THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY? RURAL SCHOOL CLOSURE CONFLICTS AND RURAL IDENTITY IN NOVA SCOTIA

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2024

Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the
ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

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For Benjamin, Walter, and Louis, my favourite rural kids.

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Abstract

In the 2010s in Nova Scotia, school boards in the province decided to close and consolidate over 30 schools, most of them in rural areas. The closure of these elementary and secondary schools came amid demographic shifts in the aging province and cuts to the provincial education budget. In many of the rural communities with schools slated to close, community members fought back against the school closures, with varying success. Proponents of school closure made arguments about efficiency and fairness, while opponents of school closure emphasized the importance of place and claimed that that schools represented an essential local institution—the heart of the community.

This dissertation uses case studies of the school closure conflicts in the Nova Scotian villages of Maitland and Petite Rivière to draw attention to the ways in which policymakers' priorities and values clash with the priorities and values of rural residents. Through in-depth analysis of two school boards' school review processes, I interrogate the factors that drove the decisions to close schools, including the development of the school review process, the extent to which public opinion influenced decisions, and the constraints that school boards faced. While school boards may have felt like they had limited choices and that rural school closures were their only option, this outcome is contingent on the normalization of public divestment in both rural communities, and schools. Interviews with students, teachers, and community members in Maitland and Petite Rivière show that rural schools had an important community role, no matter the size.

Drawing on literature from rural sociology, political economy, and education, this dissertation ultimately invites policymakers to consider more flexible and equitable service delivery to rural areas.

List of Abbreviations and Symbols Used

Abbreviation/symbol	Description
A & A	Alteration and addition
CCRSB	Chignecto-Central Regional School Board
CSAP	Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial
GPACA	Greater Petite Area Community Association
IA	Impact Assessment (report)
ID	Identification (report)
NDP	New Democratic Party
P3	Public-Private Partnership
PES	Pentz Elementary School
PRES	Petite Rivière Elementary School
SAC	School Advisory Council
SSRSB	South Shore Regional School Board

Acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation can be a solitary task. At the same time, it is not possible without a structure of care and support. I am grateful for all the people who helped me along the way: My supervisor, Karen Foster, who helped me grow from a student to a researcher. The committee, Mike Corbett and Liesl Gambold. The external examiner, Amy Price Azano. My colleagues at Dalhousie, especially Rachel McLay and Alyssa Gerhardt, who made this process a lot less lonely. Leola and Rachelle, the backbone of the SOSA department. Dominic Silvio, the library's subject liaison. Paul MacKay at the King's Co-op Bookstore. Kala, Janice, Adam, Vanessa, and the others at the Dalhousie Writing Centre. My colleagues and the students at St. Stephen's University, who showed me that small is beautiful. The folks at CRRF, who have created a community for rural researchers in Canada. Maurice, who is a welcome companion while working from home. My family, who show me endless care. Aaron, who has been my number one cheerleader throughout this process. While his emotional support and verbal encouragement was important, what made the greatest material impact on me was the fact that he has taken care of the major household expenses for the past few years. This dissertation represents one of the worst financial choices of my life, and for some unknown reason, my husband has supported this decision. Aaron: Thank you. I love you.

And most importantly, the people of Maitland and Petite Rivière, who graciously shared their stories with me. I hope I have done them justice.

Chapter 1. Introduction

"If the community lost the school, it felt like it was really going to be... having the heart cut out of the place," Alan[1] said of the rural village of Petite Rivière, on Nova Scotia's South Shore. This idea—that the local school is the "lifeblood" of a rural community, has been repeated frequently by people living in communities where schools are under threat of closure. And while a powerful statement, this assertion requires investigation. What is it about schools that make people fight so hard to save them? And if schools really are at the heart of rural communities, then why do school boards and governments decide to close them? This dissertation aims to answer these questions, through case studies of two rural school closure conflicts in Nova Scotia.

In the 2010s, rural schools in Nova Scotia were vulnerable to closure: low enrolments in rural schools, aging school buildings, economic woes in the province as a whole, and austerity policies that squeezed government budgets meant that school boards had to look for somewhere to cut the budget, and small rural schools were an obvious choice. But school board decisions to close rural schools were not popular, and were met with resistance from community members. As the following chapters show, for the small villages of Maitland and Petite Rivière, the conflict around school closures

[1] All names of interview participants are pseudonyms.

was not just about the schools. Rather, it represented a conflict over values and community identity.

Rural sociologists David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft characterize school closure conflicts and other rural policy conflicts as a debate between efficiency advocates and equity advocates (2019). For efficiency advocates, the quest for economic development in the country as a whole means that regions must compete for jobs and investment, and regions falling behind is necessary in an increasingly efficient and prosperous economy. Equity advocates, on the other hand, are willing to accept slower growth if it means that growth is spread more evenly across space. The efficiency view of regional development is a hallmark of neoliberalism, which can be described as "the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 350). While this is a global phenomenon, there is a small but significant Canadian literature critiquing neoliberalism (Corbett, 2014a; Foster, 2016; Pinto, 2015; Shaker, 2018). The ideology of neoliberalism has been widely adopted by government agencies around the world, including in the Atlantic Canadian region, which has traditionally been underdeveloped compared to the rest of Canada (Foster, 2016).

The case studies in this dissertation are in rural Atlantic Canada—these two dimensions of place (rural and Atlantic Canadian) situate Maitland and Petite Rivière on the periphery of the centres of economic growth. The word *rural* itself contains connotations of backwardness, being on the periphery, and being outside of modernity

and growth. Rural places are seen as refuges from the efficiency and competitiveness that characterize neoliberalism (Kelly, 2013). Rural culture has been described by a number of social scientists in various areas of the world (Halperin, 1990; Polanyi, 1957; J. C. Scott, 1976; Tönnies, 1957), and while there are differences in theory and locale among these scholars, they agree that what distinguishes rural or peasant economies from urban economies is their emphasis on social relations and long-term survival over economic growth. And while this sort of ethic may be viewed nostalgically, and can serve to develop cultural tourism or foster a national identity (McKay, 1994), it is more often seen by policymakers as a limitation to economic development.

This is particularly relevant in Atlantic Canada, a region that has struggled to reach the same levels of productivity as the rest of the country. While some have argued that the uneven development of this region is a structural issue (Burrill & McKay, 1987; Fairley et al., 1990), others—including those making recommendations to government—believe that the region is a place of latent economic potential (Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, 2020). The events in the case studies outlined below mainly take place in the ten-year period between 2008 and 2018, a time that, in Nova Scotia, was characterized by a recession and dire predictions of economic doom (Ivany et al., 2014; Mills, 2015; Steele, 2021). Informed by neoliberal ideas of governance, successive provincial governments presented budgets that were meant to grow the provincial economy and decrease the provincial debt. This was often accomplished through decreasing public expenditures, including education expenditures.

Freezes or decreases in education spending at the provincial level translated to tight budgets for the eight elected school boards who were in charge of the operations of public primary and secondary schools in Nova Scotia. Unable to increase revenue, and with limited options for saving money, they turned to school consolidation as a solution. Small rural schools, which tended to have a higher per-pupil cost than larger schools, were vulnerable to closure. In the rural communities where schools were in danger of closing, people were used to being the losers in the zero-sum game of efficiency and regional competitiveness. While the Nova Scotian government's goal was economic growth, austerity budgets ensured that rural Nova Scotia would continue to be left behind. If there was low school enrolment, it often was preceded by years of economic and demographic decline. But, as researchers have shown, the presence of any school in a community has important social benefits. Schools are an important part of community identity and the building of strong social ties (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Kearns et al., 2009)—intangible things that may be particularly important for people living rurally. And, research from some other regions around the world shows that school closures can be correlated with negative population effects (Elshof et al., 2015; Lehtonen, 2021).

This dissertation explores the tension between the ideas of rural school closures as a practical, efficient choice for a have-not province, and rural school closures as devastating blow to specific communities. In Maitland, the primary justification that the school board gave for school closures—cutting rural schools would free up funds for programs in other areas of the region—was accepted by some community members and

strongly opposed by others. Those who opposed it appealed to ideas about valuing children and the school's important role in community cohesion. In Petite Rivière, the circumstances around the school closure conflict were different, but opponents of the school closure also appealed to ideas about the role of the school and sense of justice (See also Corbett & Helmer, 2017). In both villages, participants felt strongly about the resilience and strength of their community, and saw the school as integral to that.

In both communities, there were many opportunities for community members to add their comments and grievances throughout the process of school closure. And while school board members—some of whom lived in the school districts of schools facing closure—understood the perspective of community members, this perspective did not affect the ultimate decision-making on school closures. Maitland and Petite residents had *participation without power.* There were plenty of opportunities for public comments throughout the school closure process, but the school boards were constrained by working within a neoliberal, bureaucratic system, one that did not have much room for small rural schools. Much of what community members valued about their schools—such as place-based education and the connection between the community and the school—was not seen as relevant in the debate over school closure, even if school board members themselves shared those sentiments.

This dissertation explores the school closure conflicts in Maitland and Petite Rivière in-depth, and sets them within the context of rural schools, rural areas in general, and Nova Scotia in the 2010s in particular. It begins, in Chapter 2, with an

examination of the *idea* of a rural community. I introduce the concept of the rural idyll and posit that the definition of rurality is intrinsically connected to backwardness and nostalgia. Later in Chapter 2, I look at the position of rural regions within a neoliberal political and economic context. Specifically, I show how an ideology that privileges private sector growth, competitiveness, and efficiency leads to economic development happening unevenly across space and populations, and I demonstrate that this has been true in the rural Atlantic Canadian context, which lags behind the rest of the country on many economic indicators.

In Chapter 3, I shift attention to the rural school context, referring to academic literature from around the world on the roles of a rural school in its community, including the education, social capital, and social reproductive roles. Chapter 3 also details the arguments for and against school closure, and evaluates the evidence for these arguments. The literature does not come to a consensus on the impact on public finances, student learning, or the local community when schools close, indicating that there is a need for more research, and a nuanced qualitative analysis.

Chapter 4 introduces the case study methods used in this dissertation. Because of the complex and contextual nature of rural school closures, case study methods can help scholars gain a deeper understanding of these situations. Chapter 5 contextualizes the Maitland and Petite Rivière school closure struggles within the Nova Scotia education system. The wave of school closures in the 2010s was not the first in Nova Scotia, and the resistance in Maitland and Petite follows a long tradition of clashes

between those who govern schooling and the people they serve. To illustrate this, the chapter includes two brief sketches of other Nova Scotian rural communities where there was a conflict over school closures.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 present the case studies of the Maitland District Elementary School and the Petite Rivière Elementary School closure conflicts. Both conflicts occurred in Nova Scotia in the 2010s in rural communities, but there are important differences. While there were passionate parents, students, school staff, and community members in both communities fighting for the schools to remain open, only the school in Petite remains open today. The case studies analyze the school closure conflicts, drawing on school board and government documents and participant interviews. While each case study uniquely reflects each community's situation—including the important difference that the Maitland school closed, while the Petite school remained open—the reasons that participants gave for wanting to save the schools were similar, and people in both communities connected school closure with rural decline.

Chapter 8 revisits my research questions in light of the Maitland and Petite case studies. I discuss how community members viewed the role of their school, and how these views both fit into neoliberal ideas of rurality, and challenged neoliberal ideas of progress. Then, I discuss the school boards' reasons for closing the school, paying special attention to the ways in which school closure was positioned as being *for the public good*, despite representing a loss for rural communities.

This in-depth qualitative study of two rural school closure conflicts challenges the conclusion that small schools represent a cost for the public. Rural schools are an important part of resilience in small communities, and closure of them is only inevitable when these community roles are not taken into account by decision-makers.

The context of this study is rural Nova Scotia, at a time when rural Nova Scotia was unquestionably experiencing population decline. Today, a confluence of factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in immigration policy mean that the context is more complex: The province has a whole has grown in population, and while much growth is concentrated in Halifax (the capital and largest city), some rural areas have also felt this growth (Government of Canada, 2022). The story of rural Nova Scotia in the 21st Century is not just one of decline, despite the situation in the 2010s.

Chapter 2. Rurality, economy, and Atlantic Canada

Rural school closures typically happen within a context of rural depopulation and economic hardship. When a rural community faces the loss of a school, it is likely that they have already lost other local services. This type of process is not unique to Nova Scotia, but the closure of a Nova Scotian rural school must be considered in the context of rural areas generally, and rural Nova Scotia specifically. Urbanization and centralization—and the converse, rural decline—are an expected result of economic growth. Historically, economic development in industrialized countries has resulted in urbanization: in urban areas growing faster than rural areas. This history means that the popular understanding of *rural* is associated with places that people leave behind when the economy is booming elsewhere. Below, I explore cultural ideas about what it means to be rural, and how rural places are seen by the public. Widespread popular narratives that position Atlantic Canadian rural places as underdeveloped translate into policy decisions that turn these narratives into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And while traditional values associated with rurality are celebrated by tourists looking for an authentic experience (George & Reid, 2005; McKay, 1994) or by politicians trying to foster a national culture (McKay & Bates, 2010) when rural people actually display these values it is seen as just more evidence that they are anti-growth.

Meanwhile, public policy choices show that economic growth is a top priority of Western governments (Foster, 2016). The reification of neoliberal economics into public policy has led to decades of decisions to cut public spending in favour of supporting the

private market. For governments at every level, investment in public services is a good policy choice insofar as it leads to an increase in economic growth. Thus, public services are vulnerable to vagaries of the market. This context fuels the economically precarious conditions that threaten public institutions like schools in peripheral areas (Corbett, 2014a).

In this chapter, I explore the background of the related processes of rural decline and economic development, and then focus on the Nova Scotia context. Nova Scotia's specific history of underdevelopment compounds the issues felt by rural communities in general.

2.1 Defining rural, nostalgia, and the rural idyll

Rural is both a geographic classification and a cultural classification (Woods, 2010). Ideas about what rural places represent colour how such places are treated and governed. Bell refers to these—the locations and the ideas—as the "material moment of the rural" (Bell, 2007, p. 408) and the "rural of associations" (Bell, 2007, p. 409), respectively. As rural change occurs and the material moment of the rural – the place – shifts, so do the cultural conceptions of the meaning of rurality. In Canada today, rural as a cultural classification is tied to ideas of decline, loss, and nostalgia.

The most authoritative Canadian geographical classification of rural comes from Statistics Canada, which deems any area with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and a population density of less than 400 people per square kilometre to be rural (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, most who adopt this classification understand that it is

imperfect. Statistics Canada researcher Ray Bollman theorizes that there are two main determinants of rurality: density, and distance to density (Bollman & Reimer, 2018; Bollman, 2022). Density is self-evident: it is a measure of inhabitants per kilometre square; distance-to-density is a measure of how far a locality is from other, denser settlements. Bollman proposes that this be measured in the *cost of travel* rather than the actual distance because that better reflects how distance is experienced and the barriers to service delivery. Thus, like other human geographic terms, rurality is not a category of the *land*—it is a category based on people's relationships with the land. And these relationships are not static; however we define rural, the same piece of land may shift from rural to urban and back again many times. It is not essentially either rural or urban, but it is made so. Even Statistics Canada's quantitative definition of rural is based on a qualitative idea of what a rural place should be—small, remote, and sparsely populated.[2]

For British geographer Keith Halfacree, neither "locality" definitions of rural—that is, definitions based on "the distinctiveness of one or more of the following: agriculture and other primary productive activities, low population density and physical inaccessibility, and consumption behaviour" (Halfacree, 2006, p. 47)—nor "social

[2] Statistics Canada also uses the geographical concept of "metropolitan influenced zone," (MIZ) which measures the percentage of the workforce in a given census subdivision who works in the core of a census metropolitan area or census agglomeration, and categorizes census subdivisions on a scale from "strong metropolitan influenced zone" to "no metropolitan influenced zone." While this is a useful classification for rural researchers, the MIZ definition is distinct from Statistics Canada's definition of 'rural.' (Statistics Canada, 2021)

representation of space" definitions of rural—that is, definitions based on perceived aesthetic and social contrasts from other spaces—are sufficient to describe "a totality of rural space that, typical of everyday experience with capitalism, appears increasingly fragmented, and partially and poorly known" (Halfacree, 2007, p. 127). Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Halfacree thus proposes a conceptual triad to describe rural space, foregrounding the tensions inherent in the idea of rural. This understanding is based on a threefold conception of rural: rural localities, formal representations of the rural, and everyday lives of the rural. In any place, there may be some congruence or agreement among all three facets, or there may be disjointedness or incoherence. This threefold model helps illustrate the dynamism of rural space.

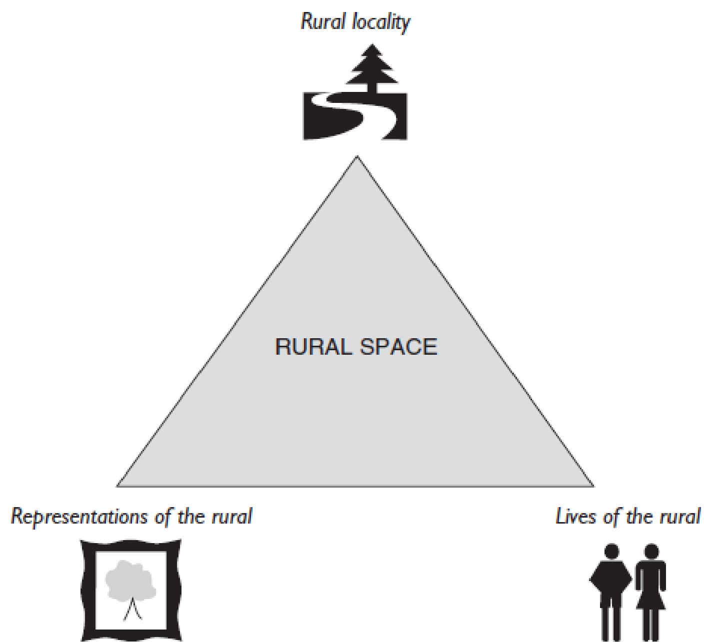

Figure 1. Halfacree's three-fold definition of rural. (Halfacree, 2006)

Thus, “urban” and “rural” are two categories of space with opposite definitions, but there are many spaces that do not fit neatly into either category. Nevertheless, the binary can be a useful category of analysis, and in what follows I use this contrast to analyze key moments in the history of Europe and Canada when differences between urban and rural, between the city and the countryside, were created at the same time as they were destroyed. That history shows that we start paying attention to rural culture and livelihoods at the moment they are under threat; ways of life that were previously ordinary enough to go unexamined become othered. For much of human history, the majority of people lived in small communities and engaged in subsistence activities. Colonization and the industrial revolution led to a social upheaval that changed these traditional ways of life, and whenever change occurred, it brought the contrast between rural and urban places into focus. Here it is important to note that while changes and upheaval may transform rurality into a marginal identity, there continue to be identities that are marginalized within rurality (such as the large rural Indigenous population in Canada).

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, enclosure policies in Britain—turning common land worked by peasants into private land for landowners to profit from—combined with industrial technological advancements and the advent of a market economic ethic to transform rural life. While this research focuses on rural Canada, it is important to understand the British context as British ideas of land and citizenship influenced—and continue to influence—Canadian colonization (see for example James

Murton's history of land resettlement in British Columbia after World War I (2007)). Present ideas of rurality, even in Canada, can be traced to enclosure and the Industrial Revolution in Britain. As for enclosure, Neeson (1996) argues that while enclosing common land may have increased narrowly defined economic efficiency in Britain, it eroded the complex moral economy of the English countryside, including previously taken-for-granted norms of interdependence and mutual aid. Importantly, it was in this moment of social change that the concept of the rural became more distinct. As Neeson writes, "peasant consciousness, lived daily in the routines and expectations of common-field agriculture and common right, was nowhere so well expressed as when peasant economy was in the process of being extinguished" (p. 328). Indeed, it is hardly a coincidence that the Romantics emerged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, with their reflections on nature and the countryside as a sacred place: Blake's "England's green and pleasant land" contrasted with the "dark Satanic mills" in the industrial towns.

It is well-established in human geography literature that urbanization is a *result* of industrial capitalism, and Britain serves as an example of this. For instance, English historian W. G. Hoskins, writing about the early Industrial Revolution in 18th century Britain, says:

> Mills arose in the remote valleys below the moors, and hamlets and villages quickly clustered around them. But established towns too were advancing over the surrounding fields. Trees and hedges were torn up, red-brick or grit-stone

> streets, short and straight, multiplied every year, even before the age of steam: Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, all were on the move. (Hoskins, 2008, p. 109)

Urbanization did not just mean rural people moving from the countryside to towns, but the transformation of the countryside into industrial towns. In Britain, this capitalist transformation could mean that someone could be born a peasant, working to subsist in the countryside, and die an industrial wage labourer—without ever traveling from their birthplace. In the hundred years between 1750 and 1851, the percentage of Britain's population working in agriculture went from 75 percent to 21 percent (Short, 2006, p. 137). Urbanization was not just a change in geography as people moved from the countryside to towns and cities to be factory workers, or as places themselves urbanized, but it was change in the way people spent their time and understood it. Urry and Larsen (2011) write "particularly in the newly emerging industrial workplaces and cities, work came to be organised as a relatively time-bound and space-bound activity, separated off from play, religion and festivity. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries work was increasingly valued for its own sake and not merely as a remedy for idleness." The social historian E.P. Thompson describes the process of industrialization and urbanization in Britain as exceptionally violent:

> The experience of immiseration came upon [workers] in a hundred different forms; for the field labourer, the loss of his common rights and the vestiges of village democracy; for the artisan, the loss of his craftsman's status; for the

> weaver, the loss of livelihood and of independence; for the child, the loss of work and play in the home; for many groups of workers whose real earnings improved, the loss of security, leisure and the deterioration of the urban environment (Thompson, 1980, p. 487).

