

SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

**A FINAL RESEARCH REPORT PRESENTED
TO THE
ALBERTA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

DECEMBER, 2001

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR
CALGARY HERALD
MAY 11, 2001**

Due to declining populations in rural Alberta, our children's education is at risk. We play a numbers game and our schools receive funding depending upon the number of students enrolled in the school. Enrolment at Manyberries School has fallen to an all-time low of 48 students from kindergarten to Grade 9. Due to fewer funds, we are not able to hire teaches for all our junior high core subjects.

Our junior high and elementary grades will be triple-graded next year. This year, our high school closed and last year our board decided not to fund kindergarten with less than 10 students; we have four.

We will have four teachers to teach every subject to all the students. There will not be extra funding to provide classroom aides to assist students with special needs. Without a school that can provide a high standard of education, the next generation will not return to the farm. Our industry feeds the world, but it is being threatened by the lack of quality education.

Our government needs to provide funding to our rural school boards so our children can receive the same quality of education as their urban counterparts.

*A Parent
Manyberries, AB.*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study focused on small rural schools averaging fewer than 25 students per grade. These schools were located in small towns, villages, and hamlets with fewer than 1000 people.

Six school jurisdictions participated in this study. Superintendents and their staff responded to a questionnaire that requested information on education programs, student transportation, school facilities, school consolidation, and funding in their small rural schools.

Other information in this study was obtained from government departments, the Rural Education Workshops at the 2001 ASBA Spring General Meeting, 12 school jurisdictions who responded to a draft report of the study, a meeting with Alberta Learning staff, and an Issues Forum sponsored by the College of Alberta School Superintendents.

Demographics

The study found a declining birth rate had caused student enrolments in small rural schools to decrease at the same time that Alberta's rural population had increased, particularly in areas surrounding urban centres. The rural economy was predicted to diversify and grow. Small rural schools in strategic locations were considered important for advancing government's three core businesses – people, prosperity, and preservation.

Government policy should recognize that small rural schools, strategically located in their communities, are an important component of the social infrastructure required to:

1. achieve economic diversification;
2. spur growth in Alberta's agricultural industry; and
3. improve the quality of life in rural Alberta.

Education Programs

Small rural schools were expected to meet the same minimum program and testing requirements as other Alberta schools. They used combined grade classes, shared programs, distance education, and other innovative approaches to provide education programs for their students.

Instructional funding for small rural schools was the same as other schools, except for the program equity funding they received for sparsity and distance. The sparsity formula allocated funding disproportionately to the small rural

schools in this study and did not take into account their varying sizes and grade organizations.

Program equity in small rural schools would be facilitated if education stakeholders and government collaborated on ways to:

1. improve methodologies for delivering programs to students in small rural schools;
2. make Provincial Achievement Tests administrations compatible with courses cycled in small rural schools;
3. improve funding equity for small rural schools by replacing sparsity funding with a formula that takes into account real cost factors such as school size and grade organization; and
4. review the distance funding formula to ensure that current allocations contribute to program equity in small rural schools

Student Transportation

Provincial policy and funding for student transportation were meeting the needs of most jurisdictions with students attending small rural schools. Enhancements to government's rural transportation funding policy would:

1. enable students in small rural schools to access specialized programs in neighbouring schools without being restricted to courses requiring special facilities or equipment; and
2. ensure that funding is not reduced for jurisdictions with declining bus populations but fixed transportation costs.

School Facilities

On a percentage basis, twice as many small rural schools in this study were in poor physical condition compared to the rest of the province. The utilization of space in small rural schools was lower than other schools in the 6 jurisdictions studied.

The provincial funding formulas for plant operations and maintenance and Building Quality Restoration Program provided less funding for small rural schools with low utilization rates than for schools of identical size with high utilization rates.

Government funding for school facility projects since February 2000 was roughly proportional for small rural schools when compared to other schools in the 6 participating jurisdictions. Government policy to upgrade facilities on the basis of building need was a benefit to small rural schools.

A more equitable government policy on facilities for small rural schools would:

1. decrease the importance of facility utilization and student enrolments in making funding decisions; and
2. allocate funding for plant operations and maintenance and the Building Quality Restoration Program on real costs instead of the present emphasis on student enrolments.

School Consolidation

School consolidation studies have focused attention on program, funding, and facility issues in small rural schools. When small rural schools were rated as non-viable they were sometimes considered for closure. Government policy on “right locating” and “right sizing” schools was seen as promoting school consolidation.

School jurisdictions saw value in guidelines that specified when school consolidations had reached an end-point. Following school consolidations, small rural schools needed sufficient funding for operating and capital purposes.

Provincial school closure policy provided reasonable guidance to jurisdictions during the school closure process. Enhancements to government’s policy on school consolidation would:

1. tie school closure procedures together with consolidation studies conducted in the jurisdictions; and
2. include guidelines that specify when school consolidation in a jurisdiction has reached an end-point.

1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH PAPER

The purpose of this research paper is to examine small rural schools from the following policy perspectives:

- education programs;
- student transportation;
- school facilities; and
- school consolidation.

The policy perspectives in this research paper take into account the:

- practices and policies of school jurisdictions operating small rural schools;
- funding policies of Alberta Learning and Alberta Infrastructure;
- educational program requirements of Alberta Learning;
- student transportation policies of Alberta Learning;
- school facility policies of Alberta Infrastructure;
- school closure policy of Alberta Learning; and
- policies of the Alberta School Boards Association.

The policy perspectives in this research paper are meant to facilitate discussion on issues affecting small rural schools.

2. THE RESEARCHER

Dr. Russ Wiebe is a former:

- teacher, school administrator, and superintendent of schools;
- executive manager with Alberta Learning;
- member of the team that developed the current provincial funding framework for K to 12 education; and
- member and chairman of the School Buildings Board from 1993 to 1997.

Dr. Wiebe operates an education consulting firm that provides services to school boards, school organizations, and government, including school consolidation studies involving small rural schools.

3. THE RESEARCH METHOD

In completing this study, the researcher:

1. Conferred with Dr. Leroy Sloan, Senior Education Advisor to the Alberta School Boards Association, on the scope, process, and presentation of the research paper.
2. Analyzed small rural school information provided by rural school jurisdictions on student programs, funding and costs, student transportation, school facilities, and school consolidation. The questionnaire used to collect this information is in Appendix C.
3. Reviewed policies and documents of Alberta Learning and Alberta Infrastructure as they apply to educational programs, funding, student transportation, school facilities, school consolidation, and school closure in small rural schools.
4. Examined Alberta School Boards Association policies related to rural education.
5. Conferred with staff from Alberta Learning and Alberta Infrastructure and administrators from school jurisdictions who participated in this study.
6. Examined policies and documents on rural Alberta obtained from other government departments including Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development, Alberta Energy, Alberta Municipal Affairs, and Statistics Canada.
7. Presented the interim findings of this study at Rural Education Workshops held during the Spring General Meeting of the Alberta School Boards Association on June 5, 2001 and incorporated ideas from presenters and participants into the draft report.
8. Submitted a draft report of this study to the Alberta School Boards Association in June 2001.
9. Summarized the feedback provided by 12 school jurisdictions who responded to the draft report in October 2001.
10. Received feedback on the draft report from Alberta Learning staff on November 6, 2001 and from College of Alberta School Superintendent members at an Issues Forum on November 30, 2001.
11. Submitted the final report of this study to the Executive Director, Alberta School Boards Association, in December 2001.

4. DEMOGRAPHICS OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

A small rural school in this study is defined as averaging fewer than 25 students per grade and located in a small town, village, or hamlet in a rural community.

A rural community is defined by Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development – as an area with a population of less than 1000 and a population density less than 400 people per square kilometer. Harry (p.1)

Participating School Jurisdictions

Information on small rural schools in this study was collected from 6 public school jurisdictions, Alberta Learning, and Alberta Infrastructure. The study intended to include separate jurisdictions, but it was found that most separate schools were located in centres over 1000 population. The jurisdictions are listed in Appendix B and referred to consistently in the paper by the letters – A, B, C, D, E, and F.

The table below summarizes the number of small rural schools and student enrolments in each participating jurisdictions. As the table indicates, 51 percent of schools in the 6 jurisdictions are small rural.

The percentage of small rural schools in the 6 jurisdictions vary from 18 to 80 percent. Student enrolments in the small rural schools ranged from 18 to 61 percent of jurisdiction totals but averaged 27 percent over all jurisdictions.

NUMBER OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS AND STUDENT ENROLMENTS IN SIX RURAL SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS							
	Rural School Jurisdiction						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	TOTAL
Number of Schools:							
Small Rural	9	5	3	14	8	7	46
Total Schools	12	12	17	22	10	18	91
% small rural	75	42	18	64	80	37	51%
Student Enrolments:							
Small Rural	1172	616	491	1723	1107	737	5846
Total Schools	2580	3409	4511	5198	1802	3959	21459
% small rural	45	18	11	33	61	18	27%

The table on the previous page does not include Hutterite colony schools or Outreach Programs. Student enrolments are for the 2000-01 school year and kindergarten children are counted as .5 full time equivalents (FTE's)

Rural Economic Trends

Agriculture remains the primary industry in most communities having small rural schools, but the rural economy in Alberta is becoming more diversified.

A Strategic Environmental Analysis Committee with Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development reported that "Agriculture is a major component of the rural economy, but it is not the sole driver. Oil/gas and forestry are playing significant roles in the development of rural areas." (p. 2)

Economic diversification in rural Alberta is also providing rural residents, including farm families, with additional job opportunities in secondary and tertiary industries such as manufacturing, construction, and services.

