

Muttart Foundation Presentation to Edmonton Public School Board Trustees

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Issues for Consideration in Respect to the Proposed Closure of McCauley School

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Background

The Muttart Foundation is a private charitable foundation with interests in the area of early childhood education and care. The Foundation sees the provision of high quality, early childhood education as a public good that benefits all children and helps to address the significant inequities in opportunity which a growing number of families experience.

The Foundation's presentation to the Edmonton Public School Board Trustees draws on its own work in the area of early childhood education as well as that of two Foundation colleagues:

Dr. Martin Garber-Conrad, Executive Director of the Edmonton Community Foundation (and a resident of the McCauley neighbourhood)
Dr. Jane Hewes, Chair, Early Learning and Child Care, Grant MacEwan University; and a Muttart Foundation Advisory Committee Member

Foundation representatives attended the McCauley School Closure meeting on March 8th, 2010 and received information from Edmonton Public School Board planning staff on the proposed closure.

Since attending the meeting, the Foundation and its partners have further considered the proposed closure of the school and sought input from local stakeholders on its potential impact on the children and families who attend the school and the broader community.

Based on this input, and allied with its own work in the area of early childhood education, the Foundation asks that the Edmonton Public School Board Trustees give consideration to two arguments relevant to the proposed closure of McCauley School:

The first - relates to those factors that contribute to successful educational experiences for new immigrant and refugee children;

The second - concerns the need for broader community solutions to the challenges of providing high quality public education for students in inner-city neighbourhoods.

1. Factors that contribute to successful educational experiences for new immigrant and refugee children

The EPSB identifies a number of criteria it considers in respect to school closure including the educational impact on students in the school. Based on information provided at the school closure meeting, as well as that gathered through discussions with EPSB representatives, one of the School Board's key concerns is that it is unable to provide the students at McCauley with the same level of programming opportunities as students at other schools. The proposed solution to this problem is the consolidation of school populations.

While there is support in the education literature for the value of enriched programming for students, there is also research on the need for students (particularly those who are considered vulnerable or at-risk) to feel prepared and ready to learn if they are to achieve school success.

The educational research focussed specifically on the schooling experiences of new immigrant and refugee children highlights the importance of children feeling accepted at school, and developing a sense of belonging, as contributing factors in their academic adjustment and school success.^{i ii}

It reveals that educational settings that are the most effective in supporting the child's education are the ones that create empowering and welcoming spaces for children, and affirm and acknowledge their histories, voices, experiences and languages.^{iii iv}

And it concludes that children who experience a greater sense of well-being are more likely to learn in effective ways, to engage in more positive social behaviours and to invest in their own well-being as well as that of others.^v

The McCauley School appears to have created a safe space in which students and their families feel welcome, valued and ready and able to learn. The continuity and scope of programming at McCauley – from the early years through to Grade 9 – is unique and enabling for this community of learners. Children from the same family go to school together. The school's strong, responsive community presence makes regular and extracurricular programming and activities accessible to the students and their families who live in the neighbourhood. The school has a place in the community and the community of learners feels at home in the school.

As the School Board weighs the arguments in support of consolidating existing school populations to provide McCauley students with more cost-effective access to higher levels of programming, the Foundation asks that it give appropriate attention to the various aspects of the schooling experience that provide a foundation for effective learning.

In this regard, the Board must satisfy itself that the educational benefits that the McCauley School offers its students and their families will not be lost by its closure – and that the anticipated enhanced educational opportunities, through school consolidation, will result in improved educational outcomes for current and future McCauley students and their families.

Providing enhanced educational programming opportunities at a consolidated school may be good for some children. However, we anticipate that there will be a cost to the social and academic development of a vulnerable community of children if they are relocated to a school distant from their families and

neighbourhoods. We are not confident, at present, that this cost will be outweighed by the advantages of enhanced programming at consolidated schools.

2. The need for broader community solutions to address the challenges of providing high quality public education for students in inner-city neighbourhoods.