That nostalgic ideas about the countryside became prominent in Britain at the time of this great upheaval is not surprising.

Canada experienced a similar shift from a primarily rural to a primarily urban population, though this shift occurred later, as early industrialization was reliant on labour-intensive resource extraction in rural places (Sandwell, 2013). But by the 1940s,

> Improved labour legislation, changing managerial practices, and the increasing profitability of resource industries encouraged many rural workers to give up their part-time farms in exchange for the high wages and steady jobs now promised by these industries and with them the homes in new factory, mine, and mill towns (Sandwell, 2013, p. 38).

As established above, industrialization led to urbanization—more people living in cities than before. As Corbett (2001) writes "urbanisation is intimately connected to the development of capitalism and the state itself" (p. 28). And environmental historian Andreas Malm writes "industrial capital hinges upon a popular exodus from the countryside"(Malm, 2016, p. 298). While cities occupy much of the attention in analyses of industrialization and the intensification of capitalism, rurality *as an idea* is also created in these moments and by the same forces. The rural idyll—the idea of rural

places as a peaceful countryside, associated with simplicity, safety, proximity to natural beauty, and a strong feeling of community—is a reactionary vision based on the perceived loss of that idyll. Geographer Michael Woods (2010) writes "The rural idyll fed on discourses of anti-urbanism, agrarianism and nature that were used to differentiate between the urban present and a romanticized rural past, particularly by nostalgic urban residents" (p. 21). In *The Handbook of Rural Studies*, Brian Short adds "the rural idyll, as portrayed by creative artistic convention, may be seen to be omnipresent at most, if not all times in Western urban consciousness, but to emerge most strong as a discourse… at particular historical moments of crisis in urban society" (Short, 2006, p. 146). Idyllic associations of the rural have existed throughout Western history, but moments of uncertainty and upheaval—like the Industrial Revolution in Britain—draw renewed interest in the rural idyll (Williams, 1973). While the rural idyll representation of rural space is a one-dimensional view, it remains true that industrialization and urbanization brought much social change, and loss of previous ways of life—the rural idyll is just one way of understanding this change. The idyllic vision of rurality is useful, not as a description of rural places, but as a glimpse into widespread anxieties in times of social turmoil.

The intensification of capitalism and urbanization around industrialization challenged many rural lifeways, including what James C. Scott (1976) calls a "subsistence ethic," which these broad societal changes supplanted with a market ethic. While Scott's observations of this peasant or rural ethic was based on a Southeast Asian example,

American anthropologist Rhoda H. Halperin observed working-class people in Appalachia referring to a similar livelihood strategy as “The Kentucky Way.” According to Halperin, this includes “commitments to kin, to hard work and self-sufficiency, to freedom and to the land, to generosity and reciprocity, and to certain kinds of practical knowledge” (Halperin, 1990, p. 11). Halperin’s informants urge her to study the Kentucky Way before it disappears. The political economist Karl Polanyi observed a similar displacement in Britain, but he called the old ethic “habitation” and the new one “improvement” (Polanyi, 1957). Meanwhile, first published in 1887, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ influential work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* categorized society into two distinct types of groups: “Gemeinschaft” and “Gessellschaft” (community and society) (Tönnies, 1957). Gemeinschaft (“community”) represents relations among kin and neighbours who organize their life together organically and hold goods in common, while Gesellschaft represents relations among firms or associations who organize the economy based on markets and contracts. For Tönnies, these different social groupings represented a difference between tradition and modernity, as well as a difference between villages and cities.

A habitation or subsistence ethic sees the purpose of land and labour as the sustenance of life, while an improvement or market ethic sees the purpose of land and labour as the maximization of profits. Polanyi argues that the institution of a primarily market economy replaced prior economic forms that were based on the embeddedness of the economy into social relations. Put simply, in a subsistence or habitation ethic, the

purpose of work and consumption is the reproduction of life, while in a market ethic the purpose of work and consumption is continuous growth, including increased consumption. As Polanyi shows, within societies with a habitation ethic, individuals make economic choices that favour the long-term survival of a community, even if these choices may seem to be economically disadvantageous to the individual in the short-term. The process of industrialization and urbanization subsumes society into the market economy. For rural places, this shift leads to depopulation: maximizing the profit that can be extracted from land tends to mean monoculture and minimizing the amount of labour needed to work that land.

As an actual space or way of life, rurality is fundamentally threatened by the same developments that served to define it more clearly. To use Bell's language, as the material moment of the rural is threatened by urbanization, the rural of associations sharpens. And this has implications for the study of rural places, as Marc Mormont has argued:

> It is of fundamental importance to realize that the classification which delimits the field of rural sociology is based on a representation of the social, on a social mythology that sees both peasant and village as the opposite of the predominant social world: positively, where the aim is to promote the moral and social values of rural civilization and negatively, where the aim is to ensure integration into the socio-economic world (Mormont, 1990)

It is in the mobility from countryside to city, and in the radical change in lifestyle from peasant to wage worker, that rurality is defined. The transformation of rural life then precipitated—and continues to precipitate—a nostalgia for that life. For people other than the rural working class, rural places become places of leisure rather than places of work. The problem with nostalgia is that it tends to look back on a past that exists only in the imagination. While this may seem like a problem relegated to the sphere of 'culture', it has political and economic implications, which can be explained through a further look at the rural idyll.

Many scholars have linked nostalgia and the rural idyll, including Ian McKay in his essential text *The Quest of the Folk,* which interrogates idyllic images of Nova Scotia. For McKay, the construction of the rural folk in Nova Scotia was a deliberate choice on the part of mainly urban middle-class people. Rural people are often seen as backwards, and whether this is a good thing (nostalgically) or a negative thing (hicks, bumpkins, yokels), the idea that rural places and people might exist in the future and not just the past is not typically part of the cultural classification of rural. Decline, loss, and nostalgia have, for over 150 years, been built into our very ideas of what being rural is. As McKay writes, "When the twentieth-century intellectuals… described rural backwardness, they did so with the effusive fondness of grown-ups describing a childlike world they had already left far behind. When they looked upon a fishing family's humble abode, they saw not rural poverty but the simple life" (McKay, 1994, p.226). Expanding upon the idea of the relationship between folk and tourism in Nova Scotia, McKay and Bates claim that Nova

Scotia “came more and more to be defined as a therapeutic space, the playground wherein stressed-out urbanites regained their vital energies” (McKay & Bates, 2010, p. 378). In this way, rural Nova Scotia is both taken for granted, and is valued as ‘Canada’s Ocean Playground’ where visitors can enjoy a romantic countryside. This is where the rural idyll shapes social, political and economic outcomes: if the public, and policymakers, have an idea that rural places are inherently associated with the past, then it is easier to make decisions that continue to limit future possibilities for these places, contributing to rural decline. And while rural people are not a monolith and in many cases do not *want* to be in a place with a declining economy, this choice is not up to them.

2.2 Neoliberalism and rural development

Rural loss may be an inevitable part of capitalist development—in a system that valorizes profits and productivity, rural communities need to fight for their survival. The transformation from a subsistence/habitation society to a market economy is an ongoing process: it is not just a historical event. And while peasant and working-class people around the world fought against this often-violent transformation at various points throughout history, and continue to fight it, the primacy of the market has, by most measures, triumphed (though as some have argued, there are more peasants today than ever before, even if the proportion of people who are peasants has decreased (Edelman, 2024). And one indication of this triumph is the way that the notion of the market as the best or most efficient arbiter the social good has come to be

almost unquestionable. According to Somers and Block (2014), the market has become so central to understandings of how the world works and ought to work as to form a "market fundamentalist ideational regime" that dictates what can and cannot be said and done. An ideational regime is the primary narrative that nations tell themselves about the *whys* of society, and because this narrative is central to national and cultural identity, questioning it seems impossible.

Many have identified neoliberalism as the dominant economic idea of the past forty years, and while there are contested definitions of neoliberalism in the literature (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Chouhy, 2019; Mudge, 2008; Venugopal, 2015), one way of describing neoliberal thinking is market fundamentalism. Margaret Somers claims that the latter is the unshakeable ideational regime at work in our society. Market fundamentalism is a term to describe the economic ideology of neoliberalism, the language of 'fundamentalism' alluding to religious fanaticism that does not allow for any heterodox views. In this dissertation, I use both 'neoliberalism' and 'market fundamentalism' to describe the view that economic growth within a free market is the most important goal in society, economy, and politics. As Somers writes, market fundamentalism

> is fixated on dissolving the boundaries between the market and the domains of civil society, the public sphere, and the polity. Its goal is to privatize, to avoid all forms of regulation and above all to marketize those public goods and services such as health care, education, and pollution control….(Somers, 2008, p. 77).

Because this view is an ideational regime, it means that it is nearly impossible to question: it is taken for granted, seen as common sense. Market fundamentalism is the market ethic taken to the extreme: not only is it more efficient for everything to be part of the free market, but it also will result in everybody being more well-off—the wealth will 'trickle-down' from capital owners to the working class. Scholars have studied the assumptions and effects of neoliberalism, and market fundamentalism, across many different institutions, and for the purposes of this thesis, those who have assessed its impacts on education are most relevant.

Importantly, education scholars across the world have pointed to similar impacts, highlighting the global reach and uniformity of neoliberalism. For example, New Zealand education researcher Michael A. Peters describes the global neoliberal project thusly:

> During the 1980s a distinctive strand of neoliberalism emerged as the dominant paradigm of public policy in the West and continues to exert influence: citizens were redefined as individual consumers of newly competitive public services with the consequence that 'welfare rights' have become commodified as consumer rights; the public sector itself underwent considerable 'downsizing' as governments pursued an agenda of commercialisation, corporatisation and incremental privatisation; and often management of public services, following principles of 'new public management' and emulating private sector styles, was

> delegated rather than genuinely devolved, while executive power became concentrated even more at the centre. (Peters, 2011, p. 5)

This means that public services—like education—are increasingly under threat of losing public funding, and ultimately under threat of privatization. As Erika Shaker writes in the Canadian context:

> When balanced-budget rhetoric took hold at the federal and provincial levels in the 1990s, social spending became a key target. As a result, social programs and public institutions, and those who depend on them, became casualties of the neoliberal agenda. Where education was concerned, this resulted in insufficient funding and under-resourced schools, tangibly felt in overcrowded classrooms, fewer resources, delayed maintenance, and school closures (Shaker, 2018).

School closures, in this view, are a result of the neoliberal policy push towards government austerity. I will discuss this further below. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on rural school closures. Schools in rural areas are doubly vulnerable, because both public institutions and rural communities are at risk under neoliberalism. Writing about rural schools, Michael Corbett writes: "the story seems to be similar around the world where the management of flows of mobile individuals, rather than the sustenance of community and rural stewardship, seems to be the order of the day" (Corbett, 2014a, p. 626).

Under neoliberalism, the aim of public policy is to ensure regions succeed in a global free market—increased GDP or increased GDP growth rate are the goals. For

neoliberals, economic growth and productivity means prosperity and desirable social outcomes. However, efficiency does not mean equality, and there are always losers in the quest for efficiency. And while the goal of neoliberalism is ostensibly increased growth (which will apparently lead to us all being better off), this growth is geographically uneven. Competition in the global free market means that regions must increase their productivity relative to other places. Public services are useful inasmuch as they help make a region competitive. For example, the website for the Nova Scotia Department of Economic Development shows their primary responsibility as "working to help make Nova Scotia competitive and business-friendly" (Communications Nova Scotia, 2018a). If economic growth relies on competition, this leaves rural places vulnerable if they cannot compete in a global free market.

The impact of neoliberalism on rural places is articulated by Shucksmith: "under neoliberalism, states have withdrawn increasingly from their commitment to universal social rights, introducing conditionalities and withdrawing public services and entitlements from rural areas" (Shucksmith, 2018, p. 168). Public services can be more expensive to deliver in rural areas—that is, if the delivery mechanism is the same as in urban areas—thus it is deemed inefficient to invest in a place where the return on investment may not be as much as compared to other places. Meanwhile, striving to be "competitive" and "business-friendly" does not necessarily translate to benefits among rural residents themselves, and even if a region does find economic success in terms of increased GDP growth, this growth is felt unevenly across a population.

The closure of rural schools is consistent with neoliberal economic development orthodoxy— of states prioritizing that which leads to economic growth rather than other goals. In the pursuit of economic efficiency, public space is turned into private space; space that is unproductive in a market economy is turned into productive space—that is, profit-generating space. Schools, in contrast, represent a cost to the public. It is far more efficient, for the government, to make use of economies of scale in schooling—to increase the number of students served relative to the amounts of land, labour, and capital that are 'inputted' to create a school program. When schools close, the costs of inefficiencies are transferred to the individuals living rurally—whether those are costs in travel or time. School closures assume that people can absorb the costs or pick up stakes and leave. These assumptions convey a message: to live rurally is a choice, and in combination with the rural idyll, it is a choice to live in a shrinking, disappearing place. If people want schools and a reasonable level of public services, they can move to a more competitive region, with a future.

For a proponent of neoliberalism, the tendency of capital to flow away from a region is a result of a region not being competitive enough in a free market. The pressure on rural areas, just like on urban areas, is to move toward a future in which the exploitation of land and labour are maximized. In the business world, this often means making use of specialization and economies of scale. In this view of the future, the rural decline that is the foundation of the rural idyll is just a byproduct of progress, and the loss of public services like rural schools is an inevitability in the search for efficiency; the

loss of public schools keeps ‘the rural of associations’ the way it is. As Brown and Schafft write:

> Efficiency advocates believe that rural underdevelopment is an integral part of the process of capitalist economic development. They argue that rural economies are inefficient, and that capital is appropriately flowing from less efficient rural locations to more efficient urban economies where returns on investment are higher. Workers are viewed as inputs in the production process who will gladly move to improve their material wellbeing…. Communities, hence, are viewed as interchangeable sites of production not as valued social contexts (Brown & Schafft, 2019, p. 300).

If capital and labour are highly mobile in the 21st Century, and if capital and labour are meant to flow to places where profit can be maximized, and if rural places are not the places where profit can be maximized, then rural decline is inevitable. Individuals will act rationally and move to a location where they have the best opportunities, while places without good economic opportunities will necessarily decline. And this is reflected in global migration flows. But people who, for whatever reason, live in rural places, challenge this pattern. Brown and Shafft describe the opposite of the “efficiency” view as the “equity” view, which includes a belief that place matters, and people should have a right to live rurally and access public services there, even if this reduces overall rate of economic growth in a country.

The work of Karen Foster (2016) suggests that efficiency and rural decline are linked in rural Atlantic Canada, where my thesis is situated. Writing about the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), the federal agency tasked with the economic development of the Atlantic provinces, she writes:

> We are talking, here, about the convergence of liberal individualism, market fundamentalism, and productivism, which has given rise to the belief that productivity and economic growth do not necessarily lead to prosperity for all, but do lead to a set of *opportunities* to prosper, for which people and communities of all size must compete. That is the understanding of economics that underpins ACOA's various programs and public relations, and indeed the activities of many other government apparatuses around the turn of the twenty-first century (p. 177).

For ACOA and other regional economic development agencies, the goal is to increase economic growth by competing in the global economy. But not every place will be competitive in the global economy (Polese & Shearmur, 2006). And as Gillian Bristow has argued, the language of competitiveness in regional development is more of a rhetorical device than empirical fact:

> regional competitiveness is deployed in a strategic and persuasive way, often in conjunction with other discourses (notably globalisation) to legitimate specific policy initiatives and courses of action. The rhetoric of regional competitiveness serves a useful political purpose in that it is easier to justify change or the

adoption of a particular course of policy action by reference to some external threat that makes change seem inevitable (Bristow, 2005, p. 300).

The neoliberal discourse of regional competitiveness puts the onus on regions—including rural regions—and positions the economy as a zero-sum game, with the prosperity of one region meaning the decline of another. This ideology is implicit in Nova Scotia's current economic development orthodoxy, which I will address more in Section 2.3. Although regional competitiveness is difficult to find conclusive evidence for, it nonetheless serves as an important motivator for policymakers, who may ask: Why would capital and labour come to rural Nova Scotia, when they could go elsewhere? For rural places, left behind in the market, what is next?

2.3 Rural Atlantic Canadian context

While Canada's development after colonization was one traditionally based on resource industries ("hewers of wood and drawers of water," as Harold Innis' reference to the Bible says (Innis, 1999)), urbanization still continued as in other industrialized countries. At the time of confederation, over 80 percent of Canadians lived rurally; now, this figure is flipped, with over 80 percent of Canadians living in urban areas (Government of Canada, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2022). Worldwide, 43 percent of people live in rural areas, but Canada's level of urbanization is in line with other OECD countries (World Bank, 2022). In real terms, the population of rural Canada has been growing, but this growth is not on pace with the population growth of urban Canada (Rich et al., 2021). In Atlantic Canada, the pace of urbanization has been slower than

other regions. The percentage of population living rurally is higher in the Atlantic Provinces than in Canada as a whole—see Table 1 for comparison among provinces.

Table 1. Percentage of population living in rural areas, Canada and provinces. (Statistics Canada, 2022). Atlantic Provinces shaded.

	2011	2016	2021
	Percentage of population living in rural areas		
Canada	18.9	18.7	17.8
Newfoundland and Labrador	40.6	41.9	40.0
Prince Edward Island	53.3	54.9	54.0
Nova Scotia	43.4	42.6	41.1
New Brunswick	47.5	51.0	49.1
Quebec	19.4	19.5	19.0
Ontario	14.1	13.8	13.3
Manitoba	27.6	26.8	25.3
Saskatchewan	33.2	33.2	31.7
Alberta	16.9	16.4	15.2
British Columbia	13.8	13.6	12.7
Yukon	39.3	39.4	36.4
Northwest Territories	40.8	35.9	34.7
Nunavut	51.8	51.0	54.9

This dissertation focuses on Nova Scotia, where the trend towards urbanization is slower compared to Canada as a whole, as is the rate of economic growth; these two areas where the province lags behind the rest of Canada are intimately related. Some call the Atlantic Provinces, of which Nova Scotia is a part, the 'have-not' provinces, and equalization payments tend to flow to them (Feehan, 2020). Pundits try to solve the problem of Atlantic Canada; politicians blame slow economic growth on the "defeatist attitude" in the region (CBC, 2002). There have been various attempts by the federal

government to increase productivity and growth in the Atlantic Region over the years, as Foster (2016) outlines. There is also a large tradition of scholarship trying to understand why there is such a discrepancy in development between the region and elsewhere in Canada.

The region's "underdevelopment" was studied in-depth in the late 20th century by political economists who focused on Atlantic Canada, often from a Marxist perspective (Apostle & Barrett, 1992; Brym & Sacouman, 1979; Burrill & McKay, 1987; Clow, 1984; Veltmeyer, 1978). For many in this school of thought, economic development in central Canada *depended* on the underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada and the exploitation of its raw materials and labour. The Maritime Political Economy scholars studying Atlantic Canada were influenced by the Dependency Theory of development popularized by Latin American Marxist thinkers. The latter suggests that dependency on 'core' countries hinders countries on the 'periphery' from developing, and power and economic growth flows from the core to the periphery. Countries at the core, the theory goes, need the peripheral countries to remain underdeveloped so the core countries can continue to exploit resources and labour from the periphery. Dependency Theory leads to the conclusion that the peripheral (colonized) countries will never reach their full economic potential unless they get out from under the thumb of the core (See Frank, 1969). The Maritime Political Economy tradition marshalled plenty of evidence to support this theory and apply it to Canada's east coast.

Veltmeyer (1978), for instance, took the Dependency Theory tenet that "peripheral areas are led to specialise in the production and export of raw materials necessary for industrial expansion at the centre," and argued that

> Canada has stood in the same relation first to England and then to the United States as the Atlantic region has stood in relation to the central provinces, and at a different level again, the rural areas stand in relation to urban centres (p. 60).

Additionally, drawing again on Marxist thought, some of these writers saw Atlantic Canada as a source of surplus labour. The occupational pluralism common in rural Atlantic Canada—that is, the fact that the average family provided for their livelihood through not only wage labour, but also some combination of farming, forestry, and fishing, and household production—meant that:

> the rural subsistence farming areas of the Maritimes have provided and still provide a major holding place, and feeding trough, for the production and reproduction of a relative surplus population—a holding area of cheap labour and a relatively secure place of return during capitalist crises (Sacouman, 1980, p. 237).

Because rural Maritimers relied on more than just wage labour for their livelihood, their wages could be kept low, except during times when they needed to be called upon during economic booms or labour shortages elsewhere in the country. In other words, the shift from a "subsistence" or "habitation" economy did not happen completely or all

at once, and in fact these rural livelihood strategies can be exploited within a market economy.

The Maritime Political Economy school shaped their critique around the Maritime Provinces as a whole, but the rural parts of the Maritimes including rural Nova Scotia can be seen, through their lens, as doubly economically disadvantaged—Atlantic Canada is at the periphery of the national economy, and rural areas are at the periphery of that. This is not to imply that rural Nova Scotians have accepted their underdevelopment and exploitation; to do that would be to ignore a history of resistance to exploitation, with the unionization of Cape Breton miners and the Antigonish Movement of co-operatives among fishers and farmers being two early-20th Century examples (See Coady, 1939; D. Frank, 1999; Sacouman, 1977). Still, the main tenets of the MPE school hold true and remain useful for understanding the situation in Nova Scotia today. The idea of Atlantic Canada as a source for surplus labour, for example, helps explain the large number of Atlantic Canadians who are interjurisdictional workers—that is, who live in one province and work in another. In 2016, for example, there were over 8,000 Nova Scotians who worked elsewhere in Canada—3,500 of them working in construction (Neil & Neis, 2020).

