

# Final Report

## Impact of Schools on Rural Communities Study

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### On behalf of:

**Alberta Education**  
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Disclaimer:

*The interpretation and conclusions contained herein are those of the researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the Government of Alberta. The Government of Alberta does not express any opinion in relation to this study.*



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## Executive Summary

### Executive Summary

**Introduction:** The Impact of Schools on Rural Communities study was commissioned by Alberta Education, Alberta Municipal Affairs and Alberta Agriculture and Forestry to understand the challenges, opportunities and the impacts of schools in Alberta’s rural communities. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?
2. What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?
3. What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?
4. What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

A consortium of researchers from Schollie Research & Consulting, Negroportes Consulting and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) completed the study in a two-year period between March 20, 2015 and March 31, 2017.

**Study Method:** The study method is characterized as a mixed methods approach (Creswell 2013). The methodology includes secondary data analysis, personal in-depth interviews and focus groups. This multi-method approach allows internal corroboration of the data.

First, a literature review was conducted to identify issues, themes and trends in rural school sustainability. We then established a working definition of a “school in a rural community” as one that is located in a remote and sparsely populated area, has fewer than 150 students, is not located on or near a major economic corridor, is a public, separate or Francophone school, and has been open for at least five years or closed in the past five years. This clear definition allowed us to create a sample frame of 36 school jurisdictions and 129 schools.

The next step was to interview superintendents from 34 of the 36 school authorities that operate schools in rural communities as defined above. These interviews yielded broad data on the challenges facing schools in rural communities and helped us identify and select six school-community pairs which would be case studies. The case study research comprised individual and group interviews with 124 stakeholders including parents, students, teachers, principals, school staff, community members, municipal leaders, trustees and business owners.

This study was guided by standards for research ethics and included several measures to protect anonymity and confidentiality. The study and the case narratives were reviewed by appropriate parties to test these measures and to check for factual accuracy.

**Findings:** The literature review yielded important insights into defining rural which helped set the parameters for this study. It also identified important Canadian rural trends that are a critical context for rural schools and their communities. The dynamics between rural communities and their schools was underscored in studies about the variety of impacts small schools have on their

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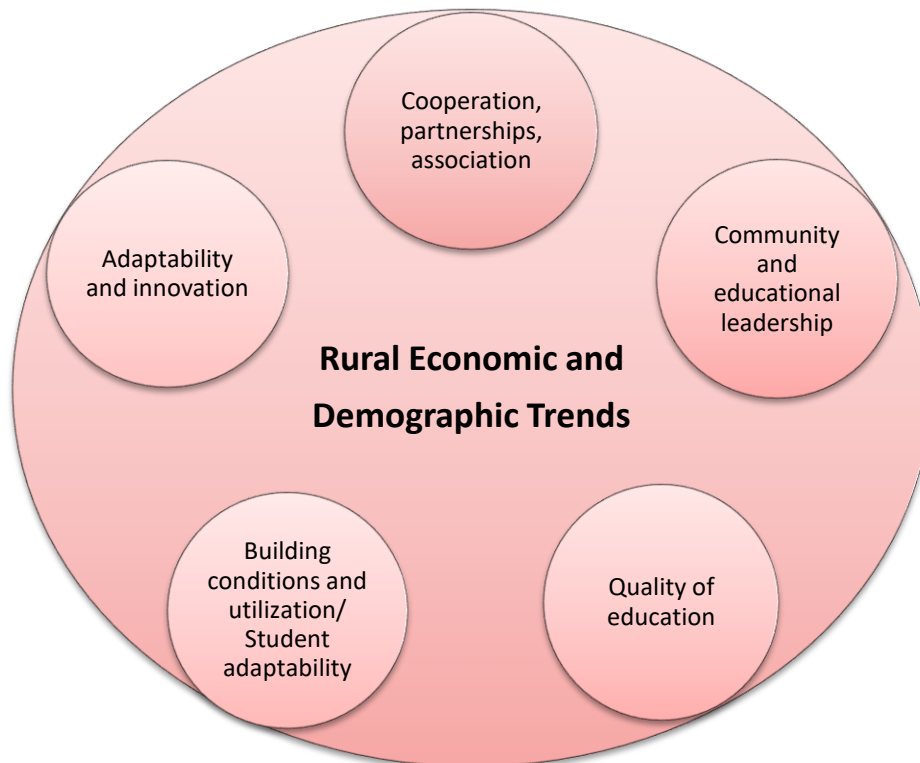
communities and what strategies have been implemented to sustain them. Our findings are very consistent with these published studies from the past 15 years. However, this study provides new information on the rural dynamics and processes related to the sustainability of schools in rural communities.

**Research Question 1:** What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?

Overlaying the factors at play in rural education is rural depopulation due to a series of demographic, economic, geographic, cultural, government, technological, and societal changes. (Figure 1) Key among these trends is the “upscaling” of agriculture. The land that many families may have once farmed is now efficiently run by one family and a few employees who often do not reside in the school’s catchment area.

A very mobile population combined with the rapid growth of regional service centres draw businesses, employment, and residents away from rural communities. Without non-agricultural employment, rural communities have few assets to attract or keep residents. The inevitable result is rural depopulation and for some schools, double-digit enrolment declines over the past five to 10 years.

Figure 1: Factors, Mechanisms and Processes Impacting Rural Schools



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## Executive Summary

Within this context of rural decline, the bold leadership of educators and community members has been pivotal in establishing partnerships and adopting practical and creative solutions to boost enrolment and manage costs. The impact of proactive leadership cannot be overstated as a factor impacting the sustainability of schools in rural communities. Whether the leadership emerges from parents, students, school leaders and staff, school trustees or jurisdiction administrators, a common theme is that leaders envision a better future and are willing to collaborate, step over traditional boundaries, take risks, and persevere to make it happen.

Delivering a high quality of education to rural students is paramount. While many stakeholders are willing to making some “sacrifices” (e.g. multi-grading, limited options) to keep the school in the community, others do not find the trade-offs acceptable. While many advantages were cited for smaller schools (e.g. small classes, multi-age relationships, community support), some participants acknowledged the reality that as enrolment declines and budget pressures mount, it becomes more challenging to adjust operations in a way that doesn’t impact on quality of education.

In terms of adaptability and innovation, rural community and school leaders have implemented varied strategies to sustain their schools. In terms of the school program, examples include becoming an International Baccalaureate school, developing expertise in virtual course delivery, literacy and meta cognition initiatives, and core curriculum focus. Student-centred strategies include enrolment/ focus on Indigenous students and students from other communities, cultural enrichment programming and curricular adjustment for these groups, sports initiatives, customized and shared CTS<sup>1</sup> programming, meal programs, and attendance incentives. Schools have also taken steps to further engage the parent community, particularly those from immigrant communities who value language training and other settlement support.

Operational adjustments such as multi-grade and multi-course teaching, four day schedules, resource sharing, school-grade consolidation, and teacher and principal sharing have been successful strategies for many schools and school authorities. Fundraising and careful fiscal management both play an important role in sustaining the schools.

**Research Question 2:** What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?

The ability of people to work together for a common purpose is crucial for the sustainability of schools in rural communities. Where all community stakeholders were working together, there was more coordination of effort, more positive action, and more optimism about the future. Few formal partnership arrangements were described. Rather participants described a “rural” pragmatism and informality that fostered cooperation from groups not accustomed to working together. Mutual trust and an inherent understanding of the value of collaborating for a common purpose was the common bond in successful partnerships (Figure 2).

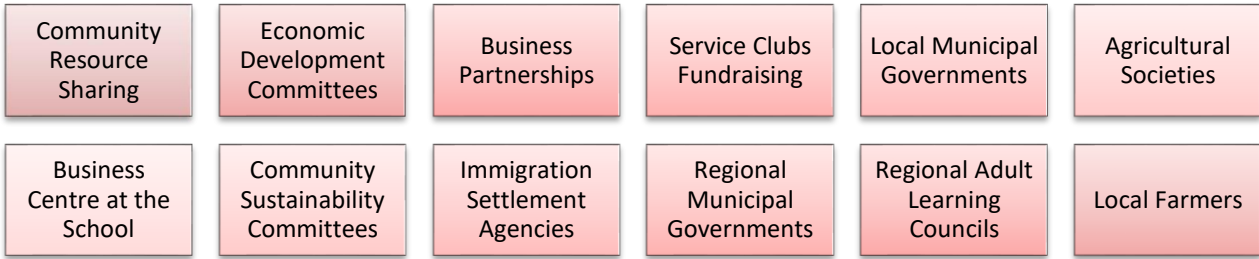
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<sup>1</sup> CTS = Career Technology Studies is a provincially authorized curriculum for Alberta secondary schools designed so high school students can explore their interests and career options.



Executive Summary

Figure 2: Examples of Rural Education Partnerships



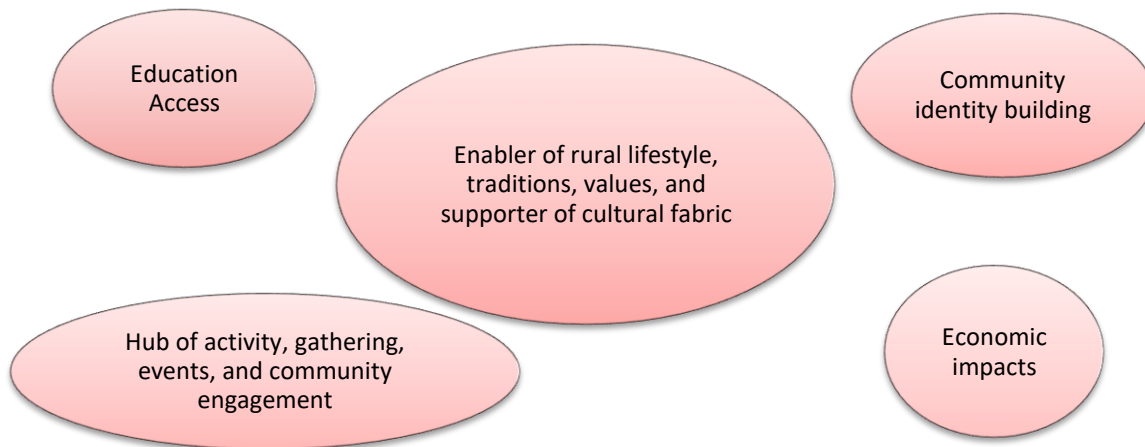
Research Question 3: What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?

Schools have a variety of important impacts on rural communities, beginning with providing education in rural areas (Figure 3). Schools are a hub of activity, celebrations, events and community engagement. In many cases, staff and students generate the events that give people a purpose to gather. Through this activity, schools shape and sometimes redefine perceptions of community identity and spirit.

Schools have economic impacts on the community by often being the largest employer and by generating parent traffic to the community, where they may use other services in the community. Schools make the community more attractive to potential new residents.

A significant theme emerging in the research is that stakeholders in rural communities perceive schools as critical anchors that enable and sustain rural culture. That culture in turn supports the agriculture industry and a mainly rurally based resource economy. Furthermore, several participants believe that rural schools and communities are integral to the unique and diverse social fabric of Alberta.

Figure 3: Role of Rural Schools in Community Revitalization



## Executive Summary

Schools play an important role in community sustainability in that community and school health are inexorably linked; the health of one directly impacts the other. However, there comes a point where a declining community population can no longer support a school. Several participants commented that by the time a school closes the community has died. The rural context and trends are simply too powerful for communities and schools to survive.

**Research Question 4:** What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

The emerging model we observed is one of proactive leadership and planning. Schools and school jurisdictions incorporate three important factors when planning and taking action to make their schools in rural communities sustainable. These factors are: 1) Understanding the changing nature of the rural context; 2) Multi-stakeholder leadership and collaboration; 3) Proactive community development planning and action on the part of these stakeholders (Figure 4).

Together, these three factors are critical in identifying a variety of unique strategies to enhance school sustainability. While the use of these factors suggests a process, the process does not necessarily flow in lockstep. That is, sustainability discussions begin with any of the three factors but always incorporate the other two factors.

While the individual strategies to enhance rural school viability are important, the process of community stakeholders working together across mandates toward a common vision of a vibrant community is the key since every rural school sustainability situation is unique and calls for unique action to support its sustainability.

**Figure 4: Emerging Model of Rural School Sustainability**



## Executive Summary

**Lessons learned:** This study captures some insight based on a “moment in time” in the evolution of education in some of Alberta’s most “rural” communities. The definition of “rural” in this study included only schools that are relatively remote with small enrolments. However, the lessons in this context will have some applicability to the broader rural school context in Alberta.

1. The trends causing rural depopulation are the largest challenge facing schools in rural communities. These persistent and unavoidable trends place a backdrop on rural education against which some small communities, and their schools in their current formats, appear to have little chance to succeed. In these cases, school closure or some form of consolidation or reconfiguration is unavoidable.
2. Sustainability of schools in rural communities is a direct function of community vitality. School enrolments are impacted when rural communities lose population, services, businesses and small farms. A school closure is one factor in the sustainability of a rural community. In most cases, by the time a school closes, the community is already having sustainability challenges
3. Schools in rural communities play a vital role in Alberta. They bring educational opportunities to places and people where they live. Schools in rural communities are centres of activity and engagement for all regional residents to gather, celebrate, build social networks and relationships, and to build communities. These schools support a rural lifestyle, traditions and culture that are central for the agricultural and other industries operating in rural areas. Schools in rural communities contribute significantly to the cultural fabric of Alberta.
4. Stakeholders believe schools in rural communities are one of the last pillars supporting rural life. As such, they feel rural schools merit additional and special policy support to keep them viable. Examples of additional support include enhanced education and transportation funding models or programs to help sustain rural schools.
5. Strong coordinated leadership is the most important factor to sustaining a school in a rural community. Thriving schools and communities have courageous, optimistic and proactive leaders in their midst. These leaders, who come from a variety of backgrounds and stakeholder groups, actively define their own futures and take positive action. These leaders don’t need to be told about the important relationship between community and school sustainability; they instinctually know this and care enough to do something about it long before there is a crisis.
6. Formal or informal partnerships created by community leaders are critical to sustaining a school in a rural community. Successful partnering is built on a mutual understanding of a common goal and a willingness to work outside of traditional boundaries and mandates to contribute to a broad, inclusive vision of community sustainability. Complacency, indifference, drawing “lines in the sand” and/ or conflict can hasten the demise of a rural community and its school.

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**Executive Summary**

7. Solutions to potential school closure or reconfiguration situations can be found at the grassroots level. Armed with information, a framework, and some staff support, local parents, teachers, and other stakeholders are capable of solving complex rural school sustainability problems in a logical manner. Top down decision making can be quicker but authentic grassroots involvement can lead to more acceptable outcomes.
8. School-specific strategies that directly boost and maintain enrolment appear to be the most effective in sustaining rural schools. These strategies include:
  - Welcoming students from nearby Indigenous communities.
  - Working with other religious and cultural communities or immigrant communities to develop programs, and initiatives to meet their specific educational, cultural, and settlement needs.
  - Reconfiguring schools to focus on a smaller range of grades.
  - Consolidating small schools into larger regional schools.
9. When small schools are closed, reconfigured or consolidated to create larger schools, students, parents and staff generally have positive outcomes:
  - Students adapt quickly and thrive in their new environments. They cite advantages such as expanded course choice, larger peer groups, and better access to extra-curricular activities.
  - Parents recognize, albeit sometimes reluctantly, the same positive outcomes as students listed above.
  - Teachers have fewer multi-grade classrooms, more access to education assistants, more professional peer support, and are able to focus their practice on a smaller range of courses.
10. Sustaining schools in rural communities is a continuous struggle without simple or universal solutions. The emerging model for sustainability is based on multi-stakeholder leadership and collaboration, understanding the changing nature of the rural context, and proactive planning and action.

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## Introduction

### A. Introduction and Study Context

In January 2015, the Government of Alberta issued a request for proposal (RFP) to conduct a study titled “The Impact of Schools on Rural Communities.” While Alberta Education originated the study, it was also co-funded and co-administered by Alberta Municipal Affairs and Alberta Agriculture and Forestry. A consortium consisting of Schollie Research & Consulting, Negroportes Consulting and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) submitted a proposal and were awarded the contract.

The passage below underscores the logic for the Government of Alberta to conduct this study:

The Government of Alberta values Alberta’s rural communities and has an interest in investigating ways to support rural communities and rural education sustainability. This study aligns with Alberta’s Rural Development Strategy, which identified the importance of rural schools and access to education as part of the learning and skill development pillar, and the Rural Economic Development Action plan, which recognizes the connection between community development and social infrastructure (such as schools) to economic development. (RFP No. AE-14-08, p 3)

The overriding research objective for the Impact of Schools on Rural Communities study is to understand the challenges, opportunities and the impacts of having schools in rural communities. Additional objectives include making a contribution to the understanding of the broad impacts schools have on rural communities, inform work on rural education sustainability, and continue the process of refreshing Alberta’s research on rural education.

The following research questions were identified:

1. What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?
2. What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?
3. What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?
4. What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

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**Literature Review****B. Literature Review****B.1. Definitions of Rural**

There are a number of variables that act on a rural school setting. Understanding and controlling these variables is critical for this research in order to make valid comparisons and observations about the challenges, opportunities and impacts of schools in rural communities. For example, an elementary school located 10 kilometers from a large fast-growing town will have very different challenges and opportunities than a similar school located in a village of 125 people that is 150 kilometers from the nearest significant-sized town. In the school near a growing town, challenges and opportunities are not due to something endemic to the *rurality* of the school and the community; rather they are a function of the impact of the broader region.

The critical research issues in terms of defining rural are that a) there is an explicit definition so that the context and limitations of the research are understood and b) that the definition matches the research question, focus, and intent of the analysis (du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2001).

There is no consistently-used, single definition of what constitutes *rural*. The issue is more complex than just agreeing on one standard definition. The issue relates back to how dynamic and varied rural actually is. In Canada the socio-demographic character and the population changes significantly depending on the definition of rural. For example, Canada's rural population could comprise anywhere from 22% to 38% of the total population depending on the definition of rural (Desjardins, Halseth, Leblanc & Ryser, 2002). In terms of the variety of rural communities, a common saying among rural analysts is, "Once you have seen one rural community, you have seen one rural community," (Bollman, 2014, p. 4).

Variables used to define rural, or degree of rurality usually fit into these categories (Dejardins et. al., 2002, Reimer, 2006):

1. *Geographic* - Distance to an urban centre, commuting zones, postal codes, census divisions, land use.
2. *Demographic* - Population or population density, age structure, occupations, relationship of the population to the natural environment.
3. *Social* - Types of relationships between residents, sense of belonging to the area, identification with the community.
4. *Institutional Capacity* - Presence of schools, hospitals, and other public services.
5. *Economic* - Type and number of industries in the area, land use, connection of the economy to the global economy, economic stability, leading or lagging on socio-economic indicators.

Some argue that rural is primarily a geographic concept. That is, degree of rurality can be defined on two dimensions: population density and distance from a densely populated area (Bollman, 2014).

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**Literature Review*****B.2. Canadian Rural Trends***

Bollman's review of Statistics Canada's Federal Census and other data gives a very thorough overview of the demographic trends impacting rural Canada and Alberta (Bollman, 2014). Some highlights of this analysis include:

1. Canada's non-metro (rural) population was 10.4 million (31% of Canada's population) in 2011 compared to 1.3 million (35% of Alberta's population) in Alberta. As a percentage of the total population, Alberta on average is more rural than Canada.
2. Approximately 15% of Alberta's population is in an area considered to be a moderate to weak "metro-influenced zone" (MIZ).<sup>2</sup> This compares to 12% for Canada.
3. In each intercensal period since 1986, the population of non-metro (rural) areas has grown, but metro areas have grown at a significantly faster (two to three times) pace.
4. The pace and variance between metro and non-metro population growth varies widely between province. Between 2011 and 2012, Alberta's metro population grew at 3% versus 1.7% for non-metro areas.
5. Although growing overall, non-metro population growth is not universal. Growth is strongest near cities, in cottage country or other desirable retirement areas, in areas with strong resource development, and in northern areas with higher Indigenous birth rates.
6. Many rural areas are experiencing population decline because natural population growth (number of births minus number of deaths) is very low or negative. The key to growth is attracting new residents, including immigrants and people from other areas.
7. Rural Canada was originally settled to produce and export resources. These once labour-intensive industries are becoming dramatically less so with increased mechanization and use of technology. If something new to export is not found, they will continue to lose workers to other regions.

In an examination of Alberta's rural demographic trends, the Conference Board of Canada concurs with the conclusion that rural communities must focus on attracting and retaining people (Conference Board, 2012). They also contend that this rural demographic crunch is coming for all developed countries and that Alberta will have many competitors who are also looking to entice newcomers and retain their rural populations.

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<sup>2</sup> Degree of influence in an MIZ is based on the percentage of residents employed in the labour force who commute to work in a neighbouring census metropolitan area or census agglomeration.

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## Literature Review

Along with reduced population growth or decline, comes the inevitable reduction in all types of services in rural Canada. The unfortunate result of this decline is a loss of services that enhance residents' quality of life. This lower service level increases the reluctance for people and businesses to locate in an area as there is no basic level of medical, educational, or other community services (Halseth & Ryser, 2004). As Stelmach (2011) aptly puts it: "Out-migration from rural communities is essentially caused by and causes economic problems."

As part of the New Rural Economy (NRE) Community Laboratory Project, 32 rural communities across Canada were tracked and researched over a period of several years (Halseth and Ryser, 2005). In 2005, a service inventory of 19 of these communities was taken and compared to the same inventory seven years prior. Lower service levels were noted in nearly all areas including various health services, some emergency services, business services, government services, recreation services, and education services. For example, in 1998, 79% of rural communities had elementary schools compared to 68% in 2005. Similarly, the percentage of rural communities with high schools declined from 47% in 1998 to 42% in 2005.

### *B.3. Impacts of Schools on Rural Communities*

Much of the current scholarly literature regarding how schools impact rural communities is based on international studies that address economic development, school closures and consolidations, educational leadership and policy, rural issues and economies, and the unique characteristics of schools in rural communities. There are only a few studies that have implications for the issue of the impact of schools on their communities.

In a study by Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott (2001) that included an extensive literature review and case studies of five rural Australian school-community combinations, the following contributions of schools in rural communities were noted:

1. Outcomes for Youth:
  - Educational - Increased attendance and retention in secondary school.
  - Personal development - Increased self-esteem, confidence, leadership skills, volunteerism.
  - Social/ civic - Increased retention in the community, increased involvement and knowledge of community networks and organizations.
  - Employment/ career - Better opportunities and success.
2. Outcomes for the Community:
  - Personal development - Increased self-confidence/ esteem through interaction and recognition by the school.
  - Social: Increased levels of inter-generational trust.
  - Community learning - School staff provides instruction, leadership and the school provides a venue for community learning programs and initiatives.
  - Environmental - School and staff provide programming and leadership for environmental awareness and programs.



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## Literature Review

- Economic - School and the staff buy local and thereby support the local entrepreneurs and economy.
- Indigenous and Marginalized Communities – School staff provide leadership and work collaboratively with parents and community leaders to remove barriers, improve culturally inclusive programming and instruction and develop strong community partnerships.

### B.3a Economic Impacts

Schools increase the attractiveness of a community for potential newcomers. Economic development professionals generally agree that presence of schools or proximity to schools constitutes a competitive advantage for attracting business investment (Simms, Freshwater & Ward, 2014; Wrigley & Lewis, 2002).

In a large scale study of 233 American municipalities, Reese and Ye (2011) attempted to determine the role of economic development policies and the municipalities' attributes in determining economic prosperity. Among the many variables that correlated to economic prosperity they found that education policy, particularly capital investment in school infrastructure, construction, and the rates of graduation from local schools were related to economic prosperity.

Economic impact of a local school is also critical through the jobs and other economic spin-offs it creates. In many cases a rural community's school is the largest employer, or in the top three largest employers if there is a health centre, and/ or regional municipal office also located in the village or town. For example, a study of the impacts of public sector spending in rural Saskatchewan found that every public service job generated indirect employment of another 0.39 jobs. The employment earnings of public sector workers had an economic multiplier effect of 0.4434 so that each dollar of public sector earnings created another \$0.44 in spending (Martz & Sanderson, 2006).

There is evidence that residential property values are higher in communities with schools. In a 2002 study of 64 villages with populations of 500 or under in New York State, those that had schools had significantly higher average house values (Lyson, 2002). Larger villages (population 501 to 2,500) with schools also had higher property values than those with no schools, but the difference was not as large as for the smaller villages. The villages with schools were also associated with a number of other economic and social benefits. There are a greater proportion of professional, managerial, and executive workers, and a greater proportion of residents who reported working in the villages with schools. The study also demonstrated that municipal infrastructure was more developed in villages with schools.

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**Literature Review***B.3b Cultural and Social Impacts of Schools in Rural Communities*

Schools in rural communities are commonly linked to the social and cultural well-being of the communities they are located in. Schools provide meeting places, venues for the arts, a library, theatres, art galleries, recreational spaces, and other civic activities that otherwise would not be available (Halseth & Ryser, 2005; Lyson, 2002).

By being a venue for many events and activities, interactions, and connections, schools in rural communities are viewed by many researchers as hubs for the development of social capital (Bauch, 2001; Desjardins et. al. 2002; Kilpatrick et. al, 2001; Robinson & Wittaker, 2012). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] defines social capital as the “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups” (OECD, 2001, p 41).

Much of the research supporting the connection between social capital and schools in rural communities is based on observing the negative impact of school closure on rural communities. For example, Oncescu (2014) found that a school closure in rural Saskatchewan decreased the residents’ sense of community and there was a decline in civic engagement in the terms of volunteerism, community recreation participation, and intergenerational relationships. In a second study in the same rural community she also found that the school’s closure decreased the sense of community and instilled fear for the community’s future among residents that do not have school-aged children (Oncescu & Giles, 2014).

There is evidence that public sector employees, which includes teachers, contribute significantly to the communities they live and work in (Martz & Sanderson, 2006). With a survey of 424 public service employees in two rural Saskatchewan communities, they found that these employees impacted the communities in many ways:

1. Human capital in the form of their skills and education that allow them to provide meaningful interactions, teaching or instruction, and leadership in the community outside of their employment.
2. Contributing to the civic culture of the community through giving, volunteering, involvement with public affairs and issues, and participating in community groups, boards, and organizations.

The conclusion that public sector employees volunteer more in their communities is reasonable given that research shows that people with higher levels of education and income have a higher volunteer rate and volunteer more hours (Vezina & Crompton, 2012).

Schools in rural communities also play a significant role in sustaining the rural culture, heritage, and lifestyle that support the agriculture industry (Morton & Harmon, 2011). In focus groups with 49 parents of children that attend some of Montana’s small frontier schools many participants identified this impact. Focus group participants stated:

Not all children want to leave the area. They didn’t leave. They love this life, they want to be in it, and they want to raise their kids in it. I think that comes from enjoying the school that they grew up in and the type of

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lifestyle that they were involved in. It is appealing to the children of our children. Not all of them, but a lot of them will come back and be the next generation of us. (Morton & Harmon, 2011. p. 10)

In the country the small schools are a necessity because of the desire to keep the children involved in ranching, in agribusiness. Most of the small towns are agricultural based areas. Parents desire to keep the kids involved and teach them along the way.... So by sending them to town, from kindergarten all the way up they've missed out on learning about ranching. They learn to work. And they're important to the community. (Morton & Harmon, 2011. p. 10)

### *B.3c Other Impacts*

Another impact of schools in rural communities is that they are a delivery point for health and other services (Kilpatrick et. al. 2001). Schools are an ideal location for delivering these services because nearly all children between certain ages can be accessed through them. In all schools in rural Alberta, a variety of community health services are provided (e.g. immunizations) and are a gateway for other family supports, counselling, and community mental health services.

### *B.4. Strategies for Small School Sustainability*

The argument for universal access to education is powerful. A recent report by the OECD links a country's education system and their economic well-being. It concludes that, among other things, the quality of a country's schooling (as measured by empirical studies such as PISA and TIMSS<sup>3</sup>) is associated with a country's economic health (OECD, 2015).

A study by Morton and Harmon (2011) categorized and studied the effectiveness of a number of sustainability practices for small rural schools. They surveyed 237 school district personnel from 141 frontier school districts in 42 Montana counties. The list below shows the broad categories of sustainability practices along with specific examples, and the percentage of respondents who indicated that this practice contributed to school sustainability.

1. General operations:
  - Multi-grade classrooms (67.8%)
  - Operating school facilities to serve community functions (41.8%)
  - Operating on a 4-day schedule (11.9%)
2. Staffing:
  - Made available special in-service opportunities (45.1%)
  - Created partnerships with other districts (31.2%)
  - Employed teachers with multiple endorsements (30.9%)
  - Passed local levy (30.4%)
  - Promoted reputation of school (30.4%)

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<sup>3</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

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**Literature Review**

3. Fiscal:
  - Instituted competitive bidding model for all purchases (39.2%)
  - Cooperated with other districts for specialized personnel (31.2%)
  - Hired teaches at the low end of the district pay scale (36.7%)
4. Distance learning:
  - Delivered professional development for teachers (40.9%)
  - Provided enrichment experiences for students (38.0%)
  - Provided citizens access to internet (16.9%)
  - Offered courses to meet state-mandated curriculum requirements (16.5)
  - Offered advanced placement courses for college-bound students (12.7%)
  - Offered school board training (12.7%)
  - Delivered professional development opportunities for administrators (11.4%)

A study by MacDonald (2003) cited many similar strategies as the above-cited study but also mentioned “semestering,” high school courses, dropping 200 level general courses, independent study at the high school level, challenging for credit, and offering courses in alternate years.

In a literature review and essay by Stelmach (2011), she argues that curriculum relevancy is key to rural school sustainability. To achieve that, she believes that teachers need to engage with the local community and culture(s) to understand and appreciate their value and role in curriculum development. Other sustainability strategies she discusses are clustering rural schools to share resources and forming partnerships with community-based organisations and post-secondary institutions (Stelmach, 2011).

Community-based partnerships and shared services are very common themes in the discussion of rural school sustainability. Bauch (2001) suggests that school-community partnerships are an appropriate means for school renewal because this approach “capitalizes on a community’s sense of place and other distinctive features of rural school communities” (Bauch, 2001, p. 1).

Harmon and Schafft (2011) take the idea of partnerships a step further by suggesting that future school administrators should be prepared and trained to effectively engage with the community:

Good rural schools are only possible where the community and schools share a responsibility and take collaborative actions that enhance the conditions necessary for all students to be successful—where community social capital serves the school and the school fosters a sense of place among students (p. 7).

As a strategy, sharing services between schools and jurisdictions is only limited by creativity and practical limitations of distance and time. In the Report of the Task Force on Rural Education, completed for the British Columbia ministry of education, shared services was one of 19

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recommendations. The report cited several successful examples in British Columbia's rural areas including sharing of financial services, facilities, staff, and professional development (Clarke, Imrich, Surgenor, & Wells, 2003).

A case study, *Smaller, Safer, Saner Successful Schools*, identified the following characteristics that schools that share facilities with other organizations can offer (Nathan & Thao, 2001):

1. broader learning opportunities for students
2. high quality services to students and their families
3. higher student achievement and better graduation rates
4. ways to stretch and make more efficient use of tax dollars

Although there appear to be no research studies on developing sports academies as a strategy for schools in rural communities' sustainability, sports academies are becoming more prevalent, particularly in Western Canada. For example, there are approximately 135 sports academies in Alberta of which 40 to 50 are found in rural communities (Balderson, 2012). The most popular is the hockey academy but there are also baseball, soccer, lacrosse, figure skating, golf, and multi-sport elite athlete focussed schools.

### ***B.5. Conclusion***

As indicated in the introduction, the literature review provides an overview of the current literature and research studies that inform this study of schools and their impact on their rural communities. In the literature review we explored the importance of defining rural to set the parameters for this study and identified Canadian rural trends to provide a context for the school and their communities. This led into a discussion of the impact of small schools on their communities and concluded with strategies that have been implemented in small schools in other communities.

The intent was to focus the literature review on recent Canadian research on the topic of the impact of schools on rural communities; however, a lack of peer-reviewed published Canadian research caused us to broaden both the geographic and temporal scope of the literature review. In particular, some of the most relevant research was based in Australia and the United States and was conducted 10 to 15 years ago. However, the literature review did provide insight into rural demographic trends, some impacts of schools on rural communities, and the connection between community development and schools in rural communities.

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**Study Methodology****C. Study Methodology*****C.1. Definitions and Method Overview***

The overriding research objective of this study is to understand the challenges, opportunities and the impacts of having schools in rural communities. Answers to the following research questions are sought through this study:

1. What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?
2. What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?
3. What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?
4. What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

From the stated research purpose and questions, we created the following broad guidelines to help develop the methodology:

1. To ensure the focus of the study is on small schools in rural communities, defining “rural” and selecting the appropriate subjects is critical. For example, parameters are needed to ensure that the sample includes schools that are situated in “truly rural” municipalities, towns, villages, hamlets or remote communities, and set apart from the immediate influence of larger metropolitan areas.
2. The four research questions suggest that qualitative and exploratory research methods will be critical. Meaningful two-way dialogue that fully explores the research questions above with knowledgeable subjects will provide the sought after insight.
3. There are many interrelated factors and dimensions to answering the research questions and it will be critical to seek input and perspectives from a variety of rural education, community and municipal stakeholders.
4. Insight into the research questions will require careful sampling throughout the province to ensure all geo-demographic factors are represented. For example, the study should include a broad spectrum of rural communities, including those with significant Indigenous and immigrant populations, along with communities that reflect the linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity of rural Alberta.
5. Particularly in small rural settings with relatively unique situations and histories, anonymity will be challenging to protect. As such, security and integrity of data, and ethical treatment and recruitment of participants is paramount.

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We determined that a mixed methods approach would best address the complexity of the research questions. The mixed methods research approach included secondary data analysis, personal in-depth interviews and focus groups, as outlined by Creswell (2013). This approach served to provide both depth and breadth of understanding, corroboration and quality of the data being collected.

To ensure a focus on schools in rural communities, this study defined a “school in a rural community” as:

- Located in a remote area at least 50 kilometres from large population centres.
- Located in sparsely populated areas.
- Relatively small enrolments, probably fewer than 150 students.
- Not located within or near a major economic corridor.
- Must be a public, separate, or Francophone school rather than a colony, charter, private, alternative, outreach, federal, provincial college, or other non-traditional school.
- Open for at least five years or has been closed in the past five years.

