

"A community where people live by choice... not by circumstance"



August 10, 2015

Mrs. Pam Eyking,
MLA Victoria-The Lakes
P.O. Box 741
Halifax, NS B3J 2T3

Dear Mrs. Eyking,

On behalf of the St. Ann's Bay Development Association (SABDA), I am writing to express our concerns regarding the lack of education facilities in our region. As you well know, it is important to attract new families to rural Nova Scotia for the general economic wealth of our province. As SABDA was gearing up to lobby for alternative education systems that would enable our kids to go to school and daycare in our region, we hear that instead, the province is looking at closing even more schools in the coming years. Recently, 2 young families who had moved to the Wreck Cove area, found that their children faced an hour and forty-five minute bus ride in the morning and again at the end of the day to get to Baddeck Academy. The other option for these families had was to drive themselves to Ingonish (30 minutes) to Cape Smokey Elementary School. As the parents are employed by Parks Canada in Ingonish they had chosen the later. However, the closure of the Cape Smokey Elementary school would mean that for those kids, the commute to school becomes 30 minutes in a car to Ingonish followed by another 45 minutes to an hour bus ride from Ingonish to Neil's Harbour morning and evening every day. We feel that the recent decision to move Grade 6 from Cape Smokey Elementary to Cabot High school in Neil's Harbour (the Middle School Model) was in fact a strategic step towards proving the elementary school not sustainable when the lease is renegotiated in the coming years and not based on actual benefits for the kids. In fact, we believe exposing young kids sooner to issues that teenagers are facing will be detrimental to their development, exposing them earlier to problematic such as drugs and bullying.

We understand the importance of efficiency and that school boards are looking at students/teacher ratio diminishing. However, there will be other costs to society incurred if Ingonish elementary school closes. These are costs to the health system caused by not enough time to be physically active due to 2-3 hours bus rides per day and the inability of parents to support their kids to participate in various extra-curriculum activities such as sports, drama, music, etc. because of the distance. School serves as hubs and keep a community vibrant. They provide jobs and are used by other community groups. We've seen in the past school closures that resulted in permanent loss of infrastructure in communities (such as North Shore) because the maintenance of the building was passed on to the municipality which opted to tear it down because they didn't have the means to maintain them. There are also indirect costs associated with a potential increase in car accidents, greenhouse gas emissions and highway maintenance.

Finally, but most importantly, this will have a rippling effect and cause young families to leave the area and discourage immigration in our communities, and therefore less enrolment in remaining schools and the cycle continues. It is primordial that the province take a big picture approach to ensure the overall health of our kids and communities. We should focus efforts on increasing economic growth in our region through having welcoming communities (with services such as schools), immigration and tourism (<http://onens.ca/>) instead of eliminating jobs.

School boards and the province really need to have a more holistic approach to cost savings that will not impede the quality of living of Nova Scotians. SABDA is happy to take part in working groups to find alternative solutions to this problem, please don't hesitate to contact us to further discuss and work on our behalf to at least keep up the minimal services that we have in northern Cape Breton.

Best regards,

Anne-Claude Pepin
Chairman, St. Ann's Bay Development Association

cc The Honourable Karen Lynn casey, Minister, Education and Early Childhood Development
Beth MacIsaac, Superintendant, Cape Breton Regional School Board
Maxine Hardy, Principal, Cape Smokey Elementary School