Nevertheless, the analysis of Atlantic Canadian underdevelopment put forward by the Maritime Political Economy school has been dwarfed, in the public sphere, by neoliberal analyses of economic development (Ivany et al., 2014; Savoie, 2017). If the Maritime Political Economy thinkers were concerned about equity—about class analysis

and the question of who benefits from rural Atlantic Canadian's goods and labour—neoliberal thinkers are concerned about efficiency—how to produce the most economic growth and remain competitive in a global economy.

One thing the MPE thinkers and the neoliberals could agree on is that Nova Scotia was facing economic crises in the mid-2010s. The recovery from the 2008 global recession was slow: a 2014 report on Nova Scotian youth employment found that "our provincial economy has created 31,000 jobs over the past five years, but only 2,000 of those represent jobs that did not exist before the recession (and all of those were part-time in nature)" (Parker & Foster, 2014). An aging population and youth outmigration meant that the government's already precarious financial situation was in danger of becoming a full-blown crisis. Some rural municipalities had already faced budget crises and were forced to amalgamate or be absorbed into larger communities. Rural health care centres struggled to retain doctors and nurses. As school board budgets tightened, these boards put many rural schools under review.

Amidst all this, an independent commission working closely with the public service in Nova Scotia published the Ivany Report in 2014. This document warned about imminent demise of rural Nova Scotia unless there was a significant stimulation of economic growth, claiming that "Nova Scotia, and particularly its rural regions, now hovers on the brink of serious economic and population decline unless macro-economic conditions improve and new growth drivers emerge in the near future" (p. 16). Focusing on economic growth and regional competitiveness, the report's framework for rural

development in Nova Scotia was a neoliberal one, downplaying the role of the state in creating or solving the conditions of regional decline, and placing the onus instead on individuals or communities. They wrote:

> While the continuing retreat of the federal government from a regional development role and fiscal weakness at the provincial level are serious constraints, the single most significant impediment to change and renewal is the lack of a shared vision and commitment to economic growth and renewal across our province (p. vii).

The implicit directive to the residents of Nova Scotia was that if they just worked harder, or were less resistant to change, then together they could solve economic and demographic problems. The focus on individual consumption or production choices rather than structural issues was criticized by some (MacEachen Institute for Public Policy & Governance, 2017), but still, the report maintains influence—there is an online dashboard at onens.ca where one can track progress on goals recommended in the Ivany Report and the website boasts membership from a number of powerful organizations in the province, including the provincial government itself, ACOA, and local universities. The 19 goals on the website all have to do with economic growth, including doubling tourist revenue, decreasing the net debt to GDP ratio, and increasing the labour force participation rate.

The main idea of the Ivany Report—that rural underdevelopment in Nova Scotia could be blamed by a lack of societal commitment to growth – would have stung the

people in communities like Maitland and Petite Rivière, where local public elementary schools were on the chopping block. In the rationale of the Ivany report—where individuals, especially their attitudes, are presented as a main barrier to growth—the loss of a school can be blamed on the communities themselves. And the 'rural of associations,' where resistance to growth is basically assumed, and its manifestation in the 'folk' in Nova Scotia, makes it easy to believe that rural decline was only to be expected. Within neoliberalism, a popular truism is "you either grow or you die." This does not bode well for the small rural communities and ecologies where populations and economies are not growing, but where people care about the place and spend their lives there.

While I agree that there is a connection between rural school closure and economic decline, I argue in this dissertation that schools themselves have an important role to play in community economic development. Communities are not losing schools because the people who live in those communities have a lack of commitment to economic growth. Rural school closures are a policy choice based on neoliberal ideas of government austerity, a rural idyll that restricts rurality to a shrinking past, and discourses of regional competitiveness. Within this context, rural communities are interchangeable and expendable—liabilities, rather than assets to the region as a whole—and the social and community impact of closing a school in a rural place is not taken into account by policymakers.

Chapter 3. The roles of a rural school

It is difficult to make an economic or efficiency argument in favour of the small rural school. In Canada, it is the responsibility of provincial governments to provide education, from kindergarten through secondary school, to their constituents. Like in most other domains of public services, provincial governments look for ways to keep costs down, and a preferred route is consolidation—pulling up stakes from small local delivery mechanisms and putting key services in a single, centralized spot that ostensibly serves a wide geographic area comprised of multiple communities. In rural areas, which may be sparsely populated and have aging populations, the cost of keeping a small school open is greater than in larger schools. In the case of small rural schools, there are higher infrastructure and staffing costs per student compared to larger schools with bigger geographic catchments. Crucially, while access to education is enshrined as a citizenship right by federal and provincial legislation, there is no definition of a reasonable distance to travel for said access (Foster & Jarman, 2022). In other words, a provincial government will be within their its mandate of providing education whether that education is delivered in a large consolidated school that buses students in from an hour away, or a small rural school that kids can walk to. This raises an obvious question: If the cost to the public to run a small rural school is higher than the cost of shuttering the school and transporting its students to a bigger school further away, then what possible argument is there for keeping a small rural school open?

This question echoes others in the rural research tradition seeking to understand the tensions between economic efficiency and social benefits, especially related to the changes in the agriculture industry from small family farms to larger industrial farms (e.g. Goldschmidt, 1978). Some scholars use the language of "multifunctionality" to talk about the multiple roles of farms (Huylenbroeck & Durand, 2003; Renting et al., 2009). For these scholars, multifunctional agriculture

> refers to the fact that agricultural activity beyond its role of producing food and fibre may also have several other functions such as the management of renewable natural resources, landscape, conservation of biodiversity and contribution to the socio-economic viability of rural areas (Renting et al., 2009, p. 5112).

The primary function of farms is food production, but rural researchers understand that there are multiple functions *other* than food production that farms—especially small farms—provide. Drawing from this tradition, I suggest that there are multiple community functions for schools other than the primary function of education. This dissertation views schools as multifunctional places with various roles in their communities, and explores the ways these multiple roles are taken into account by actors deciding the fate of the schools and the implications on multifunctionality when a school is lost. Thinking of a rural public school as a multifunctional place that has roles and meanings beyond the education of children helps us to understand why communities fight so hard to keep a school open, but also offers a rationale that could

counter appeals to cost savings and efficiencies. Through this exploration of various roles of schools, I aim to challenge the assumptions that policymakers make in their handling of rural school conflicts. In school closure conflicts, the problem is not that school boards make decisions without evidence. The problem is that school boards make decisions within a specific discursive frame, one based on ideas of rurality as backwards, government as responsible for supporting economic growth, regions as competitive, and schools as places for developing human capital. And while rural school closures may be rational within these assumptions, the assumptions are not necessarily shared by people in rural places.

3.1 Education

The primary function of a school is to provide education for children. Education may be for the purpose of preparing students for a career, for human development, or it may be to prepare students for citizenship. Every child has the right to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Canada is a signatory, affirms that everyone has the right to education, and that elementary education should be free (Assembly, 1948). Accessing public education is, then, an important citizenship right.

Universal primary education is important not only as an intrinsic right, but also for workforce development. Schooling inculcates *skills*, which are valuable to future employers and for the economic development of a region. People who graduate with higher skills are more productive, potentially meaning higher wages for them and higher profits for their employers. The free market depends on this skilled labour. Economists

refer to the kinds of skills and training that workers have as "human capital." For a government concerned with economic growth in their region, public schooling is a type of investment into human capital, and this investment is assumed to have a return in the future, in terms of greater efficiency and productivity.

Meanwhile, the education in a rural school in particular, when coordinated thoughtfully, may have unique benefits for learners, as Crumb et al. (2022) show. They argue that by taking an asset-based approach, rural schooling can offer better outcomes for students.

3.2 Social capital

Besides the education offered within, the presence of a rural school itself as a place to meet others in the community, a space to gather, and volunteer, may strengthen rural communities—increasing the social capital of residents. Social capital is the idea that networks of people are stronger than the sum of people themselves. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986):

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (p. 21).

In rural communities, especially declining rural communities, these types of networks are vital for survival—those who don't have access to the types of services that urban people do rely on family and neighbours more.

Influentially, Robert Putnam (2000), argues about that the importance of social capital to community is integral not just to better social relations, but to economic and political resilience; he writes that: "social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (p. 290). And indeed, empirical research shows that communities that show higher levels of social capital are more resilient—more ready to deal with changes such as population decline or losses of local services (Elshof & Bailey, 2015). For example, Elshof and Bailey explore responses to population decline in villages in the Netherlands, and describe communal responses to decline including a communal garden, a new playground, ecological restoration, and new recreational activities, and these activities were "usually not a response to the closure of a specific service, but to a general feeling that the village deserved better" (p. 89). These communal, entrepreneurial activities both required and strengthened social capital. In order to form connections, one must have an opportunity to form these connections. Schools offer an opportunity for people—both adults and children—to get to know one another and, often, to work together for a common cause. In support of this assumption, Kearns and colleagues (2009), who study school closure in New Zealand, find that:

> generally, but especially in rural areas, schools are more than sites for the education of young people. Rather, they are also portals to sets of opportunities and resources that range from the informational (e.g. news of community events), to the emotional (e.g. support in the face of illness), the material (e.g. grounds available for community use) and social (e.g. networks of support) (Kearns et al., 2009, p. 131).

One example of this community function can be found in McKeon et al.'s (2022) study of Vermont school districts supporting refugee resettlement. The authors use the term "architecture of care" to describe how school district superintendents and community members worked together to support refugee children and families. This is just one example of the ways in which schools provide important community functions to support or create care networks. Schafft (2016) argues that "rural schools… play fundamentally integrative and interactive roles within the communities they serve and, therefore, represent critical institutions because of their potential to bring together diverse segments of communities to address community development goals" (p. 144-145). Schafft focuses particularly on rural schools, and empirical data from the US shows that, compared with all schools, rural schools had greater levels of parental participation in school activities (Provasnik et al., 2007), suggesting that the school-community connection is higher in rural areas. But as Bagley and Hillyard (2011) find, this cannot be assumed to be true in *all* rural communities or all rural schools—while in some communities, the school may occupy a "powerful symbolic, cultural and temporal

position" (p. 47), the strength of this school-community connection differs from village to village.

Of course, social capital alone does not provide all the conditions for endogenous community development. Overstating the role of individual and community networks in economic development can lead us to the same conclusion as the Ivany Report: that regional decline is due to the failure of rural people to bring economic growth to their region. Seeing this trap, James DeFilippis (2001) critiques the focus on social capital in community development, arguing that we cannot understand social capital apart from understandings of another type of capital (that is, financial). In DeFilippis's view, networks and relationships themselves won't be sufficient for community development and resiliency unless they connect communities to more *powerful* networks—that is, networks with access to financial and political resources. Schools, though, can do both: they facilitate connections among community members, but they also facilitate linking connections between the state and the community. As Tieken (2014) shows in Arkansas, "a school— and especially a school district— gives a rural community state money and creates leadership positions: it provides resources, the ability to control them, and a voice" (p. 158). In a rural community, a school—and the school board that governs it—may be one of only a few connections between the community and the state. While there are key differences in school governance between American and Canadian education systems, the idea that the school represents a sort of outpost of government investment in a rural community remains relevant.

Moreover, schools also help communities come together over a shared community identity (Brown & Schafft, 2019; Ewing, 2018), strengthening those bonding social ties that also contribute to resiliency. Oncescu (2014) shows that in one Saskatchewan rural community, the community remained resilient (that is, able to positively adapt after a threat or challenge) after the school closure *because* the school had previously created conditions for community cohesion:

> In particular, recreation events and activities developed and strengthened community togetherness, sense of community, cohesion, and social networks. In addition, community recreation events and activities developed and expanded through community leadership and collective action after the school's closure. Thus, recreation activities and events that exist prior to a school's closure can be a means through which community resilience potential can be developed and displayed. Ironically, but significantly, the study revealed that rural schools that will be closed, as the one in this study and the numerous others that are anticipated to close due to rural depopulation, can help the community cope and adapt to the school's closure (Oncescu, 2014, p. 48)

While the community role of the school did not prevent the school from closing, it did mean that the community had strong connections in place to weather the storm of the school closure.

3.3 Childcare

Another important function of schools is providing childcare. As the bulk of my research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of schools as childcare became obvious. In 2020, school buildings closed and classes went online and many (but not all!) people moved to working-from-home. This had far-reaching implications in terms of education, work, and gender. In a 2021 report about women and work in the pandemic economy, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives compared working hours of mothers of young children between February and April 2020, and found that 27.2% of Canadian mothers with children under age 12 lost working hours. This included both increased absences from work and leaving jobs altogether (Scott, 2021, p. 17). This is not counting the number of women who exited the labour force altogether—the biggest proportion of these being on Prince Edward Island, the most rural of the provinces (Scott, 2021, p. 18). Schools provide free, publicly-available childcare, and when this childcare was suddenly absent during COVID-19 lockdowns, it showed how vitally important schools are for parents, and especially for mothers.

In rural areas, the childcare function of schools is even more pronounced than elsewhere, because there is often a shortage of childcare rurally (D. MacDonald, 2018), and families may have a more casual arrangement such as leaving children with a grandmother or neighbour (Friendly et al., 2016). The lack of childcare choices may mean that one parent (often the mother) has to stay home. While this is a valid choice,

it can lead to isolation in rural or remote areas (Farhall et al., 2020). The trade-off, for many rural parents, is worth it. Owing to the idyllic space rural places occupy in the cultural imagination, they are seen as good places to raise children because of their perceived safety, freedom, sense of community, and connection with the natural world (Bonner, 1997; Little & Austin, 1996; Powell et al., 2013; Valentine, 2016). In Porter's study (2022) of women in rural Newfoundland, she found that the mothers and grandmothers in the study pointed to their own happy, hard-working rural childhoods as a motivation to raise their children in rural Newfoundland. While living rurally presents its own challenges for families, parents may be willing to overlook limitations if they believe that living in a rural place will benefit their child's development.

Like all parents, rural parents are faced with many difficult choices about how they wish to live and raise their children. Should one or both parents work? Do they work away from home or from home? Who will take care of their children? The answers to these questions are influenced by socio-economic factors and geography. When there is a school in one's community, some choices are easier to make. The school provides accessible, nearby childcare to elementary-aged children during the day. But if a rural school closes, there are a number of choices that are cut off for rural parents.

Many—but not all—of the people who fiercely advocated against school closure in Petite and Maitland were mothers. All the members of the Hub School Committee in Maitland were women. The primary applicant for the judicial review against the school board in Petite's case was a mother. Meanwhile, teaching—especially elementary

teaching—is a profession that continues to be dominated by women. The work of social reproduction—"birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally" (Fraser, 2016)—is associated with women. Because rural schools are also associated with both child and community development, then the work of preventing rural school closures becomes a women's issue. It is rural women who take on the responsibility of social reproduction, so it is rural women who bear the consequences of school closures.

3.4 What happens when a school closes

A rural school closure decision is both a common policy choice and one with no definitive known outcome. Here I outline some of the arguments for and against the closure of small rural schools, and show that the evidence supporting these arguments is not consistent.

3.4.1 Impact on public finances

For school boards and governments, cost savings are often cited as the reason for closing or consolidating small rural schools. Budget cuts and ideas about economies of scale make it seem as if school closures are inevitable decisions. Luyten and colleagues (2014), reviewing five studies about the cost-per-pupil and school size relationship, discover that the relationship is negative, but caution that this can depend on local funding models and teacher and staff salaries. Meanwhile, evidence from the United States shows negligible fiscal benefits of school closures (Bard et al., 2006).

Quantitative studies in New York (Duncombe & Yinger, 2001), Texas (Stewart, 2011), and Arizona (Sadorf, 2013) show that the cost savings of school closure in those states have often been overstated. As Sadorf finds in Arizona, “there is no compelling evidence suggesting that closing a school will always result in cost savings to a district in fiduciary distress” (p. 122). Moreover, government funding formulas can obscure any fiscal benefits there may be from school closure—that is, even if school closure does result in cost savings, these cost savings do not necessarily go towards the school board in the district with the closed school (Stewart, 2011). In Canada, Corbett and Mulcahy (2006) also show that there is no compelling evidence that the closure of small schools results in greater cost savings for school boards. While studies find that school closure sometimes results in cost savings, they also show that these savings are not universal nor guaranteed.

3.4.2 Impact on student learning

Another assumption made by proponents of consolidation is that the education program in small schools is deficient compared with larger schools. Student achievement is the rationale for consolidation. In some cases, the student achievement argument is that larger schools give more opportunities for specialized programming. In the section about school closures in Nova Scotia Department of Education’s *Kids and Learning First* plan, the authors cite the fact that many Nova Scotian school buildings are more than 50 years old and that “students should have access to more modern learning opportunities” and give examples of opportunities to consider, including “access to specialist teachers and resources, and access to cafeterias, extra-curricular

opportunities" (p. 17). In other cases, the student achievement argument is that the surplus funds of a small school closing can be reallocated to support student programing. Ben Levin makes this case in his 2011 report on the Nova Scotia Education system: "school closing processes have to be designed to draw attention to system-wide issues as well, such as the opportunity cost of maintaining extra school space against enriched programming" (p. 22). Levin's (somewhat naïve) conclusion is that the public may be more likely to accept school closure if they see it as necessary in order to provide their children (or the children in the region as a whole) with better education. But there is scant evidence that school consolidation actually improves educational outcomes (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). Berry and West (2010) in a historical examination of school consolidation in the United States from 1930 to 1970, find that there was a positive relationship between smaller schools and educational attainment—those students in states with smaller schools completed more years of schooling, on average, compared to students in states with larger schools. Other research from the US supports the findings that student outcomes are better in smaller schools (Egalite & Kisida, 2016), while Luyten and colleagues' (2014) meta-analysis of school size effects finds that "the impact of school size on cognitive and noncognitive outcomes is weak" (p. 223). In the Canadian context, Jones and Ezeife (2011) look at standardized test scores for Grades 3 and 6 students in Ontario and find no relationship between school size and academic achievement. Simply moving a child into a larger school is not sufficient to increase their achievement. And, the assumptions in the *Kids and Learning First* plan and the Levin report that small schools do not have enriched learning opportunities like specialist

teachers or cafeterias *because they are small* is not always be true—while some enriched programs require a critical mass of students before they can be offered (you need more than a few kids for a band or a soccer team), other enriched programs and services can be delivered even in a small, rural school. The government's unwillingness to fund these programs does not mean delivering them is impossible. The Department of Education and school boards only offers special programs in larger schools, and then argue that larger schools are better than small schools because of their special programs. Overall, the research on school size does not support the idea that students will be better supported, or have better outcomes, in a larger school (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006).

3.4.3 Impact on the local community

While cost savings and educational outcomes are two arguments that school boards make for closing schools, community members turn to arguments about the impact of a school closure on the community. During the conflicts around rural school closure, the claim that "the school is the heart of the community" is a common refrain, and the subtext is: take away the heart, and the community will die. The literature synthesized above shows that schools have numerous purposes in a community, but whether these many purposes mean that a school is an integral part of a community is contested. Some believe that school closure is a cause of rural decline, while others maintain that is an effect of rural decline. The relationship between school closure and rural decline is complicated, and whether a school closure is a cause of rural decline, an effect of rural decline, or has no relationship to rural decline differs across communities.

This indicates the need for robust qualitative research on individual communities and their characteristics. When I speak of rural decline, I am speaking of two separate, but related processes: population decline and a decline in economic growth or prosperity. A region may have a small or diminishing population, but the people remaining may be well-off and show a high degree of resilience. While population decline is often connected to a loss of public services, leaving rural populations worse off, this is not inevitable. In this section, I examine the research of how school closures impact both population and wellbeing. As seen above, there are various roles of a school in a community, and the effects of school closure may be felt either in demographic change or in social change. It is obvious that there is some relationship between school closure and rural decline, but the nature of that relationship is contested.

The empirical evidence is mixed when it comes to the effects of school closures (or presence of a school in a community) on population growth. Some, including Foster, Bollman and Main (2021) in Canada, Lehtonen (2021) in Finland, and Elshof, Haartsen, and Mulder (2015) in the Netherlands, show that there is a positive correlation between the presence of a primary school in a community and the population size of that community—especially the population of school-aged children and families. This correlation may indicate that people move where schools are, but it may also indicate that policymakers choose to place new or consolidated schools in places that already have relatively large or growing populations. Other researchers, including Marques et al. (2020) in Portugal, Barakat (2015) in Saxony, and Amcoff (2012) in Sweden, find there is

no significant connection between school closure and population decline. Some authors—such as Sageman (2022) in the United States and Kroismayr (2019) in Austria conclude that the effects of school closure on population depend on the community. Importantly, Sageman (2022) concludes that “school closures appear to be destabilizing events in healthier rural communities but do not compound or exacerbate population loss in counties that are declining for other reasons” (p. 975). For communities that are already experiencing high rates of population decline, school closure itself does not significantly increase the rate of decline, but in some other areas, the school closure can set population decline into motion.

