

The Politics of School Closures

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Introduction

Since 2000, 33 Local Area Plans for residential development on the periphery of Winnipeg have been approved by City Council (Winnipeg, 2020). This has resulted in an influx of families with young children moving to parts of the city that had previously been largely uninhabited. Problematically, school construction has not kept pace with population growth (Martin, 2016a). Because of this, affected metro school divisions have struggled to find space for these children in their schools (Martin, 2016b). Member of the Legislative Assembly Ian Wishart attributed current school capacity pressure to successive NDP governments that “simply didn’t build enough schools” (in Martin, 2016a). During the 2019 Manitoba General Election, the Progressive Conservative party committed to constructing 20 schools in the next decade, 13 in the Winnipeg Metropolitan Area; it was pitched as “the fastest pace of school construction in Manitoba history” (PC Manitoba, 2019). However, this is not the first time there has been concentrated growth in Winnipeg.

From 1950 to 1970, St. James-Assiniboia experienced rapid and extensive development, which resulted in the population increasing from 25,138 to 70,110 residents (IUS, 1988). During this period, St. James-Assiniboia School Division (SJASD), in partnership with the Public Schools Finance Board, built 31 schools across the division (IUS, 1988). However, this population growth could not—and did

not—continue. It took just 14 years for the neighbourhood to become scarce of children (Pindera, 1989). Unable to operate schools at a fraction of their functional capacity, to the ire of many, SJASD closed 16 schools in the 1980s and 1990s. With the number of schools slated to be built and the inevitability of demographic changes, it is timely for political actors to learn from past school closures in order to better contend with them in the future.

The Messiness of School Closures

School closures highlight the unique dynamic between local school boards and the provincial government. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, education was the purview of religious institutions and the family unit. In 1867, Section 93 of *The British North America Act* gave provinces jurisdiction over education (Woods, 1936), largely removing the influence of the third sector, namely religious institutions, and placing it in the hands of the state. In 1890, Manitoba's legislative assembly passed *The Public Schools Act*, which imposed a single system that would provide "accommodation for all children between the ages of six and sixteen" (in Luccow, 1950, p. 11). While education is the responsibility of the provincial government in Manitoba, governance functions such as hiring teachers, collecting property taxes, and closing schools were delegated to locally elected school boards (Wallner, 2014). Importantly, school boards can only exercise powers delegated to them, and the province retains the right to withdraw old powers and grant new ones. Being beholden to provincial authorities for power and legitimacy adds an extra layer of complexity when school boards are tasked with making difficult and divisive decisions.

School closures have proven to be a wicked policy problem: a value-laden issue that is difficult or impossible to solve because it lacks clarity in both its aims and solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Despite this, there is limited analysis of the phenomena within a Canadian context. Much of the literature on school closures comes out of the

United States and focuses primarily on three American metropolises—Chicago (Green, 2017; Grant et al., 2014; Weber et al., 2018; Freelon, 2018), Philadelphia (Good, 2017; Connor et al., 2015), and New York (Pappas, 2012; Aggarwal et al., 2012)—each of which closed dozens of schools in the 2000s and 2010s. In each case, scholars showed school closures are more likely to occur in racialized and lower socioeconomic communities (Brown, 2021; Buras, 2016; Alsbury & Shaw, 2005). Moreover, policy actors pronounce similar reasons why a school or schools must close, namely, greater opportunities for students and cost savings (Tieken et al., 2019).

The Case

St. James-Assiniboia School Division (SJASD) is one of the City of Winnipeg's six 'metro' school divisions. Currently, the division has an enrollment of approximately 8,500 kindergarten to grade 12 students spread across 26 school sites, a number that has remained largely stable for the past decade. Although, it is important to note, consistency is a new phenomenon for SJASD, a division that for much of the twentieth century had to contend with large fluctuations in enrollment. This policy problem fell to a nine-member elected Board of Trustees. While decisions regarding school closures rested with political actors, the employees of the school board—the superintendents and secretary treasurers—offered counsel and recommendations; this meant they wielded tremendous influence over school closures. Using articles published in the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Tribune* in concert with policy documents and legislation, board meeting minutes and agendas, SJASD's enrollment trends can be divided into four segments: managed growth, explosive growth, rapid decline, and the present day. Taken together they shed light on school closures in Canada and the unique legal and political context they are rooted in.

