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Quick Study

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Danger - or Opportunity?

by Malkin Dare

It's a terrible blow to communities when they lose their school, because local schools are an important part of the glue that holds neighbourhoods together – whether it be parents coming together to support the school or Brownies meeting the gym after school hours or Elections Canada using schools as polling booths.

The closure of a school is particularly devastating in small towns where it is the only school, since it means children are going to have to be bussed to school every day. As well, it often leads to the town's slow decline, as families and teachers move away and marginal businesses close as a result.

It's probably not an overstatement to describe the pending closure of dozens of Ontario schools as a crisis in Chinese consists of two characters – one representing danger and the other representing opportunity. The school closure crisis is in fact offering school boards an opportunity – if they can only see it.

In order to see this opportunity, school boards must abandon their current view of schools as big boxes dedicated solely to the education of children. If they cling to this view, then they have no possible path other than closing dozens of schools. But if they think flexibly about schools, school boards can solve their excess capacity problems and in the process achieve better schools.

Summary

- Declining enrolment in Ontario has led to threats to close dozens of schools
- There is a better way to cope with declining enrolment – by “reinventing” schools
- Reinvented schools would be better for students, taxpayers, and communities
- Ontario should introduce more school choice.

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There are two possible ways to deal with the unused space in schools: use the unneeded space to generate extra income or sell off some of their white elephant big boxes and move the remaining students to a non-traditional space in the same neighbourhood.

The first option, that of making money by renting or selling the unused space to some other agency or agencies, offers certain advantages in terms of complementary services. For example, if a dentist were to rent out space in a school, he or she could give dental hygiene lessons to the students and look after their teeth. A public library could offer a much better selection than a standard school library. A private school is another obvious choice, and the two schools could cooperate in various ways – for example, sharing buses or maintaining an outdoor skating rink in winter.

The second option is to sell off some of the big-box schools and re-establish the schools in smaller, less expensive venues like church basements or community centres or unused commercial space. Once again, it would be great if complementary arrangements could be made. For example, if a school relocated to a YMCA, the children could benefit from the many excellent athletic and recreational facilities there. If the school was housed in a church, perhaps the students could receive music lessons from the organist. If the school was in an unused wing of a university or community college, great lecturers and enrichment activities could be pursued.

One possible objection to this scheme is that the reconstituted schools would be too small to support the cost of a principal, and this is of course a valid objection. However, it is quite feasible to operate schools without principals. Swiss schools, for example, mostly operate without principals; instead, the teachers divide up the duties among themselves. And many Tim Horton's outlets are too small to support a manager, and so they share a part-time manager with one or two other outlets. Flexibility is the key here.

Opportunities don't always announce themselves with trumpets and gongs. Hidden deep inside the school closure crisis is the opportunity to create new and better schools. But the pain involved in reinventing schools makes it more likely that school boards will just keep on doing what they've always done in the past – simply closing community schools when enrolment shrinks.

The one thing that might tip the balance – making it more painful to close schools than to reinvent them – is very vigorous protest and resistance from the communities in question.