Independent Facilitator Report

Review of the Lakehead DSB school closure decisions

June 2005

David Cooke
June 3, 2005

Dear Mr. Minister,

Please find enclosed my completed report of my review of the Lakehead District School Board’s school closure decisions, together with recommendations.

Minister, I appreciate the opportunity to have worked on this project. I particularly want to thank Ms. Carlana Lindeman, District Manager of the Ministry for her assistance and professional advice. I met many people in the Lakehead DSB community committed to quality public education. Not everyone will be supportive of my findings, however I believe that my recommendations will significantly benefit the students served by this Board based on the new criteria forthcoming in the new school closure guidelines and capital planning process.

The Ministry of Education’s new school closure policy is a major change. It requires sharing power with school communities, through honest consultation and involvement. When the Board proceeds to develop new school closure policies with the substantial and real involvement of both the school and broader community, Lakehead DSB will enjoy greater community confidence and students will benefit.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Dave Cooke
Independent Facilitator
INTRODUCTION

In late April you asked me to be the independent facilitator to review the Lakehead District School Board’s school closure decisions taken after December 2003. You have asked me to review the Lakehead DSB’s decisions to determine if the process undertaken by the board met the spirit of the new closure guidelines and capital planning process that was announced in February 2005. Further you have asked me to assess if students and the school community would have benefited substantially if the new guidelines had been applied.

Over the last few weeks, I have met with dozens of very committed students, parents, teachers, principals, trustees, school board officials, and community leaders in the Lakehead DSB region. I was very impressed with the passion and commitment of all who made presentations to me during this very difficult review.

While there are differing opinions regarding the decision the Board has made to close 14 schools, I came away from Thunder Bay knowing that the Lakehead DSB is governed by a Board of Trustees who believe deeply in quality public education.

You and your government have announced significant changes in both the criteria and process used when schools are being considered for closure. These changes recognize that public education is a partnership and that school communities must have full involvement in the process, before the decisions are made.

I have carried out an extensive consultation in Thunder Bay, meeting with board officials, the elected trustees, students, parents, federation and union leadership, as well as the President of the Chamber of Commerce, the Mayor, and many members of the community. I met with the Council of School Councils, committees to save individual schools, student leaders, and many who presented to the school board as delegations on these school closures. In addition, I visited four of the schools scheduled to close this June and met with staff, parent leaders and students. Finally I have received and reviewed much written material from the school board and the community.

I feel that my consultation has given me the information I require to carry out my responsibilities.

The Lakehead DSB has a declining enrolment challenge and over the last several years has closed many schools. The board has legitimate concerns about their situation and the board has a responsibility to the community to ensure that students have access to modern facilities that can offer a full range of quality programs so that graduates are equipped to compete for positions in university, college, training programs or the workforce. I believe that the Lakehead DSB has acted in good faith using Ministry of Education policy requirements that were in place when its process to identify schools for closure began.
REVIEW OF THE CLOSURES AND CAPITAL PLANNING PROCESSES

In October 2000, the board established a taskforce to develop a five-year plan for community schooling. The taskforce membership included parents, students, federations and school administrators.

In March 2001, the board defeated a recommendation to close Isabella St. School and then in March 2002, the board approved its closure. Throughout my consultations in Thunder Bay, this closure was raised many times by both the community and the board as a very difficult experience and I believe explains much of the board’s new school closure policy which reduced the time and opportunity for community input.

Also in May 2001, the Board requested that a five-year plan for program and facility rationalization be developed. In 2003, the board received the capital renewal facility options report and in August 2003, the Board approved the report. The committee updated and briefed school councils and union leadership.

There does not appear to have been wide consultation or real engagement of the school community through this process even though the board must have known the end result would be a significant restructuring of public education for Lakehead DSB.

In October 2003, your government was elected and in December 2003, you requested that a moratorium on school closures be implemented while facility needs could be reviewed. However, the board proceeded to review its school closure policy in January 2004, and a new policy was adopted in April 2004. The new board policy reduced the timelines for community input once schools had been identified for potential closure and there was no provision for school-based committees in the consultation process.

In December 2003, the board also decided to contract the services of C.N. Watson and Associates to recommend how the board could make best use of its facilities.

All of this activity was taking place when it was clear that the Ministry of Education was reviewing the issue of school closures and that a new approach would be the result.