We prefer the term “school in a rural community” as it aligns with the purpose of the study. However, the term “rural school” is colloquially used by many respondents and stakeholders so this term is also used throughout the report. The two terms should be treated as synonymous and reflecting those schools as defined by the points above.

To explore the complex set of issues and factors related to the impact of schools on rural communities, the research method focussed on a combination of in-depth interviews with school superintendents followed by comprehensive case studies of school-community pairs. We chose the case study schools based on whether their history or current situation could inform and answer the study’s research questions. To help with conceptualizing and organizing the sample further, we segmented the schools into three broad groups:

1. Stable-Growing: Defined as schools with stable to growing enrolment over a five-year period. We interpreted this as a school that is potentially thriving, reviving, or succeeding and would inform the study on factors relating to the success and viability of schools in rural communities.
2. Declining: Defined as schools with declining enrolment over a five-year period. We interpreted this as a school that is potentially struggling or experiencing challenging conditions and factors. Not only would this inform the study on factors relating to the success and viability of schools in rural communities, we would likely also learn about their strategies, emerging models, and partnerships to maintain their viability.
3. Closed: Closed school (i.e. within the last five years). We believed that hearing the story and studying the closure experience of schools would give sound insight into the conditions and factors related to the closure of a school in a rural community.

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The research was organized and conducted in four stages over the following time period:

1. April to July 2015: Literature review
2. March to October 2015: Define sample frame, school authority engagement and recruitment
3. June to October 2015: Semi-Structured interview of rural Alberta school superintendents
4. November 2015 to May 2016: Interviews and focus groups for six case studies

The research was conducted according to ethical standards to ensure participant protection. Participants' names will not be used in the study publications or presentations. Participants' responses are not attributed to them by name. In the case studies pseudonyms are used for the schools, school authorities, municipal governments, communities and partners.

Specific dates, events, enrolment figures and other potentially identifying characteristics of the school authorities or schools were modified to prevent identification. In addition, photographs of individuals and facilities are not being used. Each participant (or their parent if a student participant) was required to sign the Alberta Education General Consent and Permission Form (see Appendix 1).

To test the efficacy of the steps taken to keep school authority, community and study participants anonymous, two Government of Alberta employees who are very familiar with Alberta's school authorities read the case studies. While these volunteer readers could not identify the school authority, schools, or particular situations, they did offer some suggestions on wording that would further enhance the anonymity of the case studies. In addition, a superintendent or designate from each school authority/ community was asked to review the case study to ensure anonymity and factual accuracy. As with the Government of Alberta employees, the case study reviewers were able to offer suggestions on wording to further ensure anonymity and factual information.

Despite all of these measures, participants from case study schools, school authorities and communities will recognize their own cases and may be able to identify participants based on the context of their input or their quotations. Another potential risk to confidentiality may occur from participants telling others that they were study participants.

Another consideration in the overall research methodology is the potential bias of the researchers. It is important to recognize that each member of the research team has a combination of rural backgrounds along with experience as rural educators, consultants, economic developers, and researchers. While this background allows for extensive knowledge and understanding of the rural context, some readers may suggest this has the potential to bias the research. The research plan mitigated this potential bias with the following strategies in the methodology:

1. Mixed methods research approach and a variety of respondent groups, along with a literature review that created opportunities to cross-validate findings and triangulate data.



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2. Interview guides designed and reviewed by the research team, and validated and approved by the project management team.
3. Interview protocol that included two interviewers with alternating roles as interviewer and recorder.
4. Data recording protocol that included post-interview peer discussion and debriefing, and peer review of interview notes and summaries.
5. Review of case study narratives by all members of the research team, by a representative respondent from each school authority, and by an education professional not involved in the study.

### *C.2. Stage 1: Literature Review*

The purpose of the literature review is to provide a context for the study, explore what is known on the topic, seek to identify issues, themes and trends in the subject area, and identify gaps in the current research.

As previously mentioned, the intent was to focus the literature review on recent Canadian research on the topic of the impact of schools on rural communities; however, a lack of peer-reviewed published Canadian research caused us to broaden both the geographic and temporal scope of the literature review. In particular, some of the most relevant research was based in Australia and the United States and was conducted 10 to 15 years ago. However, the literature review did provide insight into rural demographic trends, some impacts of schools on rural communities, and the connection between community development and schools in rural communities. The literature scan helped refine the study with project officials to ensure the methodology fully addressed the research questions.

### *C.3. Stage 2: Define Sample Frame, Jurisdiction Engagement and Recruitment*

In this stage we identified, engaged, and recruited school authorities in Alberta that operate schools in rural communities according to the study's definition. We did this as follows:

1. Identify Rural School Jurisdictions: The research team, along with representatives from the project management team reviewed the list of 61 Alberta public, separate, and Francophone school authorities to identify those which would be operating schools in rural communities as defined by this study. This process resulted in a list of 36 school boards by eliminating:
  - The 14 school authorities who operate schools only in urban centres.
  - The 11 school authorities who operate a mix of urban schools and schools in larger rural areas, or whose schools are within 50 km of large urban centres.
2. Identify Schools in Rural Communities: We reviewed and analyzed enrolment trends for the 5-year period between 2010/11 and 2014/15 by

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authority and by school for the sample frame of 36 school authorities. This allowed us to:

- Confirm that the 36 school authorities do indeed operate schools that fit the study's definition of schools in rural communities.
  - Identify 102 schools that fit the definition of a school in a rural community.
  - Review the enrolment trends for these 102 schools and categorize them as schools that had stable/ increasing enrolment and those that had declining enrolment. This allowed us to specifically refer to these schools when interviewing the school superintendents.
  - Identify 27 schools that have closed within the past eight years in the 36 authorities. We also cross-referenced this list with other Alberta Education records of past or imminent school closures.
3. Engage and recruit authorities. We contacted the superintendents of each of the 36 authorities by email. An initial email simply introduced and explained the study and timelines. A second email requested the respective superintendents consider participating in a semi-structured interview. That 34 superintendents agreed to participate is an indication of the significance of this research. The two superintendents who respectfully declined to participate did so because of specific circumstances that placed high demands upon their time. Appendix two contains email communication to superintendents.

### *C.4. Stage 3: Semi-Structured Superintendent Interviews*

The first objective of the superintendent semi-structured interview was to identify and select the schools that would be “case study” schools in phase four of the research plan. The second objective of the semi-structured interview was to get a province-wide rural school authority perspective and understanding on all the research questions identified. This broader perspective would also allow us to quantify some findings and corroborate these findings with the themes emerging from the case studies.

Rather than take a sample of school authorities from the sample frame, we conducted a census sample. With the College of Alberta School Superintendents' (CASS) involvement in seeking engagement, we successfully engaged 90% (34 out of the 36) of the identified authorities for the interview. Figure C.1 describes the methodology followed for the semi-structured interviews.

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Figure C.1: Semi-Structured Superintendent Interviews Method Summary

Element	Description
<b>Target Respondent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jurisdiction superintendent or designate at 36 school authorities that administer schools in rural communities according to the study's definition.</li> </ul>
<b>Administration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured telephone interview conducted by Dot Negroptes.</li> </ul>
<b>Interview Instrument Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion guide containing 15 to 25 open-ended questions and prompts to elicit information. Depending on the number of schools in rural communities in each school authority, the number of questions varied. See Appendix three for the interview discussion guide.</li> </ul>
<b>Instrument Development, Pre-testing and Validity Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created by project consulting team and reviewed by project officials.</li> <li>• Reviewed for face validity by project officials, and CASS directors who are all educators with extensive rural education experience.</li> <li>• Pre-tested for wording, flow, understanding, timing, with senior administrators from three Alberta school authorities.</li> </ul>
<b>Topics/ Questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions to prompt superintendents to validate that our list of the school authority's schools in rural communities is accurate.</li> <li>• Review, discussion, and confirmation that our categorization of some of the school authorities as stable-growing, declining, or closed is accurate or if schools should be re-categorized.</li> <li>• What are some specific demographic and economic trends impacting schools in your jurisdiction?</li> <li>• For each subject school, questions were asked about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What are the factors or conditions that led to the school (increasing, decreasing enrolment, and closing)?</li> <li>○ Have there been any special strategies or initiatives that have been used (at school and/ or jurisdiction level)?</li> <li>○ What role has the community played?</li> <li>○ What if any partnerships have been established?</li> <li>○ What impact has this school had on the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Community or surrounding communities</li> <li>▪ Surrounding communities/ region/ jurisdiction</li> <li>▪ Students, parents, staff</li> <li>▪ Community organizations, partnerships</li> <li>▪ Financial impacts on the jurisdiction (closed schools)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• For closed schools, what is the building being used for?</li> <li>• What initiatives has the jurisdiction engaged in to address the viability of small schools?</li> </ul>
<b>Data Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Segmentation into categories of stable/ growing, declining or recently closed.</li> <li>• Content analysis (coding themes) for open-ended data.</li> </ul>

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**Study Methodology*****C.5. Stage 4: Case Studies***

After completion of the interviews and analysis of the superintendent interview data, we chose two schools from each category previously referenced: stable/ growing, declining, and closed. In addition to enrolment trends, information regarding recent sustainability strategies implemented by the schools, also guided the placement of case study schools in these categories. The following criteria and guidelines were used to select the case study schools.

1. Geographic, demographic and economic diversity
2. School-grade configuration to ensure a mix of elementary, junior high, and high school grades
3. Number of unique factors influencing the school, community and region
4. School and/ or community are exemplars of unique/ successful strategies or practices

We selected additional potential schools (i.e. three to four per category) to ensure that we were able to complete a minimum of two case studies per category. For example, in one case a school authority declined participation just before interviews were to commence, so another school was chosen.

Prior to proceeding with the case study research activities, we presented the list of chosen case study schools, including the additional contingency/ back-up cases, with the project management team for approval. This review included a justification, rationale, and associated criteria for each suggested case study school.

Because of the nature of the relationship of the selected case study schools with other schools in their jurisdictions, data from interviews at three additional schools were included in the case studies. For example, in one case, two schools reconfigured their grades taught, and re-opened as “new” schools. Figure C.2 outlines characteristics of the case study sample.

For each case study we held in-depth personal interviews with nine to 25 adult stakeholders and four to 11 students in focus groups. The adult interview subjects represented a cross-section of stakeholders and included school authority administration, school administration, parent council, municipal government, business representatives, economic development organizations, and community partner organizations.

The adult participants were selected through a combination of recommendation, random selection or selection due to role in the school or community. Students volunteered to participate in the focus group after an invitation was issued through the principal. Participants brought a range of perspectives and some played numerous roles within the community (e.g. parent and staff; community member and trustee).

The case study interview guide was designed using similar prompts and question topics as the superintendent semi-structured interview (Figure C.1). We designed three sets of interview guides for the schools in different categories (Appendix 4). Participants had an opportunity to prepare for the interview as they were given a copy of the interview guide.

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Two researchers attended and conducted all the case interviews. Dot Negropontes conducted each interview while Bruce Schollie recorded the participants’ responses in a word document and asked some follow-up questions. Most interviews were conducted in-person, with a small number of telephone interviews for participants who were unavailable for face-to-face interviews.

Figure C.2: Case Study Schools and Sample Size for Each School

Case Name	School Name(s)	Grades	Category	Number of Adults Interviewed	Number of Students Interviewed
1. Mourning Loss of Community	• Raven Community School	K to 9	Closed	15	6
2. Redefining Rural Community	• Deer School • Moose School • Fox School (which was modernized and renamed Elk Community School)	K to 6 7 to 8 K to 9	Closed	25	6 (Deer) 5 (Moose)
3. Working with Community	• Mint Community School	K to 9	Declining	11	3
4. Community Taking Ownership	• Aster School	K to 12	Declining	12	6
5. Supporting Indigenous Community	• Forest Glen School	K to 12	Stable-Growing	8	7
6. Reconfiguring Strengthens Community	• NS Villages Elementary School • NS Villages Jr. High School	K to 5 6 to 9	Stable-Growing	14	6
<b>Total Interviews</b>				85	39

Data analysis of the case information was completed in three stages. First, extensive notes were taken during the case interviews and after the interviews were completed these notes were reviewed, summarized for each topic, and cross validated with the second researcher.

In a second stage of data analysis, the information was further analyzed to categorize into themes and presented to project officials and the entire project management team. The interviewing researcher then wrote detailed narratives of each case. Once written, the detailed narratives were validated through a review by the research team, and by the superintendent or designate from the case school’s school jurisdiction. The detailed narratives were further analyzed individually and as an entire group to identify common themes, observations, and factors relating to the study purpose.

**Data: Superintendent Interviews****D. Results: Semi-Structured Superintendent Interviews**

The interviews with the superintendents from 36 rural Alberta school jurisdictions focused their attention on the schools in their jurisdiction of under 150 students in rural areas, villages or hamlets. In each interview the superintendents were asked to comment on schools with stable or growing enrolment, declining enrolment or schools that had closed within the last five years. Superintendents discussed factors and conditions that lead to growth, decline or closure of schools. They outlined the strategies and role of the community in maintaining schools. As well, superintendents were invited to share their observations regarding trends that are impacting rural communities and how their jurisdictions are addressing these trends. The following summary of data is the perspective of the rural superintendents.

***D.1. Superintendent Observations Regarding Schools in Rural Communities******D.1a Schools with Stable or Growing Enrolment***

Superintendents outlined the factors and conditions that lead to stable or growing enrolment. They also provided examples of why some rural schools had stable enrolments or were growing and some of the challenges that are addressed to support growth. Figure D.1 summarizes the top themes identified by superintendents during the semi-structured interviews.

**Figure D.1: Top Themes Identified by Superintendents - Schools with Stable-Growing Enrolment**

Question	Top Mentioned Themes
<b>What factors/ conditions led to stable-growing enrolment?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advantageous geographic location</li> <li>• Strong leadership/ dedicated principal/ committed staff</li> <li>• Increased immigrant populations</li> <li>• Quality education; good program, attracts students</li> <li>• Attracting Indigenous students</li> <li>• Rearrangement of grades</li> <li>• Growing community</li> <li>• Demographics – stable, growing, young population</li> </ul>
<b>Special strategies or initiatives used?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on local culture e.g. Indigenous, Mennonite</li> <li>• Focus on providing good program; good academic program</li> <li>• Good CTS<sup>4</sup> program, mobile lab – for secondary students</li> <li>• Videoconferencing</li> <li>• Good engagement with parents, community, elders</li> <li>• Grade realignment (school focuses on certain grade divisions such as elementary or junior high rather than trying to serve all grades)</li> <li>• Hiring staff to liaise with religious and/ or Indigenous communities</li> <li>• Administrative cost cutting</li> <li>• Combining grades e.g. double grades</li> <li>• Literacy initiatives</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> CTS = Career Technology Studies is a provincially authorized curriculum for Alberta secondary schools designed so high school students can explore their interests and career options.

Data: Superintendent Interviews

<b>What role has community played?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive community</li> <li>• Volunteers, parent volunteers</li> <li>• Help with fundraising, donations</li> <li>• Neighbouring communities work together</li> <li>• Supportive parents, supportive parent council</li> <li>• Relationship with Indigenous community government</li> </ul>
<b>What partnerships have been established?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> <li>• Corporate/ business support (e.g. Literacy program)</li> <li>• Good relationships with organizations such as the Church, RCMP</li> <li>• Community fundraising</li> <li>• Community library</li> </ul>
<b>What impact has school had on community/ surrounding communities?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focal point/ hub of the community</li> <li>• Community gathering place</li> <li>• Community is defined around school</li> <li>• Increased minority population leads to displacement of settled population</li> </ul>

In discussing schools with stable or growing enrolments, superintendents identified geographic location and demographics as the top two factors leading to stability or growth. In terms of geographic location, the school was either geographically isolated with little to no competition from other schools or the school was located in a high growth area.

Rearrangement or realignment of grades was mentioned under both factors that contributed to a stable-growing enrolment as well as a special strategy used. Some schools have reconfigured their grades to be more sustainable. In some cases, neighbouring communities worked together to reconfigure their grades so both communities could maintain their schools. For example, communities A and B would pool their students; community A would have the elementary school and community B would teach the high school students. In other cases, the school would reconfigure their grades so that they could focus on offering a good elementary program; high school students would travel to a larger centre where they could access a more comprehensive high school program. Superintendents noted the process of reconfiguration of grades is not easy and requires communication and planning with staff, students, parents and community.

Being able to adapt to the needs of different religious or cultural communities has helped some rural schools to thrive. Schools with growing religious immigrant populations tend to be flourishing. However, it was noted that maintaining a positive working relationship with the parents and elders of the religious community is critical to maintaining the student population. Oftentimes certain concessions are made, such as not using technology and not teaching evolution theories in order to respect the values of the population. Stable or growing rural schools often attract Indigenous students as parents wish to access programming, including attendance and literacy initiatives. For some students there is a history of generations not connecting to schools or having bad experiences with schools. Therefore, the thriving rural schools adapt and provide programs that meet the needs of the religious or cultural community to keep students engaged in learning. Unfortunately, some superintendents noted there was a less positive impact in some schools that had managed to attract students from religious or cultural groups. In a few

**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

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communities the local population began to feel marginalized and felt their school was being changed.

Economic strategies included cutting costs through combining grades, changing administrative structures or active recruitment of students. One thriving school was identified as being creative with costs. The principal role was shared by a self-managed team. The parent community helped turn the enrolment around by going out and recruiting students from home school and a neighbouring jurisdiction.

Superintendents had difficulty identifying formal partnerships. However, some acknowledged that schools received good corporate and/ or business support, service club support and parent fundraising support. A few schools have joint-use agreements, a community library, or community fitness centre. One chamber of commerce meets regularly with the superintendent to see how they can work toward common goals. In another school, a local agricultural association provided a \$1 million donation towards a new school, which allowed for a larger gymnasium, a community CTS kitchen and an extra meeting room for videoconferencing.

Many superintendents identified that rural schools had an economic, cultural and/ or social impact on the community. One superintendent identified the economic impact of a particular school on the community, as it was a major employer in the town. Through a partnership with a northern school jurisdiction, the Indigenous council provided Wi-Fi to each home at no cost to the community. A few superintendents noted that principals and/ or teachers were highly involved in the communities through service clubs, and volunteerism in the community. However, this observation does not apply to all schools since school staff do not always live in the community.

Superintendents noted the schools are a community gathering place; a social, recreational, or cultural hub; and the focal point of the community – a place of pride. In some cases, it was noted that the whole community would come to watch school concerts and productions, or moving up/ graduation ceremonies. The school, grounds, and library are used for various community activities in certain communities. Some superintendents thought the school brought people together as instruments through which students and community members connected.

One superintendent noted a particular school had a strong impact on the community by connecting families to services for mental health and drug abuse issues. Another superintendent recalled a situation where family violence was a major issue in a nearby community. A team was brought into the school and worked with the students and community for two years to address the issue. Another school was noted as being a safe and nurturing place in a community that has a lot of youth in crisis and foster care.



**Data: Superintendent Interviews***D.1b Schools with Declining Enrolment*

Superintendents outlined the factors and conditions that lead to declining enrolment. They also provided examples of why some schools in rural areas faced declining enrolment and some of the strategies employed to mitigate the decline. Figure D.2 summarizes the top themes identified by superintendents with regards to schools with declining enrolment.

**Figure D.2: Top Themes Identified by Superintendents - Schools with Declining Enrolment**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Top Mentioned Themes</b>
<b>What factors/ conditions led to declining enrolment?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural depopulation/ demographics</li> <li>• Geographic location</li> <li>• Students going to other nearby centres; Parents commute and take children with them</li> <li>• No community industry or business to attract or retain residents</li> <li>• Low enrolment</li> </ul>
<b>Special strategies or initiatives used?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer special options and programs</li> <li>• Strong leadership/ principal</li> <li>• Build communication and trust with parents</li> <li>• Public relations campaign; try to recruit students</li> <li>• Political intervention</li> <li>• Focus on and accommodate students in local cultural groups (Religious, Indigenous, Christian)</li> </ul>
<b>What role has community played?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive community/ municipality</li> <li>• Not much due to no industry</li> <li>• Conflict/ tension between community and staff/ school/ administration</li> <li>• Help with fundraising and donations</li> <li>• Municipality has provided some funding for special initiative</li> </ul>
<b>What partnerships have been established?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None/ Minimal</li> <li>• Corporate funding for CTS – traveling trades trailer</li> <li>• Community library</li> <li>• Shared facilities/ joint use agreements</li> </ul>
<b>What impact has school had on community/ surrounding communities?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community gathering place</li> <li>• None/ not much</li> <li>• The focal point/ hub of the community</li> </ul>

Rural depopulation was the most frequently mentioned reason by superintendents for declining enrolment at schools. These schools are located in communities that have little to no business or industry to attract people or even retain the local rural population. The growth of larger farms also contributes to fewer families in the rural area.

Geographic location is also a factor. Although an isolated geographic location may contribute to low enrolment, some schools tend to be at less risk of closing as there are no nearby options.

**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

These schools are likely to qualify for Alberta Education “Small Schools by Necessity” funding<sup>5</sup>. However, if a rural school is located close to a larger centre, enrolment could decline because of the proximity to other schools. Parents may commute to work in the larger centre and take their children with them, or if older siblings attend high school in the larger centre then parents may choose to send all their children to the same community for school.

Superintendents shared several examples of the strategies and community efforts to support schools with enrolment challenges. Some of these schools have implemented special strategies to try to attract new students. Schools offer special program options and programs, including:

- Robotics program
- Commercial kitchen for culinary arts
- World history class that involves international travel
- Bus students to participate in a welding program at nearby school
- Options for all grades – Engagement with local artists, trappers, etc.
- Hockey program
- Makerspace program
- 4-H Program
- Music program
- Access to technology
- Northern experience program targeted to international students
- Dual credit program<sup>6</sup>

Superintendents commented that the strategies are more successful in simply maintaining the current student population, particularly at a junior high level, rather than attracting new students.

Videoconferencing is helpful in expanding program offerings although it has been met with mixed emotions. Some schools have found that parents are not necessarily accepting of it and it can be hard to get their acceptance.

Similar to the previous section, a couple neighbouring communities have worked together to serve all students in the two communities. Students in kindergarten to grade six from both centres attend school in one community and all the students in grades seven to twelve attend school in the other community.

Providing a good quality program, quality teaching, and good leadership were also cited as success factors in keeping struggling populations stable. Leadership mentoring and recruiting good principals have proved to be important strategies. Some schools have been successful in focusing on and accommodating local Indigenous cultures and religious groups.

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<sup>5</sup> “Small Schools by Necessity” funding helps jurisdictions keep small schools which are far from neighboring schools open. This grant includes a base amount and variable amounts based on enrolment and grade configurations.

<sup>6</sup> Dual credit program allows students to earn credits for both high school and post-secondary school at the same time

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**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

Building communication and trust with parents and/ or elders was identified as an important strategy for maintaining some rural schools, especially in communities where there has been a history of strained relationships between the Board and the community.

A few parents have used public relations campaigns that include things like open houses, newsletters, public meetings, testimonials, and door-knocking campaigns to try and recruit new students. One school tried providing a year-round calendar to distinguish it from neighbouring schools. These activities appear to have been met with little to limited success.

One unique strategy employed by a school in a northern community is to take proactive measures to ensure that all students graduate. For example, teachers visit the students' homes to offer support and encouragement to students and their families.

In terms of community involvement, the main role was help with fundraising activities, donations, and volunteering at the schools. For example, in one community that lacks a grocery store, the community helps with providing healthy snacks. That community also run a boys and girls club in the evening. Another rural community has a community field of canola where the profits go towards the school.

In some communities, superintendents felt that the community and local organizations were not being as active as they could be. Reasons for this include:

- Simply not fighting for the school or rallying behind it
- Socio-economic variables
- No industry
- Community has no place for potential residents or school staff to live
- The municipality does not want to get involved or to overstep the role of their mandate
- Closed-minded community
- Community members were not agents of change
- History of tension or conflict between community and Board, school, or staff
- Community is split and not sure what is best
- Parents voting “with their feet” by taking their kids to another school

When asked about partnerships, most respondents stated none or minimal partnerships had been established. Notwithstanding, some interesting examples emerged. One municipality provided funds for a program to attract international students. Another municipality worked with the school jurisdiction to purchase and maintain a teacherage.

Several smaller scale partnerships have been established in terms of joint-use agreements, shared facilities and recreational properties, community libraries, videoconferencing, etc. One school revamped unused classrooms into community meeting rooms. The jurisdiction now holds their professional development and administration meetings there and they use local community caterers. This action was perceived to put a “positive spin” on the relationship between the school and the community.

**Data: Superintendent Interviews***D.1c Closed Schools*

Superintendents discussed the factors and conditions that led to various school closures. They also provided examples of how strategies were implemented and how various community activities were used to try to avert closure. Figures D.3 and D.4 summarize the top themes identified by superintendents with regards to school closures.

**Figure D.3: Top Themes Identified by Superintendents – Closed Schools**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Top Mentioned Themes</b>
<b>What factors/ conditions led to the school closure?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low enrolment/ rural depopulation</li> <li>• Students going to other nearby centres with more programs</li> <li>• Multiple grading</li> <li>• Inactive community – no business, industry, housing</li> <li>• Declining condition of school facility</li> <li>• Increase of a minority population and settled population leaves</li> <li>• Close to another school</li> <li>• Safety concerns from a nearby development</li> <li>• One industry town, employees commute to the town from a larger community</li> <li>• No sports</li> </ul>
<b>What special strategies or initiatives used to try to prevent closure?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community engagement process</li> <li>• None</li> <li>• Shared staff</li> <li>• Multi-grading</li> <li>• Try to attract new students via door-to-door campaigns, promoting rural school setting, promoting a supportive environment for immigrant populations</li> <li>• Parents looked at opportunities such as non-resident enrolment, and private school options</li> <li>• Political intervention</li> </ul>
<b>What role did the community play in the process?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Became involved in community engagement process</li> <li>• Tried to keep open; tried to bolster enrolment</li> <li>• Supported closure</li> <li>• Tried to develop a partnership with a post-secondary institution</li> <li>• Struggled to engage the municipality</li> </ul>

When superintendents were asked what factors or conditions lead to rural school(s) closing, by far, the most frequently mentioned reason was low enrolment due to rural depopulation. This reason was often accompanied by other factors such as declining condition of building, dual and triple grading, lack of sports and extra-curricular programs, and the draw of other viable school options within a reasonable distance.

In some instances, parents and the community supported school closures. In one case, the school was closed in September because parents simply did not register students at the school because enrolment had dropped significantly in the previous year.

Data: Superintendent Interviews

Sometimes members of the community and parents are not in agreement. In one community a pending school closure was very contentious. Many parents were in favour of closure so they could send their children to another nearby school. Fearing reprisal from school supporters, these parents privately communicated their opinions to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees supported the community publicly, because community members wanted to keep the school open. In private they supported the parents who wanted it closed. In the end, the school closed.

Figure D.4 outlines superintendents’ observations on the impact of school closure on the community.

Figure D.4: Impact of Closed Schools on Community

Question	Top Mentioned Themes
What impact did school closure have on the community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None/ minimal</li> <li>• Communities sad to see school go</li> <li>• Some lingering bitterness</li> </ul>
What impact did school closure have on surrounding communities/ region/ jurisdiction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None/ minimal</li> <li>• Some lingering bitterness</li> <li>• New, modern, centralized school</li> <li>• Better programming for students</li> </ul>
What impact did school closure have on students, parents, and staff?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students get better programming/ sports at bigger school</li> <li>• Staff, principal retire and/ or find new jobs</li> <li>• Longer bus rides for students</li> <li>• Stability</li> <li>• Students go to other schools in nearby jurisdictions</li> <li>• None/ minimal</li> </ul>
What impact did school closure have on community organizations, partnerships?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> <li>• New school has brought communities together</li> <li>• Sense of loss and grief</li> </ul>
What impact did school closure have on jurisdiction finances?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saved facility costs</li> <li>• Keeping students they would otherwise lose (to other jurisdictions)</li> <li>• Lost “Small School by Necessity” funds</li> <li>• Increased transportation costs</li> </ul>

Most superintendents did not view the closure of the schools as having a lasting detrimental impact on the students, staff or the community. Some schools that had been closed were not located in villages or hamlets. Rather they were located in rural areas surrounded by farms and/ or acreages. In those circumstances, superintendents felt there was less impact upon a community than might occur if the school was located within a village or hamlet.

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**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

While superintendents heard many community members' concerns that the school closure would impact the sustainability of the town or village, some superintendents saw the school as the "last bastion" in a community that had already reached the point of unsustainability having lost most of its organizations, services, and businesses. As such, superintendents viewed the impact of the school closure on the community as minimal even though the communities were sad to see the school go. In many cases the school closure created lingering bitterness and a social rift in the community.

The impact of the school closure on surrounding communities, the region and the jurisdiction was also perceived as minimal. Some communities got a new or modernized, central school, which brought the neighbouring communities together. In one case a school closure galvanized the communities in the rest of the jurisdiction to stall the closure plans for other potential schools.

As for the impact of the school closure on students, parents, and staff, the most frequently mentioned item was that students get better programming and better sports opportunities at a bigger school. When students moved to other nearby schools, their numbers boosted the population at the other school hence improving the funding at these other schools. The impact of school closures on staff appears to be minimal as they retire, are transferred to other schools or find new jobs. Stability and certainty were mentioned as positive impacts of a school closure. A small school on the brink of potential closure causes a lot of uncertainty for staff, parents and students as they speculate on the future of the school and how that will impact their lives. Some parents privately asked for the school closure in large part to end this uncertainty.

Negative impacts of closure that were cited include longer bus ride for some students, and unhappy parents and community. However, superintendents generally felt that the positive impacts outweighed the negative.

On balance, superintendents felt the positive financial impacts outweighed the negative, even though there were increased transportation costs, loss of "Small School by Necessity" funding and sometimes the loss of students to other jurisdictions. In one case, there was a temporary overstaffing issue due to a school closure. The school closure helped the jurisdiction to be more sustainable and one of the respondents noted that the jurisdiction was in a better financial situation. The school closure allowed some jurisdictions to keep students and funding that they would otherwise lose to another school jurisdiction.

In the majority of cases, the jurisdiction saved facility costs by closing the school although a couple of jurisdictions noted they were still maintaining the old facility. Out of 17 closed school buildings, about half the school buildings are being used. Three of the schools reopened as a private, charter, or Christian school. Six were sold, three of which were sold to the community. Communities used the facility for community centres such as library, or town office. A couple of jurisdictions were in the process of negotiations with the municipality regarding the land and/ or building.

**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

**D.2. Superintendent Observations Regarding Trends Impacting Rural Communities**

Superintendents were asked some general questions about trends, strategies, and the role of schools on small rural communities.

D.2a Demographic and Economic Trends

Once again, rural depopulation was a key theme when superintendents were asked about the specific demographic and economic trends impacting schools in their jurisdiction. Other demographic and economic trends they observed are listed in the following table.

**Figure D.5: Demographic and Economic Trends Impacting Schools in Rural Jurisdictions**

Factors	What are some specific demographic and economic trends impacting schools in your jurisdiction?
<b>Economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oil &amp; gas; Oil &amp; gas downturn</li> <li>• Forestry; struggling forestry industry</li> <li>• Expanding religious communities and large farms; Decreased traditional family farming</li> <li>• Stagnant community</li> <li>• Employers willing to pay mileage for workers to commute to worksite; workers and families end up living in larger centre and commuting</li> </ul>
<b>Demographic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural depopulation</li> <li>• Increased population of people from specific religious and cultural traditions</li> <li>• Bedroom and suburban communities are growing</li> <li>• Increasing Indigenous population</li> <li>• Increased immigrants and English as a Second Language populations</li> <li>• Lots of temporary foreign workers</li> <li>• Transient population</li> <li>• Some of settled population leaving schools due to increased minority population</li> </ul>
<b>Socio-economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of housing</li> <li>• More acreage owners and developments</li> <li>• Parents choosing other school options outside jurisdiction</li> <li>• Crowding in homes/ less than optimal home conditions</li> <li>• Poor, lower, socio-economic community</li> <li>• Wealthy community/ municipality</li> <li>• People willing to live in larger community and commute</li> </ul>

Data: Superintendent Interviews

*D.2b What Jurisdictions Are Doing*

Some interesting strategies were noted when superintendents were asked what, if anything, is being done to address the trends impacting their schools. A number of them mentioned that they were subsidizing their small schools to keep them open, being creative with costs, and trying to get Alberta Education to consider a different funding model for schools in rural communities.

**Figure D.6: How Jurisdictions are Addressing Trends Impacting Schools**

Theme	What, if anything, is your jurisdiction doing to address the trends impacting your schools?
<b>Funding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Subsidizing schools, spreading dollars to keep schools open</li> <li>● Creative approaches to reduce expenses</li> <li>● Encouraging Alberta Education to consider a different funding model</li> <li>● Working with other jurisdictions to share transportation costs</li> </ul>
<b>Programming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide CTS, Dual Credit programs, vocational related programs.</li> <li>● Videoconferencing</li> <li>● Provide a good quality program</li> <li>● Attendance initiatives and encouragement</li> <li>● Programs that meet the unique needs of the community</li> <li>● Programs such as Outreach program for students to finish school</li> </ul>
<b>Partnerships/ Working with community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working hard to engage communities</li> <li>● Working to build and/ or rebuild trust and image between school jurisdiction and community</li> <li>● Encouraging schools in the jurisdiction to promote themselves and connect with the community</li> <li>● Partnering with municipalities for rural development</li> <li>● Working with another jurisdiction to share transportation costs</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working with cultural sensitivities and norms among minority populations such as LGMS and Indigenous</li> <li>● Trying to connect people with social and community services</li> <li>● Provide academic supports for students</li> <li>● Set up a teacherage (place to live) in communities</li> <li>● Teachers are providing evening English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for immigrant parents</li> <li>● Providing breakfasts, snacks and/ or hot lunches for all students</li> </ul>
<b>Policy &amp; planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Board has a moratorium on closing schools – parents will close it by not registering students</li> <li>● Trying to keep resident population at their resident school with transportation policies</li> <li>● Using software to understand and project enrolment trends</li> </ul>



Data: Superintendent Interviews

*D.2c Role That School in a Small Rural Community Plays in Sustainability*

Community hub and community gathering place were the most frequently mentioned themes by superintendents when asked what role does a school in a small rural community play in the sustainability of a rural community.

