

Solution to ARC Peterborough High School Issues 2011  
More Local Control by Local Schools means *Successful* Schools

Purpose:

Propose a pilot program to transfer more control of each school's budget to the principals and staff directly running our local high schools.

Rationale

More local control will better solve issue of projected enrolment decrease while providing value to board, community and student. It is based on research on factors for successful secondary schools.

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I am posting this paper as a parent of three daughters who are respectively a graduate of, a current student of and a prospective student of PCVS.

Thank you for opportunity to write to the committee. One important part of this process is to learn about the tremendous accomplishments of all Peterborough high schools on your list. Finding a way to keep this success for all schools is a war worth fighting for, a problem worth solving, and a culture worth keeping. Mark Twain stated that whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting. Our schools are our water.

The reason for ARC is a *projected* short fall in enrolment in Peterborough Secondary Schools. Demographic shifts may lead one to prudently plan for enrolment drops in principle. But the likelihood of accurate predictions for individual schools to specific years is another matter. One option is to pre-emptively shut down a school. The risk with this option is that the projection might be incorrect. A consequence of shutting down a school and having higher enrolment is the expense and inconvenience of re-opening the school or building a new school – unless the real goal is to build a new school?

This paper will propose a pilot program to transfer more control of each school's budget to the principals and staff directly running our local high schools. We need more local control with the corresponding local accountability. The board still distributes funds to schools on same enrolment basis as per accepted practice and funding formulas. The board does not need to micro-manage to the degree of imposing a decision as to which if any school closes. Instead the schools amongst themselves find solutions to remain viable – while providing value to the board, community and student.

The current budget practice is that schools are allocated a budget primarily based on enrolment. The funding is dedicated to the operation of school programs (i.e., resources, some technology, classroom furniture, etc). Salaries of all work groups and work on the facility itself are seen to at the board level and do not figure into school operational budget.

More specifically, the proposal is that the board still allocates budget based on enrolment. However, the pilot would transfer the salary and facilities portion for more direct control by the local school. The transfer comes with appropriate strings attached such as applicable guidelines and constraints, e.g. union collective agreements. The local school would be accountable for following the guidelines and constraints. Most importantly though, the local school will have incentive and flexibility to pursue

solutions to keep schools successful and avoid closing. If solutions are possible, they can only be found by local control, not by a more distanced and higher layer in the school system hierarchy. In other words, a direct solution by local schools is more likely than a school board solution for that school.

However there is a possibility that a local schools will not find solutions to remain viable. The pilot would include a reporting and process protocol to enable a school to request board intervention to close that school in the event the school could not sustain itself. Before that happens, a school may work out a merger with another as a means to best serve the students. The pilot would need vigilant oversight to ensure local schools do not act irresponsibly such as by running deficits.

The running of schools in Ontario is ultimately the responsibility of the government of Ontario. Thus accordingly, Ontario has charged school boards to operate the province's publicly-funded schools. The boards administer the funding they receive from the province for their schools. To best administer this funding, the board can allocate more direct control to the schools, while setting parameters and principles as required meeting curriculum, and other legislated requirements. Let the community schools decide how to manage the declining enrolment, if it does occur while meeting ministry mandates. For example, two local schools facing student number declines will more easily work out a solution amongst themselves than from a directive from head office. Necessity is a marvellous motivator.

A school board for a larger region cannot micromanage solutions for all the schools in this district. There has to be a change in balance between decision making at a board level and a community level. Strategic decisions require consultation with the board. However, one should not have to ask a superintendent for every operations issue. By analogy complete state control by the former Soviet Union did not work. Instead give the community schools more direct control of their budget.

From my understanding, principals are assigned to school for limited terms. This is also an issue if true. Local effective control requires local champions. A limited term for principals basically strips away motivation for principals to further a cause for their school when they have to leave the school after a few years. The pilot program should include longer term assignments of principals to respective schools. Perhaps the best way to do this is to keep the same terms but enable extensions for principals that are suitable champions for that school. That said, I don't know if there is some legislation that prevents longer terms for principals?

The government of Ontario has decreed that boards have responsibility for the number, size and location of schools. Though I personally have some issue with this, I cannot wave a wand to wish away the board's mandate. However I hope I can convince the board that a pilot program for more local responsibility and accountability will give better value to student, community and ultimately to the board which can take credit for this innovation by choosing to enact it.

Some boards across the province may decide that fewer and larger schools are the best way, where best is usually defined as cost effective. In this case, "cost effectiveness" is how numbers look in an accounting ledger. There is enough experience across North America to suggest that larger "mega" schools may have quality issues for both education and well-being of students – even if the accounting ledgers look better. There are also issues if schools are too small and there is too much local control. Too much local control leads to differences in education amongst different areas. For example one school may be in a wealthier district. If that school were to get more computers and other resources than compared to other schools, this might be considered an unfair advantage. This is in contrast to a school which uses

independent means to obtain what other schools already have so that all are on par. Examples are removing asbestos for environmental reasons or to update facilities for accessibility.

A question may be, how would more local control address enrolment shortfalls? To be honest, no one knows, but it will be much more likely that local control will find solutions much more readily than a larger “more distanced” entity. Possibly, the Peterborough area high schools will follow a partnership strategy involving the local college and local university as already suggested by a previous presentation. The difference here is that the local schools make it happen instead of asking the board to do it for them. Unlike secondary schools, colleges and universities have autonomous management. Although the ministry allocates funds based on enrolment, and sets various conditions, it does not control the budget of any college or university. If secondary schools have more budget control, they would be better able to form partnerships with like-funded organizations.

