

TRI-COUNTY REGIONAL SCHOOL BOARD
SCHOOL UTILIZATION STUDY
PART I

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**Tri-County Regional School Board
School Utilization Study
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Background.....	2
The Enrolment Decline.....	4
The Delivery of French Immersion.....	5
Early Immersion for Grade 7 Students from Meadowfields Community School.....	6
Immersion Programs in Other Schools.....	10
Immersion Programs in Other Schools.....	11
St. Mary’s Bay Academy.....	12
Schools Not Recommended to Be Identified for the School Review Process.....	13
Barton Elementary School.....	14
Digby Neck Elementary School.....	16
School Recommended to Be Identified for the School Review Process.....	16
Cape Sable Island Elementary School and Clark’s Harbour Elementary School.....	16
Westport Village Elementary School.....	18
Coming Up in Part II.....	19
APPENDIX A.....	20

Tri-County Regional School School Utilization Study Part I

Background

In the spring of 2008, the Tri-County Regional School Board called for a comprehensive review of the educational programs being delivered in each of its schools with the overall purpose of understanding what is in place and determining how the program delivery can be improved for students.

The overall purpose was defined specifically in a series of questions. The first 4 questions, with a focus on the program delivery in the schools, were answered through Phase I and Phase II of the Program Review. The results of Phase I were reported in a "Discussion Paper" released as public document in February, 2009. This discussion paper provided a basis for 8 school community consultation sessions which were completed in May and June. These sessions led to a second paper entitled, "Program Review Final Recommendations", which was received by the Tri-County Regional School Board in January, 2010.

Phase III, a "School Utilization Study" is the final component of the Program Review. The following questions define the specific purpose of the School Utilization Study:

1. How can the school facilities be utilized more effectively and efficiently to deliver the educational programs?
2. What are the educational and financial implications of the recommendations?
3. What is a reasonable timeline in implementing the recommendations?

Whereas Phase I and II were about the delivery of programs and services in each school, school utilization is about possible permanent school closures and changes to school boundaries and/or grade level configurations. A paper entitled, "School Utilization Study: Processes and Primary Issues" was prepared by this consultant and released by the TCRSB as one of the discussion papers for the Phase II consultation sessions. (Relevant portions of this document are repeated in Appendix A.)

This School Utilization Study is being carried out and reported in 2 parts. The Part I conclusions presented in this paper come now with some urgency because final board decisions must be made as soon as possible in planning for the next school year or to meet a legislated timeline for the School Review process as defined in the Ministerial Education Act Regulations. The conclusions that will follow in Part II do not have the same urgency and more time is needed to complete the study. The target is to complete the Part II report before the middle of March.

One recommendation from the first 2 phases of the Program Review expanded the scope of this third phase beyond the consideration of school closures and changes to boundaries and/or grade configurations. It was recommended that the offering of Immersion in the elementary and secondary schools be given attention during the school utilization study primarily because of the declining enrollment in the school system. The rationale for this recommendation was stated as follows in the Final Recommendations report:

French Immersion is offered in a significant number of elementary and secondary schools under the jurisdiction of the TCRSB. Depending mainly on the number of students enrolled in Immersion and the total enrolment of the school, it can be difficult to effectively offer both Immersion and English programs in the same school. The presence of both programs can create challenges in matching teacher qualifications to teaching assignments, in balancing class sizes, and in being able to give high schools students the courses they have requested.

Because some decisions related to the delivery of French Immersion must be made as soon as possible in preparation for the next school year, some conclusions about the Immersion program delivery were viewed in this study as more urgent than others so they are presented in this paper---*further observations and conclusions will be made about Immersion in Part II as well.*

The Enrolment Decline: The need for this study is based primarily on the fact that the TCRSB school enrolments have been in serious decline for many years as they have been in most areas of Nova Scotia, Atlantic Canada and beyond. Over the same years, many schools built in the 1950's, 60's and 70's, have aged to the point of needing to be upgraded to modern standards or to be replaced. Given that many of these same schools are now under-utilized because of the declining enrolments, the Board's decision to initiate a school utilization study is both timely and responsible.

But difficult decisions come with a heavy responsibility. It is an understatement to say that the Tri-County Regional School Board must make some very difficult choices in the best interests of all its students and schools, knowing that the expectations of all families and students cannot be met satisfactorily.

The total enrolment of the TCRSB in 1996-97 was 9,057. It remained fairly stable until 1999-00, at 8945, but then it started a steep decline. Over the last ten years, it has declined by 20%, to 7192 as of September 30, 2009. Looking at the past 5 years, it has decreased by 14% (from 8370). According to an enrolment projection prepared by the Department of Education in August of 2009, the enrolment is expected to decrease somewhat steadily over the next 10 years and then less so after that. This projected decline is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: TCRSB Enrolment Projection for Next 20 Years

2009-10	2014-15	2019-20	2024-25	2029-30
7023	5857	4923	4324	4073

It is important to acknowledge that 20-year enrolment projections should not be given significant weight because community and demographic circumstances can change over such a long period. *The common practice in public education is to give weight to 5-year projections.*

Nevertheless, those who must plan for the future should be at least aware of the possibilities. If the enrolment projection proves to be accurate, the TCRSB enrolment will have dropped from 8945 in 2000 to 4073 in 2030, a decline of 54%. From many perspectives, 30 years is a long time, but not so from the perspective of building new schools or carrying out major renovations. The schools built in the next 10 years will still be relatively new in 2030.

Another observation seems noteworthy. Although the data show that the enrolment decline will continue, they show also that the rate of decline will diminish. This evidence is reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentage Decrease in 5-year Intervals

2010 to 2015	2015 to 2020	2020 to 2025	2025 to 2030
17%	16%	12%	6%

Obviously, the system-wide enrolment data for the TCRSB are relevant in any analysis of how school facilities are being used and how they should be used in the future. Equally so, the data are relevant in an analysis of the delivery of French Immersion.