Harry reports that, "In 1996...off-farm employment contributed 46.2 percent of total farm family income...average total farm family income in Alberta was \$59,989, an increase of 23.3 percent from \$48,671 in 1991." (p. 4)

Rural communities should benefit from the expansion that the Alberta government is forecasting in the agri-food sector. This anticipated growth is reflected in the 2001-04 Business Plan of Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development. The business plan reported that the primary agriculture, food, and beverage industries:

- employed 101,500 people in 1999 and were targeted to increase to 107,000 people in 2003;
- generated \$14.35 billion in 1999 with the opportunity to grow to \$20 billion by 2010; and
- were the third largest employer in the province in 1999. (p. 1)

The agricultural economy in Alberta appears to be well on the way to achieving its potential for expansion. A farm income report released by Statistics Canada on May 28, 2001 indicated that farm cash receipts hit \$7.4 billion, up 14.5 percent – the largest increase since 1992. The same report stated that Alberta farmer's net cash income was \$1.6 billion, up 62.9 percent over 1999.

The 2001-04 Business Plan for Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development also forecasts that growth in the primary agriculture, food, and beverage sector would contribute to the further development of rural Alberta.

The plan identified this sector as advancing the government's three core businesses – **People, Prosperity, and Preservation** by promoting **Prosperity** through a strong, competitive agriculture and food industry. (p. 3)

Others see the **People** component of government's core businesses as a key driver in the competitiveness of the agriculture sector.

In a paper entitled "What do North American Farmers Need to do to Survive", Loree identifies human resources as one of four emerging realities impacting the primary agriculture industry. He contends that a continued trend to increased numbers of larger farm operations will result in a high proportion of employed labor. As farm size increases to achieve economies of scale, there will be increased competition with other sectors of the economy for skilled workers. Loree sees the need to attract and retain competent skilled employees as they are a key resource to profitable farm operations. (p.7)

Rural Population Trends

The 1996 Census conducted by Statistics Canada, although dated and soon to be replaced by 2001 Census information, reported a sizable growth in the rural population. One school board pointed out that most growth was in areas surrounding urban centres. An analysis of the 1996 Census by Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development reported that:

- from 1991 to 1996, urban population increased 5.5 percent, compared to an increase of 7.6 percent for rural population. This is the first time since 1941 that rural growth outpaced the urban growth; and
- the steady downward trend of farm population since 1941 reversed in 1996 with an increase of 7.1 percent over 1991. It is the first time that an increase of farm population was reported since 1941; Su (p. 1)

The same analysis found Alberta's 1996 rural population to total 554,010: 188,510 farm residents and 365,500 non-farm residents. While the farm population in 1996 was found to be 7 percent of the total population – the same as 1991, the average age of farm operators was 48, compared to 38 for the general labor force in Alberta.

The older average age of farmers: 51 years for primary farm operators and 44 for secondary farm operators; raises succession issues for rural communities. In his paper "What Do North American Farmers Need to do to Survive", Loree points out a "continued trend for increased numbers of larger farm operations, with a reduction in the output from, and number of, smaller enterprises"(p. 7). The effect of this trend on rural populations would seem to depend on the number of people required to run these larger farm operations.

Rural Student Populations

The 1996 Census conducted by Statistics Canada found that the number of children living in farm families decreased from 63,560 in 1991 to 60,660 in 1996. This decline in population over 5 years occurred during the same time that the total farm population had risen by 6.5 percent. This apparent inconsistency is explained by a declining birthrate - evident when children in the 1996 Census are broken down into age categories.

The table below reports population changes between 1991 and 1996. The table also shows school age categories in 1996 as a percent of total population for municipalities contained within the boundaries of the 6 participating school jurisdictions and for the Province of Alberta.

This table indicates that all municipalities in the 6 school jurisdictions with small rural schools reported population growth. Three exceeded the provincial average of 5.9 percent.

The table also shows that the percentage of children in the age category 0-4 has decreased compared to the age categories 5-14 and 15-19 --- taking into account that the age category 5-14 spans 10 years compared to 5 years for the age category 0 - 4. This decrease in young children applied to 5 out of the 6 school jurisdictions with small rural schools and to the province-as-a whole.

THE POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS OF MUNICIPALITIES IN 6 SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS WITH SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS							
	(1996 CENSUS)						Alberta
	Rural School Jurisdiction						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Population growth (%) From 1991 to 1996	.9	6.6	4.2	7.2	3.9	6.9	5.9
Age Category: (as percent of total population)							
Age 0 – 4	7.7	9.1	7.9	7.1	7.9	6.1	7.2
Age 5 – 14	17.2	17.9	17.7	18.6	17.2	17.9	15.6
Age 15 – 19	8.0	8.1	8.5	8.5	8.6	8.2	7.1

A decrease in the number of children in the age category 0-4 in 1996 has steadily impacted student enrolments in small rural schools operated by the 6 school jurisdictions. As children from this smaller cohort entered school between 1996-97 and 2000-01, replacing the larger cohort of students leaving the system, student enrolments have declined steadily.

Policy Implications

Communities with small rural schools have economic significance for government. Many of these schools are located in areas where the agricultural industry is predicted to grow and contribute to the economic wealth of the province. Others are situated in centres where the oil and gas, mining, and forestry sectors are diversifying the rural economy.

One of the strategies for improved industry competitiveness in Alberta Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development's 2001 to 2004 Business Plan is to "encourage infrastructure and systems that support sustainable growth and diversification" (page 7). An action recommended in the business plan to achieve this end is to "encourage necessary economic and social infrastructure, value chains, transportation and services." (p. 7)

The education services provided by schools in rural communities are considered an important component of Alberta's social infrastructure. As agricultural and other businesses compete with other sectors for skilled labour, potential employees will be attracted to rural communities with viable schools. Rural schools in strategic locations will provide children with better access to education programs.

Diversification of the rural economy and continued growth in the agricultural sector will be fostered by small rural schools that offer quality education programs.

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE:

Government policy should recognize that small rural schools, strategically located in their communities, are an important component of the social infrastructure required to:

- 1. achieve economic diversification;**
- 2. spur growth in Alberta's agricultural industry; and**
- 3. improve the quality of life in rural Alberta.**

5. EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

A decline in enrolments coupled with a funding system “driven” by student numbers have made it increasingly difficult to offer education programs in small rural schools. As part of a *Rural Education Project* to plan for the future of rural education in Buffalo Trail Regional School Division No. 28, Pearson, Sloan, and Walter identified that small rural schools:

- are limited in the number of curricular offerings they are able to offer students due to available teacher time and expertise;
- lack vocational programs; and
- are less able to offer special education programs for students who are mentally challenged or gifted. (p. 27)

A school board that responded to the draft report challenged the above assertion that small rural schools were not able to provide quality special education services. This board used an inclusive model and commented “Our experience has been that small rural schools with their family atmosphere and individual attention to student needs are an ideal placement for students with special needs.”

The same school board observed that the research paper generalized from the experiences of the 6 participating school jurisdictions, but didn’t draw from “...the broader context of research that points to the benefits associated with small rural schools and combined grades.” This board elaborated its position in saying that “Reference to additional external research would help place the issue of small rural schools in a broader research and policy perspective.”

While this study did not draw from the wider body of research on small rural schools, the 6 school jurisdictions that participated in the study indicated their general satisfaction with the quality of education offered in the elementary and junior high grades of their small rural schools. In a similar vein, these boards expressed varying levels of concern over the limited resources, program offerings, and specialized staff available in small rural schools. They reported these deficiencies to be particularly acute in the senior high grades.

Notwithstanding their limitations or strengths, small rural schools in Alberta are expected to meet the same minimum program requirements as large urban schools.

Provincial Requirements for Small Rural Schools

The program requirements for provincial schools are spelled out in Alberta Learning's *Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12 Handbook*.

In a comprehensive paper prepared for Buffalo Trail Regional Division No. 28 and the Alberta School Boards Association, Wagner (1999) described the mandatory and discretionary elements of Alberta's K-12 education program. The following is a summary of his findings with some additional information provided by the researcher.

- Kindergarten programs are optional but if provided must be based on the *Kindergarten Program Statement* and offered for a minimum of 475 hours per school year.
- Elementary (grades 1-6) programs must offer English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Art, Music, Health and Physical Education in accordance with the provincial Program of Studies. A minimum of 950 hours of instruction must be provided in a school year (grade 1 can be less).
- Junior high (grades 7-9) programs must offer English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Physical Education, Health and Personal Life Skills and 2 provincial authorized optional courses (1 if the language of instruction is not English). School must provide a minimum of 950 hours of instruction in a school year.
- Senior high (grades 10-12) programs must offer a minimum number of courses in English, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science; Career and Life Management 20; 10 credits in Fine Arts, second languages, or Career and Technology Studies; two course sequences, other than English or Social Studies, that go up to the grade 12 level; and enough other courses for students to acquire 100 credits. Senior high school students must also have access to a minimum of 1000 hours of instruction in a school year, including 125 hours for 5 credit courses and 62.5 hours for 3 credit courses.
- Special education and English as a Second Language must be provided if it is determined that students require these programs.
- Programs such as second languages, Outreach, Integrated Occupation, distance education, off-campus education, and home schooling are optional and offered at the discretion of the school board.
- Students in grades 3, 6, and 9 must write Provincial Achievement Tests unless exempted by provincial policy. Senior high school students must

write Provincial Diploma Examinations to earn credits in courses where these tests are administered.

In addition to meeting provincial requirements, school boards and their communities often set other expectations for their schools. Small rural schools face the challenge of meeting provincial, board, and local standards with small student enrolments, few professional and support staff, and limited budgets.

The six participating school jurisdictions provided valuable information on how their small rural schools were handling provincial program requirements at the elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels.

Elementary Grades

In the elementary grades, jurisdictions indicated that their small rural schools were able to offer students the basic program including physical education, art, and music.

The Provincial Achievement Tests proved a challenge to small rural schools whenever content courses such as science and social studies were cycled – which was generally the case. For the unfamiliar, cycling in combined grade classes involves teaching the curriculum for one grade the first year and the curriculum in the other grade in the second year. For example, the grade 6 science curriculum could be offered to a combined grade 5 – 6 class one year. In the year following the combined grade 5 – 6 class would take the grade 5 science curriculum.