But population decline is only part of the question of rural decline—other researchers have focused on social and economic impacts of school closures. While research on the population impact of schools is primarily quantitative, research on the social and economic impacts of school closures uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, Oncescu (2014) in Saskatchewan and DeYoung (1995) in West Virginia each do an in-depth case study of the impacts of a single closed rural school. These in-depth cases tell a nuanced story of school closures. For example, Oncescu’s 2014 case study of a school closure in Limerick, Saskatchewan, found that the school, especially recreation events housed at the school, were important for community resiliency, and this resiliency helped the community weather the loss of their school. The school can foster strong social capital before school closure and this effect continues after the school has closed. Similarly, DeYoung’s study of a West Virginia high

school noted that the people involved in school extra-curricular programs were also involved in church or civic activities. This suggests that any vacuum in community activities or social capital creation after school closure may be filled by other community institutions and groups—the school, in that case, is not the only site of social capital creation. But, this depends on the existing social capital in that community, as Egelund and Laustsen (2006) show in Denmark. In terms of quantitative studies, Lyson (2002) and Sipple, Francis, and Fiduccia (2019) investigate the social and economic benefits of the presence of a school in rural communities in New York. Both studies show a positive correlation between the presence (and proximity) of a school and social and economic benefits like higher housing values, better infrastructure, higher household income, and lower income inequality.

As a whole, the research on the cost savings, educational outcomes, and wider community impact of school closures and consolidation does not unequivocally lend support to school closures; it emphasizes instead the critical importance of the local context in dictating the impacts of school closure. There is a need for further research on the school-community relationship (Hargreaves, 2009).

Chapter 4. Methods

This dissertation is an in-depth case study of two rural communities in Nova Scotia—Petite Rivière and Maitland—each of which was the site of conflict about the closing of the local elementary school in the 2010s. Through interviews with local parents, school-aged children, community members, school board members, and school staff, as well as analysis of provincial education policy and school board minutes, I explore my two research questions: Why do school boards close rural schools? And what is the role of a school in a rural community?

4.1 The necessity of qualitative research

As shown above, the majority of studies about school closure and consolidation use quantitative methods, which are appropriate for identifying patterns in large datasets, but in the case of rural schools, obscure community-specific impacts. In a survey of the research on the impacts of school closure on rural communities in Canada, Michael Haynes (2022) writes:

> There is… a noticeable lack of other types of in-depth research in the Canadian rural school closure literature such as studies which focus on oral histories and community narratives which document the impacts and consequences of rural school closure and consolidation (p. 61).

While there is a growing body of quantitative research worldwide on the impacts of school closure, there is less qualitative research on the topic. But qualitative research is

appropriate for the questions of the roles of rural schools, and the decisions around rural school closures, for two reasons.

First, rural school closure conflicts are context-dependent. In section 2.1, I detailed the difficulties in defining rural places, and the diversity among rural places. As Rye (2011) reminds us: “there are *many* rural populations, each having its own social logic and practices, including residential preferences and migration decisions” (p. 173). The point that each community is different may seem like common sense, but the difference is perhaps more important to rural people, who may seem like a monolith to people from the hegemonic urban. As Wendell Berry writes: “The only true and effective ‘operator’s manual for spaceship earth’ is not a book that any human will ever write; it is hundreds of thousands of local cultures” (2010, p. 166). Thus, knowledge is context-dependent, which means that research, especially research into human society, is too. Rural researchers consistently remind us that *place matters* (Halseth et al., 2009) and that any research on rural change must take into account local context (Reimer, 2006). This study begins with the assertion that each specific community is unique, and situated knowledge is important. Qualitative research is an effective way to launch from these assumptions, because it allows room for the researcher to explore the unique subjective experiences of people in a specific context.

Second, rural school closure conflicts are complex. The decisions around rural school closures involve a number of different actors from various social and political positions, and school closures may have impacts in government budgets, educational

outcomes for children, and in the communities where they are situated. In answering the question "When to use qualitative research?", Creswell and Poth (2018) write simply "We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored" (p. 45). This is in contrast to quantitative research, which is more useful when a problem or issue needs to be *explained*. The complexities of a rural school conflict will not be visible from a bird's-eye view or a statistical survey. To understand the motivations and context of a complex issue like school closures, a more in-depth study is required.

As the mixed findings about the roles of a rural school and the impact of a school closure suggest, there is no one-sized-fits-all answer about the relationship between schools, decision-makers, and communities. Yet, school closure decisions are both very common and very contentious. School closure conflicts are ultimately conflicts about whether or not place matters—on one side are school boards and governments who, even if they close a school in a certain community, still provide students with education in another place, treating communities as "interchangeable sites of production"(Brown & Schafft, 2019, p. 300). On the other side are community members and small school advocates, who argue that even if children receive education regardless, *it matters where*. Through a qualitative study, the ways in which place matters can be interrogated and explored.

4.2 The context of cases

As the above paragraphs show, qualitative research is appropriate for my research questions. This research program uses the case study method. According to Creswell and Poth,

> Case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes (2018, p. 96-97).

There is a strong tradition of social science researchers using case studies as a method to gain insight into the particulars of a phenomenon. The research questions about the roles of a school in a local community, and about why school boards close rural schools, are subjective questions that require contextual knowledge. And as authority in social science case study research Robert K. Yin writes: “You would want to do a case study because you want to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to your case” (2018, p. 15). Therefore, case study methods are appropriate for my research questions.

4.3 Why Maitland and Petite Rivière?

The key to case study research is choosing your case(s) well (Ragin & Becker, 1992). When I began this project in 2019, I knew that I was interested in rural school closure conflicts in Nova Scotia, and I was not interested in looking at historical data. This meant that the choice of cases was limited to rural communities in Nova Scotia that had closed, or had been threatened with closure, recently. By using Department of Education enrolment data, I found that 38 schools in the province had closed since 2009, and more were in danger of closing.

Table 2. Schools closed in Nova Scotia between 2009 and 2019. Data compiled using the annual Nova Scotia Directory of Schools (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016), the Nova Scotia list of enrolment by school (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024), news articles about school closures, and current school boundaries, as reported by Centres for Education. This list is unofficial, and may not be comprehensive.

Year	School closed	School type	Community name	School board	New school or existing?
2009	St Patrick's-Alexandra School	Elementary	Halifax	Halifax	Existing
2011	Riverport and District Elementary School	Elementary	Riverport	South Shore	New
2012	Lunenburg Academy	Elementary	Lunenburg	South Shore	New
2012	Lunenburg Junior High School	Jr. High	Lunenburg	South Shore	New
2012	Canso Academy	High	Canso	Strait	Existing
2012	Rev. H.J. MacDonald School	Elementary	Heatherton	Strait	Existing
2012	West Richmond Education Centre	Elementary	Evanston	Strait	Existing
2012	Westport Village School	Elementary	Westport	Tri-County	Existing

Year	School closed	School type	Community name	School board	New school or existing?
2013	Eastern Consolidated School	Elementary	Sheet Harbour	Halifax	New
2013	Bass River Elementary School	Elementary	Bass River	Chignecto-Central	Existing
2013	Gold River Western Shore Elementary School	Elementary	Gold River	South Shore	Existing
2014	Sackville Centennial Elementary School	Elementary	Lower Sackville	Halifax	Existing
2014	Mill Village Consolidated School	Elementary	Mill Village	South Shore	Existing
2015	Maitland District School	Elementary	Maitland	Chignecto-Central	Existing
2015	River John Consolidated School	P-12	River John	Chignecto-Central	Existing
2015	Wentworth Consolidated School	Elementary	Wentworth	Chignecto-Central	Existing
2016	Bridgeport School	Elementary	Glace Bay	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	MacLennan Middle School	Jr. High	Westmount	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	Mira Road Elementary School	Elementary	Sydney	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	East Bay Elementary School	Elementary	East Bay	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	Gowrie Memorial School	Elementary	Port Morien	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	MacDonald Elementary School	Elementary	Dominion	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	Mount Carmel Elementary School	Elementary	New Waterford	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing

Year	School closed	School type	Community name	School board	New school or existing?
2016	St. Agnes Elementary School	Elementary	New Waterford	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	St. Joseph's Elementary School	Elementary	Sydney Mines	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	Thompson Middle School	Jr. High	North Sydney	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2016	Barton Consolidated School	Elementary	Barton	Tri-County	Existing
2016	South Centennial School	Elementary	Yarmouth	Tri-County	Existing, but soon moving to a new one
2016	Arcadia Consolidated School	Elementary	Yarmouth	Tri-County	Existing, but soon moving to a new one
2017	River Hebert Elementary School	Elementary	River Hebert	Chignecto-Central	Existing
2017	Sheet Harbour Consolidated Elementary School	Elementary	Sheet Harbour	Halifax	New
2017	Florence Elementary School	Elementary	Florence	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing?
2017	George D. Lewis School	Elementary	Louisbourg	Cape Breton-Victoria	Existing
2017	Bible Hill East Court Road Elementary School	Elementary	Bible Hill	Chignecto-Central	New
2017	Bible Hill Central Elementary School	Elementary	Bible Hill	Chignecto-Central	New
2018	Mulgrave Memorial Education Centre	Elementary	Mulgrave	Strait	Existing
2018	École Jean-Marie-Gay	Elementary	Saulnierville	Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial	Existing

Year	School closed	School type	Community name	School board	New school or existing?
2018	École Saint-Albert	Elementary	Rivière-aux-Saumons	Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial	Existing

However, not all the closed schools were rural, and some of the school closure decisions were because of a new school replacing the former school in the same community. My focus was on rural communities experiencing the closure of the last remaining school. I also had to choose places that would be practical for research: Within a two-hour drive of Dalhousie University (this proved to be less important with the COVID-19 pandemic meaning in-person interviews were mainly replaced by Zoom and phone interviews), and where I had existing contacts that would ease research. I chose Maitland and Petite Rivière not only because they fit this loose set of criteria, but also because the school closure conflicts in those regions had been highly publicized at the time. Maitland school closed at the same time as two other schools in the region—Wentworth and River John, and the conflict in each of these communities was highlighted in the local media at the time. I could have chosen any one of those schools to study. But from my standpoint as a researcher, I had to choose Maitland, because paying attention to the conflict in Maitland was what made me interested in these research questions to begin with. As I mentioned above, place matters in rural research. And I had a strong place attachment to Maitland and other communities along the shores of the Cobequid Bay. My interest in rural sociology came from growing up in and around these communities and trying to understand the processes of loss and resilience

that I saw there. While my deep love and knowledge of place in Maitland may be seen as a source of bias in research, the background information I have about the area is invaluable, and the position I occupy as both insider and outsider allows me unique access.

In Maitland, the conclusion of the school review process was school closure in 2015. For the cases in this research, I wanted a contrasting case in a community where the school review process did *not* end in closure. This was not common in Nova Scotia, but one widely publicized case was that of Petite Rivière. Thus, I determined that Maitland and Petite Rivière together were appropriate communities and schools to be settings for research on rural school closures.

Figure 2. Protest in River John after the school closure decision, July 2015

In the following figure, Flyvbjerg (2006) outlines strategies for the selection of samples and cases. While these may not be the only strategies, I used this table as a starting point for thinking about how to choose cases. For this project, I aimed mainly for an information-oriented selection, and attempted to find maximum variation cases.

Strategies for the Selection of Samples and Cases

Type of Selection	Purpose
A. Random selection	To avoid systematic biases in the sample. The sample's size is decisive for generalization.
1. Random sample	To achieve a representative sample that allows for generalization for the entire population.
2. Stratified sample	To generalize for specially selected subgroups within the population.
B. Information-oriented selection	To maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content.
1. Extreme/deviant cases	To obtain information on unusual cases, which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense.
2. Maximum variation cases	To obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome (e.g., three to four cases that are very different on one dimension: size, form of organization, location, budget).
3. Critical cases	To achieve information that permits logical deductions of the type, "If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases."
4. Paradigmatic cases	To develop a metaphor or establish a school for the domain that the case concerns.

Figure 3. Flyvberg's strategies for the selection of samples and cases (2006)

Maitland and Petite Rivière provide maximum variation because while they share much in common—loss of a primary industry; residents commuting to work in larger centres; and a large proportion of the residents being seasonal or tourists—the results of the school closure conflict was different in each of these communities, and this important for my research. In Nova Scotia, there are very few possible outcomes to a school review

process, and Petite Rivière and Maitland each experienced a different outcome. In the 2010s, both communities faced school board decisions to close their elementary school, and in both, people in the school district organized and protested against the proposed school closures. In Maitland, the school closed as planned, in June 2015. In Petite Rivière, however, the school remains open after a community association took the school board to court and a judge ruled that the school board's decision-making process was flawed. Petite Rivière and Maitland are just two communities among many in Nova Scotia (and elsewhere) that have faced similar challenges, but the key difference in results provides fertile ground for more study.

4.4 Holistic case studies: What is included in this research

In each case study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with informants in the community. Interviews included families with school-aged children (including the children), school board members, school board staff, school staff, and members of the community. The interview questions varied slightly depending on who was interviewed: There is a separate set of questions for children, for example (See

A.4 Interview guide: Parents, adult community members, secondary-school aged children;

A.5 Interview guide: Elementary school-aged children; and A.6 Interview guide: School board staff and officials) . In general, interview questions covered topics about the boundaries, strengths, and challenges of the community; knowledge of the school and of decision-making processes; and memories of the conflict around the school closure. Interviews happened in groups (e.g. families or couples) or one-on-one, and took place in people's homes or on Zoom or via phone. I recruited the participants through purposeful, snowball sampling. Because a conflict was at the centre of my research, it was important to identify interviewees from various standpoints in the conflict. Based on existing contacts in each community and information from school board documents and media reports, I recruited people who I believed to have significant roles in school closure conflicts. I also used the snowball sampling method, eliciting suggestions from interviewees about other relevant people to contact. This resulted in a total of 11 participants in Maitland and 14 in Petite Rivière. Because of the open-ended nature of interview questions, the interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to over two hours. These interviews provided key context to the data from school board and government documents.

*Table 3. Maitland participants. *Names are pseudonyms**

Participant name*	**Role**	**Participation in conflict**
Laura	Community member, retired teacher	Did not protest school closure
Mike	Parent	Protested school closure
Mary Anne	Parent	Protested school closure
Joshua	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure
Noah	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure

Participant name*	Role	Participation in conflict
Doug	Community member	Did not protest school closure
Donna	School board member, community member	Voted for school closure
Carolyn	School staff, community member	School staff
Deb	Community member	Protested school closure
Elizabeth	Community member	Did not protest school closure
Heather	Parent	Protested school closure

*Table 4. Petite participants. *Names are pseudonyms**

Participant name*	Role	Participation in conflict
Sheila	Community member	Protested school closure
Brian	School staff	School staff
Janet	Seasonal resident	Supported actions against school closure
Alan	Community leader	Supported actions against school closure
Stephanie	Parent	Protested school closure
Sophia	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure
Claire	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure
Isaac	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure
Elsa	Student at the school at time of conflict	Protested school closure
Kim	Parent	Protested school closure
Erik	Parent	Protested school closure
Rachel	Parent	Protested school closure
Dennis	School board staff	School board staff
Andrea	School staff, community member	School staff

I conducted interviews between 2020 and 2022. When possible, I integrated principles of community-based research: “an approach to research that emphasizes the

importance of collaboration, participation, and social justice", with advocates arguing that "community involvement renders research more understandable, responsive and pertinent to people's lives" (Flicker et al., 2007, p. 106). For example, I presented early findings during a community meeting in Petite and a public lecture in Maitland. As Halseth (2016) writes, this type of community involvement can "enhance the accuracy of findings as community partners may be able to better incorporate the complexities and nuances of the local context into the project design and interpretation of the results" (p. 18-19). The opportunity to meet the community in a larger group (e.g. not only interviewees) provided rich ground for learning. First, it provided the opportunity for me to do some participant observation, helping me to understand the dynamics of the communities. Second, upon presenting preliminary results, I solicited and received feedback from interviewees and other community members, which gave direction for my data analysis. Finally, these events helped me to meet more community members and recruit participants, increasing my access to the communities.

Interviews with informants were a vital part of answering the question of the role of a school in a rural community. But interviews, even with school board staff and elected officials, were only the beginning of answering the question of *why* school boards made school closure decisions. But as democratically elected bodies, school boards and governments ideally must justify the decisions they make, providing the public with rationale and a paper trail. So another important part of my analysis was document analysis of school board documents and Department of Education policy

documents. These documents revealed *stated* justifications for school closures, while interviews provided more context behind the stated justification. In this way, documents helped with triangulation of information (Bowen, 2009).

I also came to document analysis from a constructivist viewpoint, using theories and principles of discourse analysis. When I used school board and Department of Education documents to triangulate information, I evaluated the content within the documents and decided, based on other information, whether it is true. But documents can provide much richer data than that. Discourse analysis involves looking beyond whether something is true or false, and asking about the function and origin of documents, and the ways in which language is used to construct and constrain reality. As Amanda Coffey writes, "documents construct their own kinds of reality" and "thus it is important that we ask appropriate questions about documents and what they can and cannot reveal about the social world" (2013, p. 377). While there are many ways of using documents in research, discourse analysis is "interested in the effects of discourse and in how particular ways of constructing meaning through language enable or prevent, empower or constrain, action." (Willig, 2013, p. 145). In terms of reading Department of Education and school board documents, this meant reading them as texts to be interpreted, paying close attention to the assumptions inherent in the text, the audience of the text, and the choice of language used and why it might have been used. A close, critical reading of the text must also pay attention to the ideology that these documents implicitly or explicitly promote. As Fairclough writes, "…discourse is ideological in so far

as it contributes to sustaining particular relations of power and domination" (2013, p. 15). While documents may claim to be "common sense" or apolitical, this may just mean that the ideology within these documents is the predominant ideology of the time and upholds current social structures.

One difficulty of discourse analysis is that to understand a text, it is often necessary to reference another text, and so on—the importance of intertextuality means that a researcher can continue to find relevant documents as long as she is looking. Practically, for the purposes of this research, I limited the data sources to a certain period of time. For school board minutes, I was limited by data availability, but attempted to gather all the minutes from the conclusion of the school closure conflict to five years preceding that. For Petite Rivière, this meant all the South Shore Regional School Board minutes from November 2012 to February 2018 (a total of 145 documents) and for Maitland, this meant all the Chignecto Central Regional School Board Minutes from September 2009 to June 2015 (a total of 73 documents). For Department of Education documents, I selected documents from the 2009-2018 range, to capture the same period of time that was captured in the school board minutes. While I found 84 publicly available documents, I selected 39 that included policies that were relevant to the school closure conflict. I used inductive coding to identify themes within the documents.

To round out the case studies, I use recent Statistics Canada data to create a demographic profile of each community. These data give more insight on the questions

of population and rural schools. As this is not a quantitative study, this will not be explanatory, but by using descriptive data I have a fuller picture of each case study community. Informational interviews with informants who offered background insight, and participant observation were two other methods I used to complete the case studies.

4.5 Data analysis

I used qualitative analysis software to examine the school board minutes, Department of Education documents, and participant interview transcripts. The first step to the analysis was coding Department of Education documents with themes or topics mentioned. This involved first reading the entirety of the documents and making an initial list of themes. Then, making a second read-through of the documents, coding with these themes. If there were themes I missed on the first reading, I added them and repeated the process as necessary. Because I was looking for answers to specific research questions, I chose codes that were based on my research questions. These codes identified topics that would be relevant to the rural school or school closure question. Besides these topic-based codes, I also paid special attention to the *language* employed in Department of Education documents. Using principles of discourse analysis, I identified a overall pattern in these documents of language of 'government as business.'

Once I coded each document, I was able to analyze the references within each theme. For example, one code was "Purpose of education." By compiling all the

references to the purpose of education, I could then identify themes within that code that could answer the question: What does the government at this time see as the purpose of education? For a list of codes used for Department of Education data, see Table 5.

Table 5. Qualitative coding of Nova Scotia Department of Education documents

Code name	**Description**	**Example**
Fiscal responsibility	Anything to do with fiscal responsibility, including budgets	Despite more money for fewer students, student results are not improving. In some areas, they have gotten worse. The province spends over $1 billion to educate students. That amounts to $3.6 million a day. Nova Scotians expect their government to live within its means, and bring costs under control, while matching resources to the needs of every student.
Goals of dept	References to the goals of the Department of Education	In addition to academic and teaching excellence, the department is committed to ensuring students are ready to succeed in whatever they choose to do after graduation and that they become valuable, contributing members of their community. Programs, services, and educational opportunities will focus on developing skills, strategies, and self-confidence to prepare students to compete on the international stage.
Hub school	References to the hub school concept	The success of a hub school model requires strong community leadership and a willingness by all partners to work toward an effective model for students, families, and the community
Managerialism and business	Language that has to do with government-as-business	The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is committed to developing the future workforce and the entrepreneurial skills and attributes of our students through increased partnership with the business community.

Code name	**Description**	**Example**
Measuring success	Anything to do with how the Department measures success in the education system	One of the department's core business areas is primary–12 education. The high school graduation rate is one of the measures for a desired outcome that falls within this core business area.
Purpose of education	References to the purpose of education or the Department of Education	Research has been clear on the importance of a strong education system to grow the economy and support long-term prosperity
SACs	References to School Advisory Councils	SAC representatives who participated in the focus groups stressed that being a member of an SAC is a volunteer role, held by parents and community members that have multiple other responsibilities. There was a concern expressed that additional responsibilities for SACs may contribute to the challenge of recruiting/ retaining SAC members.
School board responsibility	References to the role of school boards	School boards are the local body representing the interests of the local school area. It has been generally accepted that the school board is in the best position to make decisions about issues such as school configuration, boundaries, and school review and closure. Schools boards, arguably, are closer to the communities that they represent through local representation, and are also in a position to see a larger regional perspective at a board level.
School review-communities	References to the school review process in general or in specific communities	It was clear throughout the consultation that the issue of school review can evoke passion and emotion in those involved. As people spoke in the meetings and written submissions were reviewed, it became apparent that school reviews were having a negative impact on the relationship between school boards, parents, and communities.

