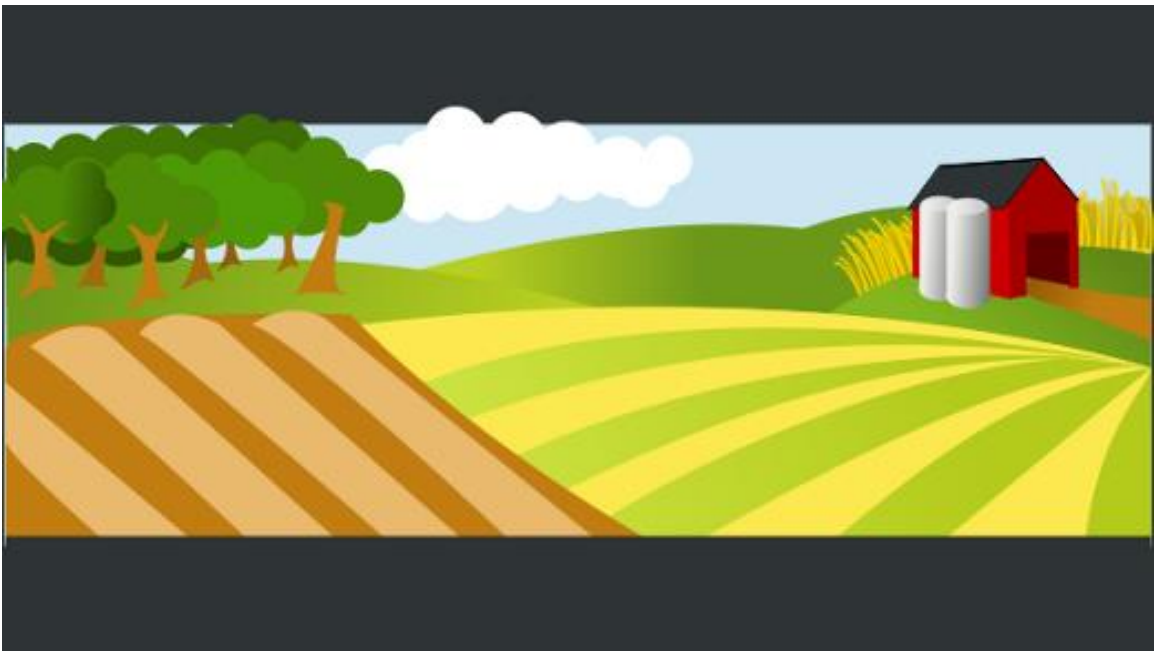


Ontario Rural Education Symposium



Saturday, November 26th, 2016
Municipality of North Middlesex
Local School Advisory Committee

2016 Symposium Report

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Acknowledgments

The Rural Education Symposium was made possible through the generous sponsorship from the Municipality of North Middlesex. The event keynote speaker and plenary panelists generously gave of their time to assist with the planning and expertise related to rural schools. Also, through the volunteer efforts of the North Middlesex Local School Advisory Committee, the vision for a provincial Rural Education Symposium was realized.

Executive Summary

On November 26th 2016 the first Ontario Rural Education Symposium was hosted in the Municipality of North Middlesex by the Local School Advisory Committee. The theme for Symposium was “Growing Innovation... Learn Local” and featured keynote speaker Doug Reycraft: Community Schools Alliance. The goals for the Symposium focused on making connections and enhancing a network of rural and small school leaders; to facilitate dialogue related to rural education and; to promote public awareness of rural community schools.

Creating a new dialogue related to sustainable rural school communities is exciting work, the Symposium offered the opportunity for participants to learn, connect, and exchange through innovative conversations related to rural school and communities.

The primary goals of this event were to create awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing rural communities, to connect to existing local capacity, to share the local/regional challenges experienced, and many ways successes in rural education have been realized. Following a Keynote presentation, three framing plenary presentations shared perspectives as learned experiences. A total of 80 participants discussed five questions related to rural schools, these discussions were transcribed and shared as a bases for further advocacy.

