

School Closures: Perspectives from Community Planners

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Permanent school closures are an emerging topic of discussion in both planning profession and academia, though to date there has been a limited amount of research in this field despite the increasing prevalence of this phenomenon occurring in many communities. These highly contentious decisions are often wrought by several factors endured by school boards, including fiscal constraints, declining enrollment, infrastructure deficits, and cyclical neighbourhood demographics. Despite this, schools hold an intrinsic value to the communities and neighbourhoods they serve. In many ways, they are part of the social fabric and are often believed to be an irreplaceable community asset. Moreover, schools are often an important, if not implicit component to the long-term strategic visions for many neighbourhoods, and thus tend to capture the attention of urban planners and municipal officials when they are identified for closure.

However, the provincial mandated procedure through which school boards evaluate schools for closure, referred to as Accommodation Review, has been critiqued to be narrow in scope, insufficiently collaborative or participatory in nature, and tends to rely heavily upon rational or technical data. To ameliorate these concerns, recent provincial guidelines mandate that a minimum number of public consultations be conducted in order to move beyond the 'quantifiable' value of the school by including the perspectives of the community at large. Despite this, school boards remain autonomous and are not required to adhere to these inputs, and often make decisions that counter the consultation process. As such, closure decisions often become extremely exhaustive and demanding for those involved, and result in an inevitable sense of resentment felt by all associated parties.

Interestingly, the current state of Accommodation Review is not dissimilar to the rational-comprehensive model that was widely embraced by the urban planning profession during the decades following the post-war period. However, several seminal planning theories emerged which ultimately resulted in a greater focus on collaborative and participatory approaches to policy development and planning decisions. While rational data remains an important component of the decision

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making process, it does not fully supplant participatory involvement from stakeholders; rather, it serves to reinforce sound decision making and supports good planning. Given the high impact and potential long-term implications of permanent school closures, and in light of the broad mandate and experiences of planning, there is significant potential for the Accommodation Review process to improve through being informed by the experiences and perspectives of the planning profession.

Nonetheless, this suggestion remains ambiguous. Due to the narrow legislative mandate of the Accommodation Review, and the autonomous nature of school boards, they are not required to consult with municipal officials or planners during the decision making process. Thus, greater attention must be given to whether or not it is appropriate for planners to take an advocacy approach in order to become involved. Given the role that schools play as both a vehicle for the delivery of education and as an imperative community asset, a more thorough discussion on how planners can contribute to the school closure process should be considered.

To do so, an increased focus should include those components that are inherent to the contemporary planning profession, namely including; past and present perspectives and best practices, participatory and collaborative methods, and the importance of strategic and long term policy considerations. However, only identifying in which ways planning experiences and perspectives could better inform closure decisions would be insufficient. To leverage these skills, tools, and perspectives, it is imperative to delineate in what capacity planners may become involved, how to navigate the process itself, and in which specific ways planners can contribute to improving Accommodation Review. In the end, creative methods of facilitation and mutually beneficial outcomes, which the planning profession strives for, would be an ideal alternative to the current school closure process.