Figure D.7: Role of School in Community Sustainability

Theme	What role does a school play in the sustainability of a rural community?
<b>Economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimizes travel for students</li> <li>Critical to the survival of the town</li> <li>Is a key employer</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adds vibrancy to the community</li> <li>Brings the community together and demonstrates community support</li> <li>Is a part of the community identity, culture, flavour</li> <li>Reflects community and societal trends</li> <li>Has a social impact, affecting community vitality, connectedness and happiness</li> <li>Creates a sense of ownership</li> <li>Can bridge community needs (e.g. culture and education)</li> <li>Helps to keep students in school</li> <li>Teachers offer after-school programs for students</li> <li>The school is “the spirit of the community”</li> <li>“The school is the last remaining symbol of what a community used to be”</li> </ul>
<b>Demographic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps attract young families to the community; helps realtors and developers to attract families</li> <li>Helps keep people in the community</li> </ul>

One superintendent indicated the school board, in particular, really believes strongly in the identity of community and what a small community can do for the life of a child. Another superintendent acknowledged the importance of schools on rural areas by commenting:

When you take the professionals, like teachers out of a rural area, research indicates there is an increase in isolation and depression for those who remain. It is a moral imperative to provide equity and access to quality education for rural communities and rural children.

On the other hand, several superintendents were clear that while the school plays an important role in the community they did not necessarily agree that it was the role of the school to keep a community sustainable. Rather the school reflects the community and societal trends. Therefore, if a school is declining so much that it is being considered for closure, then the community is already declining or changing. “The school closure is just the tombstone. The school is just the last thing to go.”

Superintendents perceived schools as an important factor in rural communities and an important partner in the community. However, one superintendent indicated, “We can’t take blame or credit for the health of the community, but we have a part to play.”

**Data: Superintendent Interviews**

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Another superintendent expressed:

We offer our facilities free to after-school community groups, but it still doesn't draw people to live in the communities... A school can't fight a community that is not thriving or growing.

While another said:

Parents close the school. The Board has done everything they can. Parents pull their kids, often for social reasons such as sports or the only child in a grade. Also, do they embrace diversity when immigrants can help a school stay open?

Even though superintendents acknowledged that smaller schools can be better in certain ways, several superintendents felt that a better quality of education and programming could be provided by providing one strong school to serve two or three rural communities rather than trying to run two or three subsidized schools. As one superintendent commented, "If we could pull the communities together, we could have built a new school for 500 instead of maintaining three to four small schools."

One superintendent felt that a school having staffing, leadership or other challenges can also be detrimental to a community. Having a good community school within bus riding distance can be a draw. It also provides stability so parents, students and teachers are not left wondering how much longer their school will stay open.

**Data: Case Study Narratives****E. Results: Case Studies**

This section contains the detailed write-ups or narratives for each of the six case studies. Each case represents a moment in time in the evolution of the rural community and the school as perceived by some representatives of the school, school authority and community.

To help with conceptualizing and organizing the case study schools further, we segmented them into three broad groups: Closed, Declining Enrolment and Stable-Growing. In addition to enrolment trends, information regarding recent sustainability strategies implemented by the schools, also guided the placement of case study schools in these categories. There are two case studies in each of these categories. Four case studies focus on one school, while two case studies focus on more than one school because of reconfigurations.

**Figure E.1: Case Study Schools and Sample Size for Each School**

Case Name	School Name(s)	Grades	Category
1. <b>Mourning Loss of Community</b>	• Raven Community School	K to 9	Closed
2. <b>Redefining Rural Community</b>	• Deer School • Moose School • Fox School (which was modernized and renamed Elk Community School)	K to 6 7 to 8 K to 9	Closed
3. <b>Working with Community</b>	• Mint Community School	K to 9	Declining
4. <b>Community Taking Ownership</b>	• Aster School	K to 12	Declining
5. <b>Supporting Indigenous Community</b>	• Forest Glen School	K to 12	Stable-Growing
6. <b>Reconfiguring Strengthens Community</b>	• NS Villages Elementary School • NS Villages Jr. High School	K to 5 6 to 9	Stable-Growing

Five of the case study narratives follow a similar outline:

1. Description of study participants
2. Description of the school and school authority
3. Description of the rural community
4. Demographic and economic trends
5. Strategies and initiatives
6. Role of the school in sustaining the rural community
7. Future of the school and community

Because Raven Community School (Case 1) was closed and the community no longer has a school, the outline for it differs slightly.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.1. Case 1: Raven Community School, Mourning Loss of Community******Case Category: Closed******Grade Configuration: K to 9******E.1a Study Participants***

We interviewed 15 adult stakeholders. The adult participants represented the perspectives of parent, grandparent, teacher, principal, school administration support, jurisdiction office staff, elected and appointed officials, and community members from Meadowlark County, Rolling Hills Indigenous Community, Sparrow School Division, town of Meadowlark, Meadowlark Composite High School, Raven Community School, Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High, Dove Separate School or Owl School. We interviewed a focus group of six former Raven students who are currently in high school.

***E.1b Raven School and Sparrow School Division***

Prior to closing, Raven School had an enrolment of 65 students and seven teachers. About 50% of the students were from Rolling Hills Indigenous Community, 15 were bussed 30 kilometers from the town of Meadowlark, and the balance of students lived in the surrounding rural area. After closure, most students from Raven School enrolled in Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School. Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High is the designated kindergarten to grade nine school for Meadowlark County students that live near Meadowlark. A few students enrolled in other schools including Dove Separate School in Meadowlark, Owl School 30 kilometers from Raven, or another Sparrow School Division school in Meadowlark. Sparrow School Division operates mainly rurally based schools but also has larger schools in the town of Meadowlark. Enrolment growth across the Division had been stagnant from 2010 to 2015.

***E.1c The Rural Community***

Raven School was situated in a rural area surrounded by farms in Meadowlark County. It was located 30 kilometers southeast of Meadowlark, the service centre for the area. The school was 30 kilometers south of the hamlet of Owl. The Rolling Hills Indigenous Community is 20 kilometers away and a religious community school is 12 kilometers to the northwest of Raven School.

***E.1d Economic and Demographic Trends***

Rural depopulation is significant in Meadowlark County, despite oil and gas development. Although there is some population growth around recreation areas, these areas attract an older, retired demographic as permanent residents.

In general, Meadowlark County found that people want to live near larger centres with amenities. Those who choose to live in the country were highly mobile and willing to drive for work, education and recreation. To manage residential development in the County, they encouraged residential acreage development in specific areas and planned for recreational hubs in these areas. This policy affected rural population growth surrounding Raven School, as it was not located near the identified development hubs. Raven School was located in an area of the county that had rich, number one soil where farming was the priority and where acreage development was discouraged. The County restricted the development of acreages to one per quarter section to

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

preserve this prime farmland. As well, Raven School was located in an area where corporate or large family farms and religious communities had reduced the number of small family farms.

***Impact of Demographic and Economic Trends***

There were a number of issues that led to considering the closure of Raven School. Economic and demographic factors provide a context for the issues facing Raven School. The major reasons leading to closure were enrolment and the subsequent funding shortfalls, program issues, and a long-term facilities study.

***School Enrolment***

Participants had different memories of the enrolment pattern at Raven School, but they all cited it as the major reason for closure. Some of those who favored keeping it open estimated the enrolment as higher than was recorded and disputed the jurisdiction's records and projections. The enrolment at Raven School had fluctuated from as high as 111 students to as low as 63 over a ten-year period prior to closing. At the time of closure, Raven had approximately 65 students in grades kindergarten to nine. Approximately 30 of the students were residents of the Raven attendance area. If the school had not closed, the jurisdiction projected that Raven enrolment would decline to approximately 35 in the following three years.

The Alberta Education regulations and jurisdiction policy governing "School of Choice" both benefited and challenged Raven School. The Raven School Council bus transported approximately 15 students from Meadowlark. As well, a bus from the Rolling Hills Indigenous Community transported approximately 30 students to Raven and a few parents drove their students from a neighbouring jurisdiction. There was no guarantee that any of these arrangements would continue as Rolling Hills Indigenous Community's own schools were perceived as improving and the anticipated number of students from Meadowlark had never filled the capacity of the 40 seat bus. As well, approximately nine students who were in the Raven attendance area attended schools in other communities. Some participants felt that younger parents did not see the importance or value of a community school and since government regulations supported parent choice, parents seemed more interested in choosing a larger urban school, another rural school within driving distance, or homeschooling.

***Funding***

All participants understood that declining enrolment affected funding<sup>7</sup>. The school jurisdiction had a centralized budget model that allowed for subsidization of small schools. Because of its low enrolment, Raven School received the largest subsidization. Raven School was an older building that required some ongoing maintenance. School jurisdiction administration and trustees were concerned that the funding required for quality programming at Raven was not sustainable. School jurisdiction administration and trustees were concerned the \$400,000 per year subsidy to Raven School affected the viability of the jurisdiction and other schools. As well, the jurisdiction was under pressure because of increasing costs in several schools. The "Small School by Necessity" funding, even when managed at the school jurisdiction level, was not sufficient to cover the impact of the continued loss of jurisdiction enrolment. The discussion regarding the

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<sup>7</sup> Education funding in Alberta is made on a per pupil basis. Some additional funding is available to very low enrolment schools but typically as enrolment declines, schools face financial challenges.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

viability of Raven and other rural schools had been ongoing over the years because of the high rate of subsidization and increase in salary, transportation and facility costs.

Other participants felt they did not have much information or clarity about funding. For parents and community members it was felt that money was viewed as more important than students being educated in their rural community. One teacher said although he didn't understand at the time, he came to realize that the low pupil teacher ratio was not sustainable. Although not familiar with the school funding model, a county official thought because of the declining enrolment that the school was not self-supporting.

***Program Needs of Students***

Related to lower enrolment and funding, participants cited the educational program needs of students as a reason for the closure. The trustees emphasized the lack of programming available and the lack of Internet accessibility due to inadequate broadband. Some staff acknowledged that there was a concern that triple grading may be needed and needs of students and programs were not being optimally met due to a funding shortfall. Parents and community members felt the quality of the program was better than they would receive at a larger school, but knew funding was a reason given by the Board for closure.

***Long-Term Facility Report***

A major reason for the Raven School closure cited by participants was a long-term facility report that had been triggered by declining enrolment and funding. For the four years prior to closing, the Sparrow School Board had been consulting with parents and other stakeholders on program and service delivery ideas to deal with an enrolment decline of approximately 16% across the jurisdiction over a 17-year period. As this decline in enrolment was projected to continue, the Board was concerned with the ability to continue to provide a small school subsidy beyond the funding received under the Alberta Education "Small School by Necessity" funding. Public consultation had suggested the need for an in-depth study of the situation. The Sparrow School Board hired a consultant to conduct a long-term facilities study.

In the September prior to closing, the Board accepted 'for information' the report that included considerations to close a number of schools and relocate programs and students. The report also included a facilities capital plan to add modular classrooms, modernizations, and school-grade reconfiguration to accommodate students from the closed schools. The integrated plan presented a step-wise process that hinged on the closure of the rural schools. For example, the case for modernizing Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School was based on the closure of Raven. In an email to administrators, the superintendent shared the Board directive that the long-term facilities report had only been accepted 'for information' and more consultation with stakeholders would take place before any decisions would be made.

The view of some community and staff participants was that once the long-term facilities report was presented, the Board basically decided to close Raven School. For some it felt like the trustees had already made up their minds and were not open to any information. Some felt that Raven School was seen as an easy win. The trustees, jurisdiction and school administration did not share this view as they felt the process was open and transparent and followed policy. They felt the long-term facilities report was a good study based on a great deal of public consultation

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

and data. They felt it was logical that Raven School was the first on the list because it required the largest subsidy and had the lowest enrolment.

Following the long-term facilities report, a year-long viability study was conducted<sup>8</sup>. Participants described the feeling of the parents and the staff as inevitable during the year; “Everyone knew it was a foregone conclusion, but they had hope.”

### *E.1e Strategies and Initiatives to Grow Raven School Enrolment*

Prior to the announcement that Raven School would be considered for closure, the school community had worked on strategies and initiatives to keep Raven a viable school with strong programming. Over many years, they developed a program that attracted students from outside the attendance area who viewed Raven as a welcoming place for those families seeking an alternative learning environment or away from a more urban environment or because of a family connection to the area.

For the ten years prior to closing, the Community School Action Society fundraised to provide a bus to bring students from Meadowlark to Raven School. This activity built a sense of ownership and stake in the sustainability of the school as all individuals mentioned it as a key activity to sustaining the school. The society actively recruited students with advertising in Meadowlark, before the jurisdiction banned actively recruiting students. One participant acknowledged that their actions affected other schools as she realized they were “robbing Peter to pay Paul” in their recruitment efforts. Another participant explained that their role was to focus on marketing the school by highlighting the benefits of a small school, including the closed campus, extracurricular activities, smaller classrooms, and personal attention.

The former principal had been at the school for several years and had worked with staff to develop a family-like, welcoming atmosphere. They had a strong outdoor education program and provincial achievement test results were good. The trustees and senior administration acknowledged there was never an issue with the quality of the instructional program. The school was viewed as a “bridge” where Indigenous students, rural and urban children and families came together. Within the rural community there were also three rural churches the students attended. As the Raven principal was also the religious community school principal and the administrative support worker also worked at the colony, strong ties developed with the colony school. This was seen as another advantage as it added diversity to the Raven School when the two schools interacted.

In the 1980’s the Raven community had worked diligently to gain the designation of a community school<sup>9</sup>. They had a community kiln and used the school as a community centre. The teacher lounge was a community lounge where members of the community came to mingle with each other and the staff. Although the provincial funding ended before amalgamation of the rural

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<sup>8</sup> A viability process engages the community in discussions about the situation to receive the community’s input, suggestions and advice, and to explore viable program alternatives in the school that could raise enrolment.

<sup>9</sup> During the early to mid-1980s, Alberta schools could apply for designation as a “Community School.” After a rigorous qualifying phase, community schools would be eligible for funding to enhance their programming. See <https://lin.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Community%20School.pdf> for more information.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

and urban school jurisdictions, that sense of a community school lingered and the teacher lounge continued to be a gathering place. School and community events attracted members of the larger community, including people from two nearby religious communities. The community also continued to hold community functions and suppers. The School was neutral “turf” for everyone and a community hub.

### *E.1f The Viability Study Year and School Closure*

Raven School was the first school to be considered for closure after the long-term facilities report. In accordance with the process outlined in Board policy and Alberta Government regulations regarding school viability and school closure, the Board voted to review the educational programs and viability of Raven School and complete a viability study. The Board’s consideration of closure was based on the “impact of projected low enrolment numbers on the quality of education and services provided to students, and the financial viability of the jurisdiction.” After the eight-month viability study the Board voted to close the school for the next school year.

#### ***Board Action during the Viability Study***

At the direction of the Board, the senior administration implemented an action plan to communicate with stakeholders, beginning with the notification of parents of the viability study and timeline and continuing with invitations to public and Board meetings. Letters and information were posted on the jurisdiction and school website and sent to parents.

The senior administration shared Raven School data including enrolment projections; educational program, student achievement, parental involvement, extracurricular, social and community opportunities, attendance area, transportation, financial implications, requirements to accommodate Raven students at Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High and advantages and disadvantages of closing Raven School. They explored a variety of options, including moving students to Owl School or building a new school half way between Owl and Raven. They examined the disposal of surplus land and the Raven School building, in consultation with other Boards, municipality and community. As well, they worked with the Board to develop a long-range ten-year jurisdiction capital plan.

During the viability study, town hall style public meetings encouraged as many voices to be heard as possible. Board and jurisdiction office personnel were available to answer questions. Answers to questions were posted on the jurisdiction and school website, including general questions on how taxes are collected, French Immersion funding, teacher salary agreements, “School of Choice” and transportation. Most questions focused on the Raven School situation.

The Board responded to the query as to why “minimal financial savings” of closing Raven outweighed other key performance indicators. The Board decision would be made to ensure a quality education for all students in the jurisdiction and emphasized the concern that providing a subsidy to small schools was not sustainable. Raven received the highest small school subsidy. The Board also clarified that Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High had capacity and would have a utilization rate of 77% with the modifications to the facility to accommodate the Raven students.



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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Parent and Community Response***

While Raven staff and administration remained neutral during this time and focused on operating Raven School as though it would remain open, parents and community were active in supporting the continuation of the school. Both the school council and the action society responded to the Board. This included parents whose children came from Meadowlark. Rolling Hills Indigenous Community parents did not engage in the process, but rather voiced their support for the school to the school staff and one of the assistant superintendents. From the Board's perspective it appeared only the parents and a few community members were involved in trying to save the school. The county had no official role, but the counselor from the area did attend meetings and voiced unofficial support for the community.

Although parents and community felt the time was inadequate to address the issues and that the Board and administration shifted principles or expectations, they explored options, including "sending feelers to the separate school board" to see if they would take on the school. They suggested cancelling French Immersion provided to schools in the jurisdiction and reviewing the cost of transportation to free up funding for rural schools, but the Board did not view those as viable options.

The Raven Community School Parent Council raised several concerns. They did not agree with the projected enrolment and felt the school had gained students over the year. They were concerned that Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School would be over capacity and that the pupil teacher ratio would be significantly higher. They did not feel the projected savings were significant and felt the program at Raven was equal to the program offered at Meadowlark and better in some ways, including access to outdoor education, the longer school day and early release in June. They queried whether the strategic facilities plan was viable as it involved projects, which required Alberta government capital funding approval. They were concerned that the criteria the Board would use to make the final decision were not weighted properly. Parents made a presentation to the Board on the benefits of small community schools. They launched a letter writing campaign and produced a video that included student voices and contacted the municipal and provincial elected officials. One trustee's perspective was that the parents seemed to think that it was the Board's responsibility to save the school, but they didn't really have any viable solutions.

From the perspective of the students, the major reason to close Raven Community School was to save money because of the small enrolment. At the time they were upset and angry. Students were not aware of strategies and initiatives taken to revitalize the school, but they knew their parents had been involved in meetings. Although one of the students did attend the School Board meeting that announced the closure, they did not feel any of the students had a voice in the closure process. They expressed concern that the voice of the Indigenous students was not represented.

***E.1g Impact of Raven School Closure***

Although Raven School has been closed for three years, it was apparent that many adult participants were still very emotional about the closing, whether they supported the closure or were against it. The greatest impacts of the closure were seen more as social and cultural rather

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

than financial or educational impacts. Several adult participants were moved to tears as they described the process and result of the viability study. Community members and parents, with the exception of one participant, were the most negative on the process and the closure. Another participant reluctantly agreed that closure “made sense” but the remaining parents and community participants would reverse the decision if they could. Students, in contrast, were the most positive about the closure and their experiences since the closure.

***Student Experience***

The rural community students from Raven were directed to Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High. The students who had been bussed to Raven School were also accommodated at Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High. Some Indigenous students chose to attend Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High, while others returned to the schools in their community. A few students attended other schools or began homeschooling.

The majority of the students felt the move to a larger school, especially to Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High, had mostly benefited them. Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High staff made a concerted effort to integrate the students because it was the designated school and most students chose to attend their school. After the “shock” of the larger classes and more people in the school, participants felt students had adapted well.

Participants cited several examples of what worked well for students at their new schools, including choosing new friends that shared their interests, participating in competitive sports, and higher achievement for many students. Participants felt the student experiences at Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High and Dove Separate School prepared them for a good transition to the larger high school. If they had gone from Raven to the large high school, they would not have known as many people. When they made the transition from the larger urban schools, they were guaranteed to know at least one person in each of their classes. For some students the bus ride was a little longer, but the difference was not as great as their school day was shorter and they went to school until the end of June, instead of middle of June. Since they would have made that transition for high school, they were not overly concerned with the bus ride.

Students were grateful for their time at Raven School. Students liked the small class sizes, freedom and flexible learning environment and teachers at Raven. They felt teachers were approachable and they could get more help from their teachers than at their new schools. Students felt the school was a cohesive school community and students got along very well. Hot lunches were homemade at Raven, not hotdogs or submarine sandwiches as at their new schools. Field trips were spontaneous and fun at Raven and involved all grades whereas at the new schools this was not the case. One participant understood that some students liked the competitiveness of the Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School sports teams, but they did not think the benefits outweighed the opportunity for all students to be involved at Raven. Two participants felt Raven had prepared their Indigenous grandchildren for success in high school and a successful transition to Meadowlark Composite High School. When they left Raven, they missed the family atmosphere.

The adjustment was difficult for some individual students. Those students who struggled with learning or behavior, particularly those whose parents had chosen to send them to Raven from

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Meadowlark so they could be on a closed campus with a low pupil teacher ratio were overwhelmed by the larger school and classes. One participant estimated that 80% of the Indigenous students returned to the Rolling Hills Indigenous Community schools because they were bullied or marginalized at Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High.

Students who did not attend Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High in September found the transition more difficult at the beginning as they did not have peers from Raven to support them. As a result, a homeschooling student moved from homeschooling to Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High later in the year. A student whose parents chose to send her to Dove Separate School liked the opportunity to practice her faith, but had few friends at first. In terms of adjustment, a participant who chose to drive her children to Owl found her children took a couple of years to stop comparing their new school to Raven. She felt the closure was devastating for students, but agreed it impacted every child differently over time. For example, a few students moved from Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High to a smaller year-round school in Meadowlark when they found the school too large.

***Adult Experience***

Adults seemed to have more of a challenge in distancing themselves from the emotional turmoil of the closure. They could see that the students were fine, but whether they had been for or against the closure they still expressed strong emotions about how difficult the process was for them personally. Individuals spoke about continuing tensions with the Board and a sense of loss in the community. Although one participant felt that it was a good decision for his children even though he was against closure at the time, he commented, “Kids are alright, but the parents are still mad.”

In the immediate aftermath of the closure, parents made a variety of choices, including sending their children to the designated school, homeschooling or choosing another school. One participant thought the reason more parents didn’t choose Owl School in the hamlet of Owl was because they thought it would eventually close, too. Some participants were concerned that there would be a loss of what they described as “rural values” when their children went to a town school. Participants thought Raven parents were less engaged in the schooling of their children when they went to their new school. For some, having to arrange for parent transportation for after school activities became complicated because parents had to drive further to pick them up, rather than just going over to Raven School.

Although staff members were quite worried during the year, once the decision was made the jurisdiction administration worked to ensure their concerns were addressed. For staff, there was not a significant change in their status as they were all given employment. Staff praised the jurisdiction office administration for how they dealt with the staff. For school officials and trustees, the feeling was that they had engaged in a thorough process and made the best decision for students and staff.

***School Jurisdiction Experience***

At the jurisdiction level, the impact of the Raven School closure began before the actual announcement and closure. Over the course of the March and April timeline, the questions from the public moved from how to keep the school open to logistics regarding the process of closure,

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

as it seemed the decision for closure was becoming a reality. The community was concerned about the disposition of items purchased by the Raven School Action Society and learned that unless there was a caveat the items would be the property of the school jurisdiction at the time of closure. The Board reassured parents that there would be transportation to the Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School as the designated Sparrow School Division school and to Dove Separate School through agreement with the separate jurisdiction, but those who chose Owl School or another jurisdiction would have to provide their own transportation to a designated bus stop.

The financial impact for the school jurisdiction was relatively small in the short term, but more positive than negative despite the perceptions of the community, parents and staff. The jurisdiction did accrue some savings in transportation and facility costs despite having to maintain the facility after the closure. As well, some program cost efficiencies were gained with the movement of students into larger classes. Most students chose to attend a school in the jurisdiction, so the jurisdiction did not lose as much student funding as some who were against the closing anticipated. The disposition of the land was delayed by bureaucratic complications. Because the school building and land had not been sold and no further schools had been closed, there was a feeling amongst many stakeholders that the Raven School closure was inconsequential. One participant commented that it would have been easier if the rest of the schools in the plan had closed since the financial gain would have been clearer and they would not feel that Raven had been singled out.

The other broader impact was that the closure of Raven School stimulated other rural communities and they worked to elect trustees on election platforms to keep rural schools open. This resulted in a change of direction for the School Board as they continued to grapple with the impact of rural depopulation and declining enrolment. No other rural schools in the jurisdiction have closed since Raven. Participants expressed concern that the issue of sustaining rural schools has not been resolved and given an anticipated shortfall in funding and depleted reserves, the challenge for the jurisdiction and rural communities will continue.

### *E.1h The Future of the Rural Community*

The small rural community surrounding Raven School lost their community centre when Raven School closed because it was the only facility in the area. It was the hub for 100 years. The teachers' lounge had acted as a gathering place with bus drivers stopping for coffee with community members, parents and staff. The turkey bingos and community suppers were a big draw and the playschool, 4-H and community volleyball were held at the school. It was the place where community celebrated wedding showers and Christmas pageants and came together for crafts and ice-skating. After the closure, the community did not come together in the same way. A few parents commented that the biggest loss was the opportunity for all the different facets of communities to interact. The community had worked hard to build a bridge with the Indigenous populations, and religious groups and communities; the loss of Raven School meant that bridge was gone.

A participant commented that although the designation and funding of an official community school had been lost years ago, the philosophy of the community school had endured until the

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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closure. The impact on neighbouring small rural communities and Meadowlark was actually an opportunity for growth in terms of student enrolment and activities like 4-H and community suppers. In terms of a financial impact on the county, the closure of Raven was neutral from the county's perspective. There was no financial loss or gain to the county. As a participant explained there was a social and cultural loss of the "old fashioned school culture," but the impact was limited to the area around Raven and did not affect Meadowlark County as a whole.

The jurisdiction continues to grapple with low and declining enrollment and how to keep the smallest schools operating and providing a quality education for all students. They know the importance of schools in communities, but also recognize their mandate is to focus on education. At the time of the study, the Board did not have a plan to close further schools.

Raven School was located in a rural area surrounded by farmland. It was not part of a village or a town, but the area does have a sense of community. The community is composed of people who have a bond through the shared history and traditions that revolved around the school as a gathering place. Some community members are still residents and some who chose to transport their children to the school became part of the rural community. Although the closure of Raven may not have impacted the county, the community of Raven is much smaller now. Some community members do gather at a neighbouring community hall for a yearly event, and three years later they still feel a loss of a rural way of life. The students have moved on and for the most part feel they gained friends and opportunities when they moved to a larger school. However, they remember Raven with great fondness and recognize they had a good start in their education. When discussing old fashioned rural values, one participant commented on what they lost with the closure of Raven School; "People want to work, live, play and pray and be educated in the community where they live."

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.2. Case 2: Fox Community School, Redefining Rural Community******Case Category: Closed******Grade Configuration: K to 9******E.2a Study Participants***

We interviewed 25 adult stakeholders representing parents, community members, teachers, support staff, retired teachers, principals, former principals, municipal government officials, and school jurisdiction officials from Field County, Elk School Division, Deer School, Moose School, Fox School, Field Composite School, the hamlets of Deer, Moose and Fox, town of West Field and the neighbouring Paddock County. As well, 11 students were interviewed in two focus groups.

***E.2b The Schools and Elk School Division***

Deer School, Moose School and Fox School were located in hamlets in Field County under the jurisdiction of the Elk School Division. The schools served kindergarten to grade nine students in the hamlets and rural area. They were simultaneously closed and a total of 230 students from all three hamlets and the rural area were consolidated at the Fox School facility and the facility was “reopened” as Elk Community School in the hamlet of Fox.

Over two years, the “new” Elk Community School has been modernized to accommodate the kindergarten to grade nine students and classes are single graded. The school has a principal, vice-principal, 13 teachers and 12 support personnel, including administrative support, success coach, custodian and educational assistants. After completing grade nine, Elk Community School students go to the Field Composite High School in the town of West Field. A pre-school play program for three and four year olds also operates in Elk Community School.

Prior to closure, the three schools had different grade configurations. Deer School was a kindergarten to grade eight school. Over the last five years of operation, the student population had declined to 70 students resulting in double or triple graded classrooms. Moose School was a grade seven to nine school with approximately 40 students and no combined grades in core subjects. Students were in multiple grade groupings for music, and Career and Technology Foundations courses, including cooking, woodworking, and silk screening. Fox School was a kindergarten to grade six school with approximately 106 students. Classes were single grade classes.

Despite some pockets of growth in the southern part of Elk School Division, it has experienced a population decline of approximately 18% from 2010 to 2015. Elk School Division has several regular schools, along with an outreach school, a Christian school, a virtual school and religious community schools. Elk School Division has two regional high schools that draw from the hamlets, villages, and rural community schools, including two kindergarten to grade 12 schools.

***E.2c The Rural Communities***

The Field County hamlets are situated 15 kilometers apart, beginning with Deer in the north, Moose in the middle and then Fox in the south. The town of West Field is 26 kilometers south of Fox. The town of West Field is the service centre for most of the Field County residents. All

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

three hamlets are located near lake and river recreation areas. Elk School Division encompasses most of Field County and a portion of Paddock County.

Deer School is located in the hamlet of Deer, which has a population of approximately 70 people. It has a senior centre, general store and post office, church, arena, public library, fire hall, sports and camping grounds, and a new playground. There are a few small businesses located in the rural area. Deer School has not been in use since being closed. The community has an agriculture society, 4-H club, senior citizen club and recreational hockey and baseball associations.

Moose is the largest of the three hamlets with approximately 113 residents, a general store and post office, arena, fire hall, bulk fuel dealership and two churches. There are a few small businesses, providing services to oil and gas and agricultural customers. The former Moose School has since become a community center, which has a community library, kitchen, gymnasium and meeting rooms plus there are playing fields and a skate park. There is a 4-H club and gun club in the community. Moose is located in close proximity to a lake with summer residences.

The southernmost hamlet of Fox is the smallest hamlet with 34 residents. It has an outdoor skating rink, church, community hall and hotel and a baseball diamond located a few kilometers to the north. There is a store and gas station located on the highway a few kilometers to the east. It is the location of the former Fox Elementary School that has been modernized to be the Elk Community School.

### *E.2d Demographic and Economic Trends*

Most participants mentioned that rural areas surrounding the three hamlets have been impacted by the rural depopulation trend that has occurred elsewhere in North America.

#### ***Demographic Trends***

Immigrants settled the area in the 1950's and as part of the baby boom generation had large families. The area has been experiencing rural depopulation since the 1970's as families have become smaller, and children move away from the farm. Very few children come back to take over the family farm or to live and work in the area. Those who do return usually have small families. There is no immigration of farm workers into the area to replace this population. There is a very small transient population in the villages attracted by low rental prices. There is a small summer resident population, because of an increasing interest in recreational property. There are no significant single or multi-family residential developments proposed in any of the hamlets. The area surrounding the town of West Field in the south of Field County has experienced some population growth.

#### ***Economic Trends***

The economy of the rural area surrounding the hamlets is primarily agricultural based. As well, many people in the area work in oil and gas or forestry to supplement farm income. There are opportunities for seasonal employment in wilderness recreation. There is no other industry in the area to attract workers - only a few farm-based businesses related to mostly agriculture or oil and gas.

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Most of the farms surrounding Deer are large and owned by just a few local families and farmers who do not live in the area. The farmers who have expanded their operations from another community have not chosen to live in the area. These large farms do not rely on foreign workers. The soil is less productive than further south, so it is more difficult for a family on a small farm to make a living. It is 60 kilometers to the nearest large shopping area or employment in a town. Although roads are good, developing and living on acreages and commuting to a town for employment is expensive. Thus, there are a limited number of acreages in the area. One participant admitted, “There is no option for kids to farm and no option for them to work at other things.”

The trend toward larger farms is increasingly being felt in Moose. At present near Moose, and more so near the Fox area, there are some smaller farms and some acreages. The farms near Fox are more productive as the soil is better and the land less forested.

Some people near Fox find the commute to West Field for work economically viable. West Field and the area to the south have experienced the most economic growth due to the proximity to major highways, job opportunities, and larger urban centres. Several businesses that support the oil and gas industry are located in this area. The economic “boom” during the previous years did not impact Deer and Fox and had a limited impact on Moose. Very little development occurred in the three communities during the boom.

### *E.2e Impact of Demographic and Economic Trends on Hamlet Schools*

Rural depopulation impacted the schools in four ways: declining student enrolment, educational programming, effective use of school facilities, and funding.

#### ***Student Enrolment***

Declining population of the farms and hamlets led to declining student enrolment in the hamlets’ schools. Participants attributed declining population to smaller families, larger farms and lack of other employment opportunities that would give people a reason to move to the area. Good, paved highways have made commuting much easier and less time consuming. As such, non-farming families often choose to locate in West Field or further south, rather than near or in the hamlets. One participant noted that some farmers choose to live in West Field and rent industrial land to store and repair their machinery. Over a ten-year period prior to the closing and reconfiguration, the combined enrolment of the three schools decreased from 370 to 235. Further enrolment declines were projected for the schools. The declining enrolment trend was more rapid in Deer School, but was also apparent in the other schools.

Small shifts in enrolment, which a large school could typically absorb, had a big impact in the hamlet schools. One participant cited the impact of a family of five moving for employment as significant to Deer School. Another participant mentioned the impact of family break-up on the demographics of the area and also schools’ enrolment. She said, “when families break up, the wife goes to [West Field] and takes the kids. The mother usually leaves the farm. She doesn’t set up on a new farm. She goes to town to work and takes the kids. The school loses the kids. Sometimes the mom drives kids up to the school, but that doesn’t last – too complicated.”



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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Although some participants felt that only Deer School was declining significantly, others felt that the decline of Moose School's population would be problematic as it was already a very small school. Fox School's enrolment was not declining at the same pace as the other two schools, but was still feeling the impact of rural depopulation.

***Programming, Facility Use and Funding***

One participant commented that the schools contributed to their own destruction in the early years. They provided students with a great education. Students left for post-secondary education and they didn't return to raise their families in the area. However, there was a growing concern regarding the quality of education and the learning environment, particularly at Deer School. The school had experienced a rapid decline in enrolment and had to create more multiple grade classrooms. At Moose School, this was less of a concern, even though they were also multi-grading for some subjects. Moose School only had three grades to deal with instead of eight, so the situation did not seem as urgent. All schools were losing a few students as parents were looking to West Field schools for alternative programming, like French Immersion. All the facilities were underutilized and in need of maintenance, but Deer School was the least utilized and the most in need of major repairs. Deer School was only using 30% of the building. The schools were receiving additional funding allocations beyond the small schools by necessity funding. Both Deer School and Moose School met the school jurisdiction criteria for consideration of school closure and both were under the critical minimum enrolment that was considered viable for operation.