Once I had analyzed the Department of Education documents, I analyzed each school board's documents. I read through both CCRSB and SSRSB documents before identifying main topics or themes related to rural schools or school closures. I then coded the CCRSB then SSRSB documents using these themes. Most codes were common to both school boards, but some codes were unique to one or the other—for example, I coded every reference to Maitland, which only occurred in the CCRSB minutes. A list of codes used for school board minutes is below.

Table 6. Qualitative coding of school board minutes

Name	**Description**	**Example**
Budget cuts	References to budget cuts or limitations	CCRSB: The Minister of Education announced a 1.7% provincial budget cut for CCRSB for the 2012/2013 fiscal year and directed the Board to absorb cost pressures, including increases in electricity and fuel, negotiated wage increases and inflationary costs.
Community members	References to public participation in regards to the Maitland or Petite schools	SSRSB: SAC Member Dee Conrad asked what the Board will do if another proposal for a new school is not accepted.
Corporate jargon	Use of vague or jargon-y language	CCRSB: Mr. Marks provided a handout, which identified the "secrets" as: Love Your Employees, Connect Peers with Purpose, Capacity Building Prevails, Learning is the Work, Transparency Rules and Systems Learn. Dr. Fullan advocates that if you practise these secrets and model them for others, you will develop more leaders who understand and use them. Putting the secrets into action will inspire effective action from others. Mr. Marks concluded his presentation by promoting three concepts: Keep repeating the goals; Ready, Fire, Aim; and Just do it.
Efficiency	References to efficiency (of money, resources, etc)	SSRSB: The Board then engaged the entire region in school utilization which was based on – how do you offer the very best programming you can, making the best use of space, within the budget you have – what does that look like?
Glaze	References to the education	SSRSB: Due to the Glaze Report, the NSSBA AGM and the national event have been cancelled

Name	Description	Example
	consultant Avis Glaze	
Hub school	References to the hub school concept	CCRSB: The Guidelines and Criteria for a Hub Model was released on July 21, 2014, by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Guidelines, criteria and timelines for communities to prepare a proposal were discussed in-depth earlier during this meeting. Communities will have at least eight months to prepare a proposal, with school boards having the option to extend time frame where necessary. The document will be included in the ministerial policy on school review that will be introduced this fall.
Labour	Anything to do with decisions related to workers (teachers, support workers, etc)	CCRSB: Board Member Vivian Farrell reiterated her sincere regret regarding the elimination of librarians in our elementary schools. She noted the importance of children having access to library services and asked for an update on how access to this valuable service is being maintained in our schools.
Levin	References to Ben Levin and Levin report	CCRSB: In response to a query posed by Board Member Vivian Farrell, Superintendent Gary Clarke advised that the education plan for the province will in all likelihood be based on the Minister of Education's formal response to the Levin Report as well as some short-term initiatives.
Maitland	Meeting items that include reference to the Maitland school	CCRSB: It was MOVED by Trudy Thompson, seconded by Susan MacQuarrie THAT THE CLOSURE DATE (FOR MAITLAND DISTRICT SCHOOL) BE JUNE 30, 2015. Chair Trudy Thompson voiced her support for the community proposed hub model and for delaying the school closure until June 2015 in order to afford the community the opportunity to develop the hub school. She indicated that if, at that time, the hub school was deemed successful, the closure motion could be rescinded. MOTION CARRIED Affirmative Votes (13):
Pentz	Meeting items that include reference to the Pentz school	SSRSB: MOTION SS037-13 by Board Member Payzant, seconded by Board Member Simms, that Pentz Elementary School permanently close and that a new school be requested to replace Pentz Elementary School and Petite Riviere Elementary School.
Petite	Meeting items that include reference to the Petite school	SSRSB: MOTION SS038-13 by Board Member Payzant, seconded by Board Member Fougere, that Petite Riviere Elementary School permanently close and that a new school be requested to replace Petite Riviere Elementary School and Pentz Elementary School.

Name	Description	Example
River John	Meeting items that include reference to the River John school	CCRSB: Chair Trudy Thompson returned to the chair. It was MOVED by Keith MacKenzie, seconded by Gordon Anderson THAT RIVER JOHN CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL BE CLOSED, WITH THE STUDENTS MOVING TO SCOTSBURN ELEMENTARY, WEST PICTOU CONSOLIDATED, TATAMAGOUCHE ELEMENTARY, NORTH COLCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL AND NORTHUMBERLAND REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL.
SACs	References to School Advisory Councils	SSRSB: Scott Milner, Superintendent of Schools, reviewed two draft SAC Workshop Draft Agendas with the board. The workshop will be held at Forest Heights Community School on November 7th at 6:30 p.m. Board members discussed the draft agendas and agreed a goal would be education on what governance means and what the role of the school board is. The final agenda brought to the board meeting next week.
School review	Anything to do with school review or the school review process	SSRSB: Board Chair Naugler explained that she is concerned about the emotional process of the Mill Village community and effects of doing another review in a years' time. Not to close any schools, would leave the Board to make cuts to programs, etc.
Wentworth	Meeting items that include reference to the Wentworth school	CCRSB: As a result of the scoring and scoring table application, the Evaluation Team recommends that: Wentworth Consolidated Elementary Hub School Proposal not be accepted.

The final part of the data analysis was the participant interviews. Because interviews in both Maitland and Petite took place throughout this project, the process of coding and analysis of these interviews was more iterative. I began analysis after a first round of interviews in Petite. After conducting the interviews and transcribing them, I had experienced them twice and began developing a list of codes. According to Bourdieu, these technical practicalities of data collection should not be separated from the development of theory. For him,

> the practical organization and carrying out of data collection—or, to be accurate, data production—are so intimately bound up with the theoretical construction of the object that they cannot be reduced to 'technical' tasks left to hired underlings, survey bureaucracies, or research assistants. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 29).

And as I interviewed more participants in both Petite Rivière and Maitland and transcribed those interviews, I added more themes as they emerged and revisited the initial interviews with the revised list of codes. Codes were primarily used to organize references into theme or topic areas related to the research questions.

Table 7. Qualitative coding of participant interviews

Name	**Description**	**Example**
bureaucracy	Anything that talks about the presence of bureaucratic systems	Mary Anne, Maitland: Yeah, there were multiple questions. It took multiple asks, multiple phone calls of "yeah, when is this coming?" "Oh, well, so and so's on vacation" ...It took years. Literally. There was some questions we didn't get the answer to until two months before we had to present
childcare	References to childcare in the community	Doug, Maitland: If you're going to work outside the community, then your kids are home alone for a couple hours before you get home from the city. School lets out at 3:30 and you don't get home till 6.
community	Connections between the school and the community	Sheila, Petite: Because people in our community knew that, for this community, the closure of the school would be a death knell for the community.

Name	Description	Example
conflict	Anything that shows a conflict, no matter the actors	Dennis, Petite: It's a messy business, right. It's a messy... it can go to court. Petite is an example. So, it's a very high-stakes... it's wrought with possibility of community anger, disruption, and attention
decline	Anything that has to do with real or perceived rural decline	Laura, Maitland: The school closed, the church closed: Those were two big losses, and then the Scout troop as well. Those were all quite big things, that it was sad to lose those.
education	Anything that refers to the actual education that students are receiving	Sophia, Petite: We are getting outdoors more during COVID, but we were already getting outdoors for math, and reading, and writing. That instance we already had a lot of outdoor learning at school.
efficiency	References to efficiency (of money, resources, etc)	Andrea, Petite: I do believe the bottom line was always driven by efficiency. And efficiency I'm going to put quotation marks around, because efficiency was determined by dollar values, and how much money could be saved.
fairness	Anything that has to do with fairness, rightness/wrongness	Alan, Petite: First of all, there was a strong feeling in the local area that their views were not being taken into account by the school board. And indeed, lots of people said, what is the point of having a local school board, if they don't seem to take any notice of what local people feel.
finances	Anything to do with money, considerations of budgets, etc	Jane, Maitland: 85 percent of our budget went towards staffing. And there was all kinds of needs, in classrooms right across our region, that we couldn't address. We didn't have the resources.
housing	Anything to do with housing in rural communities, gentrification, etc	Stephanie, Petite: But in the last ten years, our area has become known as a good area for surfing, and so that has brought in young families. So, because it's brought in people, that impacts on property values, but it's still a good thing that is bringing in these young

Name	Description	Example
		families, and ultimately that means more kids for the school.
place-based	Anything referencing something that could be understood as place-based understanding at a school	Rachel, Petite: Because it's got this amazing outdoor space, close to the river, they have a garden, they have solar panels to help keep the chickens going, they have-- there's a farm next door and they get sheep manure to put on their garden, and people come and work on it throughout the summer when school's not even open. People, students, teachers, families, are all really invested on what's going on there. And that just matters more, kind of, than the condition of the building.
rights	Anything related to the concept of rights and or citizenship	Heather, Maitland: Because I think that...as we're developing young, you know, young humans, young people. That to me is an important piece of the puzzle, that you have to make them good citizens and teach them and show them that this is a community and this is how you treat people and this is how people treat you and it's safe
strengths	Strengths of the community as identified by participants	Carolyn, Maitland: The strengths of the community are... well everyone knows everyone, everyone watches out for everyone's property, and everyone knows everyone. We know each other's kids and, except for new people that move into town, I guess. It's beautiful, it's rural, it attracts a lot of tourists, a lot of interest, there's a lot of historical... points of interest about Maitland. And it's a really nice place to live. And it was a really nice place to grow up.

Name	Description	Example
tourism	Anything that has to do with tourism or summer residents	Janet, Petite: I guess just one thing to say about seasonal people in the community. Is that it's been a community that's had seasonal folks for years. Generations. A long, long time. Many communities have sprung up more recently as seasonal communities, but Petite and Green Bay, of course, the area a little further along, are all places where people have been coming for multi generations, and it speaks to the attractiveness of the community and the fact that people have been warmly received, and I think that that's an important feature that seasonal folks do care about the community, and, in a way that perhaps that some seasonal communities are not in the same way.
transportation	Anything to do to transportation, whether or not related to the school	Kim, Petite: We love it here and we don't want to go anywhere but it is an inconvenience to get them where they need to go. They don't drive yet, and they're in a lot of different things. They're in sports and music and dance and a ton of stuff after school, and it's mostly in Bridgewater, so there's a chunk of time almost every day of the week running cars and eating takeout.
weaknesses	Weaknesses of the community as identified by participants	Deb: Maitland: We don't have any kids in this village or young people. And I think that this is an aging community. And having said that we're resilient and lasted.. Without young people, I have no idea how long that can go on

The conclusions I come to in this dissertation are based on my interpretation of patterns in what people said: Both in terms of what was written down at the time of the conflict, and in terms of what was shared with me in interviews.

4.6 What are the limitations of this method?

It is important to note here what this research can and cannot conclude. This research is not, for example, a reflection of all school closure conflicts everywhere. I cannot conclude the precise economic or demographic impact of school closures. This research is an in-depth exploration of the role of the local public school in two rural Nova Scotian communities, and the decision-making process of the school closures there.

While I am confident in the richness of my interview data, I acknowledge that there could always be more interviews. However, in this case, there was convergence of interviewees' responses, indicating data saturation. And snowball sampling sometimes meant that the same people were being suggested by other interviewees. This in itself presents an interesting finding—that there was a small group of community members who were engaged in the school closure conflict. Another possible limitation in interviewing was the fact that I was interviewing people two, three, or even up to seven years since the school closure conflict. This meant that for people I did interview, their memories were sometimes fuzzy. This also meant that I missed possible participants—for example, in Maitland, one of the leaders of the fight against school closure had died in the interim years. In both communities, participants spoke about families with children who had moved away from the communities, and cited the uncertainty about the school closure as a reason. I had no way to contact these possible participants.

To some, the lack of anonymity of the communities themselves may be considered a limitation—while interview participants are given pseudonyms, the communities are not, so anyone familiar with the communities or the schools may find it easy to identify participants. However, this is likely true even if the communities were somehow anonymized—the nature of the school closure conflicts would have revealed the communities to anyone close to the conflict anyway. This lack of ensuring anonymity for participants means that they may have spoken less candidly with me than if they had been anonymous. But as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, reflecting on an anthropological study of a community in rural Ireland (which she *did* anonymize), writes

> Anonymity makes us forget that we owe our anthropological subjects the same degree of courtesy, empathy, and friendship in writing that we generally extend to them face to face in the field, where they are not our subjects but our companion and without whom we quite literally could not survive (Scheper-Hughes, 2001, p. 12-13).

Presenting the communities' names keeps the researcher accountable to the participants, without whom this study would not be possible.

Rural researchers warn about the drawbacks of anonymization, as Bell (1994) writes: "Such a practice can distance a study from the compelling specificity that is the essence of place" (p. 244). Australian rural education researchers Green and Reid write "anonymisation of place in qualitative research washes out the specificities of geography, environment, history and social relations that have produced the particular

form of rural social space that forms the actual object of our inquiry" (Green & Reid, 2014, p. 34). My choice to forego anonymization of the case studies in this research was influenced by the idea that place matters, and that obscuring some detail of a place would misrepresent the unique stories of Maitland and Petite Rivière.

Ultimately, the claims I make about school closures in rural Nova Scotia are supported by evidence and informed by theory. But the nature of this evidence, my interpretation of it, and its connection with theory is subjective. This dissertation does not uncover a universal truth, but the conclusions come from rigorous qualitative research drawing on social science tradition.

Chapter 5. Nova Scotia education context

One of the characteristics of case study research is the attention paid to the *context* of a case. In terms of the Maitland and Petite communities and schools, the school closure conflict must be viewed in light of the history and trends in the Nova Scotia public education system. As I will show, schooling in the province has always been a site of conflict, including conflict between centralizing powers and local interests.

5.1 Early history

The origin of Nova Scotia's public education system was part of a much broader, international trend in education. The stated purpose of Premier Charles Tupper's Free School Act of 1864 was to make schooling available to children across Nova Scotia regardless of geography, class, or religion, and it is likely that this impulse was inspired by education reformers of the time, such as Thomas Chalmers in Scotland who believed that common schooling would lead to social harmony (Wood, 1991). According to historian Janet Guildford (1992), "nineteenth-century advocates of public school reform promised many benefits, but time and again they returned to a single theme: universal free public schooling would provide moral training for the young and produce a generation of hard-working, law-abiding citizens" (p. 46). Guildford suggests that the reproduction of social values was the primary goal of public schooling, and academic instruction was a secondary goal. Bruce Curtis's work on the history of public schooling in Ontario supports this interpretation. He writes:

> As sites from which to 'diffuse useful knowledge' and 'sound habits' throughout society, public schools can be understood as at once elements in attempts by respectable classes to solidify their rule, to mediate class conflict and to colonize civil society. Public schools were seen by their proponents as outposts in the moral wilderness of popular culture, and as institutions whose social role would be to civilize and humanize a barbarous population. Public schools would perform these functions through the application of moral force (1988, p. 370).

Curtis argues that while the population desired education, the state used public schools as internal colonial outposts (p. 371). In Nova Scotia, B. Anne Wood writes about Premier Charles' Tupper's motivation for expanding state schooling: "In attempting to prepare the province for its future role in an industrial, rather than a commercial economy, the Conservative administration had become committed to an extension of the parameters of state power" (Wood, 1991, p. 85). Education allowed for social mobility, and state schooling could influence this mobility to be in line with the economic goals of the provincial government.

However, the inception of the Nova Scotia public school system through the Free School Act was met with opposition in some areas. The act ensured that schooling would be free for all students, non-denominational, and would be overseen by a provincial government council. In 1865 the act was amended to include compulsory taxation to fund schools. Under the Free School Act, every child in the province would have a school within walking distance. Paul Bennett (2010) quotes the first education

superintendent in Nova Scotia T.H. Rand whose goal was schoolhouses “every three or four miles” in the province (p. 142). Some in rural areas opposed this act, even burning schoolhouses in protest (Xavier, 1957). Importantly, these acts of resistance were not about a rejection of education or schools. Rather, rural critics took issue with the imposition of *a system of schooling* paid for with compulsory taxes. While this taxation system meant that many more schools were built, it also meant that schools in poorer, rural areas were simpler; “most rural school districts were too poor to afford anything but the most modest, unadorned wooden frame schoolhouse” (Bennett, 2010, p. 142).

DeYoung and Howley (1990), reflecting on the United States but in a work that is no doubt applicable to Nova Scotia, surmise that “the reform of *the particular places* known as schools into sites for systematic *instruction* remains to this day the major theme of rural history” (1990, p. 68). Indeed, the history of rural schools and schooling in Nova Scotia shows a trend away from local control of schools and schooling to centralized (that is, urban) consolidation and control. And this trend has always been accompanied by resistance. Sociologist of education Michael Corbett (2001) argues that the values that [urban] education reformers wanted to inculcate through schooling were opposed to the values of rural communities:

> Rural people resisted the long arm of the state, reaching into the public and private spaces of their lives. But it is the structure of work and life in rural communities that grounded this resistance in a reasonable lived alternative (Corbett, 2001, p. 26).

In Corbett's interpretation of the rural resistance to public schooling, the reason for this resistance was that rural people were not interested in becoming the kind of citizens and workers that the provincial school system aimed to create. While school reformers designed a curriculum that was meant to offer moral and economic training for young people, they failed to consider that moral and economic training for young people was already a part of everyday life and work in rural Nova Scotia.

Despite early opposition, Rand's dream of a schoolhouse every three or four miles in Nova Scotia was realized by 1869.[3] Taxation programs enabled this undertaking, as did the relatively cheap labour of teachers who staffed rural schools. Perry notes that "an 'unlimited supply' of single rural women sustained and even made possible the survival of the school-section system" (Perry, 2003, p. 331). Small rural schools were typically staffed by a single woman teacher, whose salary could be kept low, and who was seen as being suited to the sort of moral training that schooling was supposed to provide.

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[3] Here it is important to note that although the Free School Act and its amendments were meant to make education freely available for all children, Black Nova Scotians were paying taxes for the public school system while being excluded from it. There were segregated schools but they lacked the resources of the publicly-funded schools. In 1884, the Act was amended again to permit Black students to attend public schools (Robson, 2019). For First Nations students, the use of the residential school system as a tool for colonial domination is well-documented (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Public schooling in Nova Scotia has never been equitable.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, the provincial school system continued to evolve. As Bennett shows, new ideas in education led to a movement of school consolidation beginning in the early 1900s. However, "any organizational or architectural changes that did occur, such as the spread of consolidated schools, were only accepted when local residents considered them inevitable" (Bennett, 2010, p. 149). In 1940, H.P. Moffat of the Nova Scotia Department of Education summarized the results of a commission on rural education in the province. The commission, led by Superintendent H.F. Munro, found inequities in schooling across the province because of the differences in wealth across communities. Moffat also noted that "the very nature of the small section restricts its offering to the bare essentials" (p. 122) and

> Twenty isolated rural sections could, in theory, combine to employ these teachers also, but in practice lack of initiative, local jealousies, and mere inertia, keep the rural school sections apart and confine the curriculum to the prescribed text books of the academic studies. Similarly, the rural areas are unable to provide a modern programme of physical education, adequate libraries and equipment, medical and dental services, and vocational training in agriculture, all of which they urgently need and have every right to expect. (Moffatt, 1940, p. 122)

For this commission, consolidation of rural schools and greater provincial control of education could solve the financial and educational problems that they identified in the system. But as is clear from the above quotation, these conclusions were rooted in

assumptions that rural Nova Scotians were regressive and “urgently” needed a more modern education programme.

This commission set into motion school consolidation in Nova Scotia, which continued with the Pottier report of 1954. This *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in Nova Scotia* is a reflection on the attitudes of many Nova Scotians at the time: Nova Scotia was moving on from the old system where there was a school within walking distance of every child. Innovations in transportation—meaning that students didn’t *have* to walk to school—and the post-war baby boom meant that one-room schoolhouses were a thing of the past. Consolidation was, according to the commission “going to be of increasing interest in the coming years” (Royal Commission on Public School Finance in Nova Scotia, 1954, p. 51). The report added that “intensification of this trend may be expected as highway and other transportation facilities improve, despite such offsetting factors as local pride and prejudice, transportation of children of tender years, geographical features and increasing costs of construction and transportation” (1954, p. 51). This would prove to be a prescient observation. As predicted (and recommended) by the report, the trend of school consolidation in Nova Scotia continued into the new millennium.

The Pottier report was not the first or the last report I read. In the course of my research for this project, I found that with almost each successive provincial government, there is a new commission or report to improve the education system in the province. While some deal with the quality of education, most deal with fiscal

questions: how will public education be paid for? Second to healthcare, education is the biggest provincial government budget item—in 2023-2024, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development had a budget of approximately 1.8 billion out of a total provincial budget of 14.8 billion—and reports like the Pottier report of 1954 attempt to rationalize a system such that the fewest resources can produce the greatest results. Rationalizing the school system to minimize costs while maximizing educational benefit has been the pattern in discussions about education in Nova Scotia, leaving little room for questioning. From the beginning of the public school system in Nova Scotia, there was an assumption that good schooling would produce productive citizens, thus improving the economic situation of the province. But, Nova Scotia continues to lag behind Canada as a whole in terms of productivity.

5.2 1994 to 2018

Changes in Nova Scotia public education continued over the next few decades, with trends in consolidation and curriculum standardization, as predicted. The most relevant changes for Maitland and Petite occurred in 1994 with updates to the Education Act determining the school review process until it was reviewed in 2014.

Prior to 1994, school review and closure were at school boards' discretion. School boards in Nova Scotia were elected by the residents of regions they served, and they received funding from the provincial Department of Education to administer the education program—including the maintenance and staffing of schools and transportation of students, and the closure and consolidation of schools.