1871-1950: Managed Growth

During this period, school construction was the sole purview of school boards. St. James-Assiniboia was divided into St. James School Division and Assiniboia-North School Division. In both divisions, despite extensive residential development, local authorities proved resourceful in finding accommodations for pupils at minimal cost to ratepayers (Butterfield, 1994). For much of this period, there was a patchwork of school buildings ranging from single room schoolhouses to modern multilevel structures (Butterfield, 1994). The community of Brooklands was served by “the white school” and “the red school.” Old St. James had Linwood, Britannia, and Assiniboine. Further west, parents in the Rural Municipality of Assiniboia sent their children to St. Charles, Bannatyne, Headingley, or Sturgeon Creek, later renamed Kirkfield Park. By 1931, growth had slowed, but the downturn was short lived—during the post war period, extensive residential development continued (IUS, 1988). With this, school construction resumed and in 1950 SJASD built its first stand-alone collegiate at the intersection of Portage Avenue and Ferry Road (IUS, 1988).

1951-1971: Explosive Growth

In the mid-twentieth century, school trustees in St. James noted the rapid residential development that was occurring. Trustees lobbied the premier “to loosen [the] Golden Boy’s money belt” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1955, p. 3) and cited other jurisdictions—Saskatchewan, Ontario, and British Columbia—all of whom had set aside large sums for school construction (*Winnipeg Tribune*, 1949). As predicted, St. James’ population grew rapidly during the 1950s and ten schools were built to keep up with the demand (IUS, 1988). From 1961 to 1971, St. James-Assiniboia’s rate of growth was four times that of the Winnipeg metropolitan area and an additional 21 schools were constructed (IUS, 1988). In 1968, a year before St. James School Division and Assiniboia-North School division amalgamated, the Superintendent of Assiniboia-North, H.A.

Mouritsen, told reporters “rapid and extensive school expansion will continue to be a vital necessity...as long as the population continues to increase at such a rapid rate...[and] there is no sign of a let up” (in Heath, 1968, p. 3). However, population growth ‘let up’ sooner than expected and three years later in 1971, SJASD reached its peak enrollment, 20,679 students (IUS, 1988).

1972-1997: Dramatic Decline

In 1972, the division’s overall enrollment began to decline and many of SJASD’s schools were underused. Birchwood was built in 1959 but by 1973 there were only 130 students, half of the functional capacity (Partridge, 1973). When parents learned that the Board of Trustees was debating the fate of their school, 40 people showed up at the public board meeting to express their concerns (Partridge, 1973). The Board voted to keep the school open for one more year, but a spokesperson for the parents told reporters, “they should have given us a guarantee of at least three or four more years” (in Partridge, 1973, p. 3). Trustee Aidan Conklin cautioned keeping the school open for more than a year would result in classes having to be combined, which would result in the children receiving a poorer education (Partridge, 1973). Despite this, the Board bent to public pressure and the school remained open. Four years later, in 1977, the Board of Trustees was once again tasked with deciding the fate of Birchwood. Trustee George Waters told reporters, “we must ask ourselves whether the advantage of keeping a small school open can compensate for the very high cost per pupil and extra burden on all the taxpayers in the community” (in MacKenzie, 1977, p. 14). This time, over 110 people showed up at the Board meeting. One delegate pronounced, “what is being discussed here is basically a rape of our community and tantamount to child abuse” (in Sadler, 1977a, p. 38). The following week the Board voted five-to-four to close Birchwood (Sadler, 1977b). Trustee D.H. McNabb told reporters that opting not to close the school would just make the decision more difficult the next time it came to the Board and that

“possibly we made the wrong decision four years ago...we should have closed it then” (in Sadler, 1977b). The school closed at the end of the 1977 school year.

Learning from what happened with Birchwood, the Board sought to distance themselves from any future closures. In the fall of 1981, the Board of Trustees approved Policy ABA *Decreasing Enrollment*. Soon after, the Board convened an Area Review Committee (ARC) that was tasked with studying the impact of declining enrollment in Westwood, a subdivision in the south-west part of the division (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981b). The committee was composed of “two parents from Columbus, one from Browning, one non-parent adult from each school area, principals of both schools, one teacher from each school, three school trustees and two division administrators” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981b, p. 7). They were told the enrollment at Columbus was 155 students and set to drop to 80 within four years (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981). Likewise, there were 205 students at Robert Browning, which was set to fall to 110, a sum significantly below the 450 students the school was designed for (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981). The committee concluded that the two schools should be consolidated with students from both schools attending Robert Browning (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981b). The Board accepted their recommendation and voted to close Columbus at the end of the 1982 school year.

Angered at the outcome, parents of children at Columbus formed a grassroots group called Parents for a Better Education, insisting that the review process was flawed. They said by only considering two schools for consolidation, it was clear from the start that the larger of the two was going to survive and asserted the Board intentionally set out to “divide and conquer” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981c, p. 7). Then, after making many emotionally charged pleas to the Board and getting nowhere, they rented two school busses, loaded them with parents and children, and spent the day marching with their placards outside of the board office (MacKenzie, 1981b). The group

also threatened to withhold school taxes and run anti-closure candidates in the next election (MacKenzie, 1981b). George Buchholz, SJASD's Secretary-Treasurer and Director of Education, told reporters that two-thirds of taxpayers in the division did not have children in school and that those with "children in school (the minority) should bow to the wishes of the majority" (in Wallace, 1981, p. 9). The SJASD Board of Trustees decided to close Columbus despite picketing and other protests (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1981d).

