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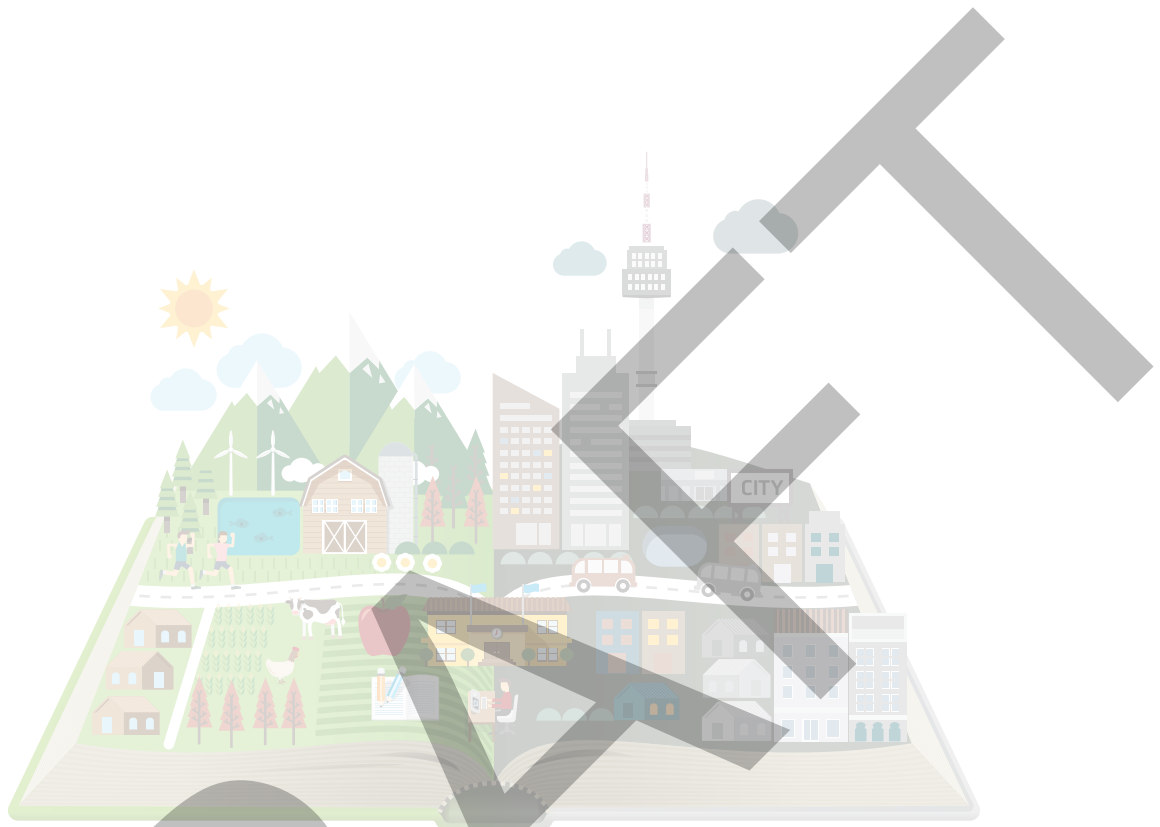
BRITISH COLUMBIA

# RURAL EDUCATION REPORT



RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS DEVELOPED THROUGH CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT





DRAFT

BRITISH COLUMBIA

# RURAL EDUCATION REPORT

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## MESSAGE FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR RURAL EDUCATION

— **LINDA LARSON**

In the summer of 2016 Premier Christy Clark tasked me to work with the education sector and community stakeholder groups, as well as Donna Barnett, the Minister of State for Rural Economic Development, to undertake a review of K-12 public sector education in rural communities. This broad review was completed through both online engagements, as well as face-to-face open houses in nine communities across the province.

I am proud of the work that was completed in obtaining feedback from British Columbians and interested stakeholders, who provided a range of different perspectives on the challenges – educational and operational – facing school districts and communities. This was an inclusive engagement process, with a diverse array of input from:

- Rural families
- Parents from rural and urban locations
- First Nations
- Boards of Education
- School district staff
- K-12 public sector associations
- Local government
- Community organizations

I am pleased to present to the Minister of Education my final Report on Rural Education, which includes recommendations for the future, focusing on the unique challenges facing rural school districts and recognizing the positive economic, social and cultural impact that schools have on small communities.

Thank you,

Linda Larson  
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR RURAL EDUCATION

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between November 2016 and April 2017, Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Education Linda Larson (Parliamentary Secretary Larson) undertook a broad engagement with British Columbians from across the province to understand their experiences, concerns and vision for K-12 public sector education in rural school districts (see Appendix 1). Input on the rural education discussion was solicited in a variety of ways: an online discussion; school district technical surveys; stakeholder submissions; and regional open houses in nine communities.

Throughout the engagement process, Parliamentary Secretary Larson heard a resounding theme –

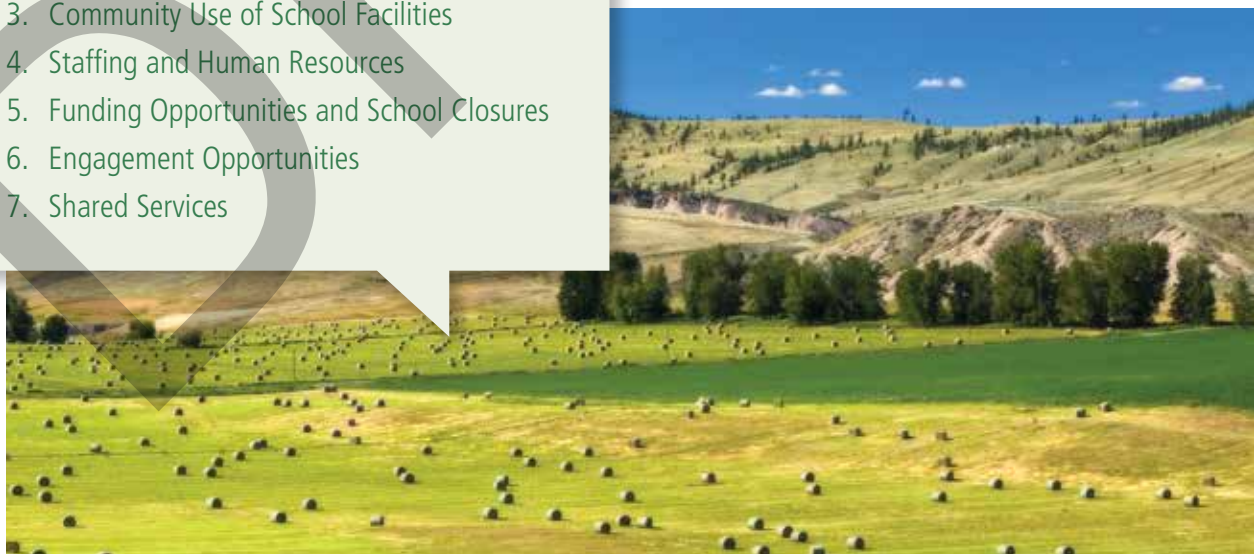
“ Schools are cornerstones of rural and remote communities across the province and that their role in these communities should not only be preserved, but strengthened.

Many participants shared personal stories about their connection to the schools in their communities, as well as their experiences with the educational programs being delivered. While a range of challenges were brought forward, the vast majority of participants voiced a strong sense of pride in their local schools.

Overall, seven key themes emerged. These areas present some challenges, but are also opportunities for significant growth and success.

1. Access to Quality Educational Programs
2. State of School Facilities
3. Community Use of School Facilities
4. Staffing and Human Resources
5. Funding Opportunities and School Closures
6. Engagement Opportunities
7. Shared Services

Based on these findings, Parliamentary Secretary Larson has provided a list of recommendations of varying complexities and timespans; some have already been implemented. This affinity across themes signifies that many of the challenges and opportunities in rural and remote communities do not exist in isolation, and therefore, require integrated solutions. When implemented, these recommendations will help maintain the health and strength of public sector K-12 rural education in B.C. and strengthen the communities in which these schools reside.



## PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

Approximately 32 per cent of students in British Columbia’s K-12 public sector education system attend schools located outside of the main urban centers of Greater Victoria, the Lower Mainland and Kelowna areas. Outside of these areas, schools are located within a wide range of geographic settings, from cities such as Prince George and Kamloops to very small remote communities – like Port Renfrew – located far from urban centers (some with a population of less than 15 students). As a result, rural schools and communities often have different needs than densely populated areas. The main purpose of this engagement process was to gain a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities associated with operating schools and educational programs in rural and remote communities.

This report provides a broad summary of findings from the public engagement undertaken by Parliamentary Secretary Larson, as well as a list of potential recommendations to help address some of the challenges identified by rural communities as it pertains to K-12 public sector education. All feedback and comments received throughout this engagement process were reviewed for this final report and the detailed information has been included in the attached Appendices.

## THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

This public engagement process was completed in two phases:

### Phase 1: Fall/Winter 2016

- Rural families, parents, community members and education leaders were engaged in an online discussion
- Stakeholder groups, such as Boards of Education, sector associations and local governments voiced their perspectives via formal submissions
- Input from senior school district staff with technical knowledge, such as Superintendents and Secretary Treasurers, was sought via a survey about issues around funding, facilities, and educational programming

### Phase 2: Winter/Spring 2017

- A summary paper was posted online for public and stakeholder comment
- The Parliamentary Secretary and/or Ministry of Education staff hosted a series of regional open houses to discuss what was heard online and through stakeholder submissions

Phase 1 of the online engagement process established a public conversation on four initial questions:

**Discussion 1:** What is your definition of a rural school?

**Discussion 2:** What are the positive impacts in the community?

**Discussion 3:** How are schools being used?

**Discussion 4:** Share your rural education story

Several key themes emerged from Phase 1 of the engagement process — summarized in an interim paper titled *A Status Check on Rural Education* (see Appendix 3). This summary paper was posted on the rural education engagement website and made available for further public and stakeholder comments. The themes identified in the paper served as a guide for the facilitated regional open house sessions during Phase 2 of the engagement process. The regional open houses were held in nine communities across the province between January and April 2017:

■ Chilliwack	January 26, 2017	■ Prince George	February 1, 2017
■ Terrace	February 6, 2017	■ Williams Lake	February 8, 2017
■ Comox-Courtenay	February 17, 2017	■ Trail	February 24, 2017
■ Kamloops	February 28, 2017	■ Fort St. John	March 3, 2017
■ Revelstoke	April 3, 2017		

Over 400 individuals, drawn from a variety of different stakeholder groups (including school trustees, school district staff, educators, administrators, unions, local government, First Nations, parents, community/non-profit organizations, and the general public), participated in the open house sessions. Where facilities permitted, video-conferencing and teleconferencing technologies engaged participants from other communities within the region. During the facilitated sessions, participants were given a copy of the summary paper from Phase 1 of the engagement process and were encouraged to begin the session by reading about what had been heard to date. The following discussion topics were presented to facilitate conversations.

**Topic 1:** What is your definition of a rural school?

**Topic 2:** What are some of the positive impacts that schools have within your communities, and what are some of the challenges associated with operating rural schools?

**Topic 3:** How are schools being used within your communities?

**Topic 4:** What are the top priorities that we should be focusing on moving forward?

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Generally, the feedback provided during the open house sessions was consistent with what was heard during Phase 1 of the engagement process, with concerns about staff recruitment and retention, the accessibility to comparable educational programming, and funding approaches, emerging as top themes. An overall summary of this feedback can be read in greater detail in Appendix 5.

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To ensure that all interested stakeholder groups had an opportunity to participate in the engagement process, formal written submissions were also invited. Parliamentary Secretary Larson received over 50 stakeholder submissions from the following major sectors or groups:

- K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Sector Stakeholders
- Individual School Districts/Boards of Education
- School district Parent Advisory Councils
- Libraries
- Local and regional government organizations
- First Nations
- Other community groups with an interest in education and student welfare

An overall summary of the feedback received through the written submissions can be read in greater detail in Appendix 6.



# KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the engagement process, Parliamentary Secretary Larson heard a great deal from participants about the role of rural schools as cornerstones of the surrounding community. Many participants shared personal stories about their connection to the schools in their community, as well as their experiences with the educational programs being delivered.

While a range of challenges were brought forward (such as isolation, funding and logistics, as well as access to staff, facilities, programs and services), the vast majority of participants voiced a strong sense of pride in their local schools. They also expressed support for collaboration between parties, such as school districts, local and regional governments, non-profit organizations and parent groups for the benefit of students and families in the community.

This section outlines, in detail, the key findings and recommendations that emerged once all feedback from the technical survey (see Appendix 2), online consultations (see Appendix 3), community open houses (see Appendix 4 and 5), and written submissions (see Appendix 6) was considered in conjunction with educational attainment statistics (see Appendix 7).

## 1. ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

### Key Findings

- Statistical achievement data confirms there is a gap between the educational outcomes of rural and urban students. The gap is even larger for rural Aboriginal students.
- Educational programs that tap into the local culture and/or economy of the region help foster strong connections between students and their rural communities.
- Rural students do not have the same level of access to educational programs and extra-curricular activities as their urban counterparts.