The Symposium attendees appreciated interacting with MPP Monty McNaughton, who conveyed encouragement and support for rural schools.

Background and Objectives

North Middlesex Advisory Committee

Who We Are: *Municipality of North Middlesex
Local School Advisory Committee
Co-Chairperson: Darren Ferguson*

Our History: *Through the development of the North Middlesex economic strategy, and faced with declining enrollment at the local secondary school, parents and municipal leaders realized that collaborating was essential to the promotion of economic growth and a sustainable local secondary school*

Symposium Theme:

Growing Innovation... Rural Education "Learn Local"

Symposium Goals:

- *connect and enhance the network of rural and small school leaders*
- *facilitate dialogue locally and provincially related to small and rural schools*
- *increase the understanding of the strengths of rural community schools*

Symposium Outcomes:

- *increased voice and vitality of rural schools in Ontario*
- *recognition of the contributions of rural schools*
- *improved rural-urban educational equity*

Symposium Report

On November 26th, a diverse group of parents, educators, municipal leaders, Trustees, researchers and community members came together to explore issues and challenges related to rural schools in Ontario.

Over 80 participated in the Symposium, attendees came from Peterborough, Paisley and Chelsey, Sarnia and Windsor, and from Southwestern Ontario.

The Symposium was emceed by the Local School Advisory Committee Co-Chairperson, Darren Ferguson with opening greetings provided by North Middlesex Mayor Shipway.

Following the opening, each participant introduced themselves to the full audience.

Symposium Agenda

- 9:00 am: Opening Greetings
Participant Introductions
- 9:30 am: Keynote Presentation
- 10:15 am: BREAK
- 10:30 am: Panel Presentation
- 11:30 am: Rural Café
- 12 noon: Break for Lunch
Interactive Session: Rural Café
- 2:00 pm: Closing remarks



Presentations

The keynote and panel presentations provided the context for the Symposium, designed with the intention to be thought provoking and informative.

Keynote: Doug Reycraft, Community Schools Alliance



PANEL PRESENTATION

Tracy Grant: TVDSB Trustee (2006-2014)

Tracy spoke to the realities faced by school boards, the student opportunities through community learning and the potential for rural and small schools.

Marcus Ryan: Zorra Township, Municipal Councillor

Marcus shared perspectives related to the needs of rural schools, relative to a city-centric approach that is not required in rural Ontario.

Daniel West: Parent Leader, A.J. Baker (Zorra)

Daniel relayed the importance of parent advocacy, and the successful practices that were applied during the "Save AJ Baker PS" campaign.

RURAL CAFÉ

Following the presentations, to value the experience, energy and wisdom of participants, three roundtable sessions were provided. Symposium participants engaged in dialogue at table groups using a world café format to share, connect to a community of practice, and identify strategies for action.

Rural Café Questions

- *What current practices are you engaged in to support rural education in the local school?*
- *How can you further support and contribute to rural education?*
- *What is fundamental to rural education? Why? How does it look?*
- *What are the issues school boards are facing, how can rural communities be collaborators in seeking solutions?*
- *How can municipal economic development and education better co-develop rural education opportunities*

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES – RURAL HARVEST

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES SCHOOL BOARDS ARE FACING, HOW CAN RURAL COMMUNITIES BE COLLABORATORS IN SEEKING SOLUTIONS?