The criteria the EPSB considers in respect to school closure include the impact of closure on the community taking into account existing or proposed development plans. Considering this aspect of school closure extends the discussion considerably beyond matters relating to pedagogy, and requires the School Board to consider the broader relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

As the community response to the recent school closure meetings demonstrates, schools play important roles in communities that extend beyond the classroom. In many ways, the health and vibrancy of a local school reflects the broader health and vitality of the community of which it is part – and vice versa.

Sadly, the situation facing McCauley School is similar to that which confronts numerous other schools in inner-city neighbourhoods across the country – and one that reflects the broader context in which public education policy and practice plays out.

The efforts of EPSB Trustees and staff, and Edmonton’s inner-city children and their families, to find creative solutions that address the high net cost of delivering quality programs to low numbers of students is a school-based response to larger community events and processes. These community changes, although they lie outside of the formal educational system, have a profound impact on its funding and delivery. Indeed, much of the research on urban education indicates that it is larger processes - such as changing demographic trends, growing disparities in family incomes, patterns of immigration and settlement, urban design, and economic and social policies - that ultimately constrain and shape educational policy and practice as compared to pedagogical concerns around curriculum and school programming.^{vi}

Just over 10 years ago the EPSB embarked on an innovative schooling strategy to address the educational needs of inner-city students - the City Centre Education Project. The project came about because the principals of some inner-city schools sought a solution to the problems they faced in serving some of the ‘most disadvantaged’ students in the district while dealing with ‘declining enrolments, limited programming options, deteriorating buildings and limited financial resources’.^{vii}

While the City Centre Education Project realized some improved educational outcomes for students and their families, as a primarily school-based response, it was unable to address the underlying problems that confront the funding and delivery of high quality education for inner-city students.

The EPSB now finds itself wrestling with a similar set of challenges that are again considered to require the same set of solutions - namely, the consolidation of school sites to support enriched programming opportunities for a declining number of students.

This experience confirms that the long-term provision of high quality educational experiences for children in inner-city neighbourhoods cannot be realized simply through the continued consolidation of

school sites. Rather, broader community responses are needed that address the fundamental issues central to the funding and delivery of urban education.

With this in mind, the Foundation asks that the EPSB consider its own role, as a steward of public education, in taking a leadership position that calls for a broader discussion of the current challenges around the funding and delivery of public education in the City of Edmonton.

This discussion would need to include the municipality and the provincial government, as well as the many other community stakeholders who lives are touched by the work of schools. It would need to start from the premise that the ability of local school boards to effectively address issues of urban education (particularly for marginalized and vulnerable populations) is significantly affected by factors that lie beyond the control of the boards themselves – and therefore requires a broad community response.

For the benefit of its students now and in the future, we urge the Edmonton Public School Board to take a leadership role in the evolving situation of inner-city education. This will require the School Board to work actively with the community, the city and provincial partners to find solutions to the complex problems that, unless solved soon, will continue to generate school-closure episodes such as those we all now face.

ⁱ Bernard Van Leer Foundation. 2008. *Early Childhood Matters: On a Sense of Belonging*.

ⁱⁱ Woodhead, M. and Moss, P. (eds) 2007 *Early Childhood and Primary Education*. *Early Childhood in Focus 2*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quaicoe, L. 2007. *Wanting to Belong: Schooling Experiences of New Immigrant and Refugee Children*. 9th Annual Metropolis Conference. *Exploring Canada's Diversity, Today and Tomorrow*.

^{iv} National Children's Alliance. 2008. *Immigrant and Refugee Children in Middle Childhood: An Overview*. Prepared for the Canadian Council on Learning.

^v Skevington, S. et al. 2003. *Creating an Environment for Emotional and Social Well-being: An important responsibility of a Health-promoting and Child-Friendly School*. Geneva: WHO.

^{vi} Levin, B., Gaskell, J. & Pollock, K. 2007. *What Shapes Inner-city Educational Policy?* *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 61, 1-22.

Levin, B. 2007. *Enduring Issues in Urban Education*. Paper Presented to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Saskatoon, SK.

^{vii} Austin, A. n.d. *Edmonton Public Schools' City Centre Education Project: Inner City Education*.