Jurisdictions reported that elementary teachers in small rural schools feel particularly obligated to prepare students for the Provincial Achievement Tests by paying extra attention to the grade six program at the expense of students taking other programs. Sometimes this involved re-teaching units in science or social studies that were instructed the year before.

The Provincial Achievement Tests in language arts and mathematics proved less problematic to grade 6 teachers than science and social studies. Whereas language arts and mathematics tests examined mainly skills, science and social studies tests covered content and processes learned in grades 4 to 6.

Jurisdictions reported that grade 3 and 6 students in small rural schools generally achieved at or above average on the provincial tests.

Junior High Grades

The junior high programs in small rural schools typically consisted of language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health, and physical education, and a limited number of complementary courses depending on student enrolments and

availability of teachers. Jurisdictions indicated that small rural schools with low junior high enrolments and small teaching staffs were often hard-pressed to offer the minimum number of complementary courses.

The grade 9 Provincial Achievement Tests posed the same problem for junior high grades in small rural schools, as elementary grades, when the science and social studies curriculums were cycled in combined grade classrooms. One jurisdiction indicated that the extra focus at the grade 9 level when classes were double or triple graded worked to the detriment of students in the lower grades.

Another jurisdiction commented “Provincial achievement exams at the grade 9 level has affected the number of complementary courses offered as most schools seek ways of providing individualized instruction to their grade 9 students taking resources away from the complementary area.”

Two jurisdictions viewed Provincial Achievement Tests favourably in that they provided an incentive for combined grade classrooms in small rural schools to maintain a focus on junior high curriculum outcomes.

Senior High Grades

Most jurisdictions reported that the senior high grades in small rural schools had considerable difficulty in offering more than a basic program. One jurisdiction stated “There are concerns meeting basic graduation requirements. Schools do not offer any program beyond.”

Another jurisdiction reported “In addition the pressure to offer core programs to both 10, 20, 30, and 13, 23, and 33 becomes extremely difficult. Adding new courses like the transitional math course at the grade 10 level is an impossibility.”

In one jurisdiction the range of options in senior high grades permitted students to graduate with an average of 110 high school credits.

The achievement levels of students on the Provincial Diploma Examinations varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from one school year to the next. One jurisdiction indicated satisfaction with grade 12 results in commenting “overall our students do well – small classes at the 30 level certainly work to the student’s advantage.”

A second jurisdiction with an acceptable pass rate at the grade 12 level had few students achieving at the standard of excellence level. The jurisdiction attributed this shortfall to the school “perhaps trying to do too much with such a small staff at the high school level.”

Another jurisdiction reported that after 5 years of reasonable results, its small rural high school had experienced a down turn in results in the past 2 years. A

second jurisdiction experienced similar difficulties in maintaining provincial standards and reaching local targets on a consistent basis. With the latter jurisdiction these difficulties had called into question such factors as instruction in combined grade settings, high teacher turn-over, and outdated teaching practices.

Instructional Programming in Small Rural Schools

Wagner defines instructional programming as comprising “the ‘how’ of education: the manner in which programs or courses are organized, scheduled and delivered, and the resources and strategies used in delivery.” (p. 2)

Small rural schools are reported by Pearson, Sloan, and Walter to face the following “challenges” related to program delivery:

- administrators have large teaching assignments as well as their full administrative responsibilities likely without the assistance of a vice-principal to off-set the workload; and
- teachers who have the responsibility of teaching a number of grades at the same time. This makes it difficult to introduce new curriculum in light of the enormous area of curricular responsibility.” (p. 8)

Jurisdictions indicated that their small rural schools were able to continue the traditional method of having a teacher in regular contact with elementary and junior high students by the use of double and triple graded classes.

This same traditional method was often found by jurisdictions to be more costly and less feasible with senior high school students. Smaller numbers of high school teachers in small rural schools were frequently challenged to address the varied course requirements and advanced subject matter of high school students.

An increasing number of senior high school courses in small rural high schools were being offered using distance education and virtual school technology. This technology did not always garner public favour. As Pearson, Sloan, and Walter found “the most pressing issue within the area of program delivery is the question of what the community is prepared to accept.” (p. 28)

The six jurisdictions in this study identified numerous ways that small rural schools delivered the instructional program to their elementary, junior high, and senior high students.

Elementary Grades

The majority of small rural schools used double grading in their elementary programs. Several schools with smaller enrolments operated triple graded classrooms, while others with more students managed to group students in single graded classrooms.

Small rural schools tended, wherever possible, to instruct elementary language arts and mathematics in single graded classes. The reverse was true for other subjects where 2 or more grades in classrooms were usually the norm.

The use of combined grade classrooms in small rural schools was generally accepted by parents. One jurisdiction commented “Double grading has been a frequent requirement of our small rural schools. In most communities this is not seen as a negative but rather as a fact of life.”

Another jurisdiction looked upon double and triple graded classes positively in that they provided “unique opportunities for students depending upon teachers’ skill set and attitude. Multi-graded settings provide an opportunity for teaching and learning in a collaborative structure with facilitative teaching. They offer students more opportunities for engaged responsible learning.”

In another jurisdiction doubled graded classes were accepted, but triple grading, was not supported by parents and teachers. They held the belief that triple grading had a negative impact on student learning.

Junior High Grades

The jurisdictions in this study indicated that junior high programs in small rural schools were typically offered in combined grade classrooms. As one jurisdiction put it “This grouping procedure causes changes in teaching methodology (much more cooperative learning types of experiences).” The same jurisdiction added “Because our rural schools have used this approach for a long period of time it is well accepted practice and does not seem to create any serious difficulties.”

Another jurisdiction pointed out that small rural schools tended to group junior high students in larger classes for complementary programs to avoid having to triple grade them in core subjects.

In a number of small rural schools, junior high students were able to access Career and Technology Studies and fine arts programs in neighbouring schools. For other small rural schools this was not an option because of long distances to travel between schools.

Distance education and virtual school technology were seldom used by participating jurisdictions to deliver junior high programs in small rural schools.

When used, distance education materials often supplemented resources in complementary courses. One reason given by a jurisdiction for not using distance education was inadequate bandwidth to accommodate this technology.

Senior High Grades

Jurisdictions reported that it was the norm in small rural schools for 2 or 3 senior high school courses to be grouped for instruction in the same classroom. They gave examples of English 10 and 13 or Drama 10, 20, and 30 being taught concurrently in the same classroom.

In one jurisdiction, the students in two senior high schools used a reciprocal arrangement to access course offerings in both schools. Under this approach one school offered the 10 – 20 -30 stream while the other school offered the 13 – 23 - 33 stream. In the remaining jurisdictions, senior high students in small rural schools took their courses from teachers or by distance education.

Distance education was used commonly to offer programs in small rural high schools. One jurisdiction commented “distance education is used quite extensively to provide a greater variety of course selection for students. The program is monitored closely by the vice-principal and often supervised in a classroom setting.”

Another jurisdiction added “Distance Learning courses provide a number of options, particularly when enrolments for these courses are very low – even for one student! Students tend to be ‘on their own’ for these courses.”

One jurisdiction pointed out that a typical high school student in its small rural schools took up to 20 credits by distance learning.

The jurisdictions reported mixed results with virtual technology. In one case technical problems and a lack of visual programming hampered students taking Physics 30. In another jurisdiction programs offered by virtual technology “created some real concerns for parents and students and so the concept was discontinued.”

High school students in the jurisdictions surveyed had limited access to off-campus programs, although each small rural high school did have some Work Experience sites in which to place students. The Green Certificate program had proven to be a very popular offering with students in 2 jurisdictions.

Other Programming Considerations

At the Spring General Meeting of the Alberta School Boards Association on June 5, 2001, presenters at the Rural Education Workshop provided additional insights on how education in small rural schools could be enhanced:

- Mr. Michael Walter, Field Services Director with Alberta Learning, presented the topic “Programming Options for School Board” which showcased promising innovative practices developed by school boards. He also distributed *Planting the Seeds, Growth in Rural Education – a Series of Choice*, a document that highlighted 9 unique approaches Alberta school jurisdictions were using in rural education.
- Dr. Hal Kluczny, Superintendent of Schools of Wetaskiwin Regional Division No. 11, discussed innovative educational practices used in his school jurisdiction to deliver a strong rural education program. In his paper *Sustaining Rural Education: Proven Practices*, he described effective strategies for combined grade and course instruction, inter-school student groupings, and “on-line” courses.
- Dr. Darwin Eckstrom, Deputy Superintendent of Peace Wapiti Regional Division No. 33, reported on *Promising Practices in Teacher Recruitment and Retention*, a study conducted jointly by Alberta Learning and its education partners. In commenting on this study, he provided varied approaches for jurisdictions to attract and retain teachers in rural school settings.

Several superintendents at the Rural Education Workshop commented on other issues affecting education in their small rural schools.

One superintendent pointed out that parents in his rural jurisdiction were demanding greater “choice” of schools for their children. Their actions had caused some “fighting” among communities over schools. Providing greater “choice” for parents raised student transportation and school facility utilization issues for the jurisdiction.

Another superintendent experienced some “backlash” from rural parents who were against alternative delivery systems such as distance education and virtual schooling. The opposing parents preferred a “human being” to teach their children. To use the superintendent’s words, “A virtual teacher can’t coach a volleyball team.”

A third rural superintendent emphasized the importance of involving students in decision-making about their educational programs. He provided instances of senior high school students already traveling significant distances outside of their

small rural communities for out-of-school activities. These students may have preferred busing to specialized programs in larger centralized schools over the limited programs they were receiving in their small rural high schools.