***E.2f Strategies and Initiatives******Early Efforts to Sustain the Hamlet Schools and Communities***

The Elk School Division and the Field County worked together with other stakeholders on economic development strategies and plans to attract people to the region. Most of the work centred on developing a marketing website. The main idea was to showcase the attributes of the hamlets and rural area. The main targets were the oil and gas workers who commuted to job sites in Paddock County and could live anywhere. However, a concerted advertising campaign in Deer only resulted in one married couple moving to the hamlet. Over the years that Elk School Division worked closely with Field County the jurisdiction still lost 1,000 students. Field County tended to stay out of the discussions regarding school viability, but did provide letters of support to the schools as they tried to grow their enrolment.

To complement these efforts, the schools showcased their programs and explored ideas, like outdoor education, to attract students and families. Lack of resources and distance hampered efforts to make the village's schools into schools of choice. One participant noted that people had lots of ideas, but that it takes a lot of time, energy and people to lead initiatives. The schools also tried to utilize their facilities by offering space for public libraries, play school and play groups and storage for the jurisdiction. The jurisdiction supported efforts by recruiting strong principals and teachers, and by providing some additional funding for staffing and maintenance. Videoconferencing was considered, but parents preferred teachers in the classroom. Community and parents offered to help with repairs to the Deer School but were declined due to safety concerns.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Many years ago, the Moose and Fox schools reconfigured from each being kindergarten to grade nine schools to designating one as the elementary and the other as the junior high. As well, Moose School had been faced with closure in the early 2000's and had rallied the parents and community to save the school. For a short period, the enrolment grew, but eventually it continued to decline. A few years before closure, grade nine was eliminated at Deer School. This did not increase enrolment at Moose School as most students just went to Field Composite High School a year earlier, instead of waiting until grade ten. Upon reflection, participants felt the reconfiguration of Moose and Fox, the previous community rally for Moose, and loss of Deer School's grade nines had only bought them some additional time. It did not change the inevitable move to more multiple grade classrooms and eventual closure. Even before the closure process began, Deer School parents started talking to Fox School parents. One participant described how parents responded to the elimination of the Deer School grade nine class, "After they took our nines we realized it was inevitable, so we wanted to shape the outcome while we could."

***Pre Task Force School Jurisdiction Efforts***

Since the early 2000's, Elk School Division has been grappling with the continued decline in student enrolment, and the resulting decline in funding. The School Board came to the realization that the decline was not just a temporary dip, but was a persistent decline due to rural depopulation. Realizing that they may have to address school viability and closure, they began a process to review and revise policies and procedures regarding school viability and closure. They examined each school community's enrolment projections and facility utilization and condition. They shared the data with each school community, as they didn't want anyone to be "blind-sided." During the mid-2000's, following the new policy and processes, the Elk School Division closed two rural schools. Deer School was the next school that met the criteria for closure. Rather than begin another closure process and in an effort to stabilize Deer School and avoid closure, the Board eliminated grade nine five years prior to its closure. Enrolment in the remaining grades continued to decline in Deer School.

The Board decided to look for a better way to work with communities on the issue of school viability. Through a series of meetings with the municipal leaders and through public consultations, the Board sought advice. The Board used filters to gather input on school viability and brainstorm solutions and possibilities. The filters included: maximum educational opportunities, sustainability, best use of limited resources and a realistic solution. Some community members were distrustful of school jurisdiction officials because of past practices, the school closures and loss of the grade nine students. As a result, the Board decided to try a new process that involved forming a community task force and asking them to review the situation, consult with stakeholders, and make a recommendation. The first schools to undergo this new process were the schools in the hamlets of Deer, Moose and Fox.

***Elk School Division Viability Process, Transition and Closure***

The Elk School Division viability process included Deer, Moose and Fox Schools. It began with a community-based task force that recommended closure of Deer and Moose Schools and the reconfiguration of Fox School to the Board. A transition team provided guidance in the reconfiguration and the Board worked through the school closure process.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****The Task Force***

The Board formed a community-based task force to provide advice to the Board on a plan to educate students in the communities that were served by the Deer, Moose and Fox schools. The task force was instructed to use the filters that had been used in the consultation process. Membership on the task force included the principals and parent advisory council representatives, and community members from the three schools and their communities. The school councils chose their representatives and the community representatives. The task force selected a retired superintendent to act as facilitator. There were no school board officials or jurisdiction staff on the task force. The role of jurisdiction staff was to answer questions and to gather information requested by the task force.

From June to December, the task force met ten times. They divided their work into three stages. In stage one, they focused on understanding provincial and jurisdiction policies and procedures related to the issue. They asked questions and received information on finances, facilities, transportation and instruction. For example, they reviewed demographic trends and facility audits, and sought information and opinions from Alberta Education. In phase two, they developed nine alternatives and evaluated them using the four filters. In the final phase, they chose an alternative to recommend to the Board. During the task force's period of deliberation, all information was posted on a jurisdiction website. The final recommendation was presented to the school communities in January at two locations, Deer and Fox Schools. The recommendation of the task force was to close both Deer School and Moose School and consolidate the students at Fox School.

The task force based their recommendation on stabilizing enrolment and maintaining a sound educational program. They also cited a reduction of costs by reducing administration, operations, maintenance and transportation expenses. As well, the task force considered realistic expectations including Alberta Education support for modernization of facilities or construction of new facilities. When it was determined that one school would be the best solution, the task force debated choosing Moose School instead of Fox, especially because the hamlet of Moose is the largest and most central. However, the balance tipped to Fox as the task force determined this location would ensure the most students would remain committed to the area rather than going directly to West Field schools. As well, one member said it was a turning point for her when she realized that Alberta Education criteria would never allow for a new school in Moose to accommodate all the students and they would only modernize Fox School, because "it was the most sound building."

Transportation was a big concern to members of the task force, in terms of bus ride times and also transporting the high school students to Field Composite High School. They recognized that students north of Deer School would have long bus rides. In the end, it was decided the best solution was to have students transfer buses at Elk Community School to go to Field Composite High School. Transportation has remained a concern as a few students have bus rides exceeding one hour.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Transition Team and School Closure Process***

After the task force submitted its recommendation in January, the Board initiated the next steps toward consolidating the three schools. These included a transition team, Board of Trustee approval process, and development of a business case.

A transition team, comprised of three members of the task force and additional members, worked on the consolidation plan. Their role was to lead the planning process for consolidation in anticipation of the Board's motion to accept the task force recommendation. Interested parents and teachers were asked to apply to be on the transition team with the three school administrative teams. They met six times to refine the vision and develop a plan for the new school. They hosted a contest to name the school, engaged stakeholders in planning activities, defined the grade configuration for the school, identified academic and extracurricular programs, and developed strategies to build a cooperative and engaged student body. Their overarching goal was to unite the regional community around a "new" Elk Community School. The transition team was seen as a much more positive experience for members. One participant commented, "It was one of the best teams I have ever been on."

Simultaneously, the Board engaged in the formal school closure process. This process required a re-examination of all the data and work completed by the task force. The Board completed this process and accepted the recommendation in the spring. One participant recalled how seriously the Board took this process and highlighted that the process was not a "rubber stamp" of the task force recommendation. A business case was developed by senior administration based on the recommendation of the task force. The business case was also discussed with Alberta Education and Alberta Infrastructure. This business case informed the final decision of the Board and it became the plan for moving forward with the consolidation.

***Financial Impact on Jurisdiction***

The Board struggled to ensure equitable funding and education opportunities for all students in the jurisdiction given a general decline in enrolment across the jurisdiction. The Board officials attempted to communicate and explain how the long-term savings in staffing, administration, maintenance and transportation from the closure of the hamlet schools would benefit students in the whole system. This was difficult for some participants to accept because the benefit to the system seemed to be at the expense of the students from Moose and Deer. It was also difficult for some participants to understand why the funds used to modernize the Elk Community School couldn't be used to either modernize the other schools or to support staffing. Other participants understood that even if the money could be used to maintain the hamlets schools, it would not be sustainable because of the declining enrolment.

***Response to the Process***

The entire process from task force to transition to approval for closure was confusing for some people. Some people did not understand that the Board had to adhere to the Alberta Education's school closure policy which includes their "due diligence" before accepting the recommendation of the task force. For those who didn't want the schools closed, this formal approval process offered them hope that the recommendation would not be accepted. This was particularly true for the community of Moose, but also for some residents of Deer. However, Deer parents were more

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

interested in ensuring there was a good transition plan in place, because they felt their school could not remain open given the steep decline in enrolment.

The task force process was challenging for its members. Some participants felt the Board had downloaded their responsibility for the closure of the schools to the community members. Some task force members still feel the backlash from parents, community members and elected officials from other levels of government. Some participants cited examples of heated, political conversations and derogatory comments from critics of the decision. As well, some respondents who were not on the task force shared concerns about the ability of the task force to make an unbiased decision. These comments reinforced the task force members' impressions of a critical atmosphere that still exists in the communities.

The community of Moose had the greatest issue with the recommendation of the task force as they felt their school was still viable and their facility was in good condition. One participant described Moose School as "collateral damage in the reconfiguration" and still could not understand why it was closed. Some community members, especially senior citizens, felt betrayed by the representatives and felt let down by the task force. One participant felt the Moose representatives had been coerced to agree with the recommendation. The Deer community reluctantly accepted the decision because of the steep decline in enrolment, condition of the building, and the loss of the grade nines prior. The Fox community felt least affected as their school was gaining three grades and had a name change to Elk Community School.

Not everyone felt the task force process was flawed. Many applauded the engagement with the community. One participant thought because local people were part of the process it went more smoothly than it may have. The process helped to inform the community leaders on the task force. By educating these community leaders on all the issues and giving the responsibility to recommend a solution to the Board, the task force process was a de facto part of the solution. Through their involvement on the task force, the members came to realize the reality and complexity of the situation. Some of them changed their minds or were convinced of the "right thing to do" despite their own agendas of "saving" their schools.

After the task force, the simultaneous push for a transition plan while the Board was in its formal policy phase fueled the concern that the decision had been a foregone conclusion. People did not see the transition plan as addressing the need to be prepared for a short turnaround time if the recommendation was accepted. Some felt the appointment of a retired superintendent as the task force facilitator was evidence of a bias towards closure, as he had been involved in the consideration of previous school closures. As well, Alberta Education's quick approval for the modernization of Fox School was also cited as evidence that the decision had previously been made. They did not see that this quick approval was necessary to make a smooth transition in a very short time period.

Even though all task force information was posted on the school jurisdiction website, some participants felt that more communication could have helped with the transparency of the process, and could have dispelled many rumours. Over a hundred and twenty questions were answered and published on the website along with all the reports. Additionally, there were many one-to-one communications by task force members. One participant felt that the Deer

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

representatives did a good job of keeping the parents and community informed and that the Moose community seemed less informed. However, Moose community representatives seemed to withdraw during the process when it was apparent that the decision would be to close their school. One participant noted that it was important to keep all stakeholders informed, including provincial elected officials, to limit the spread of misinformation.

Despite the consultations that had begun years before, the task force work over approximately one year, and the additional time the Board took to re-examine the data before accepting the recommendation, some participants felt the process was too rushed and felt blindsided. Even though the Board was acknowledged for their inclusive and progressive approach to a difficult issue with an award, there are still hard feelings and bitterness between certain people. One participant described feelings as multi-layered resentments, not just community versus community. For example, some participants noted the jurisdiction was currently conducting an attendance boundary review that could have helped Moose School had it been done earlier. They were frustrated that they had been told that boundaries couldn't change. This has fueled the continued dissatisfaction of some people with the process. Even though people in Moose fought school closure years before, one participant noted everyone was tired and didn't fight it because people "ran out of energy" for the second battle and "gave up."

Despite the controversy, there is a shared belief in the legitimacy of the process among task force and transition team members, Board members, jurisdiction staff, and many community members. They understood the view point of those who didn't agree with the decision, but felt they had worked hard to ensure all the information was reviewed fairly and the best decision was made given the circumstances. Some school jurisdiction officials cited their surprise that the task force had come up with the recommendation to close the schools and consolidate the students at Fox. This unexpected recommendation was seen as proof of the legitimacy of the process. Another participant explained that the Board took the review of data and consultations very seriously before they made their final decision. The Board could have stopped the work of the transition team and their efforts to apply to modernize the Fox School, if the recommendation had been declined.

### *E.2g Impact of the School Reconfiguration on Sustaining the Rural Community*

Once the hamlet schools were closed the Elk Community School opened its doors in the fall in Fox. For a year and a half, the school worked through the modernization of the entire school to accommodate the larger student body. Consequently, the school community dealt with developing a new school culture in the midst of the construction. Despite the additional disruption, students, parents and staff have adapted well to the consolidation of students and facility construction.

There has been a concerted effort to make the school a regional school with an inclusive name, new culture, policies, and traditions. Although the shadow of the old "Fox School" name was visible on the brick siding, many participants expressed the view that the three hamlet schools had closed and a new school had opened - Elk Community School. The staff worked hard to celebrate the new beginning by engaging the students in developing the mascot for the sports

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

teams and by holding school wide events. Some participants did not “buy in” to this message, especially those who were still frustrated with the closure process. The school has not, as yet, become a gathering place for the regional community but is showing signs of progress toward this.

***Impact on Students and Families***

Participants perceived the impact of the new school as positive for most students. They are able to remain in a rural school even if it is not necessarily in their home community. Most students are thriving and express that the move to a new larger school has benefited them both academically and socially. There were a number of elements that participants cited as positives, including the four-day school week. They noted that access to a variety of teachers, complimentary courses, friends, and stronger sports teams were assets, as was the modernized school facility and better gymnasium.

Although most students have adapted well, some students took longer than others. One parent commented that her son had been double and triple graded, so being in a single grade classroom has been good for him. Another parent commented that her daughter has done better adapting, but her son found it difficult at first. One parent felt it was the best for her kids “education wise.” Another parent believed that for students who want to succeed “there is an unbelievable amount of support.” One parent commented it has been really good for her elementary-aged child, but her older child said the last day at Deer School was the “saddest day of his life.”

Some participants mentioned missing the family atmosphere of the smaller schools. Generally, the Deer and Fox students adapted quite quickly, particularly the younger children. For example, one girl from Deer was the only girl in her class and now there are several girls in class. The Moose students found it frustrating to return to the school where they attended elementary school. They felt they lost an element of freedom from being in a school that was geared to junior high students, with fewer rules, and in a community with a local store they could walk to for lunch. One student was frustrated that at their new school the older students were expected to be leaders, while at Moose the teachers had planned events that were tailored to them. One student concluded that in the end it would be good for the students. He said, “They think the past is so great but their memories are nostalgic. It was good but not that good.”

Participants thought feelings of nostalgia would fade, as older student went on to Field Composite High School, and the younger students would only know Elk Community School as their rural school. One parent described how her son had complained about leaving his school, dreading it all summer. She made a deal with him to try it until Christmas. By Christmas, he was fine with the new school. Another parent commented on the students’ response when they finally started at Elk Community School in the fall; “Everyone was sad at first, but they got here – ‘holy cow,’ this is a nice school.”

Most families elected to make the transition to Elk Community School. For Moose and Fox parents, their children are now in just one school from kindergarten to grade nine, instead of split between the hamlets of Fox and Moose and then going to the town of West Field for high school. One parent commented that it would be easier to have all her children in West Field schools for all grades because of their involvement in community sports. However, she felt community

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

pressure to keep her children at the Elk Community School in order to support her rural community. Thus, she has made a commitment to do a lot of driving for the next five years. There were a few grade nine students from both Deer and Moose who went directly to Field Composite High School the first year the school opened because as one participant shared, “What’s the point of being here for one year.”

Some parents feel “out-of-touch” with Elk Community School because it isn’t in their community. Fewer parents are involved in the school advisory council. Extra-curricular is a challenge for some parents because of distance. However, one participant commented, “Parents found it inconvenient at first because kids are further away at school, but they have started to rearrange their life so they go into town at the end of the day. They manage their day to coordinate with the school day.”

Busing has remained a concern for some parents. Some students have shorter routes, but a few students have longer routes at the north end of the jurisdiction. Some parents worry about the complexity of the transfer process. There are a lot of buses in the driveway and parking area as high school buses pick up or drop off the high school students. However, the school has worked with the bus drivers to ensure there are safe procedures in place.

***Impact on Staff***

Participants felt consolidation of jurisdiction resources could address the recruitment and retention challenges of teachers and quality of instruction to rural communities. Attracting and retaining staff to rural schools can be a challenge. Even with the incentive of a post-secondary bursary for local students who are willing to return to the area to teach, the workload associated with combined or multiple grade classrooms in remoter rural schools makes it difficult for the school jurisdiction to attract and retain teachers. As well, a participant expressed concern that when expenses had to be reduced in the hamlet schools, the educational assistant time was sometimes reduced putting further strain on the teachers.

Some participants felt the move to single grades was better for teachers and the quality of education, particularly in those classes that had been triple or quadruple graded. One participant commented that you have “nowhere to hide” in a rural school, so teachers need to have good teaching practices. She felt the teaching culture had been enriched at Elk Community School because teachers had more colleagues. She commented, “Your practice grows when you can learn from more people in a bigger staff.”

There is a feeling among some parents and students that they have lost connection to the teaching staff. However, many teachers in the three schools were already commuting to the schools from another rural community or West Field, so they were not actually members of the community in which they taught. Elk Community School teachers are aware of this concern and make a deliberate effort to connect with students. Because most teachers transitioned from the old schools to the new school with the students there is a connection to the former hamlet schools.

One participant commented that the first year was a struggle to unify the staff as everyone had their old mindset. They couldn’t let go of commenting on “in the past.” To facilitate the adjustment, teacher meetings were held each Tuesday at lunch. One participant felt some support



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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

staff and teachers were feeling the stress of the task force and transition year, along with the first year of operation in the midst of the modernization. Some teachers liked the challenge while others found the adjustment to new rules to address the various grades and number of students difficult. Communication was challenging because there is a bigger staff. As one staff member commented, “Staff mingles well at the new school but to some degree the elementary and the junior high keep to themselves.”

***Impact on the Hamlets and Rural Communities***

For most participants, the social and economic impact of the loss of the hamlet schools has not been as significant as many first thought it would. Because the communities have other facilities for senior or sporting community events, they are still engaged in community events. One participant felt the schools had mostly been gathering places for the parents and students, not the community. One participant commented that parents and community members have said, “Bravo Board, but are not saying it too loudly because of the politics.”

In the case of Deer hamlet, the community is adapting to the school closure. For example, one participant felt there had been “absolutely no impact.” Most businesses had already left the hamlets and there were already fewer families in the hamlets and rural community. He felt there was no reason to live in Deer because there was no employment. The community once had grain elevators and a bulk fuel station, but they closed years ago. There had been only one home purchased in Deer in the past ten to 15 years. One participant felt that Deer feels the impact of having an empty school as a “negative landmark.” The school jurisdiction is in the process of deciding what to do with the Deer School, but it is likely that it will be torn down. Just before the Deer School closed, momentum began to build for a fun hockey league. The fun league is thriving, whereas before, the arena was unused except for public skating a couple of nights a week. As well, a new playground, built by a parent group has been turned over to the community. Once the school is gone, the playground and sports fields will be fully visible to the community adjacent to the arena and public library.

Participants felt it has generally been more difficult for some of the Moose community to accept the closure of their school. They thought their school was viable and were concerned with the process. However, Moose was able to purchase the school for a nominal fee and turn it into an active community centre, so it has become a community gathering area, with a community kitchen, public library, gymnasium, and meeting rooms. As one community member commented, “The community is still thriving even though the school closed. People have always worked together and worked hard for the community. Volunteers are getting quite old, but still doing lots of the work.”

Some participants indicated the loss of students affected the store in Moose. It was not so much of a financial loss, but more of a social loss. The students would interact with the community when they came for lunch. At times the store even subsidized some students so they could have lunch. The store still supports the students through the new school by providing the hot lunch program. As one community member commented, “It was fun when the kids came. They sat down with whoever and visited while having lunch at the community tables.”

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Most participants did not identify a major economic impact to the hamlets and rural community as a result of a loss of the schools. There may be some impact to the two general stores, but both continue to operate. Municipal development may have been impacted in regards to trying to attract business, industry and workers with families. Having no school in the hamlets may be a deterrent to families, while others feel having “a better school just down the road” is still attractive to people who want a rural education for their children. One participant commented, “The school closures are redefining what community looks like.”

The loss that both communities still feel is the lack of young people and school staff in the community during school hours, and the loss of after school clubs and activities. Many participants commented on the benefit of having young people in the community for the seniors. It was easier for seniors to come to school events when the schools were in the hamlets. The teachers contributed to the community beyond their teaching. For example, in Deer they put on a seniors’ lunch, and in return, the community put on a pancake breakfast. In both Deer and Moose, there were more multi-generational interactions. As well, because the public libraries were in the schools, the community could access the library during the day. Now access to the public library is limited. In the end, as one participant commented, “Seniors were disappointed since they perceived the school as something that helped keep the town alive. They haven’t wallowed in it. They are being proactive and trying to make the best of it.”

To keep a connection with the hamlets and rural communities, the Elk Community School has tried to include them in activities and showcase what is happening at the school. They have brought students back to the hamlets for senior teas or sporting events. As one participant commented about Deer, “The community doesn’t see the positive because they don’t see what is happening in the new school. They just look at the abandoned building and feel bad.”

### *E.2h The Future of Elk Community School and the Rural Community*

Some participants questioned the role of a school in sustaining a rural community and felt that it might actually be the community that sustains the school. Participants felt that the rural depopulation was not related to the school. People were not leaving the community because of the quality of the education. As one participant commented, “There is a need for jobs or industry or nothing will stop the decline of rural.”

Some participants felt that other community groups like senior’s groups, 4 H clubs, and agriculture societies are more critical to sustaining the rural community than schools because the hamlets have continued to thrive without the schools. A community member commented, “The sports teams and ag society are critical to sustaining a community. Because we have those, the closure of the school is less of a factor.”

Another community member was less optimistic. She explained how the community of Moose had changed since the closure. She said, “The school made it feel like it was a happening place...made it seem like a complete community with something to offer all ages....Now it feels like a community full of old people....Now it feels like the community will slowly fade away.”

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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There was a tone of resignation in many participants as they thought that eventually the rural population would continue to shrink as the population ages, and the number of family farms decreases. One participant commented, “School is the last thing to go. Store is already gone. Church is gone. Gas station. Gone. Families are gone. The school is closed metaphorically before the Board closes it.”

One participant explained, “The School Board can’t bleed their mandate to support the sustainability of the community. If we didn’t want rural communities to die, we never would have built good highways or encouraged corporate farming. Can’t keep living in the 1800s.”

Unless development comes to the area, Elk Community School might experience declining enrolment over the next few years. The hamlet schools were projected to continue to decline because of the demographic and economic trends of the area.

Field County has developed new county planning guidelines to make acreage development more restrictive and to encourage “growth nodes” where services can be accessed and farmland is protected from past practices of “haphazard” acreage development. In previous years, “spot zoning” created vacant acreages and land use conflicts between acreage owners and farmers. Most of the future development in the county will be near West Field and in the south, rather than near the hamlets of Deer, Moose or Fox. That being said, having paved road access is one of the criteria for a growth node, which the hamlets do possess. Neighbouring Paddock County felt that the closure of Deer School thwarted their economic development efforts and were frustrated with the decision of the Elk School Division Board to close Deer School as Deer School served the southern residents of their municipality.

Most participants feel that students are getting a good educational program in the new school. Even though they have lost the close family feeling, they are still in a rural school. As one participant commented they can keep up better with the West Field schools. She said, “By saving one rural school they have better funding in that school for resources and a bigger staff with more skills that can offer more interesting options and courses.”

Several participants indicated that the school, students and parents have come together, but the community members need to figure out a way to thrive in the broader rural community. One participant felt residents need to connect with each other beyond the hamlets and consolidate their voices to sustain a rural lifestyle. Some participants felt the school is playing a role in bringing the communities together. Other participants felt there was a role for the municipal governments to bring people to the community. One participant summarized the concern felt by many, “Every time you jerk a pillar out of a community, things start to sag. If you pull enough out, something is going to collapse.”

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.3. Case 3: Mint Community School, Working with Community******Case Category: Declining******Grade Configuration: K to 9******E.3a Study Participants***

We interviewed 11 adult stakeholders, representing staff, parents, elected officials and community members from Mint School, Plains School Division, Village of Mint, Mint Library, Wheat County and Plains Indigenous Community. As well, a focus group of three students in grades eight and nine were interviewed.

***E.3b Mint School and Plains School Division***

Mint School is a grade one to nine school in the Plains School Division. Mint School is located in the village of Mint, 40 kilometers east of the town of Wheat and 60 kilometers south of the village of Fescue and 65 kilometers from an Indigenous community. Mint students go to Wheat High School for grades ten to twelve. The enrolment of the Mint School has been in decline for several years from a high of approximately 59 students five years ago to approximately 52 students. The school was built to accommodate 150 to 200 students, which means the school is at about one third of its capacity. The school has a modernized gymnasium and office area, plus a surplus of space, some of which is used by the community as a business centre.

There are three teachers at Mint and a principal who is shared with Fescue School, a small rural grade one to nine school about 30 minutes from Mint. The principal spends two days a week at Mint and three days at Fescue. For this year, one of the teachers was appointed as Mint vice principal. The school employs six community residents, including a jurisdiction administrative support person, educational assistants and a custodian.

Plains School Division has experienced a 6% growth from 2010 to 2015. The jurisdiction's growth is mainly attributable to an increasing number of Indigenous students and students from nearby religious communities.

***E.3c The Rural Community***

The village of Mint is situated in Wheat County within walking distance of a lake recreation area. This recreation area has a few acreages, mostly for retirees or summer vacation homes. The village has a population under 150. The village serves the farms and lake acreages. It has a hotel, card-lock gas station, natural ice surface arena and fitness facility, curling rink, post office, grocery store and modern library. Those who live in the area are mostly engaged in farming and agri-business, but there are a few individuals who commute to larger centers, work from home via the Internet or are retired.

***E.3d Demographic and Economic Trends***

Participants identified the major reason for rural depopulation in the county is the changing nature of agriculture in the area.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Demographic Trends***

The population in the village of Mint has experienced slow growth since the early 2000's. Two years prior to the study, two lots were sold and there were houses under construction. The lake recreation area has attracted a few people to the area and a few younger people have returned to the area to be near family. The population of the neighbouring Indigenous community is growing while the Wheat County population is experiencing a slow, steady decline.

***Economic Trends***

In Wheat County surrounding Mint, many small family farms have been absorbed into larger family farms, corporate farms, or religious communities. The major economic engine in the county is agriculture, but the oil and gas industry, and tourism are present. A major employer in the village is the school along with a few small businesses. Several community members have come together as a cooperative to co-own a local agri-business, and community members co-own the restaurant building that they rent to the proprietor at a discount to ensure the community has a local restaurant. Community members express concern that there are few jobs to attract young families to the village.

***Impact on Mint School***

Current enrolment in Mint is approximately 52 students. There are 26 Indigenous students attending along with about seven students who are from families that have settled in the area to work on farms. Approximately 19 students are from the rural area and village.

“School of Choice” has both negative and positive impacts on Mint School. Choice has meant that some families have sent their children to Wheat School rather than remain at Mint, which is a negative for Mint School. Reasons for sending their children to the larger centre of Wheat include: access to single grade classrooms, more programs, better athletics and social engagement for their children; or because their older children are already attending the high school; or because Wheat is a more efficient choice given their family activities and work. A few families may have chosen a larger centre because of the high expectation for volunteerism at the Mint School. Additionally, some young families that are moving back to live in a rural area want city amenities, so they may choose Wheat School.

On the positive side, choice has allowed some families from the Indigenous community to choose Mint over their Indigenous community school. The ability for Indigenous students to attend Mint has been a stabilizing force for Mint School enrolment. This could change depending on the decisions of the Indigenous community leaders, who fund a bus to Mint and pay tuition for students. There is a new elementary school opening in the Indigenous community. Each neighbouring jurisdiction must negotiate a separate agreement with the Indigenous leaders. At present the Indigenous community caps the total number of students allowed to attend either Mint or Fescue schools at approximately 47, which the two schools divide between them depending on family affiliations with the school and programming needs. Many of these Indigenous families who chose to attend one of these schools are second or third generation families and have close ties to the schools. Although capped, Indigenous enrolment has been consistent for several years and Mint has a waiting list of Indigenous students who would like to attend.

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Although the migration of people from religious communities has significantly bolstered school populations in some parts of the jurisdiction and helped to stabilize the jurisdiction enrolment, this has not been the case in Mint School. There have only been a few of these families who live in the Mint area. People from these religious communities are not usually landowners, but rely on seasonal farm work. While these families work and live on farms near Mint, they must travel long distances for church and faith-based community activities. If work is available nearer to their church community or if the school falls out of their favor, the families may decide to relocate to a new school community, home school their children, or send their children to congregated faith-based sites. These religious communities are not a homogeneous group. They have a range of religious traditions and beliefs that influence their engagement with public schooling.

### *E.3e Strategies and Initiatives*

The participants were eager to explain a number of strategies that have been used to attract families to the area and to the school, as well as their current initiatives. The participants emphasized that they were often the first to try an idea and continued to look for opportunities that were unique. Their goal was to make Mint a destination place and Mint School a quality-learning environment.

#### ***Leadership***

Leadership is a key factor in the viability of both Mint village and Mint School. The stabilizing factor is the existence of a strong group of parent and community champions to support school staff.

#### ***School Staff Leadership***

Over the past three years there have been four principals and numerous teacher changes. The only long-term employee is the school administrative assistant. She is a community member who divides her time between the school office and library. A recent addition to the staff was a teacher who had experience in Indigenous education and was a long-time resident of a neighbouring rural community.

Staff members feel they are under “pressure” to figure out how to make the school grow. They expressed support for the school even if they could not commit to remaining at the school for several years. There was a concern about the lack of policies and procedures to guide administration and teachers plus a need to strengthen the educational program and administrative tools. For example, it was felt that a clear process and criteria for how Indigenous students are accepted from the waiting list must be implemented to ensure the students would be successful. Staff acknowledged that schools must have basic policies and procedures and better accountability and oversight to assure families of consistency, high standards and quality and they are working to make this a reality.

#### ***Parent Leadership***

A core group of five parents work diligently, providing parent leadership and support for the staff. The group ensures that parents are available to assist in whatever is required, including coaching, supervising or helping with events and field trips or fundraising and promoting the

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

school by participating on community committees and initiatives. The parents are aware that there has been a lot of staff turnover in Mint School and so they have worked with staff to ensure continuity.

***Jurisdiction Leadership***

The Plains School Division is committed to parental choice, diversity and success of all students, including those students who are representative of a specific cultural or religious group. This translates to support for Mint School. The trustees share a deep understanding of what rural schools mean to their communities with officials. Rural schools and their communities are viewed as a specific cultural group and there is a belief in the educational, cultural and social value of the rural school. For example, the jurisdiction reopened a rural school, which had been closed, in order to provide programming for a local religious community. As well, the jurisdiction has reached out to other religious groups in an urban centre to include private religious school under the jurisdiction's umbrella.

Despite the action taken by a previous Board to close a small school many years ago, the current Board has taken the position that it will not close rural schools unless families and the community stop supporting the school. Each year as budgets are examined, the practice of the Board is to maintain small rural schools as long as possible. Their philosophy was captured by the participant statement, "The Board will not close a rural school – parents will close it."

An example cited to show the jurisdiction's commitment to rural community education was the rebuilding of a rural school in a village that had burned down. A participant commented, "The best place for kids to be educated is in their home community."

***Municipal Relations***

One community member mentioned the possibility of the village becoming a hamlet and the concern that this conversion could further challenge the viability of the community and school and endanger the rural way of life. Participants expressed concern that the County Council may be too focused on their efforts to maintain agriculture and their internal Council struggles to worry about Mint's viability. Participants have concerns that County Council would not be focused on things like manufacturing, business and industry, and development of the lake recreation and housing to bring more residents with school age children to their community. However, the Wheat County councillor for the Mint area is viewed as a champion for maintaining a school in Mint and exploring opportunities for development as a draw for people to move to the rural area and village.

***Community Champions***

Mint and the surrounding rural area have a core group of champions with a long history of collaboration. Participants indicated they shared a belief that having a strong rural presence is important to the fabric of Alberta. Many of the active members of the community trace their families back to the original homesteaders and ranchers in the area. Volunteers take on numerous tasks and roles in the community. There is an active Lions Club, Village Council, Library Board and Recreation Committee. The community has supported projects like the library and fitness centre and has contributed to school field trips and activities through fundraising events. Official

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partnerships have not been formed with the school, but rather facilities are shared with the school. For example, students are encouraged to use the public library, arena and fitness facility.

There is a strong feeling among all the community groups that the school is a key component in the community and without it the village would cease to be viable. Therefore, the community has initiated projects in an effort to support the school and to sustain a rural lifestyle for residents. This desire to work collaboratively was reflected in a Plains School Board meeting where village officials made a good impression on the Board as they came with an “attitude of what can we do to make the school and community stronger.”

***Community Sustainability Committee***

A small active group of community champions representative of the school, village, county and rural community formed a Community Sustainability Committee under the umbrella of the village Recreation Committee. The sustainability committee engages in specific activities that champion the school and village and rural area to boost the population of the community and enrolment of the school. They described their relationship as symbiotic because the community will not survive without the school and the school needs the community. A community member summarized the guiding principle of the committee as, “If it is good for the school, it is good for the community.”

The village and school officials are working on a website to promote the community and the school. The school and jurisdiction developed a new website a few years ago and through the Community Sustainability Committee, the principal has made contact with a community member who is helping with the development of communication materials to promote Mint School.

In concert with promoting Mint School, the Community Sustainability Committee also champions the development of the community as a destination for people attracted to the geography of the area and acreage or village lifestyle.

The community has already developed a bike path between the lake and the village. Although Mint would not be described as a summer village, several acreages located near the lake are vacation or retirement homes. There have been efforts to work with the Wheat County to develop lots around the lake and encourage permanent residents who could commute to large centres or work from home via the Internet. This development is complicated and must take into consideration environmental and agricultural concerns.