### Recommendations

- Develop targeted strategies to close the urban-rural gap in educational outcomes for students, in collaboration with Boards of Education.
- Support rural schools to build on local strengths, develop innovative programming tailored to the surrounding community, and share promising practices provincially.
- Ensure equitable access to educational programs, services and extra-curricular activities for students, and professional learning opportunities for staff regardless of where they live.

## Key Findings

- There are many innovative ways to deliver quality educational programs, in addition to brick-and-mortar facilities, including virtual, facilitated and experiential options.
- Innovative programming and solutions to educational challenges are being implemented in schools across the province; however, the effectiveness of these programs and solutions is not being explored systematically and successes are not being shared widely.
- Teaching in a multi-grade classroom environment can be difficult; many teachers in rural and remote schools are new, and they often have limited access to classroom support.
- Lack of access to specialist services, long travel times, and high costs in some rural schools and communities are contributing to long wait times for special needs assessments and, therefore, delays in receiving services.
- Transitioning to larger communities, whether for work or further education, is difficult for rural students.

## Recommendations

- Ensure that rural educators and administrators are well-supported to provide quality educational programming within complex learning environments (i.e. multi-grade classrooms).
- Increase supports to students to ensure that they are prepared for post-secondary, career, and life transitions within and outside of their rural community.
- Improve access to technological tools, software and supports that encourages innovative educational programming, including opportunities to collaborate between schools and school districts across the province.

## 2. STATE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

### Key Findings

- 'Use it or lose it' approach to facility maintenance funding makes it difficult for rural school district to undertake larger-scale maintenance projects, leading to higher deferred maintenance costs and facility deterioration.
- Rural school districts have limited funding options to help them 'right size' their school facilities in the context of enrolment decline.
- Specialty program space and equipment, such as shop/trades, requires upgrading in order to adequately prepare students for the workforce.
- Technology and connectivity are important in delivering educational programs and engaging with parents; however, there are many schools in the province reporting limited or no access to new technologies and/or the internet.

### Recommendations

- Establish more flexible capital funding criteria, to allow for: greater optimization of space; extend the useful life of facilities; ensure access to 'state of the art' equipment; and enhance community use of rural school space.
- Ensure that all rural schools have a minimum level of access to technological infrastructure and internet connectivity to support 21st century learning and that this access keeps pace with technological advances.

## 3. COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

### Key Findings

- Community groups and the public are experiencing barriers to using school facilities in some communities – owing to factors such as insurance costs and user fees.
- Boards of Education in rural school districts do not always have the budget to fund initiatives outside of their core educational mandate in support of community programming.

### Recommendations

- Work with Boards of Education to streamline and improve community group access to school facilities for non-educational purposes.
- Improve cross-government coordination in order to integrate public services/supports (e.g. counselors, mental health workers, social workers) within rural schools for the benefit of both students and the broader community.

## 4. STAFFING AND HUMAN RESOURCES

### Key Findings

- Rural school districts are experiencing great difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff for educational, administrative, and operational positions.

### Recommendations

- Work with rural school districts to identify their staffing needs and develop local action plans to ensure that their needs are met.
- Implement a coordinated, strategic recruitment program to attract qualified education sector professionals to rural schools.
- Offer incentives to staff in rural school districts to reduce turnover and increase stability for students in the classroom.

## 5. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

### Key Findings

- There is a lack of understanding amongst stakeholders of how the K-12 public sector funding allocation system and governance structure work, which impacts the relationship between Boards of Education and stakeholders.
- Stable and predictable funding is critical to education. Although the current funding model provides supplements for rural school districts, funding based primarily on enrolment does not reflect the higher costs of delivering comparable programs and services in low enrolment and remote environments.
- School closures can be a difficult process for everyone involved. In many communities, there is a strong interest from local government, parent groups, and community organizations to have a stronger voice in the process.

### Recommendations

- Undertake a comprehensive review of the K-12 sector funding allocation system to better reflect the operational and educational realities of operating schools in rural and remote communities.
- Continue to provide targeted funding outside of regular operating grants to address unique rural issues, such as transportation and housing.
- Help Boards of Education to keep schools open where it makes educational sense to do so, and where communities may be adversely impacted by closure.

## 6. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

### Key Findings

- Public reporting and stakeholder engagement practices by Boards of Education vary widely across the province. A number of stakeholders expressed frustration with the level of information being provided, the perceived lack of planning, as well as with coordination between public sector organizations.

### Recommendations

- Encourage local/regional governments and Boards of Education to work together for the benefit of their communities (e.g. joint facilities planning, community plans, programs/services, etc.), and report out publicly on outcomes.
- Strengthen public reporting from Boards of Education to their stakeholders, including Strategic Plans, Facilities Plans, and regular financial updates.

## 7. PARTNERSHIPS AND SHARED SERVICES

### Key Findings

- Rural school districts often have limited administrative capacity and subject matter expertise compared to their urban counterparts (i.e. Human Resource capacity/expertise, Information Technology Support, long-range facilities planning, etc.).
- A great deal of cooperation and coordination is happening across rural and remote school districts in response to educational and operational capacity issues; however, these practices are not being shared widely across the province.
- There is a significant interest in exploring further shared service initiatives between school districts and across other sectors where possible.

### Recommendations

- Continue to address capacity issues in rural school districts and find efficiencies for the benefit of rural school districts by establishing new and innovative shared services initiatives, including partnerships outside of the K-12 public sector where feasible.
- Facilitate a conversation between school districts and external technological partners to enhance facilities, equipment and learning opportunities in rural education across B.C..

# FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

During the engagement process, two areas were identified as high priority themes emerged that should be addressed immediately:

- 1. Support for staff recruitment and retention
- 2. Support for trades programming

Key initiatives were introduced in early 2017 as immediate actions to support rural schools and school districts in these two areas.

## 1. Staff Recruitment & Retention

While the *Letter of Understanding No.5* of the teachers' collective agreement provides a rural stipend of \$2,300 annually to teachers working in certain rural areas, rural and remote school districts have experienced difficulties hiring teachers and specialist staff (including certified educational assistants). Given this, Parliamentary Secretary Larson and the Minister of Education determined that assistance to rural school districts to address recruitment and retention had to be acted upon immediately.

To help address the recruitment and retention priority as soon as possible, the Ministry of Education created a one-time \$1.5 million Rural and Remote Workforce Sustainability Fund (RRWSF). The fund is being managed by the British Columbia Public School Employers Association (BCPSEA). An additional \$0.5 million has been provided to BCPSEA to provide centrally-coordinated recruitment supports to rural school districts (*Make a Future – Careers in BC Education*).



Non-compensation related incentives covered under the fund include (but are not limited to):

- Relocation/moving expenses, including temporary lodging and travel expenses.
- Relocation assistance including orientation to professional services and the local area and assistance for spouses/dependents seeking employment.
- Training and professional learning including travel, accommodation and course fees.
- Travel assistance for new teachers and their families during the first year of employment to maintain family connections.
- Teacher and administrator exchange programs/secondments between rural and urban school districts and reasonable administration and/or associated moving expenses.
- Assistance with the upgrade of existing qualifications for out-of-province teachers and Teacher Regulation Branch certification fees, as well as fees associated with attaining a work permit.
- Support for student teachers on practicums (short and full) through reimbursement of reasonable travel expenses (including mid-practicum) and arranging for and covering local accommodation costs.
- Individualized publicity, marketing and branding support for the school district, working in conjunction with BCPSEA, as it seeks to recruit new staff.

## 2. Trades Programming

The quality of shop and specialty programming space was a frequent subject of discussion during the rural engagement process. As a result, a Youth Trades Capital Equipment Program was established to ensure capital projects could be initiated before the end of the school year. Of the \$15 million over 3 years for the purchase of new trades-training equipment, \$9 million will be distributed to rural school districts providing the investments support the delivery of an Industry Training Authority (ITA) youth trades program. Safer and more modern equipment along with stronger ties to apprenticeships offer better facilities and opportunities for rural students and provide a chance for them to learn and work in their home communities.



# APPENDIX 1: TERMS OF REFERENCE

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## PURPOSE AND AUTHORITY

The Parliamentary Secretary's role is to support the Minister of Education in achieving the outcomes outlined by the premier with respect to the completion of a Rural Education Strategy, with a focus on sustainable and predictable funding for rural schools. The Parliamentary Secretary is authorized by the minister to act as his agent, working under his authority and direction with regard to the specific duties and deliverables listed below.

## MAJOR DUTIES

The Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Education's specific duties include:

1. Establishing and working with the Rural Schools Working Group, which includes representatives from key K-12 sector stakeholder groups, with membership determined in collaboration with ministry staff;
2. Working with the Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Development to assess the economic, social and cultural impact that rural schools have on small communities; and
3. Working with the Minister of Education and Ministry of Education staff to undertake a review of rural education, including funding for rural schools, and the development of a Rural Education Strategy that outlines recommendations for improvement in the future.

## APPROVED SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES

- Review of analytics pertaining to:
  - » Educational supports and outcomes for students in rural schools in British Columbia
  - » Student enrolment in rural schools in British Columbia
  - » Condition of rural school facilities in British Columbia
  - » Community impacts of rural schools (i.e. economic, social, cultural, etc.)
- Review of operating and capital funding practices in place for rural schools in British Columbia (ministry and school districts)
- Stakeholder engagement pertaining to rural educational supports and the operation of rural schools in British Columbia, including school district and community consultations around the province
- Review of challenges and opportunities (educational, operational, financial, etc.) facing school districts with respect to the operation of rural schools in British Columbia
- Reporting on the results of research, analytics and stakeholder consultations, and making recommendations for improving rural education and the operation of rural schools in the future

Deliverables for the 2016/2017 school year were as follows:

- ✔ Work plan for the completion of the Rural Education Strategy
- ✔ Monthly status updates to the Minister of Education and Ministry of Education executive team
- ✔ Definition of 'rural school'
- ✔ Engagement plan for seeking input from K-12 sector stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities (educational, operational, financial) facing school districts
- ✔ Report on rural education facts, outlining the initial findings from review of research and analytics pertaining to rural education and the operation of rural schools
- ✔ Report summarizing feedback from stakeholder consultations
- ✔ Final report on rural education, including recommendations for the future

## APPENDIX 2: SCHOOL DISTRICT STAFF TECHNICAL SURVEY RESULTS

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School district trustees, superintendents and secretary treasurers, were asked to complete a survey between November 21, 2016 and January 9, 2017. A total of 110 responses were received, with 71 per cent of respondents identifying as a school district employee in B.C. and 26 per cent as a member of a local Board of Education in B.C.. Of those that identified as a school district employee, 53 per cent identified as school district management or administrators and 40 per cent as teachers or support staff. 48 per cent of respondents came from the Cariboo (source data is at the end of this Appendix).

When considering the definition of a rural or remote school, the most important factors identified were: distance to a major population centre, distance between schools and the size of a community. However, similar to the public online discussion comments, other factors beyond distance and size were noted; for instance, the form of transportation (e.g. bus or boat), the type of weather, and the conditions of the transportation infrastructure should be taken into account.

Similarly, when defining a rural school district, community size and distance between schools in the district were seen as the most important factors, with the themes mentioned corresponding to the previous question about schools. However, some respondents wanted a greater consideration for areas that do not have large urban centers and so have limited access to economies of scale. Specifically, respondents identified the impacts of a less well-developed public transportation infrastructure and lack of access to speciality teaching and educational support staff.

The key challenges in delivering educational programs in rural communities/rural schools were staff recruitment and retention, ability to deliver a range of educational programs and transportation / travel time for students, although all options were given a high score.

None of the Geographic Factors in the Funding Allocation system ranked well. The Small Community Supplement was the best ranked with 46 per cent selecting 'Well' or better.

Over 78 per cent of respondents had the impression that student enrolment in their school district was decreasing, although 13 per cent noted enrolment was static over the past ten years. Despite this, the majority of respondents reported an increase (or at least a slowing decrease) in enrolment over the last two years, owing to a variety of factors such as families returning from other school districts and provinces (such as Alberta); economic changes in the local communities; and the addition of new educational programs .

A total of 94 people responded to the question on how changes to student enrolment trends impact the delivery of educational programs and school district operations. Respondents overwhelmingly noted that enrolment decline impacts course options the most, with middle and high school grades disproportionately affected. At the same time, the number of multi-grade classes was noted to increase, while the availability of teachers on call (to cover teachers for preparation time, meetings and other absences) and specialist teachers was seen to decline. Overall, all school district staff were seen as overstretched and performing many more functions when enrolment dropped, leading to stress and anxiety for staff, and ultimately students. It was frequently noted that student needs and the fixed costs of running a school district do not change based on enrolment; respondents noted that this reality is not adequately addressed by the funding model, with many of these additional costs (such as transportation and training) also being much higher than in non-rural school districts.

Regarding additional use of school facilities, recreation and sports, parent or community meetings, pre-kindergarten and adult/community/continuing education programs were the most frequent uses cited for these facilities (over 75 per cent of additional uses). Respondents suggested cultural/arts activities and daycare/after school care as other uses. Of those who expressed an opinion, 37 per cent estimated that school facilities were being used more than ten hours per week for these activities, with 39 per cent estimating between six and ten hours per week.

