the themes investigated in the study and is the result of the combined commentary by the range of interviewees on any given topic. The lessons learned are organized under the headings of practices that should **continue**, strategies that could be **initiated**, and approaches that were not seen to be helpful and should be **eliminated**.

Before continuing on to the lessons learned, it is important to provide the context of the ARC process itself. While the focus of this study is principally about the experience of stakeholders during transition and consolidation, the patterns of communication and community expectations set up through the ARC establish the tone for the planning and implementation of the consolidation process.

The ARC Process

"There was an enormous amount of information during the ARC process and questions were answered as they were asked. The committee looked at all aspects of the new facilities and assessed all of their strengths and weaknesses." (Community Member)

Although an evaluation of the ARC process itself was not the focus of this study, participants did offer insight that is worth articulating. The purpose of this study is to focus primarily on the impacts experienced by students, staff and community members once the decision to consolidate is made and implemented. That said, the interviewees, including the Board's senior officials, expressed their perspectives about factors they saw as significant in terms of conducting a successful ARC process. They are as follows:

"Having trustees in an advisory role on the ARC helped build bridges with community members." (Senior Staff)

"A clear analysis of the impacts and frank conversation with people on the ARC helps the Board make good decisions." (Trustee)

- Having Principals acting as trusted and available pillars of information for their communities;
- Having the terms of reference for the ARC be crystal clear at the beginning of the committee's deliberations;
- Providing supplemental information in a timely and predictable way in response to emerging questions;
- Having the Area Superintendent, who is responsible for the schools under review and intimately familiar with their students' learning needs, chair the ARC proceedings with the Superintendent of Facilities acting as Secretary to the ARC to ensure that information provided to the ARC members is pertinent and readily available;
- Having an external advisor to the ARC process, who is with an independent planning and accommodation company, as an advisor to the Board officials, trustees and the ARC members;
- Having trustees serve to support the process and to clarify Board policies to the ARC as non-voting members;
- Encouraging as many parents as possible to attend the public meetings associated with the ARC, to reduce anxiety and to have questions aired and answered;
- Having a truncated ARC process when the best option is clear to the majority of people at the beginning of the discussions;
- Where a Board enjoys some certainty at the front end of the ARC process regarding available funding for additions and repairs, the discussions with the community are more trusted and there is less suspicion that there are hidden agendas;

“Having to apply for capital funding at the end of the ARC process is not helpful as you have lost some credibility with community members when funds are not available to act promptly on what was discussed and promised.” (Senior Staff)

- Careful consideration should be given to the role of municipal representatives in the ARC deliberations to ensure they can productively contribute to the discussions on what is best for the creation of optimal learning environments and flourishing communities.

*“Specific Board personnel devoted to the ARC and the transition process as well as a dedicated section of the website were very important to good communications.”
(Trustee)*

The *lessons learned* from this school consolidation experience study are articulated and organized according to the themes of **Communication, Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions** and **Program Offerings and School Culture**.

1. Communication

Continue:

“The communication plan was clear and understood and the Chair and staff of the ARC were respectful, balanced and impartial.” (Parent)

The highlights of the advice received about what should be continued in the communication efforts during the consolidation experience are as follows:

- Facilitating of the ARC, openness to correcting course as needed during process and patient listening to various perspectives
- Ensuring community/parental voices are as acknowledged as school staff input
- Responding in a timely fashion to requests for information
- Adjusting the process where possible in response to suggestions from staff, students or community members
- Supporting the central roles of the principals of the merging schools in communicating with the school communities about the consolidation

There was a broad consensus that the efforts made to provide clear information during the ARC process and during the transitional period were very well received by those involved in the deliberations of the ARC and those who were directly impacted by the consolidation of the two schools.

“Board staff was approachable and did an excellent job. I felt my questions were answered well.” (Parent)

Many of those interviewed commented on the timeliness of the responses by Board staff to questions or requests for clarification. There was also an acknowledgement that all perspectives were listened to during the ARC process and the appropriate people and resources were available to address emerging concerns either directly at scheduled meetings, or through the dedicated space on the Board’s website where inquiries could be made or observations could be posted. There was also a generally held view that having public fora at the beginning of the process provided much needed opportunities for input into transition planning to meet the perceived needs of students and staff. These public fora were seen as essential to building public awareness and establishing “buy-in” by those who would be affected by the consolidation.