Participants at the Issues Forum sponsored by the College of Alberta School Superintendents on November 30, 2001 pointed out that educational programming in small rural schools could be facilitated by the following developments:

- The newly formed Minister's Advisory Committee on Small School Programming has a broad membership and mandate to improve programs and practices in small schools.
- Two symposiums: one in March 2002 sponsored by the Alberta Distance Learning Centre, Pembina Hills R.D. No. 7; and a second in May 2002 sponsored by the Central Alberta Regional Consortium will focus on the delivery of programs in smaller rural schools.
- The Alberta Distance Learning Centre has plans to improve distance learning opportunities for students in smaller rural schools by expanding the use of current technology, strengthening partnerships with school systems and parents, and securing additional funding from the province.

Instructional Funding in Small Rural Schools

With the exception of student fees and fund raising, virtually all funding for instruction in small rural schools comes from the provincial government.

Basic and Special Program Funding

The basic and special program funding rates for students attending small rural schools are the same as those for students in larger urban schools.

The funding framework administered by Alberta Learning allocates most program funding on a per student basis with nearly all earmarked for basic instruction. Instructional funding is also provided on a per student basis for the Teacher Assistants Program, Early Literary Initiative, and Technology Integration; and for students with severe disabilities and English as a Second Language.

A number of school jurisdictions received project funding for Enhanced Opportunities, Native Education, Regional Assessment Services, and Institutional education, however these programs made up only a minute portion of the provincial education budget.

Most jurisdictions participating in this study indicated that instructional funding from the province was not adequate to meet current program requirements in small rural schools. One jurisdiction commented “In our smaller schools, even with judicious allocation of resources, we can barely cover the cost of instruction.”

Allocating Basic and Special Funding to Small Rural Schools

In their use of site-based decision making to allocate funding to small rural schools, jurisdictions usually retained some funding centrally to cover costs that were not spread evenly among schools such as special education, substitute teachers, and technical support. The balance of funds tended to “flow through” to the schools on understanding that schools would maintain balanced budgets.

Jurisdictions provided the following information on how specific programs in their small rural schools were funded:

- Special education – one jurisdiction saw special education funding as adequate to cover program costs. Other jurisdictions indicated that special education funding was insufficient to address program needs. Jurisdictions often pooled a portion of special education funds centrally. These funds were allocated to schools on a needs basis to attain program equity in special education.
- Computer Technology – one jurisdiction was satisfied that funding provided for the costs of technology. Other jurisdictions indicated that technology funding was not sufficient to provide adequate hardware, supporting software, technology and networking staff, and an evergreening program for their small rural schools.
- Funding Transfers From Larger Schools – In 2 jurisdictions a small amount of funding was pooled from larger schools for use by small rural schools.
- Funding Transfers Between Instruction and Other Programs – Four out of 5 jurisdictions did not transfer funds between instruction and other programs such as student transportation. One jurisdiction transferred some funds from instruction to cover plant operations and maintenance costs.

Equity Funding

Sparsity and distance funding are allocated to jurisdictions to provide for program equity. Both funding mechanisms pre-date the current funding framework. The sparsity and distance formulas were incorporated with little change into the funding framework when it was adopted in 1995-96.

Although the principle of sparsity funding has remained unchanged over the past 5 years, the formula has been modified in a number of ways to accommodate a range of circumstances for individual jurisdictions. This has added complexity to the sparsity formula and made it more difficult to interpret.

The distance funding formula has also been expanded since 1995-96 to include distance from schools to board office as a factor in determining funding.

Sparsity Funding

According to Alberta Learning’s 2000-01 funding manual, “funding for sparsity assists school jurisdictions in sparsely populated areas of the province to provide instruction to meet the learner expectations of students in smaller schools.”

Stated another way, sparsity funding provides jurisdictions with additional funds to address the higher instructional costs for students attending small rural schools. The purpose of sparsity funding is to attain program equity.

School jurisdictions that meet the density and size requirements in Alberta Learning’s funding manual receive sparsity funding for each student.

The table below shows the amount of sparsity funding provided in 2000-01 to the 6 rural school jurisdictions participating in this study. The table also reports sparsity funding on a per student basis for small rural schools in those jurisdictions.

SPARSITY FUNDING PROVIDED TO 6 SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS WITH SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN 2000-01						
	Rural School Jurisdiction					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Sparsity funding	\$ 944,831	\$636,393	\$323,514	\$2,871,384	\$2,723,720	\$ 244,592
Small Rural Schools: Enrolments	1172	616	491	1273	1107	737
Sparsity funding per student in small rural schools	\$806	\$1,033	\$659	\$2,256	\$2460	\$332
Note - the above table reports enrolments for 2000-01, but does not include Hutterite colony schools or Outreach Programs. Kindergarten children are counted as .5 FTE.						

As the table on the previous page indicates, the amount of sparsity funding provided for students attending small rural schools in the 6 jurisdictions varies significantly – from \$332 to \$2,460 per student. Using these funding amounts, a small rural school with 100 students in the first jurisdiction qualifies for \$33,200 in sparsity funding, while a small rural school in the second jurisdiction qualifies for \$246,000 for the same number of students – a difference of more than \$200,000.

The foregoing table and example assume that all sparsity funding should flow to small rural schools having enrolments that average fewer than 25 students per grade. One of the boards who responded to the draft report considered this assumption as narrowing the intent of sparsity funding. Regardless of definition, the present sparsity funding formula, using population density as its main determiner, allocates funding disproportionately to jurisdictions with small rural schools.

It should also be noted that the present sparsity formula does not differentiate funding according to the grade organization of small rural schools. Elementary students in small rural schools are funded at the same rate as senior high school students even though their instructional costs may be different.

Distance Funding

Alberta Learning's 2000-01 funding manual states "funding for distance assists school jurisdictions located outside of urban centers to meet the learner expectations of students in schools with above average instruction costs." A purpose of distance funding is to address the added costs of travel and moving goods and services to schools in non-urban centers.

The distance funding formula is based on two factors: distance of board office from urban center which generates most of the distance funding; and distance from board office to schools which produces a lesser amount of the distance funding.

All schools in a jurisdiction that qualify under the distance formula, small or large, are eligible to receive distance funding.

The table on the following page shows the total amount of distance funding allocated in 2000-01 to the 6 jurisdictions in this study. It also gives a breakdown of distance funding for each jurisdiction by student.

As indicated in the table, the variance among jurisdictions for distance funding is much less than sparsity funding. The jurisdiction receiving the most distance funding, \$174 per student, is about 450 km from an urban centre. The jurisdiction receiving the least, \$16 per student, is less than 70 km. from an urban centre. These dollar amounts reflect the workings of the distance formula.

What is less known is whether or not the distance funding formula allocates funds equitably to address differences in program costs.

DISTANCE FUNDING PROVIDED TO 6 SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS WITH SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN 2000-01						
	Rural School Jurisdiction					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Distance funding	\$79,817	\$105,500	\$161,615	\$906,661	\$145,104	\$63,212
School Jurisdiction: Enrolments	2580	3409	4511	5198	1802	3958
Distance funding per student in the jurisdiction	\$ 31	\$31	\$36	\$174	\$81	\$16
Note - the above table reports enrolments for 2000-01, but does not include Hutterite colony schools or Outreach Programs. Kindergarten children are counted as .5. FTE.						

Distributing Equity Funding to Small Rural Schools

The 6 participating jurisdictions provided information on how they allotted sparsity and distance funding to small rural schools.

One jurisdiction distributed distance funding on a per student basis to all schools, large or small. The same jurisdiction allotted equal amounts of sparsity funding to each of its small rural schools.

The typical approach used in other jurisdictions was to combine sparsity and distance funding and distribute it to small rural schools as a supplement to other instructional funding:

- One jurisdiction varied the amount of sparsity and distance funding to small rural schools depending on their size and program needs.
- Another jurisdiction used sparsity and distance funding plus some funding reallocated from its larger schools to provide a small school supplementation to its small rural schools.

Two jurisdictions indicated that the sparsity and distance funding provided by the province was not adequate to attain program equity in their small rural schools. These jurisdictions each received less than \$1,000 per student in combined sparsity and distance funding for students attending their small rural schools.

INSTRUCTIONAL COSTS IN SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

Instructional costs on a per student basis are generally higher in small rural schools than in schools with larger student enrolments. These added costs can be attributed to factors such as:

- Higher instructional costs because of lower student-teacher ratios. For example, teacher instructional costs in a small rural school with a student-teacher ratio of 15 to 1, are one-third more than a larger school with a student-teacher ratio of 20 to 1.
- Higher per student costs for instructional support services. A small rural school with 100 students has similar instructional support costs as a larger school with 500 students – including a principal, school secretary, and librarian.
- Lower economies of scale in the use of learning resources. Instructional resources such as computers, gymnasium equipment, and libraries that are used throughout the day in a larger school are used only intermittently in small rural schools.

The purpose of sparsity funding is to cover the difference in instructional costs between small rural schools and their larger counterparts.

Instructional Costs Vary With Grade Organization

Small rural schools vary in their grade organization – a factor that affects their instructional costs.

Small rural schools with senior high school grades are usually more expensive to operate, because of the diverse program requirements of students in grades 10 to 12.

Unlike the common core program provided to students in grades K to 6, senior high school students take different routes for post-secondary entrance and work force preparation.

Programming for junior high school students, although less varied than senior high school, can be more demanding on school resources than the elementary grades because of complementary course requirements.

The table below shows the grade organizations for small rural schools in the 6 jurisdictions in this study.

As evident in the table, most small rural schools have elementary/junior high organizations. A lesser number are elementary/junior-senior high schools with the remainder made up of elementary schools and a middle school.

The table points out the variation in grade organizations for small rural schools in this study. Whereas one jurisdiction has 6 small rural high schools another jurisdiction doesn't have any small rural schools with senior high grades.

THE GRADE ORGANIZATIONS OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS						
IN THE 6 PARTICIPATING SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS						
	Rural School Jurisdiction					
	(number of schools)					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Grade Organizations:						
Elementary	1	1	-	3	-	5
Elementary/ Junior High	5	2	2	8	2	2
Elementary/Jr. Sr. High	2	2	1	3	6	-
Middle School	1	-	-	-	-	-
Total	9	5	3	14	8	7

As indicated earlier in this report, the funding formulas for sparsity and distance do not differentiate funding levels for elementary, junior high, and senior high school students in small rural schools.