In terms of school closures, 78 per cent of respondents approximated that between one and five schools have closed within their school district over the last five years, while 14 per cent estimated no school closures. Respondents pointed out that closing schools has a variety of impacts on both students and communities. For students, they often face increased travel times and reduced sleep, leading to higher absenteeism for some students. Further, because of the longer transportation time, students are less able to participate in after (or before) school activities. It was also mentioned that for many students, especially in lower income communities, school represents a beneficial constant in their lives. Closing a school and having students travel long distances reduces this stability. The schools that remain open are also seen as becoming over-crowded and, as a result, have difficulty providing adequate specialty support to these more disadvantaged students.

With regards to impact on the larger community, many respondents noted that areas that lose schools become less desirable to live in and result in falling property values. Because schools are often hubs of other activities, these communities are further impacted by a decreased ability to bring residents together. The relationships between Boards of Education, communities and politicians become stressed as a result. The morale of these communities, as a result, is often negatively affected by school closures.

Another area of focus was Aboriginal students and educational programs. The majority of respondents (77 per cent) believe up to 40 per cent of their students identify as Aboriginal. In relation to programming, 55 per cent of school districts offer specific programs on Aboriginal culture and the history of Aboriginal peoples in B.C., including class materials on residential schools. In addition to the categories listed, language, culture, trade and female-focused Aboriginal education programs and initiatives were mentioned. Among the unique challenges or difficulties in delivering educational programs to Aboriginal students, funding for training, and lower (often seasonal) attendance of Aboriginal students were by far the most significant. Poor relationships with local bands was seen as another difficulty, along with conflicts between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students. There were numerous challenges noted about finding and sourcing locally relevant content and people willing to share their knowledge. Aboriginal students switching between federal band schools and rural schools create challenges for educational continuity, with transportation to and from reserves, as well as internet connectivity on reserves, also posing a significant challenge.

School districts reported that the vast majority of them (74 per cent overall) have adequate or better working relationships with each of the groups and organizations listed. Working relationships with local MLAs scored significantly lower at 54 per cent.

When asked for additional feedback, 53 people provided input. Many people reiterated that the funding block model did not adequately address the needs of rural school districts, specifically infrastructure costs and the increasing special needs of students. Another common theme was the perceived difference between the funding and opportunities of urban schools versus rural schools. School transportation and the transportation infrastructure (e.g. bus stop lighting) received additional comments. The need to properly resource extracurricular travel to support the development of youth with diverse interests was also raised.

## RURAL EDUCATION – QUANTITATIVE RESULTS SUMMARY

[ NOVEMBER 12, 2016 – JANUARY, 9 2017 ]

How important is each of the following factors when defining Remote Schools or Rural Schools?

	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT
Size of school	41%	29%	17%	9%	3%
Population density of school district	44%	21%	20%	8%	6%
Size of community	52%	37%	8%	3%	0%
Distance between schools	61%	28%	8%	2%	1%
Distance to major population centre	65%	28%	5%	2%	1%

How important is each of the following factors when defining Rural School Districts?

	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT
Size of schools	41%	32%	16%	6%	5%
Population density of school district	51%	26%	17%	4%	2%
Distance between schools in district	53%	39%	7%	0%	0%
Size of communities	52%	31%	17%	0%	0%

How important is each of the following operational and educational challenges associated with delivering educational programs in rural communities/rural schools?

	VERY IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	SLIGHTLY IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT
Ability to optimize space in school facilities (i.e. capacity distribution)	32%	28%	18%	12%	9%
Maintenance of facilities (i.e. deferred maintenance)	52%	32%	11%	4%	1%
Geographic & weather-related conditions	53%	29%	13%	4%	1%
Overall operating costs for rural school facilities (i.e. utilities, staffing, supplies)	56%	31%	8%	2%	3%
Availability of curricular & extra-curricular opportunities, such as sports teams, or field trips	57%	26%	14%	4%	0%
Training and professional development for staff (e.g. new curriculum transition)	63%	23%	11%	3%	0%
Student transportation/travel time	72%	21%	6%	2%	0%
Ability to deliver range of educational programs/special programs for students	78%	17%	4%	2%	0%
Staff recruitment and retention	83%	14%	4%	0%	0%

How well does each of the Geographic Factors in the Funding Allocation System address the business requirements associated with the operation of rural schools?

	EXTREMELY WELL	VERY WELL	WELL	NOT WELL	NOT WELL AT ALL	NOT VERY WELL
Climate factor	3%	9%	32%	25%	3%	15%
Sparseness factor	6%	9%	25%	27%	17%	17%
Small community supplement	6%	14%	26%	20%	20%	14%
Rural factor	6%	12%	25%	25%	18%	14%
Student location factor & supplemental student location factor	6%	8%	25%	29%	16%	16%
Low enrolment factor	7%	9%	22%	24%	22%	16%

Over the past 10 years, (in general) has your school district's student enrolment been:

Increasing	7%
About the same	13%
Decreasing	78%
Don't know	2%

In addition to K-12 educational programs, for what other purposes are your school facilities being used?

Recreational/sports	23%
Parent or community meetings	21%
Pre-Kindergarten	17%
Adult/community/continuing education programs	15%
Political meetings	10%
Other	5%
Seniors	3%
Healthcare services	3%
Public library	2%
School facilities are not being used for anything else	1%
Don't know	1%
Museum	1%

On average per school, how much time would you estimate are the facilities being used for programs or activities not directly related to the delivery of educational programs?

0-5 hours per week	21%
6-10 hours per week	33%
11-14 hours per week	11%
15+ hours per week	20%
Don't know	15%

By your approximation, how many schools have closed within your school district in the past 5 years?

None	14%
1-5	78%
6-10	4%
11+	1%
Don't know	3%

On average per school, how much time would you estimate are the facilities being used for programs or activities not directly related to the delivery of educational programs?

0-5 hours per week	21%
6-10 hours per week	33%
11-14 hours per week	11%
15+ hours per week	20%
Don't know	15%

By your approximation, how many schools have closed within your school district in the past 5 years?

None	14%
1-5	78%
6-10	4%
11+	1%
Don't know	3%

What percentage of your students identify as Aboriginal?

0%-20%	28%
21%-40%	49%
41%-60%	7%
61%-80%	7%
81%-100%	0%
Don't know	8%

Do you have specific Aboriginal education programs or initiatives geared towards any of the following categories?

Aboriginal culture	30%
B.C.'s history, including residential schools	25%
Environmental concerns	12%
Economic hardship	10%
Health and wellness	18%
None	0%
Other	5%

In your opinion, what is the strength of your school district's working relationship with the groups and organizations below:

	VERY STRONG	STRONG	ADEQUATE	WEAK	VERY WEAK
Regional government	6%	17%	48%	26%	5%
Local MLA(s)	5%	19%	29%	29%	17%
Local environmental organizations	9%	21%	43%	23%	4%
Business organizations such as Chamber of Commerce	5%	23%	43%	23%	6%
Local/Municipal government	11%	28%	45%	17%	0%
Other community organizations (i.e. non-profit societies, cultural organizations etc.)	14%	32%	40%	12%	2%
Local charities such as Lions or Rotary Clubs	13%	34%	34%	15%	5%

To better understand who is responding to this survey, please consider providing a bit of information about yourself - these questions are optional.

Are you:

A member of a local Board of Education in British Columbia	23%
An employee of a school district in B.C.	71%
Other	6%

If you are an employee of a school district, are you:

A superintendent or assistant/associate superintendent	19%
Secretary treasurer or senior business official	8%
School-based administrator	27%
Teacher	32%
Support staff	8%
Other	7%

How long have you worked with the B.C. public K-12 education sector?

0-5 years	19%
6-10 years	10%
11-15 years	15%
16-20 years	6%
21-25 years	23%
25+ years	23%
Not applicable	6%

In what region of British Columbia do you live in?

Cariboo	48%
Kootenay	13%
Mainland/Southwest/Fraser Valley	7%
North Coast	6%
Northeast	2%
Thompson Okanagan	12%
Vancouver Island	11%
Nechako	2%
I live outside of B.C.	0%

**APPENDIX 3: INTERIM SUMMARY PAPER**  
**– STATUS CHECK ON RURAL EDUCATION**

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**A Status Check on  
Rural Education**



# A Status Check on Rural Education

Maintaining the health and strength of rural education in British Columbia requires a clear understanding of where we stand. Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Education Linda Larson is currently undertaking a public status check, asking British Columbians to paint the picture of rural education as it exists today. The findings will help guide next steps in planning for the future of rural education.

Participants are being asked to provide input in a variety of ways:

- An online discussion with the public (November 23, 2016 – January 9, 2017)
- Surveys from superintendents and secretary-treasurers (under review)
- Stakeholder submissions (currently being received and under review)
- Regional open houses (beginning January 26, 2017)
- Additional input on this draft document

This paper is a summary of key themes identified during the online discussion. These themes will help guide the conversation at regional open houses taking place across the province between January and March 2017.

Comments are being accepted on this discussion paper until 4 p.m. on March 15, 2017. All feedback will be considered for the final report.

## Engagement Process

There are two key phases to this engagement process. The first phase took place in the fall and winter of 2016, and included gathering public comments through an online discussion forum and surveying senior school district staff with technical knowledge about rural education. The surveys received by senior school district staff are currently under review.

The second phase spans the winter and early spring of 2017 and includes a deeper exploration of the themes identified during the first phase of engagement, as well as a summary of stakeholder submissions. Additionally, the Parliamentary Secretary and Ministry of Education Staff are hosting a series of regional meetings to discuss what has been heard so far.

All of this feedback from phases one and two will result in a final report with recommendations by the end of the 2016/17 school year.

## Themes We've Heard So Far

Below is a summary of the 11 key themes that emerged from the online discussion.

## Theme 1: Rural School Definition

Many of the contributors to Discussion 1 understood the challenge with creating a one-size-fits-all definition of a rural school. They mentioned that while there are situations where a rural school exists in a more urban district, there are also situations where a remote school exists in a rural district.

Contributors offered a variety of definitions and criteria. Many identified small community populations as a key factor, though their suggested population sizes varied. For example, while one person said that any school in a community with a population of less than 25,000 could be considered rural, others felt that the community should be smaller than 5,000 for the school to be considered rural.

Many felt that distance from an urban centre was a main factor, though there were varying ideas about what the distance should be. While some felt that a drive of 12 or 15 minutes should be the criteria, others felt that the school should be at least 30 or 45 minutes from the closest town. Contributors also identified a range in distances of between 15 km and 80 km.

Others felt the definition should include the degree of difficulty in getting to school, travelling by road or water. A lot of people talked about a rural school as being one where kids rely on school bus service and those where students have to travel by dirt roads. Others said a school that has students arrive by ferry should be considered rural.

Some said that rural schools could be identified by their small student population, and those with a wide range of grades. There were several mentions that multi-grade classrooms should be part of the criteria.

A few people mentioned that rural schools should be assessed on a case-by-case basis and that each school should be assessed on demographic, economic and human factors. A few people mentioned that the focus on agriculture and industry could also be part of the rural definition.

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**Question:** Is there anything additional about the definition of a rural school that you want to share?

## Theme 2: Remote School Definition

Many people agreed that a remote school is far away from services and they are isolated from other schools and communities. However, there were a range of suggested distances.

While several contributors felt that a remote school should be one that is located one or more hours by road from any other schools, others suggested that a remote school should be one that is separated by three or more hours by road, or one or more hours by boat, to the nearest town. Another suggestion was that a remote school should be more than 30 minutes away from a city, or that a remote school is one that is more than 100 km away from an urban centre.

Some general criteria identified were that a remote school is one that is isolated from other centres, has reduced access to services and communities, and that requires students to be bussed in or travel by boat or plane.

Some felt that factors such as little or no Internet connectivity, a lack of access to diverse facilities such as for the trades, being a one or two room school, and more extreme weather-dependent road access set apart remote schools from rural schools.

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**Question:** Do you have anything to add on the definition of a remote school?

### **Theme 3: Rural School District Definition**

Some felt the definition of a rural school district is one that exists in an agricultural region and has no cities, where schools are small and students are bussed. Others defined it as where children are not able to safely travel between home and school due to a major highway or a body of water.

Some contributors defined a rural school district as one where:

- the district oversees a rural school;
- the majority of schools are defined as rural or remote;
- any school is more than 30 minutes from the city; or
- the majority of schools are in rural areas.

There was a suggestion that the RCMP or Statistics Canada definitions for rural be applied, and a request that the rural school district definition be reviewed over time as communities change.

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**Question:** Is there a specific definition of a rural school district that you prefer?

### **Theme 4: A Rural School is the Heart of the Community**

Many who commented, particularly parents, mentioned the plentiful positive aspects of the rural school experience, and described their schools as the hub and heart of their community. Many parents who had grown up in small towns themselves made the choice to raise their children in small towns to give them the rural school experience. These parents shared heartwarming stories about the benefits of this life. Others suggested rural schools give students a unique perspective on wildlife and nature.

Many people talked about how rural schools build community and how that teaches important lessons for children as they grow up.

