



Office of: Director, Electoral Area 'B'

January 30, 2017

Ministry of Education

Via email: rural.education@gov.bc.ca

Dear Deputy Minister Dawes,

Re: Rural Education Practices and Education Funding – Public Review

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the benefits of our rural schools to inform the development of a new Rural Education Strategy by the end of the current school year. The Board has allowed me to comment as Electoral Director for Area 'B' of the Peace River Regional District, an area that is quintessentially 'rural' and is in fact home to several rural schools which also serve as community centres in the often remote areas they serve.

The first issue I would identify as a barrier to rural education is funding. On that note, thank you for the funding announcement in August of 2016 that assisted our local school districts to provide continued access to rural education through the bus fund. We are hopeful that this will continue and that the formula will be examined and updated for fairness and equity across the Province of BC. There needs to be a factor in the formula that takes into account the size and distances traveled in addition to the population factor. School Districts are very aware of the need to plan bus schedules to be as efficient as possible using the available road networks available, however, in this region, many of our roads are not on a grid which means the bus drives both up and down the same gravel road to get students to the main road that leads to the school. It costs our school district more for gas, wear and tear and wages because a provincial grid system of roads is not in place.

Secondly, I must point out that across the Province, there may be several different interpretations of what constitutes 'rural' education. In the North, our definition of rural might be somewhat different as the Peace River Regional District (PRRD) is comprised of seven municipalities, the largest of which is Fort St. John with a population of approximately 21,000 people, and the second largest being Dawson Creek with approximately 12,00 residents. The remaining five municipalities account for a combined population of approximately 8,500. The four electoral areas, which are spread across a vast geographic area, (the PRRD is the largest regional district in the Province at about 120,000 square kilometres) have a combined population of approximately 21,000 residents. *For the purposes of these comments, please consider that the viewpoint that 'rural' includes those schools that serve the unincorporated areas in our regional district and the smaller schools outside of municipalities whose students are primarily bussed to and from school from rural areas surrounding municipalities.*

I would be remiss if this letter did not include a comment regarding the need for equal access to education for students everywhere in the province. 'Rural' education opportunities need to continue to be provided to rural areas and funding for bussing to those schools is a key component of that access. In some cases, it is the bus that takes the students to a local school where they can access the internet which provides them the opportunity to further their education without having to be separated from their families.

diverse. vast. abundant.

PLEASE REPLY TO:

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Finally, let me comment on the many benefits that rural schools provide, in addition to providing access to education. In many cases, they are the community centre for the area they serve and allow the community to offer programs and community support outside of school hours that contribute greatly to the local social fabric of the community, and to economic development locally and provincially. As an example, consider the Clearview School which is situated about 45 minutes northeast of Fort St. John and is the most central point for those students who live 30-45 minutes beyond the school. School District #60 put the need for a larger gymnasium high on their priority list when the school was expanded to include grades 9 and 10 when previously the oldest and largest students were in grade 8. Despite being identified as a priority, the larger gymnasium never achieved funding. An agreement was reached between the School District, the PRRD, and the residents, who agreed to contribute funding for the facility over a five year period and allowed the gym to be built. This facility allows students to continue to take part in physical education and ensure their continued pursuit of a healthy lifestyle, and allows the community to offer additional healthy activity programming outside of school hours to residents in this remote area. This is only one example of how the school becomes the building block for the community and fosters community pride. There are several similar examples in our region. Two of our rural schools have hockey arenas that have been built on school district property which allows school access during school hours. They can even boast having had one of their students play for Team Canada. During the spring and fall or when the weather is inclement the arena is used for physical activity such as broomball and volleyball.

Another example, in the more distant community of Wonowon, involves the replacement of the community centre after it was tragically destroyed by fire. In this situation, Wonowon was given permission to reconstruct the hall adjoining the school which resulted in a dual purpose facility serving as both a community hall and school gym. The support of the school district staff and trustees has made these projects possible. We are fortunate to have a very good working relationship with them.

In support of rural schools and the benefits they provide not only to the local area but to the province as a whole, I point out that in this area, agricultural is pursued alongside the forestry, oil and gas, and mining industries. Many of our rural students have an advantage of learning through experience and become sought after employees because they have learned how to do by doing. Our rural schools are the centre of the community and are often considered to be the foundation to the economic success of the community, region and the province.

In closing, let me extend appreciation to the Province of BC for the opportunity to submit our feedback to inform a Rural Education Strategy. I have emphasized the importance of free transportation, equal access to education and a request to clearly define 'rural' as key considerations for the Ministry's consideration. We congratulate our School District and thank both the staff and the trustees for all their efforts to make sure that our schools stay open and affordable for the many students who have no other options. I am looking forward to attending the open house on March 3rd at the North Peace Secondary School Library from 6-8 pm to hear more from the government and the public regarding the feedback received in the early stages of consultation and what the proposed next steps are based on that feedback.

Yours truly,



Karen Goodings,
Director, Electoral Area 'B'
Peace River Regional District