“There was an enormous amount of information during the ARC process and questions were answered as they were asked. The committee looked at all aspects of the new facilities and assessed all of their strengths and weaknesses.” (Community Member)

There was also an appreciation expressed by members of the communities, school staff and administrators, of the willingness of Board staff to alter the course of the public consultation and make adjustments along the way in the consolidation process as a result of reasonable input and suggestions. The principals of the two schools were seen by all as highly instrumental in keeping the lines of communication open with staff, students and the schools' communities as the consolidation proceeded. Focused support for the schools' leadership teams is crucial as they are central to staff, students and their parents embracing the new learning environment in the consolidated setting.

Initiate:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be initiated or started regarding communication are as follows:

- More professional communication and social opportunities between staffs prior to consolidation
- Opportunities for dialogue with staff, students and parents at other schools which have gone through a consolidation experience to share their experiences
- Increased communication between the staffs of the two schools prior to the consolidation and facilitated professional learning opportunities to bring the staffs together once they are working in the merged school setting

“Teaching staff in a consolidated school are all on a professional learning curve as they adjust to an often more diverse student population. On-going support for this professional learning is very important.” (Teacher)

- More outreach to parents and community members to involve them in the discussion, planning and execution of transition strategies
- More communication with school staffs who are not part of the ARC to ensure clarity and understanding of the process as it unfolds
- Increased opportunity for the students from the two schools to interact prior to the consolidation

Many of the stakeholders interviewed expressed the view that more interaction between the staff, students and communities of the merging schools prior to the actual consolidation would smooth the transition and answer many questions and allay many anxieties. It was suggested that parents from the closing school be given a tour of the consolidating school site and have an opportunity to discuss the transition with staff and parents in the receiving school prior to the actual consolidation.

It was also suggested that more structured meetings and communication between both the administrators and guidance heads of the two schools should be a 'built-in' part of the transition process to ensure appropriate knowledge transfer and the sharing of information about student needs. Some believed that guidance staff and the special education team at the receiving

school should visit the closing school in order to become familiar with the processes and approaches that students and parents would be accustomed to in the closing school.

Because of the short time available between the decision of the board and the actual consolidation of the schools, there was a sense of the staff only knowing their situation for the following year very late in the term. Some staff who were interviewed suggested a formal meeting with all staff to explain the process of staff placement and the options open to people as a result of the consolidation would have reduced the feeling staff had of being 'in the dark'. More communication about decision-making processes and possibilities would ease staff anxiety even before final decisions are made. Of course, this is a challenging task as there is a concern about not presupposing the outcome of the Board's deliberations.

"The timelines were incredibly tight and the procedures and actions that make a transition smooth were delayed as people listened to many rumours and waited for the formal announcement of the Board's decision." (School Administrator)

Following the final ARC decision, a formal meeting of the involved staff chaired by the area superintendent should be held to clarify and coordinate next steps and transition plans. It was suggested that ongoing communication and follow-through on commitments would have been aided by the establishment of a formal monitoring committee of students, staff and community members who could meet in the first year of the transition to ensure that communication lines are kept open and that any emerging issues are addressed.

Eliminate:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be discontinued regarding communication efforts are as follows:

- Extremely tight timelines between the Board's decision and its implementation which make calm, ongoing effective communication difficult
- Interference in the ARC's main task by the participation of municipal representatives focused primarily on facility acquisition rather than what is best for student achievement
- Unaddressed rumours well in advance of the establishment of the ARC

"Conjectures and rumours as enrolment declined created anxiety for staff, students and community members, even prior to the announcement of the ARC process." (Teacher)

Most interviewees felt that the voting participation of the municipal politician on the ARC impeded the capacity of the group to keep the focus on what was best for student success. Some suggested that municipal perspectives could be ascertained outside the formal process of ARC to gather any ideas about potential use of school board facilities but suggested it should be done in a way that would not detract from the ARC's central task.

All staff interviewed commented on the difficulty of having sufficient preparatory communication between the members of the two school communities when the timeline between the final decision of the Board and the actual consolidation of the two schools was too short. It was suggested that the ARC needed to have commenced earlier in the school year for the results of the decision to be successfully implemented in September. Or, as was mentioned by some, the implementation of the Board's decision should have been delayed several months to allow for sufficient and informative communication between and among those involved.