- *School funding formula restrictions: school boards are limited to make changes (Provincial top-up funding is being phased out)*
- *Rural communities need to understand the informal culture of school boards, to know what the drivers and values are*
- *Enrolment (student) level is returning to traditional levels, studies show enrolment is stabilizing*
- *Increased and regular communication with municipal councils as collaborators*
- *Municipal Council → School Board Trustees → School Board*
- *Communication is key:*
 - *Suggest and explore solutions; i.e. boundary changes*
- *Continue this dialogue, schools are an asset to the local community*
- *Communicate → Engage in meaningful conversation → Solutions*
- *When you don't understand ask... and ask again!*
- *Being proactive is critical*
- *Involving the student voice is valuable*
- *Communities (Families of School Councils) must be proactive in offering potential solutions (rather than being problem driven)*
- *Provincial government could explore dissolving school boards and having local community (Municipality) and Trustees create local school governance boards*
- *Involve Trustees and Senior Administration in events, use these opportunities to promote benefits of small and rural schools*
- *Rural communities must advocate for increased power for Trustees*

- *Rural communities must also band together, because the ARC(Area Review Committee) process creates a "us against them" approach amongst competing schools*
- *(School board) does not have a urban census unit, some(school boards) are totally rural especially in rural Ontario (different than larger school boards with rural and urban constituents)*
- *Sharing administrators in rural schools – a northern Ontario approach for leadership in small schools*
- *Teacher education – encouraging the value of rural schools through teacher preparation at Faculties of Education*
- *Online learning leveraged at elementary and secondary schools similar to post-secondary*
- *Relationships only go so far, we need to be honest and clear about deficits in programs and offer potential solutions*
- *Rural communities must advocate for increased powers for Trustees*
- *Boards are too big – trying to deal with rural and urban students yet stay accountable to those in their own riding, local school decisions could be made at the municipal level (Town, Township)*
- *Rural schools can be collaborators by becoming engaged and communicate the local issues with Trustees, getting to know Trustees*
- *Rural communities need to market their community, job opportunities that are in the community for secondary students and local employment post-secondary*

WHAT CURRENT PRACTICES ARE YOU ENGAGED IN TO SUPPORT RURAL EDUCATION IN THE LOCAL SCHOOL?

- *Attending school board meetings, forming relationships with Trustees and school board staff*
- *Involved with the school council, Home and School Associations, advocating for school council, Home and School Associations to become more involved in education*
 - *Monitoring school board decisions and policy discussions*
 - *Staying current on key discussions so that one can ask critical questions*
 - *Asking the bigger question "What is the school board doing for us?"*
- *Increasing public awareness of the rural voice through social media*
- *Volunteering at local day-care, before and after school care is critical to rural communities (a green solution)*
- **Awareness**
 - *Council saving the local high school a part of the one-year strategic plan*
 - *representatives(council/municipal) and school representatives "talking" to bring issues to a broader audience*
 - *we had a Superintendent attend (school) council meeting and provide an update*
- **Outreach and breaking-down silos**
 - *Involving all forms of government; municipal, provincial and federal*
 - *Contacted MPP to come to the school to dialogue, we learned that Trustees were unable to attend*
 - *Working to get everyone together to further discussion and make connections to the issues*
- **Communication**
 - *Trying to get ahead of misinformation*
 - *Being informed proactively*

- *We don't know what's... what... in terms of process and questions to ask i.e. enrollment numbers*
- *Volunteer as parent representative or as a community representative to the school council*
- *Lobbying for collaboration between local district school boards and local colleges*
- *Coaching, mentoring – it's not about the game it is about the life lessons, teamwork and respect*
- *Students know "nanny" for helping with the healthy school program*
- *Celebrate the achievements of the local schools, the kids feel important and successful, promoting special education: such as Special Olympics*
- *Attending school board meetings, asking for additional supports for the school*
- *Being present at the school – attending fundraisers, school dinners, drama presentations*
- *Assist with programs that have students and seniors come together*
- *Remembrance Day activities – held at the local school brings the community together – as the student enrolment decreases this jeopardizes the teaching lines required for this type of event*

HOW CAN YOU FURTHER SUPPORT AND CONTRIBUTE TO RURAL EDUCATION?