Meanwhile, other metro school divisions were also experiencing declining enrollment and began closing schools to the dismay of parents. Frustration rose to the level of the Minister of Education, Maureen Hemphill. SJASD Board of Trustees, who were at the time in the process of closing Deer Lodge Junior High, maintained that "closings are a matter for school boards because local situations vary." Board Chair George Eakin said he doubted "the provincial government would do anything so disastrous as try to legislate school closing procedures" (in MacKenzie, 1981, p. 5). Hemphill saw things differently and instructed divisions to "delay their reorganization plans" while the department developed "policies which would maintain the quality of education, protect smaller schools, develop guidelines for closing schools and come up with alternate use for empty school buildings" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1982b). *The Provincial Guidelines on School Closures* did not weigh-in on whether divisions should close schools; rather, it outlined steps to ensure procedural fairness in all closures moving forward (Government of Manitoba, 1982). Deer Lodge ended up closing but more importantly, the new provincial policy marked an important the shift towards centralized control of school closures.

With enrollment declining in Silver Heights, a neighborhood located in the centre of the division, the Board of Trustees convened an ARC to decide the future of six schools. The "38-member area review committee will include two trustees, a principal and teacher from each of the six schools, plus two parents and two residents from

each school area” (MacKenzie, 1982, p. 7). However, some members of the committee openly speculated if “the board made up its mind beforehand” (in MacKenzie, 1982). Buchholz clarified, “while trustees have no preconceived ideas on area reviews, they make it clear they won’t necessarily accept the committee’s recommendation” (in MacKenzie, 1982). After reviewing all the pertinent data, the committee recommended closing Bannatyne and putting Woodhaven under a 20-month review (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 1983). The Board voted to close both of the elementary schools, but this was later amended to keep Bannatyne open (Martin, 1983). Members of the Woodhaven parent council said they would appeal to the Minister of Education. However, the province did not intervene on the parents’ behalf and the school closed at the end of the 1983-84 school year (Martin, 1983).

The John Taylor ARC looked at enrollment in the Crestview suburb located on the north-western edge of the division. They recommended closing Arthur Oliver and transferring the students to nearby Heritage and Crestview (Bray, 1988). The president of the Arthur Oliver parent council told reporters that a phone survey of 400 residents living near the school revealed 85 percent opposed closing (Bray, 1988). Community members hoped that the Board would keep the school open and lease vacant classrooms to Winnipeg West Child and Family Service, which would run a daycare and drop-in programming, but this plan did not come to be (Bray, 1988; *Winnipeg Free Press*, 1990). The school closed in 1986 and sat vacant for a number of years. Then in 1991, SJASD was approached by the St. James-Assiniboia Seniors’ Centre asking that the building be turned over to them (Bridge, 1991c). Chair of the Board Bruce Alexander cautioned the group that “under provincial legislation, the division must pass on its carrying costs to the tenant” and that “taxes and maintenance costs on Arthur Oliver currently add up to about \$150,000 a year” (in Bridge, 1991c, p. 105). This was too much of an obstacle for the not-for-profit and the property was sold to a developer.

For over a decade no schools in SJASD were considered for closure or consolidation. Then, all at once, the Board began discussing the possibility of closing three of its schools. The first school under review was Collège Silver Heights Collegiate. Silver Heights was housed in an old building and was over capacity. In contrast, Sturgeon Creek Regional Secondary School, located just one kilometre away, was newer and underutilized. The Board complied with the provincially mandated 20-month review process and after hearing from staff, students, parents and the community, trustees voted in favour of closing Silver Heights. At the end of the 2006-07 school year, Silver Heights was closed, and the site was sold to a developer (CBC News, 2007). With Silver Heights closed, the Board shifted their focus to two middle schools, Ness and Hedges. However, this did not move forward due to an announcement from the provincial government that school boards no longer had unilateral, or really any control over closing community schools.

2008-Present: The Present Day

On April 29, 2008, the NDP Government of Manitoba introduced Bill 28, *The Strengthening Local Schools Act*, which placed a moratorium on school closures (Government of Manitoba, 2008). At the time, there were 13 schools in Manitoba that were under review for closure (CBC News, 2008). On June 12, 2008, Bill 28 received Royal Assent and was passed into law, meaning that “except with the minister’s written approval under this section, a school board may not close a school that pupils attended in the 2007-08 school year” (Government of Manitoba, 2008). Lawrence Lussier, President of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, told reporters that “This is a very drastic measure. It reaches into the school community [and] school-division business in a very drastic way” (in CBC News, 2008). Speaking specifically about the situation in SJASD, Board Chair Bruce Chegus said, “the concern and reality

for us is that we have low enrollment, but we still have fixed costs, because we are not allowed to close any sites” (in Preprost, 2012).