Finally, it was suggested that every effort should be made to address rampant rumours by having regular update meetings with the two staffs, outlining initially the right-sizing challenges faced by the Board and then, subsequently outlining the steps that would be taken to ensure the effective implementation of the consolidation and how it would impact students, staff and communities.

2. Transition Planning and Implementation of decisions

“Considering changing the school name, arranging for students to meet their new teachers ahead of time, and arranging for the two school bodies to meet ahead of time to ease tensions that were there at the beginning.” (Student)

“Once the announcement was made all staff worked to prevent issues that would negatively affect the students.” (Parent)

Continue:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be continued in the transition efforts during the consolidation experience are as follows:

- Focusing on team building in the ARC process from the beginning and choosing committee members and the Chair carefully to ensure appropriate facilitation skills, to represent a range of opinions and to be fair to all members of ARC and observers as discussions regarding optimal transition occur
- Including an outside observer to participate in the process
- Ensuring and expanding key staff transfers so students from the closing school recognize teachers in the new learning environment
- Conducting public fora – to establish “buy-in” for all stakeholders and explore perceptions of transition needs
- Ensuring that at least one administrator from each school remains through the transition period and at least the first year of consolidation
- Making commitments to appropriate renovations to ease transition and honoring these commitments (reducing portables, improvements to school facilities such as theatre, washrooms, culinary arts areas)

- Pairing of staff from each school according to subject area curriculum to plan instruction and assessment strategies
- Transferring key support and teaching staff from the closing school with students, especially a vice-principal, guidance and special education staff, and coaches who are leading the teams identified with the sending school
- Subsidizing students' travel costs for all students who began their high school experience in the sending school

All stakeholders interviewed believed that it was essential that the Chair of the ARC be someone who people recognized as being fair, non-biased, supportive of diverse stakeholder views, and capable of mobilizing engagement through the ARC process and the public fora. Many participants reiterated the need to include an outside observer from an independent firm specializing in accommodation planning in the process to ensure an independent, expert voice.

Ensuring the transfer of key support and teaching staff (including principals and vice-principals, guidance, special education staff and coaches) to the newly consolidated school is essential to ensure continuity and enhancement of programming, to make students feel welcome in their new school environment and to continue building upon student-teacher relationships. Many participants stated that for students to have 'a face they recognized' made them feel welcome and gave them a sense of security in the consolidated school. Further, ensuring that staffs in each discipline from both schools collaborated allowed for continuity of course planning and meeting of students' individual needs.

The renovations to the receiving school facilities (notably to the theatre, library, washrooms, and culinary arts instructional areas) gave the school a much needed "facelift" and permitted the expansion of already established academic and co-curricular programs and also allowed the offering of new options to students. The newly renovated facilities, and the academic and social learning enhancements they made possible, contributed to the development of a positive culture in the school.

Initiate:

"A smooth transition to move students, staff and resources needs more than six weeks."
(School Administrator)

The highlights of the advice received about what should be initiated or started in the transition planning were as follows:

- More widely sharing the rationale for choice of the schools under review
- Longer timelines between the decision and the consolidation date to allow more preparation time for teaching and support staff to make the necessary moving and sharing arrangements
- Increased clarity for staff around decision-making processes and timelines once the Board has made its consolidation decision

- Having groups of students, parents and staff visit or consult with other schools that have already been through the consolidation experience/process as transition planning is underway to learn from others' experiences
- A transition plan that includes strategies to distinguish the consolidated school including (but not limited to) a possible name change and creating a space to honour the memorabilia of the closing school
- Involving student representatives in both schools in transition planning discussions
- More investment in developing team spirit among student athletic and music groups and clubs prior to, during and after transition to new school
- More structured co-ordination between the efforts of the two schools' administrators in establishing the staffing model for the consolidated school, and co-ordination of dialogue and joint planning by the two schools' guidance staffs

“In anticipation of the consolidation, there was an exodus of key staff before the Board’s decision was made; the regular rules for the staff transfer process didn’t work well in this situation.” (Teacher)

