

A Case Study The Story of Pentz and Petite

The following is a case study of one school board's experience with the province's school review policy. While it is an attempt to provide an understanding of a particular context, it also illustrates how school review and closure decisions are influenced by a myriad of policies beyond the school review policy. It demonstrates the need for changes in multiple provincial policies and the need to redefine what it means to be a "community school" at the elementary level in Nova Scotia.

Is it possible in the midst of the controversy surrounding the South Shore Regional School Board's 2013 motions to close Pentz and Petite Riviere schools to provide an understanding of the context in which the motions were made and why? As its current Chair I am going to try. I sat on the eight member Board when the motions were made. Seven of the eight board members were newly elected in November 2012. We were immediately faced with the decision, already initiated by the previous provincially appointed school board, to review no less than six schools. Two of those schools were Pentz and Petite Riviere, as well as four other schools: Mill Village, Gold River, New Ross, and Hebbville. Reviews don't always result in closure. New Ross, a P to 9 school, would remain open but their grade nine students move to Forrest Heights in 2014. Hebbville, another P to 9 school, would remain the same for the time being. The Board made the decision to close four small elementary schools: Mill Village, Gold River, Pentz and Petite Riviere. According to the regulations in place at the time, all closure decisions were final and neither the School Board nor the Minister of Education could reverse them. Mill Village and Gold River schools were designated for closure the following school year. No date was set for the closure of Pentz and Petite Riviere, although the provincial policy required closure by the 5th year following a closure decision.

The 2013 motions for both the Pentz and Petite Riviere Schools consisted of two parts: to close the schools **and** apply for a new school build to accommodate both. The wording of these two motions is what created confusion regarding the Board's intent. Both schools are located just 14 kilometers from one another on the LaHave River. While the Board recognized that the students of both schools could be accommodated at Hebbville, which is where they normally attend for grades six to nine, we were seeking a different solution. Our intention in passing the motions around the closure of Pentz and Petite and asking for a new school to accommodate both communities was to move our district, and hopefully the province, to a re-imagining of community schools in rural Nova Scotia. The School Review policy provided a five-year time frame to close schools after a motion is made. It seemed a plausible time frame within which to accomplish a new school build that reflected a new vision. We believed this was particularly relevant in light of the Ivany Report's concern about the need to stem the flow of families from rural communities and provide the supports young families need to thrive and remain there. During school reviews across the province a consistent theme emerged: schools are the heart of our communities. Without our schools, families leave and communities die. How do we prevent this? It was one of the questions posed by the Ivany Report. How could we as a School Board address this problem given the constraints we faced? What were those constraints? Why were we faced with six school reviews? Let me tell you why.

First, you need to understand the context. School Boards are created by the province and report to the province through the Minister of Education and the provincial Department of Education. Their authority and role is delineated in provincial legislation, regulations and policies. School Boards are accountable to the provincial government for their implementation, or they can be dismissed. While elected by local

communities to represent them, individual board members must take a system perspective and consider the needs of all the communities within their board, not only the needs of their particular area. This system perspective is necessary to ensure equity in the provision of programs and services across the entire board. Our job is to ensure it's not just the "squeaky wheel that gets the grease."

It is not only the province's school review policy that governs school reviews. The provincial policies that influence school reviews are many. Funding is critical. Annual funding is based on the end of September student enrollment numbers per school district for each school year. Student enrollment has and continues to decline in our district and across the province, with the exception of Halifax. Declining enrollments translate into declining funds, most of which go towards staffing. Very little, less than 1%, is left to address building maintenance and repairs, which is problematic for schools built 40 to 50 years ago. Invariably school board budget decisions favor classroom programs and supports over maintenance, and some building conditions show it.

The province's space utilization formula is another constraint governing school board decisions. That formula dictates whether a school building is considered under or over-utilized based on the grade level and the number of students. Fewer students and low space utilization result in a push by the province to have school boards close schools in order to reduce excess square footage. Under-utilized school buildings are considered too expensive to maintain, particularly if space is available and students can be accommodated in neighboring schools. Often, closing small schools means that staff can be better allocated and a more robust continuum of programs and supports can be provided to more students, and include music, art, and second language programs as well more supports for students with special needs. What the province's space utilization formula does NOT take into account is travel times. Nor does it reflect new directions the province is taking to respond to knowledge in neuroscience about the importance of the early years. That is why the Department of Education is now the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Nor does it reflect the need for a more holistic approach that includes mental health supports and breakfast programs. Nor does it respond to the 2006 Nunn Commission's call for a more comprehensive integrated delivery of programs and services for children, youth and their families. That was the intent of the province's "Our Kids Are Worth It" strategy, now seemingly abandoned, although pieces of that strategy remain in the form of Schools Plus and the Early Childhood Education pilots which certainly require space in school buildings.