While the costs of operating small rural schools with varying student populations and grade organizations have yet to be determined, it is questionable whether the present equity funding system is addressing their differing instructional costs.

When sparsity and distance funding for the 6 jurisdictions in this study are combined, amounts are found to vary from \$348 per student in one rural jurisdiction to \$2,541 per student in another rural jurisdiction. Most of this difference can be attributed to sparsity funding.

Policy Implications

Small rural schools are expected to meet the same minimum program requirements as other schools in Alberta.

Combined grade classes are used commonly in small rural schools to group elementary and junior high grades for instruction. Classes offering two or more courses, complemented with distance education, are used frequently to deliver programs in the senior high grades.

The instructional methodology used to deliver programs in small rural schools is developing. New technologies and organizational approaches are emerging to assist small rural schools with their educational programming. Two symposiums are being planned in 2002 for this purpose.

Small rural schools are often challenged by the Provincial Achievement Tests in science and social studies. In grades 6 and 9 these courses are frequently cycled, because of combined grade classes, placing their course content in alternate years out of synch with test content on the Provincial Achievement Tests.

The Alberta School Boards Association (policy 9.L.07) believes schools should be given the opportunity to have students write the Provincial Achievement Test in the year they take the curriculum tested. The attainment of this policy direction becomes difficult because grade 6 and 9 tests in science and social studies examine concepts and skills learned in grades 4 to 6 and grades 7 to 9 respectively.

Alberta Learning's current business plan commits to improving the quality of education in small rural schools. A strategy in this plan is to "enhance access to learning opportunities by work(ing) with partners and stakeholders to examine ways of enabling and sustaining access to quality learning programs in sparsely populated rural communities." (page 8)

The Alberta School Boards Association (policy 8.L.05) believes in the equality of access to educational opportunities for all students

Program equity for students attending small rural schools will be attained when they are given the opportunity to meet the basic learner outcomes prescribed in the provincial curriculum. Program equity funding is required for small rural schools to meet this challenge.

The government provides sparsity and distance funding to address program equity in small rural schools.

The funding formula for sparsity allots funds disproportionately for students attending the small rural schools in this study. The sparsity formula does not take into account the varying costs of operating small rural schools with different student enrolments and grade organizations.

The funding formula for distance provides funds to address higher instructional costs of schools in jurisdictions removed from urban centres. The extent to which distance funding contributes to program equity in small rural schools is not clear.

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Program equity in small rural schools will be facilitated if education stakeholders and Alberta Learning collaborate on ways to:

- 1. improve methodologies for delivering programs to students in small rural schools;**
- 2. make Provincial Achievement Tests administrations compatible with courses cycled in small rural schools;**
- 3. improve funding equity for small rural schools by replacing sparsity funding with a formula that takes into account real cost factors such as school size and grade organization; and**
- 4. ensure that distance funding contributes to program equity in small rural schools.**

6. STUDENT TRANSPORTATION FOR SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

Student Busing Services in Small Rural Schools

The Alberta School Act and its accompanying Student Transportation Regulation spell out the requirements for transporting students to small rural schools.

Students who reside more than 2.4 kilometers from their designated school are eligible to be bused to that school. Provision is also made in government policy to bus students to schools outside of their transportation service area to access programs not offered in their designated school.

Government policy is silent on busing service levels such as how long a student should spend riding a school bus to and from school. These decisions, including designated stops on school bus routes or levy of transportation fees, are the purview of school boards.

The jurisdictions participating in this study had few concerns about government policy on student transportation. They commented on the flexibility provided in policy to transport students to small rural schools and for students in small rural schools to access programs in neighbouring schools:

- “Provincial policy, especially in the area of CTS and special education, have enabled our rural students to access programs found mainly in town;”
- “Express buses are in place that take students from one attendance area to a school in another which offers a specialized program required by the student but not available in their home school;”
- “Boards are free to allow for the transportation of students to schools of their choice, which is good. The provincial policy is not too restrictive, which leads to a need for strong local policy to define and control how access to programs of choice is gained”; and
- “Provincial and (board) policies enable us to do this (transport students to programs in other schools), but distances prevent us from capitalizing on these possibilities.”

None of the jurisdictions set limitations on the length of time students would have to spend riding school buses. All tried, however, to set bus routes that kept ride times for students reasonable. Several jurisdictions used one hour as a “rule of thumb” for maximum ride time – acknowledging that some outlying students spent as long as 90 minutes riding the bus each way to and from school.

Jurisdictions pointed out that the operation of small rural schools decreased the length of time students would spend riding on school buses. In the words of one jurisdiction “One of the major arguments for keeping small rural schools, especially elementary grades open, is the issue of time riding the bus.”

In two jurisdictions, the operation of small rural schools added complexity to the transportation system by buses having to collect at certain points to transfer older students to buses taking them to larger centralized schools. The ride times for these students was lengthened by the lay-over time spent at the point of transfer.

One jurisdiction pointed out other advantages for student transportation that accrued from having small rural schools:

- drivers within an attendance area are employed instead of only those from large central areas;
- the yearly kilometers on each bus is kept down, thus saving fuel and extending the life of the bus; and

- the buses can be repaired in each small town which saves the expense of transporting them to larger centres.

Student Transportation Funding and Costs

All funding for student transportation is provided by Alberta Learning – except for transportation fees collected from parents or funding transfers from other programs.

The rural transportation funding formula adopted by Alberta Learning several years ago takes into account population density in a school jurisdiction and the distance students must travel to their designated school. Funding rates for students attending small rural schools are typically above average because they live in communities with low population densities and have longer distances to travel to school.

Alberta Learning also provides transportation funding to bus students in small rural schools to programs in neighbouring schools. Such inter-school transportation is restricted to special education and courses of study requiring a special facility or equipment not available in the school they attend. Also excluded from inter-school funding are work experience programs, intermittent busing to activities such as swimming programs, and courses that could be offered in small rural schools.

A presenter at the Rural Education Workshop at the Spring General Meeting of the Alberta School Boards Association pointed out that students in small rural schools are not able to access programs such as drama and band in other schools because these programs do not qualify under the inter-school provision of the student transportation funding.

Adequacy of Rural Transportation Funding

The majority of jurisdictions found funding from Alberta Learning sufficient to cover the costs of their student transportation systems. One jurisdiction disagreed saying that the funding rate increase in 2000-01 did not address higher fuel costs.

A participant at the Rural Education Workshop indicated that his jurisdiction was disadvantaged by the rural transportation funding formula. He pointed out that a loss of 49 bus students between 1999-00 and 2000-01, without a corresponding reduction in bus routes, had resulted in lost funding that was made up only by the 3 percent increase in funding rates. He stated that there were no funds left over to increase compensation for busing contractors.

This participant added that adjustments to the density portion of the rural transportation funding formula, such as using a sliding scale approach, would have been one way to curtail the jurisdiction's loss of transportation funding.

The same participant pointed out that his jurisdiction was being penalized by the rural transportation formula by busing students on behalf of other jurisdictions. These non-resident students had reduced the density factor in the funding formula and the amount of transportation funding the jurisdiction would have otherwise received.

None of the 6 jurisdictions in this study had to subsidize busing for students attending small rural schools from other parts of their transportation budgets.

Policy Implications

Provincial and local policies on student transportation are meeting the transportation needs of most students attending small rural schools. The amount of time students spend riding on buses has usually been reasonable.

The funding available to transport students to small rural schools appears adequate to cover costs without subsidy from other programs. There is some concern that the rural funding formula is not sensitive to jurisdictions that have declining bus populations on a fixed number of bus routes. In these jurisdictions funding decreases, because of fewer students, but costs remain fixed because the number of bus routes cannot be reduced without imposing unreasonable service levels.

Funding for inter-school transportation is restricted to courses that require a special facility or equipment not available in a small rural school. This provision prevents students in small rural schools from accessing specialized programs such as Mathematics 31 and drama in other schools, as neither of these programs requires specialized facilities or equipment.

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE:

Alberta Learning's rural transportation funding policy should be amended to:

- 1. enable students in small rural schools to access specialized programs in neighbouring schools without being restricted to courses requiring special facilities or equipment; and**
- 2. ensure that funding is not reduced for jurisdictions with declining bus populations but fixed transportation costs.**

7. FACILITIES FOR SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

The Physical Condition of Small Rural Schools

A recent audit of 1,463 school facilities conducted by Alberta Infrastructure revealed that the physical conditions of small rural school in the 6 participating school jurisdictions were somewhat different than the province-as-a-whole.

The table below shows the percentage of schools in the 6 participating rural school jurisdiction that were in good, fair, and poor condition.

When examined collectively, the number of small rural schools in fair condition paralleled other schools in the province at about 44 percent. The percentage of small rural schools in good condition was about 39 percent compared to 47 percent for the province. About 17 percent of small rural schools were in poor condition compared to 9 percent for the rest of the province. Further study is required to determine if these differences have province-wide significance.

A COMPARISON OF THE PHYSICAL CONDITION OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN 6 SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS TO THE PROVINCE (In Percent)								
Rural School Jurisdiction								
Physical Condition:	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average	Province
Good	11.1	80.0	0.0	42.9	62.5	28.6	39.1	47.1
Fair	55.6	20.0	33.3	57.1	37.5	28.6	43.5	43.7
Poor	33.3	0.0	66.7	0.0	0.0	42.8	17.4	9.2

Jurisdictions in this study reported that the school facility audits conducted by Alberta Infrastructure were useful for short and long term capital planning. To use the words of one jurisdiction “If the small rural school is a viable school, the facility audit places them on the same level of importance as all other schools.”

Another jurisdiction added “The audits are a useful tool in helping Districts develop long range plans for upgrading small rural school facilities. In our particular case, our small rural schools have been extremely well maintained and the audits are not overly valuable in make decisions re: upgrading.”