- Following the final ARC decision, initiate a formal monitoring process involving principals and vice-principals in meetings chaired by the area Supervisory Officer to co-ordinate and oversee next steps and transition plans, including the following:
 1. Process for dispersal of supplies and equipment
 2. Placement of key personnel at the consolidated school to best meet student needs
 3. Establishment of school visits by the guidance and special education teams from the receiving school to the school that is closing to better understand the students' experiences and learning needs
 4. Establishment of a parent transition meeting and school tour at new school
- Out of box thinking around transportation, such as creating a process to monitor the impact of travel costs, particularly for families in the South West quadrant facing financial challenges and who have more than one child requiring transportation
- Exploring potential cost recovery uses for the closed facility for joint services for the community

“The processes for procedures that make for a smooth transition were slowed down waiting for the announcement of the Board’s decision and once the decision was made the timelines were incredibly tight.” (Teacher)

Several plans were implemented to facilitate the transition of students and staff. That said, some of the stakeholders interviewed commented on the short timelines for the actual transition, which constrained the efforts to explore ideas for transition and to bring staff, parents and students from the two schools together prior to the actual consolidation. Because of the short timeline, staff felt they did not have the information they needed soon enough to make the move

in an orderly and co-ordinated way. In particular, the staffing model for the consolidated school would have benefitted from more frequent co-ordination between the two school principals. Some interviewees suggested ongoing monitoring of student travel costs. There was some concern that the closed facility should be a source of revenue from shared services.

Eliminate:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be discontinued in the transition efforts are as follows:

- Tight timelines for merging the schools – needs to be at least six months between the Board’s decision and closure

“There was information available throughout the process but the consolidation decision was made too late in the school year to avoid an exodus of key staff”. (Teacher)

“The parents from the school community council (SCC) were involved and felt they were heard and were supported by the principal.” (Parent)

- Storing the memorabilia of the sending school instead of displaying it prominently

Almost all of the stakeholders interviewed felt that the timelines for the ARC’s final decision and the process to consolidate the two schools was too short and was quite stressful.

“More time where groups of staff from both schools could get together and build trust through joint efforts would ease the transition process.” (School Administrator)

The final decision to consolidate was announced mid-May, allowing for less than four months to plan for, undertake, and to follow through with the consolidation. With the timing of the consolidation process being at the end of the academic year, staff and students also had to deal with graduation, final exams and other end of year activities on top of the consolidation process. Many participants described how, given the context and the timing of the consolidation, they felt that there was not enough time or opportunities to make connections and establish relationships among staffs, students and the greater school community.

Many felt that the Board’s promise to display memorabilia of the sending school in the newly consolidated school was not honoured. At a time of change that threatens people’s sense of achievement and tradition, it is vital to ensure that the consolidation builds in ways to recognize the accomplishments of the past while planning for the future of the merging communities.

3. PROGRAM OFFERINGS, CO-CURRICULARS AND SCHOOL CULTURE

“At the beginning there was a lot of student resistance and conflict between students from the two schools because the schools were seen as rivals.” (Student)

“My two daughters couldn’t take French or Music at Donevan but could at the consolidated school and there was a wider variety and scope of extra-curricular options available to them at the new school.” (Parent)

Continue:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be continued in the program, school climate and co-curricular implementation efforts throughout the consolidation experience are as follows:

- Making program options transparent and easily accessible to students from the sending school
- Ensuring guidance staff and administrative staff from the receiving school assist students in their decision-making and course selections
- Facilitating discussions and joint activities between student councils of the two schools prior to the consolidation
- Providing parental information on the academic program and co-curricular activities of the receiving school as well as the vision for the consolidated school
- Supporting strong relationships between staff and students from the closing school so there is a mechanism to ease the transition for students into the new setting
- Providing significant program and co-curricular enhancements that reflect the needs and interests of the combined student bodies
- Moving speciality staff with transferring students to assist with special needs

*“Clearly the consolidation resulted in enhanced academic programming for students.”
(Teacher)*

All participants agreed that they thought it was a positive initiative to ensure that there were key guidance and administrative staff from the sending school at the newly consolidated school. They also observed that the support of guidance staff from Eastdale to students at Donevan in the months prior to the consolidation assisted the students in making appropriate program choices and in reducing the anxiety that such a significant change brings, especially when decisions are made late in the school year. This assistance was very welcome, given Donevan students had already made course selections through the regular process prior to the decision to consolidate the two schools. This direct support helped alleviate confusion for the transferring students.

