

# CURRENT ISSUES IN RURAL EDUCATION IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been my privilege over the last fifteen years to meet and work with rural educators, researchers and scholars from all over the world. I have visited many small schools, many in quite remote and isolated places in my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador. I have had many conversations with many students, parents and community leaders. I have disciplined myself to listen and respect the local knowledge that has been shared. I say 'disciplined' because too often university professors are more apt to talk rather than listen. I have come to realise we academics need to talk less and listen more.

These many experiences in rural places and rural schools have been truly educational. That is important because, as we say in Newfoundland, I am a born and bred 'townie'. That means for most of my life I have lived and worked in an urban area; I have not had the experience of growing up in a rural community or in an 'outport' as many rural places are called in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Being a bit of an outsider has had its advantages. I come to rural issues, concerns and questions with some degree of objectivity. My vision and understanding is not blurred in any way by sentimentality or mythology. Making a living and a life in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, historically, was a constant struggle with the elements of the sea, the wind and the land just to survive. To make a living from the fishery meant long hours of back-breaking work, most of which was performed with imminent danger never far away. To a large extent the good old days are something of a myth; older rural women will assure you of that.

Life in most small rural communities today is still a struggle in my part of the world. Those communities that remain dependent on the fishery are in fact at risk of ceasing to exist.<sup>2</sup> Since 1992, there has been in place a moratorium on the cod fishery. The cod was initially Newfoundland's *raison d'être*. England established fishing plantations on the island in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and for nearly four hundred years the word 'fish' meant 'cod' in Newfoundland. However, it appears the fishing stocks are almost totally depleted and there is not a lot of hope that they will come back.

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<sup>1</sup> This article has its origins in a key note address I gave at SPERA in 2006 at Hobart, Tasmania.

<sup>2</sup> Information about rural Newfoundland and Labrador can be accessed from The Rural Secretariat <http://www.exec.gov.nl.ca/rural/default.asp>

In some rural communities the fishers have been able to turn their attention to alternative species such as shrimp and crab. They are experiencing some success with these ventures; but overall the situation is bleak. To emphasise the precariousness of the situation a forum with the provocative title *Can Rural Newfoundland and Labrador be Saved* was held at the Corner Brook Campus of Memorial University in May, 2006. The organiser of the conference, Dr. Ivan Empke introduced the forum by noting:

Pick up any daily newspaper and, if you look carefully in the spaces between the major articles on life in the city, you can find the stories of rural areas. Many of them are stories of despair – loss of services, youth out-migration, economic collapse, environmental challenge, struggles in governance, a culture of poverty. Some are stories of an idyllic past that will not return, stories that drip of romanticism. But here and there are stories of courage, of conviction, of defiance even.

Reading between the lines, these stories highlight the fact that the crisis of rural communities is not simply an economic or structural crisis, but it is also a social and cultural crisis. They raise the question of why rural is worth saving – or even if it is worth saving at all (Empke, 2006).

I will hasten to add that my colleague in Corner Brook cares very much about rural places and he would answer quite definitively, as would I, that rural communities are worth saving.

For two months in 2006 I was a visiting scholar at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, NSW. This was quite a wonderful, fascinating and again, a truly educational experience. I had many very informative conversations with my new colleagues at the School of Education. With the assistance of Colin Boylan and Andrew Wallace I had the opportunity to visit a number of small schools in New South Wales.

The journey to and from these schools was filled with conversations about educational issues in our respective rural contexts. We have discovered we have much in common; yet there are some significant differences. However, throughout my career, I have discovered that small rural schools often have more in common with similar schools in quite diverse places than they do with larger schools in their own immediate environment.

In my travels in North America, the UK, and Australia, I have found that the issues and concerns of rural communities and rural educators are very much the same the world over. Government policies which often reflect ignorance, insensitivity or an indifference to rural sustainability and development appear to know no borders or boundaries.

While in Australia, I also had the opportunity to visit with the folks who run the Multi-age Association of Queensland. One of my primary research interests is multi-age education and at the invitation of Terry Ball, I spent a week on the Gold Coast visiting small schools and talking with educators. I also had the opportunity to visit with the President of MAAQ, Dr. Nita Lester who is a lecturer at the Mt. Gravatt Campus of Griffith University.

In my brief time in Australia I developed a deep affection for the place and its people. The landscape was quite stunning (despite the drought in NSW) and beautiful and the people were both gracious and generous with their time and knowledge. I did not feel that I was in a foreign land; but rather had come to another home. The people of

Australia, at least the ones I have met, are very much like Newfoundlanders – informal, welcoming, quite accepting of others and they have a great sense of humour.

I suspect, like Newfoundlanders, rural Australians have demonstrated courage, conviction and even defiance as they continue to insist that rural does indeed matter and is worth preserving. I wish to sincerely thank Charles Sturt University for providing me with the opportunity to add these understandings to my continuing education into rural matters.<sup>1</sup>

My purpose with this a paper is to share with you some of the rural issues and concerns that rural parents, educators and researchers have to grapple with in their struggle to provide a quality education for the children and youth attending schools in rural communities of Newfoundland and Labrador. As I indicated above I am sure many of these issues will resonate with many of this journal's readership who work in similar circumstances in Australia.

## **ENROLMENT DECLINE AND RURAL POPULATION CHANGE**

The number one issue affecting rural education in Newfoundland and Labrador today is the dramatic changes in the population of the schools and many of the rural communities. Rural schools have experienced a sharp enrolment decline and many communities have also lost significant population.

A decline in student enrolment creates a domino effect that impacts all important aspects of educational provision including the allocation of personal, financial assistance, curriculum programs and the configuration of classrooms for instruction. To a large extent all the issues that I discuss in this paper are related in one way or another to declining enrolment.

Rural communities are also experiencing a decline in their overall population. This decline has resulted not only in less people but a significant change in community demographics. This demographic shift is also making a dramatic impact on education and schooling. Enrolment and population decline impacts small schools and small communities most severely.