Plains School Board worked with officials to transfer property to allow for development of lots within the village. There is a small new subdivision and a few new houses under construction in the village. Housing is significantly less expensive in the village than other urban locations. Participants are hopeful if new lots are available in the village and if the lake development goes forward, there may be increased enrolment if young families choose to make the area their permanent residence.

Community members are continually thinking about how to develop community assets to attract people. New ideas generated include attracting university research in astronomy because of the



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lack of artificial light and clear skies or a golf course development to complement the lake recreation area.

***Business Centre***

To support development, the Community Sustainability Committee has set up a Business Centre in the school. With an outside entrance, restroom, kitchen and meeting room, and access to high-speed connectivity, the Business Centre provides community members and groups with a working space. This shared use of the facility benefits both the jurisdiction and the community as it uses under-utilized school facility space and provides access to technology and meeting areas for community members.

***Jurisdiction Funding***

The Plains School Division has struggled to maintain a stable rural student population and so they have reached out to schools within the city. While farm-based rural school populations have declined, the jurisdiction has experienced enrolment growth by acquiring urban-based religious schools and promoting programming for Indigenous students and students from local religious communities. This has stabilized the jurisdiction's funding.

Although jurisdiction officials recognize that funding a small school is challenging, their approach is a reflection of the Board's guiding principle that ensures families have the choice of educating their children in a rural community school. A jurisdiction official commented that conversations that target small rural schools as a "drain" on the jurisdiction are not allowed because of the "ethics of providing education to all rural kids" regardless of their location.

The jurisdiction has centralized funding to appropriately fund small rural schools. The larger schools are "subsidizing" the smaller schools because the school-based provincial funding model does not allow small schools to be sustainable. Even so, if the Indigenous student enrolment were to decrease, it would be very difficult to maintain programming at Mint. As such, there is a concerted effort to reach beneficial agreements and provide appropriate programming for Indigenous students. Mint is double and even triple graded for some subjects and has reduced costs through sharing their principal. Mint School was one of the first schools in Alberta to initiate a parent supported four-day week to save transportation and facility costs and to encourage junior high students to stay at Mint.

***Engaging All Learners***

The teachers have worked to meet the needs of their diverse student population from the three distinct populations – rural and village, religious communities and Indigenous. The program is modified to meet individual and cultural needs. Integration of all the students is challenging, particularly as the students mature and differences between their cultures become more apparent. A staff member commented, "The students at the younger grades mix well, but distancing occurs as the students get older."

Students have access to basic programs, including the integration of technology, the jurisdiction focus on literacy, extra-curricular athletics or activities, and support through services such as family school liaison workers. Older students are bussed to Wheat for Career and Technology Studies. Providing a strong extra-curricular program is difficult. The low student population

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makes it difficult to field athletic teams. Since most students are bussed, after school activities require commitment from families to provide transportation. This can be a challenge for families who work or live in the rural areas or in the Indigenous community.

The staff works with the jurisdiction's religious community liaison to provide an appropriate program and the transition to high school. Integrating programming for students from the religious community can pose challenges given their cultural concerns with the integration of technology and some aspects of curriculum, policy, values and culture that do not align with their beliefs and values. The staff is aware that they must be sensitive to the values of this group as religious leaders will influence parents to remove students if policies or curriculum are not deemed acceptable. Although Mint School only goes to grade nine, the teachers have worked with the jurisdiction outreach school to provide distance education on-site for one student who wished to continue to high school, but was not comfortable in attending a large high school.

In the same manner, the staff works with the jurisdiction's Indigenous liaisons and family school liaison counselors to implement programming to address the needs of Indigenous students, particularly in literacy and coordination of services for students with complex needs. Although overall jurisdiction accountability pillar results are strong and some of the Indigenous students have the highest marks at Mint, some students from the Indigenous community require additional assistance.

***Innovative Programming***

There is a tradition of implementing programs that will set Mint School apart as a destination school with enhanced programming. Many years ago Mint was the pilot school in the jurisdiction for integrating Apple computers into the classroom. This drew students to the school until technology spread to other schools. They continued to innovate with the installation of videoconferencing and interactive whiteboards. The school had a hockey program that helped to retain some junior high students, but the program was dissolved when the staff champion of the program left the school. Although it didn't come to fruition, the community did try to establish a bursary scholarship program to pay post-secondary tuition for Mint School graduates. Currently they have a marine biology program that includes a trip for the junior high students. They have incorporated distance learning and partnering with other schools to provide high school programming for students who want to stay in the community. All of these efforts were cited as examples of a high level of dedication and collaboration by school and community.

***International Baccalaureate (IB) Program<sup>10</sup>***

Recently through the support of the Community Sustainability Committee and through the fundraising efforts of the community to raise over \$50,000 for teacher training, the Mint School has become an International Baccalaureate (IB) Candidate School for grades one to three. Unlike the hockey school, this initiative has survived the transition to a new principal. Key community members also support it. Although participants acknowledge that gaining acceptance as an IB program for the primary grades and then moving the program into upper elementary and junior high school is a difficult task, they believe it is a unique program that may attract young families

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<sup>10</sup> An internationally focused and accredited educational program that encourages students to be active learners, well-rounded individuals and engaged world citizens. See <http://www.ibo.org/> for more information.

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to the area who are interested in global awareness, second language instruction, independent learning and an international learning program. The designation as an IB school and the high standards that must be attained was cited as a solution to a concern that was raised by an individual, “It’s a happy place, but not a highly academic, demanding, rigorous place.”

### *E.3f Role of Mint School in Sustaining the Rural Community*

All participants viewed Mint School as a key component of rural development and sustainability of their rural community. A participant commented, “When it comes to the school and the community, one is the heart and the other is the hands.”

#### ***Impact on Students and Families***

Participants were clear that they felt students were receiving a good education at Mint School and that the community was a partner in their education. They felt the community supported the school through fundraising, attending events and giving students access to facilities. They felt students were learning good values and the unique cultural mix was an asset, as students knew each other well. Combined grades were not viewed as a negative, but rather an opportunity for children of different ages to mix. Adults emphasized safe and small classes while students were more focused on the benefit of small classes, responsive teachers, friends and field trips. Students liked the interaction with friends and enjoyed events when the community was involved.

Parents feel the loss of Mint School would not only affect the community, but also the students if parents chose to homeschool rather than send their children on a longer bus ride to a larger school. They liked that students looked out for each other and did not “fall through the cracks.”

#### ***Impact of Mint School on the Village of Mint and Rural Area***

When talking about future development of the community, children and youth were an important consideration. A participant described the community as from “birth to death and everything in-between.” He went on to explain that if the rural community decides to develop an adult living community, similar to what has been done around some golf courses, it would be a mistake because “the absence of kids is a mistake.” His belief was that the youth sustain a community so rural communities must provide a reason for them to stay or return. Having a good school in the community will draw young families to the community and is a key asset for economic development.

If Mint School were to close, participants felt most of the businesses would close and development would cease. People would have fewer reasons to stop by the grocery store or the restaurant or even the library and post office, so services would dwindle. The community of Mint is viewed as pro-active and an important partner as the school and community work on sustainability together.

Mint School provides a rallying point and a common cause for the community to support and enjoy. It gives a reason to come together in multigenerational activities that enrich the lives of all community members. Although interactions occur on a daily basis as students use community facilities like the arena and library or when parents and community members come to the school, participants used the examples of the school community literacy event, Christmas caroling door

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to door or the annual spring cleanup of the community as events that draw the community together. The school provides cultural and social entertainment for the community.

The vibrancy of the community is further reflected in the example of the Mint Fall Fair that draws more attendees than fairs in other larger communities. People return because of a tie to the community and the school. A participant described the relationship of Mint School and community as having, “very intertwined, symbiotic, multigenerational impacts.”

*E.3g Future of Mint School and the Rural Community*

The participants ranged from cautiously optimistic to pessimistic about the viability of Mint School, and the development of the village and rural area. They were strong in their conviction that the school provided a good program, but were concerned with the low school enrolment numbers. They were concerned that the school could not depend on the continued enrolment of students from the Indigenous community or the religious community as those students had affiliations with their cultural and religious communities that also provided schools. They were hopeful that the Board would give Mint School and the community an opportunity to implement the IB program and rural development ideas. They were confident there would continue to be strong parent and community support. As one participant concluded, “Don’t count us out.”

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.4. Case 4: Aster School, Community Taking Ownership******Case Category: Declining******Grade Configuration: K to 12******E.4a Study Participants***

We interviewed 12 adult stakeholders, representing staff, parents, elected officials, service providers and community members from Moon County, Open Spaces School Division and Aster School in the hamlet of Aster. As well, a focus group of six Aster School students were interviewed.

***E.4b Aster School and Open Spaces School Division***

Aster School has approximately 54 students. Most students are bussed from the local farms and acreages in the area and only a few students live in the hamlet of Aster. Eight students are from out of province and two students are recent immigrants. The school is operating at roughly one third of its capacity. It is extremely well maintained with a newly painted interior and lockers. Aster School has a principal, four teachers, and three support staff, including administrative support, educational assistant, library support and custodian. A jurisdiction technology support person is also housed at the school. Aster School is part of the Open Spaces School Division. The jurisdiction has a relatively small number of students spread across a large geographic area and has experienced a 6% decline of students from 2010 to 2015. It has several colony schools and eight other schools in seven communities. The largest jurisdiction school in Daisy has an enrolment of approximately 350.

***E.4c The Rural Community***

Moon County is mostly a farming/ ranching community. Aster is one of three small hamlets located within 30 kilometers of each other. Because of the strong tradition of working together, the three hamlets and surrounding area are known by the acronym “ABC” - Aster, Bluebell and Cornflower. Aster is the location of a kindergarten to grade 12 school that serves the ABC hamlets and the large rural area. Aster also has a towing service, Alberta Treasury Branch (ATB) agency, hall and post office. It has a few residences. Bluebell is the most developed hamlet with the most residences, a hall, a small general store with a post office and gas station, a playground and ball diamonds. Cornflower is the smallest with no services. The nearest town, Daisy, which provides access to shopping, medical and social services and recreation facilities for the hamlet residents, is located 50 kilometers west of Aster in Moon County.

***E.4d Demographic and Economic Trends***

From the perspective of all participants, Moon County and the hamlets within have experienced rural depopulation directly related to the changing nature of agriculture.

***Demographic Trends***

Moon County’s population has declined slowly over the past ten years. Participants suggest that this decline is due to families having fewer children and the disappearance of small family farms. Large farms, centralized grain handling, and the loss of the rail line have also contributed to population decline.

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The services available in the hamlets have also declined. The remaining farm population is aging and few children are returning to the family farm. The only growing segment of the population is the immigrant farm workers from Ireland, Australia, and Ukraine. They have settled in Aster or on nearby farms. Recently there have been more immigrant families, instead of single men coming to the farms. There are only a few places to rent and resale of existing homes is difficult. There are only a few acreages on which to build as it is expensive to develop sites with water, power and sewage. A participant commented that most people live in the area because of a family connection. She said, “Not a lot of people chose to be here.”

***Economic Trends***

The ABC area includes a few small farms and acreages, but has mostly large corporate farms, religious communities, community pastures, and public land. Outside investors are purchasing land to rent, but do not live in the area. This has resulted in a trend of abandoned farmyards. This is also a frustration for larger ranchers who are located in the area, but can't compete with those who have “deep pockets” from outside the area.

One participant commented that it is hard for many young people to start farming. Some farmers are working longer so their farms are not passing to the next generation. Their sons and daughters are choosing other careers and settling elsewhere, instead of returning to the farm. However, some farm families are third generation and have been good managers and able to survive the economic ups and downs. They have become some of the large farmers in the area. The participant commented, “Kids have gone away and gotten educated, come back to revolutionize and grow the family farms.”

Many people have supplemented farm income with work related to the oil and gas industry. This has also helped young families stay in the area, so the current downturn is troublesome. Besides farming and oil and gas, there is little other employment in the area, except in agri-business or construction. As well, the Open Spaces School Division employs some local people at Aster School. Aster lost its hospital years ago when many of the businesses left town. Even the larger community of Daisy is having difficulty attracting doctors and the community care facility that was planned has been shelved.

***Impact on Aster School***

In the 1960's the population of the school was 300. By the 1980's it had declined to around 140 students and has continued to decline steadily. Over the past five years, the population of Aster School has declined from 61 students to 54. This decline is directly related to the rural depopulation of the area. Despite this decline, the school has maintained grades one to 12 with a private kindergarten. The isolation of the hamlet of Aster has also made it challenging to attract teachers and principals to Aster School. The major issue is a lack of viable living accommodations and amenities.

***E.4e Strategies and Initiatives***

The participants expressed the belief that a quality school and a vibrant community were essential strategies for attracting and retaining the population in the ABC area, and subsequently, student

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enrolment at Aster School. As such, the participants described specific examples of how they worked together to strengthen their communities, and their school.

***Community Leadership***

The story that several participants told the interviewers was about how they hired a new principal. They described how leaders at several levels worked to make a significant change in the pattern of school leadership.

Aster School had a history of high expectations, academic excellence and high transition to post-secondary rates. Participants gave examples of graduates who had successful careers in a number of areas. In recent years, the school had suffered from a lack of consistent leadership in the role of the principal, and had issues with the quality of teaching at some levels. As one participant said, “We had five principals in five years!” Parents and community members realized that restoring a reputation for quality leadership, teaching, and programming was essential for Aster School. As one participant commented, “We were starved for leadership and direction...needed a leader to weave community values into the school.”

Although there was no specific move by the jurisdiction to close the school, community members felt the perceived lack of leadership was putting the school at risk. A participant commented, “I realized that if they didn’t stabilize this, the school would die – parents were fed up and ready to move their kids.”

Community members and parents expressed their concern to the superintendent and requested that he ensure the next principal would be someone who would be a strong advocate for the school, ensure a quality learning environment and would be committed to staying at the school for a reasonable period of time. The superintendent agreed to address the community concerns and worked with the parent council and community leaders to find a suitable principal.

In the meantime, the community recognized that the teacherage next to the school was not in good condition and the village of Aster did not have the amenities that a principal would find attractive for a family. In anticipation of a new principal the School Project Team with parent and community members began to work with Moon County officials, the agriculture society and the Lions Club to provide funds for a new teacherage owned by the community. The location of the new teacherage was the hamlet of Bluebell. It was considered to be the best location in ABC because of its amenities and its proximity to the town of Daisy. As well, a serviced lot was available to put a manufactured home on site in a very short time should a new principal be found.

In late August a call was made from the superintendent to a community member about an excellent candidate for the Aster School principal position. The candidate would be interested in relocating with his five children and wife if there were suitable living accommodations. The superintendent asked the community member if a house could be provided for a new principal and how soon could it be ready. The community member stated it would be done in time for September if the principal accepted the position. Although the timeline was short, the Moon County officials worked with community members to make the home a reality by the end of

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September. Through these efforts the community was able to provide a home at a reduced rental rent.

The community has worked on a beautification of the school and building a playground. It uses the school for fitness and community events. The agriculture society and Lions Club provide ongoing financial support for reading programs and hot lunch or “anything the school wants or needs.” The community supports the students by coaching, donating to whatever cause the students are supporting and attending school events. The gymnasium will fill up with 500 people for just one graduate from the high school. Students like that the community comes to all events and also provides activities for students, like “discing” (a form of indoor curling or shuffleboard) in the community hall in the winter.

Presently, the community is interested in the school’s initiative to start agriculture-based programming at school. They also would like to explore how funding could be used to provide a special allowance or financial incentive to encourage teachers to come to the Moon County area. The community is also interested in loosening the parameters around fundraising to provide support for the school, particularly to support transportation and staffing.

Participants praised local farmers who have hired immigrant farm workers with families as they have brought new people into the community with young children. Participants felt the farmers were actively hiring workers with families, rather than just single workers, and were providing housing in either Aster or on farms within the school catchment area. The decision of these farmers was viewed as supportive of growing the community, and in turn, the school.

***Principal Leadership***

Participants described the changes brought by the new principal and the addition of five new staff members. The principal worked with the staff to focus on mastery learning and meta-cognition strategies to improve learning. He emphasized quality education by modeling quality instruction and supervising teachers, especially videoconferencing instruction. He took action to deal with teachers who were not providing quality instruction and was very direct in dealing with inadequate teaching through the teacher evaluation process. He “rocked the boat” by taking over the instruction of a videoconferencing course in the last three weeks of a course to ensure students had better quality instruction.

The principal has worked with the staff to use the provincial high school redesign to improve delivery of the high school program. As part of high school redesign, teachers instruct for half the time and host tutorials for half the time. He is working with the staff and community to explore the possibilities of agricultural programming and off campus programming for the entire jurisdiction. He has led the school in developing quality videoconferencing programming that has moved Aster School from being a “net receiver” of programming to being a “net sender” of programming. Currently the teachers at Aster School are teaching 30 students in other schools through videoconferencing; the school is quickly becoming a hub for videoconferencing excellence.

One participant commented that the principal understands that it is more than academics that makes a school. Because the school is small, team sports are difficult. Therefore, the principal has



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encouraged individual sports, such as archery and badminton, to provide pride in the school and give students an opportunity to compete on a provincial level. He has also worked to engage the immigrant farm families, particularly the mothers and young children, through the regional learning centre by offering the school facility as a site for adult learning. As one participant commented, “[Principal] is not scared to stand up for the school...he is setting a tone or culture of change....a positive role model....lots of energy....teachers and he want to be here.”

The principal posted a “dream board” in the staff lounge. It is a tangible artifact of the efforts of the staff and community to continue to think differently about how the school can grow and change to meet the needs of learners.

***Jurisdiction Leadership***

The efforts of the principal to improve learning are supported by the Open Spaces School Division. The jurisdiction has refocused on quality teaching and there is a belief that quality of teaching has improved significantly over the past few years. The efforts of the Aster School principal and staff reflect the jurisdiction emphasis on quality. As one participant commented, “The staff is vested in the community. They’re not just doing their time and moving on.”

The jurisdiction recognizes the importance of remote rural schools. The great geographic distances are prohibitive to gathering students in a central location, so it is important to provide a quality education experience within the rural community. There is a belief that access should transcend provincial borders. The jurisdiction has worked to allow students from Saskatchewan who are closer to Aster than to Saskatchewan schools to have access to Aster School.

The jurisdiction has developed a system of shared learning sites through videoconferencing by ensuring a group of schools across the jurisdiction have the same timetables to allow for sharing of courses. They also work with other school jurisdictions on videoconferencing programming to build capacity for small rural schools. The blended approach to videoconferencing ensures that teachers visit the sites they are videoconferencing to at least once a month and that students also have an opportunity to meet each other. Jurisdiction leadership provided an opportunity for Aster to expand its programming through videoconferencing and become a jurisdiction and regional hub. A participant explained, “[Aster School teachers] want to be leaders. They want to pave their own way....Not willing to be doormats to anyone....Not interested in just surviving. They are interested in being leaders!”

***Municipal Leadership***

In an effort to bring rural people back to the area and to support those who choose to remain in the area, community leaders working within the Moon County have developed a number of initiatives. These include economic development partnerships to highlight the advantages of the area, and to provide support to implement business plans. Most efforts have focused on marketing the area and improving services, such as access to connectivity and amenities. Working with the community to provide housing for the principal was a direct example of Moon County support improving amenities for staff. The municipal leaders also recognize that students and their families won’t choose to live in the area if there are limited amenities. To address this, Moon County is working to improve Internet connectivity in the rural area. As one participant

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commented, “Kids won’t come home on weekends because they can’t do their homework because the Internet connectivity isn’t good enough.”

***Collaboration for Learning***

Moon County has several partnerships to deal with population decline. For example, they support programming for adult learning and job training. Some of these programs involve the Aster School, such as a community builders program for adults that brought a speaker to Aster School to talk about rural leadership. Moon County also tries to access any programming or grants that will counteract rural depopulation. However, a participant explained that programs are not always aligned with the rural context. For example, provincial job grant programs stipulate that farmers and rural business owners cannot get funding to train family members. This is frustrating efforts to get young people to return to the family farm or a rural business.

The adult learning centre in Daisy is also a source of support for the ABC community and Aster School. For example, immigrant parents from Ukraine, Mexico, Brazil and South Africa were “disconnected” from the school and the community. The principal worked with the center officials to provide English instruction for some of the immigrant farm families at Aster School. As an activity in the English instruction course, the women had an opportunity to plan meals, go grocery shopping and engage in a cooking program with students. This helped them gain confidence and provided an opportunity for them to interact with students in the school. Their husbands attended evening classes and formed friendships outside of work. As well, a pre-school playgroup is hosted in the school. Mothers attend the classes and bring their children to the playgroup during the day, and so they are making contact with school staff and other community members.

The learning centre also offered an “early years” fair and invited service providers from the area to attend so recent immigrants and others understand their local services (e.g. fire/ police/ ambulance/ optometry/ chiropractic/ public health/ speech/ mental health/ injury prevention/ banks). The fair attracted 50 service providers to Aster School and had an increase of 22 participants in the second year.

These initiatives allowed parents to better connect with the school and brought them into the community. Several participants recognized the importance of breaking barriers and increasing community connections, so new immigrants remain in the rural community. The trend for farmworker immigrants in the ABC area had been to stay long enough to get permanent resident status and then relocate to larger centres for more support and/ or to be with their ethnic community. By welcoming these immigrants into the community through the school, the atmosphere has changed. As a participant described, “Now, with the ESL program, people are not looking to leave....Very happy there....Like small, family-centered atmosphere...Husbands work together and now the spouses know each other, visit and support each other....More like a big family.”

As well, the learning centre is offering high school upgrading through videoconferencing for adults in the region at Aster School. Some people are trying to advance their education since the oil and gas downturn. Access to training in the area will hopefully keep them in the area.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives***E.4f Role of Aster School in Sustaining the Rural Community*

Aster School is viewed as a hub of the ABC hamlets and the rural area. Community leaders take the responsibility of maintaining the school seriously by giving of their time and talents to ensure the quality of the facility and the ability of the school to offer a quality program. They see a connection between the health of the school and the health of the community.

***Impact on Students and Families***

Participants identified a number of ways that Aster School enriches the lives of students and their families. The school provides a solid academic program in a safe environment. Students are engaged in their schooling and take pride in their success. Pride is reflected in the efforts of students and families to work with the community on the beautification of the school. There are high expectations for students. Students develop a good work ethic that translates to success in the workplace and post-secondary. As one participant commented, “Farm kids know how to work.”

Students perceive that a rural upbringing with farm chores and a rural education has advantages. It has taught them time management. They believe Aster School is more personalized as they have more one-on-one time with teachers than they think would be available in a larger school. They believe the metacognition focus was best for the younger students, but the older students like the tutorials in the afternoon. The flexible time provides access to teachers and time to work on projects and homework. They view videoconferencing as a positive way to access high school and post-secondary education. A college provides dual credit courses for high school students through videoconferencing.

Participants acknowledged that students have limited course choices, resources, extra-curricular events and sports teams. They appreciate that they are able to join other small rural schools for presentations at Daisy School, but they are not interested in attending school in Daisy. The bus ride would be even longer and they would lose their community. Despite the limitations, students feel the “trade-off” is worth it because of the closeness and sense of community in the school.

Participants commented on how being in such a small school helps students to learn to be tolerant and respectful, because of the diversity in the community and the school. Some participants felt that outsiders may not realize that diversity exists in rural communities. There was a strong feeling that students learn how to have empathy for differing perspectives, because they have to work and learn together in such a small community. They had no choice if they want friends. Stories were shared that described accepting differences on multiple levels, including age, gender, sexual preferences, culture, ethnicity and political beliefs. For example, one participant commented that the students interact with the different generations because so many activities are multi-generational. The teenagers look after younger students and spend time with seniors. This ability to interact with different generations was cited as a good skill to have as an adult.

***Impact on Aster, Bluebell, Cornflower and the Rural Community***

Participants perceived Aster School as the “true hub” and “pillar” of the ABC community. It is “vital.” It is “owned” by the community – “one continuum.” It brings everyone together from the three hamlets and the rural community through students from these communities and “defines

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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and creates community.” Students described how everyone has many roles. For example, a teacher might also be a neighbour or a parent is a member of the agriculture society or the principal is a member of the Lions Club. This makes the community very tight.

Participants commented on how the school is the place where everything in the community is “played out from birth to death.” The community pulls together through celebrations and through tragedies and the school is often the venue.

The school events have a positive effect on the senior population, as they are engaged in the service organizations as they work to benefit the students, through activities like providing housing for the principal or beautification of the school or by engaging in social activities. Other community members are drawn to the school for fitness or adult learning activities, like fitness boot camp or evening volleyball. A participant commented that the “youthfulness of the community” is generated from the school and the school has helped to build “community connections.”

Because people are willing to travel within the ABC community, ABC has become a close-knit community. The Bluebell, Cornflower and the rural community members drive to Aster School for activities, like the summer fair. The school has enhanced the coming together of the communities because the school atmosphere is welcoming. This openness also extends to the community of Daisy and the larger region. As a participant commented, “[ABC] is a very close knit community. [ABC] people have a mindset of being welcoming so you feel completely comfortable. People smile and say hi to you. It is in their genes – mindset.”

One service that is provided through the school is banking as the elementary students operate a Junior ATB banking branch with the support of the ATB. Many community members, especially the elderly, come to the school once a week to open accounts or make deposits. On the first day the Junior ATB branch opened, \$11,000 was deposited. Community members stop in the staffroom, which serves as a community drop-in space. They come for coffee and to visit as they do their banking.

Participants acknowledged the loss of the school could mean that fewer people would stay in the ABC community. They felt the sense of the ABC community would diminish or splinter. Seniors who lived in Bluebell and do not have grandchildren in the Aster School would probably leave if the school closed. Aster School gives the “sense of purpose” to the community, particularly the agriculture society and the Lions Club. As well, participants felt it was important to retain students in the community or attract them back to the community after their post-secondary training. Students felt that more students would come back to work in agriculture and the oil industry if there were employment opportunities.

Participants commented that children would not automatically go to Daisy if Aster School closed; home school or school another jurisdiction would be options. This would also impact the sense of ABC as a community as families would be drawn into different communities for schooling, shopping or services. One parent commented, “If the school isn’t here, we don’t have a sense of community.”

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Another participant concluded,

When a school closes the whole school community spirit dies....The school is the energy of the community....Everyone is connected through the schools....The school brings optimism to the community....Young people keep you full of life....If school wasn't there it would be a huge blow to the community....Aster School is the anchor for the ABC community.

*E.4g The Future of Aster School and the ABC Hamlets and Moon County*

According to participants, the future of Aster School looks very bright despite the low enrolment. Although community members are willing to drive many kilometers for services, participants are concerned about adding to the bus times of students. Already long bus rides would be intolerable if made longer, especially for younger students. Therefore, participants felt geography plays a role in the viability of the school. However, community pride and community action were cited also as stronger factors in participants' optimism for the future of the school and rural community.

The community and municipal leaders take the responsibility of maintaining Aster School seriously as evidenced by their actions. By giving their time and talents to ensure the quality of the facility and the ability of the school to offer a quality program, they put into action their belief that the school is an important part of community sustainability. Participants see a connection between the health of the school and the health of the community. They recognize the school enrolment is small, but they believe without the school, the ABC and Moon County communities will further erode. As one participant commented when asked about the future of the school and the community, his response was, "Can't disconnect them. Can't draw lines. Short-sighted to not see the interconnections."

One participant illustrated the commitment of families to the school and community by sharing how a loss of students was averted. A group of frustrated parents "demanded" a bus to take their children to Daisy because of a staff issue at Aster School several years ago. When they realized their action would take 12 students from Aster School, they recommitted to the school. Since that time, parents and community members have worked with the jurisdiction to improve the school. At present the school jurisdiction sees Aster as viable school. A participant commented that when a school is viable, there is a sense of "calmness, stability or comfort" for the families in the community; family life is so much better when there is a school.

Finally, participants were united in their belief that leadership, particularly in the role of the principal, is critical to sustaining the school and community. As long as there is an effective principal who is committed to the school, the participants felt the future of the school was positive. This would reflect positively on the sustainability of the community.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.5. Case 5: Forest Glen School, Supporting Indigenous Community******Case Category: Stable-Growing******Grade Configuration: K to 12******E.5a Study Participants***

We interviewed eight adult stakeholders, representing staff, parents, local school jurisdiction officials, and community members from the Forest Glen Indigenous Community, Green Hills School Division and the Forest Glen School. As well, a focus group of seven Forest Glen School students were interviewed.

***E.5b Forest Glen School and Green Hills School Division***

Forest Glen is a kindergarten to grade 12 school with approximately 105 Indigenous students. It has grown from 75 students over the past four years. Most classes are combined grades. The school has a principal, seven teachers, and seven support staff including educational assistants, administrative support, community school liaison, native language instructor, custodians, and cafeteria workers. The school is well maintained with two new detachable classrooms for the high school program. The school has a cafeteria kitchen, gymnasium and science lab in addition to regular classrooms. Most students are bussed to the school while a few live in homes nearby.

Forest Glen School is part of the Green Hills School Division. Green Hills School Division has experienced a 5% growth from 2010 to 2015. Most schools in the jurisdiction, like Forest Glen, are in rural or remote areas.

***E.5c The Rural Community***

Forest Glen Indigenous Community is a large rural community. There is a small hamlet that houses the community administration offices, an early childcare centre, medical centre, post-secondary college offices, gas station, arena and community hall, Forest Glen School and a few homes. Most members of the community live in the rural area on small farms or acreages. The community has a strong tradition of working together to provide services to the community.

***E.5d Demographic and Economic Trends***

The Forest Glen Indigenous Community is a growing community with access to economic opportunities both within the community and in the neighbouring communities.

***Demographic Trends***

The population of the community is growing. At present the membership in the Forest Glen Indigenous Community is approximately 1,500 people, with approximately 700 individuals currently living in the community. The number of individuals living in the community fluctuates as individuals leave for adult post-secondary education, trades training and employment or to access educational programs for their children that are not available at Forest Glen School. They return for employment, affordable housing, or re-connection with family and culture.

***Economic Trends***

There is limited employment in the community, but the region has oil and gas, agriculture, construction, transportation, forestry, and outdoor recreation employment opportunities. The

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Green Hills School Division and Forest Glen Indigenous Community employ some individuals in the community. However, unemployment is high in the community.

Forest Glen Indigenous Community has created jobs in the community through infrastructure projects or hiring local seasonal workers for projects. Participants expressed hope that more opportunities would be available in the future with the planned construction and operation of a seniors' care facility. If employment opportunities are available in the area, individuals prefer to stay in the community.

When individuals seek employment outside of the community it is mostly in oil and gas and forestry. Some are able to commute to work from the community while others have to relocate for periods of employment or training. This causes some movement of individuals to and from the community depending on the economy. The recent downturn in the oil and gas industry has caused some individuals to move back to the community. One community member viewed the economic downturn as a positive opportunity to focus on economic development in the community. She commented, "The economic downturn has made us focus inward and look to community for resources. [We] have tapped into things that have always been here but never realized it."

***Impact on Forest Glen School***

As one participant explained, the school jurisdiction tries to use the local workforce for teaching, educational support, maintenance and transportation to benefit Forest Glen School and support the community. It works to everyone's advantage when they can hire locally. It decreases costs to the jurisdiction and unemployment in the community plus it provides a connection between the school and the community. For maintenance projects, in particular, it helps cut down on "windshield time" from the jurisdiction office providing better service to the school. As well, the local individuals have a vested interest in keeping the school open and functioning effectively as the school is a major employer.

The school enrolment has followed a similar trend of growth as the community. There is a segment of the student population that is quite transient as parents seek training or employment outside the community or return to the community during downturns in the economy or at the conclusion of training.

***E.5e Strategies and Initiatives***

The strategies and initiatives described by participants emphasized the contribution of both school personnel and the community. Efforts were focused on improving the quality of education and ensuring students were supported and engaged in schooling. The community provided additional support to school and jurisdiction efforts.

***Principal Leadership***

Participants recognized that the principal has brought stability to the school. There had been several principals in the school over a period of years. A few years ago one of the senior teachers who had attended the school as a student stepped forward to take the role of principal. She had returned to the community and married a community member; she had worked as an educational

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

assistant and then went on to complete her Bachelor and Master's degrees in education to become a teacher and then principal. Participants recognize that she has stabilized the school and worked well with the community because of her skill and deep connection with the community. The principal has been a valuable liaison to the school jurisdiction because of her hard work and understanding of the community.

***Teachers and Elders***

Both professionally trained teachers and Elders are important teachers in the Indigenous community. Elders share their knowledge of the culture and history of the Indigenous people, as well as practical skills. Professional teachers address the academic program but also can be role models for students, particularly when they come from the community. One participant commented,

Teachers and school support staff provide mentorship, inspiration, and role models for people to be productive with their life. Our history hasn't been great. My dad is a residential school survivor. The school shows people that you can move on with a career, life, job that you really enjoy.... [The]Community will rise above issues of the past with the help of the school." ~ Case participant, Forest Glen School.

Participants recognize the strength of Forest Glen School is that it has three Indigenous teachers, Indigenous support staff and a principal all closely connected to the Forest Glen Indigenous Community. As part of succession planning and to ensure there are Indigenous teachers who may return to their communities to teach, the Green Hills School Division has played an active role in working with Indigenous communities, the Alberta Government and post-secondary institutions to deliver an Indigenous teacher training program. In 2014, the program graduated 24 students. The program continues to exist, but there is no funding support to sponsor students.

Indigenous Elders come to the school to share their expertise in culture, including cooking, storytelling, and language. For example, one Elder is a poet and speaks Cree. Some participants felt Elder sharing could happen more frequently and would benefit the students. However, because the school can't afford to pay Elders an honorarium, teachers are reluctant to ask the Elders. An honorarium acknowledges and respects an Elder's expertise and contribution. To fill this gap, the Forest Glen Indigenous Community provides additional opportunities to learn about the culture and includes youth through community activities.

Although many teachers choose to stay in the community, participants also recognized that Green Hills School Division tends to be a teacher training ground for new teachers who are seeking experience. Participants believe these new teachers have a lot to offer. New teachers participate in the jurisdiction orientation program, which focuses on cultural understanding and jurisdiction initiatives. Participants also recognize the importance of providing good housing and including the teachers in community activities. New teachers stay for an average of three years.

