

Visioning Project: Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

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What does it actually mean to be “on the back burner”? As defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.), it means to be “in the position of something that will **not** receive immediate attention and action.” Sadly, this is the current position of rural schools within School District #28 and, on a larger scale, the position of School District #28 within the province of British Columbia. My children attend a rural school—Parkland Elementary—and I have had the opportunity to work in this school as a temporary, part-time (0.4 FTE) Grade 2/3 teacher, as well as a temporary, part-time (0.7 FTE) Grade 4/5 teacher. I have experienced and witnessed the issues of “rurality” firsthand. I have seen and felt what it is like, as both a parent and a teacher, to be put on the back burner; to see your School closed, only for it to be “saved” at the last minute. I have seen how it effects students, support staff, teachers, administrators, and the neighbourhood community.

My twin boys are in Grade 6 and they have already had five different principals. The School does not attract certified teachers, often filling teaching positions with temporary, uncertified teachers that teach on letters of permission. Teacher-turnover and support-staff turnover (like principal-turnover) is high, with staff leaving as soon as “better” opportunities arise in the more urban schools of our District. The School has been described as a “revolving door” and a “stepping stone” to better things. It is a school where students, parents and the community, as well as the principal, teachers, and support staff, feel least prioritized—it is at the “bottom of the barrel” and gets put “on the back burner” regularly.

The School lacks resources of every kind (material and human). The School is the first to be “shorted” a TTOC or on-call support staff. The School’s principal is also the librarian, part-time Grade 3/4/5 teacher, and secretary. Teachers are expected to teach three grade levels with little to no additional classroom support. Classroom experience has shown me that these classrooms have students whose abilities span six grade-levels (or more), and it is extremely

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

difficult (if not impossible) for one teacher to modify student learning and differentiate instruction to such an extent without support. These issues are close to my heart. They affect my children and my community. They are obstacles standing in the way of equitable education in Quesnel and throughout British Columbia.

Karen Robson (2012) highlights the wide-spread staffing problems, pointing to research that shows how difficult it is to attract teachers to rural areas and how rural schools often employ younger, less experienced teachers who are burdened with heavy workloads and tasked with teaching multiple grades and courses outside their area of expertise (Chapter 7, Neighbourhoods, Regions, and Locations, n.p.). She goes on to say that there exists “marked differences between levels of educational outcomes between urban and rural areas”; that in “rural areas, compared to urban areas, high school dropout rates are significantly higher and PISA scores are significantly lower” (Chapter 7, Neighbourhoods, Regions, and Locations, n.p.).

Change is needed! We need a new *vision*, one where rural schools are seen and heard; where they are adequately **funded** and given a voice at the table; where our District, the Province, and our Minister of Education take remedial action to remove rural schools and rural school districts from the back burner—before they boil over from lack of attention and inaction. As a pre-service teacher with a background in Social Geography, I believe it is important to view the plight of rural schools and rural school districts from a place-based perspective—one that looks at the state of education relationally, from place to place. According to Lauzon, Bollman, and Ashton (2015) all rural communities share two dimensions: low density and/or long distance to density. Each rural community, however, has its own unique history, geography, and development trajectory complete with its own set of challenges and opportunities. That is, communities are not necessarily destined to a particular fate simply because they are rural, but they are constrained in many ways (Lauzon et al., 2015, p. 2).

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

This is where a rural perspective becomes important. The objective of a rural perspective tends to be geared toward policy and a consideration of how to address the implications of “rurality” on policy and programs; the Federal Rural Secretariat terms this the “rural lens” (Lauzon et al., 2015, p. 2). Many scholars, in addition to Lauzon, Bollman, and Ashton, have applied this rural lens to their research (Atkin, 2003; Corbett, 2014a, 2014b; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Corbett & Helmer, 2017; Newbold & Brown, 2015; Wallin, 2008). According to Corbett and Helmer (2017, p. 47): “the history of rural education in North America can be understood as a history of school closure, amalgamation, and consolidation of schools. Typically, historical and geographical arguments have converged in debates about whether or not to close small community schools, which are positioned as the victims of the march of time and reconfiguration of space”; adding that the “rural school problem” remains a constituent part of what Cubberley (1922) called the “rural life problem.” Such discussions, according to them, represent geospatial debates over the proper scaling of educational services, the relationship between schooling and community development, and the question of what constitutes educational equality/equity and quality education (Corbett & Helmer, 2017, p. 49).

When the “rural” is addressed, it is typically framed in terms of generic policy concerns: provision of services, maintenance and coordination of facilities, school closures, distance electronic learning, inter-agency cooperation, staffing, and teacher recruiting and retention (Corbett, 2014a). Corbett highlights how geography and spatial thinking can work with social theory and educational thought to re-evaluate the importance of space and place in educational theory and policy discourse; helping to show that rural schools, like those in Quesnel, are not spaces that formal education can afford to leave behind, nor are they locations of isolation, impoverishment, and deficit; rather, they are important places on the educational landscape.

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

In Canada, school boards are principally responsible for a kindergarten to grade twelve (K-12) system of universal public schooling; approximately ninety-five percent of Canadian youth are educated within this system, typically in their neighbourhoods and home communities.