- *Champion for the whole community be involved in the local school*
- *Develop a Rural Education Centre, through this initiative create partnerships with conservation authorities, municipality, local business, farms/agri-sector, and the school board*
- *Foster relationships with the school board Trustee and school board staff*
- *Encourage urban centers to be aware of the rural issues*
- *Encourage and promote urban/rural student interactions*
- *Engage with all Trustees to educate them about rural school issues*
- *Be proactive; support or develop a "School Advisory Committee" connect municipal and parent leaders, working together serves as a unified voice, increases communication and broader knowledge of the issues, challenges and options*
- *Become involved with the school council, champion the efforts of parents, attend school events and assemblies*
- *Be a rural school advocate; no one can be apathetic*
- *Understand school board policies, participate in public input*
- *Support rural schools with special events i.e. Tractor Day*
- *Spread the positives of rural education: sports, drama, school clubs*
- *When your child participates locally you can pick them up, watch the game, volunteer as a coach*
- *Promote what you need to get into post-secondary courses – most everything you need is offered in a local rural school, there is very little reason go to a larger school*

WHAT IS FUNDAMENTAL TO RURAL EDUCATION? WHY? HOW DOES IT LOOK?

- *Fair funding (provincial), communities need certainty that the local school will not lose what is needed for students to be successful*
- *Bigger is not always better, homogeneous – small size*
- *Farmers feed Ontario cities, (Toronto needs to eat!)*
- *It looks like: keeping schools in rural communities so students can attend school in their own community*
- *Rural education is fundamental, make this an election issue*
- *On-line courses should be electives not core courses, currently on-line courses need to improve in the delivery of educational learning, as teachers are often at a distance to the learning*
- *Schools as anchors of rural Ontario*
- *Local opportunities for youth – in the local school and in the community*
- *Schools as the anchor of the community, a hub offering community based learning*
- *For families; manageable bus rides that honour rural family life*
- *Using the Canadian Index of Well-being as an indicator of the benefits of rural schools in rural communities*
- *Urban vs rural – fair is not equal – rural schools and education delivered through provincial curriculum*
- *Access to reliable place based learning*

HOW CAN MUNICIPAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION BETTER CO-DEVELOP RURAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES?

- *Strategic plan: municipal level how does the school boards PAR (Pupil Accommodations Review) fit with in the municipal plan*
- *Community group (collaborations)*
- *Continuity across the province related to how Boards/Trustees understand the PARG (Pupil Accommodations Review Guidelines)*
- *Ministry Policy prevents meaningful dialogue*
- *Reduce the silos at all levels (Municipal, Provincial and Federal)*
- *Understand the rules and regulations and make it work for the local municipalities*
- *Municipalities working to utilize empty space (in schools)*
- *Facilitate apprenticeships (agriculture trades) with local business in the municipality*

CALL TO ACTION – NEXT STEPS

- *Rural community members (parents, municipal leaders) can be collaborators by becoming engaged and communicating with Trustees, and attending school board meetings*
- *Rural communities need to market their community, job opportunities that are in the community for secondary students and local employment post-secondary*
- *Develop a Rural Education Centre, through this initiative create partnerships with conservation authorities, municipalities, local business, farms/agriculture sector, and the school board*
- *Encourage and promote urban and rural student interactions*
- *Rural education is fundamental to rural Ontario; make this an election issue, for example; protest at Queens Park, write letters to MPP's, invite MPP's to public meetings*
- *Encourage urban centers to be aware of the issues in rural Ontario, farmers feed Ontario cities*
- *Be proactive; support or develop a "School Advisory Committee" connect municipal and parent leaders, working together serves as a unified voice, increases communication and a broader knowledge of the issues, challenges and options*
- *School funding formula restrictions: school boards are limited, Ministry education policy prevents meaningful dialogue (top-up funding is being phased out)*
- *Rural communities need to understand the informal culture of school boards, to know what the drivers and values are*
- *Increasing public awareness of the rural voice through social media*
- *Continue this dialogue, schools are an asset to the local community, rural communities must also band together*
- *Be a rural school advocate, no one can be apathetic*