Yet one scenario could be that despite all innovation, creativity and partnerships, some schools may find viability to be a problem. Perhaps two schools will decide to merge. This would be a local solution resulting when all options have been exhausted. We would be confident that this was the only solution. That said, my anticipation is that this scenario would not come to pass.

Ideally each school would prosper by using its advantages. Does the board favour a jack of all trades approach or one of specialized economy of scale? Although we do not know what solutions local control may develop, I will speculate on one possibility.

When I witness presentations to ARC I am stunned by accomplishments. Others may find it attractive to send students here. The local schools could come up with ways and means for students outside the province to attend school in Peterborough that is in a way that is affordable, meaning less expensive than private schools and also financially sustainable for the school. I say out of province, because I am assuming that there might be issues from taking students from other districts funded by our provincial Ministry. With all due respect, I believe only local school administration could make this happen because there is a very strong survival incentive to do so. A district level administration probably would not have such a strong incentive. Indeed if enrolment in the Lakeshore communities increases with a net gain for entire KPRDSB region, why would the administration care about some local decreases as long as the entire district increases?

For example, a prospective student wishing to pursue education in a publically funded high school in Ontario could search for schools at [StudyinCanada.com](http://StudyinCanada.com). A filtered search would reveal only one link to date, being the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. With decreasing birth rates in Canada and other like countries, a local school may have better motivation and “moxy” to recruit students from areas where the birth rate is still high.

Similarly, local control means more likely local partnerships. If a local school needs to meet a ministry mandate, such as to meet accessibility requirement, enable it to proceed with a solution. Though the board is acting in good faith according to its mandate, it is unavoidably more distances from the front lines. The board may believe it knows what is best at the front.

This idea of local control is not some invention just made up for the ARC review. There is solid research in education policies that back this up. *Making Schools Work* is a book written by William Ouchi. It is

based on thousands of hours of research and was a basis for a Maclean's article about successful secondary schools. The book lists and elaborates upon seven keys to success.

1. Every Principal is an Entrepreneur. This means the principal spearheads innovative programs and creative solutions. Our principals basically are doing this. Why pull the rug out from under them?

2. Every School controls its own budget. Why should the board do the thinking for a school principal? Let the principal (and principal's team) decide what is best use of funds? Perhaps the local principles decide that one school accommodates more trades education while another accommodates more arts and so on.

3. Everyone is accountable for student performance and for budgets. The "everyone" refers to superintendent/trustee, principals and teachers. The local superintendent/trustee will know which principals are using money wisely. The principals will know which teachers are most effective. The teachers will know what works for each student.

4. Everyone delegates authority to those below. This enables staff and teachers to assist in finding effective solutions.

5. There is a burning focus on student achievement. Every year at PCVS there are several award programs for a large range of achievements. It seems other Peterborough schools do similarly.

6. Every school is a community of learners. All Peterborough schools have reached out to ways to the external community. The Terry Fox run of course involves most Canadian schools. Locally, we have our Kiwanis music festival, local art exhibitions, theatre in the community and other programs. Schools have a culture that keeps on going because every year a new intake replaces the graduates that move on. I don't believe there is an instance where any student willingly transfers to another school at some point mid-way of their secondary schooling. Forced dispersing of students from a closed school to other schools may even be traumatic as friendship and community bonds are strong in all schools (with possible exception of mega-sized schools). Good schools are part of a community.

7. Families have real choices among a variety of unique schools. If you close down a school, you have just eliminated choice by a fourth. Transferring successful programs is no guarantee of success. Transferring organizational success from one location to another has always been a tricky proposition. For more information about the issues of transferring successful programs, refer to the Stanford Innovation Review article at <http://www.bridgespan.org/LearningCenter/ResourceDetail.aspx?id=484>.

If a perspective student is most interested in trades, they want to go the school with the best shops. If she or he is most interested in the arts, go to the one that is best in that area. Some other varieties may emerge. Local control with board oversight of ministry policies will ensure that all schools provide necessary education requirements.

Let's consider the Integrated Arts program at PCVS. The building and proximity to art centres is only part of the picture. A key to its success is a dedicated and inspired core of educators who developed this program. This core "invested" heart and soul to grow the program. The reputation grew so strong that a group developed curriculum for the arts for the entire province. The organizational culture and

motivation does not simply transfer when ejected from one organization. One cannot simply inject the culture into another organization. Growing is an apt analogy. Transplanting trees is not impossible but it is not a simple and requires significant nurturing.

There is no generic teenager. Each has different interests. We have a local acquaintance whose son has potential for World Cup Soccer glory. Why wouldn't he go outside Peterborough to attend one of the best for soccer? Hence there is no one-size- fits-all high school. That said, there is temptation to build supersized schools in this attempt for one size fits all. Generally these approaches have failed. A school can be too small, meaning it cannot offer enough programs. Also a school can be too large. Research has shown that students learn better in smaller schools, provided it is not too small. As I understand it optimal enrolment sizes range from 600 to 900. It seems that Peterborough is in the Goldilocks zone. Let's keep it there. To learn more about why very large schools are not a good idea, refer to <http://www.thestar.com/article/643417> and <http://educationnext.org/small-schools-work-after-all-a-good-study-shows/>.

Peterborough is not unique in success. But it does need more local control to meet the challenges up ahead. We ask that ARC hold off on school closures and begin a pilot program for more budget control by local secondary schools. This could be time-limited commitment, say five years, with a review to assess next steps.

What are the next steps? The board with local school administration and councils will likely be better able to answer this than me. Perhaps it is an extension of the current ARC under guidance of a professional mediator team to work out details for the pilot? I suspect that the Peterborough community could even come up with professional mediators to volunteer services.

Hopefully we in Peterborough will have the wisdom not to fight amongst ourselves, but work for a common win-win solution for everyone, - the board, the community and student.