The Delivery of French Immersion

As explained above, the offering or delivery of French Immersion was to be given attention during this final phase of the overall study primarily because of the declining enrolment. In no way should the following analysis be interpreted as a questioning of the educational value of French Immersion as an optional program in public schools. This analysis and the conclusions are underlain by the assumption that Immersion has significant educational value. *Only the viability and sustainability of the Immersion program and the impact on the delivery of other programs are under review here.*

The main approach was to review, from this consultant's external perspective, the results of an internal study completed in April, 2009. Based on the work of a sub-committee of the Board, a report on French Immersion Programs (Report #62-09) was submitted to the Board on April 21, 2009 by the Superintendent of Schools, the Director of Programs and Student Services and the Coordinator of FSL Programs. This report contained 6 recommendations related to the delivery of Immersion at individual schools. This analysis (in Part I and Part II) takes a second look at the rationale behind these recommendations and offers some conclusions for consideration by the Board.

Various consultations were taken to understand the issues. These included interviews with principals and regional administrators and 2 school meetings to hear from parents and staff members of Meadowfields Consolidated School and Yarmouth Central Elementary School.

Some General Observations: Before moving on to address the situations in individual schools, the following observations came to mind as being particularly relevant to any consideration of the delivery of French Immersion in the TCRSB.

Many communities within region of the Tri-County Regional School Board reflect a strong French history and culture. The Conseil Scholaire Acadien Provincial (CSAP) serves the francophone students and families in its own schools in the same areas. Because many of the TCRSB families are francophone, their children could be attending CSAP schools instead. This factor is acknowledged as one that creates tension from time-to-time because both school boards are trying to adapt to the enrolment declines while serving the same communities. Although the possibility of tension over declining enrolments is acknowledged, this is not to say that it should be a barrier to making decisions in the best interest of all students, both those in the Immersion programs and those in the English programs. The families who have francophone entitlement are fortunate to have the choice of attending school in one system or the other.

The importance of the French history and culture in some communities of TCRSB is evident in another way. Table 3 presents data on the relative percentages of Grade P-6 students in Early Immersion, during this school year, in the schools that offer Immersion. The highest percentage (59%) is at Drumlin Heights School and the next highest are at Plymouth School (51%) and Yarmouth Central Elementary School (45%). The lowest percentages are at Meadowfields Community School (29%) and Evelyn Richardson Elementary School (22%). *To have 40% to 60% of an elementary school population in French Immersion is unusual and demonstrates the relative level of interest in Immersion. This level of interest should be a factor of considerable weight.*

Table 3: Percentage of Grade P-6 Students in Early Immersion in 2009-10

	P-6 Enrolment	Immersion	% Immersion
Digby Elementary School	390	126	32%
Drumlin Heights School	171	101	59%
Evelyn Richardson Elementary	137	30	22%
Meadowfields Community School	509	147	29%
Plymouth School	109	56	51%
Weymouth Consolidated School	242	79	33%
Yarmouth Central School	203	91	45%

These general observations were kept in mind in developing the conclusions drawn with respect to individual school programs.

Early Immersion for Grade 7 Students from Meadowfields Community School:

The senior staff recommendation put forward last April is that “the Early French Immersion program be housed at Yarmouth Junior High School to serve both Town and County students”. If approved by the Board, the Grade 6 students in Immersion at Meadowfields Community School will move on to Yarmouth Junior High School in Grade 7 next fall, rather than going to Maple Grove Education Centre (MGEC). Presently there is no Early Immersion program at MGEC.

A proposed new school configuration and amalgamation of schools in Yarmouth is particularly important in this consideration. If approved by the Board, South Centennial Elementary School (SCES) and Yarmouth Central Elementary School (YCES) will be combined, in a newly renovated Grade P-8 school along with Grades 7 and 8 from Yarmouth Junior High School. This new P-8 configuration could be operating within the next 5 years on the site of Yarmouth Junior High School and Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School and across the street from YCES.

In trying to draw a conclusion, it seems important to take the perspective that all Grade P-6 students in the Yarmouth area could be housed in one of two schools within the next 5 years, MCS or the new P-8 school. From this perspective, the combined elementary grade enrolment in the P-8 school is critical as are the enrolment history and projection for MCS.

The 5-year elementary enrolment histories for the schools involved in this analysis are reported in Table 4 and 5---all historical data are “official” September 30 enrolments.

Table 4: 5-Year Enrolment History, MCS and MGEC

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
MCS	540	526	483	516	509
MGEC	485	444	441	468	472

Table 5: 5-Year Enrolment History, SCES and YCES Combined

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
SCES	148	178	166	136	125
YCES	293	272	252	220	203
Total	441	450	418	356	328

According to Table 4, the MCS and MGEC enrolments for this school year and last year show increases compared to a decline in the previous 3 years. The increase showing in 2009-10 is actually due to the magnitude of the increase in 2008-09. Overall, MCS has decreased by 6% and MGEC by 3% in the past 5 years.

The longer term data for MCS is noteworthy in this consideration because no decline is evident as it is in the school system. When the school opened in 1999-2000, the enrolment was 506. Although there has been some variability over the past 10 years with a peak at 540 in 2005-06, overall the enrolment is stable.

According to Table 5, SCES shows a significant increase in 2006-07 and then a significant, continuous decline over the next 3 years. To those who are familiar with the history of the school and community, the variability in the enrolment of SCES is not surprising because of how a relatively large number of families with young children can move into or out of the school's catchment area from one year to the next. The YCES enrolment does not show the same variability and shows a continuous decline---31% over the past 5 years. SCES has decreased by 16% over the past 5 years.

Looking at the data more closely, the increase of 33 for MCS in 2008-09 may be related to the significant decreases of 30 and 32 for SCES and YCES in the same year. Whether or not this shift is an anomaly or a part of a trend will not be known for a few years.