The Utilization of Small Rural Schools

A decline in the rural school population has contributed to lower utilization of small rural school facilities. Schools that were originally built for larger rural student populations are now only partially full.

The table below compares the utilization rates of small rural schools to other schools in the 6 participating jurisdictions. In all cases, small rural school facilities in the jurisdictions are utilized less than larger schools.

Although the difference in utilization rates between small rural schools and other schools in one jurisdiction is small – about 51 percent compared to 55 percent, in the other 5 jurisdictions the differences in utilization rates are much greater.

A COMPARISON OF UTILIZATION RATES OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS TO OTHER SCHOOLS IN 6 RURAL SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS (In Percent)
2000-01

School Category:	Rural School Jurisdiction					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Small Rural	50.0	49.7	51.1	54.1	38.6	62.2
Other	64.3	74.9	55.3	82.4	64.1	87.5
Jurisdiction	56.9	68.6	54.8	70.2	45.6	82.2

Note: A school's utilization rate is determined by dividing its enrolment by the rated capacity of the school facility.

Jurisdictions indicated that utilization rates were not particularly useful in making decisions about small rural schools located some distance from other schools in their systems. One jurisdiction commented, "Utilization in small rural schools is often quite low, however, due to location we need to continue to operate them."

Another jurisdiction reinforced the same point, "In our jurisdiction, this (utilization rate) will be of little or no effect. The main factor in the operation of our small rural schools is their proximity to another school program. Distance plays a major factor in determining the viability of a school more so than the utilization of that school."

Maintenance and Upgrading of Small Rural Schools

Small rural school facilities are expected to be safe, comfortable, and suitable learning environments for students. Facility maintenance and upgrading is needed to achieve this end.

Maintenance in Small Rural Schools

An Operations and Maintenance Handbook for School Facilities developed recently by Alberta Infrastructure sets out standards and guidelines for school facility maintenance. One purpose of this manual is "...to ensure that the investment in infrastructure is protected in a consistent, measurable, and sustainable manner." The manual further states that "School facility operations and maintenance exists to support the primary purpose of K-12 education: quality and learning."

Small rural schools have the same plant operation and maintenance requirements as other schools. The need to repair, replace, and renew components in small rural school facilities poses some additional challenges:

- maintenance staff and contracted personnel must often travel longer distances to provide services;
- lower utilization rates increase the cost per student for maintenance; and
- uncertainty over the continued operation of a small rural school could defer facility maintenance.

In support of school building maintenance, one jurisdiction stated "It is our goal to provide teaching and learning environment that promote excellence in education by providing facilities that are safe, clean, and healthy." Another jurisdiction aimed towards the same goal but felt constrained by the funding shortfall in its plant operations and maintenance budget.

Upgrading Small Rural Schools

Facility upgrading includes the restoration of building components, modernization of structures, and the replacement of buildings.

As reported earlier, about 17 percent of small rural schools in this study were in poor physical condition – compared to about 9 percent of all schools in the province. This indicates an apparent need to upgrade small rural school facilities under government's New Century School Plan.

An analysis of the 405 school facility projects approved by government between February 2000 and June 2001 indicated that small rural schools were faring

reasonably well under the New Century School Plan. As the table below indicates, 16 out of 38 or 42 percent of the projects in the 6 jurisdictions were for small rural schools.

NUMBER OF SCHOOL CAPITAL PROJECTS FUNDED BY ALBERTA INFRASTRUCTURE IN 6 RURAL SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS FEBRUARY 2000 TO JUNE 2001							
Rural School Jurisdiction							
School Category:	A	B	C	D	E	F	Total
Small Rural	8	3	2	0	1	2	16
Other	1	0	7	8	0	6	22
Total	9	3	9	8	1	8	38

The levels of support for small rural schools appears reasonable considering that they make up 51 percent of the schools in the jurisdictions, but only 27 percent of the student population.

The types and numbers of projects approved by government for small rural schools in this study included:

- Facility studies/audits 4
- Restorations/modernizations 6
- Replacement additions 3
- Replacement schools 1
- CTS equipment 2

School Facility Funding and Costs

In 2000-01, government funded the upkeep of small rural school facilities under 4 categories:

- plant operations and maintenance;
- Building Quality Restoration Program (BQRP)
- modernization and renovation; and
- new construction.

Plant Operations and Maintenance

Most plant operations and maintenance funding in small rural schools is used to pay the costs of utilities, caretaking, grounds maintenance, and building insurance. Remaining funds are used mainly for building maintenance such as painting, repairs, and small replacement items.

The funding formula for plant operations and maintenance bases 75 percent of the allocation on student enrolment and 25 percent on building area. Funding is also topped-up by a percentage amount for jurisdictions with sparsity or distance factors.

The formula for plant operations and maintenance provides less funding for small rural schools having lower utilization rates than other schools with higher utilization rates.

This is illustrated by the example in the table below. In this table a small rural school with 80 students, utilized at 50 percent, is compared to a school with 136 students, utilized at 85 percent. Both schools buildings have identical areas of 1,000 square metres and net capacities of 160. The calculations in this example use 2000-01 funding rates.

	Low Utilization School	High Utilization School
Number of Students	80	136
Student rate	\$438	\$438
Student funding	\$35,040	\$59,568
Area in Sq. Meters	1,000	1,000
Area rate	\$11.00	\$11.00
Area funding	\$11,000	\$11,000
Total Plant Operations Funding	\$46,040	\$70,568

As the chart shows, the small rural school with low utilization receives \$46,040 in plant operations and maintenance funding. By comparison, a high utilization school having the same area and capacity receives \$70,568. The difference in funding levels is \$24,528 for equal sized buildings.

While the cost of operating and maintaining a school facility with lower utilization might be modestly less than a high utilization school, because of caretaking and

utility costs being somewhat lower, it is doubtful that such savings would be anywhere close to the \$24,528 difference in plant operations and maintenance funding allotted by government for the 2 schools.

Three out of 5 jurisdictions in this study indicated that funding from the government was not sufficient to cover the plant operations and maintenance costs of small rural schools.

One jurisdiction commented that since the new funding framework was implemented, it had been forced to transfer between \$250,000 to \$300,000 each year from other programs to cover plant operation expenditures. This jurisdiction equated its funding shortfall to low facility utilization; the same reason given by another jurisdiction.

A school board that responded to the draft report indicated that plant operations and maintenance funding for under-utilized school facilities would be more equitable if it was based 75 percent on building area and 25 percent on student enrolment.

Two jurisdictions with higher facility utilization rates found government funding for plant operations and maintenance to be sufficient, although one expressed concerns about specific areas such as service levels in caretaking.

Building Quality Restoration Program

Funding for small rural schools under the Building Quality Restoration Program (BQRP) is used for regular building maintenance that extends the useful life of buildings and sites including the replacement of components.

The funding formula for BQRP is very similar to the formula for plant operations and maintenance in that 75 percent of the allocation is based on student enrolment and 25 percent on building area. Funding for jurisdictions is topped-up by a percentage amount based on their distances from designated urban centers.

BQRP funding is less for schools with low utilization rates. The same 1,000 square metre school facility used in the example under plant operations and maintenance would qualify for \$6022 in BQRP funding if utilized at 50 percent of capacity with 80 students; and \$9229 if utilized at 85 percent of capacity with 136 students. These amounts are based on current BQRP funding rates of \$57.27 per student and \$1.44 per square metre using the same method of calculation as the example under plant operations and maintenance.

The example points out a difference in BQRP funding of \$3207 for identical buildings with the same restoration requirements. For example, a failed roof in the low utilization school costs the same to replace as a failed roof in a high

utilization school. Since most small rural schools have lower utilization rates, they receive less BQRP funding than same-sized schools with higher utilization rates.

In spite of the funding discrepancy, jurisdictions commented favourably about the Building Quality Restoration Program. Two jurisdictions found funding for this program sufficient to meet the basic requirements of small rural schools.

Two other jurisdiction indicated that increased BQRP funding would enable them to address more facility needs. One pointed out that “ BQRP funding of approximately \$400,000 annually does not go very far when spread over seventeen schools, many of which are thirty to forty years old.”

Modernization and Renovation

Jurisdictions received block funding for modernization in 2000-01 to upgrade school facilities to current technological standards and to meet new program needs.

Modernization funds were also allotted based on building area and a distance factor. The level of modernization funding varied for each jurisdiction depending on the condition of their buildings using government audit results.

Jurisdictions had mixed opinions about the continued use of block modernization funding for upgrading small rural schools. A jurisdiction that favoured block funding felt that this approach would be an asset for improving facilities to acceptable levels without having to wait great lengths of time for government approval.

Another jurisdiction commented, “Block modernization should help the future upgrading of small rural schools if the funding is at an acceptable level. The funding level applied with the 2000 block grant was insufficient to provide for the needs of any school.”

A third jurisdiction was less optimistic about the potential to upgrade small rural schools using block funding in remarking, “The issue is clear, with small enrolments and a relatively large number of buildings to maintain, the block modernization formula is inadequate.”

Government also granted funds for modernization on a project basis, driven mainly by needs. Projects were approved for 6 small rural schools in this study that required upgrading.

New Construction

Government has made increasing use of new construction when it is not feasible or economic to replace obsolete school facilities. Four new construction projects

were approved for jurisdictions in this study: 3 replacement additions in 3 small rural schools and the replacement of an entire small rural school.

Policy Implications

On a percentage basis twice as many small rural schools in this study are in poor physical condition compared to the rest of the province.

Government funded 16 facility projects for small rural schools in this study between February 2000 and June 2001. These projects represented 42 percent of the approvals for participating jurisdictions. This approval rate is roughly proportional to the 51 percent of small rural schools in these jurisdictions.

Small rural schools have lower facility utilization rates than other schools – unavoidable because of declining enrolments. It is questionable whether utilization rates should be a factor when government considers capital funding for small rural schools.