Additionally, some felt that with growing challenges like drugs and mental health, more needed to be done to ensure that rural schools are a supportive and connective environment, and a place for youth to go to be engaged in positive social interactions.

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**Question:** Do you have any additional stories that capture your feelings about rural schools as the hub and heart of the community?

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## Theme 5: Quality of Education and Diversity

There was a lot of conversation about the quality of education a student receives in a rural school. While many felt the rural educational experience is superior to urban schools, others felt the opposite and described a large divide between the experiences of students in rural versus urban districts.

Some talked about the lack of diversity in small rural schools, and felt more cultural experiences and lifestyle teachings could be brought into rural schools to help prepare students for the world outside the rural community. Also mentioned was the need for English as a Second Language funding so that the school system can make room for these children in rural communities. It was also felt that schools need funding to help refugee students settle in.

There were also mixed feelings about what can be accomplished in a small school. One commenter who has lived rurally his whole life and has experience in a rural school as a student, teacher and administrator said he is witnessing declining enrollment, which is resulting in real challenges in delivering educational programming. In contrast, a commenter in the Thompson Okanagan felt their small numbers have inspired a progressive approach and a reimagining of school, which has resulted in hosting 31 school visits over the past few years on their creative approach to personalized education. Consistently, there was tremendous pride for students coming from a rural school who had succeeded.

---

**Question:** What can government do to protect the quality of education at rural schools and support diversity?

## Theme 6: Teaching Challenges

Most of the challenges presented were from teachers who had worked in rural schools. Some talked about the recruiting and turnover challenges and many talked about teachers putting in their time to eventually move to a larger community.

Both parents and teachers talked about the challenges of the parent/teacher relationship in a small community where everyone knows each other. Similarly, another parent felt that teachers in rural schools can be very entrenched.

Another teacher talked about technology challenges and Internet connectivity in rural schools. A teacher on a small island suggested that a conversation about technology, Internet access and online learning should be included as part of the rural education discussion.

Multi-grade teaching was also pointed to as a challenge, requiring creative and innovative thinking. There was a suggestion that some rural schools be used as a test site to explore new ideas and approaches around rural education.

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**Question:** What teaching opportunities and challenges have you experienced in rural schools?

## **Theme 7: Rural Schools Support Jobs and the Economy**

There were many comments that highlighted the connection between rural schools and the health of the local economy. It was made clear that without rural schools, rural industry would struggle to attract workers, and that existing families would be unable to stay in a community without a strong rural school.

Many contributors felt that a community cannot thrive without schools because a community cannot thrive without young families. In particular, it was expressed that there is a mutual benefit for a school to be connected to local businesses, as the school community generates customers for local business owners and, in turn, the school gets support from local business owners.

Several people talked about the rising housing costs in rural areas and the impact of rural schools on property values.

There was also a comment about the importance of rural schools for students completing a dual credit program for first and second year post-secondary studies without leaving the community. This helps save tuition and housing costs in those years.

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**Question:** How else do rural schools impact jobs and the economy?

## **Theme 8: Rural Schools as the Hub for Culture and Generation Integration**

There were also many examples of how rural schools bring cultures and ages together in one setting. Some talked about how well rural schools educate students about Aboriginal culture and how their school is also a gathering place for elders and a spiritual place for all. Opportunity for students to learn First Nations languages from the other students was also pointed to as a cultural strength of rural schools.

Others talked about how important their school is for seniors and other adults in the community as a place of learning and community-building, and how much students themselves learn by spending time with seniors.

This weaving of culture and generations was identified as a very important part of the rural school experience for many.

---

**Question:** Do you any ideas for strengthening the cultural and generational benefits of rural schools?

## Theme 9: Facilities Rental and Use

Contributors seemed proud to share stories about their school facilities being put to shared use and partnerships. Here are some of the unique uses that were mentioned:

- Flu immunization clinics and public health nurse sessions
- Adult literacy opportunities
- Cultural gatherings
- Spiritual purposes and churches
- Non-profits using the high school as a community kitchen
- Sports facilities, like the gym and track and field
- Community celebrations at Easter, Christmas and Halloween
- Adult wood working in the high school shop
- Poetry cafes
- A place for elders to share
- Theatre groups
- Boy Scouts and Girl Guides
- Cadets and colour guard
- Driving classes
- 4H Club
- Regional science fairs
- Yoga, Zumba, fencing, martial arts
- First-aid instruction
- Strong Start, preschool and afterschool programs
- City council and community meetings
- Ceremonies for births, marriages and deaths
- A safe location during emergencies such as wildfires
- Polling stations for elections
- Craft fairs
- Community gardens

Others felt that more could be done with schools and facilities. Some felt that collaboration between school districts and municipalities is a key solution to the funding of rural schools, and that integrating services on a smaller level between municipalities and school districts would dramatically reduce their costs and allow more money to be used for educational purposes.

---

**Question:** What ideas do you have to integrate rural school facilities with the wider community?

## Theme 10: Fear of School Closure

Worry about school closures was pervasive throughout the online discussion. There were some who expressed concern about their children and the quality of their lives if they had to travel long distances to go to a school instead of a short distance to a small rural school in their community. Some felt long hours on a bus would cut into homework and family time.

There was also concern about what would happen to the well-being of the community if a rural school closed. The connection was made between school closures and the impact that would have on jobs and the economy.

Some told us that the thought of school closures produced a lot of anxiety for children and families. Others shared stories about moving due to the potential of a school closure, or having to move because secondary school programs weren't available in the community.

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**Question:** Is there anything else you would like to tell us about school closures?

## Theme 11: Physical Condition of Rural Schools

There were a few people who mentioned the physical condition of some rural schools, where overcrowding was a concern, as was unreliable plumbing and mold in classrooms. Others talked about decades-old schools that were in poor condition, too hot and with poor lighting.

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**Question:** Is there anything about the physical condition of rural schools that you want to point out for the final report?

If there is anything additional you feel government should consider, please contact us via:

<http://engage.gov.bc.ca/ruraleducation>

[Rural.Education@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Rural.Education@gov.bc.ca)

Ministry of Education  
Resource Management and Corporate Services Division  
PO Box 9151  
Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria BC V8W 9H1

# APPENDIX 4: REGIONAL OPEN HOUSE DISPLAY BOARDS

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016 PREMIER CHRISTY CLARK TASKED PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY LINDA LARSON TO WORK WITH THE EDUCATION SECTOR, THE PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS, AS WELL AS DONNA BARNETT, THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TO CREATE A RURAL EDUCATION STRATEGY BY THE SUMMER OF 2017.



## Rural Education Strategy

### Engagement Process

OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THERE ARE A NUMBER OF WAYS TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS ENGAGEMENT PROCESS:

<p><b>PHASE 1:</b> FALL/WINTER 2016</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Online discussion with the public until January 9, 2017.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Stakeholder groups can email formal submissions until January 9, 2017.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> School district leaders will be canvassed through a survey.</li> </ul>	+	<p><b>PHASE 2:</b> WINTER/EARLY SPRING, 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A draft discussion paper based on feedback received in Phase 1 will be posted online.</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Regional meetings will be hosted by the Parliamentary Secretary.</li> </ul>	=	<p><b>PHASE 3:</b> END OF 2016/17 SCHOOL YEAR</p> <p>Once all the feedback is reviewed from Phase 1 and Phase 2, a final report will be released which will include recommendations for the future.</p>
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[ENGAGE.GOV.BC.CA/RURALEUCATION/](http://ENGAGE.GOV.BC.CA/RURALEUCATION/)



## A conversation about Rural Education


### Welcome!

The purpose of this public open house is to gather input from your community about the status of rural education here and your vision for its future.

Please help yourself to some refreshments and take some time to read the poster boards around the room. Take a look at what we have heard so far and consider what you want to add to the conversation.

In a short while, we will gather together for a facilitated discussion. We want to hear your ideas, your concerns and your hopes for the future of rural education in British Columbia.

Thank you for being here.

## A conversation about Rural Education



### A Rural Education Status Check

In British Columbia, approximately 32% of students in the public K-12 education system attend schools located outside of the Greater Victoria, Lower Mainland, and Kelowna areas, many in very small communities that use school facilities as a hub for community activities.

No two school districts in British Columbia are alike – some have large numbers of students with schools located in high density urban areas, some have a combination of both urban and rural schools, some cover an expansive geographic area with significant distance in between individual schools, and some have very small numbers of students located in remote, isolated areas far from larger urban centres.

Operating schools and educational programs in rural communities presents a range of challenges and opportunities for school districts, families, communities and other stakeholder groups.

The purpose of this open house is to learn more about the promising practices that are already underway within the public K-12 education sector in British Columbia (both educational and operational), determine whether there are opportunities for improvement and share this information broadly across the province.

## A conversation about Rural Education

### A Two-Phase Process



#### Phase 1: Fall/Winter 2016

Rural families, community members and education leaders engaged in an online discussion. Stakeholder groups, such as school boards, sector associations and local governments voiced their thoughts via formal submissions. Input from senior school district staff with technical knowledge, such as superintendents and secretary treasurers, was sought via a survey about issues around funding, facilities and programming.

#### Phase 2: Winter/early spring 2017

Based on the Phase 1 discussion, a series of regional open houses are being held to discuss what has been heard so far. A summary paper is also available online.

Once all feedback is reviewed, a final report will be released near the end of the 2016/17 school year, containing recommendations for the future with a focus on the unique challenges facing rural school districts.





## A conversation about Rural Education

### What is your definition of a rural school?

Here are some words and phrases we've heard so far:

- Community hub
- Small community population
- Small student population
- Small school facility
- Students get to school by bus or boat
- Distant from an urban centre
- Distant from other schools
- A strong sense of community
- Multi-grade classes
- Agriculture and resource-based community
- Limited access to technology
- Innovative and creative
- Natural landscape barriers
- Isolated
- Nurturing and personalized
- Rural is different than remote





## A conversation about Rural Education

### What are the positive impacts in the community?

Here are some words and phrases we've heard so far:

- Heart (spirit) of our community
- Community events space
- Attract new families to the area
- Community learning space
- Employment opportunities
- Volunteer opportunities
- Community support network
- Recreational facilities
- Centre for civic life
- Gathering place for clubs/groups
- Relationships between school and local business
- Gathering place with First Nations
- Early education options
- Personal celebrations space
- Social integration
- Distance learning options





## A conversation about Rural Education

### How are schools being used?

Here are some words and phrases we've heard so far:

- Cultural (theatre, dance, plays, concerts)
- Sports and fitness
- Community meetings
- Playgrounds
- Community lessons (e.g. music, bike safety)
- Out of school care
- Civic activities
- Mental and public health
- Early childhood education
- Ceremonies (weddings, funerals, births)
- Community centre
- Internet, photocopier, fax
- Adult education and literacy
- Seniors activities
- Community kitchen and garden
- Only public building in the community

## A conversation about Rural Education

### Emerging Themes: Identify your top three priorities

**Quality and Availability of Educational Programs**

This includes sharing ideas across B.C., exploring new programs and means of delivery, availability of specialty courses and training opportunities and access to supports for students with special needs.

**State of School Facilities**

This includes maintenance of school buildings, utilization of school space and school closures, technology and connectivity in schools, quality of shop and specialty programming space.

**Use of School Facilities**

This includes community access, out of school care, sharing with other community services such as daycares, seniors and other programs.

**Funding Opportunities**

This includes review of existing funding mechanisms of the existing funding model, new opportunities to support rural schools and rural school partnerships.

**Partnerships & Shared Services**

This includes partnerships between school districts, local government and/or other social, public and mental health assistance organizations.

**Staffing & Human Resources**



This includes recruiting and retaining teachers, support staff and administrators, plus staff training/development.

**Transportation & Housing**

This includes bussing, billeting, safety and accommodating staff.

**Engagement, Planning, and Communications**

This includes joint planning between Boards of Education, local government, and other community organizations; stakeholder/public engagement and communication of school district plans and priorities.

## A conversation about Rural Education

### Thank you for sharing your ideas.

Keep the conversation going by visiting the website:

**[engage.gov.bc.ca/ruraleducation](http://engage.gov.bc.ca/ruraleducation)**



Read the summary report of what we've heard so far. Tell your friends and contacts to visit the website so they too can have their say on the current status of rural education in B.C. and their vision for its future.

You may also send comments by email to: [Rural.Education@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Rural.Education@gov.bc.ca)

Or by mail to:

Ministry of Education  
Resource Management and Corporate Services Division  
PO Box 9151  
Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria BC  
V8W 9H1

The health and strength of rural schools are important to the communities they serve and to the well-being of our entire education system. Thank you for being here.

## APPENDIX 5: SUMMARY OF REGIONAL OPEN HOUSES

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Regional open houses were held in nine communities. The following is a detailed summary of the discussions during this part of the public engagement process.

### RURAL & REMOTE SCHOOL DEFINITION

Participants questioned the purpose that any definition of rural or remote would serve and sought confirmation that any designation would not be viewed as a deficit. They expressed the advantages of the rural school experience and not just the barriers. Their focus was on ensuring equity within education while reflecting the diversity of rural locations.