Discussions and meetings between student groups prior to the consolidation were perceived as very helpful to initiate collaboration between the two school groups. These actions and activities contributed to the development of a positive culture and eased the transition of students and staff to the consolidated school. By all accounts, the support of the close relationships between Donevan staff and students, especially those with exceptionalities, in the preparatory arrangements and in the actual transition was very helpful to students and their families.

There was universal acknowledgement by interviewees that the greatly enhanced physical learning environment and enriched program opportunities made the consolidation worthwhile for students from both schools, as did the expanded co-curricular activities which the augmented enrolment made possible. The focus on these advantages prior to and during the transition reassured both students and staff.

“Schools meshed through the work of the teachers.” (Parent)

Initiate:

*“The kids were prepared for the curriculum but not for the social environment.”
(Teacher)*

The highlights of the advice received about what should be initiated or started in the program, co-curricular and school culture implementation efforts throughout the consolidation experience are as follows:

- Ensure that teachers promote new co-curricular opportunities with students in the early days of the consolidated setting
- Expand co-curricular options to include as many choices as possible in the first year of consolidation to give students increased opportunities to get involved
- Establish a prominent display of the memorabilia and awards of the closing school in the consolidated school
- Create awards for the consolidated school that are named for the closing school's achievements or leading teams and activities

As is expected when a major change is implemented, there were several challenges to the successful consolidation of these two secondary schools. In these transitional situations, there is a strong need to concentrate on the overall well-being of the students in the new setting, which involves recognizing the past experiences and traditions which they and their communities bring to the consolidated school. One suggestion made by several of those interviewed was that there should be more focused attention on the honouring of the traditions and achievements of the closing school, including following through with commitments such as memorabilia exhibits and ongoing recognition of teams and clubs that were central to the social environment of the closing school.

Several people also mentioned the need to promote and celebrate the program and co-curricular opportunities that the new setting provides in very proactive ways in the first year of the consolidation. This investment of time and energy is well worth it, as it highlights the advantages that the new setting provides and encourages as much student and community engagement in the new culture as possible early in the merger of the two schools.

Eliminate:

The highlights of the advice received about what should be discontinued in the program, co-curricular and school culture implementation efforts throughout the consolidation experience are as follows:

- Cancelling courses and co-curricular activities that were available in the sending school and that students who are transitioning may have planned to take part in

“Co-curricular options were generally greater due to larger enrolment although Donevan’s popular Lacrosse program was lost.” (Teacher)

- Failing to honour commitments to recognize the traditions and identity of the closing school in the consolidated school and expecting students from the closing school to blend into an existing school culture

It was very apparent throughout all the interviews conducted for this study, that students, staff members and parents made the adjustment to the new setting much better when the positive aspects of the closing school were recognized and maintained where possible. The short timeline in this particular closure may have impeded the opportunity for attending to all the details of the ending of an era for the closing school as “the urgent” sometimes overtook “the important.” The demands of the physical move itself were substantial given the limited time available at the end of the year. The pressure staff felt to make this happen smoothly and to accommodate all the students’ program needs may have led to oversight of some of the recognition of Donevan’s legacy and history that had been intended at the outset.

Although many efforts were expended to ease the transition to the consolidated school, some more bridging between “the old and the new” for the Donevan community including students, staff and parents would have been helpful in fostering early student engagement and community awareness of the academic and social development advantages the newly consolidated school offered.

Part IV: Constructing the Way Forward

Areas for Future Consideration:

“In the beginning some grade 9 and 10 Donevan students felt displaced and disconnected but by grade 12 felt integrated in the new school.” (Student)

“Students responded differently to the transition. My son really needed graduation from Donevan but his younger sister looked forward to starting life in a new school.” (Parent)

Five years after its implementation, the consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale is largely seen as successful and the students and staff have created a vibrant and rich learning environment where as one student leader put it, “There is something for everyone.” It is widely acknowledged that great effort was invested in involving the community in discussion about the best learning environment for the students of these two schools in southeast Oshawa throughout the ARC process, which was generally seen to be open and transparent.