Our Board considered these concerns and constraints when making school review decisions. We opted for a new school build for the combined Pentz and Petite communities to change the conversation. We wanted to re-imagine the community school. We saw schools as the social infrastructure required for community sustainability, development and growth, and necessary to keep young families in rural Nova Scotia. Schools on their own cannot provide all the supports children and their families need. However, as space in schools becomes available due to declining student numbers, it provides an opportunity to take a more holistic approach.

Why not co-locate early childhood education and care, family resource, early intervention, and before and after school programs in elementary schools? Is that not the intent of the province's Early Childhood Development initiatives? Why not extend school board collaborations with municipal recreation departments, our public libraries and mental health? Why not use elementary schools as a platform for the delivery of programs that support young children and their families and enable them to thrive in rural communities where there is no public transportation and limited access to services like child care, recreation and mental health? This was the rationale for requesting a new school build

three years in a row. A new school could be a pilot that redefined a community school at the elementary level in rural Nova Scotia. A pilot with the potential to address many of the concerns identified by both the Nunn Commission and the Ivany Report.

In 2014, the province came up with a new School Review policy that included what they referred to as a Hub School. Unfortunately their Hub School was based on a business model, suitable perhaps for a commercial enterprise, but not appropriate for an essential service like public education. Which is why, while there were many attempts to establish Hub Schools, they all failed. The Hub School policy does not work. It does not support public schools to co-locate the programs and services that young families in rural communities need. Nor does it support the desired and espoused provincial goals of community sustainability and economic growth. This new provincial policy provided for broader participation by the communities affected, but it did not change the fact that closure decisions were final, nor change the funding model, nor the space utilization formula. Neither were there changes to the Hub School policy that clearly was not working. So where did that leave us as a school board?

Three times the province denied our request for a new school build for Pentz and Petite. The five year time frame for closure was approaching. Our bylaws do not allow us to rescind the motion and under the Education Act the closure decision is final. We met the condition of the motion by repeatedly applying for a new build. We had to proceed with planning and it was apparent we had to consider alternatives. Hebbville School, where the Pentz and Petite children eventually go for grades six to nine, could accommodate them from primary to five, and continue to provide space for an after-school program, as well as a preprimary program, should the province decide to fund one. In considering this possibility, the Board directed staff to explore changes to busing routes and make plans to relocate the district's assistive technology center located in Hebbville School to another location. The Board and senior staff continued to meet with both the Pentz and Petite School Advisory Committees to keep them informed and involved in planning efforts as the legal time frame for closure approached.

Recognizing that a new school build was unlikely, the Petite Riviere School Advisory Council requested that the School Board apply for a major renovation of Petite Riviere Elementary through an "Additions and Alterations" - an A&A - from the province. They obtained the support of their local MLA. The Minister of Education wrote the Board Chair suggesting that the Board rescind the closure decision for one school, Petite Riviere, and apply for an A&A for Petite. Funding through an A&A was not pre-approved however. There was no guarantee of A&A funding. According to the Minister's letter to the Board, funding would be subject to Cabinet approval.

The Pentz community wanted to know why an A&A was proposed for Petite and not Pentz Elementary School. The Pentz community made presentations to the Board proposing Pentz as a viable site for an A&A. The board asked the province to cover the cost of having an engineering firm evaluate the condition of both school buildings. The province covered the cost and it turned out Pentz was in better shape thus would be the rational choice to remain open. In addition, staff determined that revamping busing routes with Pentz as the base could better serve both school communities with an average student travel time of 30 minutes.

So what next? The Board consulted legal counsel about the Pentz and Petite closure decisions. Our legal counsel cautioned that rescinding the 2013 closure motions would contravene current legislation and require a change in legislation and the School Review policy. We discussed this with the Minister of Education who indicated the Government was not interested in making any legislative change. Doing so would set a legal precedent and could result in school closure challenges across the province. The

Minister proposed instead that the Board rescind the closure motion for Petite only, which the Board had been advised was a clear violation of the province's own School Review policy, legislation and the school board's bylaws. We found ourselves in a politically fraught predicament: competing communities, political pressures to support one community over another, no changes in provincial legislation, nor any uptake on the part of the province to re-imagine elementary schools in rural Nova Scotia. Nor did there appear to be any consideration on the part of either the province or the Greater Petite and Area Community Association about the importance of a system perspective and ensuring equity of access to ALL Board students. What about the Pentz community's desire to keep its school open? Why should millions of dollars in A&A funds be allocated to Petite Riviere when numerous other school buildings across the district were desperately in need of repairs and refurbishing? It took three years of piecemeal allotments of funds from the Province to enable the Board to repair New Ross School's leaking roof. Furthermore, the students of both Pentz and Petite could be accommodated and provided with an enhanced continuum of programs at Hebbville. And, planning by the Board's transportation department was resulting in more effective and shorter bus routes and times, similar to and often surpassing that of other areas in the school district.