The term 'rural' was considered a relative concept - areas considered rural by citizens in urban areas of B.C. may not be considered rural by local residents. For instance, schools with nearby agricultural activity such as Chilliwack are considered rural from the perspective of Vancouver. As a result, the northern region would be considered rural. In contrast, others pointed out that many of the communities considered rural by some, are not. Common characteristics offered to help distinguish what is rural included: population size, distance of student travel, the presence of a general store or public transit, the degree of an agricultural or resource based economy, and internet connection. The distance and accessibility of services and technology were seen as more challenging than in major urban centres.

Contributors in the Kootenay region commented that rural is not just about distance. There can be accessibility challenges during the year due to difficult terrain, such as the Kootenay Pass, when avalanches and rock slides can make schools inaccessible. Elsewhere, the need to use a ferry was an issue. Accessibility was frequently raised as an issue that could not be viewed as a certainty in rural areas, in contrast to larger urban environments.

In the end, participants agreed that rather than a blanket definition, it is individual community needs across a range of factors that should be considered.

With regards to remoteness, isolation was considered an important factor. A number of characteristics were identified, including whether any alternative schooling options were reasonably available to students and whether distances to access services are substantially further than other locations. It was also identified that remote schools would likely contain multiple grades in one or two rooms. There were concerns that if a remote school were to close, there would be no other local school for students to go to. One former rural school teacher suggested that remote, rural schools should be considered an essential service.

Many participants affirmed being rural is also a lifestyle and a choice. It was a place they moved to or decided to stay because of the small community, the sense of belonging, the affordability, and the tight-knit, family friendly environment. Some participants were worried that the label rural could make a community less attractive to professionals.

## QUALITY & AVAILABILITY OF PROGRAMS

Participants agreed that declining enrolment impacts rural areas, with remote schools experiencing the greatest decline. Schools that used to have 100 students may now have 20. Even a few children moving could make a difference to the viability of a school. The smaller and more remote the school, the more challenging it is to maintain services and programming. Small one and two-room schools were identified as having high staff turnover and needing additional supports.

### School District 8 (Kootenay Lake): Wildflower School

Wildflower School is a schooling choice. Rather than seeing multi-age classes as a deficit, it features multi-age and theme-based learning as strengths. Students between 6 and 12 or 12 and 15 come together in the classroom. Ideally the students work with the same teacher and in the same cohort over several years. The multi-age setting encourages collaborative learning, mutual support, self-esteem and trust. Wildflower also innovates by integrating one day a week of home-learning activities.

There was widespread concern about limited academic programming at senior grade levels, especially in math and sciences. Student numbers are often so low that, to make it cost efficient, the courses were only offered in alternate years and double-stacked (e.g. Physics 11 and Physics 12 in the same year). The perception was that urban areas could hire specialist teachers to offer courses (e.g. coding) while in rural schools many courses were being offered by non-specialists. Cutting programs drives families to move out of these communities to ensure that their children have continued access to courses.

Many participants said that more support was needed to address students with special needs. High transportation costs, along with difficulties in recruiting educational psychologists, reduce the speed of student assessment and the ability to provide regular service to communities. Access to continuing education was considered an equity issue for some populations in rural areas.

Despite the obstacles, participants consistently voiced the strengths of rural schools. As one principal in attendance said, "it would be a shame if rural schools were seen as a problem that needed fixing, rather than innovation factories that needed supporting." Innovation was often a product of the constraints that schools faced and resulted in many positive outcomes. But there were also warnings that there are limits. It was the participants from the smallest school districts that articulated most clearly that they felt they were unable to stretch much further.

Contributors noted that in rural communities, families supported each other and it fostered a positive environment. Proximity to First Nations communities made it possible to have elders share local knowledge and culture with students. Easy access to the outdoors and environment allowed weekly checks on a beaver dam, access to ski hills, and even the development of innovative dual credit programs. Strong relationships with local industry mean programs like "Heavy Metal Rocks" can offer students heavy equipment training in an open pit while others grow produce through a food-to-table program. There was widespread interest in building new relationships with local artists, artisans, and musicians. The Ministry was encouraged to learn from successful rural projects and explore how they can be replicated elsewhere.

### School District 10 (Arrow Lakes): Lucerne Elementary-Secondary School

Lucerne Elementary-Secondary School provides an immersive, multi-age learning environment focusing on modeling sustainability. School gardens and greenhouses grow everything from food to medicinal plants. StrongStart and every grade from K-12 participate in rotating garden plots while older elementary students compost the school and community Garlic Festival waste. Students contribute after school through the Green Thumbs club. Café Connections Culinary Arts secondary students engage in learning nutrition, cooking, and entrepreneurship, providing lunches for the school each week using garden produce. Trades and senior math and science students were involved in a solar power project and gained certification on the way.

FOR MORE, VISIT: <http://sd10.bc.ca/video>

There were frequent reports that students transitioning from small communities to larger may experience difficulties. However, participants also commented that rural schools make it easy for students to be a star as every student is needed for school teams and activities. Students develop unique skills and strengths due to the personalized learning experiences available through rural schools.

Online learning was viewed as improving access and availability of education. However, there are technological barriers in some communities and it does not work for all families. A principal specializing in online education had teachers attend family homes to support students and wanted additional funds for social experiences, field trips, and compensation for fuel. Another meeting shared that when children from separate communities who had previously only met in virtual classrooms, met in person to build robots, the results as a social and learning opportunity were positive.

### School District 74 (Gold Trail): Elementary Connected Classrooms

The Elementary Connected Classrooms project unites Lytton, Lillooet, Cache Creek and Ashcroft students from grades 3-7 across five schools using video conferencing and online learning tools for one hour per day. Students are able to use this technology to lead their own theme-based project groups and then gather multiple times a year to build these projects. Last year they designed Mars Rovers and this year there is a doomsday theme reading *The Scorch Trials*. What began as a necessity as enrolment declined and fears that teachers could not be experts in every subject, has become an exciting way for teachers to come together, co-plan, co-teach, and lead subjects they and the students are passionate about. Kids with diverse interests and backgrounds can forge a wider set of social relationships across communities. The connected classroom has been internationally recognized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as an innovative learning environment.

## STATE OF FACILITIES

A variety of facility challenges were raised at the meetings. Schools built for larger student populations now had far less students. In some cases facilities had been adapted to facilitate shared or community use, but often they had not. There were also concerns that old schools had not been designed to include space for visiting speech therapists or school psychologists.

There was recognition that emerging technologies could support learning in rural and remote schools and help to address physical, social, and demographic limitations. However, limited access to technology and internet connectivity remains a challenge in many rural communities and can limit the ability to create virtual classrooms.

Overall, there had been improvements in connectivity, but the cost of using the Next Generation Network (NGN) was viewed as high. Limited service providers charging high fees in remote communities decreased the digital literacy of some families and the ability for some students to use the internet to support their education from home.

Facilities maintenance can be challenging. Repairs are completed through the Annual Facilities Grant (AFG), but in rural and remote locations only parts of a project can be completed at any given time owing to factors such as the cost for major repairs (usually exceeds the AFG) and the shorter building seasons in many areas. There were concerns that many facilities are ageing, raising anxiety about the future of the buildings as major upgrades and renovations were unlikely to be approved in low enrolment areas.

### Rural and Remote School District: Annual Facilities Grant

Many rural projects exceed the Annual Facilities Grants (AFG) received by small school districts. One school district hired a consultant to develop a roofing plan based on small piecemeal projects over eight years with the priority on emergency and leak prevention. Approximately \$120,000 of the \$200,000 AFG was spent on roofing every year and the plan would nearly start again upon completion. Any other major emergency at a school such as a heating issue would potentially defer the plan for a year. One facility manager said they were grateful for two recent grants from the Ministry of Education of approximately \$250,000 each. Four years were cut from the roofing plan and they could tackle an entire roof versus only a part of a roof which is more efficient and far cheaper depending on the scope of the work. A new roof also means that the roof should be sound for 25 years.

Uncertainty about school facilities was a major concern. Some participants wanted government to identify where it wants communities to be developed further and to look at ways to use the education system to do so. The presence of a school helps attract doctors and other professionals to a community. In contrast, the threat of school closures has significant impacts on communities. Families left the community at the threat of closure before final decisions were even made. This created a cycle which exacerbates pre-existing financial and enrolment pressures.

## USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

Similar to the online discussion, using rural schools as community hubs was broadly supported. Participants offered an extensive list of activities held at most rural schools and integration with local communities was viewed positively. Rural and remote schools serve many communities by offering space for seniors groups, elections, community gardens, community theatre, fairs, events, and storing emergency supplies. Seeing schools sitting unused on evenings and weekends, especially where it is the only public building in a community, was not popular, however, barriers sometimes exist to facility use outside of school hours.

Participants expressed that pressures on the operating budgets of Boards of Education can impact policies. As one participant expressed, 'we need to pay for education with education dollars, not subsidize community activities.' In many cases, it means school districts charge fees to either reduce or eliminate their costs. Participants indicated that community groups decreased or stopped using the school as costs were increased. One parent stated that the times booked for Brownies had been reduced and the new reduced times made it difficult to coordinate with her work hours. Some participants found it difficult to understand how one school district provided space at no cost to Scouts Canada, while another increased the fees.

Insurance was the second most common barrier discussed. Some groups cannot afford the cost and many do not know how to deal with insurance applications and processes. Insurance rules on community activities were also discussed, as well as a shortage of storage in some sites. Other concerns raised included the inability to pay by credit card and the need to pay up front for space; many groups do not have enough funds to pay for long portions of time in advance. Custodial fees were also questioned. Participants asked why community groups could not clean their own space or assist with cleaning to reduce charges.

Participants raised the importance of community use of facilities for enrolment. Some families residing in rural communities have chosen not to attend their local school. If families were encouraged to use the facility for other purposes they may be more likely to attend the school. Flexibility around shared use and ways to increase the role of school facilities throughout the year was important to participants.

## FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

There was recognition that in a context of enrolment decline rural schools may not generate enough funds to offset their operational costs. Despite the financial challenges, some schools cannot be closed as there is no reasonable alternative for students. There were also participants opposed to schools being closed due to funding shortfalls. Many thought the current funding model does not work for rural schools, especially remote schools. Preference was for sustainable and predictable funding that can accommodate rural differences, ensure equity of education, and keep rural schools at the centre of their communities. There was support for targeted funding if the funding formula could not accommodate schools otherwise.

Concerns were raised about the degree to which small communities are relying on outside sources of funds such as CommunityLINK and parent advisory councils. Reliance on the same group of parent volunteers to repeatedly fundraise for educational experiences was seen as unsustainable in some communities. The costs of travel are high. Contributors indicated that most day trips to Vancouver exceeded \$1,200. Many communities could not even easily reach Vancouver within one day. There was support for additional funding to ensure equity of educational experiences, but much stronger support when students were motivated or when a program was a good fit for a student. For instance, Barriere and Clearwater students worked together so they could field the Spartans rugby team, despite the communities being nearly an hour apart, as neither school population was large enough to field a team independently.

There was interest in capacity building partnerships and shared service models to increase services for students, reduce costs and also to build communities. There were suggestions that there may be opportunities for additional funding through partnerships with non-profits as they can apply for funds and grants that Boards of Education cannot apply for.

There were discussions at some meetings about creating innovative partnerships and unique programming. For instance, the Saturna Ecological Education Centre, a community-driven initiative, was supported by the school district. It has drawn more students and investment to the small island school. Students come from elsewhere in the province for an eye-opening educational experience.

## PARTNERSHIPS & SHARED SERVICES

There was widespread support for partnerships and shared services. Many understood that, due to financial considerations, Boards of Education were looking for partnerships that were dollar-for-dollar in nature. However, there was also interest in community partnerships with non-profit organisations not able to meet this level when it is feasible. These types of partnerships could help strengthen the community and provide unique educational experiences. For instance, seniors using the school facilities can bring generations together and offer leadership opportunities for students.

Participants were supportive of working with First Nations communities to develop learning opportunities for students. They also wanted to share successful programs with other parts of the province to improve programs elsewhere. There was interest in making the transition from band schools to provincial schools and back again more consistent and easier on students. Formalized educational relationships with Aboriginal communities appeared to vary widely across the province and there was interest in improving relationships in general.

Participants discussed the importance of working together with other partners because better facilities could be built when agencies worked together. Larger gyms, community theatres, kitchens, and more, become possible or have been built in communities in the province through partnerships. Vibrant communities, strong schools, and services, were seen as important to keeping families in, and attracting new people to, rural locations. Strong partnerships not only increased the likelihood that infrastructure would be built, but that the facility would be in use to the maximum extent possible. Frustration was also expressed when participants perceived that facilities could have served both community and students but appeared not to.