The consideration of this consolidation’s impacts through the rear view mirror of this study led to the conclusion that the merging of the two schools in an enhanced facility has resulted in a much better learning context for the students of both schools. Able and conscientious people including trustees, parents, students, system and school staff, and community members contributed their insights and initial aspirations for the newly consolidated school. They considered viable options to make the best use of human and physical resources available to meet student needs in the newly consolidated Eastdale. As the commentary under the **Continue, Initiate and Eliminate** categories in the foregoing sections of this report suggest, there were certainly lessons learned from the experience. These conclusions can inform the approaches taken and the strategies employed by those leading consolidation processes in similar school accommodation right-sizing initiatives.

Helpful ideas emerged from discussions with all the stakeholders through the advice that they would offer to school districts and communities undertaking a school closure/consolidation in the interests of addressing underutilized space and redirecting resources to foster student achievement and well-being. Many of these suggested approaches and initiatives were evident in the reflections students, staff, parents and community members offered on their experiences in the consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale. Some of the observations made by those interviewed in this study addressed strategies that were seen as vital to a successful consolidation and shed light on areas where things could be initiated or discontinued to improve satisfaction with the process and its outcomes.

Many of these approaches were part of the school consolidation of Donevan and Eastdale and some were the result of thinking about what might have been added or altered to further support the successful transition. All in all, they represent collective lessons learned by diverse stakeholders including board staff and policy makers whose views were sought for this study:

- Establish mechanisms for reliable, regular and inclusive communication of information and decisions to all affected parties in a timely way from the beginning of the ARC process throughout the first year of consolidation
- Work with the federation to agree on staffing provisions that recognize the unique circumstances that a consolidation creates and afford maximum flexibility to the process of staff assignments and appointments to positions of responsibility
- Form a group consisting of students, staff and parents to make suggestions for the transition planning once the Board decision is made and well in advance of the actual closure and merging of facilities and school cultures
- Facilitate co-ordination of the efforts of the administrative teams of the consolidating schools in creating the program options, staffing model, facility improvements, co-curricular opportunities, and community outreach
- Ensure sufficient time to allow for transition activities for students and families to become familiar with the new setting, and the academic and co-curricular learning opportunities that will be available in the newly consolidated school

“The timelines were incredibly tight and the procedures and actions that make a transition smooth were delayed as people listened to many rumours and waited for the formal announcement of the Board’s decision.” (School Administrator)

- Provide ample opportunity for shared planning, staff collaboration and facilitated professional learning in the newly consolidated school to:
 - break down divisions among staff,
 - identify new or emerging student needs resulting from the consolidation
 - set the stage for a genuinely effective professional learning community
- Introduce ways in which community members can contribute to the creation of a new identity for the consolidated school, including renaming where appropriate
- Create ways to celebrate and honour the most significant traditions of the closing school in the days just prior to closing and through some more permanent recognition of the closing school’s history and achievements such as exhibits, awards or annual events
- Ensure the transportation needs of students in all communities are addressed in both the initial year of the consolidation and in the future for students whose travel distances substantially increased
- Empower an ongoing group of staff, students and parents to monitor the implementation of transition plans throughout the consolidation process and make ‘course adjustment’ suggestions as needed

“School leaders could benefit from a debrief where the principals of the consolidating schools could reflect on what would have improved the transition process.” (School Administrator)

- Identify, where possible, ways in which the closed facility if it remains the School District’s property, can be used in cost recovery ways to provide a venue for community, municipal activities and/or programs

Throughout this study, individuals and groups from both of the secondary school communities as well as senior board staff, trustees and community members were generous with their time and their reflections on their experience in this school consolidation. Several years have passed and many people commented that the lens through which they were viewing the process and the events of the transition was quite different than it had been when they were first involved in the bringing together of Donevan and Eastdale. In many people’s perspectives, the anxieties that accompanied the move for Donevan students and their families and the changes for the Eastdale school community have largely dissipated with the passage of time, and the evolution of a rich academic and applied studies program, as well as engaging and diverse co-curricular offerings in the consolidated Eastdale.