For the past thirty-five years the enrolment decline in Newfoundland and Labrador has been nothing short of dramatic. At the time of Confederation with Canada in 1949, there were approximately 80,000 children attending the province's schools. There was anticipation and expectation that this enrolment would greatly increase. In 1967 The Royal Commission on Education and Youth projected that the enrolment in schools would increase as follows:

- 1971: 165,000
- 1981: 190,000
- 1991: 240,000

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to sincerely thank Colin Boylan who did so much to make my visit to Australia possible. In addition he and his wife Gail welcomed me into their home and demonstrated the true depth of Australian hospitality. I will always be in their debt.

This increase in enrolment was partly based on a projected increase in the province's overall population. It was anticipated in 1967 that by 1991 the province would have a population of at least 770,000 people. (The actual population in 1991 was only 579,518)

As can be seen from Figure 1 the Royal Commissioners got it terribly wrong. The enrolment in Newfoundland schools peaked in 1971/72 school year at 162,818 students (*Structuring the education system: A public consultation paper for educational change in Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1997). Starting in 1975, the province started to experience a steady and increasingly dramatic enrolment decline. By 1980 the enrolment dropped to 140,000.

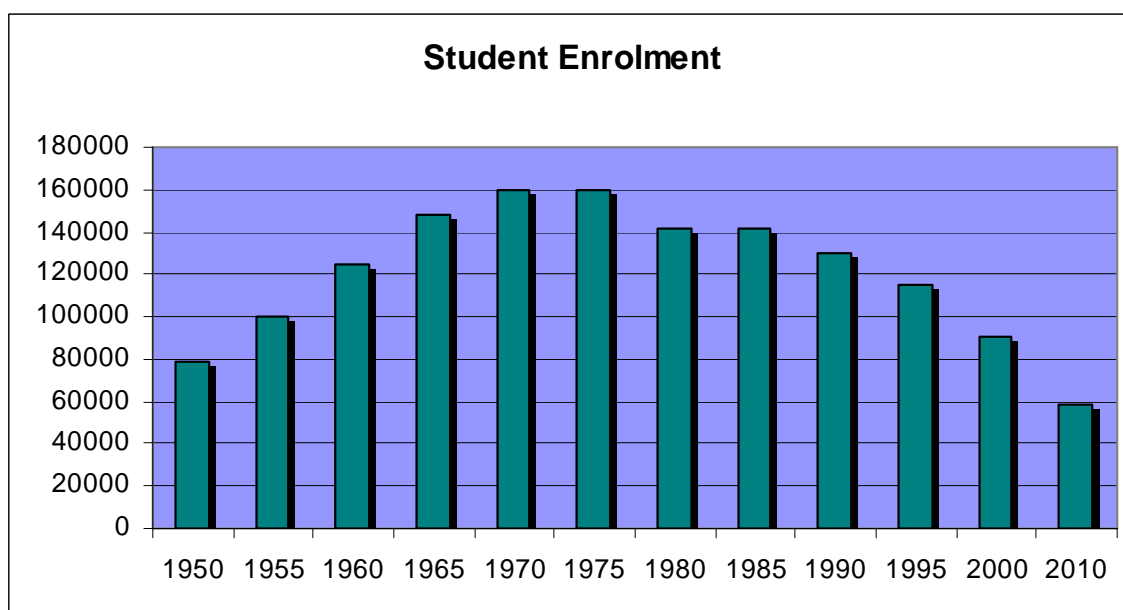


Figure 1

By September of 1995, enrolment had fallen to 110,456, a decrease of 32% from 1971. The Royal Commission had estimated that by the 1990s the school population would be 240,000.<sup>1</sup> They miscalculated the total school enrolment by about 130,000! Surely there is a lesson here for strategic planners everywhere.

The most recent statistics (Education Statistics, 2005/06) available from the Department of Education indicate that there are 76,763 students enrolled in the province's 294 public schools (102 urban/192 rural). There are 33, 693 fewer students attending school today than 10 years ago. The Department further projects that by 2010 the enrolment will drop below 60,000 students.

This decline in enrolment is being experienced province wide; however, it is most dramatic in rural areas and its impact is most significantly felt by small schools, some of which have lost up to 40% of their students in the last ten years.

<sup>1</sup> The apparent leveling off between 1980 and 1985 is actually caused by the province introducing a third year of high school in 1981.

## **REASONS FOR DECLINING ENROLMENT**

### **Change in fertility rate**

The baby boom period ended midway through the 1960's as female baby boomers began pursuing higher education and entering the workforce at rates previously not witnessed. This combined with the introduction and proliferation of more birth control methods and a rising number of abortions, pushed fertility rates and births down in most of the industrialized world (Demographic Change, 2005, p. 1).

The most significant factor that has led to this dramatic enrolment decline has been a radical change in the province's fertility or birth rate. When Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, it had one of the highest fertility rates in the world. It was not at all unusual or remarkable for families, especially in rural areas to have ten, twelve, fifteen or more children. Personally, I knew several people who were from families of twenty children.

The birth rate in Newfoundland and Labrador has been in a steep decline since the 1960s. Births dropped from over 12,600 in 1971 to about 4,500 in 2004, and are projected to drop to less than 3,400 by 2020 (Demographic Change, 2005, p.2). Currently the fertility rate is 1.3:1 and it is the lowest in Canada; it is also well below the rate of 2.1:1 which is what is needed just to maintain current population levels.

Naturally this change in birth rate can be seen in the differences in school enrolment. For example, the number of children entering grade one in 2005 was 30% less than those entering that grade in 1995.

Again, the change in birth rate is a province wide phenomenon, however, that change has been most dramatically experienced in rural areas.

### **Rural out-migration**

A second factor contributing to the decline in school enrolment, especially in rural areas, has been the out-migration caused by the changed economic circumstances that has befallen many rural communities, especially those dependent on the fishery.