The method for calculating the enrolment projections in Table 6 and 7---and other projections in this paper---should be explained. The elementary school enrolments in each grade are simply carried forward with the assumption that the number of children moving from an area will balance with those moving into an area, unless there are known demographic factors that would cause a shift in this balance. To verify the accuracy of this method for each school, the enrolments of one or two grades are tracked from Grade Primary to Grade 6 to confirm the constancy from year to year.

The projection of the Grade Primary enrolment is more difficult because accurate data is not accessible. There was a time when Nova Scotia school systems and the Department of Education could have access to detailed information about families and their children, especially the birth dates and addresses. This detail allowed educators to predict with some accuracy the number of children who would enter Grade Primary each year. Now, because of the Freedom of Information and Protection of privacy legislation

in Nova Scotia, Department of Health officials cannot share data as easily as in the past. Educators must estimate the numbers based on their own internal data.

In this case, the consultant looked at the Grade Primary data trend for the past 5 years for each school and, based on that trend, made a somewhat arbitrary assumption to project the next 5 years. Also, the 5-year history for Grade Primary and the assumption made to project the next 5-years were discussed with each principal. Because of the method used, the total enrolments projected for each school should be viewed as rough estimates based on enrolment histories and arbitrary assumptions.

Another step was followed to substantiate the method being used. The Grade Primary enrolments for each school were tracked over the last decade and then compared to the total enrolments for the same time. In all cases, the Grade Primary enrolments correspond or correlate closely with the elementary school total enrolments.

The projection for MCS in Table 6 shows a small increase over the next 5 years.

Table 6: 5-Year Enrolment Projection, MCS

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
MCS	498	509	508	511	520

The combined total projection for SCES and YCES in Table 7 shows a more significant decline of 15%.

Table 7: 5-Year Enrolment Projection, SCES and YCES Combined

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
SCES	131	127	127	118	116
YCES	197	192	187	170	162
Total	328	319	314	288	279

Because of the particular attention being given to Immersion at Yarmouth Central Elementary School, it is worthy to note, as reported in Table 8, that the percentage of Grade P-6 students in Early Immersion has been over 50% during the past 5 years, except for this year. Data for Meadowfields Community School (MCS) cannot be reported in the same way because Early Immersion started there only 7 years ago. To offer some type of comparison, the percentage of Grade P-5 students at MCS in Early Immersion in 2008-09 was 29%, the same percentage as that of the Grade P-6 students in Immersion this year---at least the percentage over 2 years remained exactly the same.

Table 8: Percentage of Grade P-6 Students in Early Immersion at YCES

2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
56%	59%	55%	50%	45%

Another set of data demonstrates the relatively high level of commitment of families in Yarmouth to Immersion. Table 9 reports the number of elementary school students that transferred from Immersion to the English program over at least a 7-year period---not necessarily the same period. MCS is not included in the table because Immersion has not been operating for a full 7 years in the school. The data shows that the rate of transfer from Immersion for YCES, 16%, is the lowest percentage of all the elementary schools that offer Immersion.

Table 9: Percentage of P-6 Student Transfers from Immersion to English Program

	Digby Elementary	Drumlin Heights	Evelyn Richardson	Plymouth School	Weymouth Consolidated	YCES
Percentage	42%	19%	33%	33%	41%	16%

The main question being addressed in this section is about the location of Grade 7 Early Immersion for the students of Meadowfields Community School in September, 2010. Should it be located at Yarmouth Junior High School or should a new program be started at Maple Grove Education Centre? Table 10 combines the present Early Immersion enrolments of MCS and YCES at each grade. This data indicates the class sizes that can be expected over the next 7 years, assuming all students would remain in the program. Conservatively, the YCES 16% rate of transfer from Immersion to the English program could have been applied to the data to predict more realistic class sizes.

Table 10: Combined Immersion Enrolments, 2009-10

	Primary	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
MCS	19	26	19	25	20	22	16
YCES	16	11	12	15	9	15	13
Total	35	37	31	40	29	37	29

Based on this data in Table 10, it should be possible to accommodate all the Immersion students in a single classroom, assuming that some students would transfer to the English program if it was offered in either MGEC or YJHS. If the enrolments remained fairly constant, then 2 classes might be required for the students presently in Grade 1 and Grade 3.

In coming to a conclusion on the question at hand, the following are viewed as critical factors:

- The enrolment of Meadowfields Community School has remained quite stable overall, since it opened in 1999-2000, while those of all other schools in the region have decreased. *Furthermore, MCS is at its optimum capacity as a facility.* If the enrolment starts to increase over the next 5 to 10 years, adjustments in school boundaries and grade configurations may be necessary.
- The level of interest in Immersion of the families of YCES is one of the highest in the school system. Furthermore, the percentage of Immersion students transferring to the English program is the lowest in the school system---with the acknowledgement that comparable data is unavailable for MCS.
- It is reasonable to expect that more students from the catchment area of South Centennial Elementary School will choose Immersion if it is offered from Grade Primary to Grade 8 in the new P-8 configuration in Yarmouth.
- Presently, buses travel from the areas MGEC and MCS because the high school is situated beside the YJHS---this circumstance will change somewhat when the new high school begins operation.

The following conclusions are based on the information and factors presented above.

Conclusion 1

No decisions should be made that would contribute to an increase in the enrolment of Meadowfields Community School and a corresponding decrease in the Yarmouth elementary grades. In other words, preventing MCS from becoming an overcrowded school should have high priority.

Conclusion 2

A decision to house Grade 7, 8 and 9 Early Immersion at Maple Grove Education Centre and not at the newly configured P-8 school in Yarmouth would most likely lead to MCS becoming overcrowded.

Conclusion 3

The Early Immersion program should remain at Yarmouth Junior High School for all Immersion students from Meadowfields Community School, Yarmouth Central Elementary School and South Centennial Elementary School.

Conclusion 4

If the Early Immersion enrolments increase once the new P-8 configuration in Yarmouth is fully operational, the present class sizes demonstrate the real possibility that 2 classes may be necessary in Grade 7 and 8. If so, the option of providing Early Immersion at both the Yarmouth P-8 site and Maple Grove Education Centre could be considered. Given the level of interest in Immersion in the Yarmouth area, this is a possibility a few years from now.