Discussion

Policy Learning In SJASD

The creation and subsequent amendment of SJASD’s school closure policy is evidence that the Board of Trustees was learning from past closures. Policy learning is defined as “a change of beliefs or development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of experience and the identification of best practice” (Wallner, 2014, p. 101). SJASD’s first school closure was Birchwood, as already noted, and the process was plagued by issues. However, the Board learned from this experience and in 1981, before closing another school, they wrote Policy ABA *Decreasing Enrollment*. The policy defines the problem, explains the function and composition of an area review committee, as well as includes guidelines for the committee’s final recommendation. Policy ABA guided the process that was used to review Columbus and Robert Browning. Again, the closures were also beleaguered with problems but in November 1982 the policy was revised based on what they learned such as ensuring equal representation from each school under review as well as, when possible, studying whole communities rather than focusing exclusively on only two schools. SJASD’s policy on school closures was revised again in September 1983, December 1983, 1984, 1988 and 1989 prior to being renamed Policy KC *Community Involvement in Decision Making – School Reviews* in 2007. In each case, policy encoded the learning that came from the most recent school closures.

Local vs. Central Control

A central theme in the history of Canadian public education governance is the tension between centralization and decentralization (Wallner, 2014). Autonomy focuses on the degree

to which school boards and individual school administrators are able to act independently from central overseers (Wallner, 2014). *The Provincial Guidelines on School Closures* and the moratorium on school closures are both examples of central control, but the most sweeping step in this direction came on March 15, 2021, when the newly appointed Minister of Education Cliff Cullen released the findings of the K-12 Education Commission along with the government's response. Bill 64, *The Education Modernization Act*, would have done away with school divisions and elected school boards, and replaced them with an appointed Provincial Education Authority Board (Government of Manitoba, 2021). However, the Bill did not come to pass. Reaction was swift. After months of sustained opposition from labour, political and grassroot organizations, *The Education Modernization Act* was pulled from the order paper. Despite Bill 64's downfall, centralizing forces remain strong in Manitoba (Brodbeck, 2021; Lett, 2022).

Lessons Learned

Bill 64's lack of clarity as to the future of the moratorium on school closures became a rallying cry for those who opposed the legislation, demonstrating that closing schools remains an emotionally charged policy problem. As such, when population pressures lead to overcrowding, whenever possible officials should consider "smaller buildings that will be viable longer and using 'relocatable' classrooms to get over population peaks" (Pindera, 1989, p. 2). Moreover, when enrollment declines, alternatives to closures should be considered. In 1977, after voting to close Birchwood, Trustee Rev. Armstrong said "unfortunately, we can't close little pieces of each school" (in Sadler, 1977c, p. 51). However soon after, SJASD looked for ways to do just that. Rather than close schools, the division looked for partners that could "pay rent sufficient to cover the cost of operating the space" while also offering "some community benefit" (MacKenzie, 1977b). This remains a viable option today. When schools must close, concessions can be

made to “soften the blow” (Doern & Prince, 1989, p. 455). In 1982, the SJASD Board of Trustees voted to close Birchwood; parents were angry that their children would have to walk longer distances to get to school (Woods, 1977). In response, the Board agreed to provide transportation for any student who lived more than one kilometre from school opposed to 1.6 kilometre as specified in *The Public Schools Act* (SJASD, 1977/2018). This is just one method of getting communities on side when making policy decisions that impact a family’s lifeworld and limit the impact of school closures in the face of demographic changes.

Conclusion

The wicked policy problem that is school construction and closures is rooted in larger urban planning problems. In Winnipeg, 18 areas on the fringe of the city have been earmarked for new residential development in the coming decades (Kives, 2013), meaning demand for new schools will persist well into the future. It is unclear what will become of the twenty schools this government has committed to. Will these buildings continue to be needed decades into the future or will they, like so many schools in SJASD, end up underutilized and subject to closure? Regardless, decision makers would be wise to acknowledge schools are the “nerve centre of society” (Fuller, 1982, p. 235) and recognize that any move to close schools should not be done flippantly. School boards have vast experience when it comes to closing community schools and have created policy to minimize the harm to parents, families, and the community, all the while minimizing political fallout. As such, everyone with a political stake should heed lessons learned by school boards on how best to minimize the tension between politics and public policy that is inherent to school closures.

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