Some Forest Glen teachers stay for more than a few years or return to the school after teaching elsewhere. In fact, two of the teachers returned to Forest Glen after experiencing layoffs in their home province. They never considered applying to another school in Alberta, because they enjoyed teaching at Forest Glen and living in the community previously. Participants believe that



**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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these teachers from outside the community combined with the experience and the skills of the teachers from the community have provided a strong teaching team at Forest Glen.

***Jurisdiction Programming Initiatives***

Forest Glen School participates in two major school jurisdiction initiatives that focus on literacy and attendance. As well, the jurisdiction supports courses related to culture such as Indigenous Studies and language. There is a Cree language course taught by one of the teachers from the community. The school has implemented these initiatives in a manner that works with community and family values.

***Literacy***

The focus on literacy is mostly with the younger children with the use of the Daily 5<sup>11</sup> literacy structure. Participants believe they are making gains at the elementary level and need to extend the program into junior and senior high school. The literacy program also includes a component for adults with adult computer nights once a week.

***High School Attendance***

Participants recognize that regular school attendance, particularly in high school, is a challenge. Although there are 24 students registered in high school, only a handful attend daily; the rest attend once or twice a week. Participants cited family and cultural issues, unemployment and poverty, social media influence and drugs or alcohol abuse as aggravating factors in student engagement and attendance.

Forest Glen School has tried a number of attendance incentives, but they have not had consistent success. Recently, they have implemented a new attendance initiative that includes home visits and engaging social services. They have a monthly attendance assembly and students' names are put into the draw for some "awesome" prizes.

"Social promotion" or advancing students to the next grade to keep them with their peers is often done at the school. However, some teachers indicated that an unintended consequence of social promotion in elementary and junior high grades, for students who have not met the grade level outcomes, is that they struggle with course content in higher grades. This becomes problematic when students have difficulty meeting the outcomes of high school credits and begin to fail individual courses, further discouraging them and affecting their attendance.

Despite the difficulties of high school attendance, all participants felt it was important to maintain a high school in the community. One participant said it is so much better than before when there was no high school. If there was no school in the community, then the high school completion rate would be even lower. As one student stated, "Lots of people would not go to school if there was no school here."

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<sup>11</sup> A scheduled learning activity where students have a choice of five activities to work independently toward their personal literacy goals. Read to self, work on writing, read to someone, listen to reading, or word work.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Student Engagement and Authentic Learning***

Although Forest Glen aims to provide a full high school program, it is difficult to offer the different streams of core subjects or a variety of complementary subjects. Teachers often teach several streams and grade levels at once in high school. Students find it hard when they are the only student in a course or grade, and the teacher is focused on the other students in the room. Some students take courses through the Alberta Distance Learning Consortium; most are successful if they work on the course under the supervision of a classroom teacher.

Students describe the school as a very positive learning environment where they get to know students from other grade levels. They appreciate the small class sizes and access to teachers. Many students are drawn to the school to socialize or to use the Internet. They appreciate the breakfast and hot lunch programs. They cite Career and Technology Studies [CTS], math, science and Indigenous Studies, especially those activities that related to “living on the land”, as classes they like. Students indicate they have aspirations to complete high school and post-secondary training, even if they leave school to work for a time and then return to school.

The need for grounding student learning in authentic experiences is illustrated by the difference in the way that videoconferencing was accepted by the students in contrast to their engagement in a week-long focus on CTS. The jurisdiction offered courses through videoconferencing for high school students, but it was not effective as students were not engaged and completion rates were low. In contrast, students participate in CTS courses enthusiastically, as they are viewed as practical, fun and interesting. The CTS courses are offered only a few times a year for a week at a time and students are able to complete course requirements quickly over a short time. The courses focus on skills the students find valuable and interesting such as: small engine repair, moccasin making, sewing, cooking and carpentry. High school attendance is almost perfect during the CTS week. As well, one participant observed that students also benefited from a provincial skills competition as it provided another practical experience.

The jurisdiction office staff, principal and school staff are aware of the need for more authentic learning and are working to provide more hands-on learning opportunities. However, they feel they can only offer courses that the teachers are skilled in teaching. They decided on a weeklong CTS focus a few times a year to access expertise outside the school. Because they are teaching many combined courses and grades, the planning to integrate experiential learning into core subjects is a challenge. School Board officials hope that high school redesign may provide more flexible programming for students, perhaps by bridging to the core subjects from a foundation of authentic, practical experience. There is very little “hands on,” experiential learning in core courses, even though that is what students describe as the most engaging learning.

***Funding***

One participant explained that the provincial funding model doesn't support schools like Forest Glen. In particular, funding based on course completion and 35 credits earned per year disadvantages schools that struggle with high school attendance, course completion and a transient school population. Many of the Green Hills School Division high school students earn only 10 to 12 credits per year. It is difficult to provide adequate instructors or programming with the funding model and support for small schools like Forest Glen.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Although the school was clean and tidy, it is an older facility that some participants felt is inadequate for modern programming. It took a long time to get much needed high school classrooms. There are no CTS facilities. As one participant commented, “We are unique. We don’t get the same treatment as schools in other municipalities. We are isolated and forgotten. We had to beg and plead for our portables. We could use a new school.”

***Life Long Learning***

High school students have aspirations to seek post-secondary education even though some students were frustrated with access to high school courses or course content. Although many students may have difficulty with high school completion, several participants commented on how the school provides a stimulus for further education, as students mature. One participant viewed the school as a symbol of hope for the future.

Many participants acknowledged community members who may not have completed high school, but who returned as adults for post-secondary trades training and university degrees. Some have also become entrepreneurs in the community. Because of the support of post-secondary institutions, government programs and industry, adults are able to access educational programming and support both while living in the community or going to urban areas. Several of the participants recounted their personal experiences or experiences of relatives of attending post-secondary training later in life. Participants felt these role models of life-long learning were important to encourage students that education was available even after high school. In particular, one participant described a partnership with oils sands companies and Indigenous communities that supported trades training through the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Her sons upgraded their high school mathematics and both received trades tickets, one as an instrument technician and the other as an electrician.

***Supporting Parent Choice***

The philosophy that guides the Green Hills School Division is to put student learning and parent choice first when making funding decisions. Putting student learning and parent choice first can put a strain on budgets and may mean lower enrolment in some jurisdiction schools as some parents choose to have their children attend a school outside the jurisdiction.

The school and jurisdiction work to make transitions to other schools seamless so students are not disadvantaged, but this is difficult especially when students move out of the Green Hills School Division schools. They ensure that when students return to Forest Glen, the program is adapted to where they are in their programming. This involves providing extra support for those students who require assistance.

Parents may choose to move to an urban area or have their child board with family or friends so their child can attend a larger urban school and access more programming and services. Green Hills School Division provides a home boarding allowance for those students who cannot complete the courses they require in their local school. The provincial boarding home allowance does not cover the entire home boarding expense. The school jurisdiction has also made a decision to increase the home boarding allowance where there is no high school because parents have no choice.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

Although most parents may not be involved in volunteering in the school, the parents are very active in supporting their individual children in the school. Work experience and Registered Apprenticeship Program [RAP] placements are hard to arrange and only happen with the support of parents. One parent drove her child to a neighbouring community every day so he could complete his RAP program.

***Supportive Community***

The local school advisory board works with the principal and Green Hills School Division to govern the Forest Glen School. Participants perceive there is a good relationship between the Forest Glen Indigenous Community leaders, the local school advisory board and the school jurisdiction. However, there is an undercurrent of lack of trust grounded in the history of colonialism and residential schools and the current issues around land, resources and self-determination. As one participant explained, the Forest Glen Indigenous Community leaders don't necessarily drop into the school or take the first step to engage with the school, but they are always supportive if approached by the principal for support.

Participants recognize that parents may not be able to pay for extra costs, so the school often appeals to the Forest Glen Indigenous Community leaders for support rather than ask parents for fees or engage in community fundraising. When fundraising is done it is usually selling something the students have made, like aprons. As one participant commented, "How are you going to fundraise if nobody has any jobs and money?"

The Forest Glen Indigenous Community covers the costs for school supplies, special events, field trips or the attendance initiative, and for specialty equipment like graphing calculators. As well, the Forest Glen Indigenous Community hosts community events and invites the school to participate, particularly cultural events that involve the Elders of the community. The Forest Glen Indigenous Community also has Family and Community Support Services, recreation programming, pre-school, driver training and youth summer employment for youth outside of school. For example, during the summer employment program, the youth are hired to paint and do yard care for the community.

***E.5f Role of Forest Glen in Sustaining the Rural Community******Impact on Students and Families***

Parents generally feel that Forest Glen School provides a safe place for their children and a place where they can interact with adults in a positive learning environment. Parents would be very uncomfortable to send their children, particularly the younger children, to a school outside of the community. As well, the school is welcoming to parents and encourages them to be part of their child's education. Unfortunately, not all parents are comfortable volunteering or visiting the school and may only come when they have a concern, but they are always welcome at the school. As one participant commented, "School is the best and most productive and stable, structured seven hours of these kids' day. They get two meals, get Internet, get to play [and] have positive role models."

**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Impact on the Forest Glen Indigenous Community***

Participants noted that while the importance of Forest Glen School to the community is indisputable, it is complicated because of the concern that a colonial or Western schooling model can disconnect students from their culture. For some participants, it feels like the school and community are quite distant and the school is run by an outside agency. Despite this uneasy tension, participants acknowledge the community is represented by the local advisory school board in the governance of the school. All participants spoke about the importance of education, particularly for employment and “getting on with life.” As well, the role of the school as a major employer in the community is seen as critical for the financial stability of the community.

Participants said the community does not hold a lot of community events at the school because they have their own hall, so there is a sense of separation from the school. However, they noted that when the hall was being renovated community gatherings and meetings were held at the school. It was good to have community in the school and the school perceived as part of the community. They were optimistic that this might carry on in the future. As one participant commented, “It would be a lonelier community without the school.”

A few participants did see the school as a hub of the community where parents, students and community could gather around activities that involve youth. They described events such as Christmas concerts or when students cook supper for the Elders as times when the community came to the school. One participant described how it is healthy for everyone when the Elders come to the school. They engage with the younger people and share their expertise. It gives Elders a sense of purpose to teach the younger people the Indigenous culture and language. Because many students are bussed they don’t socialize on the weekends with school friends, so the school is a gathering place for them, in addition to community events.

***E.5g The Future of Forest Glen School and the Forest Glen Indigenous Community***

The future of Forest Glen School and Forest Glen Indigenous Community is stable. The school and the community are quite separate, but they are supportive of each other in sustaining education and the Indigenous culture. Because the community population is limited to the Indigenous families that are part of the community, the school does not draw new people to the community. However, it is an amenity that encourages members of the Indigenous community to stay or return. The population is experiencing slow internal growth so it is estimated that the school enrolment will remain stable or grow slowly.

Resource sector employment for individuals in the community is one of the biggest factors affecting the community, so the Forest Glen Indigenous Community has made efforts to stabilize employment with community infrastructure projects and other employment opportunities. Participants praised the Forest Glen Indigenous Community leaders for providing work to keep people in the community busy, especially during the economic downtime and seasonal layoffs. The school is part of that employment stabilization. One participant commented, “The people are our biggest resource and as long as we keep the people, we’ll have what we need.”

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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Despite the difficulties posed by high unemployment, participants noted an increase in community pride that was reflected in how the community looked and the services and activities in the community. The community has well maintained public infrastructure and homes. Participants were optimistic. The community is very self-sufficient and proud as they care for one another. One participant highlighted this observation with the comment, “We don’t have or need a food bank.”

Although the participants recognize that their school has challenges in its funding, educational programming and social issues, they are optimistic about the future of the school. Without the school, participants felt families would keep their children at home or leave the community for education, rather than bus their children to another community. Keeping the family together in the community is important to participants. The Green Hills School Division recognizes the importance of the school to the community and is committed to supporting the school.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****E.6. Case 6: NS Villages Elementary/ Jr. High School, Reconfiguration Strengthens Community*****Case Category: Stable-Growing****Grade Configuration: K to 5 and 6 to 9****E.6a Study Participants**

We interviewed 14 adult stakeholders, representing staff, parents, elected officials, and community members from Snowy County, River Valley Indigenous Community, Mountain School Division, NS Villages Elementary School and NS Villages Junior High School. As well, a focus group of six Junior High students were interviewed.

**E.6b The Village Schools and Mountain School Division**

NS Villages Elementary and NS Villages Junior High are located in Mountain School Division. The elementary school is located in North Village and the junior high is located in South Village. Their shared name of “NS Villages” reflects their locations and their shared purpose to educate the kindergarten to grade nine students in this rural area. At the time of the interviews, the schools had been open in their new configuration for six months.

NS Villages Elementary has 125 students in pre-kindergarten to grade five with a principal and vice principal, six teachers, 15 support staff, including administrative support, educational assistants, and custodians. The school is a well-maintained school with specialty rooms suited to an elementary school.

NS Villages Junior High has 88 students in grades six to nine with a principal and vice principal and four teachers, and eight support staff including administrative support, educational assistants, and custodians. The school was modernized to accommodate the junior high school program. In grade ten students attend Snowy Composite High School in the town of Snowy 45 kilometers southeast of South Village.

Mountain School Division is located in the town of Snowy. From 2010 to 2015, the School Division experienced a 2% growth in student enrolment. It has many schools, including several religious community schools and one alternative school.

**E.6c The Rural Community**

North Village and South Village are located on a rural highway ten kilometers apart in Mountain School Division. Acreages, family farms, corporate farms and camping areas surround the villages. There is some oil and gas activity and a gas complex. Between the villages is NS Villages Park, a recreation area that is maintained and used by members of both villages and the rural community. There is a popular tourist and recreation area 45 kilometers to the west. To the east is the River Valley Indigenous Community.

North Village has a population of approximately 290. It has postal service, a community library, church, a few small businesses, including a restaurant and a small food manufacturing business. There has been some recent development of playground and splash park amenities in the village.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

South Village has a population of approximately 190. There is a community hall, post office, church, a few small businesses and a general store.

### *E.6d Demographic and Economic Trends*

Lack of employment opportunities adversely affects demographic make-up of the villages and surrounding rural area.

#### ***Demographic Trends***

Snowy County has experienced more than twenty years of stagnant population growth and only slow population growth in recent years. One participant noted that while Alberta's population has doubled since the late 1970's, the County has fewer residents than it did in 1977. As a result the County is working to bring additional services to the rural residents and village, including high speed Internet and improved amenities in an effort to attract residents.

The North Village population has been slightly larger than South Village's for many years. Despite having low mill rates and low utility costs in comparison to other Alberta villages, residents have not been attracted to the area. At the time of this study there was a provincial viability study in process in South Village to determine whether it should move to hamlet status. Although the number of households has remained the same in South Village, there are fewer people per household and more weekend or vacation residences than previously. There are already 14 hamlets in the County, so there has been a trend of villages moving to hamlet status over many years. The culture of villages is also changing as the population is aging. Some of the Indigenous people have chosen to live in the villages, particularly in North Village, rather than in the River Valley Indigenous Community.

#### ***Economic Trends***

Most of the residents in the villages and the rural community are either employed in agriculture, agri-business, education, wind energy or at the gas complex. A food manufacturing plant in North Village is a major employer. In a recent shift in production, the plant worked closely with the Village Council to ensure that the plant didn't close, but it has downsized its workforce significantly. Both the villages and the rural community are affected by the downsizing of the workforces in the wind energy industry and gas complex. There is concern that the gas complex will close in the future. Some people work from home via the Internet, commute daily to larger neighbouring towns or commute weekly to the city or coalmines in British Columbia. The school jurisdiction is a significant employer in both villages.

North Village has a strong economic development committee and South Village is planning to form an economic development committee. North Village has already looked at ideas to diversify the village economy by attracting light industry, working with existing industry, expanding tourism, bringing in a gas station and working on beautification and recreation facilities. They have installed a new playground and a splash park to attract visitors and community.

Farms and ranches are getting larger, especially as corporate farms, religious communities and local large family farms expand near North Village. South Village has more small family farms in the surrounding rural area than North Village. However, in both communities, local farmers



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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

have difficulty expanding due to the rising cost of land. Although the farm community is aging, young third and fourth generation farm families have returned to the farms, acreages or villages to be near grandparents and to connect to a “rural lifestyle and family values.” These young families are smaller than previous generations. The parents find it difficult to earn a living on the farm and often have to choose off farm work. As well there are a few immigrant families with children who have moved to the area for work in agriculture.

***Impact on the Village Schools***

The impact of rural depopulation due to larger farms, smaller families and lack of employment opportunities, has been the main cause of decline in enrolment in the village schools. Since the 1970’s the population of the schools has fluctuated somewhat depending on the demographics in the villages and rural community and the inclusion of Indigenous students, but the long-term trend has been declining enrolment.

There was a time when both villages had high schools and were “arch rivals” in sports. In the 1970’s as the school populations declined and the South Village School was in disrepair, the Mountain School Board decided to close South Village and move the elementary and junior high students to North Village School. The high school students from both schools would attend Snowy Composite High School. In the 1980’s a South Village community member who was the member of the legislature for the area championed the rebuilding of South Village School and a new school was opened in the village.

During the 1990’s the South Village School struggled to maintain a viable population while North Village School continued to be stable because of the growing number of Indigenous students. Indigenous enrolment grew from 50% to 70% of the student population. After dropping to 45 students in 2002, South Village also invited Indigenous students. However, there was still a fluctuation in enrolment and overall declines. During this time, the principals discussed reconfiguring the schools to make a junior high in North Village and an elementary in South Village. However, that solution was not implemented at the time. Both schools valued their junior high sports programs and maintaining pre-kindergarten to grade nine schools in their respective communities.

***E.6e Strategies and Initiatives***

Although School Board and the Village and County Councils were supportive of each other’s efforts, the participants did not identify specific efforts to work together on strategies or initiatives to sustain the school or community. The story of the Mountain School Board’s reconfiguration of the village schools was the main strategy that all participants pointed to when discussing the impact of schools on rural communities and sustainability of the community. Inclusion of Indigenous students, funding and staffing were also discussed in providing good programming for students. Finally, the efforts to support the communities at working together were also noted by participants.

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**Data: Case Study Narratives*****Reconfiguration of the Village Schools***

The reconfiguration of the schools in NS Villages was the major strategy employed through the leadership of the Mountain School Board to maintain a school in each village during a time of fiscal restraint. The North Village and South Village both had kindergarten to grade nine schools named after their respective villages. Prior to reconfiguration, South Village School had 87 students and recently a relatively stable population, while North Village School had 137 students, but a declining student population. A few years earlier, the reverse was true and South Village School had been experiencing a declining enrolment and nearly had to close as a result. South Village stabilized their enrolment by opening their doors to students from River Valley Indigenous Community.

***School Board Leadership***

The Board approached the principals and community with a plan to deal with the overall issue of viability of both schools. The Board believed that given the enormity of looming budget pressures, they had to act swiftly. Reconfiguring the village schools was a strategy to stabilize enrolment and ensure there would be a viable school in each village.

Events happened quickly. On the Wednesday before Spring break, the principals were told the schools would be reconfigured for the Fall Term to keep both schools viable. After the Spring break, parents and community were invited to public consultation on how the schools would be reconfigured. The meetings regarding the reconfiguration were well attended by the community. The County and Village municipal officials were not involved in the discussion but were aware of the process. At the end of the process the municipal governments were pleased that the Board had been able to maintain schools in both villages.

In an effort to stabilize the fluctuating school enrolment, the village schools were reconfigured from kindergarten to grade nine schools into a pre-kindergarten to grade five school in North Village and a grade six to nine school in South Village. The decision was based mostly on the suitability of the facilities, the larger number of elementary-aged students in North Village, and minimizing the impacts of bussing.

Once the decision was made, the school and jurisdiction staff developed plans to ensure a smooth transition. If the students transitioned well, then parents and the community would also make a good transition. The name NS Villages was deliberately chosen for the two schools to reflect the names of both North and South Villages and the recreational area, NS Villages Park, which is situated between the two villages.

***Response to Reconfiguration***

Most participants reported having adjusted well, even though some participants would like to go back to the way it had been. Participants knew that not all students, staff, parents and community members were in agreement with the reconfiguration decision as some felt they had “lost their school.” Some parents felt it was an advantage for the junior high schools to be separate so they could focus on programming for that age group, while others missed the opportunity to have their younger and older children in one school. Some people were concerned with the loss of identity in the community, particularly as older members of the community had strong ties to the local sports teams. The proposal was met with distrust by some of the older community members as it

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

was seen as the first step to the closure of both schools. Because there had been fluctuation of enrolment, the senior members of the community hoped both villages would have increased enrollment again. However, the participants noted this was not likely given the declining school age population.

The North Village citizens felt that South Village had gotten the “better deal” as their school was more “in trouble.” They were upset that South Villages was being “rescued” and would also get the junior high sports team in their village. Although there was a sense that North Village could maintain its enrolment, the enrolment trends indicated that both schools would see enrolment declines over time. The reconfiguration idea had gone back and forth over the years with one or other of the schools who was experiencing low enrolment initiating the discussion.

The participants agreed the process was stressful and seemed rushed. The employees in the schools felt stressed about the number of unknowns even though they knew their employment was secure. However, most participants felt there had been good communication about the logic of the reconfiguration and in the end agreed with the plan. For example, one parent noted that she attended the public meetings and voiced her support for it. Her son would have had a very small class without the re-configuration. She felt it was mostly the senior community that was against it. Another parent noted that reconfiguration was the best thing that could have happened to her family because the enrolment has stabilized. She felt being involved with a better sports program was a benefit since it would make the transition to high school easier as her child would already know a lot of people. Even a parent who was still against the reconfiguration acknowledged that his child had adjusted well and had made a “very good new” friend. He felt the children from both communities got along very well, but he still felt he lost his school and his connection to his community through his children.

As a result of the re-configuration, very few parents chose schools in other communities, but some Indigenous parents in North Village did choose to send their children to the school in their Indigenous community rather than make the transition to a new junior high school in South Village. Board officials recognized that they did not involve the Indigenous community as much as they should have in the public consultation process and this resulted in some problems around bussing. However, they continue to have more requests to attend the two village schools from Indigenous families than they can accommodate.

Bussing and travel continued to be an issue for some students and families. The reconfiguration was not smooth for all students, particularly for younger students, who had to take a bus out of their village or had a longer route. The Board committed to keep bus routes less than one hour. For some students, attending extra-curricular activities is difficult because parents aren’t able to come to the school if they are in a different village. “Juggling between two schools” is a challenge for parents with children in both schools.

***Impact on Elementary Students***

At the time of the reconfiguration, the majority of elementary students were the least affected because most of the elementary students live in North Village, so they remained at their village school. Those students who were from the South Village had the opportunity to have more friends in their age group. With the additional students, students were no longer in combined

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

grades. The building was also well suited to elementary students and had space for multipurpose rooms and additional programming.

***Impact on Junior High Students***

The most significant gain seemed to be for the junior high students. The junior high students adapted well and even those students who initially had concerns felt the move had been good for them. A participant noted the junior high students separated themselves into their “village groups” on the first day, but blended happily shortly after. The experience had been positive and students settled into the school and enjoyed new friends, better access to teachers, more equipment, new sport team names and uniforms, more complementary subjects, and specialist teachers.

Participants noted that there is a new community spirit emerging, perhaps because of the success of the new junior high sport teams that both communities could support. The students felt the old rivalries of the former sports teams is gone, and is a subject of jokes since they now play on the same team. The fact that their sports team is winning and that they all will transition to high school teams in a few years anyway seems to have erased the old team loyalties. One participant commented, “We thought it would be hard for [North Village] students to change teams but in the end it didn’t matter since they were on a strong team and winning for a change. It’s just a name! You have to change teams and names when you go to [Snowy High] in grade ten anyhow.”

The students had wondered if student council elections would reflect village loyalties, but this did not happen. The students admitted the transition had been a bit “shaky” as it took the teachers awhile to get organized and for the students to adjust to new teachers. One participant noted she was worried, but now was wondering what all the fuss was about.

Finally, with minor renovations, the school facilities were well suited to the grade levels at each village school providing dedicated subject or grade rooms with more programming and extra-curricular opportunities.

***Inclusion of Indigenous Students***

Although the inclusion of Indigenous students has been vital to the stability of the schools, participants recognized this was not always met with support. In the past the inclusion of the Indigenous students was viewed by some as a “shock” to the strong family-based culture of the community. Some parents in both village schools pushed back because they felt the culture of their school was changing from one with a strong academic and sports focus to one with issues of absenteeism, discipline, social problems and lower academics. As well, many of the families shared the same religious affiliation, which was a strong factor in the school and community interaction. Over the years there was a growing recognition that the inclusion of the Indigenous students provided stability to the schools and enriched the school environment and community. As one participant commented, “Without [Indigenous students] we would lose our schools even faster.”

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

One Indigenous parent explained that some of the neighbouring River Valley Indigenous Community families have returned from the city because of high rents, urban problems, lack of employment or a desire to return to family and culture while others have never left their community. By living in the Indigenous community, their children are part of their own culture, can learn about their culture and have friends in the Indigenous community, but some parents may decide to send their children to the village schools to access alternative educational opportunities for their children. Some Indigenous families choose the village schools, for similar reasons to the residents of the villages and rural communities – multigenerational ties, academic standards, educational resources, one to one instruction, small class sizes, access to sports and activities, supportive family oriented environment, safe and caring environment, responsive administration and teachers, alignment with family values, and location of the school.

Presently in the schools, there is a concerted effort to ensure Indigenous students have appropriate programming that is respectful of their culture. The Indigenous liaison worker provides support for Indigenous students and families and help teachers provide programming. Both village schools work with the Indigenous liaison worker to develop criteria for Indigenous enrolment and programming. This ensures there is a good fit with the school and the program for the Indigenous students and their families.

Although there has not been a revision to the agreement with the Indigenous Community since the 1980's, Mountain School Division is working with the Indigenous leaders on a new agreement. The River Valley Indigenous Community does not cap the number of students who may attend Mountain School Division schools and support "Schools of Choice" for all their students. The limiting factor for Indigenous student enrolment is the capacity of the village schools.

***Funding***

The Mountain School Division has a centralized approach to funding to ensure equitable support for small schools. The village schools meet the criteria for small schools by necessity funding, and for an additional subsidy from the Board. Most students attend the village schools, but there are a small number of families in the North Village area who have chosen home schooling. If Mountain School Division families choose to send their children to a school outside their school catchment area, they must take their children to the closest bus stop of the chosen school and pay a \$200 transportation fee. Few families choose this option. The River Valley Indigenous Community families can access a bussing service through a bussing cooperative to allow families to exercise their "School of Choice" option.

***Human Resources***

Providing a professional, stable teaching force is a strategy the Mountain School Board employs to ensure quality education at all schools. Approximately 50% of the teachers live in their school communities. Teachers have strong roots in the community through family connections and athletics. Many former students become teachers and return to coach their former teams. Both village schools have very stable staffing and they have no difficulty attracting and retaining quality staff. Parents and students cited the willingness of teachers to provide one to one support and the expertise of teachers, particularly in providing both academic and specialized

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

programming. To emphasize the dedication and quality of the staff, one participant mentioned that during a labour action, teachers did not withdraw services because they did not want to stop coaching.

***Community Working Together***

Despite the rivalry between the two villages and the close-knit nature of each community, the villages do work well together. The villages do some events together such as community gatherings in one of the villages or in the NS Villages Park. As well, they share a fire department, library services, village administrator, and responsibility for the shared park. In the past they had a common agriculture society. The municipal governments of the villages and County have not engaged with the schools or Board in strategic planning. Rather the schools and Board focus on the viability of the schools, the families from the Indigenous community engage with the schools through their children, and the municipal governments focus on their mandates.

The community is supportive of the schools in the traditional areas, such as participating as coaches, helping with playground fundraising, and sharing community facilities. For the most part, the biggest connection between the village schools and the community is through the churches. The schools use the church facilities and vice versa. The village schools are welcoming to the seniors and Indigenous Elders. Through the seniors and Elders there is strong connection to the larger community. One participant explained how the first row of seats for the Christmas pageant is reserved for seniors, “It’s not a school pageant. It’s a community pageant.”

Reconfiguration is viewed by some participants as a strategy to bring the larger community together. One participant hoped that the communities would get to know each other as families travel to both villages and friendships are formed. Another participant felt the reconfiguration has hastened the process of the community working together more. The community will cooperate more and the schools will create a bond between the communities. She cited the example of the two village recreation boards coordinating to build complimentary assets in the community and a common playgroup. She felt the reconfiguration eliminated the sports rivalry that was keeping the communities apart.

***E.6f Role of the Village Schools in Sustaining Their Rural Communities***

Participants agreed that schools have a significant impact on students and families and the broader community. The schools sustain the social and cultural identities of the rural communities and play a role in the economic development of villages and the surrounding rural area.

***Impact on Students and Families***

When the NS Village Junior High School students came to speak to the Mountain School Division Board, after the reconfiguration, they delivered a positive message. Despite their trepidation about their new school, they felt the program and facilities were better. They have more access to programming and friends, yet they still have a rural school experience. There had been a concern that some families would opt to send their children to a school in the town of Snowy since their children would be going to the community for high school anyway. That concern did not materialize. Although bussing and the inconvenience of having students in two

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**Data: Case Study Narratives**

schools remained a concern for some families, they were united in their support for their children's rural education. The opportunities for their children to connect with community members and the educational benefits of the reconfigured village schools outweighs personal concerns about tradition and village loyalty to sports teams.

***Impact on NS Villages and Rural Area***

The social and cultural connection to groups in the community was cited as the major impact of having the schools in the village. A participant recognized the positive relationship between the health of the school and the health of the community. He felt there was an expectation from communities and Alberta Education that schools contribute to the life of the community.

Both schools engage with seniors in the community. The seniors, including Indigenous Elders are school supporters, but are also beneficiaries of events that provide them with social engagement. The Christmas concert, pancake breakfast, sporting events, craft fair and dance performances were cited as events that draw all members of the community, including the Indigenous community to the schools. These events enrich the lives of all members of the community and provide a gathering place for community. A participant commented, "The school and the sports teams give the community a sense of identity, history and heritage."

Participants viewed the presence of professionals in the community who are employed at the school and the opportunity for employment in the schools as important to the economic viability of the community. A community member commented, "The staff of the schools live locally, and shop locally. They contribute to the community."

Community use of the schools is viewed as an efficient use of a public facility and adds to the community amenities in the villages. For example, adults come to the schools to use technology because of the high-speed connectivity or play evening sports. Participants expressed concern that property values would drop, particularly in the South Village if the schools closed. The schools are seen as an economic driver because they are "draws to the community."

***E.6g The Future of the Village Schools and Community***

Most participants viewed the future of the village schools and communities as positive with a "very bright future" with some exceptions. One participant recognized that the stabilization of the schools was related to the population of the villages and rural areas. If the population of school age children fell, the schools would be challenged again with funding and program issues. He doubted whether the villages would be able to sustain themselves into the future without the presence of the schools. Another participant felt the next step would be the closure of both schools as rural depopulation would continue. School closures in turn would hasten depopulation of the area. There was a concern that the schools could not rely on the Indigenous community to stabilize the schools as they may choose to send their children to Indigenous community schools.

In contrast to these concerns, the Mountain School Division demonstrates commitment to keeping schools open and the Board has only closed schools in the past when parents decided to send their children to other schools. This happened years ago when parents chose to quit sending their children to a small school even though the Board was willing to keep it open. School

**Data: Case Study Narratives**

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officials are hopeful that the reconfiguration will stabilize the enrolment in the village schools for many years.

In general, there was hope amongst participants that young families would be attracted to the area and the population of the schools and the area would grow. Students are optimistic that the schools and the villages will do well. One participant even hoped there would be so much growth it would be necessary to open both schools in their original configurations of kindergarten to grade nine.



## Discussion

### F. Discussion

#### F.1. Factors, Mechanisms, Processes

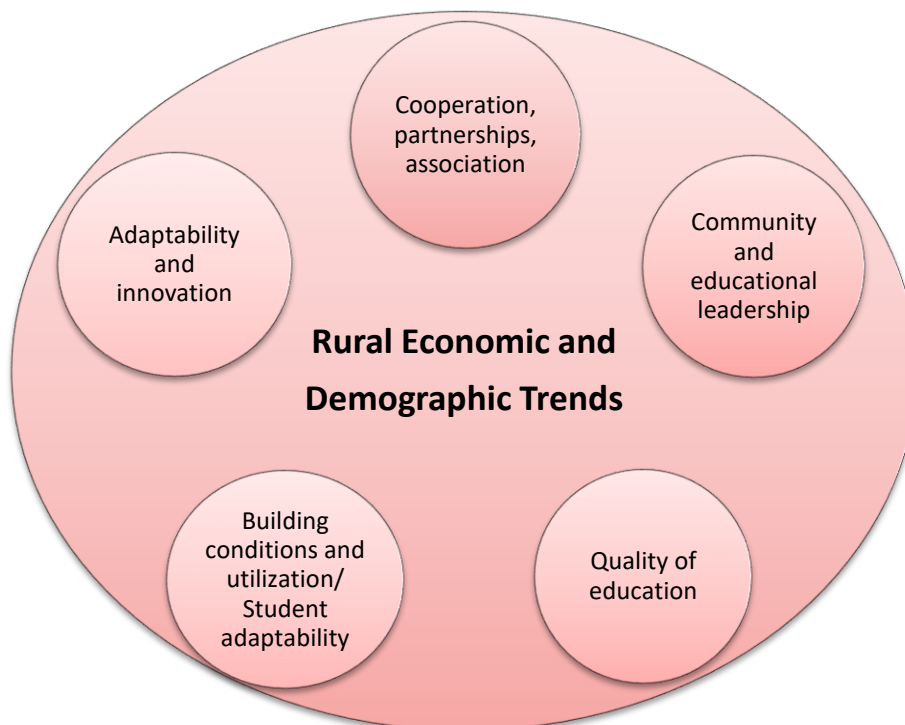
The first of the research questions for this study asked about the factors, mechanisms and processes related to success or failure of schools in rural communities. A second research question was related to identifying the forms of rural cooperation, association, and partnership that have emerged to support the viability of rural schools. We discuss these questions together in this section since the study clearly identified rural cooperation and partnerships as a key mechanism that that is related to the success or failure of schools in rural communities.

We identified the following six themes relating to the factors, mechanisms and processes related to the success or failure of schools in rural communities:

1. Rural economic and demographic trends
2. Leadership
3. Adaptability and innovation
4. Rural cooperation, association, and partnerships
5. Quality of education
6. Other - building conditions/ utilization and student adaptability

This section of the report discusses the study results these six themes in detail (Figure F.1).