The economic circumstances of Newfoundland and Labrador, while improving somewhat in recent years because of the discovery and development of off-shore oil and gas, remains somewhat bleak. Whatever economic indicator one cares to use – employment rate, per capita income, and per capita provincial debt – the province is at the bottom of the Canadian barrel. And from a provincial perspective, rural regions are worse off again. The economic prosperity that has been generated by the oil industry is being mostly experienced by the capital city of St. John's and its surrounding communities. The rest of the province which is primarily rural is under economic siege and in a struggle for survival.

The single most significant blow to the rural economy came in 1992 when the federal government imposed a moratorium on the cod fishery. The *raison d'être* for England's

claiming Newfoundland as a colony in the 16th century was the presence of abundant quantities of cod. For four hundred years the culture of the place was defined by hundreds of small communities scattered around the 800km of coast line whose people's life and livelihood depended on the continued presence of the cod.<sup>1</sup>

Then in 1992, this fishery collapsed and thus began a dramatic exodus of people from rural Newfoundland. In the fourteen years since the moratorium over 70,000 people have out-migrated from the province; the overwhelming number of these from rural communities affected by the collapse of the fishery.

The moratorium, the downturn in the rural economy, and the subsequent out-migration increased the rate of enrolment decline. In the fourteen years leading up to the moratorium there was a decline of 29,132 students, an average of 2,080 a year. In the fourteen years since the moratorium these figures have jumped to an average reduction of 3,455 students a year, a total loss of 48,370.

### **The domino effects of declining enrolment**

This dramatic decline in student enrolment has impacted the whole province, but its effects have been most pronounced in rural areas where the schools tend to be smaller. Some small rural schools have lost as much as 40% of their students in the last five years. It is much more difficult for a small school to absorb significant loss in student numbers.

There is a distinct domino effect experienced by small schools when enrolment declines. The allocation of teachers to a school is directly linked to student enrolment. A dramatic decline in enrolment automatically triggers a cut in the number of teachers assigned to individual schools. I have outlined below how this domino effect generally plays out:

- *Reduction of educational personnel*  
This reduction does not just apply to classroom teachers. The school's administration is also affected as the teaching responsibilities of both the principal and vice-principal increase, thus leaving less time for their administrative duties and responsibilities. Specialists teachers, such as music, art, and phys-ed are also affected with their time in the school reduced.
- *Increased workload for remaining teachers*  
As a school strives to maintain its academic and extra-curricular programs, the teachers remaining in a school will have their work load increased. Many will have to teach courses outside their areas of expertise and spend more time in supervisory activities. For some the increased workload will be a disincentive to stay teaching at the small school.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the years a number of other industries developed in Newfoundland and Labrador. The most important of these are logging and mining. However, these industries affect very few rural communities.

- *Funding reduced*  
In Newfoundland and Labrador schools are funded primarily on a per-student basis. This is considered to be a fair and equitable way to fund education. Small schools have always been short-changed with this approach, as costs of many essential items needed by the school are not linked to enrolment. Any funding cuts further erode the small schools ability to purchase essential resources.
- *Program cuts*  
The school's capacity to provide on-site courses is directly tied to the number of teachers assigned to the school. As teachers are cut, so too are programs and courses. The general result is a narrowing of the curriculum available to students with the first programs to be cut being the arts and non-academic courses.
- *Increased reliance on combined classrooms*  
As teachers are cut there is an increased need to combine classrooms. Multi-grading has been a tradition in small schools the world over. For some schools teacher cuts may mean implementing multi-grading for the first time; for others it may mean increasing the number of such classrooms, or increasing the number of grade levels in an existing combined classroom.
- *Introduction of, or increased use of, distance education*  
A reduction in the number of on-site teachers combined with program cuts may lead to the introduction of distance education or an expansion of that mode of program delivery. Distance education is a two-edged sword for small rural schools. It can provide access to programs and courses not offered by the school; however, not all students have the necessary attributes to succeed with this mode of learning. This is an issue I will return to later in this paper.
- *Increased pressure to close and consolidate*  
The most serious consequence of declining enrolment is the increased pressure on a community to agree to close their small school and have their children bussed to a larger school in another community. This too is an issue I will return to later in this paper.

### **The changing rural demographic**

The significant decline in the overall population of the province has resulted in some very significant demographic changes for many rural communities. There are three key questions that have to be addressed to understand these changes and their implications for education and schooling:

- Who is leaving?
- Who is staying
- Who is returning?

Depending on how these questions are answered will determine the impact on both the school and the community. In many rural communities those leaving tend to be younger and/or better educated who have a skill-set that they can use to find employment either elsewhere in Newfoundland and Labrador, or outside the province. When they leave they take their children with them, and the potential for future enrolment in the community school. Equally important, the rural community is denied the leadership and social capital that this group represents.

Many of the young people who are staying tend to be those who dropped out of school or who did not do very well. They have little or no post-secondary education and tend to move from part-time seasonal work to some form of social assistance. It is their children who will be attending the community school (if it remains open). Given what we know about the interaction of socio-economic factors and education, this changed demographic will create a uniquely challenging pedagogical context.

Leadership and efforts to sustain and develop these communities will also fall to these young people who remain. This will create its own challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, there are those who are choosing to return to rural communities in the province. Most of these are folks who left in an earlier time to seek employment outside of Newfoundland and Labrador and who are now retired. Many Newfoundlanders have a great sense of place. They may have left physically because of the need to find work, but spiritually and emotionally they remained tied to the province.

While it is a good thing to have people moving back to the province and to rural communities, the contribution of this particular demographic group to both the school and the community may be limited. They do not have children of their own; in most cases they do not have grandchildren living in the community. Their interest in sustaining or keeping the school is limited. Many also lack the interest or the energy to get overly involved in community affairs. These folks, because of their age, are - and will increasingly be - placing considerable demands on the rural health care system.

## **Section Summary**

In this section of the paper I have outlined the impact that a dramatic decline in student enrolment and out migration is having on rural schools and the communities they serve. The enrolment decline has created a domino effect that is affecting all aspects of school from personnel cuts to curriculum modifications. Selective outward and inward migration is changing the demographic profile of many communities with serious consequences for both school and community.