Given this context, and what appeared to be the more powerful community and social capital of the Petite Riviere community, who had both the local MLA and Minister of Education's support, the Pentz community asked the Board to set a firm date for closure to put the conflict to rest. They indicated their willingness to work with the Board to plan for the transition to Hebbville. Given that the five-year time frame would expire in the spring of 2018, the Board set the date for closure of both schools as June 2018 and formally initiated transition planning for both schools. The Petite Riviere community formed the Greater Petite and Area Community Association (GPACA) and decided to challenge the closure date. They initiated a judicial review of the Board's decision. Throughout this period the Board and senior staff were disparaged by members of the GPACA as unreasonable, uncooperative and unwilling to listen. The media was more than willing to accept this perspective. Media coverage of the issues was incomplete and skewed. In fact, the board has always done its work in public, with the exception of matters related to human resources, legal and some financial, and all decisions related to Petite and Pentz were done in this manner. The provincial government was content to have the Board considered to be the problem rather than the problem being the provincial legislation and policies that govern school board closure decisions. Most problematic was the selective political support for one community, but not the many other small communities who wished to keep their schools open. Where does equity and fairness fit in this context? This concerns me greatly as it doesn't show equity for other communities. In my tenure as a school board member I found that school boards are often convenient scapegoats for deflecting blame for decisions made by Government, decisions reflected in the provincial legislation and policies that govern school boards' work.

The most troubling turn of circumstances however is the Nova Scotia Supreme Court's recent ruling in relation to the Board's decision to close Petite Riviere School. Justice Brothers called the Board's decision a violation of the duty of procedural fairness and said the Board did not conduct the community consultations required by the Province. I can say with certainty that fairness was always a guiding principle for our Board, and to state that the Board did not consult with the community is simply incorrect. The record before the court contained numerous examples of continuous ongoing communication with both communities over a five year period!

And as any Board would in similar circumstances, we consulted our legal counsel throughout the process. After the ruling, our legal counsel advised that there are several points that could go to appeal,

any of which could overturn Justice Brothers' decision. However, given the environment we find ourselves in, and the fact that if we filed an appeal it wouldn't be resolved – or possibly even heard, until after the board was dissolved, we decided not to appeal Justice Brothers' decision. We also thought it only right to extend the Petite Riviere decision to Pentz School because the 2013 motion regarding Pentz School mirrored the Petite Riviere motion. Nevertheless the Board has concerns with Justice Brothers' decision that we believe are important to put on the public record, if only because of the potential impact on other elected or appointed boards and municipal councils, as well as our future enhanced school advisory councils.

1. Justice Brothers used the minutes surrounding our 2013 closure motion to interpret the board's motion. This very fact could set a precedent that may in the future stifle open and free public debate of elected or appointed boards and municipal councils during their public meetings. The Justice did not apply the same test to the board's 2017 motion that set an exact date for the closure of Pentz and Petite, thereby contradicting herself. The 2017 motion was misinterpreted as a closure decision when the discussion around the motion clearly shows it was a simply a motion to set the closure date. This is significant!
2. Justice Brothers stated that it was unreasonable for the Board to consider the decision to close a school as final. However, both the wording of the Education Act and the actual School Review Policy plainly state that such decisions ARE final. The Board has difficulty understanding why its reliance on the plain meaning of these documents is "unreasonable".
3. The Board was criticized for seeking legal advice. However, seeking legal advice only shows that we are being responsible. Surely this is part of prudent, informed decision making. Justice Brothers also said that if the 2013 motion was straightforward, the Board would not need legal advice. It is true that the board motion consisted of two statements: the closure decision and the request to apply for a new school, and that created confusion. However, if she considered the decision was so straightforward, why did it take 34 pages and 6 months for her to render a decision?
4. We are concerned that the impact this case has on public policy is being lost in the media and the dialogue following the decision. It appears most people are looking for a "David and Goliath" story rather than recognizing a case of greater and wider impact and the need for change in provincial legislation and policies governing school districts.