### **School District 19 (Revelstoke): Revelstoke Secondary - The Power of Partnerships**

Rural partnerships can make amazing things happen. It opens up exciting funding sources, maximizes efficiencies and brings new facilities and opportunities to rural communities and rural students. In Revelstoke, it brought the Revelstoke Arts Council and School District 19 together to support the 275 seat Revelstoke Performing Arts Centre. By sharing space and events, students access professional level theatre experiences from acting to lighting and set design. In the first year of operation the venue was host to 30 events, and now hosts over 150 events annually from professional and local arts to film and mountain culture. Dance, drama and other acts come to perform for the community, and provide workshops for students, enhancing instruction and cultural experiences. The non-profit Arts Council helps to cover operating expenses and secures funding for the theatre manager position and the City of Revelstoke through the Economic Development Commission provides a grant in recognition of the theatre's contribution to attracting visitors to Revelstoke. This partnership, and others with early learning partners and service providers, opens the school to the community, and enhances student access to sport, fitness, and mental health and well-being support.

While some partnerships are common (e.g. local government and school districts), others are more unique. Participants from Sun Peaks spoke of integrating their four day school week with activities on the fifth day tied to the ski hill. In addition, due to the limited facility space, they used hotel and conference facilities to hold meetings and school events. In general, there was support for partnerships with industry and the trades to allow rural students to learn about local opportunities and improve choices for students. Most wanted better partnerships with other public services, such as mental health and addictions and stronger partnerships to enhance internet and technological access.

## STAFFING

Through the regional open houses, it became apparent there are recruitment and retention issues across rural B.C. Rural school districts have challenges not only attracting teachers, but also keeping them in the school district long-term. Participants indicated difficulties hiring for positions such as specialist and generalist teachers, as well as various school district staff.

Teachers taking rural positions are usually new to the profession and often perceive the position as transitory until they can relocate to larger centres. There were examples of teachers leaving mid-year, which is difficult for students and other staff. Specialist teachers only teach their specialty or passion a portion of the time and have to teach other classes. Consequently, they are unlikely to stay when a full-time position in their subject becomes available.

A consistent concern was the impact of variable funding on recruitment and retention due to enrolment decline. As a result, rural schools rely on annual contracts and then rehire for the next year. This becomes an impediment to retaining staff and makes it difficult for program planning. Not only do teachers rotate frequently, often principals and leadership positions do as well. The most common ideas for solving the recruitment problem were to increase salary or offer student loan forgiveness. The use of teacherages in remote areas was seen as an important factor in making living and working in some communities more attractive.

Small remote schools were seen as especially challenging for staff. Experience in one or two room schools was something that few teachers had and participants indicated that teacher training did not adequately provide for this need. The problem of burnout for both teachers and management was raised because, with fewer teachers-on-call available, management often cover teacher absences, adding to their workload. At several meetings, it was recommended that all schools should have at least two teachers, regardless of student population, and that school districts should develop a mentorship program to reduce the sense of isolation.

### Chris Lewis, Grade 4-7 Teacher

I grew up on Vancouver Island and Giscome Elementary is my first position. Teaching in a remote two room school means you have to like a solitary lifestyle and be independent, but the staff, kids, and community are really cohesive and happy. My experience as a swim coach has improved my ability to teach in a multi-grade classroom because I need to teach multiple skills at various levels at the same time. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed as I have more responsibilities than a typical teacher. I have administrative duties such as answering the phone even if it rings in the middle of my class, school newsletters, scheduling staff, and I maintain the bookings for the dual-use Eastline Community Centre. The biggest challenge is to my personal life. I commute two hours a day from Prince George and I am trying to limit myself to 55 hours of work a week. I volunteer two days to run a math and a games club because the community centre tied to the school does not have enough extra-curricular activities.

Stronger partnerships were seen as potential ways to reduce staffing pressures. Rural schools struggle to provide specialist resources, such as psychologists, so collaboration with health and social services may be an alternative to build strength and resilience in students and families. There were widespread discussions about how to integrate local experts into the classroom. The range and intensity of how to do this varied from relaxing certification requirements, to creating community mentorship opportunities so local trades and artisans could give students educational experiences they may not otherwise have in rural and remote communities. At one meeting, creative student discovery programs using local professionals in forestry, ecology, mining and the RCMP were discussed. Finally, there was the suggestion of training teachers as facilitators. All were seeking to improve educational equity and address staffing challenges.

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation was discussed at every regional open house. Participants suggested that it is impossible to think of a rural school district operating without transportation. Contributors indicated that prior to the Student Transportation Fund a range of bus reductions or fees were considered in many rural areas. They warned that the funding did not offset all the costs of transportation.

### School District 64 (Gulf Islands): Water Taxis

Approximately 100 outer Gulf Island students in School District 64 travel by bus and water taxi to attend school on Salt Spring Island. Of the two water taxi routes, the route servicing Galiano and Mayne Islands travels through Active Pass, one of the busiest coastal waterways in B.C.. Approximately 25 of these outer island students board three-nights per week with local families and receive boarding allowances of \$350/month so they can participate in sports and clubs. The two routes cost \$718,000/year increasing to over \$800,000 during the contract. Ridership can at times exceed capacity. Financial planning requires a 12-seat reserve back-up vessel at a potential cost of \$18,000-22,000/month depending on the route.

Transportation costs and time were seen as a challenge for everyone. For teachers, it results in additional costs to attend professional learning and frequently requires an additional day of travel on either side of the training because it is rarely offered locally. Teachers participating indicated they had additional fuel costs to and from work as they prefer to reside away from the site and choose to reside in an accessible nearby community.

The cost to offer student learning opportunities outside the community was widely discussed. Costs to access the lower mainland typically exceed \$1,200 per day for most rural communities. Even shorter trips to nearby regional centres typically cost over \$200 per day. This makes it challenging to provide repeat programming, such as swimming lessons, and reduces the ability to provide supplemental bussing for extra-curricular activities. A Superintendent provided one example of the difficult educational decisions distance creates. A student from one community may be well-suited to take a program in another community; however, approval would cost half the basic allocation funds the school district receives for the student. This is not a cost effective decision but it is in the best interest of the student.

There were concerns not just about equity of access to programs, but also about the impact of transportation on educational experiences. Students travelling for long periods of time are not able to stay after school for extra help or join in extra-curricular activities. A participant called it the 'layers of disadvantage.' Not being able to participate risked the creation of social exclusion which then impacted their behavior on the bus and academic performance. Concerns were raised that once this started, it could lead to students leaving school rather than graduating. Participants at two of the meetings indicated that there were possible income related aspects to the issue as some families could not afford the additional travel.

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*The Parliamentary Secretary would like to acknowledge and thank the participants of the Regional Open House Meetings for their contributions.*

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## APPENDIX 6: SUMMARY OF WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

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Stakeholder submissions were posted online for public view when permission was received. Informal submissions from members of the public were not posted publicly to ensure privacy. A summary by sector is provided below.

### Libraries

The Rural Education Review heard from the BC Library Trustees Association (BCLTA) as well as several school district and local libraries. The submissions indicated that schools and public libraries share a focus on creating learning and growth opportunities for students and communities. Libraries emphasize self-directed learning rather than support a structured curriculum. Both institutions also face financial and facility constraints in rural and remote locations.

The BCLTA notes that B.C. public libraries are working collaboratively with local school districts to support students and believes more opportunities should be explored. They encourage the school-house, public library model which places facilities within or attaches to a school. Libraries and K-12 public sector education are both connected to the Ministry of Education and the shared ministry could make proactive models and policy possible.

Similar to schools, libraries co-host events such as early literacy programs, author tours, and literacy based groups. In many communities, there are other programs and family friendly events supported. Submissions also suggested the large number of books and other resources available through the public library system could compliment school resources through stronger partnerships and co-location.

### Education Stakeholders

Submissions were received from a range of stakeholders including the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA), the BC Teachers' Council (BCTC), the BC Principals' and Vice Principals' Association (BCPVPA), a number of regional teachers associations, the Rural Education Advisory Committee (REAC), and the Association of School Transportation Services of BC (ASTSBC). The BC Association of School Business Officials (BCASBO) and BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) recommended participation and submission at the local level by members. The submissions differed more widely than other sectors due to their varying mandates.

Many stakeholders commented on the strengths of B.C. public sector K-12 education. B.C. schools rank highly in comparison with other K-12 public sector education systems globally, with rural schools and school districts often having many innovative programs and strategies that could be shared to benefit the broader education system. They drew attention to the personalized and inclusive relationships that students, staff, and communities form in rural schools. Teachers and students have the ability to broaden their experience by taking advantage of easy access to the outdoors and the opportunities that this provides for developing healthy lifestyles and skills.

Many educational stakeholders recognize that rural schools have faced declining enrolment which is part of a broader shift in provincial population and employment trends in rural areas. The BCPVPA and REAC highlighted the importance of rural schools to the viability of communities, as well as the economic contributions that rural communities make to the province. From this view, public sector rural K-12 education funding would be part of a broader strategy to grow rural communities.

Enrolment decline impacts financial stability and generates pressures to increase efficiencies, centralize locations, reduce excess facility space, and close schools. The BCSTA prefers funding be adequate to the costs without taking away from schools or school districts. If funding is based on a standard definition of rural and remote, some stakeholders want to be jointly involved in its development. In particular, they prefer to better differentiate between small schools near urban facilities and schools a long distance away. Sustaining the rural conversation and ensuring avenues for a rural perspective or voice on educational policies and decisions was also supported broadly.

Submissions also reminded the review that many rural and remote schools have a high percentage of Aboriginal students, and the needs of these learners must be considered in any plan to strengthen public sector K-12 rural education. If the shared goal of equal results for Aboriginal students is to be met, there must be an availability of appropriate, equitable resources and programs in rural communities and schools (including federally funded on-reserve schools).

In general, stakeholders understood the value of integrated services and facilities, but are concerned that allocations of resources be adequate to cover any additional costs involved. There were concerns by some stakeholders that funds for K-12 public sector education should not subsidise non-educational programs. There was also a view that rural school districts should be given additional grants and resources to ensure that all schools have the facilities and resources necessary to offer a full spectrum of programs. Others highlighted the additional costs of operating rural schools in relation to administrative support, external services and travel beyond the facility and program costs. Several regional teaching associations highlighted the importance of fully implementing class size and composition agreements.

Both the BCSTA and the BCTC agreed that the availability of teacher education programming was important and there were concerns raised about equity of access for teachers. The BCTC was concerned about the supply of certified educators in rural areas of the province and generally most stakeholders were concerned about recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas. The BCPVPA was also interested in a similar stipend.

Educational stakeholders indicate that the Next Generation Network (NGN) has improved internet connectivity although there are still limits in many remote schools. Computer and technological hardware is needed to address educational limitations found in some rural and remote schools. Also there was interest in showcasing rural best practices and highlighting what rural schools offer.

The Association of School Transportation Services of BC (ASTSBC) elaborated on the transportation theme. Both ASTSBC and BCPVPA discussed the need for some provincial guidelines (e.g. maximum bus travel times). The ASTSBC prefer transportation services be mandated, funded and resourced. There is also a request for extra funding for extra-curricular trips in rural areas so that the costs of necessary travel for educational purposes are met. They note that capital funding for school bus replacement as well as the costs of repairs and maintenance will be higher in rural areas due to the road conditions and distances that are common on rural routes. As with all staff inside schools, there are costs for training and access challenges that need to be considered.

## Boards of Education and School Districts

Submissions were received from across B.C. and emphasized the strengths of rural schools. Students can receive personalized attention due to small school size and they learn to work across all ages. Rural schools are often the heart of small communities. Community use ranges widely from early learning through to adult learning, seniors' programs, civic events, sports, and social activities. Schools are also cultural institutions acting as host for dances, theatre, music, and community feasts. Submissions even pointed to using schools for medical clinics.

Submissions discussed the importance of schools for communities beyond their use. To be able to attract employees with families, employers need to be able to say there is a school that children can attend. School District 60 (Peace River North), for example, advised that the expense of a rural school is insignificant compared to the contributions these schools make to communities or the damage to the social fabric when a school closes. In agricultural and resource communities, remote schools keep families available to work the land and produce.

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The submissions provided information on a number of important themes.

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### *Funding Formula*

There are challenges to funding rural schools as a result of enrolment decline which creates pressures on school district finances. In addition, the comparative general cost of doing business in rural settings impacts everything from field trips to professional development. Providing services and transportation across a vast geographic region with smaller student populations is different than providing the same service within a geographically small region. Costs to service remote or isolated schools and to transport students are significantly higher.

Submissions varied widely on how to address the challenge. One submission recommended a transparent cap on the effects of declining enrolment and adjustment periods for extremely small and remote school districts. Another suggests that remote and rural funding allocations need to be supplemented with unique community by community funds to offset the costs that do not fit in the formula.

Submissions raised the possibility of updating the supplements in the funding formula currently used by the Ministry of Education. Rather than use the distance to the board office to calculate some supplements, they suggest using the geographic size of a school district or the distance to a major center, or a combination of the two. School District 50 (Haida Gwaii) clarified that this also impacts targeted grants for those who self-identify as Aboriginal students. These funds are allocated equally across the province; however, the cost of providing services is higher and not factored into the targeted funding.

There were discussions of how different rural school districts attempt to address their budget issues. Some attempt to reduce the impact through international education programs, continuing education, distributed learning, hybrid education, and specialty programs. Other Boards of Education shifted to a four-day school week which reduced transportation and non-instructional costs.