One of the concerns expressed by families during a meeting at Meadowfields Community School is acknowledged and was given much thought by the consultant. Several, although not all, spoke about their discomfort in sending their children to what they perceived as the less secure environment of a town school where students have more freedom to come and go during the school day. The concern of these families, who are used to the environment and ways of a rural school as compared to those of a school in the middle of a town, is understandable. Nevertheless, from professional and personal experience in large rural schools and town schools, the consultant has a high level of confidence in saying that the level of safety and security for students in town schools is comparable to that of a rural school. Students can do things they shouldn't be doing at lunchtime in the hallways and fields of a large rural school just as they can on the streets of a downtown area. Students who spend their lunch hour on the streets and in the food establishments of a town are constantly in the presence of adults.

As a final footnote to this section, further observations or conclusions about the delivery of French Immersion in the Yarmouth area may be forthcoming in the Part II of this study. They will come out of a consideration of the future use and possible configurations of Maple Grove Education Centre, Arcadia Elementary School, Plymouth School and the new high school in Yarmouth.

Immersion Programs in Other Schools

The delivery of Immersion in the following schools was addressed in the April, 2009 senior staff report to the TCRSB: Evelyn Richardson Memorial Elementary School (ERMES), St. Mary's Bay Academy (SMBA), Shelburne Regional High School (SRHS) and Drumlin Heights Consolidated School (DHCS). Conclusions regarding the staff

recommendations with respect to two of these schools are put forward here and some will follow in the next report.

Table 11 reports the 5-year enrolment history for Evelyn Richardson Memorial Elementary School.

Table 11: 5-Year Enrolment History, ERMES

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
ERMES	212	181	169	173	147

The enrolment decline of 31% is significant but, because of the nature of the historical data, a reasonably accurate enrolment projection is very difficult. Over the past 5 years, the Grade Primary enrolment has varied significantly from 17 to 26. Depending on the Grade Primary enrolment in each of the next 5 years, the total enrolment could remain quite stable or it could drop noticeably. There is no evidence to suggest it will increase.

Even if the enrolment remains fairly stable, the grade level enrolments in French Immersion are already very low, as reported in Table 12.

Table 12: 2009-10 Early Immersion Enrolments for ERMES

Gr. P	Gr. 1	Gr. 2	Gr. 3	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6
2	7	1	5	3	5	7

Two combined classes of Immersion are in place this year at ERMES, a Grade P-2 class and a Grade 3-6 class. With only 2 students in Grade Primary and 1 in Grade 2, the concern is obvious. Because of the extremely low Immersion enrolments, the normal small school risks of being unable to meet the program requirements effectively from year to year are accentuated or aggravated.

There is no reason to suggest that a particular problem exists in the Immersion program delivery this year. The students and families are fortunate to have teachers who are able to provide the program effectively in the combined classes. But experience shows the potential for problems from year to year are related to factors such as teacher turnover, difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified teachers and the particular learning and behavior needs of students who may be in the combined classes.

What if only 2 or 3 students join the program over the next 3 years? It is not unreasonable to anticipate the possibility that the total P-6 Immersion enrolment could be less than 20. Would this mean a combined class of Grade P-6?

Quite simply, the enrolments are too low to say that Immersion at ERMES is sustainable, even if it could be called viable.

The impact of such small enrolments on the effective delivery of a particular program is not the only issue in a situation such as this one. There is a matter of fairness and perceived fairness for all students and families to be considered. If 2 teachers are offering an optional program to a relatively small number of students, how does this affect the program delivery for the other students and the perceptions of fairness? There may be no problems or concerns now, but the risks to problems arising quickly are high.

Last April, the senior staff recommended the following:

That the Board, for at least one more year, continues the Early Immersion program at Evelyn Richardson Memorial Elementary School with the understanding that there will be no guarantee that the program will not be cut at a particular point in time or that it will continue beyond Grade 6.

Because the Immersion enrolments are very low already, with no reason to expect an increase, the recommendation from senior staff was reasonable and understandable at the time. Adding to the seriousness of the situation, the total enrolment of ERMES has dropped by 26 or 15% since the recommendation was formulated last April. There is little choice but to conclude the following.

Conclusion 5

The Early Immersion program at Evelyn Richardson Memorial Elementary School is not sustainable and should be discontinued immediately or phased out over the next few years. Consultation with families should occur before the decision is made to discontinue the whole program for September of this year or to phase it out over several years.

The serious difficulties implicit in these conclusions are obvious to the consultant. These are some of the most obvious:

- Commitments made to families who chose Immersion for their children cannot be kept. Some ways of compromise must be considered carefully and additional, temporary or transitional financial costs should be absorbed.
- Some children may require additional support to ease the transition into the English program.
- The loss of Immersion at ERMES will have a negative impact on the Immersion program at Barrington Municipal High School.

It is important to emphasize that the position taken here with respect to the situation at ERMES is based on the educational or program delivery challenges and risks, not on any obvious financial benefit or advantage under the present circumstances. Generally, teaching positions can be found or saved when very small classes are eliminated and integrated with already larger classes. With the present grade level enrolments at ERMES, it would be difficult to offer the English program next year if the classroom teacher allocation was reduced by the elimination of Immersion. *In the long term and in most small schools, it is normal to expect that optional programs such as Immersion require additional teaching positions. The situation at each school has to be assessed on its own and depends of the numbers from year to year.*

St. Mary's Bay Academy: Based on the senior staff recommendation in April, an Early Immersion "lead" class was started in Grade 7 at SMBA in September. This new Grade 7 class enabled the Grade 6 Immersion students from Weymouth Consolidated School (WCS) to continue in Immersion. This new class started in September with an enrolment of 8.