These governance bodies have been steadily amalgamated to contain broader geographies, but the fundamental principal is that local citizens close to communities and schools are responsible for governance and regulation—making school districts of prime concern when studying education (Corbett & Helmer, 2017, p. 48).



Figure 1: BC School Districts

The British Columbia Teacher's Federation (BCTF) states that:

Although most British Columbians live in the Lower Mainland and Lower Vancouver Island, most school districts serve children and parents located outside that region. In many school districts, rural life continues to be a geographic and economic fact. Delivering equal school services and ensuring equal educational opportunities to areas with thinly scattered populations continues to be a challenge for the provincial government and school districts. Education across the province needs to be equitable and accessible. Students in all areas of the province must have equality of opportunity (Rural Education, 2018).

British Columbia's Ministry of Education acknowledges that it is difficult to define "rural" education—that is, what counts as a "rural school" and a "rural school district"—but an online engagement study revealed that participants defined a rural school district as one where: the District oversees a rural school; the majority of schools are defined as rural or remote; any school is more than thirty minutes from the city limits; and/or the majority of schools are in rural areas (A Status Check on Rural Education, 2017).

By such standards, Quesnel belongs to a rural school district—School District #28—which serves the city of Quesnel, in addition to the surrounding communities of Wells and Nazko (pictured below). K-12 schooling is offered at sixteen schools throughout the District, with twelve elementary schools (K-7), one junior high school (grades 8-9), one high school

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

was a result of the financing policies at the time, such as the elimination in the education finance formula of a base of funding on a per-school basis. Regardless of the size of the school, some costs are the same for administrative and other basic services. When funding is simply on the basis of a per student amount without a school base, a district finds it hard to maintain smaller schools in more rural communities. School districts might have been able to save some of these schools if they had adequate overall budgets. However, austerity budgets provided by government meant that districts had little flexibility to make decisions to keep open schools that they and the community did not want to close (pg. 2).

Throughout the “Brief”, the BCTF gives seven recommendations to remedy the situation, all of which are meant to ensure that “students in rural and remote communities across the province have access to quality education” (pg. 2). The first recommendation pertained to the “Value of rural and small schools”, asking that “the rural development process champion the value, benefit, and importance of rural and small schools” (pg. 2). The second recommendation addressed “Education funding” asking: (1) that the Provincial Government increase education funding to meet the educational needs of the Province’s students and to ensure equality of educational opportunity for all students; and (2) that the Provincial Education Funding Formula take into account the unique circumstances facing rural and small schools (pg. 3).

The third recommendation related to “Recruitment and retention of teachers”, asking that (1) the Provincial Government, school districts, and the BCTF work together to develop strategies to promote the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote school districts; and (2) that teacher education institutions ensure that teacher preparation programs take into account the unique needs of teachers in rural settings (pg. 3). The fourth recommendation spoke to “Professional development (PD)”, requesting that “special measures be taken to improve the availability of teacher professional development programs in rural areas of the Province, including consideration of additional professional development funding and release time” (pg. 4). The fifth recommendation focused on “Learning resources”, asking that (1) the Ministry of Education and school districts provide a variety of learning resources to assist

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

teachers in meeting the needs of students in rural and small schools; and (2) that teachers in rural and small schools be provided with the time and resources to develop, adapt, and implement curricula that meet the needs of all students (pg. 5).

The sixth recommendation, “Support for Aboriginal students” advocates that “encouragement and resources be provided for schools to work with Aboriginal communities to meet the needs for education that supports Aboriginal student success” (pg. 6). The seventh, and final, recommendation focused on “Distributed Learning”, asking that (1) Distributed Learning be considered a positive offering for rural schools within the BC public school system only when fully supported by adequate staffing, funding, and resources; (2) that Distributed Learning programs and courses in rural schools be equivalent to other programs and courses in curriculum, assessment, and reporting; and (3) that Distributed Learning not be used in place of sufficient staffing or adequate facilities to offer full programs for students (pg. 6-7).

Together, the BCTF’s seven recommendations provide the basis for a new vision for rural education—that is, a broad goal for rural schools and rural school districts. Currently, I do not believe that the BCTF’s vision has come to fruition. Three years from the release of the aforementioned “Brief” and formal education continues to leave rural schools and rural school districts behind; they are still underfunded and understaffed; they still lack specialized teachers and resources (both human and material); they are still cast off as either close-knit, cozy arrangements for children and their families or looked upon as spaces of impoverishment, isolation, and deficit. They fail to be seen as important places on the educational landscape. In both scenarios, they are ignored—either because there is a belief that they do not need help or that they are beyond help. Neither is the case, which is why teachers, like myself, need to keep pushing for change. Actual realities playing out in rural schools and rural school districts must be addressed. Then, and only then, will they be taken “off the back burner”!

Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

Figures

Figure 1: BC School Districts, retrieved from Educational Facility Managers Association of BC -
bcmap.png

Figure 2: School District #28 Boundaries, retrieved from
[https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/geographic/land-use/administrative-boundaries/school-district-boundaries/map - sd 28 - quesnel.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/geographic/land-use/administrative-boundaries/school-district-boundaries/map_sd_28_quesnel.pdf)

Figure 3: School District #28 Schools, retrieved on October 31, 2021 from
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_District_28_Quesnel

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Taking Rural Schools off the Back Burner

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