### *Staffing & Human Resources*

There was widespread concern about the ability to recruit staff with specialized training, including: math and science teachers, counsellors, technology specialists, speech pathologists, and special education teachers. Some rural school districts were also having difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in general. One even has difficulty filling casual and term positions such as maternity leave coverage. To encourage trained teachers to move to the region, the school district is developing recruitment videos and materials to better sell the rural lifestyle.

Staffing and travel costs to rural schools are significant and reduce the cost-effectiveness of services which makes it challenging to provide counselling, resource teachers, or speech and language pathologists to rural schools. The costs of externally sourced services are also high. One submission specified that they had a school psychologist, counsellors and para-professional behavior intervention workers; however, the increasing demand for services meant that they could not fully meet the needs of the students. Recruitment, increased demand, and cost combine into a formidable barrier.

Increased travel time and cost makes it difficult to provide equitable learning opportunities for staff and students. Many trips require a full day of additional travel on either side of an event, thereby generating additional accommodation requirements. This may lead to restricting or prohibiting participation or reduce the support for requests by staff and students. It is also challenging to obtain many health services locally which generate the same travel issues.

Boards of Education also provided many ideas and suggestions. On recruitment and retention, there were suggestions of rural placements during training, tuition assistance, student loan forgiveness, financial bonuses, and relocation allowances. In relation to learning and development, there were suggestions about funding presenters and trainers to travel to rural areas and for field trips of two or more days in duration. Finally, a submission suggests that teachers be skilled in blended learning (online components). They recommend that the Ministry encourage the teacher training institutions to provide specialized pre-service and in-service training for teachers in rural school districts.

### *Facilities and Infrastructure*

Many submissions raised the importance of internet connectivity and access to technology, not only at schools but in the communities where students live. Education is not limited to school hours and access to technology impacts homework assignments and allows expanded access to educational programming. There was also a submission that raised the issue of long waits for school replacements and/or upgrades; if left too long, buildings can become a safety issue. Other concerns were raised about needing to be a growing school district or part of the seismic mitigation program in order to obtain a new school or funding for renovations. Local climate impacts operations, overtime costs and repairs due to snow removal and heavy rains.

### *Transportation*

There were three main transportation issues raised in the submissions. The first was that the Student Transportation Fund does not cover all the costs of transportation. Another issue was the need to fund transportation services beyond getting students to and from school. They proposed grants to allow for additional extra-curricular travel to improve equity of opportunity for students. The final area was the isolation of communities surrounded by water which creates a reliance on not only bussing, but ferry and water taxi services. In these communities, travel time and fuel costs are often exceptionally high and the services may not necessarily be coordinated.

### *Partnerships*

There were many accounts of how schools are used in a wide variety of ways in rural communities. Many of these uses are as a result of partnerships with community groups, regional districts and municipalities. The main concern was that local community groups and local government do not have sufficient funds to be 'true partners' and cover all the operational costs involved in the partnership.

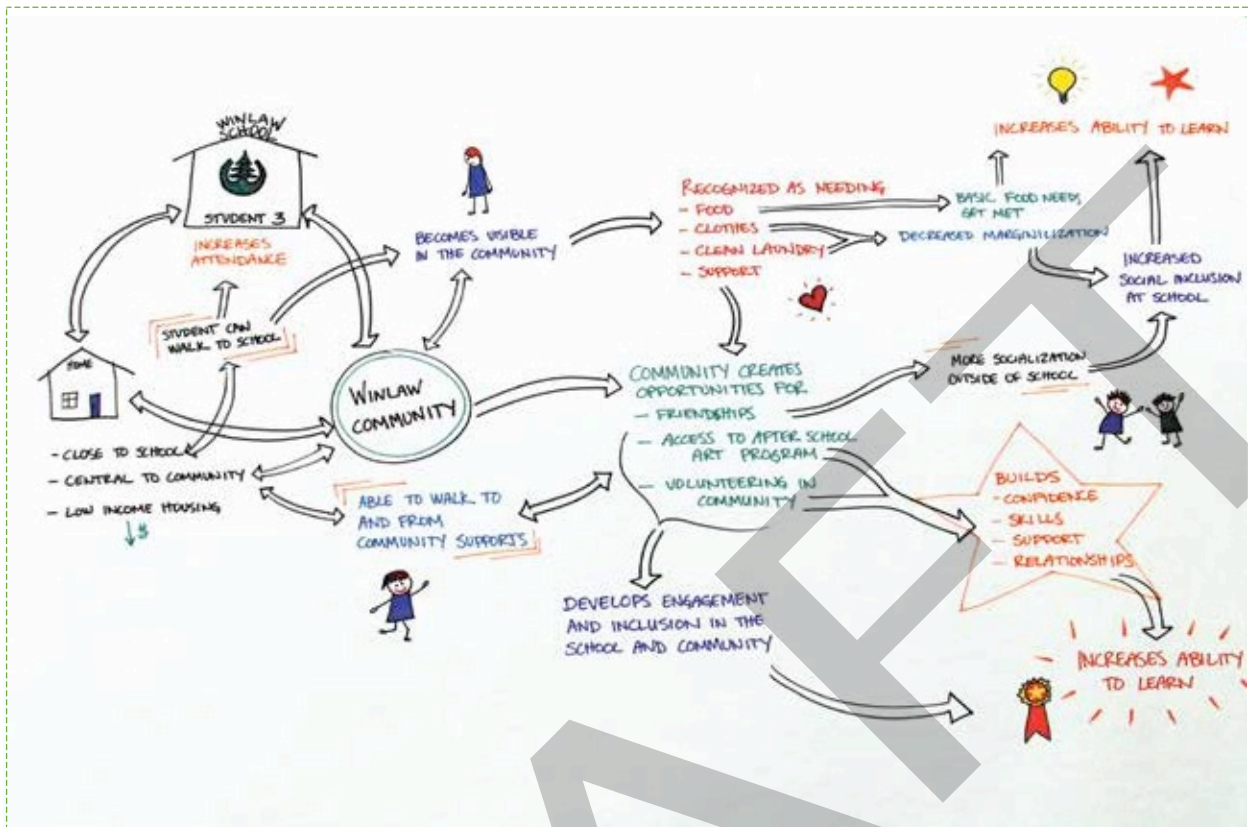
## Parent Advisory Councils

Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) mainly contributed through the regional open house meetings and the online discussions. The BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) and a few PACs did make written submissions. They prefer a comprehensive review of education funding; however, BCCPAC recommends that supplements for unique geographic factors continue and the funds should be directed to rural schools. Local PACs wanted funding to address inequities of educational opportunities and the barriers to participation, for example in sports teams.

Local PAC submissions also raised the school closure process. One submission detailed how a school remained open through a partnership with a municipality where the building and grounds were maintained by the municipality. The classrooms are rented and the wages of teachers and support staff are paid by the school district. Other PACs questioned why, while co-location was being explored in the community, it was not part of closure consultations. This weakened confidence in the process and in K-12 public sector education.

BCCPAC and local PACs consistently raised the problem of recruitment and retention of staff. Local PAC submissions highlighted that schools in rural areas are viewed as a training ground for inexperienced teachers. One local PAC felt that this type of environment required experienced classroom managers as often it required teaching between three and seven grades in the same classroom. Their preference is for stronger selection and vetting of candidates. There are also significant challenges in many communities because there is no secondary school available. Bussing leads to long days, and results in many families moving away from the community which impacts enrolment further as younger siblings also move.





## Local and Regional Government

Submissions were received from both local and regional government across the province. Locations ranged from local governments in Bowen Island and Creston to regional districts such as Fraser-Fort George. There were communities that had grown and wanted to share their experience such as the Resort Municipality of Whistler to communities that had faced challenges to keep schools open such as the Town of Osoyoos and District of Wells.

Submissions pointed to the importance of rural schools for ensuring a thriving and vibrant community. They attract young families, contribute to the social fabric and improve local economic stability. Schools provide more than education; they are the hub of programs and the centre of communities.

## *Funding*

Submissions indicate that one-size-fits-all funding models do not work in rural communities. Funding based predominantly on enrolment is a challenge for communities where enrolment has declined. Three or five year planning cycles were suggested to assist Boards of Education in their decision-making and make it easier to form partnerships and work together in community building.

Very few submissions discussed a definition or a set of criteria to identify what is rural; rather, submissions primarily highlighted challenges with funding.

Rural school districts with smaller schools spend a greater proportion of their budgets on fixed costs and overhead rather than to student services, supplies and other needs compared to larger urban schools. The dispersed geography and transportation limits students' ability to take part in after school activities, both academic and recreational. To ensure student opportunities, they support late buses and on-call van transport. Considerations for size and distances traveled need to be considered when funding schools. There are also unique factors for consideration; for instance, roads in the Peace River area are often not on a grid, which adds additional distance on gravel roads to gather students. As a result, it costs more for gas, wear-and-tear and wages.

## *Programs & Training*

Local and regional governments offered a number of suggestions for improving rural education. Longer planning cycles would provide a degree of certainty in course availability and improve confidence that secondary students can complete their schooling in their community. Courses could be better integrated with third party facilities such as aquatic centres and arenas. Several expressed concern about the loss of youth to larger communities upon graduation. Schools could examine their local labour market and provide stronger linkages to education. For instance, job fairs could take place in earlier grades to open local career paths.

Due to recruitment and retention challenges, loan forgiveness and applying Northern grants to rural areas of B.C. were recommended. Offering learning opportunities in class management, multi-grade classrooms and maximizing limited resources were suggested to better prepare teachers for careers in small rural communities. More reliable internet access and improving computer and video conferencing capabilities are needed to maximize program availability and teaching capacity. Several submissions also raised concerns about a lack of mental health support and student services such as speech therapy in rural schools.

## *Facility Usage*

Rural schools are used by communities for a wide range of activities. Although there is the potential for increased use, barriers are diminishing the potential social value of the facilities. Schools are often closed during the summer, winter breaks and on weekends. The growing costs for using facilities and an increasing requirement for formal rental agreements rather than open-ended approaches were identified. Liability insurance and janitorial costs were also mentioned as barriers to community use.

## *Facilities & School Closure*

Barring the submission from the District of Tofino, where enrolment growth increased pressure on limited space and a potential need for portables, the submissions worry about the effects of enrolment decline on sustaining schools in small communities. One community relates how by only teaching grades K-7 in the local elementary school that many well-established families have relocated to larger centres to be closer to high school.

Concerns were raised about the closure of schools. They warn that when schools close the focus is on the length of bus rides and on the budget, but not on the effect on what is also the seniors' centre, the local recreation facility, and the gathering site for celebrations. The Town of Osoyoos submission illustrated how the announcement of a potential school closure meant that people eliminated the town as a place to purchase a home and some residents placed their homes for sale. In their view, the hesitation to purchase in Osoyoos still affects the community. Local employers were also concerned about losing potential student employees.

There was an interest in strengthening the consideration of future use as well as the transfer of school facilities and lands to the community prior to closure. Questions were raised about communities paying for closed school facilities that taxes had previously paid for. Not being able to access closed facilities was considered counterproductive to relationships with Boards of Education. Advice also included developing a school reconfiguration or conversion process to facilitate community use and reduce the chance of closure. There were additional concerns that rural requests from high seismic areas were slower to be upgraded or replaced.

## *Partnerships*

The District of Wells showed how it was able to work with the community and Board of Education to take over the school facility and maintenance costs in order to prevent the closure of the local school. Now the community is trying to find creative ways to bring secondary education back to Wells. Whereas Bowen Island Municipality illustrated how their joint-use agreement allowed the Bowen Island Community Recreation office to be located at the school. Shared facilities located at the schools, include the gymnasium, multi-purpose rooms, sports fields and kitchen. Groups use the facility for their programs and as a cultural and athletic venue.

The Resort Municipality of Whistler recommended their partnership as a model for public sector K-12 rural education. In 1992, the municipality and School District 48 worked to open their first community school. Through the partnership and support of community donors, there are now two other community schools where operations and management are shared through Joint School Use Agreements. The partnership between the municipality and the school district has been vital to creating robust facilities for community education and recreation programs in Whistler.

Other submissions from different regions in the province suggested that partnerships are something wanted but that there are obstacles. One submission indicates that despite community and local government support, their experience was that Boards of Education have no mandate to support shared usage agreements. Policy and legislative changes to broaden school use and make it easier for the public to access schools during operating hours were suggested.

One submission reports that as a local government using taxation, it has provided grants to user groups to offset rising fees for using school facilities. They indicate that the fees have consistently risen and it puts pressures on families in an area of the province where incomes are lower than the provincial average.

Two submissions questioned Board of Education structure and how it can limit representation and partnerships. Board meetings often happen once a year in rural communities, which reduces access to decision makers and limits the ability to participate in meetings. Sometimes school districts contain very disparate communities with different economic conditions and demographics. In these cases, they suggest models with stronger regional representation.

## Transportation

The lack of late buses or on-call transport limits the ability of students to take part in after school activities. It impacts the ability to participate in sports, clubs, tutoring, or receive additional support from staff. There were indications that as distance between schools increase that parent volunteering also decreases. In another submission, the combination of late bus with boat prevents First Nations students in neighbouring communities to take part in programs. The same submission registers concern about First Nations graduation rates and that more needs to be done to meet the needs of First Nations youth and their families.

