

Accommodation Review Committee Meeting

A meeting of the Accommodation Review Committee was held on February 28, 2007 at 6:30 p.m. at the Waterloo Region Catholic Education Centre.

Committee Members Present: Chuck Williams (Principal – St. Luke CES), Rick Boisvert (Principal – St. Nicholas CES), Maureen Sutherland (Parent – St. Paul's), Mark Whaley (Councillor – City of Waterloo), Fr. Charles Fedy (Pastor – St. Agatha Parish), Roger Farwell (The Walter Fedy Partnership), Brian Page (City of Kitchener), Louise Ervin (Trustee – WCDSB), Judy Nairn (Trustee – WCDSB), Roger Lawler (Director of Education), Heather Cullen (Superintendent – WCDSB), Dave Bennett (Senior Manager of Facilities – WCDSB / Committee Chair), John Shewchuk (Senior Manager, Public Affairs – WCDSB)

Recording secretary:

Lindsay Reinhardt (Planner – WCDSB)

Regrets: Joseph Gowing (Trustee – WCDSB), Bill Strauss (Mayor – Woolwich Township)

Next Meetings: Wednesday, March 28, 2007; Wednesday, April 25, 2007 (6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.)

1. Welcome and Opening Prayer:

The meeting opened at 6:30 p.m. with an opening prayer led by Roger Lawler.

2. Introductions

Introductions were made around the table. It was noted that City of Cambridge municipal and business officials were invited to participate on the committee but have not responded to the invitation.

3. Presentation – Review of Ministry Accommodation Review Guidelines

Dave Bennett reviewed a series of PowerPoint slides detailing the new government guidelines. Topics reviewed included school valuation, best practices, roles and responsibilities of the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC), and application of the guidelines. School boards must create a generic framework that determines the value to student, value to school board, value to community and value to the local economy. The “value to student” portion must be weighted highest. This committee is responsible for developing a generic framework that could be used for all future accommodation reviews. Once in a specific review, the ARC that is established would be allowed to add to the generic framework but not delete anything.

Roger Lawler reported WCDSB must have a new accommodations policy by the end of June and WCDSB cannot begin any accommodation review process before then. The Ministry of Education has agreed to WCDSB's proposed policy development time line.

Roger Lawler reported that most boards have declining enrolment and that the Ministry of Education reports approximately 45% of elementary space could be surplus province-wide within a decade. Locally, by 2016, approximately 25% of WCDSB's elementary space could be surplus, equivalent to 6-8 schools. This means that schools must close or the surplus space must be used differently.

Roger Farwell raised the issue that in the “Places to Grow” document the province is targeting growth to the Region of Waterloo, therefore our population should increase significantly. Roger Lawler indicated that there will be a change in demographics and the type of people that will be moving to the Region are unknown. John Shewchuk raised the point

that the population increase will be largely driven by immigrants and whether or not they will be Catholic will affect WCDSB. Dave Bennett indicated that there will still be school construction but that the WCDSB school population cannot reach the same level as during the baby boom when schools were very large and located in close proximity to one another. School catchment areas are now much larger. Mark Whaley stated that most of the growth in the City of Waterloo in the future will be done through intensification. The question was raised as to whether or not these intensified forms of housing will generate students.

Maureen Sutherland asked whether the WCDSB would consider boundary changes before beginning a school closure process. Dave Bennett responded that an accommodation issue would be identified internally. It would then be determined if a boundary change is required or a school closure is the appropriate solution. Depending on which solution is decided upon, it would then initiate the school closure process that is being determined through this committee or a boundary review process.

4. Examples of Valuation Frameworks

Dave Bennett introduced three examples of possible school valuation frameworks. The “Value to Student” section was the only portion of the framework examined in order keep the meeting focused to deciding which framework type would be best for the WCDSB.

The first framework example was created by Drew Nameth at C.N. Watson and Associates and was introduced to school boards in November. It is a quantitative approach that is very formulaic where each criteria is weighted resulting in a numeric score. The committee agreed this method would be difficult to explain at a public meeting, particularly if the numeric results for several schools were separated by only a few points. This would be problematic to defend without a qualitative analysis.

The second framework example was purely qualitative. Each criteria would be ranked from “very poor” to “very good”. There is a section for each criteria to provide comments from which the ranking are based. This method would generate a report where the “value to student” section would be chapter one and each of the criteria evaluated would be a subsection. The comments would be text of the report. With this example, it would be difficult to ensure that the “value to student” section would be weighted the highest.