There was very wide agreement that this consolidation has resulted in much richer programming, enhanced extra- curricular opportunities and certainly better facilities for the students of the two schools. It was also generally agreed that efforts were made to provide relevant and emerging information to the students, staff and communities affected by the consolidation throughout the ARC process and during the transition. That said, there were some reflections on how the timelines, staffing processes and transition strategies could be changed to make the consolidation experience less stressful and build confidence in the newly consolidated school more quickly. These suggestions or “lessons learned” have been described in the body of this report and are captured in a summary way in the eleven points listed under the heading “Constructing the Way Forward.” It is hoped that an outcome of this study will be that District School Boards engaged in this kind of process will be informed by the exploration of this particular consolidation experience and the insightful observations of those who were consulted about their responses to the merger of these two schools. Their recommendations for the optimal strategies to pave the way for successful change and continuous improvement in the learning environments we create for our children and the partnerships schools forge with their communities are appreciated.

“I believe that students who were able to be positive about the change had the best experience. Although part of me still felt like a Blue Devil, when I graduated I was glad I was given the opportunity to become an Eagle.” (Student)

Appendix: School Consolidation Experience Study Interview Guide

School Board Perspective (Questions for administrators, teaching and non-teaching personnel)

Board Accommodation Review Policy

1. When was it drafted?
2. Who was involved in the drafting of the policy?
3. How did Ministry guidelines inform the development of the Board's Accommodation Review Policy?
4. Did the Board consult with other school boards regarding their policies or processes when drafting your policy or initiating an ARC process?
5. How and at what point were trustees involved in the development of the Board's ARP?
6. Has the Board's accommodation review policy been revised/modified as a result of experience or input?
7. How was the Board's ARP shared with staff, parents and other stakeholders?

Decision-Making Process Regarding Establishment of ARC

1. What are the key factors that led to the decision to establish an Accommodation Review Committee? Enrolment? Program limitations? Financial viability? Facility conditions? Equity of access and opportunity for students and communities? (What were the lens through which the decision to establish an ARC was made?)
2. Was an analysis of potential impacts of the possible closure or consolidation of the school(s) undertaken prior to the establishment of the ARC? If so, at what point and how was this analysis shared with stakeholders (trustees, parents, students, staff and community members)
3. To what extent is an analysis of the accommodation needs of the Board included in the long range planning and budget considerations of the trustees? In other words, are potential school closures/consolidations within the school board part of an overall multiyear strategic plan for increased school efficiencies and improved management of schools?
4. How were members of the ARC chosen? How was the opportunity to participate as an ARC member made public?

Process of the ARC

1. *Communication*: What was the communication plan to inform the public and specific stakeholders about the process and timelines of the ARC?
2. *Composition of the ARC & Roles of members*:
 - a. How are the procedural rules of the ARC communicated to ARC members, stakeholders and the general public?
 - b. Who Chaired the ARC?
 - c. What was the role of Trustees on the ARC?
 - d. What was the role of Principals and Vice-Principals on the ARC (were they voting members?)
 - e. How was the role of staff (teaching and non-teaching) on the ARC defined?

- f. Were there specific school board personnel assigned to liaise and support students, teachers or parents, community members and other stakeholders who had concerns or questions regarding the ARC?
3. *ARC Options*: How are alternative solutions or proposals to address student accommodation issues developed and discussed during the ARC process?
4. *Decision-making*: What was the process for achieving consensus within the ARC?
5. *Feedback During ARC Process*:
 - a. Were there mechanisms in place for addressing stakeholder questions, concerns and suggestions during the ARC process?
 - b. How were these mechanisms made public?
 - c. How were ongoing questions from ARC members dealt with during the process of the ARC?
6. **Key question**: Did the ARC develop a transition plan to accompany its recommendations to address how students would move to new accommodations or arrangements? If not, did the Board do so and make it public at the time of the Board decision?

Assessment of the Impact of the Accommodation Decision:

1. In terms of the ARC's recommendations and the Board's ultimate decision, does the school Board document the positive and negative outcomes of the decision from the perspective of students, staff, parents and other stakeholders in order to inform future ARCs?