Table 13 provides the Immersion class sizes at WCS this year. These are low, especially in Grade 5 and 6. A problem is obvious. For at least the next 2 years at SMBA, the Grade 7, 8 and 9 Immersion students should expect to be in a combined class with a total possible enrolment of 17, unless other Immersion students move to the

area. This situation and the low enrolments in the elementary grades, lead to the following conclusions.

Table 13: 2009-10 Early Immersion Enrolments for WCS

Gr. P	Gr. 1	Gr. 2	Gr. 3	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6
9	18	11	17	15	4	5

Also, the potentially negative impact on the delivery of the Grade 7, 8 and 9 programs at SMBA is viewed as a significant factor. The junior high enrolments in the English program are already at the lower limit of what they should be. Trying to offer Early Immersion in Grade 7-9 will create new problems or barriers for both programs.

There can be little question that trying to sustain Immersion in the junior high grades will have a financial cost after each of the “lead” classes have received the one-time 70% funding support. Three years from now, the teaching positions required to provide Immersion along with the English programs would be an added cost. *The TCRSB should give careful thought to whether or not this additional funding could be used to meet some of the many other program and student services needs of this junior high and others.*

Conclusion 6

This consultant is unable to support or endorse the continuance of Early Immersion at St. Mary’s Bay for the students from Weymouth Consolidated School.

Conclusion 7

The Immersion students from WCS can access Early Immersion in the established program at Digby Regional High School.

The extra distance of having to travel to Digby is acknowledged but it is not viewed as a major barrier. The educational advantage of being able to access Immersion in a firmly established, viable program should be given greater weight than the disadvantage of distance.

As noted earlier, there are other matters to discuss with respect to the delivery of Immersion in the TCRSB schools, but more analysis is necessary. In Part II of this study, the circumstances at the other schools in which Immersion is offered will be addressed. Also, more general observations or conclusions about the delivery of Immersion may result after further analysis.

Schools Not Recommended to Be Identified for the School Review Process

This section and the next are about identifying schools to be considered for closure. This is the first decision-making stage that may cause a school review to start. *The question is not about whether or not a school should be closed. It is only about whether or not a school should be considered for closure. Such a consideration through the School Review process provides the opportunity for school staff and community to have public input into a process that spans a year.*

Not all schools studied by the consultant are being recommended to the Board to be identified for the School Review process. The reasons for studying them are explained, as are the reasons for not recommending them to be identified.

Table 14 reports the enrolment histories for Barton Elementary School (BES), Cape Sable Island Elementary School (CSIES), Clark’s Harbour Elementary School (CHES), Digby Neck Elementary School (DNES) and Westport Village Elementary School (WVES). Table 15 reports the 5-year enrolment projections for the same schools.

Table 14: 5-Year Enrolment History

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
BES	81	79	64	63	58
CSIES	120	95	94	87	89
CHES	125	128	126	122	115
DNES	59	47	44	39	36
WVES	15	16	15	16	12

Table 15: 5-Year Enrolment Projection

	2010-11	2011-12	2011-13	2013-14	2014-15
BES	54	55	53	47	50
CSIES	92	94	87	79	81
CHES	109	110	115	114	110
DNES	37	36	37	33	30
WVES	13	11	11	10	9

Earlier in this paper, the method used to project enrolments was explained. The method used to prepare some of the projections in Table 15 was modified.

The Grade Primary projected enrolments for Barton Elementary are based on a look at the 10 year history and on an actual figure for this coming September. The Principal of BES was able to contact families to find that at least 8 will be starting school in the fall.

Actual Grade Primary enrolments were determined for Digby Neck Elementary School. The Principal and the SAC Chair met with families from the community to determine the specific number of children who will enter Grade Primary over each of the next 5 years, assuming that no families move away from or to the area.

Barton Elementary School: This school could not be ignored as one that might be considered for closure because its enrolment is low and has been declining and, furthermore, it is located a relatively short distance from Weymouth Consolidated School and Digby Elementary School. In terms of distance and compared to many communities in Nova Scotia, the students could go to either school or both if their school was closed. But the reasons to not rush to consider closure are explained below.

On one hand, the enrolment is at least approaching the level of being too small and below an optimum level for the effective delivery of the educational program. On the other hand, the rate of decline has leveled out over the past 3 years and the projection indicates that the enrolment may be stabilizing.

From various conversations about the community served by Barton Elementary, the local mink industry is stable or even showing signs of growth and no major demographic shifts are anticipated that might affect the enrolment.

To say the enrolment is below optimum level is not say that problems are evident or should be expected under the present circumstances. From all the anecdotal comments during discussions about the school, student achievement is as it should be, families are very supportive and an experienced staff seems committed to remaining for the foreseeable future. Staff turnover is not anticipated as a problem.

As a facility, BES does not have the spaces and services of a modern or contemporary school facility. It is lacking because it has no cafeteria, gymnasium, art room or the other student services spaces found in newer schools. Although the school is lacking as a facility, the staff have been able to deliver the required and extra-curricular programs for many years with acceptance and support from the families and the school community.

The financial impact of a school closure is a major factor. Under the provincial funding formula for school boards, the low enrolment of Barton Elementary brings additional revenue to the TCRSB through what is known as the “small school factor”. When a “small school” is closed, the board loses this additional revenue. The financial comparison of revenue against expenditures for BES in the past fiscal year demonstrates no significant financial advantage to closing the school. Although the cost of operating the facility and some staff positions would be eliminated, the “small school factor” revenue would be withdrawn from the Board’s funding and most of the teaching positions allocated to the school would be transferred to the school or schools where the students would be accommodated.

Again on the financial side, the facility is old but in good condition and no major capital repairs are necessary in the near future. When major capital repairs and upgrades become necessary, then the TCRSB and the school community should not anticipate that support would come easily from the provincial government. It is unreasonable to expect that scarce capital revenues would be assigned to such a small school located between 2 elementary schools of fairly close proximity.

In summary, no obvious problem exists presently or is anticipated that creates an urgency to identify Barton Elementary School for consideration of closure, thus, the following conclusions.