While residents could vote for the members of their local school board, the decision-making process around school closure and consolidation was not open to the public. Community members would hear that their school was going to be closed *after* the school board had voted for the school closure. There was little or no involvement of communities in the school closure process. The 1994 Education Act created a legal obligation for school boards to be transparent and include communities in the school review process. It required school boards to notify the public of their intention to close a school "no later than October 31 in the year immediately preceding the calendar year in which the school may be closed" (1994, p. 47). It also mandated the creation of study committees made up of community members (elected at a public meeting) and school board representatives. The study committee's job was to engage the public on the school review process and to collect data and present a report to the board on the potential effects of a school closure. Upon release of the report, members of the public had the right to comment on it and attend a public meeting about it. The school board would then make the school closure decision before April 15, if the school was to be closed at the end of the school year. Furthermore, if anyone had questions about the school board's decisions or the information they used, this information was to be provided.

Importantly, the Act also added that "a school board may exempt any of its schools from consideration for closing" (p. 46). In fact, though there was a detailed explanation of the school closure process in the Act, it did not say this process was

necessary. That is, if school boards wanted to consider a school for permanent closure, the procedures for doing so were outlined in the Act, but school boards were not required to close schools. There were more changes in the Education Act relating to school reviews in 2008 and 2010, all relating to the opportunity of community members to have a say in the school review process. In this way, the regulations of the provincial Education Act gave the school boards a duty to meaningfully engage communities. However, despite the many opportunities for public comment, the Act did not specify how much the school board would take the study committee's recommendations, or the public's comments, into account. Despite the significant changes in the school review process since 1994, school boards still had the final say.

Even with the many changes to the school review process, the process remained fraught and unpopular. In 2011, Nova Scotia's NDP government engaged Ontario education consultant Ben Levin[4] to write a report outlining "Steps to Effective and Sustainable Public Education in Nova Scotia." The report focused on increasing achievement and efficiency in the school system. In the executive summary, Levin wrote "all organizations should be involved in continuing efforts to increase productivity by replacing less effective practices with more effective ones" (p. iii). One of his recommendations to "increase productivity" was that "there could be a significant number of such schools [with excess space] across the province that could be closed and

[4] In 2015, Ben Levin was convicted for charges related to child sexual abuse materials and sentenced to three years in prison.

students relocated to other schools quite nearby" (p. 21). This logic—that school consolidations could lead to improvement of the school system—is reminiscent of the logic of H.P. Moffat's report from 71 years earlier. While school closures and consolidations were not new phenomena in Nova Scotia, this report provided a justification for continuing to put small schools under review. This was convenient for the provincial government, who were making budget cuts to the education system, as the report helped present school closure decisions as necessary and inevitable.

Despite this appeal to productivity and efficiency, the school review process was unpopular. In April 2013— five months before the premier would call a provincial election—Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Ramona Jennex sent a letter to school boards asking them to suspend any school reviews in process and to delay any school closures until a new school review process was in place. This was presumably in response to public outcry about ongoing school review processes. In an interview with CBC news, Jennex explained that she had heard from parents, community groups, school boards, and municipalities that "it's been a problematic process" (CBC News, 2013). When asked if this meant that education funding would be increased, she replied that "a school review, and a school closure, should not be used to balance a budget." This election-time message contrasts with the productivity-and-efficiency-focused Levin report. From 2009 to 2013, the provincial education budget had decreased by 14%, meaning that school boards needed to find places to cut—and the

Levin report had suggested school closures as a solution. Jennex's public message contrasted with the government's ongoing policies.

As part of the review of the school review process, the Department of Education published the School Review Discussion Paper in November 2013. This paper aimed to give background information and guiding questions for public consultations. The paper included tracking of the school review processes across the province: of the 54 schools that went through the complete school review process since 2008, 40 were voted to close. I should note here that the Act specifies that a school review process is not necessary when a new school has been built for the students in the closed school(s). The school review process typically ended in consolidation—of a school being shuttered and the students in that school transferring to existing schools. In some cases, this can be relatively uncomplicated—in Halifax, a neighbourhood school might close and students would go to another nearby school. A middle school might close and the students absorbed into an elementary or high school. But in many cases, the schools that closed were rural elementary schools. For these communities, a school closure would mean that children would be transferred to a school outside the community. It would also mean the end of a community institution with no replacement in sight.

Number of Schools Identified for Review, and Outcomes (2008–2013)

	# of Identifications	# of school reviews discontinued	Schools voted for closure	School remained open
2008–09	8	0	6	2
2009–10	7	3	1	3
2010–11	23	14	7	2
2011–12	42	26	12	4
2012–13	24	7	14	3
Total*	104	50	40	14

* There were 104 identifications, representing 77 unique schools. (25 schools were identified in two review years and one school was identified in three review years.)

Figure 4. Number of schools identified for review, and outcomes (2008-2013). Source: School Review Discussion Paper, 2013

The overarching question of the Discussion Paper was “How can we improve the way we manage our stock of school buildings to do the best job of delivering the public school program to all students?” Provincial bureaucrat Bob Fowler published a summary of the results of public discussions in a February 2014 report titled “School Review Process Study: Report and Recommendations” (Nicknamed the Fowler report; see A.1 List of Nova Scotia Department of Education documents). Education researcher Jennifer Tinkham attended many public discussions in the lead up to the Fowler report, and found that in general, the public did not feel well-represented in school closure decisions, and that “the obvious solution to this problem is to create structure and process that will engage communities in meaningful ways” (Tinkham, 2014, p. 738). Fowler, too, came to the conclusion that it was necessary to update the school review process to include more public engagement.

The publication of the Fowler report was within the same month of the publication of another report in Nova Scotia: *Now or Never: An Urgent Call to Action for Nova Scotians* (The Ivany report) was released in February 2014 and garnered much attention among the public and policymakers. This report warned of imminent economic and demographic decline in the province, especially in rural areas. Fowler cites the Ivany report, saying that it “sets out a bold challenge to all Nova Scotians that change and innovation are required” (p. 4). Thus, the Fowler report was published at a time when Nova Scotians were concerned about the future of the province. In response to the Fowler report, the Minister of Education of the current Progressive Conservative government, Karen Casey, implemented a new school review process. Important changes to the process included the mandate for school boards to do long-range planning, and the introduction of “a set of general criteria to guide school boards and community groups in their consideration of possibilities for a hub/joint-use/community school facility” (Minister’s Response to Fowler report, 2014). This was a victory for small school advocates, by providing them with a framework within the education system to propose non-traditional solutions to school closures. In the following chapters, the importance of the hub school concept for small communities will be made evident.

While the new school review process did include more public consultation at all levels of the process, and more flexibility in terms of timelines, the ultimate decision was still up to school boards. In this way, the Fowler report followed the tradition of previous reforms. Changes to the process did not change the facts of the process: that

school boards could choose to close schools despite opposition from members of the public. The school review processes that had been in motion before 2014 were stalled for a time, but continued on. For example, the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board ultimately voted for the closure of three schools in June 2015—Maitland, River John and Wentworth. And in 2017, the South Shore Regional School Board set closure dates for the Petite Rivière and Pentz schools.

In 2017, the newly-elected provincial Liberal government engaged Ontario education consultant Avis Glaze to do an "administrative review" of the Nova Scotia education system. The review was announced in October 2017 and the 76-page report was published on January 23, 2018. Glaze's report recommended dissolving regional elected school boards in Nova Scotia. She noted in the report that of the 97 school board members elected in the province in 2016, 61 of those members were elected by acclamation. While regional elected school boards ostensibly gave local control to community members, the fact that so many were acclaimed, and that voter turnout was so low, meant that the democratic benefit of having elected school boards was little.

In response to the Glaze Report, the government immediately accepted her recommendation to dissolve the regional school boards in the province. The Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP), which oversees schooling in French in the province, was not changed and remains an elected board. But the seven elected regional school boards were replaced with provincial advisory council appointed by the Minister of Education. School board staff remained in their position, and the regions were renamed

"Centres for Education." Education Minister Zach Churchill accepted other recommendations from the report as well, including removing principals and vice-principals from the teachers union.

The case studies in this dissertation focus on a period of time between about 2010 and 2018. In the context of the education system in Nova Scotia, this was a time of turmoil and uncertainty. School boards continued to have decision-making power but their budgets were constrained.

Table 8. Nova Scotia Department of Education Budget. (Communications Nova Scotia, 2018b; Statistics Canada, 2024a)

Year	Budget (x1,000)	Budget in constant dollars (2002=100)	Percent change (constant dollars)	Primary and secondary enrolment (for school year beginning in September of that year)	Budget per pupil, constant dollars	Ministry name
1996	734,212	825,885		163,941	5,038	Education and Culture
1997	742,727	821,601	-0.5%	162,359	5,060	
1998	805,425	882,174	7.4%	160,011	5,513	
1999	873,746	940,523	6.6%	158,205	5,945	Education
2000	858,832	900,243	-4.3%	155,873	5,775	
2001	888,437	908,422	0.9%	153,450	5,920	
2002	928,733	928,733	2.2%	150,599	6,167	
2003	980,241	953,542	2.7%	148,514	6,421	
2004	1,002,848	957,830	0.4%	145,396	6,588	
2005	1,074,377	1,004,091	4.8%	142,304	7,056	
2006	1,138,222	1,043,283	3.9%	138,661	7,524	
2007	1,237,624	1,109,977	6.4%	135,303	8,204	
2008	1,261,744	1,105,823	-0.4%	133,134	8,306	
2009	1,285,147	1,123,380	1.6%	130,550	8,605	
2010	1,315,365	1,129,069	0.5%	128,131	8,812	

Year	Budget (x1,000)	Budget in constant dollars (2002=100)	Percent change (constant dollars)	Primary and secondary enrolment (for school year beginning in September of that year)	Budget per pupil, constant dollars	Ministry name
2011	1,135,237	946,820	-16.1%	125,540	7,542	
2012	1,112,830	914,404	-3.4%	122,643	7,456	
2013	1,105,659	900,374	-1.5%	121,028	7,439	Education and Early Childhood Development
2014	1,220,027	974,462	8.2%	119,383	8,162	
2015	1,244,607	983,102	0.9%	118,152	8,321	
2016	1,279,532	996,520	1.4%	118,567	8,405	
2017	1,317,657	1,010,473	1.4%	118,962	8,494	
2018	1,397,782	1,047,813	3.7%	120,604	8,688	
2019	1,429,342	1,050,987	0.3%	123,239	8,528	

As Table 8 shows, the early 2010s saw a cutback in education funding in Nova Scotia. This also happened to be when school boards across the province—including the Chignecto Central Regional School Board and the South Shore Regional School Board—began school review processes. At the same time, enrolment in primary and secondary schools was decreasing, pointing to the kind of demographic change that the Ivany Report warned about. While there were a few years where the constant per pupil spending decreased—crucially, those were the years when school review processes went into motion—declining enrolment meant that per-pupil spending stayed relatively stable.

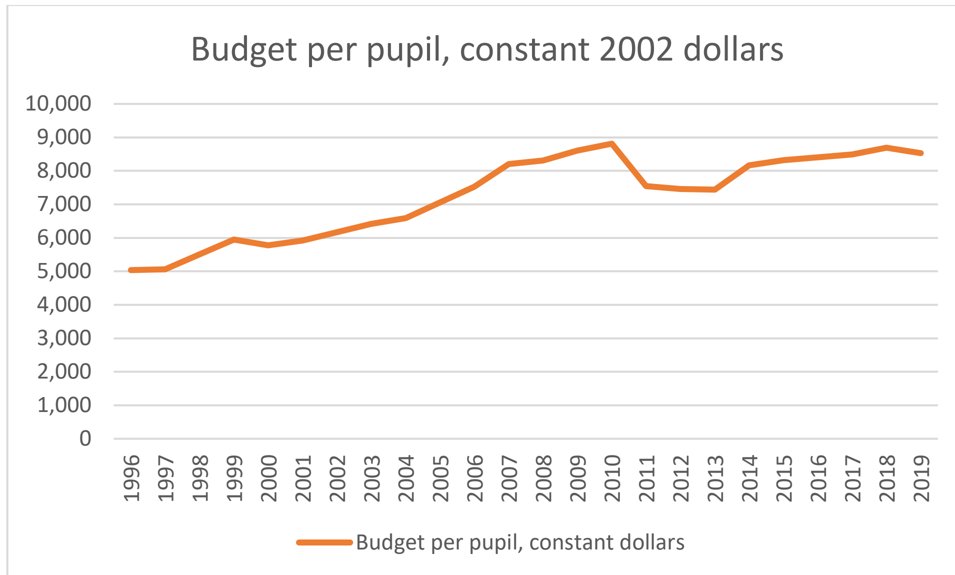

Figure 5. Budget per pupil in constant 2002 dollars, Nova Scotia Department of Education

As Figure 5 shows graphically, the education budget cuts in the 2010-2013 years were a short-lived blip in the recent history of the Nova Scotia Department of Education. But school boards at the time could not have predicted the future, and they made decisions with current budget restrictions in mind. Also, while there were many school review processes initiated during this budget-squeeze period, this was not the *only* time when these processes took place.

5.3 Resistance to rural school closures

Even as school boards continued to close and consolidate schools across the province, community members—especially in rural areas—resisted these efforts. Living in Nova Scotia during the course of this research, my work would often come up in conversation in casual contexts, and it was inevitable that someone would share *their* opinion or experience with rural school closures in the province, because Petite Rivière

and Maitland are two communities among many. Their stories are windows onto more general aspects of the context behind rural school struggles in Nova Scotia. Below, I briefly share the stories of two rural schools—one in Margaree Forks, and one in Greenfield. I use these stories to discuss a specific aspect of the school system in Nova Scotia: the rise of public-private partnerships to build schools. I also use these stories to demonstrate the lengths that people and communities go to prevent school closures, and the various strategies they use.

5.3.1 Margaree Forks

I spoke to a parent who had moved to Maitland after the school had closed, and she told me about her experience when she was in high school in Cape Breton. She had been part of a struggle to stop the closure of Margaree Forks District High when, in 1991, the Inverness District School Board had proposed to close the rural school and send the students to Inverness (about 28 kilometres away). In response, parents and other community members formed the Margaree Save Our Schools Committee (SOS). This committee engaged the community—they staged a protest of hundreds of people, coordinated a two-day student strike, and they organized the community to elect a slate of school board member candidates who were committed to saving the local school. For some years, this saved the school from closure, though the committee stayed active. In 1995 the school board again identified the Margaree Forks school for closure. At that time, the school had 248 students in grades 6-12. A new coalition of SOS and other community groups continued to fight the proposed closure. Twelve hundred residents of the Margaree area signed a petition asking for a moratorium on school closures, and

this request was granted. There was a one-year moratorium on school closures, and during that year community groups worked on engaging community members and organizing proposals for alternatives to school closure. Leaders of this group drew upon the community organizing legacy of the Antigonish Movement, the early 1900s extension program of St. Francis Xavier University led by Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins, that had provided adult education and sparked a cooperative economics movement (B. Peters et al., 2000).

At the end of the one-year moratorium, there was a protest at the school board offices, 90 parents applied to home school their children, and the students at the high school themselves staged a demonstration. According to my informant, who was a member of the student council at the time, the student council organized a lockout of the school, breaking into the building, changing the locks, and taking over the school with the other students. Their message was clear: they wanted to be educated in their own community.

Facing community opposition to the school closure plans, the Strait Regional School Board proposed a new option: Building a new P-12 school in Belle Côte, about 16 kilometres from Margaree Forks. While many in the community had pushed for upgrading of the existing schools, this plan still indicated that the people had some influence over school board decisions. The new school, Cape Breton Highlands Education Centre and Academy, was opened in 2000. The school not only serves students from the Margaree area, but also students from Cheticamp and Pleasant Bay.

High school students in Pleasant Bay travel to Cape Breton Highlands Education Centre—a journey of 60 kilometres or more each way. Meanwhile, the elementary school in Pleasant Bay serves a handful of students and employs one teacher.

The Cape Breton Highlands Education Centre and Academy was built as a public-private partnership, or P3. The Nova Scotia government began using this type of arrangement for infrastructure, including schools and roads, in the 1990s, as a way to transfer risk and costs from the public sector to the private sector. In the case of schools, this usually meant a private sector company would enter into a contract with the government to build a school building. The private sector company would retain ownership of the building and lease it to the government on a long-term basis. As Vining and Boardman (2008) write,

> Governments have articulated three major rationales for engaging in P3s. The first rationale is the minimization of on-budget government expenditures and/or the desire not to increase current debt levels. The second derives from the private sector's ability to provide both infrastructure and services at lower cost due to economies of scale, more experience, better incentives and greater ability to innovate. The third rationale relates to the government's desire to reduce risk, especially during the design and construction phase, but also during the operating phase (p. 12).

But as they show, P3 arrangements rarely work out in the public's favour. While private sector businesses may be able to provide some goods and services more efficiently than

the public sector, the goals of the private sector and what is for the public good do not align: private sector businesses prioritize profit over social goals. And it is not in the best interests of a private business to take on risk on behalf of the government unless they are compensated for it. At Cape Breton Highlands Education Centre and Academy, for example, the school site did not have potable water when it was built. For over two years after it opened, students had to drink bottled water. Because it was a P3 school, the private company operating the school was responsible for solving this problem, and they were slow at solving it (CCPA NS, 2016).

In Nova Scotia, there were 39 schools built and operated using P3 contracts between 1996 and 2001. By making P3 arrangements, the government of the day could show that they are building schools while also balancing the budget. These schools had 20-year lease agreements, and at the end of the leases the government could renew the P3 contracts, purchase the schools, or neither. In 2016 and 2017, the provincial government agreed to buy out 37 schools for a total of $215.9 million, and surrender rights to two schools in Sydney, meaning they would close when the leases expired (Communications Nova Scotia, 2017).

5.3.2 Greenfield

As the new Cape Breton Highlands Education Centre and Academy was opening its doors, another school closure conflict was playing out nearly 500 kilometres away, in the rural inland community of Greenfield, Queens County. I learned about the story of Greenfield's school because a member of the Petite Rivière community had previously worked in education in Queens County and related the story to me. Since 1945, children

in this inland rural community had been educated in its two-room school. This continued until 1987, when the Queens District School Board voted to close the school. After "concerted pressure," the school board reversed this decision later that year (*History of Greenfield*, 2020). Students from grades primary to 6 continued to attend the school. In 2000, the South Shore Regional School Board reviewed the facilities of the now-aging two-room school building, and found that it was lacking in many ways. At that time, the school, serving grades primary to 6, had 39 students.

However, members of the community, including representatives of the village's biggest employer, the Freeman Lumber Mill, were determined to find a solution for education that kept children in the community. They formed the Greenfield Community Resource Centre Society. Partnering with the province and the school board, the society built the new school building, which also includes a public library (Communications Nova Scotia, 2008). Throughout the building of the school, community and industry partners contributed cash, lumber and labour to complete the project.

The Greenfield Elementary School agreement is much like other public-private partnership agreements (CBC News, 2007), including a 20-year lease to the province beginning when it opened in 2008. But this situation differs from other P3 agreements because of the non-profit nature of it. The school is valued at 1.3 million dollars and is leased to the province for $72,000 a year.

In the 2023-2024 school year, there were 43 students enrolled at Greenfield Elementary School, in grades pre-primary to 6. Although this means Greenfield is one of

the smallest schools in the province in terms of enrolment, they are protected from closure because of their unique arrangement.

Chapter 6. Maitland case study

6.1 Introduction to the community of Maitland

I chose the Nova Scotian village of Maitland for this research not just because it had experienced a well-publicized and prolonged school closure process, but also because I have familial roots in the area. For the first few years of my life, I lived just down the shore, on a homestead that has been in my family for generations. After my family moved to the nearby town, we still made frequent visits to Maitland and Noel Shore. My interest in rural sociology is a result of what I would later learn was called “place attachment” to that corner of the world. When a local resident took me on a tour of the school, he said “your grandmother would have taught in that classroom,” referring to my late Grammy Ruth Main, who’d spent most of her career teaching in small rural schools in Nova Scotia. Suffice it to say this work is deeply personal, and relational, for me.