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<sup>1</sup> Recently in a community that I have been monitoring there was a house fire. When the volunteer fire department arrived at the scene they discovered that there was no water in the truck to put out the fire. Someone had neglected to fill the tank.



## RURAL SCHOOL CLOSURE AND CONSOLIDATION

Despite research evidence demonstrating the advantages of smaller schools and districts, especially for low-income students (e.g., Howley, 1996; Howley & Bickel, 1999), many states continue to pass regulations that require, or strongly encourage, small districts to consolidate or to close their small schools and replace them with larger, consolidated schools (Mathis, 2003). Rural and small-town communities perhaps feel the pressure for consolidation most acutely, particularly those with vulnerable economies and limited political leverage (e.g., Dayton, 1998; DeYoung, 1993; Peshkin, 1982). Moreover, with the power of rural caucuses diminishing in state and national politics, the interests of rural citizens—including their interest in retaining community schools— increasingly yield to those of urban and suburban constituencies to whom rural fates are irrelevant (e.g., Eyre & Finn, 2002; Nachtigal, 1994; Schwab, 1985). (Howley & Howley 2006).

The most serious consequence of declining enrolment for a rural community is the loss of its school. The dramatic decline in enrolment has given impetus for the government to implement several rounds of rural school closure and consolidation. Small schools have been considered something of a necessary evil for the past forty years and at every opportunity educational authorities have attempted to reform them out of existence.

Newfoundland and Labrador has always been a province of small rural schools. At the time of confederation with Canada in 1949, there were 1,187 schools in Newfoundland and Labrador; 778 (66%) of these schools were one-room schools with an average enrolment per room of 63 students (Rowe, 1976, p.27).

In 1964-65, out of a total of 1,266 schools, 845 or 67% had fewer than four classrooms; and only 99, including elementary, regional and central high schools, and all grade schools had 10 classrooms or more. There were 177 two-room, all-grade schools. Total student enrolment was 140,735 students for an average school size of 110 (*The Report of the Royal Commission on Education and Youth*, 1967, p.90).

For most of its education history<sup>1</sup>, Newfoundland and Labrador more or less accepted the existence of small schools as a necessary feature of the education system given the rural nature of the province, its sparse population, its lack of roads and the extreme isolation of many of its settlements (outports).

However, this reluctant acceptance of small schools changed in 1967. The provincial government had appointed a Royal Commission of Enquiry “to make a careful study of all aspects of education in Newfoundland” and to make what ever recommendations that Commission felt would advance the development of education in the province (*The Report of the Royal Commission on Education and Youth*, 1967, p.2). The commission’s chair was Dr. Philip Warren, a professor of education at Memorial University.

In 1967 the Royal Commission submitted to government the results of its enquires. *The Report of the Royal Commission on Education and Youth, Vols 1&2* [henceforth referenced as (Warren,1967)] contained 340 recommendations covering every aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> It is generally accepted that Newfoundland and Labrador’s first one-room school, a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel “charity school” was established at Bonavista in 1726-1727 by the Church of England Missionary Henry Jones. This would be the basic model of schooling for the next 200 years.

education and schooling in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the principal targets for its recommendations was small rural schools.

In the view of the Commission the scale of schooling in the province was a major impediment to the future development of education and the province. Simply put, the number of small schools in Newfoundland and Labrador was a major problem that had to be addressed. They were problematic because students could not receive a good education in small schools, the Commission claimed. This was especially true for rural areas where, because of the scale of schooling, education was “substandard.”

Reflecting on the fact that 25 years after confederation with Canada the average size of all schools was still only 110 students, 30% of schools were one room, and that 67% of schools had less than four classrooms, the Commission declared (with some degree of exasperation):

In spite of the progress made in the last decade, Newfoundland continues to provide a sub-standard education for thousands of children. Many of our rural children in particular are not receiving the kind of education necessary for successful living in the society described in Chapter 1 of this Report. And clearly, one of the main reasons for this disturbing state of affairs is the large number of small schools (emphasis added) in the Province (Warren, 1967, Vol.1, p. 99).

The way forward as far as the Commission was concerned was the elimination of as many small schools as possible through a process of school closure and consolidation. This was how the province could improve its academic productivity and raise educational standards in rural areas. The issue was clear as far as the commission was concerned:

While no one will contend that larger schools of themselves do provide good education, few will doubt that small schools rarely do. (Warren, 1967, Vol.1, p. 90).

Small schools with their limited facilities and narrow programmes may have met the needs of education in the past, but to continue such schools today would be to impoverish the lives of the children in these schools and do an injustice to the Province as a whole. Larger schools<sup>1</sup> are essential if we are to reduce the loss of student potential referred to earlier in this Report and if we are to provide the number of well educated high school graduates which the Province will require in the future. (Warren, 1967, Vol.1, p.102)

The Royal Commission gave the educational authorities the ammunition they needed to initiate a series of closures and consolidation assaults on small rural community schools. By the late 1980s, 741 small rural schools had been eliminated. Of the 1,266 schools that had existed when the Commission began its work, only 525 remained in 1987.

As the pace of declining enrolment picked up after 1992, the government initiated another round of rural school closures. By 1999 the number of schools had been reduced to 343 with 182, mostly rural, schools closed during that time period.

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<sup>1</sup> The Commission established a minimum size standard for schools; a school must be large enough to warrant the allocation of one teacher per grade level. Multi-grading was viewed as the principal cause of low student performance in rural schools.

In rural education literature, the school closure and consolidation wars are both a current issue and a perennial one (Baker & Gump, 1964; Cubberley, 1922; DeYoung, 1995; Fox, 1980; Howley, 1996; Howley & Howley, 2006; Kennedy, 1914; Mulcahy, 1996; Nachtigal, 1982).