Conclusion 8

Barton Elementary School need not be identified to be considered for closure through the School Review process under the present circumstances.

Conclusion 9

The possibility of having to consider closure within the next 5 years or so should be anticipated. If the enrolment shows a continued decline, then the potential for problems that come with trying to deliver the educational program in a very small school will be greater. Also, this old facility cannot last indefinitely without major capital upgrades and the Board and school community should not expect that funding capital funding support would be approved.

Digby Neck Elementary School

The circumstances for Digby Neck Elementary School are very similar to those for Barton Elementary School. The enrolment, although smaller, may not decline as much in the next few years, the facility is in good condition, and there is no financial advantage to closing the school. But one circumstance is different.

A major mitigating factor would have to be weighed carefully in any consideration of closure for DNES: The distance to each of the neighboring schools is greater than what is commonly acceptable in Nova Scotia. Islands Consolidated School is to the west on Long Island, by ferry, and Digby Elementary School is about 35 Kilometers to the east.

The long term future of this school should be considered through the School Review process, but for the same reasons put forward for the BES conclusions, there is no urgency to identifying DNES to go through the process right away. Within the next few years, more will be known about the stability of the enrolment and another situation gives a reason to hold off the review process.

Islands Consolidated School on Long Island is a very old facility in need of repair and upgrade. It is the professional opinion of this consultant that the school should be replaced with a new school. It is beyond the age and condition to say that a major renovation would be feasible. Any consideration about the future of DNES should be tied to a consideration about replacing Islands Consolidated School.

More will be said about the situation for Islands Consolidated in Part II of this study. For now, the following conclusions are based on the same reasons as those put forward for Barton Elementary.

Conclusion 10

Digby Neck Elementary School need not be identified to be considered for closure through the School Review process under the present circumstances.

Conclusion 11

The possibility of having to consider closure within the next 5 years or so should be anticipated. If the enrolment shows a continued decline, then the potential for problems that come with trying to deliver the educational program in a school which is already very small will be high. Also, this old facility cannot last indefinitely without major capital and upgrades.

School Recommended to Be Identified for the School Review Process

In terms of the provincial legislation, this section could be formally called an "Identification Report" because it presents the case for particular schools to be identified to be taken through the formal "School Review" process (Sections 14 to 21 of the Ministerial Education Act Regulations). According to this legislation, schools must be identified by a school board by April 1 so that the review process can be carried out over the next year.

Cape Sable Island Elementary School and/or Clark's Harbour Elementary School

Data on the enrolments of these schools, CSIES and CHES, are presented in Table 14 and 15. The enrolment of CSIES has declined by 26% over the past 5 years and that of CHES has declined by 8%. The 5-year projections predict that CSIES will continue to decline noticeably and CHES will remain stable.

The main observation from the enrolment data is that the 2 schools can be amalgamated. Five years ago, the total enrolment of the 2 schools was 245. In five years time, the projected total enrolment will be 191. This combined enrolment gives a more optimum size for an elementary school in terms of being able to deliver the educational program effectively, especially if the schools are amalgamated into a newly renovated facility with new classrooms added.

These 2 schools are in relatively close proximity on Cape Sable Island. As fairly old facilities, they have been maintained well, but both need modern capital upgrades. In fact, the TCRSB has decided that one of these schools should receive major renovations and the Department of Education has responded positively. Based on their condition and upgrade requirements, either facility could be selected for a major renovation and expansion.

The only question now is about which school should be renovated and which should be closed. Although some decisions have been made by the Board and the Department of Education, with some input from the school communities and municipal governments, the fact remains that one or both the schools have not been taken through the School Review process to consider a school closure. *The Education Act requires that the School Review process be applied when a school is to be closed, unless it is to be replaced by a new school.*

In this case, the consultant understands that the TCRSB first selected Cape Sable Island Elementary to be renovated, then later reversed the decision. Most recently, in a separate decision, it selected Clark's Harbour Elementary as the school to be upgraded and expanded. The Department of Education has approved the capital renovation and addition of classes but has not specified either of the schools.

The two schools are administered as one school under the authority of one principal and one School Advisory Council. According to the Ministerial Regulations, the School Advisory Council assumes the duties of the School Review Committee when a school is being taken through the process. Whether a single school or both are identified for the School Review process, the same members of the SAC would have to carry out the review.

If the consultant understands the circumstances correctly, 2 options seem possible from which the Board can choose to move this amalgamation and renovation project forward.

Conclusion 12

Option 1 assumes that the Board has to stay with its most recent decision on this matter. Clark's Harbour Elementary School would get the renovations and additional classrooms and Cape Sable Island Elementary School would be closed. Thus, CSIES would have to be identified to be considered for closure.

This first option is simply a consideration of whether or not the two schools should be amalgamated at Clark's Harbour Elementary. There is a risk that the funding commitment already made by the Department of Education to upgrade only one of the schools would be put on hold if the School Review process did not result in CSIES being closed.

Conclusion 13

This second option, if it is not too late to be considered, would allow both Cape Sable Island Elementary School and Clark's Harbour Elementary School to be identified to be taken through the School Review process. A decision to identify both schools for the review would determine which school should be closed and which should be renovated and expanded to accommodate the students from both schools.

Under this option, if both these schools are identified by the TCRSB for School Review, then detailed school impact assessment reports would have to be completed and released publicly. After release of those reports, the School Advisory Council, acting officially as the School Review Committee would have ample time to respond formally with its own report. As part of the review process, the School Review Committee would have to hold a public meeting in the community. This would provide an opportunity for open community input into the location of the school and the members of both school communities would be involved.

Westport Village Elementary School

Although the official September 30 enrolment of Westport Village Elementary School (WVES) this year is 12, the actual enrolment is 11. The school has continued to operate with a low enrolment until now because it is located on Briar Island. The students travel by ferry to Islands Consolidated for Grade 7 to 12.