Key questions: Impact on specific populations and/or groups of students (for example, Special Education, Aboriginal, At Risk students)

- a. How did the consolidation / joint use impact course offerings / programming in relation to student needs? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - b. How did the consolidation or joint use impact students' in-school extracurricular activities? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - c. How did the consolidation or joint use impact students' community-based extracurricular activities? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - d. How did the consolidation or joint use impact student travel times? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - e. How did the consolidation or joint use impact student well-being (physical health, mental health, school safety)? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - f. How did the consolidation or joint use impact childcare and early years programs (convenience, options available)? Did your experience differ from what you thought?³
 - g. How did the consolidation or joint use impact support-student and teacher-student relationships? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
 - h. How did the consolidation or joint use impact parent, guardian and caregiver engagement / involvement in their children's learning? Did your experience differ from what you thought?
2. Has an **action plan** been developed to minimize/mitigate any negative outcomes and maximize successful strategies for future accommodation decisions?

³ This question was omitted from the interviews as none of the schools involved in this SCES had child care facilities or early years programs.

3. What were the **lessons learned** that could be applied to future ARCs and implementation of Board accommodation decisions?
 - a. **Stop – Continue – Start Exercise**
 - i. What would you recommend not be done in the future?
 - ii. What do you think would be essential to continue doing in the future?
 - iii. What would you suggest should be included in the process that was not part of this experience?

Student Perspective (Questions for students)

1. How and at what point was the school consolidation communicated to you?
2. Who communicated the information on the consolidation to you?
3. How did you prepare/how were you asked or expected to prepare for the school consolidation?
4. Do you feel that you were well prepared for the school consolidation?
5. Did the consolidation impact the courses and programs offered to you? (more or fewer, different courses or programs) How?
6. Did the consolidation impact your travel time to and from school and your means of transportation to/from school? How?
7. Did the consolidation impact the extra-curricular activities offered at your school? How?
8. Did the consolidation impact your participation in extra-curricular activities outside of your school? How?
9. Did the consolidation impact your relationships with your teachers and other school or board staff? How?
10. Did the consolidation impact your relationships with your friends and peers? How?
11. Would you describe your overall experience of the school consolidation as positive or negative? Why?
12. Did the school consolidation impact your future plans (postsecondary) plans in any way?
13. What do you feel could have been done differently, if anything? Why? How?
 - a. **Stop – Continue – Start Exercise**
 - i. What would you recommend not be done in the future?
 - ii. What do you think would be essential to continue doing in the future?
 - iii. What would you suggest should be included in the process that was not part of this experience?

Parent Perspective (Questions for parents)

1. How and at what point was the school consolidation communicated to you?
2. Who communicated information on the consolidation to you?
3. How did you prepare/how were you asked or expected to prepare for the school consolidation?
4. Do you feel that you were well prepared for the school consolidation?
5. Did the consolidation impact the academic courses and programs offered to your children? (more or fewer, different courses or programs) How?
6. Did the consolidation impact your child's transportation to/from school? (means of transportation/travel time) How?
7. Did the consolidation impact the extra-curricular activities offered at your child's school and your child's participation in extra-curricular activities? (nature of activities, variety and number of activities) How?

8. Did the consolidation impact your child's participation in extra-curricular activities outside of the school? How?
9. Did the consolidation impact your relationships with your child's teachers and other school or board staff? How?
10. Did the consolidation impact your involvement and/or engagement in your child's school? How?
11. Would you describe your overall experience of the school consolidation as positive or negative? Why?
12. What do you feel could have been done differently, if anything? Why? How?
 - a. **Stop – Continue – Start Exercise**
 - i. What would you recommend not be done in the future?
 - ii. What do you think would be essential to continue doing in the future?
 - iii. What would you suggest should be included in the process that was not part of this experience?

Community Stakeholder Perspective (Questions for community stakeholders)

1. How and at what point was the school consolidation communicated to you?
2. Who communicated information on the consolidation to you?
3. Were there any expectations of you as a community stakeholder in the school consolidation process?
4. Do you feel that you were well prepared for the school consolidation?
5. Did the school consolidation impact your relationship with the school administration and/or school community (staff, students, parents)? How?
6. Did the school consolidation impact your participation, access and/or engagement in the school and/or school programs?
7. Would you describe your overall experience of the school consolidation as positive or negative? Why?
8. What do you feel could have been done differently, if anything? Why? How?
 - a. **Stop – Continue – Start Exercise**
 - i. What would you recommend not be done in the future?
 - ii. What do you think would be essential to continue doing in the future?
 - iii. What would you suggest should be included in the process that was not part of this experience?