Such is the case here in Newfoundland and Labrador. As I have indicated, small schools have been targeted for closure since 1967. The pace of school closure has slowed since the 1990s because rural folks have become much more knowledgeable and politically astute in resisting the government's closure initiatives.<sup>1</sup> There are also limits as to how far and for how long it is considered acceptable to bus children. The government, however, continues to push those limits. Although the pace of closure has slowed, it continues relentlessly and each year one or more communities lose their schools and another group of children begin to ride the bus or have their existing ride extended.

The most recent statistics (2005/06) from the Department of Education indicate that there are just 294 schools in the province: 192 rural, 102 urban. The average enrolment in all schools is 261; the average rural school is 169 while the average urban school has 434 students. Close to a hundred of these rural schools are all-grade schools offering programs and courses from Kindergarten to Level III (Grade twelve).<sup>2</sup> There are no urban all-grade schools. (An all-grade school is comparable to an Area School, or a Central School, or a District High School designation that is used in Australian states and territories.)

As has been the case throughout its history, Newfoundland and Labrador continues to have a significant number of very small schools. For example, there are 25% (75) of schools that have less than 100 students; 44 of these schools have less than 50 students.

Currently each of the four major school districts<sup>3</sup> in the province has some kind of restructuring plan in place. Each of these plans calls for the closure of a number of small community schools. One example of such a plan was developed by the largest school district in the province, the Eastern School District (<http://www.esdnl.ca/>) which provides for 44,000 students in 122 schools. This district serves the capital city region of St. John's and three distinctly rural areas.

In 2005 the Eastern School District hired a group of consultants to develop a comprehensive multi-year re-organizational plan for the district. Throughout this school reorganization and restructuring process, the stated goal of the Eastern School Board was to:

[p]rovide for educational programs and school facilities where all students receive the highest quality educational experiences possible, thus assisting them in achieving to the best of their potential. (Eastern School District: School organization plan 2006-2010, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> It may be of some interest to Australian rural educators to know that Newfoundland and Labrador has never had a boarding school option for rural students. A bursary program exists which pays room and board for students who wish to attend a larger school in a distant community. However, most rural families do not access this program.

<sup>2</sup> The average grade level cohort in these all grade rural schools is 14. However, most would be considerable smaller than that. There are many rural schools with a graduating class of between five and ten students.

<sup>3</sup> There is a fifth district that serves the province's small francophone district.

The consultants' report reflected the (false) conventional wisdom that has dominated educational thinking for the last fifty years: larger schools, necessarily, offer students the greater opportunity for quality educational experiences. In the section of the report leading up to their recommended school closures and consolidations, the following points were identified as "planning considerations":

- The goal of the school board in this planning process is to provide for educational programs and school facilities where all students receive the highest quality educational experiences possible.
- Unfortunately, some rural schools are located in small and isolated areas where there are insufficient numbers to offer a broad-based program.
- In those cases, school viability comes down to questions of what is too small for a class size and what is too far a distance to travel for particular grades/ages. *Larger schools* benefit from a broader-based curriculum because of the efficiencies and economies of scale that can be attained; however, there are trade-offs, such as higher class sizes and longer times spent travelling by bus.
- Within the current model of schooling, the key to optimizing educational opportunities for students is their aggregation into *larger school* settings.
- *Larger schools* offer economies of scale in terms of programs and services and are generally located in communities which have the greatest amount of infrastructure available to enrich educational experiences.
- As well, *larger schools* offer greater levels of administrative and secretarial support and provide greater opportunities for collaboration among staff members.
- Generally, students in *larger schools* are assigned to single grade classes and have greater access to trained specialist teachers and the programs and services they offer (i.e., physical education, music, art, drama, guidance, resource centres, computer studies, etc.).
- These schools also provide greater numbers of student role models and increase academic competitiveness, both of which have been demonstrated to increase overall student achievement (*Eastern School District: School organization plan 2006-2010*, 2006, pp.10/11).<sup>1</sup>

The basic position is quite familiar to anyone who has followed the closure and consolidation wars in North American for the last fifty years or more:

- Quality education can only be experienced in larger schools;
- Student achievement is higher in larger schools;

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<sup>1</sup> At the very end of the report, p.34, the consultant's bring themselves to make a more or less positive statement about small schools:

- Single-grade classrooms are better than multi-grade or multi-age;
- A broad and rich curriculum requires a larger school; and,
- Larger schools enable the achievement of economies of scale.

There is no research evidence presented in the report to substantiate any of these claims. There is not any research presented because there is not any that would allow such unequivocal assertions to be made.<sup>1</sup> In fact most of the research repudiates these claims. Raywid (1999) offers this overview of the small schools literature:

The small schools literature began with the large-scale quantitative studies of the late 1980s and early 1990s that firmly established small schools as more productive and effective than large ones. These studies, involving large numbers of students, schools, and districts, confirmed that students learn more and better in small schools (Lee & Smith, 1995). Students make more rapid progress toward graduation (McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994). They are more satisfied with small schools, and fewer of them drop out than from larger schools (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Students behave better in smaller schools, which thus experience fewer instances of both minor and serious infractions (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). All of this is particularly true for disadvantaged students, who perform far differently in small schools and appear more dependent upon them for success than do more fortunate youngsters (Lee & Smith, 1995).

All of these things we have confirmed with a clarity and at a level of confidence rare in the annals of education research. As one researcher summed it up, "a large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools" (Cotton, 1996b). Another researcher noted that size exerts a "unique influence" on students' academic accomplishment, with a strong negative relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the students' achievement levels (Howley, 1994).

Other research has disputed the other purported benefits of larger schools and the alleged disadvantages of small schools.