While we are still here, our Board will continue to work with both the Pentz and Petite Riviere Staff and School Advisory Committees to achieve the best for their students, their families and both communities. Our intent as school board members, and in our future roles as community members, is and always will be to advocate and support schools in rural Nova Scotia while also committing to the principles of equity and fairness for all. I also want to say we are happy to have the Pentz and Petite Schools remain open, particularly if it means that they become a catalyst that prompts the Province to re-imagine elementary schools in rural Nova Scotia and create the necessary legislation and policies to support them. That was the intent of our 2013 motions and is our hope for the future!

Theresa Griffin, Board Chair
South Shore Regional School Board

GROUPTHINK

by Irving Janis

Theresa Griffin

Symptoms. In my studies of high-level governmental decision-makers, both civilian and military, I have found eight main symptoms of groupthink.

1. **INVULNERABILITY.** Most or all of the members of the in-group share an illusion of invulnerability that provides for them some degree of reassurance about obvious dangers and leads them to become over-optimistic and willing to take extraordinary risks. It also causes them to fail to respond to clear warnings of danger.
2. **RATIONALE.** Victims of groupthink ignore warnings: they also collectively construct rationalizations in order to discount warnings and other forms of negative feedback that, taken seriously, might lead the group members to reconsider their assumptions each time they recommit themselves to past decisions. James C. Thompson, Jr., a Harvard historian who spent five years as an observing participant in both the State Department and the White House, tells us that the policy-makers avoided critical discussion of their prior decisions and continually invented new rationalizations so that they could sincerely recommit themselves to defeating the North Vietnamese.
3. **MORALITY.** Victims of groupthink believe unquestionably in the inherent morality of their in-group. This belief inclines the members to ignore the ethical and moral consequences of their decisions. Evidence that this symptom is at work usually is of a negative kind - the things that are left unsaid in group meetings.
4. **STEREOTYPES.** Victims of groupthink hold stereotypes views of the leaders of enemy groups: they are so evil that genuine attempts at negotiating differences with them are unwarranted, or they are too stupid or too weak to deal effectively with whatever attempts the in-group makes to defeat their purposes, no matter how risky the attempts are.
5. **PRESSURE.** Victims of groupthink apply direct pressure to any individual who momentarily expresses doubt about any of the group's shared illusions or who questions the validity of the arguments supporting a policy alternative favored by the majority. This gambit reinforces the concurrence-seeking norm that loyal members are expected to maintain.
6. **SELF-CENSORSHIP.** Victims of groupthink avoid deviating from what appears to be group consensus; they keep silent about their misgivings and even minimize the importance of their doubts.
7. **UNANIMITY.** Victims of groupthink share an illusion of unanimity within the group concerning almost all judgments expressed by members who speak in favor of the majority view. This symptom results partly from the preceding one, whose affects are augmented by the false assumption

that any individual who remains silent during any part of the discussion is in full accord with what the others are saying. When a group of persons who respect each other's' opinions arrives at a unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This reliance on consensual validation within the group tends to replace individual critical thinking and reality testing, unless there are clear-cut disagreements among the members. To avoid such an unpleasant state, the members often become inclined, without quite realizing it, to prevent latent disagreements from surfacing when they are about to initiate a risky course of action. The group leaders and the members support each other in playing up the areas of convergence in their thinking, at the expense of fully exploring divergences that might reveal unsettled issues.

8. **MIND GUARDS.** Victims of groupthink sometimes appoint themselves as mind guards to protect the leader and fellow member from adverse information that might break the complacency they shared about the effectiveness and morality of past decisions.

Products. When a group of executives frequently have most or all of these symptoms, a detailed study of their deliberations is likely to reveal a number of immediate consequences. These consequences are, in effect, products of poor decision making practices because they lead to inadequate solutions to the problems under discussion.

- First, the group limits its discussions to a few alternative courses of action (often only two) without an initial survey of all the alternatives that might be worthy of consideration.
- Second, the group fails to re-examine the course of action initially preferred by the majority after they learn the risks and drawbacks they had not considered originally.
- Third, the members spend little or no time discussing whether there are nonobvious gains they may have overlooked or ways of reducing the seemingly prohibitive costs that made rejected alternatives appear undesirable to them.
- Fourth, members make little or no attempt to obtain information from experts within their own organizations who might be able to supply more precise estimates of potential losses and gains.
- Fifth, members show positive interest in facts and opinions that support their preferred policy; they tend to ignore facts and opinions that do not.
- Sixth, members spend little time deliberating about how the chosen policy might be hindered by bureaucratic inertia, sabotaged by political opponents, or temporarily derailed by common accidents. Consequently, they fail to work out contingency plans to cope with foreseeable setbacks that could endanger the overall success of their chosen course.