In May 2004, the C.N. Watson report was received by the board. It recommended 26 school closures, as well as renovations and program enhancements beginning in 2005, with completion in 2017. The report also recommended the construction of one new elementary school and one new secondary school.

The board established an implementation committee comprised of principals and board administrators.

All questions from parents were to be directed through school councils to the board. Anyone wishing to address the board on this issue submitted a request in writing to be a
delegation before a regular board meeting. Questions from other members of the community were directed to the board’s media officer.

There were no school-based committees to provide input which resulted in many concerned parents and students feeling that they had no participation in the decision making process.

Public education is a partnership between the community, parents, students, staff and the elected board. Election to office does not mean that decisions should be made without respect for this partnership. A decision making process that engages the community will strengthen public confidence in public education even if there is not complete agreement with the final decision.

The proposed school closings for Lakehead DSB represent almost 35 per cent of the existing schools. This significant change cannot be successful without community involvement and school based advice.

In September 2004, the board approved 11 schools to close in 2005, and eight schools to close in 2007. The board at first gave the community about eight weeks to respond and then extended this to January 25, 2005.

On January 25, 2005, the board further reduced the number of schools to close, and approved the closure of seven schools in June 2005 and another seven in June 2007.

In February 2005, the Ministry of Education released “Good Places to Learn: Renewing Ontario’s Schools”, in which the government articulates its new policy guidelines on school closures.

The board has expressed concern to me that the policy announcements from the ministry were released much later than expected. It will be essential that the regulatory framework implementing these policies be released quickly so that the board can revise its school closure policies and proceed in a timely manner to address its significant facility needs.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

After completion of my consultation and the review of documents made available to me, I must conclude that the consultation process was inadequate. It failed to engage school communities or work in partnership with the community at large. School closures are best dealt with by local school boards as locally elected trustees are focused on community needs. The Ministry of Education sets the province-wide policy and the legal framework and the local school board adapts the policy to local circumstances. The Ministry of Education has announced major changes in both the consultation process and the criteria for school closings.
1. 2007 School Closures

With this in mind, I recommend that all of the proposed school closings scheduled for 2007 be re-examined based on the new provincial guidelines and in consideration of the new capital planning process outlined in your February announcement.

The Lakehead DSB, like all school boards, will have to revise its school closing policies to conform to new provincial policy guidelines. The new school closing policy should be developed in partnership with the Lakehead community. Extensive consultation is important if the new policy is to enjoy support.

After the new policies have been adopted by the board, the proposed 2007 school closures should be re-examined using both a proper consultation process and new school closure policy.

2. Ministry Support

The Ministry of Education should consider assisting the Lakehead DSB in developing a consultation process that should include school-based committees of parents, staff, students, and the community. Trustee involvement on these committees will assist greatly in the process. In addition, the community at large should have opportunities to express their views to the board. The ministry should offer advice on the process, with the objective of documenting this as a “best practice” that could assist school boards across the Province. The ministry should consider assisting the board financially with this process.

3. 2005 Closures - Secondary Panel

Ft. William Collegiate Institute

The Lakehead DSB operates six secondary schools: three in the North Ward and three in the South Ward. The board has proposed that one South Ward school (Fort William Collegiate Institute) be closed in June 2005, since there is sufficient space in the remaining two South Ward schools for these students. The June 2007 proposal is that two North Ward schools (Hillcrest High School and Port Arthur Collegiate Institute) would be closed and a new school constructed to replace the two old buildings.

I met with students, staff, parents, and the community and listened to a range of views regarding the future of Fort William Collegiate Institute. A recommendation on this matter is very difficult.

The President of the Chamber of Commerce and others made the point that modern facilities are essential both for local students and in order to attract business and people with the needed skills to Thunder Bay.
Also students need access to a full range of programs with teachers teaching in their area of specialty. These facts argue in favour of closure. However the school’s EQAO results are better than the board and provincial average and the school has strong community ties. The school itself is showing its age and it requires updating if it is to meet student needs.

The school community wants to be involved in deciding the future of this school and I feel that rather than rushing to make a decision now, it would be in the best interest of the community to suspend the closure decision, and have the board reconsider the decision once new school closure policies are in place. I therefore recommend that Fort William Collegiate Institute should be reconsidered along with other schools scheduled for closure in 2007.

