What is School Consolidation?

For the purposes of these studies, school consolidation is defined as the closure or re-organization 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.

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

Background

Given the current fiscal context, the School Board Efficiencies and Modernization (SBEM) strategy was developed to promote consolidation or joint use of existing or new school space.

To support this goal, the Ministry committed to conducting case studies on recent experiences of school consolidations/reorganizations across the province to share promising practices based on the results of these experiences and ultimately increase positive outcomes.

The research team conducted approximately 100 on-site interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders impacted by recent school consolidations/reorganizations. The research team also conducted site visits to understand the diversity of stakeholder views.

“While operational decisions may differ from school to school the mission and vision around student achievement has to take the lead in all conversations about facilities.” (Superintendent)

Three Case Studies

Three distinct case studies in two district school boards focussed on school consolidation/reorganization experiences:

Algoma DSB

1. Merging two schools into a newly created cross-panel school: Bawating and Sir James Dunn into Superior Heights Collegiate and Vocational School (Grades 7-12).

2. Merging elementary and secondary panels into one cross-panel school: The reorganization of the grade seven and eight programs from all Central Algoma elementary schools through a relocation of these programs into Central Algoma Secondary School (CASS).

Durham DSB

3. Merging two schools into an existing / refurbished school: Dr. F.J. Donevan Collegiate Institute and Eastdale Collegiate and Vocational Institute into Eastdale Collegiate and Vocational Institute.
What Are Some Highlights from the Findings?

The detailed studies have a wealth of information on lessons learned and advice for school board administrators in future consolidations/reorganizations. Some highlights from the studies include:

- The initial fears of individuals impacted by consolidation/reorganization were significantly allayed after the transition plans were successfully implemented
- There were perceived benefits particularly around expanded academic programming and co-curricular activities
- Students adapted more quickly than school staff to their new environment.

“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)

Key Themes

Communication: the quality and consistency of communication, of board decision-making and planning and the facilitation of connections and dialogue between staff groups, between student groups and between the board and stakeholders (including parents, staff and student and community members) had a direct impact on the acceptance and positive impact of the consolidation/reorganization experience.

Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions: collaborative planning coupled with efficient and thorough implementation of decisions and commitments were vital to the success of consolidation/reorganization efforts.

Program Offerings and School Culture: due to larger student cohorts and consolidated staff, program offerings and co-curriculars were generally enhanced through consolidation/reorganization. When all parties in the consolidated/reorganized school were engaged in creating a new school culture an inclusive and encouraging learning and teaching environment resulted.

What Was Learned?

Lessons learned were articulated around the themes of Communication, Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions, and Program Offerings and School Culture. The three reports offer lessons learned specific to each case study and deserve specific attention. The following are broad examples that apply to all three case studies:

- Establish working groups for collaborative planning involving students, parents, staff and community members to explore similar experiences in other jurisdictions to fuel planning activities and reduce anxieties about transition issues.
- Create ample opportunities for all stakeholders to be provided with timely and accurate information from the formation of the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) through to the monitoring of the first few years of the operation of the newly consolidated school or reorganized facility.
- Facilitate the involvement of students and the inclusion of student voice and leadership in transition planning and implementation to ensure an empowering and productive learning environment.
- Ensure sufficient time to allow for transition planning and transition activities for staff, students and parents before the consolidation/reorganization takes effect.
- Provide ample opportunity for shared planning, staff collaboration and facilitated professional learning for the staffs from the schools involved in the consolidation/reorganization to:
  - Break down divisions among staff,
  - Identify new or emerging student needs resulting from the consolidation, and
  - Set the stage for a genuinely effective professional learning community.
- Empower an ongoing group of staff, students and parents to monitor the implementation of transition plans throughout the consolidation process and in the first year after the consolidation to provide advice on ‘course adjustments’ and to ensure that legacy and other commitments are honoured.

“Decisions are made through the lens of student learning so there has to be strong collaboration between those making capital and finance decisions and program planning and leadership.” (Superintendent)