



Urban and Community Studies Institute

Studying School Sustainability in New Brunswick – Policy and Practice

Overview

Dr. Lee Chalmers
Academic Fellow, Urban and Community Studies Institute
University of New Brunswick, Saint John

December, 2018

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Overview

Study aim and methods

Since 2014, a wave of school sustainability studies (SSSs) has taken place in New Brunswick, resulting in the closure of a number of schools. Those involved have raised a number of concerns about how well the *Policy 409* process governing these studies is working. With a focus on the Anglophone School Districts, the present study has sought to map out in some detail how the process laid out in the policy is implemented in practice to determine a school's sustainability. The aim has been to shed light on specific areas of contention and concern with a view to identifying specific areas where change is needed. Producing this map of the process relied on the analysis of in depth interviews with fifteen individuals who had first-hand experience with the sustainability study process (as parents and community members, individuals with District Education Council (DEC) experience, and school staff), as well as an examination of relevant documents (e.g., *Policy 409* itself, DEC meeting minutes, documents generated through particular sustainability studies, etc.).

Results

This detailed mapping allowed the identification of two key areas where the SSS process has been organized in ways that limit the potential of sustainability study to produce optimal outcomes for a district's students and their communities. These problematic areas pertain to how "sustainability study" and "public consultation" are understood and practiced.

Sustainability Study

A number of problems were identified with the current policy and how it is put into practice that compromise efforts to engage in a meaningful study of a school's sustainability.

- Despite a shift since 2009 to a focus on "sustainability," *Policy 409* and the SSS process continue to be oriented towards school closure.
- There is a tendency, at times, for district documentation to "accentuate the negative" in its presentation of information about a school, to the relative neglect of what is positive.
- Decisions in areas that bear on school sustainability (e.g., around grade reconfigurations, catchment area boundaries, capital improvements, out of zone transfers, and the location of programming like Early French Immersion) are made with no formal connection to assessing or planning for a school's sustainability.
- The trigger criteria and the triggering process in use are inadequate and can have a negative impact on the sustainability of certain schools by perennially threatening them with closure.
- By limiting sustainability study to three "infrastructure" options (status quo, repair, close), the policy provides no space for meaningful consideration of alternative "sustainability enhancing" options (e.g., grade reconfigurations, changes to catchment area boundaries...

opportunities for joint use arrangements to capitalize on under-utilized space in schools, etc.).

- *Policy 409's* focus on studying schools individually constrains efforts to engage in the meaningful study of school sustainability across a collection of schools.
- In policy and in practice, infrastructure planning and sustainability study/planning remain disconnected.

Public Consultation

Similarly, a number of problems were identified with how the policy and its implementation function to limit the scope and impact of public consultation for the SSS process.

- In practice, a narrow definition of those affected by the sustainability study of a particular school and its possible closure has focussed the SSS process on parents/guardians of students to the relative neglect of the school's broader community.
- The structure of the public consultation – as three meetings occurring in an often condensed timeframe and involving an exchange of information with little opportunity for discussion and dialogue – fails to facilitate meaningful consultation.
- The desired outcome of an informed decision can be compromised where community members experience challenges accessing the information they need to construct a thorough response to a district proposal, or where discrepancies between information presented by the district and that presented by the community remain unreconciled. On this latter point, a particular problem can arise where a district relies on assumptions that are presented as fact (e.g., that larger schools offer greater educational value than smaller schools).
- A lack of collaboration and prior consultation can allow the process to become adversarial, and misinformation and misunderstanding to limit a sustainability study's value.

Suggestions for change

- The focus of the process, in policy and practice, needs to shift to “sustainability” (and away from closure).
- Meaningful sustainability study requires
 - early and collaborative involvement with the affected school community (or communities);
 - a standard package of information about the school that is made available at the outset;
 - the provision of a timeframe and supports that allow for the thorough review of a school's standing;
 - structures and processes to facilitate discussion and dialogue (not simply information exchange), to create space for “out of the box” thinking about school sustainability, and to support a collaborative approach to assessing the feasibility of

- all options on the table (those aimed at enhancing the school's sustainability as well as status quo/close options)
- a commitment to grounding decisions about school sustainability more thoroughly in an understanding of the local context and the needs of particular communities – a commitment that requires a more collaborative and integrated approach to infrastructure planning and sustainability study/planning.

The changes suggested by those participating in this study highlight a number of specific areas where change efforts might usefully be directed. However, one useful starting point may be to convene a broader group (or series of groups) of past SSS participants for a facilitated discussion to flesh out what a SSS process might look like, in policy and practice, if it is to have greater success addressing educational and community needs at the local level in New Brunswick.