**Figure F.1: Factors, Mechanisms and Processes Impacting Rural Schools**



## Discussion

### *F.1a Rural Trends*

The single biggest factor is simply the changing nature of rural Alberta and the multi-layered challenges this creates for schools in rural communities. “Rural” as we once knew it is rapidly re-defining itself due to a series of unavoidable economic, demographic, geographic, and other changes (Figure F.2).

Nearly every superintendent and case study participant mentioned rural depopulation, and a host of other interrelated demographic, economic, technological, factors that are causing declining enrolments. There was a great deal of consistency between the information given in the superintendent interviews and information given by the multiple stakeholders interviewed for the case studies.

**Figure F.2: Trends Impacting Schools in Rural Communities**

Rural Trend	Description
<b>Demographic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very large farms absorbing land once farmed by several family farms.</li> <li>• Large farmers, who often live elsewhere, hire small, seasonal, workforces of non-local contract workers, single men, or others who don't live locally.</li> <li>• Canadian and rural families are having fewer children. Children move away and few return to take over the family farm due to capital needed and other interests. A buyout from a large farmer is often the only way to transfer wealth between generations.</li> <li>• While some communities are growing slowly, it is often with retirement aged people, or people owning seasonal recreational property rather than families with school-aged children.</li> <li>• In three of the case study schools, students from nearby Indigenous communities account for approximately half of the student enrolment.</li> <li>• On average, birthrates for Indigenous communities are relatively higher than for non-Indigenous communities.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upscaling and automation of agriculture has radically lowered labour need and increased capital requirement to farm.</li> <li>• Small family farms are economically unviable without second income. Non-agricultural jobs in rural areas are limited to municipalities and school boards.</li> <li>• Centralized grain handling/ loss of rail lines has contributed to population decline.</li> <li>• Retail and other services in rural communities is limited/ declining.</li> <li>• Difficult to recruit school staff to work/ live in declining rural communities.</li> <li>• Cyclical economy stresses families relying on a second non-farm income.</li> <li>• Large tracts of land owned by non-local investors who rent it to large farmers.</li> </ul>
<b>Geographic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vastly improved highway infrastructure improves accessibility of nearby towns leading to their growth as regional service centres with large retail outlets, and other services capable of efficiently serving a large market area.</li> <li>• To be as efficient as possible, large farmers seek to minimize home quarters, acreages and other impediments to having contiguous farm land. This reduces the housing opportunities for potential new residents.</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly mobile commuter population including teachers who choose to not live locally but in the regional service centres. This is due to spousal employment, lifestyle choice, housing options, family connections, and many other reasons.</li> </ul>

## Discussion

- Success and expansion of religious communities consume very large tracts of land for self-contained and self-sustaining communities with their own workforce, schools, and food and goods production. These self-sustaining communities often do not shop or use local services to the same extent as the previous farms families did.
- Children of immigrant populations such as those from religious communities, while welcomed and accommodated at local schools present resource challenges arising from their language, cultural and religious norms, and educational expectations.

### Government

- Policies of counties and municipal districts support farming and the preservation of farmland. These policies seek to minimize land use conflicts, and the cost of servicing residential and farming by attempting to geographically separate these two types of land uses.
- Some small towns and villages are in financially precarious situations and struggle to provide basic services to their residents. This leaves little budget for growth.
- Unable to sustain themselves financially, small towns and villages sometimes request the Minister of Municipal Affairs to undertake a viability review, which may result in the municipality being dissolved and becoming part of the surrounding rural municipality.

### Technological

- Poor Internet connectivity in rural areas limits technology-based curricular options, creates a barrier for younger generations to visit or live in rural areas, and limits technology-based economic development opportunities that could enable rural areas to grow.

### Societal

- Perception of rural people that there is a lack of understanding and respect for rural Alberta in the urban areas and in the broader Alberta population and government.
- Increased and growing scrutiny/ suspicion of agriculture and rural Alberta evidenced by controversies over Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO), food labelling, treatment of animals, use of farm chemicals, water pollution, feed lots, and other issues. There is a growing sense that rural Alberta is under constant pressure to earn a “social license” for what they do.
- Perception that rural alienation or disenfranchisement is growing and there has been a societal value shift toward urban-centric values.

The demographic trends and observations outlined above are supported by trends reported by Statistics Canada. Canada’s rural population is growing at a much slower pace than urban areas particularly if it is not in a metro influenced zone, and some rural areas have declining population because natural population growth is very low or negative (Bollman, 2014). Regarding economic trends, Bollman also makes the point that the once labour intensive resource based industries are becoming dramatically less so with increased mechanization and technology, and unless something else is found to export, rural areas will continue to lose workers to other regions.

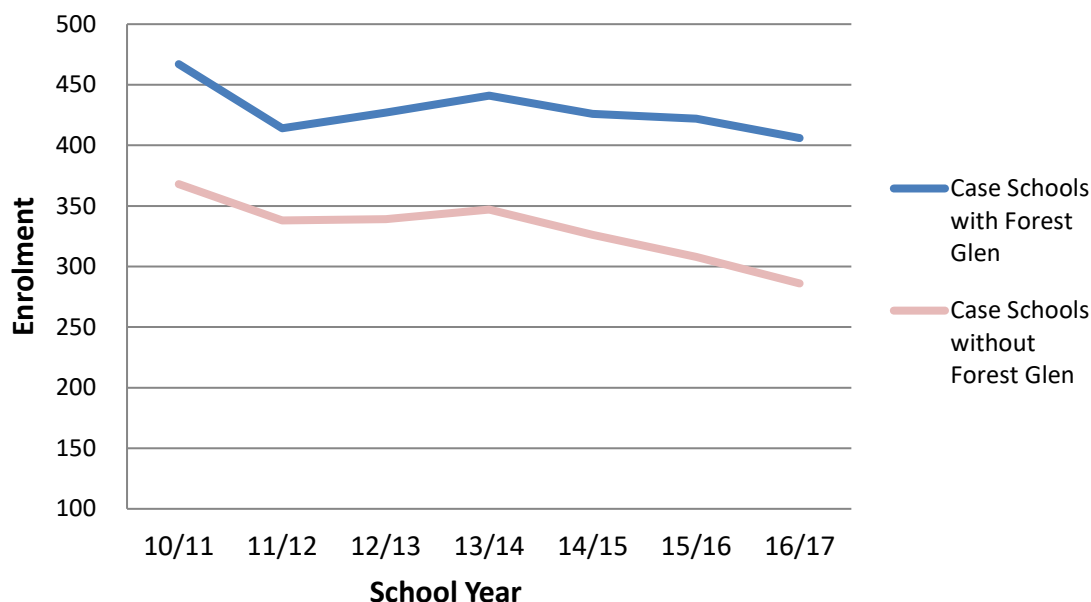
While Alberta’s population has doubled since 1977, the population of Snowy County is the same. ~ Case participant NS Villages Elementary/ Jr. High School.

The impact of these trends on enrolment is evident in our case study schools’ enrolment history over the past seven years. As a group, case study schools’ enrolment has decreased from 467 to 406 (13%) between the 2010/11 and 2016/17 academic years. Removing Forest Glen School, our

## Discussion

Indigenous case school, which had an increase of 21 students over this period, the decline in the other case schools as a group is 22%.

**Figure F.3: Yearly Enrolment Trends for Case Study Schools**



### F.1b Leadership

Next to these rural trends, the second factor and mechanism that is impacting the success and failure of schools in rural communities is leadership. Underpinning this is people who have the courage to not accept the status quo of the decline of their schools and communities. We met many practical, action-oriented rural people that have a “can-do” attitude. Rather than wait for other people to solve their problems, they take action to solve them with the resources at hand.

Likewise, strong leadership is also evident in situations where schools have been closed; whether advocating the case for a closure or for remaining open. Just as effective leadership has been a factor it is equally notable how an absence of leadership also played a role in the various cases. Observations about the role of leadership include:

- Leadership arises in anyone. For example, at Mint Community School, the driving force behind the schools’ success is the work of a small group of long-term community volunteers consisting of the local County councillor, the Village CAO, the librarian, and a few others from local service clubs. These community “champions” formed a “community sustainability committee” that has led initiatives such as the IB program, the business office at the school, school fundraising, school branding, website, recreational enhancements, and positive engagement with the school jurisdiction. We also observed strong leadership on the part of students who play an active role in helping other students and their parents adapt to their new school or newly re-configured school.

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**Discussion**

- Leaders have a broad, inclusive vision of community health. Rather than focusing on “school sustainability” leaders with stable or growing schools take a broad view of “rural community sustainability.” These people see a connection between school health and community health and know that what is good for one is good for the other. Rather than focus on “saving the school” their focus is broader on enhancing the community, the economy, the services, etc. Often these leaders are not just concerned parents fighting for the school, but are community members whose children graduated long ago who are concerned about the well-being of the community.
- Leaders have perseverance and persistence. At Mint Community School, community volunteers recognized the importance of the school forty years ago and have led and supported many initiatives including community school designation, introduction of Apple computers, a four-day week, shared principal, and many others.
- Leaders step over traditional boundaries and work collaboratively with others. Leaders are relationship-builders. Recognizing that language was a barrier for recent immigrant parents to engage with the school, settle in the community, and support their children’s learning, the principal at Aster school arranged for adult ESL classes at the school. He has also coordinated other resources to support these families in their successful settlement in the community.
- Absence of leadership may also be a factor. During a prolonged school closure controversy at Raven School, parents of Indigenous students, who comprised roughly half of the school’s enrolment did not attend meetings nor become involved directly to save the school. In another school, a community member was concerned about how having “five principals in five years” was leading to instability and motivating parents to move their children to a different school. If that happened, the school would likely close. “Parents were getting fed up with a school in turmoil. We were starved for leadership; we needed a leader to weave community values into the school.” This community member took positive, proactive steps to work with the superintendent in hiring the next principal.
- Leaders have a proclivity for action and are not afraid to take risks. When faced with the prospect of a new principal moving to Aster School and with no place for them to live, a community member coordinated funding and in-kind donations from the rural municipality, agricultural society and local service clubs, to acquire the land and new home to be placed in a nearby community. In taking action, these leaders are decisive and are not afraid to “rock the boat.” In another instance, a principal took over teaching a virtual course due to concerns with the quality of the instruction. He did this within a few weeks of the course end date, and students were able to complete it with his help.
- Leaders have a vision of a thriving school. We noted many instances of strategic thinking about leveraging unique strengths to create and work toward their vision. For example, recognizing that their remote location has very little light pollution, a community member in Mint is exploring the idea of establishing an observatory in the community.

Discussion

- Leaders take personal responsibility. Seeing a need for stable long-term leadership at Forest Glen School, a community member worked her way up from educational assistant to principal, over a period of many years.

Another positive leadership characteristic noted in the case studies is creativity. After a number of controversial school closure experiences, the Board of Trustees of Elk School Division tried a new approach to their next potential school closure. With broad parameters, a facilitator and information support, the Board formed a community-based advisory committee. Not only did this community-based leadership team come up with a recommendation that was ultimately accepted, their activities engaged and enlightened community members about the issue in their rural area. Putting this responsibility in the community’s hands also imparted ownership of the situation and the solution. In so doing, the task force process became an integral part of the solution.

The other leadership factor that is evident is the Board of Trustees’ stated “philosophy” toward closure of schools in rural communities. In two of the case study jurisdictions, the trustees and central administration we interviewed were unanimous and adamant that they would not close a school in a rural community but rather parents would close it. Their attitude was that until the last family leaves, they would find a way to educate them. This very powerful and positive statement created a constructive, solutions-based tone that fostered innovative thinking toward rural education.

*F.1c Adaptability/ Innovation*

Another factor that impacts the success and failure of schools in rural communities is the ability to adapt to changes with innovative solutions. Community members understand the changing nature of rural and the challenges to their schools. They have responded with a staggering number of initiatives aimed at sustaining their schools. Many of the strategies such as multi-grading, four day schedules, resource sharing, and modified programming, align very well with some of the most effective sustainable strategies identified in a study of rural school sustainability in Montana by Morton and Harmon (2011).

Figure F.4 outlines some of the school and jurisdiction-based program related strategies being used to help sustain schools in rural communities.

**Figure F.4: Program Adaptability and Innovation in Schools in Rural Communities**

Category	Examples of Adaptability/ Innovation
Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiatives to focus on student literacy</li> <li>• Focus on teaching and completion of core curriculum</li> <li>• Launching an International Baccalaureate (IB) program</li> <li>• Expansion/ enhancement/ specialization of Virtual Education program to be a “net sender” of courses to other schools. The effort includes shared learning sites with timetable coordination, and site visits</li> <li>• Teaching more than one grade or more than one course level<sup>12</sup> in a classroom</li> <li>• Indigenous teacher training program</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> For example, Math 30-1 is generally considered a prerequisite for post-secondary programs requiring the study of Calculus. Math 30-2 and 30-3 equip students for entering trades or directly into the workforce.

## Discussion

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using the concept of “high school redesign” to split instructional time into segments for both teaching and tutoring</li> <li>Teaching students meta-cognition strategies</li> <li>Using field trips/ travel to enhance curriculum</li> <li>Developing curriculum around an agricultural focus</li> <li>Changing school to a “sports academy” that focuses on education and training for elite athletes of a particular sport</li> </ul>
<b>Student Engagement and Inclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on individual sports (e.g. archery) to allow schools lacking population for team sports to participate in competitions, and to build school pride</li> <li>Week-long CTS scheduling and content relevant to students’ interests and community culture (e.g. outdoors, crafts, Indigenous cultural)</li> <li>Mobile CTS teacher and resources such as a mobile lab-trailer</li> <li>Cultural enrichment/ learning by bringing in Elders and other community members to teach language, traditions, crafts, etc.</li> <li>Attendance incentive programs using prizes, payments, or linking attendance to special activities or trips</li> <li>Extra-curricular, field trips, activities</li> <li>Family-school liaison workers for individual schools and jurisdictions for Indigenous students and students from religious communities</li> <li>Curriculum adaptations for special cultural and religious groups</li> <li>Hot meal programs</li> </ul>
<b>Community Engagement / Life-Long Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Immigrant settlement efforts by hosting “early years fair” at school to make immigrants aware of Canadian resources for families</li> <li>English language courses for immigrant parents to help them settle and adapt to the community and the school, and to help their children in school</li> <li>Re-engagement of early school-leavers with financial and educational support through the school</li> <li>Renting space to private pre-school/ playschool operators</li> </ul>

Using innovative strategies that increase curriculum relevancy such as the agriculture-based program being considered at Aster School, and the culture based CTS programs at Forest Glen School, have grounding in literature. For example, in a literature review and essay by Stelmach (2011), she argues that curriculum relevancy is a key to rural school sustainability. To achieve that, she believes that teachers need to engage with the local community and culture(s) to understand and appreciate their value and role in curriculum development.

In Forest Glen School, where attendance is an ongoing struggle, the hot meal program is seen as a core strategy to engage students. Since the two meals provided at the school may be the only meals prepared for them some days, it is a strong draw to attend the school.

Another group of innovations that revolve around staffing, funding, and operations is shown in Figure F.5. One of the more common strategies in this category is enrolling students from nearby Indigenous communities, who are interested in attending an off-reserve school for a variety of reasons. The main reason is the belief that the neighbouring school offers a better quality of education, or there was a family tradition of attending the school, or the off-reserve school is located closer to the family home.

## Discussion

**Figure F.5: Operational Adaptability and Innovation in Schools in Rural Communities**

Category	Examples of Adaptability/ Innovation
<b>Funding and Resource Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small Schools by Necessity funding and other funding flows through a centralized budgeting model whereby allocations are made based on need and jurisdiction and school priorities</li> <li>• Education Service Agreements for Indigenous students</li> <li>• Contributions of services from municipalities and local businesses such as grading, snow-plowing, and landscaping</li> </ul>
<b>Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four-day school week to save on facility and bussing costs</li> <li>• School-grade reconfigurations in cooperation with nearby schools to narrow and focus on a smaller number of grades at each school</li> <li>• Consolidating smaller schools into one larger regional school</li> <li>• Bussing students from nearby communities whose families want a rural school experience for their children</li> <li>• Marketing and promotion to increase enrolment</li> </ul>
<b>Staffing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional sharing of specialized resources such as band and CTS programs</li> <li>• Principal sharing between schools or operating without a principal using a teacher “shared leadership” model</li> <li>• Use of community volunteers for coaching, tutoring, seminars, presentations</li> <li>• Building and maintaining teacher residences or “teacherages”</li> </ul>
<b>Fundraising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local service group fundraising for special events, equipment, travel</li> <li>• At Forest Glen School, the local administration pays for all school supplies</li> <li>• Fundraising by parents and local community champions</li> <li>• Local groups contracting to the school for maintenance services and donating profits back to the school</li> <li>• Donations from local businesses</li> </ul>

When passionate community members devote their energies to fundraising, the results can be remarkable. For example, at Mint Community School, over \$50,000 was raised for teacher training for the school to become an International Baccalaureate (IB) Candidate School for grades one to three. At Raven School, parent fundraising was used to operate a school bus to bring students from the nearby community of Meadowlark. In another example, a group of parents won a bid to perform maintenance work on their school and donated all the profit back to the school. In another situation described in the superintendent interviews, a local agricultural association provided a \$1 million donation towards a new school, which allowed for a larger gymnasium, a community CTS kitchen and an extra meeting room for videoconferencing.

### F.1d Rural Cooperation, Association and Partnerships

We observed that the ability of people to work together for a common purpose was crucial for the sustainability of schools in rural communities. In the case studies where all stakeholders were working together, there was more coordination of effort, more positive action, and much more optimism about the future. In these situations, trust was evident and there was an inherent understanding of the value of collaborating for a common purpose.



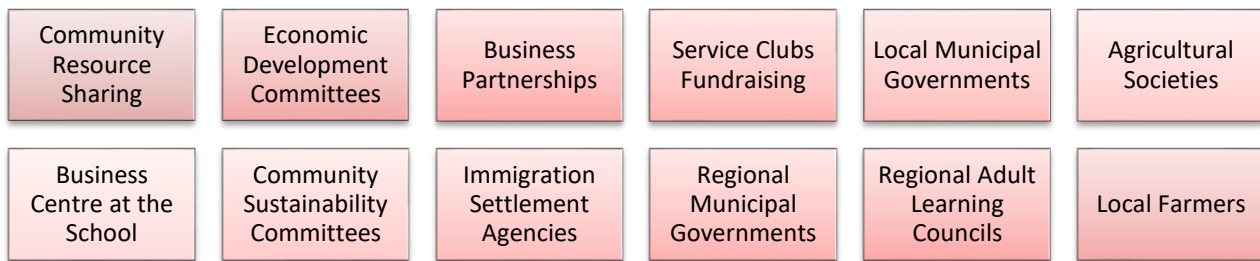
Discussion

Education research literature also supports the notion that collaboration is important for school sustainability. School-community partnerships are an appropriate means for school renewal because this approach “capitalizes on a community’s sense of place and other distinctive features of rural school communities” (Bauch, 2001). Harmon and Schafft (2011) take the idea of partnerships a step further by suggesting that future school administrators should be prepared and trained to effectively engage with the community.

Perhaps it can be ascribed to a rural pragmatism and informality that there tends to be very few formal partnership arrangements but much cooperation. For example, Aster School’s list of collaborators included nearly every organization in the region such as the agricultural society, local businesses and farmers, regional economic development alliance, the regional adult learning council, the municipal government in the area, nearby villages, the Lions Club, the recreation board, and service providers in the nearby town of Daisy. The school also has a strong connection with the superintendent, the Board of Trustees and other schools in the rural area. However, no formal agreements are in place (Figure F.6 and Figure F.7).

In the school-community case studies where some stakeholders were indifferent to the school’s plight, or there is little effort to collaborate, there was less positive action, less optimism and less coordinated effort. The missing connection in some cases tends to be the municipal governments. For example, the chief administrative officer of Meadowlark County was aware of Raven School’s controversial closure but had no contact with Sparrow School Division or the school throughout the process. In another case, among the more challenging interviews to arrange was with Field County officials. When spoken to late in the project they admitted to having very little involvement in the closure and reconfiguring of the three schools that resulted in Fox School being opened. It is impossible to suggest how outcomes in these two situations would have changed with more active municipal involvement. At the very least, it may have been a more thorough and well-informed process had their perspectives been represented.

Figure F.6: Examples of Rural Education Partnerships



In the superintendent interview portion of the study, it was noted that in jurisdictions that had schools with declining enrolments, there was sometimes a lack of participation, indifference, or even tensions between community members, local organizations, and the school.

Discussion

Figure F.7: Examples of Partnership and Collaboration

Category	Example of Partnership or Collaboration
<b>Resource Sharing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community library used by students of Mint Community School.</li> <li>• Most schools allow after hours use of their gymnasiums for community use and Forest Glen School has community Internet nights where local community members come to the school to use the Wi-Fi.</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational Cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both Elk School Division and Open Spaces School Division have been members in a regional economic development partnership with a mandate to promote the region and attract new businesses, and residents.</li> <li>• In partnership with the Village, Mint Community School has converted some unused space in their school to a business office (boardroom, meeting room, offices) that can be rented to local entrepreneurs or visiting business people on a long or short term basis.</li> <li>• Mint Community School is part of the community’s “sustainability committee.” The committee is the fundraising force behind their recent IB program, and has a mission to “champion the school and the community.”</li> <li>• Aster School hosts a community “early years” fair in partnership with the local adult learning council to help support and settle new immigrants. The adult learning council also partners with the school to offer adult upgrading through the school’s videoconferencing.</li> <li>• Aster School, in cooperation with the local ATB branch operates a Junior ATB branch at the school where students learn about banking with hands-on experience.</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raven Community School had a very effective parent council who raised significant amounts of money to support the school’s program.</li> <li>• Forest Glen School operates its daily meal program (breakfast and lunch) through corporate donations.</li> </ul>

One superintendent noted that better engagement and involvement with the communities in their jurisdiction has resulted in a positive shift from evaluating and judging the Board of Trustees and jurisdiction administration to working cooperatively with them. Consequently, they now look at how they can work together to attract and retain students. The concentrated effort by the Board and superintendent to engage in partnerships with municipalities and local industry has resulted in more resources.

Another superintendent noted that relationships and the trust are what make rural schools so important and so effective - everyone knows someone. The superintendent stated, “When you have a good degree of cooperation between the school and community, it benefits both.”

## Discussion

### *F.1e Quality of Education*

It is beyond the scope of this study to assess the quality of education as it relates to school size or location. However, a recurring consideration or theme in the discussion of the viability of schools in rural communities revolves around the quality of education. Participants noted many positive aspects of small schools such as smaller classrooms and smaller teacher to pupil ratios, closer relationships, community ties, programming flexibility/ autonomy, and others. However, many interviewees stated or implied, sometimes reluctantly, that as enrolment declines and funding pressures mount, it becomes more challenging to adjust operations in a way that doesn't have a detrimental impact on quality of education.

A very common strategy is double and triple grading or teaching different levels of a course in single classrooms. Although there are mixed opinions on these strategies, they are generally considered sub-optimal. For example, one student in Forest Glen School felt as though she received very little teacher support because she is often the only student taking the university entrance level of the course in a classroom where most other students were taking the other levels.

Discussion and consideration of the “quality of education” also encompassed other factors such as students’ opportunities for extra-curricular activities and social relationships, along with bussing, and many other considerations. For example, some students felt that larger schools offered a better quality of education because they offered a larger pool of potential friends or a better selection of extra-curricular sports from which to choose.

Teachers, administrators, and Board of Trustees that we interviewed indicated that while having a school in a rural community was very important, the most important consideration was the quality of education being offered. Many of the parents and students we spoke to were more amenable to making some “sacrifices” (e.g. multi-grading, limited options/ CTS) to keep the school in the community. However, many other parents were not amenable to these “sacrifices” or had other concerns that influenced them to enrol their children in other schools in the region to pursue what they perceived as a better quality education. Figure F.8 lists the various opinions expressed by participants regarding small school advantages and challenges.

**Figure F.8: Comments and Themes Regarding Quality of Education**

Area	Small Schools Advantages	Small Schools Challenges
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller class sizes easier to manage for teachers and allows more teacher time/ attention for each student</li> <li>• Closer relationships between students, parents, and teachers</li> <li>• Curriculum flexibility and professional autonomy</li> <li>• Closer connection to the community/ fostering intergenerational relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-grade or multi-level teaching more challenging/ time consuming for teachers</li> <li>• Fewer educational assistants add to higher teacher expectations</li> <li>• Generally higher workload with smaller staff to share extra-curricular duties, supervision, and other tasks</li> <li>• Less opportunity to specialize/ teach in one subject area, more expectation to teach multiple/ various subjects</li> </ul>

Discussion

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>particularly if teachers live in the community</li> <li>• More opportunities to engage with the broader community and perform service work in the community</li> <li>• More opportunities for teacher advancement into school administration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less professional/ peer support from a smaller staff - “Your practice grows when you can learn from more people on a bigger staff.”</li> <li>• Less choice in programs and options for students with varying interests/ aptitudes</li> <li>• Challenges from curriculum adaptations for students from certain religious backgrounds</li> </ul>
<b>Extra-curricular</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility to use local resources for extra-curricular activities</li> <li>• More opportunity for students to participate in extra-curricular sports because everyone is needed for the team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging to build a competitive team without “tryouts” and being able to select best players</li> <li>• Can be challenging to fundraise in a small community especially if less economically vibrant</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership opportunities for older students by mentoring younger students</li> <li>• More multi-generational interaction through school/ community events</li> <li>• Less likely to have cliques or groups forming – more socially inclusive.</li> <li>• Inclusive communities build bridges between diverse communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited pool of friends so do not necessarily choose friends based on similar interests</li> <li>• May not have any same aged, same gender students in your grade</li> <li>• Some pressure to do “social” promotion of students to next grade to keep them with their cohorts even when not ready for next grade</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safer because schools have a “closed campus” (i.e. students don’t leave the school during the day)</li> <li>• Safe and caring atmosphere because everyone knows and “watches out” for each other - “No one falls through the cracks because we care.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allocation of resources challenging in schools with small enrolment and many grades (i.e. K to 12)</li> <li>• Enrolment instability from year to year makes planning more difficult</li> <li>• Transition to large high school in new community can be easier if coming from a larger school rather than from a very small junior high school</li> </ul>

Some superintendents interviewed commented that while small schools are positive in certain ways, a much better quality of education could be delivered by having one larger, financially stronger, and more stable school serving two or three rural communities. It was felt that the stability of one larger school within a reasonable bussing distance was a draw for the region whereas the declining enrolment of a smaller school in a community can be a negative since parents are not sure how long it may survive.

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**Discussion***F.1f Other Factors, Mechanisms and Processes*

Condition and utilization of the school building was nearly always a factor in the assessment of viability of schools in rural communities. Most of the case study school facilities were built in the 1970s and 1980s and had original capacities of 150 to 300 students. Many of these now operate with a fraction of that enrolment. While they are well maintained, retro-fits and maintenance are becoming more expensive. For example, when the Elk School Division task force was deciding which of the three closed schools would be modernized into the new school, building condition was a significant factor. Building condition was also a factor in the closure of Raven School.

Another theme in the discussion of viability of schools in rural communities is the adaptability of students. In most cases where a school was reconfigured or closed and students had to attend a different school, they adapted and thrived in their new environment. Despite some initial concern, most students we talked to in this situation like their new school. One student at NS Junior High School noted she was worried at first, but is now wondering what all the “fuss” was about. The adaptability of students is recognized as a key factor in making transitions to new schools successful. Student leadership in accepting and positively adapting to the changes are critical in convincing their parents that the change was for the best and will be positive in the long run.

Students moving to Meadowlark Elementary-Junior High School after the closure of Raven Community School were mixed in their assessment of the move. Some were enthusiastic about the new friends, competitive sports teams and the fact that they are doing better academically at the new school. They also commented that the eventual transition to Meadowlark High School will be much easier since they will move with a large group of friends. Other students were more nostalgic for the family and home-like atmosphere of Raven Community School. Some students reported feeling overwhelmed by the larger school and class sizes.

In addition to leadership in adapting to their new schools, students also showed a degree of wisdom when assessing the changes. One student at Elk Community School commented that it would be a positive change for students over the long term and that people were nostalgic, “They think the past is so great but their memories are nostalgic. It was good but not that good.” Another student agreed to move to Elk Community School only if he could opt-out at Christmas; at Christmas he decided to stay at Elk. He commented: “Everyone was sad at first, but after they got here – ‘holy cow, this is a nice school.’”

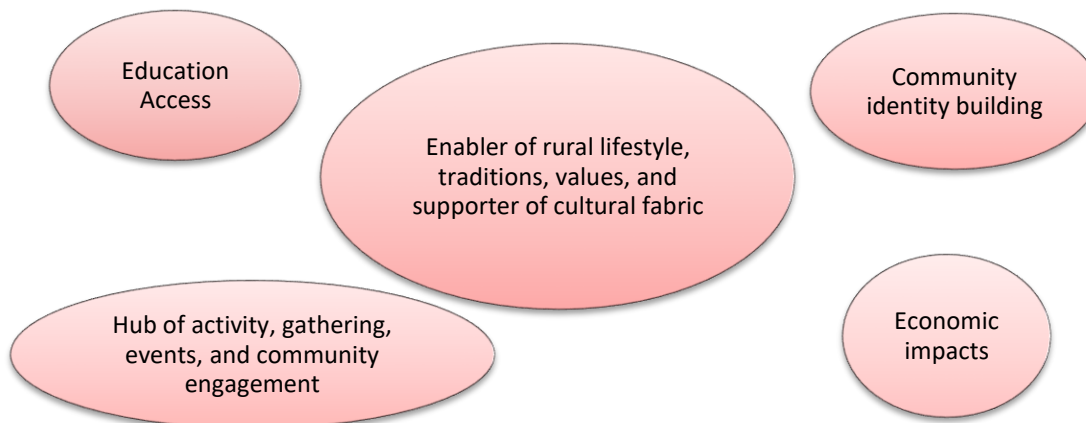
## Discussion

### *F.2. Impacts of Schools on Rural Communities*

A key objective of this study was to identify and discuss the impacts schools have on rural communities. The literature review found an interesting array of studies on the impact of schools on rural communities. These studies identified several impacts including positive outcomes for youth and the community (Kilpatrick et. al. 2001), economic impacts (Rees & Ye), cultural impacts (Halseth & Ryser, 2005), hubs for social capital formation (Bauch, 2001), community service (Martz 2011), sustaining rural culture and lifestyle (Mortin & Harmon, 2011), and a delivery point for health and other services (Kilpatrick et. al. 2001). The findings from this study replicate the literature findings with an “Alberta” context (Figure F.9). The major impacts of schools on rural communities we observed are:

1. Education access
2. Economic impacts
3. A hub of activity, gathering, events, and community engagement
4. A role in community identity building
5. Enabler of rural lifestyle, traditions, values, and cultural fabric

**Figure F.9: Role of Rural Schools in Community Revitalization**



#### *F.2a Education Access*

At a very fundamental level, schools in rural communities have the impact of educating youth and without this accessibility some rural youth may simply not attend school nor would they complete high school. In the Indigenous community of Forest Glen, where high school attendance and completion is a serious issue already, some participants felt that without a local school, many high school aged students would not attend any school. It is likely that in the other case study schools that have significant enrolment of Indigenous students, a similar trend may also result. Participants from case study schools in more remote areas felt that if the schools were to close, some older students would likely not opt for either the new designated school or home schooling, and would simply join the workforce.

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**Discussion***F.2b Economic Impacts*

Economic impact is clearly an impact of a school in a community primarily through employment of teachers, administrators, educational assistants, support staff, and bus drivers. Quantifying this impact on the community was impractical due to the fact that employees did not necessarily live and spend their money in the local community. At best, the employee spending has a regional economic impact. However, it was also not unusual for employees to live outside of the region and commute from a nearby larger town or major city. The other complicating factor in determining economic impact is that even when school employees live locally, much of their spending is outside the community because the community does not have many businesses that can address their needs.

The supplies and resources that the school purchases have a minor impact on local economy mainly because there are few supplies a school uses that are not purchased centrally. Even if the school wanted to purchase significant supplies locally, it is likely they would not be available locally. Where schools do need services (e.g. catering or food for hot lunches) schools try to use local businesses when they exist.

For those communities like Mint, that have a bank, a small grocery store, post office, and restaurant, the school is a “driver” of economic activity simply because it generates parent and other traffic in the community. Going to and from the school, parents are more likely to bank in the community, buy groceries and use other services. When the schools closed in the communities of Moose and Deer, the general stores were negatively impacted by the loss of both student and parent traffic.

The other important economic impact from school-generated employment is that the income stabilizes and supports households that operate family farms where work is seasonal and incomes can vary, or who have an off-farm employment in a cyclical industry like oil and gas. A second household income from teaching, bus driving, or being an educational assistant can make the difference between being able to survive in a rural area with a rural lifestyle or not.

Several participants view schools as an important pillar for their economic development. They believe that having a school makes the community more attractive for potential residents, businesses, and others seeking to move to the community. Without the school people, especially families with children, would not want to move there. The literature supports these opinions. Schools do increase the attractiveness of a community for newcomers and businesses (Wrigley & Lewis, 2002) and are associated with a community’s economic prosperity (Reese & Ye, 2011). Studies also show that residential property values are higher in communities with schools (Lyson, 2002).

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## Discussion

### *F.2c Hub of Activity, Gathering, Events, Community Engagement*

A rural school is a gathering place for community events, celebrations, clubs and youth groups, music and art, recreation, civic activities, sports and ceremonies that are widely attended and valued by the local and regional residents. Participants recognize that as a gathering place, schools are a critical community resource for its social and cultural well-being.

In essence, schools foster the activities that create communities. When a school closes it decreases residents' sense of community, volunteerism, community recreation participation, and intergenerational relationships (Onescu, 2014). In our study, many seniors expressed that their volunteerism and engagement with the school gave them a reason to live in the area. They also see the school as a symbol of hope.

The school made it feel like it was a happening place...made it seem like a complete community with something to offer all ages....Now it feels like a community full of old people....Now it feels like the community will slowly fade away. ~ Participant Village of Moose. ~ Case participant, Fox School.