The report is also lacking in its failure to adequately discuss the effects of long distance bussing on students' health, wellbeing or academic achievement. There is no discussion of the safety concerns that parents have for their children while being bussed. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that most students do not gain the purported benefits of larger schools if they do not have their own way of getting to and from school.<sup>2</sup>

There is no discussion of how important small schools are to the well being and survival of the communities they serve (Mulcahy, Boylan & Gardener, 1998). Rural communities rarely give up their schools voluntarily since they know their sustainability and future development often depends on the continued existence of a school. There is an acknowledgement by the consultants that "continued stakeholder opposition can be expected to some of the proposed restructuring changes. In some cases, the board may be required to defend its position in the courts, in which case delays can be expected" (Eastern School District: School organization plan, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Given over fifty years of consolidation, it is somewhat puzzling that educational authorities are not able to produce a body of research evidence to demonstrate the benefits they claim for consolidation.

<sup>2</sup> In this school district, students are not permitted to carry their music instruments on the bus. So if they wish to take part in any music activities either during school or afterwards, they have to have an alternative way of getting their instruments to school and themselves home after school.

One other idea that is not given adequate consideration in this report is web-based distance education for small rural high schools. I will explore this topic more extensively in the next section. However, I wish to note here that the expansion of web-based distance education provision through the Centre for Distance Education and Innovation has made the size and location of a school irrelevant in terms of its program capacity. Yet, this report does not seriously discuss this issue as an alternative to school closure and long distance bussing.

At the very end of the report the consultants acknowledge, reluctantly it would seem given the syntax, that small schools have merit:

While the thrust of the recommendations in this report is toward larger schools, this is not to suggest that small schools are not capable of meeting students' needs. (Eastern School District: School organization plan, 2006).

### **Section Summary**

In this section I have tried to provide a brief overview of where we are in Newfoundland and Labrador currently, *vis a vis* the perception of and attitude towards the continued existence of small rural schools. Small community schools are under siege today as they have been for the last fifty years. The same old arguments, unsubstantiated by research, are being used to justify eliminating these schools. The concerns of parents and community leaders continue to be ignored. The pace of closure has slowed only because further action will necessitate some extreme and dangerous bus rides for students and an increased combativeness of a better informed rural citizenry. However, the 'conventional wisdom' that bigger schools are better schools remains the dominant and narrow ideology. The idea that the wellbeing of the community and the role of the school in sustaining a community be considered as part of a restructuring plan remains an alien concept.

The research of the last thirty years clearly justifies educational policies that support the creation of new small schools and, more importantly for rural areas, sustaining and supporting existing small community schools. There is little if any justification for closing small schools. All fair-minded people have to wonder given this research base:

Why do so many states [and provinces] continue to develop consolidation policies that are anything but research-based? Why is this irrational and failed approach to educational improvement forced upon rural communities, despite their widespread and often vehement opposition? (Rural Policy Matters, 2006)

To continue to pursue a policy of closure and consolidation in the face of the research evidence on community development is to put the education of rural children and youth at risk (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

## THE CURRICULUM ISSUE AND WEB BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

*It does not follow necessarily that more opportunities exist in larger schools.* — Kent McGuire, 1989

The final issue I am going to discuss in this paper is the increasing reliance of small rural schools on web-based distance education to provide access to programs and courses for its students. I would like to link this discussion to one of the traditional criticisms of small schools – their inability to provide adequate curriculum programs because of their size. The curriculum argument against small schools has become the dominant one used to justify school closure since the achievement argument has been all but totally debunked.

The criticism that smaller schools cannot offer as broad a program of studies as larger schools has been around for a very long time; it is often used as a justification for closing smaller schools. Educational authorities, pursuing an agenda of school consolidation, point out the obvious: larger schools can offer a wider range of programs and more courses than can smaller schools. “Therefore, goes the argument, operating small schools with more limited curricula is unfair to the students who attend them” (Cotton, 1996). However, as Cotton (1996) points out:

While this has a certain common sense appeal, examination of the research reveals that there simply is no reliable relationship between school size and curriculum quality. For one thing, researchers have found that “it takes a lot of bigness to add a little variety”—that is, “on the average a 100% increase in enrolment yields only a 17% increase in variety of offerings” (Pittman & Haughwout). Moreover, “[t]he strength of the relationship between school size and curricular offerings diminishes as schools become larger”.

This broader curriculum purportedly improves achievement, provides students with more choice in terms of courses and better prepares them for post-secondary participation. This argument was first popularized fifty years ago with the publication of Conant’s *The American High School Today* (1959) and has been used ever since by those advocating consolidation.

The assumption that a broader curriculum somehow equates with a high level of student achievement does hold up to critical scrutiny. The research evidence clearly demonstrates that the number of courses offered in a school has no effect on overall student achievement. Students in smaller schools perform as well or better academically compared to students in larger schools regardless of the number of programs and courses either set of schools offer. *The broader curriculum does not have a positive effect on student achievement.*

Research into this issue (McGuire, 1989; Monk, 1992; Rogers, 1987) has called into question the claim that the larger school offers a more varied and richer curriculum. What one tends to find in larger schools is not more advanced courses in key academic areas but more introductory courses in non-core areas. (Many parents whose children attend larger schools are often amazed and dismayed at how little choice there is when they help their children pick out courses). Another relevant and interesting finding from the research is that “only five to twelve percent of the students in large schools avail themselves of the extra courses these schools typically offer” (Cotton, 1996).

The work of Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffin, and Moss (1990) is of particular relevance for those concerned with very small high schools. They found that it is possible for schools graduating as few as 25 students to be able to offer a mathematics program equal to that of a much larger school. The notion that larger schools with the larger number of courses better prepare students for post-secondary participation has also been investigated by researchers. Again, the research has disproved this belief.

Like the curriculum argument, the assertions about college readiness have been disproved by research. Six documents address the relative merits of large and small schools *vis a vis* college-related variables—entrance examination scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average, and completion. Five found small schools equal (Rogers, 1987; Fowler, 1992; Jewell, 1989) or superior (Burke, 1987; Swanson, 1988) to large ones in their capacity to prepare students for college entrance and success. (Cotton, 1996).

### **E-Learning trumps curriculum argument**

Whatever merits the curriculum argument may have had in the past, current developments in web-based distance education (“E-Learning”) make any claim of program inadequacy in smaller schools totally irrelevant. In the 21st century through the use of information and communication technologies, access to a rich and varied curriculum is available to any student regardless of where they live or the size of the school they attend.