The third framework example was a mixture of qualitative and quantitative. Each of the four values that must be assessed would have an overall weighting. Within each of those there would be a list of criteria to be evaluated. Each of these would be assigned a weight. The criteria would be evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 and then weighted. A comment section would be included under each criteria to provide an explanation of the weighting.

Discussion – framework:

Judy Nairn indicated that the “value to student” and “value to community” is very subjective and would be difficult to evaluate. How would we keep these as objective as possible? Dave Bennett responded by saying that the focus would have to be on the physical school space because the student population and the teachers can be relocated and remain constant. Heather Cullen pointed out that the WCDSB has standard programs provided at all schools regardless of the school size. The programs that are volunteer dependent should be evaluated under the “value to student” section.

Mark Whaley inquired as to why a school cannot simply be closed because it has a small and declining enrolment and that it is not cost-efficient to operate. The Ministry of Education requires that school boards go through a closure process therefore eliminating the option of closing the school solely based on declining enrolment. Maureen Sutherland responded that parents will buy houses in certain areas because it has a neighbourhood school and it should go through a fair, public process in order to close. Parents try to approach the school closure process in a logical manner however it is an emotional process.

Maureen Sutherland requested that the “value to student” section be renamed. Parents will personalize this term and the process will become more emotional. Dave Bennett indicated that this title was taken directly from the Ministry accommodation review guidelines but saw no reason why the name could not be changed as long as the intent remained.

Roger Farwell suggested that the framework should have a guiding principle and asked what the triggers would be in the new policy that would initiate the school closure process. Dave Bennett indicated that there are several triggers in the existing policy that could be used in the new policy. A list of these triggers could be appended to the new policy.

The guiding principle could speak to issues such as the minimum amount of bus travel, the board's position on portables, excess capacity, etc.

Dave Bennett noted the valuation committee has the opportunity to define the weightings and determine which criteria the local Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) must examine. An option would be to have the Valuation Framework Committee weight the four general categories and the local ARCs would then weight the criteria within those categories.

There was consensus from the committee that a purely quantitative method is not desired. Roger Farwell thought the "value to student" and "value to school board" sections should be more quantitative and the other two sections should be more qualitative. Judy Nairn thought that framework example #3 would be the best method to take because example #2 does not give the committee enough structure. Numbers are easier to summarize how an ARC arrives at a decision. John Shewchuk thought that a hybrid between qualitative and quantitative is important to identify where the problem schools are and the reason the review is underway.

Discussion – Criteria:

Judy Nairn inquired about the difference between "value to community" and "value to economy". These would essentially be the same in a community with only one school. Dave Bennett indicated that the Ministry guidelines were developed for all school boards in Ontario. In many northern boards, there are schools in small communities that provide the only community meeting place in the town and one of the only employers in the area. Possible alternative uses could be considered in the "value to the local economy" section. However this matter should be handled delicately in the review process so as not to suggest that a school is closing to allow for an alternative use.

Roger Lawler asked for clarification as to what "range of programs" means. Does this mean that triple grades would receive a lower score than a single grade? The board's priorities will have to be determined prior to determining the weighting.

Fr. Charles Fedy indicated that the amount of students the board would lose as a result of a closure should also be evaluated. Dave Bennett suggested that the other side of that argument also be examined; how many students are we currently losing by having large bussed areas and no neighbourhood schools in growth areas?

Chuck Williams indicated that the criteria used to evaluate schools during a closure process in the past have always been good. Will this new process be similar? Dave Bennett explained that in the past, different scenarios were evaluated as possible solutions. The number of students walking, being bused, operating costs, and proximity to a parish are examples of the types of things that were evaluated in the past. This is very similar to the types of criteria that need to be evaluated in the new process. The framework could also be used to evaluate different scenarios and ideally the receiving school's score should go up.

Judy Nairn suggested that rather than evaluating the school's proximity to a parish, it should be evaluated as to whether or not the receiving school is within the same parish boundary. Roger Lawler indicated that WCDSB should review the relationship of the school to the parish in terms of services the parish is providing to the school rather than the proximity of the school to the parish.

Decision: Create a general framework that is both qualitative and quantitative similar to example #3.

5. Next Steps

Dave Bennett or Lindsay Reinhardt will send the committee a copy of the presentation and a copy of the presentation on enrolment trends that was made to the trustees by email.

Lindsay Reinhardt and Dave Bennett will develop questions/criteria to be discussed at the next meeting. Input from Roger Lawler, Heather Cullen, Rick Boisvert and Chuck Williams will be needed for the "value to student" section.

6. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:15 p.m.