Plant operations and maintenance funding is based primarily on student enrolments – a provision that provides less funding for small rural schools with lower utilization rates than for schools of the same size with higher utilization rates. An Alberta Infrastructure committee with stakeholder representation will examine how plant operations and maintenance should be funded when this government department assumes responsibility for this program in 2002-03.

Building Quality Restoration Program funding is determined mainly by student enrolments, which provides less funding for small rural schools with lower utilization rates than for schools of the same size with higher utilization rates.

Block funding could be effective for modernizing small rural schools if funding amounts were sufficient and allocations based on building needs. Block funding for modernization is not likely to benefit small rural schools if allocations are determined by student enrolments and building utilization rates.

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

To improve equity for small rural school facilities, Alberta Infrastructure should:

- 1. decrease the importance of facility utilization and student enrolments in making funding decisions for block modernization and capital projects; and**
- 2. allocate funding for plant operations and maintenance and the Building Quality Restoration Program on real costs instead of the present emphasis on student enrolments.**

8. CONSOLIDATION OF SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

As student enrolments decline in rural communities and school buildings age, boards are under increasing pressure to consolidate their small rural schools.

A purpose for school consolidation is provided in Alberta Infrastructure's January 2001 newsletter of the School Facilities Task Force Implementation Plan. The New Century School Plan is seen as "...improving the condition and functionality of school buildings; 'right sizing' and 'right-locating' schools; and planning for changing delivery of education."

Stated another way, "right sizing" means the building fits the number of students and "right-locating" means the school is in the right spot. Both concepts are considerations of school consolidations. An outcome of the New Century School Plan is the "consolidation and disposal of non-viable schools."

Jurisdictions were in agreement that current government policy "leaned towards" school consolidation. They provided the following insights:

- "Provincial action has a definite effect on encouraging consolidation. It seems that any plan presented to Infrastructure which results in consolidation is met with significant positive encouragement;"
- "Provincial policy encourages consolidation, i.e. utilization drives capital upgrading;" and
- "Provincial policy encourages consolidation of small rural schools where practical. It does encourage boards to review school viability before directing large sums of money into a facility that may be closed in the short term."

Viability of Small Rural Schools

A number of school facility studies conducted recently by school boards used rating scales to determine the viability of school facilities. The outcome of these studies has sometimes resulted in recommendations to consolidate schools – particularly small rural schools.

A recent study of school facilities in Wolf Creek Regional Division No. 72 used the following criteria to assess the viability of schools. (p.31-32):

- the variety of programs available to students, the suitability of facilities to offer the programs, and the strategic location of the school within the attendance area;

- the efficiency, effectiveness, and flexibility of instructional and administration spaces to deliver educational programs;
- the economic efficiency of a school operation based on instructional, administration, and plant operations and maintenance costs for each student;
- the percentage utilization of school space within sectors with minimum and maximum levels required to optimize program efficiencies;
- the physical condition of school facilities; and
- the projections of student enrolment.

The above criteria would give a high rating to a well utilized, efficiently operated school, with modern amenities to support a wide range of programs. A school's viability would increase further if it was centrally located and have the potential for increased student enrolments.

A school with a low viability rating would be under-utilized, more expensive to operate, in poor physical condition, and able to offer only a basic program. Such a school would be rated even less viable if it had a declining student population that could potentially attend another school.

Small rural schools tend to be vulnerable when the above criteria are applied. The majority have small declining student populations occupying under-utilized school buildings that are in fair or poor condition. Most are able to offer only basic programs with above average costs for instruction, administration, and plant operations and maintenance.

The "saving grace" for many small rural schools is their strategic location. Without these schools, students would have to be transported unreasonably long distances to other centers. Because of their younger age, elementary students are considered particularly disadvantaged by lengthy school bus rides.

Small rural schools that are less strategically located, because of their proximity to other schools, are more vulnerable when school consolidation is under consideration. These schools are often targeted for school closure.

Consolidation Factors Considered by Jurisdictions

Jurisdictions provided feedback on the importance of various factors when considering consolidation for small rural schools in their systems.

The following factors were given high importance by most respondents:

- improving the quality of instruction for students;
- broadening the scope of the school program;
- declining school enrolments; and
- age and condition of school facilities.

Most jurisdictions attached moderate importance to these factors when school consolidation was being considered:

- allowing staff members to specialize more in their areas of training;
- reducing instructional and school administration costs;
- reducing plant operations and maintenance costs; and
- reducing capital expenditures and redirecting those funds to other capital projects.

Jurisdictions rated the following as less important during deliberations on school consolidation:

- requests by parents to have their children attend larger schools; and
- streamlining and reducing the cost of student transportation services.

Jurisdictions were split on the importance of the following factors for school consolidation – 2 rated them high and 2 rated them lower:

- improving staff recruitment and retention, particularly in specialized program areas; and
- low utilization of school facilities.

One jurisdiction stated that all of the aforementioned factors held importance when schools were streamlined to deliver enhanced programming for students. This jurisdiction pointed out that “a balance has to be maintained between reasonable efficiency and access to suitable programs near home for younger children.”

Closure of Small Rural Schools

School closure is a difficult process for communities, school boards, and school jurisdiction staff. Many rural communities have had schools dating back to their formations in the early 1900's. Most see educational, recreational, social, cultural, and economic benefits to maintaining schools in their communities.

Small Rural Schools are Valued by Their Communities

The majority of rural communities take pride in the education provided by their schools. Although basic in scope, programs generally promote high academic standards and a rural work ethic. Most farming communities have tended to be stable, resulting in students, their parents, and in some cases their grandparents attending and graduating from the same school.

Rural schools are often people centres. Students, parents, and community members meet there for sporting events, social activities, and cultural purposes. Some adults use school facilities to recreate, further their education, and pursue personal interests.

Rural residents generally regard their schools as vital to the economic viability of their communities. Having a local school is seen as increasing “traffic” to local businesses, sustaining property values, retaining current residents, and attracting new families. Losing a school is viewed as the “last nail in the coffin” because many rural residents have already lost grain elevators, rail lines, and businesses from their communities.

A number of participants at the CASS Issues Forum on November 30, 2001 indicated that an important consideration of school consolidation was the continued viability of rural communities directly impacted by school closures.

School Closure Policy

School boards are required to follow a rigorous process when a school or three or more consecutive grades in a school are considered for closure. Although the process was simplified somewhat in 1997 when the requirement for Ministerial approval of a school closure was removed from the School Act and the Closure of School Regulation, provisions for notification, public meetings, and decision making remain stringent.

Jurisdictions reported little difficulty with present government policy on school closure. Most indicated that this policy helped guide them through the school closure process. One jurisdiction stated that school closure procedures also protected small schools to a certain extent.

In responding to the draft report, one school board provided a detailed explanation of how parents were effectively involved with the board on school consolidation matters. Although this board supported the policy perspective on school consolidation presented in the research paper, they were very satisfied with their present school closure policy.

Another school board found the provincial guidelines on school closure clear. This board also endorsed enhancements in the policy perspective that provided

increased flexibility in the school closure process and an increased level of funding for those small rural schools that remained after consolidation.

Two jurisdictions identified ways for improving the provincial school closure policy.

One jurisdiction deemed questionable the regulation requiring a school closure to take effect in the year the closure was initiated. In support of removing this requirement, the jurisdiction commented "...there are instances where that might be counterproductive at worst, or confusing to the public at best. (e.g. One instance could be when a school closure is contingent on other work in a receiving school being completed.)"

This matter was clarified at a meeting with Alberta Learning on November 6, 2001 when a department manager pointed out that while the school closure process had to be completed within a school year, other board actions could occur in subsequent school years.

Another jurisdiction saw value in tying the closure process to the viability review process used in consolidation studies so that the "whole exercise" would only need to be done once. At present, the viability review process – which often is comprehensive and involves the public, must be followed-up by similar school closure procedures mandated by government.

On the whole matter of school consolidation, one jurisdiction pointed out that "School Divisions needed to be encouraged to take some measures to enhance the delivery of programs for students in small rural school. In some instances this may involve school closures, rather than letting them "starve to death" by enrolment decline."

The same jurisdiction emphasized that "Once a board takes measures to streamline schools to a reasonable degree, it should be rewarded with the fiscal ability to support the remaining small rural schools without having to penalize other schools. All schools that remain open should then be supported with a reasonable core program."

One participant attending the Rural Education Workshop at the Spring General Meeting of the Alberta School Boards Association pointed out that guidelines were needed to determine when school consolidation in a jurisdiction was "complete". This was required because jurisdictions that initiated school consolidation were often uncertain of an end-point to the process. He suggested an important factor in such guidelines would be the length of time students spend riding on school buses.

Without such an end-point, others pointed out that government might argue that school boards were not operating their small rural school efficiently and therefore consider them ineligible for equity funding.

In responding to the draft report, one school board questioned whether defining an end-point to school consolidation was a prudent move. If put into effect government policy on school consolidation would include guidelines that specified when school consolidation in a jurisdiction was complete. This school board had the following concerns with such a policy change:

- "... the decision to consolidate or close (a school) is ultimately a board's decision, after diligently following a process outlined in policy;"
- "... boards take their responsibilities seriously and should not rely on the government to make those decisions for them. This will only lead to the 'watering down' of authority, and the ultimate redundancy of locally elected boards; and
- "It should not be the government's mandate to say when the board is 'finished'."

This board elaborated further by saying "that every government policy 'suggestion' should be scrutinized through this lens to ensure the result of a policy change will not inadvertently lead to an erosion of autonomy."

The difference of opinion over whether guidelines are needed to establish an end-point in the school consolidation process could become a 'balancing act' between school board autonomy and equity funding considerations for small rural schools.

