What is School Consolidation?
For the purposes of this study, school consolidation is defined as the closure or re-organization of one or more school(s) and the subsequent amalgamation into one single school on an existing or a new site, either in an entirely newly constructed facility or an existing building.

“Positive faith-based culture and excellent education is not about location: it is about the people who work together.” (Board Senior Official)

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 of Education committed to conducting case studies on recent experiences of school consolidations/reorganizations across the province to share promising practices and based on these results increase positive outcomes. The fourth School Consolidation Experience study provides perspectives on the school consolidation experience in a Catholic school district context.

The Case Study
This study focused on the consolidation of three schools into one newly-built school in the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board (SMCDSB). Our Lady of Grace, Prince of Peace, and Our Lady of the Assumption were consolidated into a single newly-built school on the original site of Our Lady of Grace (K-8). In this case study, the research team conducted approximately 10 key informant interviews and eight focus groups with stakeholders impacted by these school consolidations and new school construction.

“While you walk into the front doors of our current building, you can easily identify where each school is represented in the chapel and other highly visible places. . . . we have key artifacts placed to mark a school culture and where each school community can feel a part of this new building.” (Principal)

Program Offerings and School Culture
- Engage local school(s) council members from the closing school(s) in the research, design and implementation of the new school(s) or consolidated school(s) academic programming, co-curricular options and identification of community partners for innovative practice.
- Involve students, parents, and staff in ongoing discussion about ensuring excellence and equity in programming and co-curricular activities.
- Celebrate rituals, traditions and activities of the merging school(s) during the early days of the transition to the new school(s) or consolidated school, and continue to do this throughout the first year of the new school’s operation. For example, faith-based celebrations and messages helped bridge the divides that existed at the outset among the three schools.

“... It is important to respect the fact that whatever you think is the best plan could and should change to meet community needs; we have to be open-minded, flexible and responsive.” (Superintendent)
What Are Some Highlights from the Findings?

This study reflects important lessons learned and advice for school board administrators in future consolidations/reorganizations. Highlights from the study include that:

- Articulation of the aspirations/values of the Catholic school system acted as a unifier of different school communities.
- Discussion in the communities about the benefits of expanded academic programming and co-curricular activities were effective.
- Efforts made by school leadership to involve staff, students and community members from the consolidating schools during the transition process helped in diffusing dissension and fostering an inclusive atmosphere in the new school.

“This has been a lot of work, but I feel like we have really become something special.” (Principal)

Key Themes

**Communication**: the quality and consistency of communication about 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, students 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, was 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-curricular 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?

**Communication**

- Involve students by encouraging student voice and leadership during the transition planning and implementation process.
- Have a clear plan for the use or disposal of the closed school facilities and communicate this as openly and transparently as possible.
- Identify ways in which the resources from the closed facilities will be used or disposed of so there is clarity for parents and community members about the resources in which they may have invested.
- To encourage good communication and relationship building, before the consolidation takes place, bring staff from the consolidating school(s) together socially and to collectively plan instructional and assessment practices. For example, staff retreats for all staff from the consolidated schools in advance of working together in the new setting is an excellent strategy to establish collaboration and ensure quality instruction. In addition, program consultant support for teachers was provided as they planned for the new school environment.

**Transition Planning and Implementation of Decisions**

- Prior to consolidation and/or the building of a new school, establish working groups involving parents, staff, students and community members to investigate similar experiences in other jurisdictions, either through research or visitation.
- Get buy-in from parents and community members and have them lead planning activities as the old school(s) close and the new one opens.
- To address concerns as they arise and to facilitate the transition process, assign a liaison person at the Board’s central office who can be the first point of contact for the Principal(s).
- Seek staff input from all of the consolidating school(s) on the design features of the new school, both in terms of instructional and co-curricular activities. Be sure engagement of stakeholders is authentic and their suggestions are taken seriously especially in situations which are emotionally charged like the naming of the new school.
- Design events and activities that bring staff and students to the new facility before the actual opening of the new school. In this case study, staff and students were brought together for a formal cutting of a tri-ribbon representing the three consolidated schools, signalling the launching of solidarity at the newly consolidated school. This event was accompanied by the celebration of Mass for the new school community.
- Empower an ongoing group of staff, students and parents to monitor the implementation of transition plans throughout the consolidation process so that “course adjustments” can take place, and the legacy of the amalgamated schools can be honoured.