The 5-year projection in Table 15 for Westport Village Elementary School is quite arbitrary. There are no students in Grade Primary this year and few actual data are available yet for next year. The Principal is aware that 2 students will enter Grade Primary next year and there are other pre-school age children who will start within the next 5 years. The projection assumes there will be 2 students in Grade Primary next year and 1 each year after that. The difficulty in trying to project such a small enrolment is that the loss or gain of 1 or 2 students makes a significant difference in the total. The main point of the projection is to emphasize that there is no reason to believe the enrolment will increase.

As a facility, although it has been maintained well, it is seriously lacking in terms of what a school should have for instructional and extra-curricular spaces. The main problem is that the students must walk quite a distance, or be transported by bus, for physical education.

Regarding the delivery of the educational program, there is no evidence of a concern or problem because two classroom teachers have been allocated for the 11 students and specialists are shared with Islands Consolidated. But the risk of what can happen from one year to the next in terms of staffing, a sudden decrease in enrolment, and new students with very special educational needs, should be taken seriously. What if 2 families move away over the summer and what if a staffing problem arises? The School Review process takes a full year to complete. Even if a serious problem arose and the best solution was to put the Grade P-6 students on the bus with their older siblings to attend Islands Consolidated, the decision to proceed could be challenged on legal grounds because the School Review process was not followed. Under the circumstances, it seems prudent to go through the process while no particular problems exist.

Regarding the financial impact of closure, there is no advantage. The TCRSB receives additional revenue to its general operating budget through the small school factor and this more than covers the cost of operating WVES.

This consultant's concern is mainly about the level of risk to how the circumstances could change quickly to create serious problems for the students and about the comparative educational and social benefits of being able to attend classes with a larger group of students. These would be explained in greater detail in the impart assessment report if the school is identified to be taken through School Review.

The following conclusion is drawn with the understanding that at some time in the not too distant future Islands Consolidated School should be replaced with a new school. More will be said about this in Part II of this study.

Conclusion 14

Westport Village Elementary School should be identified right away to be taken through the School Review process to be considered for closure.

This is not a conclusion that the school should be closed. Rather, it is a call to start a process in which the school staff and families are involved in a consideration over the next year of closing the school. Whether or not the school will be closed by the TCRSB will be answered through and after that discussion.

Coming Up in Part II

Throughout this paper, comments have been made about matters to be presented in Part II of this School Utilization Study. This summary of what to expect is for those schools and communities that may be wondering or concerned.

More consultation with regional and school staff and more analysis about the delivery of French Immersion will be carried out with attention to the situations at Plymouth School, Barrington Regional High School and, perhaps, Drumlin Heights and Shelburne Regional High School.

Some further observations may be made about some longer term possible options for the configurations of the new high school in Yarmouth, Maple Grove Education Centre, Meadowfields Community School and Plymouth School. The longer term future of Arcadia Consolidated School will be considered in this analysis.

The future of Lockeport Regional High School is being considered carefully and will be a focus of the Part II paper.

Every effort is being made to complete the final phase of this study by the end of February so that it can be released by the TCRSB in March.

At this point in the study, the consultant is able to advise that no other conclusions or recommendations will be brought forward to have particular schools identified by April 1, 2010, to be taken through the School Review process over the next 12 months. The cases for immediate reviews have already been presented in this paper.

APPENDIX A

A paper entitled, "School Utilization Study: Processes and Primary Issues", was prepared by this consultant and released by the TCRSB as one of the discussion papers for the Phase II consultation sessions of the Program Review. The full paper is available through the schools or the regional office.

The "primary issues" explained in that paper and are repeated here for the convenience of the reader.

Impact of Declining Enrolment

As noted in the main paper, the enrolment of the TCRSB has been declining significantly for the past decade and the projected decline is even more severe for the next decade. Because school board funding is tied directly to the September 30 enrolment, the annual decrease in the per-student operating revenue may be the most measurable impact (in numerical terms), from the school system perspective.

Because teacher salaries absorb about 60% of the budget, the number of teachers must decrease annually. Likewise, other staff positions are tied, directly or indirectly, to the student enrolment, at least in the long run. For example, a large enrolment decrease over a number of years will cause a decrease in staff allocations for educational program assistants, administrative assistants, school administrators and, in the extreme, bus drivers. These staff decreases will occur even if no schools are closed. In fact, the closure of a school may have relatively little impact on total staff allocations because the allocations are primarily based on the number of students in a system, not the number of schools. The most obvious exception is the number of school principals. Even in this case, the closure of schools will cause the loss of an equivalent number of school principals, but the number of vice-principals in the system may increase as a consequence.

One major effect of declining enrolment from an individual school's perspective is the loss of flexibility in matching teacher qualifications to teaching assignments and in providing suitable programs for students. The impact of this loss of flexibility on schools and students is complex or multi-faceted. It is characterized from several perspectives in the sections below.

Optimal School Size

Recently, this writer reviewed the literature on optimal school size. The following "basic conclusions" drawn from the literature review are relevant to this study:

1. Although an optimal school size has not been defined precisely, a range of 300-400 for elementary schools and a range of 400-800 for secondary schools should contribute to a balance of effective program delivery with operational efficiency.
2. Although the recent research favours small schools over large schools, the size of "small" is defined neither numerically nor in relation to "large".
3. The literature comparing small schools to large schools is silent on the question, "How small is too small?".
4. Secondary schools of over 1200 students push the reasonable limits of educational advantage, economy of scale and operational efficiency.

The term, "optimal", refers to what is best educationally for students and to what is best in terms of operational efficiency. The literature on school size is predominantly about

comparing small schools with large schools and not in any way about answering the separate question, “How small is too small?”. This question must be answered from practical experience because no answer can be found in the research literature.

When is a school too small?

As school enrolments decline, it is reasonable to question whether or not individual schools are reaching a limit at which they may be described as too small. At some point, the disadvantages of smallness outweigh the advantages. Although this limit is not precise or distinct and may vary from one school to another, it is important that the question be asked openly and answered carefully.