Students attending small community schools can have the best of both worlds. They can enjoy the many advantages that come with small-scale learning communities *and* have access to any course or program to which they aspire. The common use of distance education in small rural schools has a long history. In 1996 Theodore Roellkie wrote:

Advances in computer and video technologies have permitted many rural school districts to electronically import courses otherwise unavailable in the school system at a cost of one third to one half of a resident teacher's salary (Smith, 1990). Computerized learning programs, interactive television, and Internet access are additional resources that can enhance the curriculum of small high schools. Success has been reported in using these technologies to provide advanced placement and college credit courses as well as instructional services for students with special needs (Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, 1994).

Canada has become a world leader in the establishment of E-Learning at the secondary level of schooling. Recent proceedings of the National Congress on Rural Education in Saskatchewan (2001-2006) have been filled for the last several years by presentations that focus on online and other forms of distance learning. Given contemporary technology, synchronous, real time teaching and learning possibilities in small, isolated communities are opening up at a rate that is only constrained by our imaginations:

Improved technological literacy and Internet access have enabled educators and governments to establish virtual schools as partial solutions to the problems of curriculum equity, changing demographics, shortages in specific teaching disciplines and the need to be cost-effective. (Fury & Murphy, 2005).

In a policy brief entitled “The power and promise of distance learning in rural education” Hobbs (2004) states that:



A rapidly growing number of rural students are increasingly involved in some form of distance learning for all or part of the school day (or night).

Research shows that it can be as effective as classroom learning in terms of student performance. It offers the opportunity for an enhanced curriculum and advanced classes, as well as for students to participate in low enrolment, high-cost classes such as physics, anatomy, chemistry, music theory, or calculus. Along with the academic advantages come economic ones: school size no longer determines the scope or breadth of curriculum offered. Schools of any size can offer a virtually unlimited curriculum without incurring the costs of hiring additional teachers. Savings increase even more if schools participate in distance learning consortiums to share master teachers, personnel and technology costs.

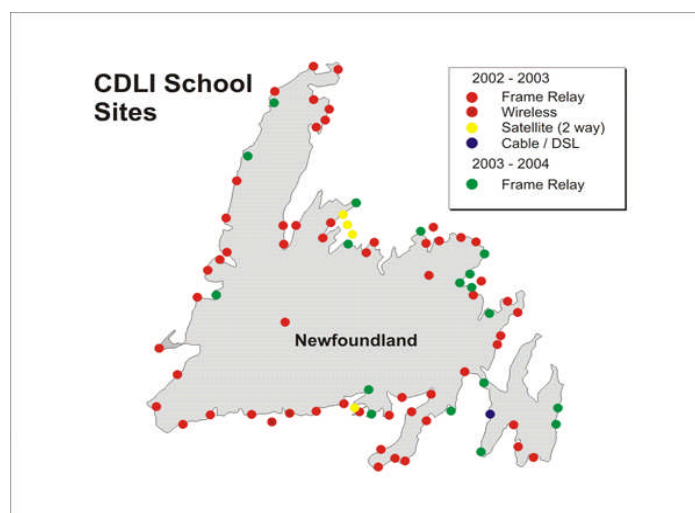
“Most importantly,” says Hobbs (2004), “distance learning can enable small schools to remain open and small—thereby embracing more than a half century of educational research showing that smaller schools offer a multitude of educational advantages for students over larger schools.”

Today distance education and web-based learning are essential features of all progressive education systems. Technology is used by both rural and urban schools as a way to supplement the programming offerings available to students. It is hard to believe that educational authorities anywhere continue to use the curriculum inadequacy argument to make a case against small schools.

### **The Centre for Distance Education and Innovation (CDLI)<sup>1</sup>**

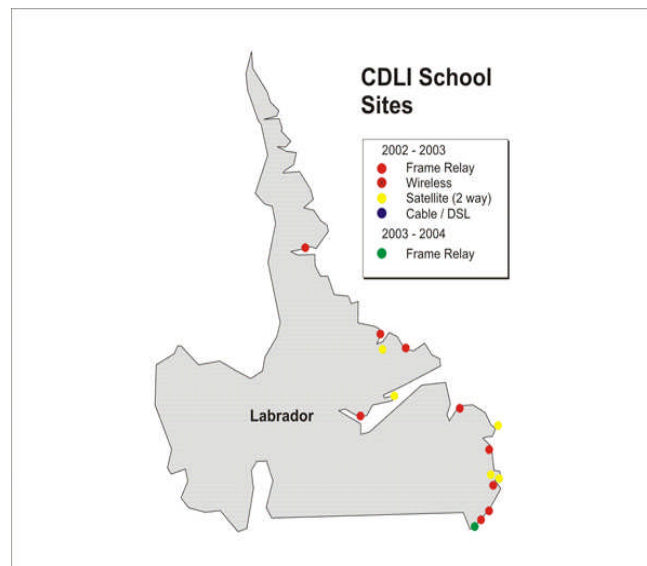
In Newfoundland and Labrador, the agency responsible for E-Learning in secondary schools is The Centre for Distance Education and Innovation. CDLI was founded in 2000 by the Department of Education. The primary mandate of CDLI is to provide students attending small rural schools access, via the Internet, to programs and courses not available in the schools they attend.

Currently, CDLI makes 34 courses available to students in over 100 small schools.



**CDLI sites on the island and Labrador (below)**

<sup>1</sup> CDLI web site: <http://www.cdli.ca/>



Through the facilities and personnel of CDLI Newfoundland, students in remote and isolated schools can access all of the courses they need to fulfill graduation requirements. In addition, they can also access an ever-increasing number of elective courses in music, art and French. The creation of CDLI has great *potential* benefit to students attending the more remote schools on the island. I say ‘potential’ because there are a number of issues that need to be resolved.

