

# Communities Left Behind?

## School Closures, Community Liveability, and Justice-Informed Decision-Making in Ontario



### INTRODUCTION

Public schools are more than places of learning—they are foundational elements of complete, healthy, and liveable communities. Across Ontario, however, schools in rural and inner-city communities have faced increasing closure pressures, raising important questions about social equity, community resilience, and environmental justice.



### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This multi-university research initiative, led by Patricia Collins (Queen's University), examined how school closure decisions in Ontario affect communities, particularly those already facing social, economic, or geographic challenges.

Supported through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Grant, the project explored whether existing decision-making frameworks adequately consider the broader impacts of school closures on community well-being, local identity, accessibility, and long-term sustainability.

The research recognized that while current provincial guidelines emphasize student programming and school board finances, they often overlook the broader community consequences of closure decisions.



### UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH CONTRIBUTION

The University of Guelph team, including Wayne Caldwell and Regan Zink, contributed to this research through the facilitation of stakeholder workshops in late 2023. These workshops were designed to:



#### Share emerging research findings

Help participants understand key themes and evidence.



#### Gather diverse perspectives

Engage municipal leaders, educators, parents, and community stakeholders.



#### Explore principles for improved decision-making

Identify what matters most to communities beyond enrolment and budgets.



#### Inform future policy discussions

Support the development of more inclusive and justice-informed approaches.



### WHY THIS MATTERS



Schools contribute to complete and resilient communities.



Closure decisions impact social equity and community well-being.



Community infrastructure extends beyond roads and services.



Fair, collaborative decision-making supports stronger, more inclusive places.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Schools are community anchors**  
Schools support community identity, social connection, and local vitality.
- Closure impacts extend beyond education**  
School closures can affect local economies, community cohesion, accessibility, and neighbourhood stability.
- Rural and inner-city communities face disproportionate pressures**  
Ontario's closure patterns have raised important socio-spatial equity concerns.
- Current decision frameworks are incomplete**  
Budget and enrolment considerations alone may fail to capture community impacts.
- Collaborative approaches are needed**  
More inclusive decision-making models can better support fair and sustainable outcomes.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

This project examined the shortcomings and consequences of current school closure decision-making in Ontario and explored ways to develop a more collaborative and comprehensive approach.

Webinar and workshop materials are available at:

<http://waynecaldwell.ca/projects/communities-left-behind>

Patricia Collins, Queen's University

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