The most important question is educational in nature and is about how a very low enrolment affects the ability of a school to deliver the required programs. The factors or variables listed below should be evaluated school-by-school as potentially serious barriers to effective program delivery. A school may have reached the point of being too small when:

- Various staff allocations for a school must be increased beyond what the regional staffing formulas or methods provide to deliver the required programs.
- Teaching assignments cannot be matched appropriately to teacher qualifications because of the low number of teachers on staff. This means that some teachers must carry responsibilities which do not fit well with their qualifications, experience and/or interests.
- A relatively significant number of the teachers are itinerant teachers who have their assignments spread across two or three schools. This creates a variety of difficulties in program delivery and other aspects of the school’s operation.
- It is difficult to sustain effective special education services. This difficulty is related to being unable to attract and hold suitably qualified teachers, create a “learning centre” approach to special services delivery, ensure reasonable minimum case loads for specialists, and provide Reading Recovery (25% of population and at least 2 students per term).
- The expectations on teachers and other staff members to carry the numerous mandatory and “volunteer” responsibilities are very unrealistic and unreasonable. In every school, many expectations for staff involvement come from the school, the regional office and the community. Because a small staff cannot meet the expectations, the result is often burnout and high staff turnover.
- Multi-age classes with more than 2 grades per class must be created for operational reasons, although the school staff and the parents may not have accepted multi-age classes as being pedagogically sound.
- Building a “professional learning community” (PLC) is very difficult, if not impossible in a practical sense. There is strong evidence that a PLC is beneficial to student and their learning. It is very impractical to adopt this approach to professional development and collaborative support among colleagues when the number of staff is very small.

- Teacher teaming for instructional and program purposes is extremely difficult.
- Unique programs such as French Immersion cannot be offered because of low numbers, thus causing the transfer of students to other schools.

This list is not intended to be comprehensive and all-inclusive. Other factors could be added and those already listed suggest others implicitly. For example, there may be student issues in a very small school that are more social than educational. If multi-age classes require that each student will stay with the same classmates and the same teacher for three years, certain problems of a social or behavioral nature may be very difficult to solve.

Overall or broadly speaking, one word categorizes the difficulties or disadvantages in a school that is too small. That word is inflexibility. Inflexibility is a formidable barrier to applying good practice in most operational or administrative activities; e.g., staffing, scheduling, assigning students to classes, setting up intra-mural and extra-curricular activities.

Changes in School Grade Configurations

Can the grade configuration of a school be changed without a negative effect on students and on learning? The short answer is “Yes”. Recently, this writer completed a research paper for the Department of Education entitled, “The Relationship between Learning and Grade Configuration. The “overall conclusion” is repeated here:

1. Grade configuration need not affect student learning negatively;
2. Possible negative effects can be prevented in designing a school’s physical layout and its organizational characteristics;
3. Whatever the configuration, there is some advantage to students if Grade 9 is recognized as a year of transition; and
4. The number of school-to-school transitions experienced by students during their school years should be given weight in selecting school configurations.

In other words, schools can be set up in various grade level configurations without causing a negative or positive effect on student learning. All kinds of grade level configurations have been operating for many years in Nova Scotia and all seem to be satisfactory or without unique, significant problems. These are the common configurations: P-5, P-6, P-8, P-9, 6-8, 7-9, 7-12, 8-12, 9-12, and 10-12.

Given these conclusions on grade configuration, various configurations are suitable options to use existing school facilities more efficiently. An elementary school with Grades P-6 can become a P-8 school; a high school with Grades 10-12 can become a 9-12 high school or a 7-12 secondary school; and even a P-12 school can be reasonably considered as an option. Such schools have been in common use across Nova Scotia over the past 40 years or more.

Adjustments in Student Transportation

Any possible changes to school grade configurations and school boundaries must always take into account the required adjustments in student transportation. The main issue is about the amount of time students must spend on a bus and this is related directly to the maximum distances traveled during a bus run. The amount of time spent on a bus, the departure time from home in the morning and the arrival time at home after

school are important factors which must be considered. How these factors affect all students should be evaluated, with particular attention to the impact on younger children.

Financial Issues in School Utilization

Three major financial issues in school utilization, in times of declining enrolment, may be expressed with the following questions:

1. How much additional funding is required to staff a small school, beyond what the staffing formula provides?
2. Can underutilized school facilities be used more efficiently and in different ways to bring them closer to their full operational capacity?
3. What major capital maintenance and renovations are required to keep a school operating?

Analysis of the operational inefficiencies in schools which are under-utilized is complex. Some of this complexity results from the fact that school staffing levels and school size (square footage) are directly related to the annual operating cost, but the same numbers are used in the provincial school board funding formula to determine a school board's operating revenue.

This complexity is most observable in how school boards receive their revenue for "property services" each year from the Department of Education. The "property services" portion of a board's total funding is the amount assigned to operate the school facilities. Fifty percent of the property services funding is tied directly to the total square footage of all schools, with the assumption that schools are operating at 87% capacity on average. The other 50% is directly related to the total enrolment of the school system. This second half of the property services funding is calculated by multiplying a dollar amount per student by the total number of students.

This 50-50 combination based on both the square footage of school space and the student enrolment means that reducing the amount of space being used in a school or closing a school entirely is not related directly to how much money is saved. Reducing the amount of square footage in operation cuts expenditures on a per square foot basis, but also it reduces revenue by the formula amount.

The student enrolment half of the property services funding is not affected when schools are reduced in operational square footage or when a school is closed entirely. The enrolment portion of the funding "travels with the students" no matter where they are attending school.

Some cost savings result from reducing the amount of school space in operation or by closing schools, but the amount saved in terms of a board's operating budget is less than what is generally expected. The more significant savings are in terms of "capital" expenditures. Outside of the annual operating costs, every school requires capital upgrades and maintenance on a regular basis over a period of years. If a school needs a new roof or new flooring, then the additional capital costs are very significant. It is a matter of sound stewardship for a school board to manage its capital assets responsibly.