Several submissions raised ferry travel. They suggest expanded funding for the BC Ferries BC Resident Assistance Program and for provincial funding for Active Transportation Plans for schools. Students travel for free on the ferry when they are attending school activities or events on the mainland. However, there are concerns that teachers, coaches, parental chaperones, school buses and organized car pools are not covered under the B.C. Ferry program. This additional ferry cost is then passed onto the parents through increased sport and event field trip costs.

## Child And Youth Mental Health And Substance Use Collaborative

There was only one submission from a health related agency, the Child and Youth Mental health and Substance Use Collaborative. This stakeholder thinks there is a valuable opportunity to build on the Local Action Team infrastructure to continue to enhance mental wellness and resilience of children and families through K-12 public sector rural education.

In their experience, schools alone cannot provide all the answers to societal problems. Local Action Teams bring together all sectors, including schools, to identify and act. This is in recognition of the shared responsibility to educate, build capacity and support children, youth and families. The submission adds that across B.C., K-12 public sector rural education is the collective responsibility of both communities and schools in fostering thriving children, youth and families. They recommend capitalizing on the infrastructure of Local Action Teams – and trusting and supporting them to partner with schools for collective impact.

## Conseil Scolaire Francophone De La Colombie-Britannique (CSF)

[ SCHOOL DISTRICT 93 ]

The CSF's written and verbal submissions explain their distinct position in B.C.'s K-12 public sector education system. It is the only province-wide school district and administers French as a first language education as set out under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms where student numbers sufficiently warrant. The CSF has 37 schools with plans for expansion.

The CSF have schools in both rural and urban areas, but advise that schools in urban areas are in effect similar to those found in rural communities. The next nearest school is often 10-20km away in urban areas and further in rural areas. For instance, students in Burnaby and New Westminster travel to Port Coquitlam or Vancouver. The CSF prefers an allocation of buses and equipment as part of school start-up costs to ensure access for their students. They also suggest that the Student Transportation Fund calculation does not properly reflect their school district.

CSF schools also serve as a community hub. They are often the community centre and gathering space for the French-language community. In their view, it is critical to language and culture transfer and they want to preserve their ability to provide space and programs.

The CSF warns that they have recruitment and retention issues and difficulties hiring rural teachers. They participate in job fairs in Quebec and Ontario; however, teachers have a 'cost shock' when they arrive in Vancouver. There are not enough incentives to attract teachers to rural locations and that French language training programs are mainly staffing French immersion programs. Currently, no teachers are shared with other school districts. They request access to similar funds to address recruitment and retention issues as rural schools.

The CSF has difficulties obtaining school space. They frequently share with Anglophone schools or lease closed schools. Consequently, keeping English-language rural schools from closing despite operating at low capacity may reduce the CSF's ability to secure educational space. They suggest requiring English-language school districts with surplus space to contact the CSF and inquire about its interest in leasing space. They propose establishing incentives for English-language schools that transfer or lease school facilities to the CSF.

Partnerships with English-language school districts can be difficult because the CSF may take up increasing amounts of space and in some cases grow faster than the school containing it. They also note an absence of partnerships and consultations with local governments for community development or land use. Most partnerships are with French-language community groups and non-profit organisations such as the Association des Francophones des Kootenays Ouest.

## First Nations Education Steering Committee Society (FNEESC)

The First Nations Education Steering Committee Society (FNEESC) delivered written and verbal submissions. They note that with higher proportions of Aboriginal students in rural areas, challenges to K-12 public sector rural education will affect Aboriginal students' overall achievement. Local Education Agreements (LEAs) are helping to facilitate cooperation among First Nations and School districts by sharing responsibilities to support students.

A number of challenges were raised in relation to K-12 public sector rural education and First Nations students. First, FNEESC identified transportation as a key issue; long distances and travel times prevent many students from participating in before and after school programs as well as extracurricular activities. They point out that transportation services vary as to whether school districts pick-up on-reserve and that many First Nations students walk or drive long distances to reach an initial pickup point. Transportation considerations need to account for remoteness, road conditions, and other risks (e.g. wildlife) in rural locations.

The lack of teaching staff reduces course options, especially senior science courses in rural secondary schools, which may impact student admission to post-secondary institutions. Student learning outcomes could also be improved through additional supports for the professional development of teachers to overcome isolation, limited resources and staffing barriers. While addressing recruitment and retention in general, educational outcomes and student engagement would benefit from attracting and retaining more Aboriginal teachers in particular.

A third challenge relates to access to information and communication technology (ICT). Rural schools have poorer connectivity and technology compared to urban schools. Rural students rely more frequently on web-based learning to ensure course availability, so strong connectivity is important for rural schools. Students have work to complete for school and they often need access to the internet to complete their work; however, FNEESC indicates that many First Nations students do not have internet or computer access at home.

Finally, their submission reminds the review of the Auditor General's eleven recommendations found in *An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the B.C. Public School System* (2015). In addition, FNEESC observes that research shows peer victimization is more common in rural Canadian schools, with B.C. Ministry of Education data showing that, between grades 4 and 12, the rate of bullying in B.C. schools is 3 to 5 per cent higher for Aboriginal versus Non-Aboriginal students across all grades. FNEESC recommends that racism and safety need to be addressed in B.C.'s schools for Aboriginal students.

# APPENDIX 7: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

## COMPLETION RATES

YEAR	RURAL		URBAN		RURAL-URBAN	
	ABORIGINAL	NON-ABORIGINAL	ABORIGINAL	NON-ABORIGINAL	ABORIGINAL	NON-ABORIGINAL
2011/2012	56.8%	80.8%	57.1%	85.5%	0.3%	4.7%
2012/2013	59.1%	81.1%	60.5%	87.9%	1.4%	6.8%
2013/2014	60.1%	81.1%	64.6%	88.6%	4.5%	7.5%
2014/2015	62.8%	80.5%	64.3%	87.9%	1.5%	7.4%
2015/2016	64.5%	79.7%	64.2%	87.9%	-0.3%	8.2%

## FSA RESULTS: GRADE 4 & GRADE 7

RURAL												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non-Aboriginal					
	GRADE 4			GRADE 7			GRADE 4			GRADE 7		
	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR
2011/2012	61.1%	66.2%		45.4%	57.0%		77.6%	80.7%		66.3%	75.4%	
2012/2013	66.5%			67.7%			81.6%			82.3%		
2013/2014	57.5%	68.9%		47.9%	58.6%		74.7%	82.7%		68.5%	76.6%	
2014/2015	68.1%			69.2%			83.3%			83.3%		
2015/2016	55.9%	66.2%		46.6%	61.9%		73.9%	79.2%		67.3%	76.7%	
	64.2%			68.5%			78.4%			82.4%		

URBAN												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non-Aboriginal					
	GRADE 4			GRADE 7			GRADE 4			GRADE 7		
	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR
2011/2012	67.1%	70.6%		51.3%	64.9%		81.6%	82.1%		76.0%	78.3%	
2012/2013	76.0%			76.1%			88.0%			90.6%		
2013/2014	63.7%	75.6%		54.9%	65.6%		81.2%	83.4%		79.5%	78.9%	
2014/2015	79.0%			74.4%			88.7%			89.2%		
2015/2016	63.9%	72.0%		54.3%	66.1%		81.4%	82.6%		78.2%	79.7%	
	74.8%			73.8%			88.0%			89.5%		

RURAL-URBAN												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non-Aboriginal					
	GRADE 4			GRADE 7			GRADE 4			GRADE 7		
	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR	NU	RE	WR
2011/2012	6.0%	4.4%	9.5%	5.9%	7.9%	8.4%	4.0%	1.4%	6.4%	9.7%	2.9%	8.3%
2012/2013	6.2%	6.7%	10.9%	7.0%	7.0%	5.2%	6.5%	0.7%	5.4%	11.0%	2.3%	5.9%
2013/2014	8.0%	5.8%	10.6%	7.7%	4.2%	5.3%	7.5%	3.4%	9.6%	10.9%	3.0%	7.1%
2014/2015	11.5%	8.5%	12.3%	4.7%	6.7%	5.8%	9.3%	4.2%	6.7%	11.4%	3.8%	7.0%
2015/2016	9.7%	5.5%	7.4%	6.4%	4.0%	6.9%	6.7%	4.7%	7.3%	10.1%	2.8%	4.7%

NU – Numeracy, RE – Reading, WR - Writing

## PROVINCIAL EXAM RESULTS WITH C+ OR GREATER

RURAL												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non Aboriginal					
	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11
2011/2012	13.0%	45.8%	43.2%	30.5%	26.9%	39.3%	19.4%	65.8%	58.5%	49.9%	49.6%	56.9%
2012/2013	13.2%	50.1%	45.9%	29.8%	31.0%	42.0%	19.0%	69.2%	59.8%	47.5%	55.1%	58.8%
2013/2014	12.3%	45.1%	41.5%	33.1%	27.4%	39.3%	16.0%	62.2%	58.5%	51.2%	50.0%	56.6%
2014/2015	10.6%	37.6%	43.5%	32.9%	28.2%	47.9%	18.2%	57.0%	59.2%	49.2%	51.3%	62.5%
2015/2016	11.7%	40.9%	42.8%	28.8%	30.5%	42.6%	16.4%	59.2%	56.1%	49.5%	51.8%	58.4%

URBAN												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non Aboriginal					
	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11
2011/2012	14.4%	50.1%	54.4%	35.8%	31.3%	41.9%	16.7%	63.2%	59.5%	64.9%	60.6%	60.7%
2012/2013	16.5%	57.8%	54.4%	34.7%	37.7%	46.8%	18.0%	67.2%	62.3%	64.6%	64.8%	62.3%
2013/2014	15.0%	52.7%	54.3%	36.3%	33.2%	48.0%	15.8%	61.7%	60.5%	68.4%	61.8%	61.9%
2014/2015	14.5%	42.9%	53.3%	37.7%	34.9%	50.4%	17.4%	56.0%	62.6%	66.5%	64.2%	65.6%
2015/2016	13.7%	47.3%	53.7%	37.0%	36.3%	49.4%	15.4%	57.9%	59.9%	66.3%	64.5%	65.0%

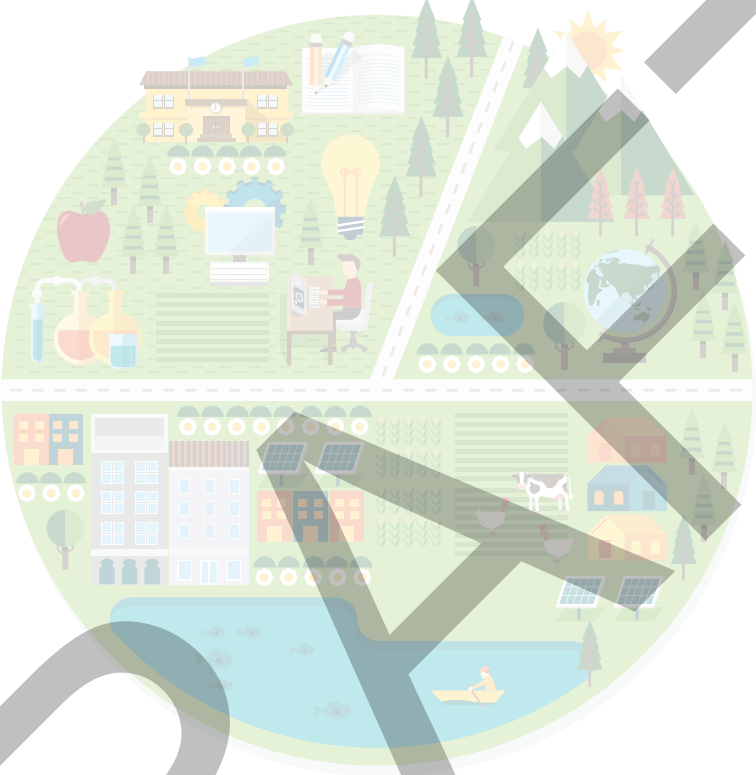
  

RURAL-URBAN GAP												
YEAR	Aboriginal						Non Aboriginal					
	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11	AWM 10	English 10	English 12	FM/PC 10	Science 10	Social Studies 11
2011/2012	1.4%	4.3%	11.2%	5.3%	4.4%	2.6%	-2.7%	-2.6%	1.0%	15.0%	11.0%	3.8%
2012/2013	3.3%	7.7%	8.5%	4.9%	6.7%	4.8%	-1.0%	-2.0%	2.5%	17.1%	9.7%	3.5%
2013/2014	2.7%	7.6%	12.8%	3.2%	5.8%	8.7%	-0.2%	-0.5%	2.0%	17.2%	11.8%	5.3%
2014/2015	3.9%	5.3%	9.8%	4.8%	6.7%	2.5%	-0.8%	-1.0%	3.4%	17.3%	12.9%	3.1%
2015/2016	2.0%	6.4%	10.9%	8.2%	5.8%	6.8%	-1.0%	-1.3%	3.8%	16.8%	12.7%	6.6%

AWM 10 - Apprenticeship And Workplace Math 10. FM/PC 10 - Foundations Of Math And Pre-Calculus 10

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