The CDLI model of distance education can provide rural students with access to more and a wider range of courses than might otherwise be available to them. But then, if it is just a matter of *access*, the same goal could be achieved with a greater use of mail order correspondence courses. A commitment to education equality and a quality education for all has to go well beyond the provision of access.

It remains an open question, therefore, whether the computer-mediated, internet-dependent model of distance education will in fact *equalize educational opportunities for rural students*, particularly those attending the smallest and most remote schools. An equally significant unanswered question at this point is whether or not the increased reliance on distance education as an alternative mode of program delivery will improve *the quality of education* provided to rural children and raise levels of rural academic achievement.

Among the key issues in need of critical inquiry and public discourse are:

- Equality of access;
- The appropriateness of online distance education for all learners;
- The educational equivalency of online and face-to-face instruction; and,
- The effect of an increased reliance on distance education at the high school level on all-grade schools.

I would like to say a few words about two of these issues: equality of access and the appropriateness of distance education for all learners.

## Equality of Access

First of all, there is the question of *equality of access* to these new educational opportunities. Access to the Internet remains problematic in some rural areas of the province. It is most problematic for those small and remote schools most in need of program enhancement. Young students are quickly frustrated when the technology does not work as intended. A very important aspect of the CDLI model is two way synchronous voice communication between teachers and students. When that is not available or is of poor quality and consistency students lose confidence in this mode of learning. The folks at CDLI are well aware of these technical problems and are constantly striving to improve the system.

Equality of access is not just a matter of communications infrastructure; it is also a matter of economics. Funding formulas for educational resources favour larger schools over smaller ones. Most rural schools are small, and all remote schools are very small. Rural schools (and rural districts), therefore, do not have the financial resources to spend on technology that larger urban schools do. Many rural schools are situated in those parts of the province experiencing the most challenging economic and social circumstances; they are also in those regions experiencing the greatest out-migration of people. They do not have the opportunities for fundraising and creating partnerships with businesses that schools in larger centres do.

If the responsibility for funding the technology, the machines, and the technicians required to support online distance education is downloaded to rural boards and small schools, then a dramatic digital divide will be created in the province. Again, this will greatly compromise the equality of access students will have in rural schools compared to their urban counterparts.

A third dimension of access equality is the issue of home access for students taking online distance education. Those students who have access to computers and the Internet in their homes, will have a distinct advantage over those who cannot afford home access. This is the second and more serious dimension of the digital divide.

These privileged students will indeed enjoy the much touted “anytime, anywhere” advantage of online education. In those communities where connectivity is problematic, especially during peak times during the day, having home access might be considered a necessity. Many families in rural Newfoundland and Labrador have to deal with very challenging financial circumstances. They may not be able to afford to provide home access for their children. At this point in time the Government does not intend to fund home access for rural students.

As long as online distance education is an option for select students wishing to take advanced academic courses, perhaps this issue can be ignored. However, if, as proposed by the Government, distance education is to function as an alternative mode of program delivery for all schools and the only form of program delivery for certain essential courses for small rural schools, then, access issues become of paramount importance.

If we do not provide equality of access for rural students, rather than equalizing educational opportunities we may in fact be doing the very opposite, especially for those students who live in remote places and/or in challenging economic circumstances. We will be making their educational and life chances worse, not better. At the same time we

will be increasing educational opportunities for children who already enjoy many privileges.

### **The appropriateness of distance education for all learners**

A second issue is the appropriateness of online distance education for all learners. The Government proposes that distance education be re-conceptualized from a supplementary program to being an alternative mode of program delivery for all students. A constant caution in the literature suggests that distance education is not appropriate for all learners. This is because all forms of distance education, including online learning, requires certain attributes and dispositions not possessed by all learners. This is evidenced in part by the 50% completion rate in distance education for *adult learners*.

Previous to 2002, distance learners in this province had been a select group of students chosen in large part for their maturity and their demonstrated capacity for independent and self-regulated study. For the most part, this group of learners have been those taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Although this latter group of students were selected especially for these courses, completion rates and the number of students writing and passing the AP exams were not as impressive as one might expect given the calibre of students involved.

In the new model all students in the more remote and isolated schools will be expected to take a significant portion of their high school program via the Internet. Given the difficulties some of the advanced students have had functioning in a virtual learning environment, it is to be expected that the average and below-average student will encounter difficulties making the adjustment. Experience has clearly demonstrated that young learners, even those with the necessary characteristics, need *academic tutoring* when taking distance education courses. The failure to make this a distinct component of the new model could put future generations of rural students at risk. The Government has on many occasions lamented the poor academic performance of rural students compared to their urban counter parts. Is imposing a more demanding mode of learning on rural students creating a level playing field? Is such a development likely to ameliorate the purported rural under achievement?

Web-based distance education has the potential to make the size and location of a school irrelevant in terms of its capacity to provide a broad range of programs and courses to rural students. In doing so it can enable students to enjoy the obvious advantages of small community-based schooling; it can enable communities to keep one of its most important institutions. However, there has to be a commitment to provide whatever level of support young learners need in order to succeed in web based learning.

Although I have raised a number of questions about the province's new model of online distance education, I remain convinced that such an approach has potential for enhancing the provision of education in small and remote rural schools. However, as always, the devil is in the details. What is needed to make the new vision an educational reality is more sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of the planners and designers to the actual pedagogical needs of those rural students who will be participating.

The system has to be designed for the students in question; they cannot be expected to 'sink or swim' in a system that does not consider who they are and where they live.

Furthermore, careful consideration has to be given to how any proposed change will affect the whole school and all students. Our commitment has to be to every student, not a select few.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have attempted to provide an overview of some of the issues and challenges confronting rural educators and parents in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. I have chosen to focus on three of the most pressing at this point in time: declining enrolment and its consequences; the continuing pressure on rural communities to close their small schools; and the potential and pitfalls of web-based distance education. I suspect the ideas presented in this paper will resonate with many rural educators in Australia. If that is indeed the case I would welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation.

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**Key Words:** Student Progress; Small Schools; Academic Achievement