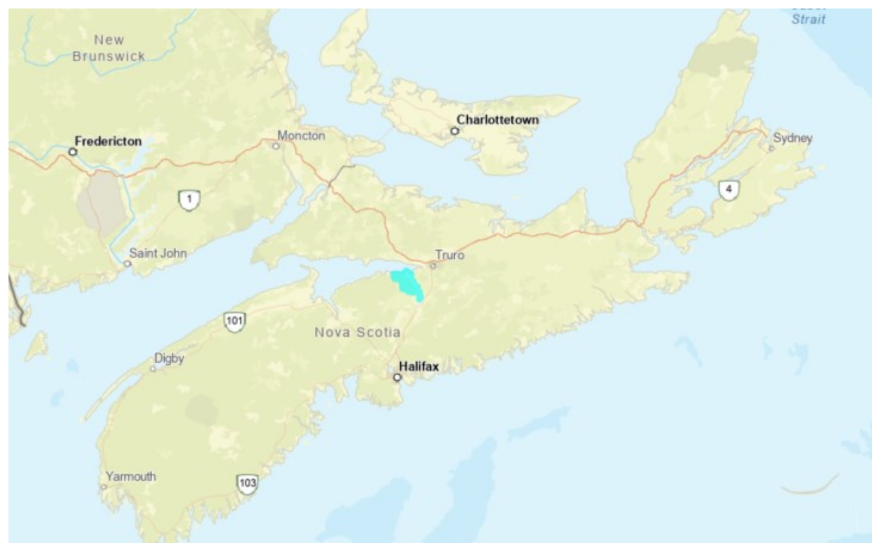

Figure 6. Maitland area highlighted on Nova Scotia map. (census dissemination area 12080056)

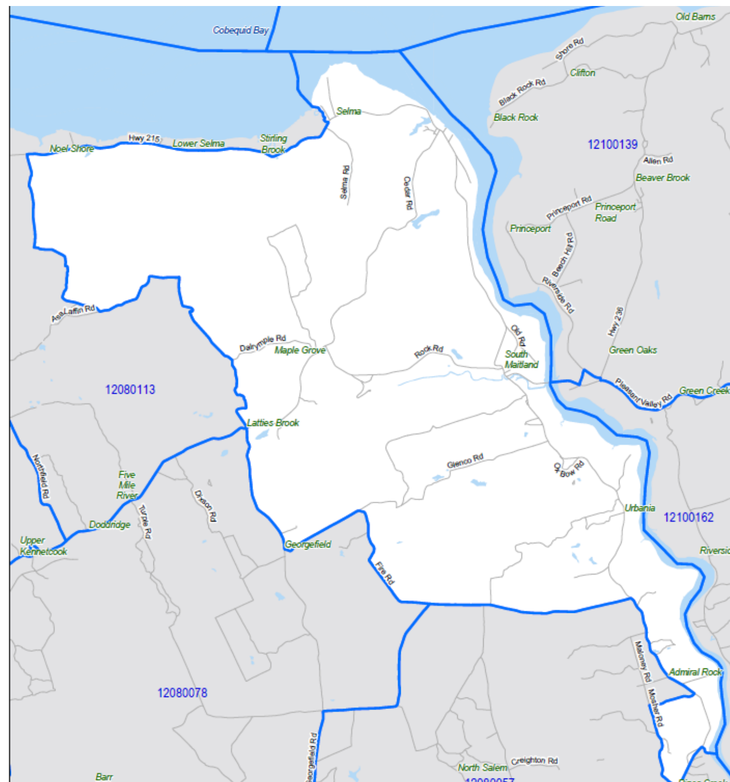

Figure 7. Maitland dissemination area. Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021; Hydrography from Natural Resources Canada, Topographic Data of Canada, CanVec, 2019.

Maitland is a rural village where the Bay of Fundy meets the Shubenacadie River, creating the world's highest tides. Because of my family's attachment to the area, I always found the village enchanting. The Acadian dykes on the Shubenacadie River, the huge wooden ship captain's houses, and the way the sun shines through the willows on the church hill collapse time, bringing history into the present day. Maitland is also the first "heritage conservation district" in Nova Scotia, a designation meant to preserve the historic architecture in the village. For some, the feeling of being surrounded by history is exciting, but for others, it is a signal that the peak of the community is long past. I

view the village through the eyes of someone who grew up around the area, and who usually can't stop in the village without running into someone I know. But despite this love of place, it isn't hard to see where history meets decline. The ship captain's houses have peeling paint. Buildings that clearly used to be storefronts or businesses are now abandoned or are converted into homes or workshops. It is a quiet village.

Maitland's population peaked with the wooden shipbuilding industry in the late 19th century, with approximately 2,700 people (Burns et al., 2016). The village is located about a 30-minute drive from the population centre of Truro; and about an hour from the province's capital city of Halifax, and it is not on a major highway. In the past 30 or so years, the area has lost the only bank branch, the only gas station, the United Church, and in 2015, the elementary school. Today, the centre of the village includes the historic Frieze and Roy general store (that can sell liquor and recently added a café), the volunteer fire department, the post office, and the High Tides Arts Centre, a performance space in the old church building.

While many people in the community are retired or are summer residents, there are others who are employed in the area or nearby Truro, or commute the hour to Halifax. Within the past few years fibre op internet has been added to the community, giving people much-needed high-speed internet access, so there is also the possibility to work from home. Within the community, a handful of mainly seasonal jobs are available: there is a small tourism industry based on the historic W.D. Lawrence house

provincial shipbuilding museum (which is temporarily closed in 2024, and residents fear for its future), small inns, and rafting on the tidal bore on the Shubenacadie River.

As Table 9 shows, since 2011, the population of the Maitland area has decreased from 832 to 636—the community has lost nearly a quarter of its population in ten years, even as the populations of Nova Scotia and Canada as a whole have increased. Meanwhile, the median age in Maitland is higher than the median age in the rest of Canada by over ten years—and it continues to increase. The 2021 census data shows a community decline, by the population measure.

Table 9. Maitland population data. Statistics Canada. 2012. 12080056, Nova Scotia (Code 12080056) and East Hants, Nova Scotia (Code 1208008) *(table).* Census Profile. *2011 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-XWE. Ottawa. Released October 24, 2012; Statistics Canada. 2017.* 12080056 [Dissemination area], Nova Scotia and East Hants, MD [Census subdivision], Nova Scotia *(table).* Census Profile. *2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017; Statistics Canada. 2023. (table).* Census Profile. *2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023.*

		2011	2016	2021
Total population	Maitland	832	839	636
	Nova Scotia	921,727	923,598	969,385
	Canada	33,476,688	35,151,728	36,991,980
Median age	Maitland	50	51.4	54.8
	Nova Scotia	43.7	45.5	45.6
	Canada	40.6	41.2	41.6
Percentage of population aged 0-14	Maitland	9.6	13.8	9.4
	Nova Scotia	15	14.5	14.1
	Canada	16.8	16.6	16.3

Noah, a young person who had been a student at the Maitland school at the time it closed, described the community like this:

> The main thing is, since a lot of the people are elderly, and the nature of it is that people come and go, it has a core group of people in that are holding up the entire community. But as they age, it's becoming less active, and a lot of new people are moving in, but they don't have the same drive to do community stuff. So… we have a lot of people that come in as vacationers, so they have vacation homes, so it's becoming less of a residential place and more like a summer home, which is kind of strange. But another thing about it being small, is that it's friendlier, sort of.

The villagers were aware that the community was changing and declining, but multiple participants used the term “resilient” to describe it. When I asked about the strengths of the community, this is how Deb, a retired community member who had advocated to keep the school open, responded:

> I think that resilience, it wasn't just when the school closed, things changed. Over the years that this place has been a village, there had been a number of times when it looked like it was the end of the road for this village but they... we're still here. When shipbuilding ended a lot of people had to leave to look for work, but the community adapted... much smaller obviously, than when they were building ships here. But we're still here.

Though Maitland's population seems to be declining year after year, a small community is still a community. In Deb's words "we're still here." The decline of Maitland's population reflects the decline of the rural Canadian population in general—even though the share of the population that is urban continues to grow, this does not erase the fact that some people still live rurally, and there will always be some people living rurally.

6.2 Introduction to Maitland District Elementary School

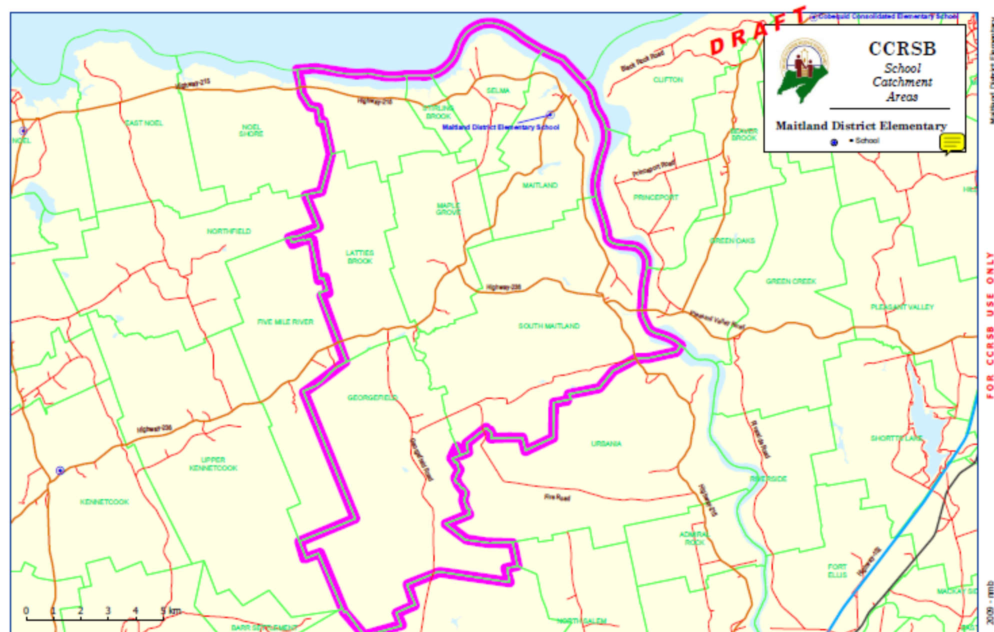

Figure 8. School catchment area for the Maitland District Elementary School. From 2012 Impact Assessment Report

Maitland District Elementary School was built in 1962 as a consolidated grade primary to 6 school, replacing a number of one-room schoolhouses and the old Maitland Academy. This was part of a larger trend of school consolidation in the post-war era. The baby boom after the wars meant that new spaces needed to be built to accommodate

these children in school. When the Maitland school opened for the first time for the 1962-63 school year, there were 150 students enrolled, but that was the peak of enrolment; there has been a decline in the number of students ever since then, in line with the general community demographic decline.

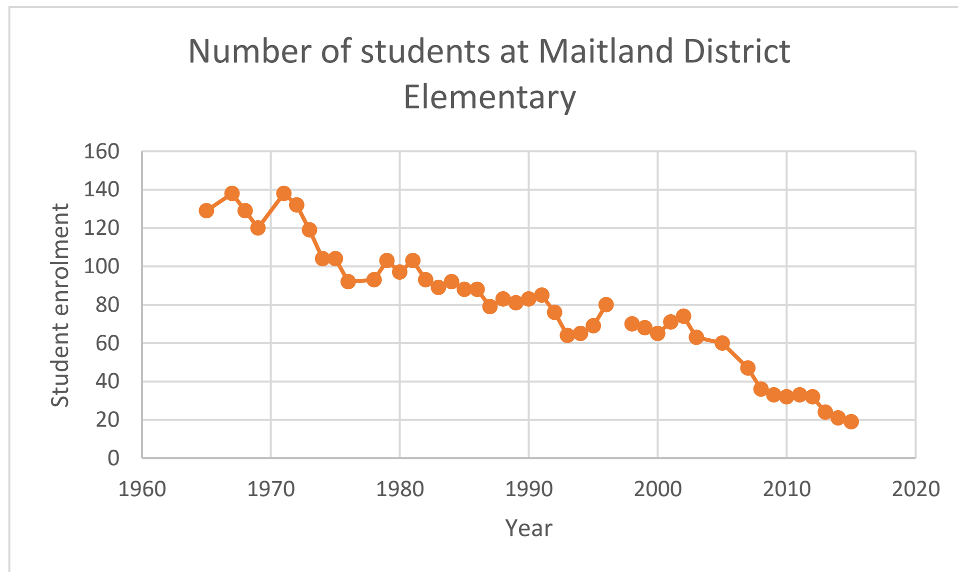

Figure 9. Number of students at Maitland District Elementary School. (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024)

In 2012, the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCSRB), which oversaw school programs in central and northern Nova Scotia, began the school review process for Maitland District Elementary School. After multiple committees, reports, community meetings, and a change in government, on June 10, 2015, the school board ultimately confirmed their decision to close the Maitland school at the end of the 2015 school year. Maitland was not the only school that closed that year—at that same meeting, the school board voted to close two other small rural elementary schools in the region—Wentworth and River John. All three schools had a community committee that had

worked to submit a "hub school" proposal, an innovative model for using the surplus space in school buildings for community activities or businesses. I detail the hub school prospect below, as it was a key aspect of the Maitland school closure conflict. While the board considered these proposals, they decided none were viable.

Figure 10. The former Maitland District Elementary School, February 2021

6.3 The Maitland school closure saga

This case study is a post-mortem of a decision that could not be easily reversed. Interviewing community members and school board members six or seven years after the school closure, it is clear that the conflict around the school closure was meaningful and memorable for all involved. To understand the school closure, I interviewed people from the community—parents with children in school, children who had attended the

school, community members who fought to keep the school open, and community members who didn't. I also interviewed former teachers at the school and one school board member. Because it is such a small community, and because it had been a long time since the school closure, I sampled purposively, ending up with a total of 11 interviewee participants. Besides interviews, I combed through 5 years of school board minutes, other school board documents, government policies and reports. I looked at Statistics Canada population data for the community and Department of Education enrolment data for the school. A year and a half into the research project, I presented preliminary results to the community and invited feedback. This is the basis for this case study. This case study does not capture all school closure decisions. But this case study *does* provide a deep, and, I believe, accurate, picture of the decision around the closure of the Maitland school. By all accounts, it was a long "drug out" process. In this case study chapter, I intend to show the process from the point of view of community members, and from the school board. In doing so, I can answer (for Maitland) my research questions—why do school boards close small rural schools, and what is the role of a school in a community?

6.3.1 School closures: Before 2012

In interviews, participants hinted that the Maitland school review process that began in 2012 was not the first for the community. Most notably, there was a time in the 1989-90 school year when Maitland was in danger of closing, but that plan was scrapped, most likely due to community outcry. That same year, a school in the next district over (Noel) was also in danger of closing. Community members told me of how

the Noel community was blindsided by the announcement. There had been no public consultation, and community members—including school staff—found out about the upcoming school closure through the radio morning news. For one school board member I spoke to, fighting back against that school closure was one reason she later ran for the school board. The school in Noel did not close (in fact, it is one of two schools that children in Maitland attend today). For the school board member who had been involved in that fight as a community member, the problem with that incident was the *process*. The fact that a rural school might close was not the issue; the issue was that the school might close suddenly, without community input.

6.3.2 School closure: 2012-2015

In January 2012, CCRSB members voted to begin their region's school review process "in light of anticipated budget issues." By March, the board had identified five schools to continue to review—including Maitland District Elementary School. Though the motions to continue the school review passed, they did not pass unanimously, with some on the board voicing their dissent. The school review process continued with impact assessment reports for each of the schools under review. In September 2012, the board received the impact assessment reports for three schools and again voted to continue the school review process. Again, this vote was not unanimous, but passed with a majority of school board members' assent.

Continuing the school review process included public meetings in each community and the creation of study committees for each community. The study

committee consisted primarily of parents of students at the school. In Maitland, these public meetings were very well-attended, and sometimes became quite heated.

On March 20, 2013, after the school review process, the CCRSB voted to close Maitland District Elementary, effective June 30, 2015. The primary reason that the closure date was two years away was to allow the community to develop a hub school model. Although the school board had made their decision, the fact that they allowed the extra time meant there was still some hope in the community that the school could be saved. There was still time for a last-ditch effort—the school was not closed until it was closed.

The community study committee that was formed as part of the school review process had proposed a third option—an alternative to the wicked choice of closing the school or keeping it open. A hub school, as later defined by the Nova Scotia Department of Education is,

> The reasonable and sustainable use of a public school space for purposes other than delivering the public school program that does not impede the delivery of the public school program, is financially and operationally viable, and is supported through a strong business case from the community (2014 Guidelines for Hub School Model).

Advocacy for the hub school model in Nova Scotia came from the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative (NSSSI), a coalition of people co-founded by education consultant Paul Bennett and Petite resident Leif Helmer. NSSSI was formed as reaction

to the numerous school closure processes happening across the province, and aimed to build solidarity among small school advocates through sharing resources and ideas. The group was inspired by a 2010 paper by David Clandfield, who proposed "school community hubs" as a solution to school closures in Ontario (Bennett, 2013; Clandfield, 2010). For study committees in places undergoing school reviews, hub schools were an innovative option. With the hub school option, equity did not have to be sacrificed for efficiency. It was an opportunity for the school board to save money without closing small rural schools.

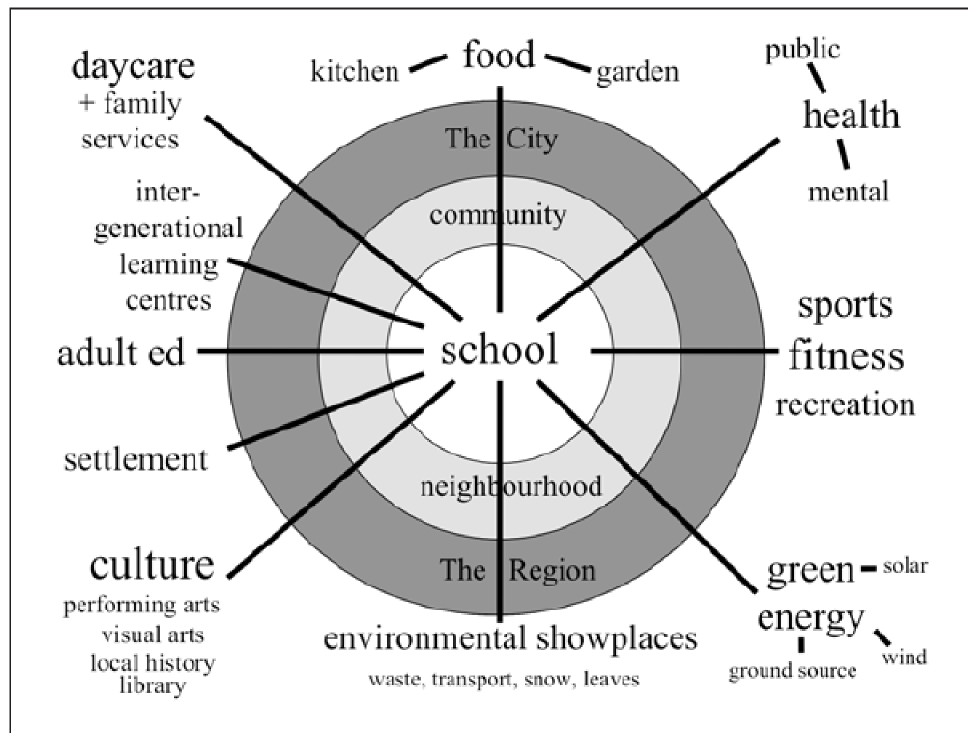

Figure 11. "The school at work as community hub." Clandfield (2010).

The school board claimed that "excess square footage" was the primary issue leading to the school review process. In theory, a hub school—co-locating community

organizations or businesses within the school building—would make use of the excess space within the school. Under public pressure—much of it from the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative and people in communities where schools were in danger of closing—in 2014 the provincial Department of Education created Guidelines and Criteria for a Hub School Model, introducing a mechanism through which community groups could submit proposals for hub schools to school boards. This added another dimension to the school closure process.

A volunteer hub school committee made up of community members and parents of Maitland school students submitted their 111-page hub school proposal to CCRSB on March 31, 2015. It followed exactly the criteria laid out by the Department of Education. Proposed for the unused school space was a secondhand shop and café, a community centre, seasonal accommodation, and commercial rental space. The proposal included timelines, risk analysis, detailed budgets, floor plans, and letters of support from community organizations. At the same meeting, representatives from River John and Wentworth, two other communities facing a school closure from CCRSB, also submitted hub school proposals.

These were among the first proposals submitted to a Nova Scotian school board since the province created the mechanism to propose a hub school. On June 10, 2015, during a public board meeting in Truro in a packed room, the CCRSB rejected all three hub school proposals. Bob Fowler, the consultant who had recommended that the government consider hub schools, was vocal with his displeasure over these decisions

(Laroche, 2015). This was the last board meeting before the June 30, 2015 deadline for school closure as decided in the March 2013 vote.

During this meeting, school board member Vivian Farrell made three separate motions (one for each school) to reconsider school closure. In the case of Maitland and Wentworth, 4 board members voted for the motion and 12 voted against. In the case of River John, it was a tie—which resulted in the motion being defeated. Despite some on the school board still having reservations, all three schools were slated to close. After three and half years of uncertainty, the Maitland school shut its doors for good a few weeks later.

The elementary students in Maitland were diverted to two other schools in Kennetcook and Noel, 25 and 22 kilometres away respectively. The dividing line for the new school catchments was on Cedar Road—the road where the now-closed elementary school sat, and the middle of the village.

6.3.3 Why did the school board close the school?

Because the school closure process was so long and so contentious, I wanted to know why (or if) this process was necessary. There were at least two competing interests in this case: those who wanted the school to remain open, and those who wanted to close the school. In the end, the school did close, indicating the power of the school closure camp. But even the people who exercised the decision-making power to vote for the closure of the school did not want the school to close, as shown below. In the debate over the school closure in Maitland, neoliberal ideology prioritizing fiscal

prudence was presented by common sense by the school board (and accepted as such by some in the community), while detractors of the school were seen as impractical.

In an interview with me, Donna, who was on the school board and voted to close the Maitland school said:

> We were following the criteria that we had, because we had to have so many community meetings, and I think that as board members, not one of us wanted to close the school. But at the end of the day […] as a board member you have to look at the whole system, not just one school.

Meanwhile, an administrator in a leadership role in the school board at the time told me:

> And I know at the time, there was a lot of debate, elected school boards really really struggled with the decisions to close schools, and most often, as you read through the minutes, you'll see that most often, the discussion or debate or dialogue for the school board often came down to a budget issue. And how much it costs to bus, to maintain the school, repair the school, how old the school might be, and what the future projections might be for the school facility itself.

Although the school board had to make the decision to close schools, they struggled with making the decision. The quotes above suggest that this was not something the school board members themselves wanted to do, but rather something that they felt like they needed to do. To understand why the school board made a decision that they

really did not want to make, I examined school board minutes to understand the constraints they faced.