The recommendations I have made regarding Fort William Collegiate Institute will create significant challenges for the board since many students have already made plans to attend a new school. However with goodwill, and a continued commitment at both the board and school level, students will be back at Fort William in September receiving a quality education.

At the end of this process the board’s plan should result in secondary schools with modern facilities designed to give Lakehead DSB students the skills necessary in today’s competitive society.

4. 2005 Closures - Elementary Panel

I turn now to the elementary schools planned for closure in June 2005. With significant declining enrolment in the Lakehead DSB, some school closures are essential and the community recognizes this. The result will be fewer split grades, access to improved facilities, more access to specialist teachers, improved remedial opportunities, and improved access to after school activities.

**Edgewater Park/Rosslyn Road, Oliver Park, Valley Central/Rosslyn Village**

Three of the elementary schools planned for closure made no requests to meet with me during my consultation: Edgewater Park/Rosslyn Road (88 students), Oliver Road (163 students) and Valley Central/Rosslyn Village (55 students). The community use of these schools is minimal and I believe the case for closure has been well documented by the Board and accepted by the school community. There would be no benefit to the students in delay and significant benefit in proceeding.

**Health Park**

Health Park (290 students) has seen its enrolment decline and the school itself is very much showing its age. I toured the school, met with parent leaders and spoke to staff. Community use of Heath Park School is minimal. I believe that if the new school closure
guidelines were applied, the board’s decision would be confirmed. Therefore I recommend that Heath Park close as scheduled June 2005.

Fourway School

The proposed closure of Fourway School has been difficult. Parents have organized in opposition to its closure and have been very outspoken in support of their school.

The current enrolment at Fourway School is 57 students and the proposal is to have the students attend Kakabeka Falls School this fall.

Having the students at Kakabeka Falls School would mean fewer split grades, no triple grades, specialist teachers and access to more remedial help. The school bus ride would be about 20 minutes longer for some students but the education program would be greatly enhanced. I was told that in the last two years there have been no “snow days” where buses have been cancelled due to dangerous weather.

There will be no impact on the local economy from the closure of this school and the community use of this school is minimal. I believe that if the board were to apply the new school closure guidelines, Fourway School would close. I know some parents will be disappointed with my recommendation; however I strongly believe that the board’s decision is in the best interests of the students.

Gorham and Ware Schools

Gorham and Ware School has 211 students and is a community centre for the Lappe Service Board. The community use of this school is impressive. There is an after school program that uses the school and community centre daily, Wado Kai and Ti Kwon Do classes use the school several days a week, exercise classes are held, the school council and Home and School have meetings in the school. In addition the Lappe and Area Community Centre use the school under an agreement with the school board. Finally the Lappe Service Board uses the community room monthly and the local Lappe Fire Department uses the facilities for training.

I visited the school, met with parents and staff and I was very impressed by the way the students and community are served. For me, this school is a good rural school model that the ministry’s new policies intend to preserve.

I recommend that this school remain open and that the board offer a JK to Grade 8 program and that it not be re-examined for closure for at least the five years, as outlined in the Ministry guidelines.
5. Financial - Capital Planning and Operating Savings

Your ministry has also asked all boards including the Lakehead DSB to prepare and submit capital plans in the fall which will incorporate all of the board’s future capital needs in relation to their existing facilities. Although the board was clearly looking to address a need to modernize their existing facilities the timing of their decision means they did not have time to fully consider the new requirements.

At this time, I am not aware of the board’s ability to fund the secondary school construction project with the changes made in the Good Places to Learn document.

Lakehead DSB, like all boards is asked to take into account the existing asset value of schools. The combined asset value of these five schools is around $12.5 million and the board should make every effort to work with the community to identify potential uses for these sites. The reality is that these facilities were paid for by the public and are most valuable as schools, however the decision to forfeit this value seems reasonable under these circumstances in the best interest of students.

Ministry staff have provided information indicating that the board could lose $1.4 million in annual operating grants from the proposed closures. The deduction for the 2005 closures is just over $1 million annually from the 2005 but this amount that drops to $600,000 per year annually under my recommendations.

Taken together the financial information available supports the need for the board to submit the schools indicated to the new ministry policies.