Aster School is a catalyst for community service. One participant felt that the school gives a sense of purpose to both the community and the agricultural society and the Lions Club. Without the school, these organizations and the volunteerism within them would likely diminish.

Much more than being a “venue” for community events and activities, it is important to recognize that the schools in rural communities are a “generator” of these activities and without the school these activities would not happen. Graduation ceremonies, Christmas pageants, Remembrance Day ceremonies, dramatic productions, cultural events, community sports and exercise programs, and many others are school staff and student initiated, led, and maintained. One participant explained how the first row of the seats for the Christmas pageant is reserved for the community's seniors; “It's not a school pageant. It's a community pageant.”

While teachers and administrators lead the work that creates community events and ceremonies as part of their job in the school, participants also noted teachers' contribution to the well-being of the community through their volunteer work and service. Students at Aster School described how everyone in their community has many volunteer roles including teachers. For example, the principal is a member of the Lions Club. That teachers and other professionals contribute volunteer service to their rural communities is evidenced in other research (Martz & Sanderson, 2006; Vezina & Crompton, 2012).

In a number of interviews, participants suggested as gathering places, rural schools “build bridges” between cultures and groups. For example, Raven Community School worked to integrate and build connections between local religious groups, Indigenous students, religious communities, and others. The school's teacher lounge was a “community lounge” where all were welcome. Likewise, NS Villages Elementary School and Mint School are proud of the success they have had in fostering good relationships with local Indigenous, religious groups in their area. Schools are welcoming to seniors and Indigenous Elders. Through the seniors and Elders there is strong connection to the larger community.



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**Discussion***F.2d Community Identity Building*

Through their role as a hub for community gathering, rural schools shape and sometimes redefine perceptions of community identity. For example, the communities of Aster, Bluebell, and Cornflower (ABC) consider Aster School their regional school and hold most community events there. Over time and through this association the three communities refer to themselves as the “ABC region.” Regional residents reflect on the school as the place where everything in the community is “played out from birth to death.” The community pulls together through celebrations and through tragedies and the school is often the venue. Participants perceive Aster School as the true hub and pillar of the ABC community that everyone in the ABC community takes pride in and ownership of. A similar sentiment was expressed by a participant at Mint Community School who defined a community as everything that happened between the “cradle and the grave” and suggested that the school plays a critical role in every step.

In Mountain School Division, North Village and South Village each had kindergarten to grade nine schools and deeply held rivalries largely based around their schools’ intermural sports teams. However, with their reconfiguration into a kindergarten to grade five and six to nine school, a number of participants noted that a new “community spirit” was emerging based on rallying around one stronger sports team that has a new “community neutral” name. Students noted also that village loyalties have largely dissolved among them as evidenced by observing that student council elections did not reflect village loyalties. An adult participant suggested that the sports rivalry traditionally kept the communities apart. She expressed hope and optimism that the school reconfiguration will hasten community cooperation in other areas and make the region stronger. Another participant noted, “The school and the sports teams give the community a sense of identity, history and heritage.”

Through the transition from three schools to one in Elk School Division, the hope is that the new Elk Community School will become a focal point for community gathering and a regional identity. A few participants noted that there were early signs of this happening as parents re-arrange their routines and as their students adapt to their new school.

Raven Community School was not located in a village or town; it was located in a rural area. Participants noted that the school had been their community centre for 100 years. After the closure the community did not come together in the same way. Just as a school can be a community builder, the loss of the Raven Community School “dismantled” the community.

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**Discussion***F.2e Lifestyle, Traditions, Values, Cultural Fabric of Alberta*

For the most part, participants see schools in rural communities as critical anchors that enable and sustain a rural culture that is based around the agriculture industry. This sentiment completely parallels findings in research of Montana's rural or "frontier" schools (Morton & Harmon, 2011).

Rural schools are essential to keeping children involved in agriculture to perpetuate the industry and the lifestyle surrounding agriculture. Several participants commented on the importance of rural children to the future of agriculture in Alberta and how rural schools understand the importance of rural children to the family farm. One participant said, "Kids are the future of farming and rural communities. If you send them to the city, they are less likely to come back and that will kill rural communities faster."

Another participant described the closing of Raven Community School and sending their children to a town school as a loss of "rural values." Another participant commented that the closing of the school was a loss of "old fashioned school culture."

In several of the case studies, participants commented on the impact of rural school on the social fabric of Alberta. Participants felt that the unique contribution of rural schools is overlooked or their importance is not valued. In particular, small rural schools may be viewed as a drain on resources or as not contributing to the economy. Participants expressed their concern with a lack of understanding of rural Alberta. It seemed to them that rural areas are overlooked even though the province has a long history based on rural agriculture and resource economy. It was evident to participants that rural communities and rural schools have to work hard to be noticed and included in decision-making.

Several participants commented on the importance of rural families and rural children to Alberta society. They commented on how rural families' members are dependent on each other. Children learn acceptance, responsibility, leadership, and teamwork lessons in real life scenarios where the family and the community depend on the children's contribution. For example, participants said one of the small communities raised more money per capital for a national charity than anywhere else in Canada. Participants used this as an example of how the students learn to work with their community to do something that contributes to all of Canada.

A participant remarked, "If we lose rural schools and communities, we lose an important part of our character as a province. Kids learn different lessons and values in a rural school than they would in the city."

Participants felt Albertans could learn from how their school works with the community. A participant commented that cities try to create communities within the larger city because they realize that a sense of community spirit is important in an urban area.

## Discussion

One school official commented that rural people bring a community spirit to larger centres and those centres improve as a result. Another school official described the importance of rural schools and rural communities to Alberta as follows:

Plain and simple, great leaders come from rural. If you looked at percentages of where great leaders come from, you would find that more are from rural. It's because of rural values, ethics, connectedness to family, and to each other. You have to work together and learn how to get along with everyone because you have no choice who your friends and team mates are..... [Rural is] like a greenhouse where kids are transplanted across the province and thrive because of rural roots. We don't keep kids. We transplant them and they succeed anywhere globally....If we lose rural schools and communities, we lose an important part of our character as a province.

Participants also expressed concern with a growing disconnect between rural and urban Alberta as fewer people have a connection to agriculture and rural communities. One school official focused on the lack of understanding of rural communities and the importance of farming that is passed on through generations. This lack of understanding has resulted in the need for farmers and the agriculture industry to obtain a “social license” or public trust that they grow and raise food in an ethical, ecologically friendly, and sustainable manner.

The loss of rural schools diminishes society's connection with, knowledge of, and trust in rural Alberta, as fewer children are raised in rural communities. A school official felt the school plays a role in educating the public by graduating informed students. A parent explained the importance a rural upbringing and what this adds to Alberta in terms of developing good citizens; “Rural builds whole people...[rural children] see life and death, failure, and success.”

One parent commented that there would be no reason to live in the village or area without schools and it would be another blow to the family farm if the village school closed. He said, “Taking out our rural schools would kill the family farm. With schools gone, many people would sell land and leave. The big farmers would buy the land – happily pay double - and eventually it would just be farmland and no people.”

### *F.3 Role of Schools in Community Revitalization*

Another research question for this study asked about the role of rural schools in community revitalization. Participants clearly told us that schools have a role in the vitality of their rural community. A school in a rural community has impacts on the people, the economy, the organizations, the social capital, and on sustaining rural culture as a whole in Alberta. There is a mutual, symbiotic relationship between schools and their communities. As one participant stated when reflecting on their school and the community, “One is the heart and one is the hands.”

Rural communities that understand and embrace the idea that community and school health are inexorably linked, and have the leadership to act upon this, appear to have more vitality than those that don't. As one participant from Aster commented when asked about the future prospects for the school and community: “You can't disconnect them. Can't draw lines. Short-sighted to not see the interconnections.”

**Discussion**

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These communities also understand that the presence of schools and children are essential for a positive future. A Mint Community School stakeholder expressed this best when he said “The absence of kids is a mistake for a community to be vital.”

Participants recognize that with this relationship between school and community health comes the real potential that if either the school or community is struggling, it will impact the other. While it appears logical that a vibrant growing community can revitalize a struggling school, there is recognition by several participants that it is much less likely that a school can revitalize a struggling rural community. In fact, several participants commented that by the time a school closes the community is “already dead.” As one participant from the Elk School community noted, “School is the last thing to go. Store is already gone. Church is gone. Gas station. Gone. Families are gone. The school is closed metaphorically before the Board closes it.”

Superintendents we interviewed generally agreed that it is very difficult if not impossible for a school to revitalize or sustain a community that is struggling. The following three comments from three superintendents express this sentiment:

In the communities where we closed schools, it is about the same. The school didn’t make a difference, open or closed, to the viability of the community.

A community may thrive and survive if there is a school, but there also comes a point that the economic viability of a community is not there. Keeping the school open didn’t stop people from selling their land at a good price and leaving. Viability is not dependent on the school alone.

In many of our communities, the school is the heart of the community. The school is structurally one of the last buildings in the dwindling community. I have changed my thoughts. I think it is a part, but it can’t grow kids. You can lengthen the life of the school, but there is a point that you can’t provide programming that is adequate. Closing leads to a hopeful beginning.

In some cases, the rural context and trends are simply too powerful for communities and schools to survive. Even with the best leadership efforts and plans, the school is not sustainable. As such, pinning the hope of community revitalization on the school alone in the rural community is unrealistic. The role of a school in community revitalization appears to be most effective when there are proactive steps taken by leaders from the community, local government, and the school that leverage the interplay between school and community health.

## Discussion

### *F.4 Emerging Models for Long Term Viability*

The final research question asked about the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities.

The emerging model we observed is one of proactive leadership and planning. Schools and school jurisdictions incorporate three important factors when planning and taking action to make their schools in rural communities sustainable. These factors are: 1) Understanding the changing nature of the rural context; 2) Multi-stakeholder leadership and collaboration; 3) Proactive community development planning and action on the part of these stakeholders (Figure F.10).

Together, these three factors are critical in identifying a variety of unique strategies to enhance school sustainability. While the use of these factors suggests a process, the process does not necessarily flow in lockstep. That is, sustainability discussions begin with any of the three factors but always incorporate the other two factors.

While the individual strategies to enhance rural school viability are important, the process of community stakeholders working together across mandates toward a common vision of a vibrant community is the key since every rural school sustainability situation is unique and calls for unique action to support its sustainability.

**Figure F.10 Emerging Model of Rural School Sustainability**



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**Lessons Learned****G. Lessons Learned**

This study captures some insight based on a “moment in time” in the evolution of education in some of Alberta’s most “rural” communities. The definition of “rural” in this study included only schools that are relatively remote with small enrolments. However, the lessons in this context will have some applicability to the broader rural school context in Alberta.

1. The trends causing rural depopulation are the largest challenge facing schools in rural communities. These persistent and unavoidable trends place a backdrop on rural education against which some small communities, and their schools in their current formats, appear to have little chance to succeed. In these cases, school closure or some form of consolidation or reconfiguration is unavoidable.
2. Sustainability of schools in rural communities is a direct function of community vitality. School enrolments are impacted when rural communities lose population, services, businesses and small farms. A school closure is one factor in the sustainability of a rural community. In most cases, by the time a school closes, the community is already having sustainability challenges.
3. Schools in rural communities play a vital role in Alberta. They bring educational opportunities to places and people to where they live. Schools in rural communities are centres of activity and engagement for all regional residents to gather, celebrate, build social networks and relationships, and to build communities. These schools support a rural lifestyle, traditions and culture that are central for the agricultural and other industries operating in rural areas. Schools in rural communities contribute significantly to the cultural fabric of Alberta.
4. Stakeholders believe schools in rural communities are one of the last pillars supporting rural life. As such, they feel rural schools merit additional and special policy support to keep them viable. Examples of additional support include enhanced education and transportation funding models or programs to help sustain rural schools.
5. Strong coordinated leadership is the most important factor to sustaining a school in a rural community. Thriving schools and communities have courageous, optimistic and proactive leaders in their midst. These leaders, who come from a variety of backgrounds and stakeholder groups, actively define their own futures and take positive action. These leaders don’t need to be told about the important relationship between community and school sustainability; they instinctually know this and care enough to do something about it long before there is a crisis.

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**Lessons Learned**

6. Formal or informal partnerships created by community leaders are critical to sustaining a school in a rural community. Successful partnering is built on a mutual understanding of a common goal and a willingness to work outside of traditional boundaries and mandates to contribute to a broad, inclusive vision of community sustainability. Complacency, indifference, drawing “lines in the sand” and/ or conflict can hasten the demise of a rural community and its school.
7. Solutions to potential school closure or reconfiguration situations can be found at the grassroots level. Armed with information, a framework, and some staff support, local parents, teachers, and other stakeholders are capable of solving complex rural school sustainability problems in a logical manner. Top down decision making can be quicker but authentic grassroots involvement can lead to more acceptable outcomes.
8. School-specific strategies that directly boost and maintain enrolment appear to be the most effective in sustaining rural schools. These strategies include:
  - Welcoming students from nearby Indigenous communities.
  - Working with other religious and cultural communities or immigrant communities to develop programs, and initiatives to meet their specific educational, cultural, and settlement needs.
  - Reconfiguring schools to focus on a smaller range of grades.
  - Consolidating small schools into larger regional schools.
9. When small schools are closed, reconfigured or consolidated to create larger schools, students, parents and staff generally have positive outcomes:
  - Students adapt quickly and thrive in their new environments. They cite advantages such as expanded course choice, larger peer groups, and better access to extra-curricular activities.
  - Parents recognize, albeit sometimes reluctantly, the same positive outcomes as students listed above.
  - Teachers have fewer multi-grade classrooms, more access to education assistants, more professional peer support, and are able to focus their practice on a smaller range of courses.
10. Sustaining schools in rural communities is a continuous struggle without simple or universal solutions. The emerging model for sustainability is based on multi-stakeholder leadership and collaboration, understanding the changing nature of the rural context, and proactive planning and action.

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**Appendices****Appendix 1: Consent to Participate for Adults and Parents of Students.****Impact of Schools on Rural Communities – Research Study****General Consent and Permission Form for Adult Participants**

The Government of Alberta values Alberta's small and rural communities and has an interest in investigating ways to support rural education sustainability. The *Impact of Schools on Rural Communities* Study has been commissioned by the ministries of Education, Municipal Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry in order to enable a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and impacts of schools in rural communities. The study will help inform our continued support of rural education sustainability.

Schollie Research & Consulting has been selected as the researcher and will conduct the study. Schollie is composed of a team of experts with experience in conducting rural research and they have strong connections to rural communities. Schollie will be working in partnership with Alberta Education and with the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) to ensure the success of the study.

The study will involve meaningful engagement with school authorities in order to collect data regarding the impact of schools in rural communities. By signing this form you are agreeing to participate in this study. Participation may include being interviewed, recorded and surveyed and may include follow-up focus group participation or meetings with researchers and project partners.

As these activities are part of a major research initiative, participants may be photographed, videotaped, audio taped, interviewed or quoted either face to face or electronically.

**Dissemination of Findings**

Findings will be presented to Alberta Education in written format, including photographic content and at face-to-face stakeholder events within the province and through electronic media. The determination of appropriate electronic media and stakeholder events will be made in consultation with Alberta Education personnel. The final written report may be published online or in print journals; and written reporting may be presented at stakeholder events within Alberta; and at local, provincial, national or international academic conferences for the purposes of furthering research on rural education.

**Collection of Personal Information**

The research will be conducted in keeping with the ethical standards to ensure your protection. Your name will not be used in the study publications or presentations. Your responses to questions from researchers will not be attributed by name. Due to the small sample of schools and jurisdictions in the case-study component of the study and the use of photographic images, your anonymity cannot be ensured.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE IMPACT OF SCHOOLS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES STUDY**

- I understand that I am consenting to take part in activities or events related to the study;
- I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time;
- My consent is voluntary.

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Participant's name

Date

## Appendices

Information and recordings/images collected from any of the project activities and events may be used by Alberta Education and other project partners to showcase that particular activity or event and will be archived by the provincial government and may be showcased on Government websites.

Images or any subsequent media coverage of the research project will NOT be used for commercial purposes. This Consent to participate and Permission to reproduce form will be archived by Alberta Education.

### REPRODUCTION RIGHTS

I, \_\_\_\_\_ HEREBY GRANT TO THE CROWN IN RIGHT OF ALBERTA, AS REPRESENTED BY THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION, including its employees, agents or other third party the Crown may authorize or on its behalf, the non-exclusive right to:

- Photograph me for educational presentations and reports;
- Represent me in visuals on the Alberta Education website and/or related publications;
- Use, adapt, publish, reproduce, and duplicate, my photograph in any format worldwide, in perpetuity.

For the purpose of consent regarding THE IMPACT OF SCHOOLS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES STUDY

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### FOIP Collection Notice

Personal information including your name, voice recordings, photograph, and personal views or opinions are being collected under section 33 (c) of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. Personal information is being collected for the purpose of researching rural education. Information gathered in the course of this research may also be used as part of Alberta Education or Government of Alberta publications, products, services or solutions. If you have questions about the collection of personal information you may contact Karen Andrews, Director of Research at Alberta Education.

#### Questions/Concerns:

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

**Research Lead**  
**Alberta Education Contact**  
Karen Andrews  
Director, Research Branch  
780-644-5194  
[karen.andrews@gov.ab.ca](mailto:karen.andrews@gov.ab.ca)

## Appendices

### Government of Alberta ■

Education

#### Title of Project

Impact of Schools on Rural Communities – Research Study



Investigators: Dorothy G. Negroponetes, Ed. D; Bruce Schollie, MBA, BSc., CMC

#### Sponsors

Ministries of Education, Municipal Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry

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Information to be shared with the parent by the principal;

Your child is currently attending a school that has agreed to be part of a research study entitled Impact of Schools on Rural Communities. The study has been commissioned by the Ministries of Education, Municipal Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry in order to enable a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and impacts of schools in rural communities. The study will help inform our continued support of rural education sustainability.

The study will focus on four key research questions:

1. What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?
2. What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?
3. What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?
4. What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

#### What Will My Child Be Asked To Do?

If you agree for your child to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

1. Your child will be asked to complete a student survey/respond to an interview. This survey/interview will be completed at school under the supervision of a classroom teacher. The results from this survey/interview will be compiled electronically to provide the researchers with information on students' views and experiences about rural schools. Your child's individual answers will not be identified. Only aggregate or summarized response data will be analyzed.
2. As a participant in this research, you and your child are assured:
  - a. He/she will be able to complete the survey/interview at school.
  - b. He/she is free to refuse to answer any questions posed

## Appendices

### What Type of Personal Information will be Collected?

The research will be conducted in keeping with the ethical standards for conducting research to ensure your child's protection. Your child's name will not be collected or used in the study publications or presentations. Your child's survey responses or responses to questions from researchers will not be attributed by name.

Other data collected will include: Data collected from teachers, school leaders and community members through surveys and interviews.

### Are There Risks or Benefits if My Child Participates?

There are no foreseeable risks or harm to your child if you choose to allow your child to participate. There may be limited inconvenience in disruption of your child's classroom routine. There will be no consequence if you do not choose to have your child participate in this research study.

The purpose of the study is to add to the body of research knowledge of rural education and to support rural communities. As researchers, it is hoped that our presence in the school will not be too intrusive to teachers or the students. There will always be advance notice of our arrival.

### What Happens to the Information My Child Provides?

Participation is completely voluntary, and data shared is treated respectfully. You and your child are free to discontinue your child's participation at any time during the survey/interview or the study. You or your child may simply inform your child's teacher, principal or researcher your child wishes to withdraw from the study. Data that has been collected from you before a withdrawal will remain in the study.

### Dissemination of Findings

Findings will be presented to the sponsoring Ministries (Education, Municipal Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry) in written format. The final written report may be published online or in print journals; and written reporting may be presented at stakeholder events within Alberta; and at local, provincial, national or international academic conferences for the purposes of furthering research on promising practices in rural elementary school programs.

## Signatures

The Parent has read and understands to his/her satisfaction the information provided to them about his/her child's participation in this research project

Parent's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The Parent hereby gives permission \_\_\_\_\_ (child's name)  
to participate in research project entitled: *Impact of Schools on Rural Communities*.

**Appendices**

Parent's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The principal has informed the parent of the contents of this document and the parent has given written consent to his/her child's participation in the research study.

Principal's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Principal's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**FOIP Collection Notice**

Personal information including your child's name, and personal views or opinions are being collected under section 33 (c) of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. Personal information is being collected for the purpose of researching contemporary elementary school programs in rural and remote areas. Information gathered in the course of this research may also be used as part of Alberta Education or Government of Alberta publications, products, services or solutions. If you have questions about the collection of personal information you may contact Karen Andrews, Director Research Branch, 780-644-5194.

**Questions/Concerns:**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

**Research Leads**

Dorothy G. Negropones, Ed. D.  
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**Liaison for School Superintendents**

Barry Litun  
Executive Director, College of Alberta  
School Superintendents  
780-451-7106  
[barry.litun@cass.ab.ca](mailto:barry.litun@cass.ab.ca)

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form to be filed with Alberta Education.

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**Appendices****Appendix 2: Sample Communication to Superintendents****Email 1:**

Subject Line: INFORMATION: Impact of Schools on Rural Communities Study

Earlier this year CASS, in partnership with Bruce Schollie and Elan Buan of Schollie Research & Consulting, and CASS Life Member Dr. Dot Negropontes, submitted a proposal to an RFP issued by the Government of Alberta (GOA) to conduct a research study titled ‘The Impact of Schools on Rural Communities.’

The study was commissioned by the ministries of Education, Municipal Affairs, and Agriculture and Forestry in order to enable a better understanding of the challenges, opportunities and impacts of schools in rural communities. As stated by the GOA, the findings of the study will help inform government in its goal to provide continued support of rural education sustainability.

I am pleased to inform you that the submission was approved and we, in collaboration with representatives from the identified ministries, have begun work on the study. Bruce Schollie is serving as the Project Manager and Dot Negropontes is the lead researcher. A timeline for the study is provided later in this email.

A research plan has been developed. The overriding research objective is to understand the challenges, opportunities and the impacts of having schools in rural communities. The research plan identifies the following research questions:

1. What factors, mechanisms and processes are related to the success or failure of individual small rural schools?
2. What forms of rural cooperation, association or partnership have evolved to support the viability of rural schools?
3. What role do rural schools play in community revitalization?
4. What are the emerging models that address long-term viability of schools in dynamic rural communities?

When considering the impacts on rural communities, factors such as the type of school, the region of the province the community is located in, school closures, and enrolment trends, will be included as part of the analysis. The study will involve meaningful engagement with school authorities.

The project will provide an opportunity to highlight the broad impacts schools have on communities, inform work on rural education sustainability and continue the process of refreshing Alberta research on rural education. This project aligns with Alberta’s Rural Development Strategy, which identified the importance of rural schools and access to education as part of the learning and skill development pillar, and the Rural Economic Development Action plan, which recognizes the connection between community development and social infrastructure (such as schools) to economic development.



**Appendices**

The GOA contact responsible for the study is Karen Andrews, Director, Research for Alberta Education. She can be reached at [karen.andrews@gov.ab.ca](mailto:karen.andrews@gov.ab.ca) or 780-644-5194.

An outline of the activities that will be undertaken as part of the study is as follows:

1. Literature review
2. Phase 1 – Telephone interviews with superintendents of jurisdictions that are primarily rural, or that have small schools in rural communities (Approximately 2/3 of the superintendents of public, separate and Francophone school jurisdictions will be invited to participate in a 30 minute interview)
3. Phase 2 - Case studies involving six rural jurisdictions.

Thirty-six jurisdictions have been identified as having schools that fit the following definition of ‘rural schools,’ used in this study. A rural school is one that meets most if not all of the following criteria:

1. Remote – at least 50 kilometers from large population centres
2. Located in sparsely populated areas
3. Relatively small enrolments – fewer than 150 students
4. Is a public, separate or Francophone school

A timeline that has been established for the study is:

1. April to June 2015 – Literature Review
2. June to October 2015 – Superintendent telephone Interviews
3. January to September 2016 – Case studies
4. February 2017 – Final Report to the GOA

Immediately after I send this email to all superintendents, I will be sending emails to the superintendents of the jurisdictions that have been identified as having schools that fit the criteria outlined above. Within the second email, I will provide some background to the nature of the telephone interviews and will be asking those superintendents to reply, indicating whether they would be agreeable to participate in the interview.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Barry

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**Appendices****Email 2:**

Subject Line: INFORMATION: Impact of Schools on Rural Communities Study – Request for Telephone Interview

Superintendents

Further to my previous email sent to all superintendents (and copied in its entirety below), schools within your jurisdiction have been identified as fitting the definition of ‘rural schools,’ as presented by the research team and accepted by the GOA representatives. Included in the criteria of identifying a rural school are:

1. Remote – at least 50 kilometers from large population centres
2. Located in sparsely populated areas
3. Relatively small enrolments – fewer than 150 students
4. Is a public, separate or Francophone school

I invite you to consider participating in a telephone interview that I anticipate will be approximately 30 minutes in length. Dot Negroptones or Bruce Schollie will conduct the interviews.

The primary goals of these initial interviews are:

1. Opportunity to showcase rural school success and contribute knowledge on topic of rural school sustainability.
2. Themes of enquiry/ questions asked will relate to:
  - Factors/ mechanisms that contribute to rural schools’ success and failure
  - Experience with models, strategies or initiatives to make rural schools thrive/ revive
  - Forms of community involvement/ partnership that contribute to viability of rural schools
  - The role of schools in community sustainability/ revitalization
3. If your jurisdiction is chosen for one of the six case studies, there will be further interviews with four - six community and school stakeholders.

I anticipate that within the next week, I will be emailing you an overview of the questions that will be asked.

I will also be emailing you a consent form that you will be asked to sign and return if you agree to participate. This is a standard procedure for research studies.

It is hoped to begin the interviews as soon as the middle to end of next week, and continue until the second week of July. Interviews not completed during this time will be scheduled for the period of late August to late September, or early October if necessary.

If you agree to participate, your Executive Assistant will be contacted to arrange for a time that is convenient for you.

**Appendices**

Every effort will be made to find a time in June to interview superintendents who are retiring or moving to a different jurisdiction at the end of this school year.

Superintendents who are in the first few years with their jurisdictions and feel they may not yet possess some of the ‘corporate history’ of the jurisdiction are most welcome to have another member of their leadership team join them during the interview.

If you are willing to participate with the interview, please send me a quick reply indicating such.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Barry

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**Appendices****Appendix 3: Discussion Guide for Semi-Structured Superintendent Interview****Definition of a “Small Rural School”**

For this study, we define a small rural school as one that has an enrolment of about 150 or less, is in a sparsely populated area, is located away from larger population centres, and is in a rural area, or a village or town with less than 1,000 people (may be some variations).

**Identifying and Understanding Thriving Schools**

1. Are any of your jurisdiction’s small rural schools exceeding your expectations in terms of enrolment growth or stability?
2. For each school mentioned:
  - a. What are the factors or conditions that led to this?
  - b. Have there been any special strategies or initiatives that have been used?
  - c. What role has the community played?
  - d. What if any partnerships have been established?
  - e. What impact has this school had on the community or surrounding communities?

**Identifying and Understanding At-Risk or Declining Schools**

3. Do any of your jurisdiction’s small rural schools have declining enrolment, or are under review, considered, or trending toward possible closure or reconfiguration?
4. For each school mentioned above, ask:
  - a. What are the factors or conditions that led to this?
  - b. Have there been any special strategies or initiatives that have been used to try to prevent closure or to revitalize the school?
  - c. What role has the community played?
  - d. What if any partnerships have been established?
  - e. What impact has this school had on the community or surrounding communities?

**Identifying and Understanding Experience with School Closure**

5. Has your jurisdiction closed any schools (or grades?) in the past five years? If yes, ask:
  - a. What are the factors or conditions that led to this?
  - b. Were there been any special strategies or initiatives that have been used to try to prevent closure or revitalize the school?
  - c. What role did the community play in this process?
6. What impacts has the school closure had on:
  - a. The community?
  - b. Surrounding communities/ region/ jurisdiction?
  - c. Students, parents, staff?
  - d. Community organizations, partnerships?
  - e. Financial impacts on the jurisdiction?
7. Is the former school building being used? For?
8. Are there any school staff, administrators, and/ or central office staff who were involved in the closure still working with the Board or living in the area?

**Other Questions and Factors**

9. How many years have you been with the Jurisdiction? As superintendent?
10. What are some specific demographic and economic trends impacting schools in your jurisdiction?
11. What, if anything, is your jurisdiction doing to address the trends impacting your schools?
12. What role does a school in a small rural community play in the sustainability of a rural community?

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**Appendices****Appendix 4: Sample Case Study Discussion Guide for Adults and Students****Interview Questions for Aster School – Adults**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about 45 minutes. We would like to talk about Aster School and the surrounding community. From the interviews we do we will develop a case study describing Aster School that will provide insight across the province into the impact of rural schools on communities.

The information we are collecting today will be rolled up into a larger pool of data in the larger study. Any quotes that we may use will not be attributed to you by name in the final report, but instead to your role. (E.g. school staff, community member, municipal government member, senior district administrator). The name of the community and school will also not be used in the study to preserve anonymity. **[Tell respondent that these measures will protect their identity from the larger public, but internally they may be able to identify each other based on comments and information. Is that acceptable for them? Double check that we have signed consent forms from respondent and sign if necessary].**

**A. Definition of a “Small Rural School”**

For this study, we define a small rural school as one that has an enrolment of about 150 or less, is in a sparsely populated area, is located away from larger population centres, and is in a rural area, or a village or town with less than 1,000 people. From researching your jurisdiction and school, we identified that Aster School and the surrounding area meet this definition.

1. How many years have you been involved with Aster School and/ or the surrounding community? Did you live in the community? Describe your role at Aster School/ in the community.

**B. Identifying and Understanding Your School and Community**

1. We would like to begin by asking some questions about Aster School, the community, and the surrounding rural area.
  - a. In your experience, what do you observe to be some of the demographic and economic trends impacting your school and the surrounding community?
  - b. How have these trends impacted Aster School?
  - c. Have there been any special strategies or initiatives that have been used to address this trend and/or sustain Aster School?
  - d. What role has the community played in this strategy(ies)?
  - e. What if any partnerships have been established?
  - f. What does the future look like for Aster School?
2. What impacts or effect has Aster School had on the community and its residents?
  - a. The community in general including residents
  - b. Students, parents, staff
  - c. Community organizations, partnerships, business community
  - d. Surrounding communities/ region/ jurisdiction
  - e. Probe demographic/ economic factors
3. What role does Aster School play in the sustainability of your rural community/ area?

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Appendices

**Focus Group Interview Questions for Aster School – Students**

**A. Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about 45 minutes. We are looking to get to know Aster School.

The information we collect today will be grouped with all the other schools we are studying.

**B. Definition of a “Small Rural School”**

For this study, we are focusing on small rural schools in Alberta and Aster School meets our definition of a small rural school.

1. How many years have you attended Aster School? Do you live in Aster, nearby?

**C. Understanding Your School and Community**

4. What are some of the good things about attending a small rural school like Aster?
5. What are some of the not-so-good things about attending a small rural school like Aster?
6. How do you think having a school in Aster helps...
  - a. Community in general including the people that live there?
  - b. The school’s students, parents, staff?
  - c. Community organizations, partnerships, business community?
  - d. Surrounding communities/ region?
7. How do you think Aster School will change in the future?

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**Appendices****Interview Questions for Raven Community School (Closed) – Adults****A. Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about 45 minutes. We would like to talk about Raven Community School and the surrounding community. From the interviews we do we will develop a case study describing Raven Community School that will provide insight across the province into the impact of rural schools on communities.

The information we are collecting today will be rolled up into a larger pool of data in the larger study. Any quotes that we may use will not be attributed to you by name in the final report, but instead to your role. (E.g. school staff, community member, municipal government member, senior district administrator). The name of the community and school will also not be used in the study to preserve anonymity.

**B. Definition of a “Small Rural School”**

For this study, we define a small rural school as one that has an enrolment of about 150 or less, is in a sparsely populated area, is located away from larger population centres, and is in a rural area, or a village or town with less than 1,000 people.

1. How many years have you been involved with Raven Community School and/ or the surrounding community? Did you live in the community? Describe your role when the school was open.

**C. Identifying and Understanding Experience with School Closure**

1. What are the factors or conditions or events that led to the closure of Raven Community School?
2. Were there any strategies/ initiatives that were used to try to prevent closure or to revitalize the school?
3. How were community members or organizations involved in decision, process, and events surrounding the closure of Raven Community?
4. What impacts or effects has the school closure had on?
  - a. The community
  - b. Surrounding communities/ region/ jurisdiction
  - c. Students, parents, staff
  - d. Community organizations, partnerships
  - e. Financial impacts on the jurisdiction
5. Is the former school building being used? For?

**D. Economic and Demographic Factors**

1. In your experience, what do you observe to be some of the demographic and economic trends impacting your school and other rural schools and communities?
2. What, if anything, do you observe being done to address the trends impacting your school and other rural schools and communities?
3. What role did your school play in the sustainability of your rural community?
  - a. What could have been done differently?
  - b. What have been the pros/cons with the closure of your school?

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**Appendices****Focus Group Interview Questions for Raven Community School (Closed) – Students****A. Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview which we expect should take no longer than about 45 minutes. We are looking to gain an understanding of your closed school and how it affected you.

The data we are collecting today will become part of the data set that will inform the case study of your school, and in turn, the larger study.

**B. Definition of a “Small Rural School”**

For this study, we are focusing on small rural schools in Alberta and Raven Community School meets our definition of a small rural school.

1. How many years did you attend Raven Community School? What grade were you in when the school closed? Did you live in the community?

**C. Identifying and Understanding Experience with School Closure**

1. Why do you think Raven Community School closed? How did it make you feel when you heard the school was going to close? Happy/Sad?
2. Did you want the school to stay open? Why or why not?
3. Were you/students asked what they thought about the school closing? If so, what did you/students say? If not, what do you think you/students would have said?
4.
  - a. What are some of the good things that you’ve experienced since Raven Community School closed and you’ve gone to your new school? [Also probe about friends’/peers’ experiences.]
  - b. What are some of the not-so-good things that you’ve experienced since Raven Community School closed and you’ve gone to your new school? [Also probe about friends’/peers’ experiences.]
  - c. Do you think it is better or worse or about the same for your family now that Raven Community School has closed? Why?
  - d. What things do you miss the most about Raven Community School?