Participants at the CASS Issues Forum on November 30, 2001 provided the following ideas on school consolidation:

- Distance between schools and the length of time students are required to spend riding on school buses should be the main determiners in deciding whether small rural schools should continue to operate or be consolidated.
- The level of funding provided for rural transportation has a direct bearing on whether schools can be consolidated. With less funding, larger buses and longer routes are required – making school consolidation less feasible.
- A two-tiered funding system may be required to differentiate small rural schools that operate out of necessity from those that operate out of choice. A small rural school that must operate should be funded sufficiently.
- Any funding system for small rural schools should have built in 'checks and balances' to promote efficiency and avoid fragmentation.

- Communities should be key in deciding school closures – taking into account available funding and educational alternatives for their children.

Policy Implications

Rural jurisdictions are under increasing pressure to consolidate their small schools because of program, funding, and facility issues.

The viability of small rural schools is under scrutiny during consolidation studies. Most small rural schools don't rate high on the current viability scales - unless it is impractical to bus their students to other schools.

During deliberations on school consolidation, factors such as improving educational programs, declining school enrolments, and age and condition of buildings rated higher for jurisdictions than reducing costs, or staff specialization, and recruitment.

The provincial school closure policy is generally accepted by jurisdictions for the guidance it provides on school closure. Some feel the policy could be streamlined by tying together processes for school closure and viability studies.

The small rural schools that must operate should be funded sufficiently. Guidelines are needed to determine when school consolidation in a jurisdiction is no longer an option.

A POLICY PERSPECTIVE:

Government's policy on school consolidation should be changed to:

- 1. tie school closure procedures together with school viability studies conducted in the jurisdictions; and**
- 2. include guidelines that specify when school consolidation in a jurisdiction has reached an end-point.**

APPENDIX A

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPENDIX B

THE SIX PARTICIPATING SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS

The following Alberta school jurisdictions graciously participated in this study:

- Grassland Regional Division No. 6
- Clearview School Division No. 71
- Peace Wapiti Regional Division No. 33
- Livingstone Range School Division No. 68
- Wetaskiwin Regional Division No. 11
- Prairie Land Regional Division No. 25

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONNAIRE SENT TO SIX PARTICIPATING SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS WITH SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

April, 2001

Superintendents of Schools
Six Participating School Jurisdictions

Dear (Superintendent):

Re: Small Rural School Facilities – A Policy Perspective

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study of small rural school facilities I'm conducting for the Alberta School Boards Association. Your jurisdiction is one of six I'm contacting to obtain information on policy issues included in the study.

For the purpose of this study, I'm defining a small rural school as averaging fewer than 25 students per grade and located in a small town, village, or hamlet. The responses you and your staff provide to questions in the attached document should pertain specifically to the small rural schools in your jurisdiction that meet this criteria.

The attached document is broken down into the following sections:

- Student Programs;
- Funding and Costs;
- Student Transportation;
- School Facilities; and
- School Consolidation

You will note that one page of questions is devoted to each section. This is done for your convenience in "farming out" responsibilities to your staff. Please feel free, however, to rearrange the topics in these sections to best suit your organization.

The responses you and your staff provide will be incorporated into the policy paper I'll be presenting to the ASBA. The policy paper will not identify your jurisdiction, or any individual in your jurisdiction, as providing particular information or holding a specific policy position. With this assurance of confidentiality, I would encourage you and your staff to be candid and as detailed as you feel is necessary in your responses.

I would appreciate receiving responses from you and your staff, individually or collectively, by Wednesday, April 25, 2001. If you prefer, these can be incorporated into the attached document and e-mailed, faxed, or mailed to me. If you choose to fax, please call first so I can switch my computer to fax mode. My fax number is the same as my home office number; 1-403-652-7551.

I am most grateful to you and your staff in providing responses to questions relating to small rural schools. It is hoped that the policy paper will assist the Alberta School Boards Association, its members, and others to improve rural education in Alberta.

Sincerely,

(signed and sent by e-mail)

Russ Wiebe, Ph.D.

c.c. Dr. Leroy Sloan, Alberta School Boards Association

SMALL RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

STUDENT PROGRAMS

A. Elementary Program

1. To what extent have your small rural schools been able to offer more than the core subjects (i.e. language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science) to elementary students?
2. To what extent is double or triple grading been used in classrooms to group elementary students for instruction, and if so, with what effect?
3. How have the Provincial Achievement Tests helped or hindered the elementary programs in your small rural schools?

B. Junior High Program

1. To what extent have your small rural schools been able to offer a variety of complementary courses to junior high school students?
2. To what extent is double or triple grading been used in classrooms to group junior high school students for instruction, and if so, with what effect?
3. To what extent do junior high school students in small rural schools receive part of their program in another school?
4. To what extent have instructional delivery methods such as distance learning and virtual school technology been used to provide programs for junior high school students in small rural schools?
5. How have the Provincial Achievement Tests helped or hindered the junior high school programs in your small rural schools?

C. Senior High Program (if applicable)

1. To what extent have your small rural schools been able to offer senior high school students programs that go beyond meeting basic graduation requirements.
2. To what extent are senior high school students in small rural schools receiving instruction in 2 or more courses grouped together in the same class? (e.g. English 10 and English 13 instructed at the same time in a classroom.)
3. To what extent do senior high school students in small rural schools receive part of their program in another senior high school?
4. To what extent have instructional delivery methods such as distance learning and virtual school technology been used to provide programs for senior high students in small rural schools?
5. To what extent have senior high school students in small rural schools had access to Outreach and off-campus (e.g. work experience) programs?
- 6.. How well have senior high school students in small rural schools achieved on the Provincial Diploma Examinations over the past 5 years?

SMALL RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

FUNDING AND COSTS

Note - please provide the funding mechanism your jurisdiction uses to allocate instructional funding to schools in 2000-01. In some cases this documentation will be sufficient to address the questions below.

A. Instruction

1. To what extent does instructional funding received from the province for students attending your small rural schools cover their instruction costs?
2. Has sparsity and distance funding from the province been sufficient to address higher than average instructional costs in small rural schools?
3. To what extent, if any, has instructional funding allocated for students attending your larger schools been used to fund instruction in your small rural schools?
4. Has funding from the province been sufficient to cover special education costs in your small rural schools?
5. Has funding from the province been sufficient to provide for the computer technology needs of your small rural schools?
6. Has any funding been transferred between the instruction block and the support block(either way) in the current school year?

B. Plant Operations and Maintenance

1. Has funding from the province for plant operations and maintenance in your small rural schools been sufficient to cover their costs?
2. Has plant operations and maintenance funding provided for your larger schools been required to offset plant operations costs in your small rural schools.
3. Has funding from the Building Quality Restoration Program been sufficient to fulfill the basic requirements of that program in your small rural schools?

C. Student Transportation

1. Has student transportation funding from the province been sufficient to cover the cost of busing to your small rural schools?
2. Has student transportation funding provided for busing students to your larger schools been required to offset transportation costs for students attending small rural schools?

D. Other

1. Are any other funding considerations of importance to small rural schools?

SMALL RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

Note - please provide copies of student transportation policies in your jurisdiction that pertain to transporting students to small rural schools. In some cases this documentation will be sufficient to address the questions below.

1. To what extent does provincial and local busing policy help or hinder students from small rural schools in accessing specialized programs (e.g. CTS, special education, IOP) in other schools?
2. Does your jurisdiction place limitations on the length of time students ride on school buses, particularly those attending small rural schools?
3. Does the operation of small rural schools in your jurisdiction simplify or add complexity to the student transportation system in your jurisdiction?
4. Does the operation of small rural schools in your jurisdiction increase or decrease the average length of time students ride on school buses?
5. Are there any other student transportation considerations of importance to small rural schools?

SMALL RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

SCHOOL FACILITIES

Note – please provide policies pertaining to plant operations and upgrading of school facilities in your jurisdiction. In some cases this documentation will be sufficient to address the questions below.

1. To what extent will the school audits conducted by Alberta Infrastructure under the School Facility Evaluation Project help or hinder the upgrading of small rural school facilities in your jurisdiction?
2. To what extent has block modernization funding in 1999 and 2000 been used to upgrade your small rural school facilities?
3. Would block modernization funding in the future help or hinder the upgrading of small rural school facilities in your jurisdiction?
4. To what extent will the following new guidelines by Alberta Infrastructure help or hinder plant operations and the upgrading of small rural school facilities in your jurisdiction:
 - a. “School Facilities – Guidelines for Upgrades to Building Elements and Systems, February 2000?”
 - b. “Operations and Maintenance Handbook for School Facilities, October 2000?”
5. To what extent will the recommendations in the “Area, Capacity and Utilization Sub-Committee Draft Report, December 2000” released by Alberta Infrastructure help or hinder your jurisdiction in upgrading small rural school facilities?
6. Do present provincial policies encourage the preservation or the demise of small rural school facilities?
7. Are there any other school facility considerations of importance to small rural schools in your jurisdiction?

SMALL RURAL SCHOOL FACILITIES – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

Please provide any plan under consideration to consolidate schools in your jurisdiction? In some cases this documentation will be sufficient to address the questions below?

1. How important are each of the following factors in any consideration of the consolidation of small rural schools in your jurisdiction:
 - a. improving the quality of instruction for students;
 - b. broadening the scope of the school program;
 - c. allowing staff members to specialize more in their areas of training;
 - d. improving staff recruitment and retention, particularly in specialized program areas;
 - e. declining school enrolments;
 - f. low utilization of school facilities;
 - g. age and condition of school facilities;
 - h. requests by parents to have their children attend larger schools;
 - i. reducing instructional and school administration costs;
 - j. reducing plant operations and maintenance costs;
 - k. streamlining and reducing the cost of student transportation services; and
 - l. reducing capital expenditures and redirecting those funds to other capital projects.
2. To what extent does provincial policy encourage or discourage the consolidation of small rural schools in your jurisdiction?
3. To what extent does Alberta Learning's Closure of School Regulation help or hinder school consolidation?
4. To what extent does Alberta Infrastructure's Disposition of Property Regulation help or hinder school consolidation?
5. Are there any other school consolidation considerations of importance to small rural schools?