Support. The search for explanation of why groupthink occurs has led me through a quagmire of complicated theoretical issues in the murky area of human motivation. My belief, based on recent social psychological research, is that we can best understand the various symptoms of groupthink as a mutual effort among the group members to maintain self-esteem and emotional equanimity by providing social support to each other, especially at times when they share responsibility for making vital decisions.

Theresa Griffin

An opportunity exists.

Let's create the best possible education system for our children & community!

"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."
—Benjamin Franklin



Our community can lead the way and be **proactive** in deciding what happens to and in our schools. An innovative, inspired, **community-based** school system will benefit us all and **attract families & businesses** to our town. **We can make it happen!**

Let's help every child reach their full potential while instilling within them a love of learning. We need: **engaging and meaningful education** with many **experiential learning** opportunities that allow children the chance to gain the skills and knowledge they need to **find their own path**.

The vision of Sackville Schools 2020 is to see our children **thrive & reach their full potential** within an **inspired & inspiring learning community** that is supported by an **environmentally-healthy & modern** network of educational facilities.

✓ GET INVOLVED!

VISIT OUR WEBSITE TODAY...

- > News & updates
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"There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity, there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns." —Edward de Bono

IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE

The NB government is looking to update the curriculum and is considering possibilities. We can be proactive and create the model we want to see here in Sackville.

The current education system is rooted in the 19th century and fails to adequately prepare students for the changing world in which they live.

A new model, based upon 21st century guiding principles is a proven approach to learning that benefits children, parents and community members.

Investing in an innovative education system will not only help our children find their passion, but will ensure that Sackville is on the forefront of new ideas.

SO MANY REASONS TO MOVE AHEAD

Experiential learning is already happening in this community; many more opportunities exist and benefit everyone.

Sackville has already piloted many successful projects, including Salem's outdoor classroom.

We already have a community filled with amazing resources, it's time to enable better access to them to further education.

Excellence in schooling is a deciding factor for parents & businesses when considering a move to Sackville.



check it out today! → www.sackvilleschools2020.com

WHY SACKVILLE, WHY NOW?

Sackville's school **infrastructure** is crumbling; let's invest in modern, 21st Century facilities.

The government is looking to make changes---let's be **proactive** & create a **forward-looking** education system that we design as a community.

NB receives a **D** for education, among the lowest ratings in Canada; it's time for a change!

We are a small, rural town with an **integrated learning community** that would benefit from a school system that is *more* collaborative & experiential.

Education should inspire in children a **LOVE** of **LEARNING**

Sackville has passionate, skilled **teachers** that will **benefit** from an updated model that empowers them & grants greater access to local resources.

"...Given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed — it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education, but to personalize it. ...To put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions."
—Ken Robinson

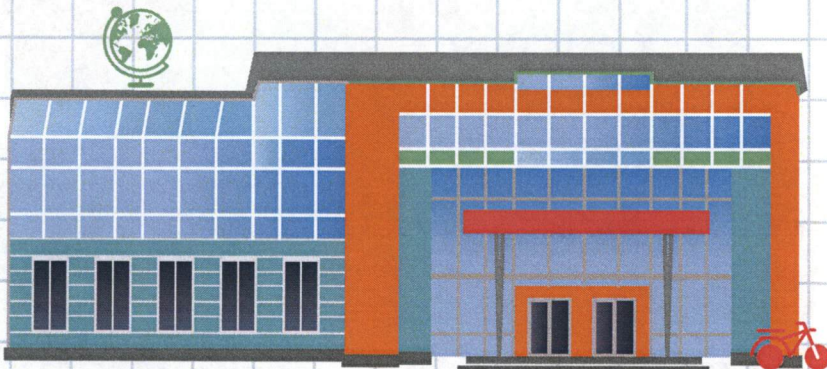
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Because existing school facilities in Sackville are outdated & need millions in repairs:

INVEST IN OUR CHILDREN'S FUTURE

Let's put our resources into building **sustainable, community-centred** educational infrastructure.

- >> healthy buildings = greater **well-being**
- >> allows **sharing** of community **resources**
- >> save us \$\$\$ in the long run!



= a community space that serves more than the school

A dynamic, healthy learning environment furthers the well-being of the whole child: head, heart & hands.

Building on this community's strengths & accessing local resources is possible with extra autonomy.

Because the current curriculum design falls short of meeting 21st century students' needs & adequately supporting teachers:

21st Century LEARNING

Let's create a Sackville model that uses these ideas as **guiding principles** & is designed with the input of **local teachers** & the **community**.



Children need to be interested in their education. They benefit from getting outside and learning through movement and hands-on activities.

The world is changing at a faster pace now than ever before. Children benefit from gaining the skills and knowledge to face future challenges.