Unsurprisingly, it appears that the primary catalyst for the school review process was cuts to the provincial education budget. This was explicitly said in board meeting minutes at the beginning of the school review process:

> In light of anticipated budget reductions and the costs associated with excess square footage, the Operational Services Committee will bring forward a motion later in this meeting recommending that the Board begin the school review process (CCRSB, 2012-01-18)

For the members of the board recommending the school review process, “resources no longer needed for schools with excess capacity due to declining enrollments may be better utilized for educational programs, supports, and services for students” (CCRSB, 2012-01-18). That is, school closures would free up budget to go towards all other schools in the region. Equity for rural communities would be sacrificed for efficiency in the region in general. Evidently, the school board only saw two distinct choices. The first choice was to close small schools, despite the importance of these school to the communities they were in. The second choice was to keep these schools open even though the cost per student in small schools was marginally higher than in other schools. At the meeting in June 2015 when the Maitland, River John, and Wentworth schools were closed for good, board chair Trudy Thompson expressed the choice in very clear terms:

> We are faced with a growing problem in CCRSB - it is the same problem faced by school boards from Newfoundland to British Columbia - excess square footage. Minister Casey has made it very clear that all school boards in Nova Scotia have tough decisions ahead. We must choose to fund programs and retain staff to support our students, or we must choose to fund underutilized buildings. We can no longer afford to do both. The decision to close all three schools was not an easy one. We do not have easy decisions ahead. (CCRSB, 2015-06-10).

The language used by Thompson-- "we *must* choose"—reveals the school board chair's understanding that the school closure decisions were inevitable. Her identification of the 'problem' as "excess square footage," meanwhile, obscures the reason why that was a problem. By excess square footage, Thompson was referring to the physical school space that the school board maintained. Many schools had been built in the 1950s and 1960s at the height of the postwar baby boom, and now those school buildings were aging, while student population was decreasing in many areas. School boards had the responsibility of maintaining these aging buildings—which could be costly—even when all the classroom space was not currently being used. Excess square footage was a pressing issue at this time because of the necessity of cost-cutting measures, and cost-cutting measures were a necessity because of cuts to the school board budget.

In a February 2013 board meeting, before public hearings in the communities, the school board members discussed the school closure process. For example, one member said that "the Board is not necessarily responsible for sustaining rural

communities," while others claimed that school reviews "should not solely be based on dollars and cents but on all factors of the reviews, including the human aspects that are important to everyone." Others urged their fellow board members to "not let emotion be the guideline" in the school review process. One such comment is recorded below:

> Board Member Marilyn Murray commented on the net savings of approximately $1-million that would be realized if these five schools were closed. These savings would allow the Board the ability to put more teachers and/or educational assistants in the classroom, or add administrative assistants, librarians or custodians in our schools.

For this board member, the community cost of closing rural schools was worth it for the budget savings. This trade-off is a common one for rural communities. For her 2018 book *For-Profit Democracy: Why the Government is Losing the Trust of Rural America*, Loka Ashwood studied rural communities in Burke County, Georgia, home to a large nuclear power plant and a nuclear waste depository. In the book, she argues that the logic of utilitarianism, which understands the public good as what is good for the *most* people, ultimately dispossesses minorities, and always creates new minorities. In the Georgia case, Ashwood writes of a White landowner, Raleigh, whose land was taken in eminent domain on behalf of the nuclear power company. He was able to negotiate compensation for more money than Black landowners did. Ashwood writes:

> Majority rule prospers on the faulty opposition between minority and majority rights, by making what seems good for oneself require a sacrifice from someone

> else. In Raleigh's case, black families receiving less money seemed fine, as did his own receipt of more money. This temporary benefit conceals a long-term loss, even for those in the majority.
>
> The 'most'—in this case, the white majority—remains perpetually vulnerable to what I call 'majority cannibalism,' in which majority status can never be assured, but always shifts to fulfill the rule of numbers's latest need to feed (2018, p. 89).

Utilitarianism demands the few be sacrificed for the good of the whole; but the decision of what is for the good of the whole—and who is the whole—is never truly settled. Majority status can never be guaranteed. For school boards, closing rural schools could mean that money could go towards other positions or programs. But that still does not guarantee that these positions or programs can be supported in the future. Closing rural schools helped with budget cuts in the short term—though how much real cost savings there were remains to be seen—but by no means did these actions prevent future budget cuts.

A glimpse at the CCRSB's 2015-2016 financial statements (for the year April 1 2015-March 31, 2016) showed that compared to the previous year, the total expenses for the school board decreased by $5.4 million. This was accompanied by a decrease in provincial funding, eventually leaving the school board with a surplus of $306,278, out of a total budget of $202.4 million. It is not specified how much of the $5.4 million savings was from the closure of the Maitland, River John, and Wentworth schools. In fact, in the 2012 Impact Assessment Report prepared as part of the school review

process, the estimated net annual budget savings for closing Maitland school was $130,258. Despite this number being a fraction of one percent of the total annual school board budget, closing the Maitland school was positioned as an inevitability by board members.

In both meeting minutes and interviews years later, school board members and staff characterized the Maitland school closure as an unfortunate but necessary choice. But the real budget numbers call this choice into question. While the closure of the Maitland school did save some money for the school board, the savings were marginal. Although the school board knew the potential community impacts of a school closure, they prioritized fiscal responsibility, however narrowly defined.

While interviews with school board officials and examination of school board minutes give a straightforward answer to the question of “why close the Maitland school”, the answer only addresses one dimension of power—that of one group forcing another to do something they do not want to do. But this fails to address other dimensions of power affecting this conflict—the control of participation and debate and the shaping of interests (Culley & Hughey, 2008; Gaventa, 1982; Lukes, 2004). Power is revealed not only through conflict, but also through who sets the terms of the conflict, and what is up for discussion in the first place. Lukes (2004) writes:

> A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants (p. 27).

Study of this dimension of power, according to Gaventa, includes “the study of social myths, language, and symbols, and how they are shaped and manipulated in power processes” (p. 15). Interviews and school board minutes reveal that the school board’s reason for closing the Maitland school were primarily financial savings. But this does not answer the question of why the school board prioritized this, and why closing rural schools was seen as the solution to balance the budget. I discuss this further in Chapter 8.

6.3.4 Why did some Maitlanders resist the school closure?

Since the first hints of school closure in Maitland, people living in the school district resisted school closure. This resistance began with some community members and parents speaking up at school board meetings, and it also included forming a committee to explore options for keeping the school open, contacting politicians at all levels, and contacting the media. When the school board held their mandated public meetings in Maitland to discuss the school review process, the room was full. However, the community of Maitland was not a wholly united front. While many people did work hard to keep the school open, others saw the closure as inevitable, and silently watched the struggle unfold. I will discuss those views below, after discussing the views of those who pushed back on the closure.

Parents with children at the Maitland school fought for it to remain open, but they were not alone in this fight. People whose children were grown also joined the fight, and so did staff at the school—to the level that was appropriate given their position as employees of the school board. Advocates against closing the school

believed the closure would have negative impacts on three important things: on kids, on the community's cohesion, and on the community's population.

6.3.4.1 For the kids

One of the primary arguments for keeping the Maitland school open was a belief that keeping it open would be better for the children in the community. Those fighting against school closure believed that the education and socialization of a small community school was better than that of a larger school outside of the community. They also worried about the impacts of a long school bus travel time for children. While Nova Scotia does have a regulation that school bus rides cannot be any longer than one hour, the bus rides for Maitland students to one of the other schools could easily bump against that limit because of stops and road conditions. They worried about the impact a greater distance would have on their children's ability to participate in extra-curricular activities such as music and sports, too.

One participant, Heather, who served on the committee that worked to create a hub school proposal, had children who had recently been through the elementary school. She believed that her children had received a better education than they would have in a bigger school. For Heather, it was not only the extra attention that each student could receive from a teacher in a small school—she also believed that the multi-graded classrooms, where two or more grade levels share the same classroom and teacher—helped socialize the children. Heather said:

> That's the sole reason I stepped up was because I saw what my kids obtained from having a small school education. And anybody moving into my community, I didn't want them not to have that same opportunity for their children.

Heather's preference for a multi-graded, small school is not unique among rural Canadians—in a study of a small school in Alberta, Elizabeth Siemens finds that parents saw their multi-graded school as providing quality education (Siemens, 2023). What is a benefit to Heather, though, may be seen as a deficit to others, who see multi-graded classrooms as less resourced.

Another parent, Mary Anne, who still had children in the school at the time of the school closure conflict, said

> It was supposed to be standardized education for all, no matter how many people were in your area. And then consolidation came in. They said, 'we still guarantee you that your children will have the same educational opportunities.' Except kids are no longer within walking or close driving distance of home. So if you couldn't get your kid picked up after basketball practice, band practice, whatever, they couldn't go.

For Mary Anne, the school closure resulted in educational inequities. The distance of the school from the community meant that children who lived further away could not do the same extracurricular activities.

For others, keeping the school open was a matter of principle. Deb was a grandparent at the time of the school closures and did not have any family members at the school, but she was counseled by an older community member:

> She said, 'it's all well worthwhile to do this.' She said, 'even if you get to the point where, you know, it's hopeless,' she said, 'Don't give up.' She said, if nothing else, 'your children will know you thought they were worth it..' …. I think that even though by the time this all happened, my kids were all out of school, I think they were all out of school altogether. And, my grandchildren, obviously, were never going to go to school in Maitland because none of them live here anymore. And still, it was that thought that our children will think they were worth it, because we fought for them.

For Deb, the fight against the school closure was not just about the school—it was about the children in the community. Struggling to keep the school open, even if the struggle was a failure, would send a signal to the children of the community that they were valuable.

6.3.4.2 The heart of the community

Another common reason for keeping the school open was the idea that the school was the heart of the community. This is connected to the decline argument: the idea that removing the school would lead to community population decline. But there are two distinct strands of the 'heart of the community' idea. When people talk about the school being the heart of the community, they are not just talking about the

population of the community, but also about social capital and community cohesion. People interviewed surmised that this is why people felt so strongly about saving the school. For people in Maitland, you did not necessarily need to be a student or a parent or a staff member to care about the school. People cared about the school because it was a part of the community and represented a way to connect with neighbours. The school was part of the community identity.

Carolyn was a teacher at the school. She described it:

> It always was a huge part of the community. Kept the community connected, I think, because that's how you knew… everyone else, through their children. And so, you'd go to concerts or events there and you would meet families, and you'd acquaint in that way, the school was used a lot too for community events: concerts, maybe, and things like that that people would use the gym for.

The people interviewed lamented how the loss of the school had affected life in the community. Another community member, Elizabeth, who had not been active in fighting against school closure, nonetheless noticed how the closure of the school had affected the community:

> It was fairly community-oriented, like they would do things... For instance, at Christmas the kids walked down to the church, one of the churches and have a church service before they had their Christmas dinner and... They'd do activities. So, but that has changed quite a bit. I mean, there were like ball teams, that kind of thing too. But once the school went, there was no organization.

For parent Mary Anne, the school closure meant fewer opportunities to be together as a community. She connects this with the fact that she does not know the people who are new to the community.

> And also in rural areas, there are only a very few things that allow us to be together and come together and tie us together. Because we all work in so many different places. Your church, your school, your fire department and your local store. Those are the things that tie you together, you start losing those, and you start splintering. I couldn't even tell you who half my neighbors are that bought the houses that were for sale, no idea.

For Mary Anne, the school gave an opportunity to build social capital—the something to "tie us together." With the loss of the school came a loss of that opportunity to create new social ties.

As part of the hub school proposal, the committee included letters from people in the community, including the chief of the volunteer fire department, who wrote:

> Loss of the local school environment will inevitably alter the sense of community that is built in children of school age via regular educational activities. Our department has seen many future members develop from students at the school, who later referred to our school visits as the foundation of their interest in community service. Closure of the local school will sever a bond to the community that cannot easily be replaced.

The school board who ultimately made the decision to close the Maitland school did not have a mandate to think about the volunteer fire department. Their scope included the efficient operation of a public school system. This narrow scope excludes the parts of the school system that are valued by the local community, but which do not directly relate to the provincial curriculum. It is not a *requirement* for a small, rural school like Maitland to invite firefighters to class, or host sports games, concerts, and events. But these activities did occur in Maitland, and the letters in support of the school show that these activities supported other community institutions. The role of the Maitland school in the community had value to the residents of Maitland, but there was no mechanism to translate that value into what the school board said they needed at the time—cost savings.

6.3.4.3 Rural decline

Another reason for wanting to save the Maitland school was a perception by community members that closing the school would precipitate population decline in the community. Carolyn, the teacher, said:

> A lot of people felt that when the school left, that would be the heart of the community leaving. And it was just behind everything else-- the church was closing as well, and all these services were leaving, and more things leave when a school leaves. More things leave.

In a letter to support the hub school proposal, a local business owner wrote:

> Without an elementary school in the area this community will suffer greatly in many ways. Moreover, young families will not move here, and others are likely to leave, if there is no local elementary school.

I did all my interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, which represented a change in population trends for some areas of rural Nova Scotia, including Maitland. Prevalence of work-from-home arrangements, the relative safety of Nova Scotia, the relatively lower price of housing in rural areas, and the installation of fibre-op internet all combined to make Maitland an attractive choice to live. According to study participants, many people had moved in during the pandemic—though they may have been part-time or summer residents. Mike, who fought against school closure and had children in the school, talked about the change in his work arrangements that allowed him to work from home:

> So I think as the nature of such work changes, I think that's going to have benefits for rural communities. But the question remains about educating the children in those communities, because it is a lot easier to close a school than it is to open one. The Maitland school has been closed, it's been sold, it's a private residence now. That school is not coming back. If they decide to open a school, to have a school in Maitland, because they suddenly had a magical flash of common sense, then they're going to have to find a place to put it and they're going to have to build a building, and all the politics that are associated with where you locate an educational facility. And that all has to happen again. Which was frustrating. When they could have just kept that building open.

Mike saw the school closure as a foreclosure of future possibilities. If the school had stayed open, and remained a public asset, then it would be ready and available in case of community renewal. But the school closure and sale meant that that future was now closed off. Even if there was a population increase or a change in the community's fortune, a new school was unlikely. Mike continued:

> The amount of money they were talking about, to keep it open. I just never understood the decision. Because it was always... they talked regularly, the phrase 'financial viability.' And I to this day, have not been able to figure out why those words are even spoken in the assessment of keeping a school. A school is not a business. A school is like a park. It's like a museum. It is a public good. And, you know, it had 20 kids in it. Yes, it did. And it had two teachers and a principal and a secretary. And those people were part of the community and their wages were spent at the store. And you know, they had a house in the community and they were part of the community. And just to say well, that's not enough. It's like Jeff Bezos made the decision, rather than people that were elected to oversee education, not finance. Another way I would put it is, this is what happens when your accountants make the decision.

While participants like Mike understood that the school had very low enrolment, they had hope that this could one day be reversed, and they felt that the school board's decision was prioritizing short-term financial savings over the long-term future of the community. Mike was under no illusions that the school could be more "financially

viable," but he pushed back against the idea that financial viability should be the primary goal for the school board. Mike questioned what had become an acceptable framing: of running government as one would run a business. The way Jeff Bezos makes decisions, he intimates, is not in the public good.

6.3.5 What were people's reasons for not fighting against school closure?

Not everyone in Maitland joined the fight against the school closure. For these community members, the school closure was a sad but necessary event. The people who agreed with the school board's decision were not as vocal about their opinion as the people who fought against school closure. Elizabeth, a community member who worked in a public-facing job and thus had a strong connection to many people in the community, said

> We went to several meetings, but it was pointless. I know some people thought we were going to make a difference. But I mean, there weren't enough children. It was only a reasonable thing to have happen. None of us had children. We had children, but we didn't have big families. And Maitland school was never a huge school, I think they got between 150 or 200 when they were opened. And that was totally amazing. You know, for all the kids who had gone to the two-room schoolhouses to go to a school that size was impressive, but it never got any larger. It was in shrinking business, basically.

Elizabeth, like many people in the community, attended public meetings about the school closure—ostensibly in some act of solidarity or maybe just curiosity. But for her,

looking back on the conflict five years in the future, the fight was pointless. About the school board, she said "it was a reasonable decision. The people who were in charge didn't make a far-fetched decision. They made a sensible decision." At the same time, Elizabeth looked back on the closures in Maitland—the bank leaving, the church closing, and the school closing, and said "it all is an injury." The school closure hurt, and she noticed a fracture in the community since the school closure, but she also believed that it was a reasonable decision and it was pointless to fight against it. Perhaps the injury is easier to bear when one believes it is inevitable.

Another community member, Doug, suggested that it was mostly the people with children at the school who wanted to keep it open, and referenced the other times when the Maitland school had been considered for school review: "You people have appealed this three times, and every time your case gets worse. You've not shown us increased population, you've not shown us anything. They had no choice but to close the school." For Doug, this pragmatic opinion was based on a conception of community that was larger than just the Maitland community—like many people in Maitland, he felt connected with people throughout the "shore"—like Noel—and in nearby communities like Kennetcook. According to Doug, closing the Maitland school would strengthen the schools in Kennetcook and Noel. Much like the school board, he saw school closure as a zero-sum game—keeping a small school open in Maitland would reduce funding from other nearby small schools. As Corbett (2014b) writes "rural schools have served as sites

of struggle for long-standing debates about what counts as community" (p. 605), and Maitland is no exception.

Another community member who had previously worked at the Maitland school called into question the 'rural decline' argument for keeping the school open. For Laura, school closure was a consequence and not a cause of rural decline. When I asked if she was among the people who had protested and worked against the school closing, she answered:

> I was not. I was not among those people. Because it wasn't a practical decision. I'm a practical person. And that was not a practical decision. It would not have been a practical decision, to keep the school open. You know, people kept saying 'Oh but if the school closes, then kids won't come to the community' and I said 'They haven't been coming. We're down to 20 kids and there used to be 98. And the school's been open the whole time. It's not because of the school that the kids aren't coming.' You know. I know that people didn't like... I didn't hide the way I felt, and people weren't happy about it. But... it's not practical. And especially, when you see classes that are overcrowded in some of the other schools, how could they justify having three teachers for one class? So, I agreed with the board decision to close. Even though it was sad to see it go.

Whether they fought to keep the school open or not, there was nobody in the community who had pleasure from the school closing. However, some saw it as the "reasonable", "sensible," and "practical" decision. Even for those who wanted the

school to remain open, it was easy to see the school board's logic for deciding to close it. Having witnessed the decline in school and community population, these people saw the school closure as an unfortunate inevitability.

6.4 The school and the future of Maitland

In Maitland, the school closure represented a foreclosure. The absence of a school closed off future opportunities and imaginings.

At its height during the golden age of sail, the forests around Maitland were cut down to build ships carrying goods around the globe for the British empire. An economy based on extraction for global markets will always be vulnerable to those markets. Indeed, Maitland has never again returned to that nadir. As Kassandra Spooner-Locker puts it in her anthropological research on capitalist boom-and-bust cycles in Cape Breton, "'time gets flattened out under the logic of capitalism, which promises an infinite future, but only through the infinity of accumulation" (Spooner-Lockyer, 2023). Spooner-Lockyer's research focuses on the way that capitalism cuts off imagined futures that do not fit within the logic of infinite accumulation. The future of a community like Maitland, continuously stuck on the –bust side of a boom-and-bust cycle, means that the residents must imagine a future that does not depend on the promise of economic growth.

Today, Maitland residents are increasingly vulnerable to climate change. Power outages from storms are more and more frequent; and Maitland's infrastructure is not high in the priority list to be fixed. When Hurricane Fiona hit in September 2022,

electricity was not restored in some areas of Maitland for more than a week. In the summer of 2023, as I begun writing this dissertation, the village was nearly cut off from the rest of the province when extreme flooding damaged the main road in and out of the community.

So, as is the case with most things in the community, neighbours rely on themselves to make sure the community is safe. What the school closure has made clear is that the only people who can take care of Maitlanders are Maitlanders. The local Facebook group, along with the usual road complaints, is filled with local residents offering services and advertising events: poetry readings, cookbook sales, concerts, a food pantry. Was the closing of the school the death of the community? Not quite. The community still putters along, and while they don't succeed in many of the markers of neoliberalism—this is not the next Silicon Valley— they succeed in continuing to creatively provide for their families and foster social capital, forming strong networks of mutual aid.

Based on observations as an outsider, it seems like Maitland is a resilient community. While important institutions like the church and school no longer exist, there are other institutions supporting community resilience. But, with the community aging and shrinking, there is danger that the volunteers who support these institutions will age out or become burnt out. The volunteer fire department, for example, relies on young members to be first responders in the community. And as Susan Braedley writes,

> The Canadian care economy is being re-structured by government policy initiatives, privatizing more completely responsibilities for care to individuals and households as public sector services are required to limit access, intensity and length of service, while at the same time closing and/or restricting access to publicly funded care settings (Braedley, 2015, p. 274).

The result of this decrease of publicly funded healthcare and childcare means that volunteer groups like the fire service are increasingly faced with a larger burden of care, even as recruitment is a challenge. Volunteers increasingly face more responsibility while at the same time facing a decrease in capacity—the volunteer fire departments found in mainly rural areas all across the country, for example, have trouble recruiting new members to replace retiring ones (Gollom, 2017). The Maitland school closure, then, can be seen as just one manifestation in a larger set of processes: of the persistent underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada—especially rural Atlantic Canada, and of the removal of public funds from the work of social reproduction.

Chapter 7. Petite case study

7.1 Introduction to the community of Petite Rivière

At the mouth of the Petite River where it meets the Atlantic Ocean at Green Bay lies the community bearing the name of the river. The population of Petite Rivière and surrounding areas is around 1,200 people— the exact population is hard to know because Statistics Canada's census geography boundaries do not line up with local geography boundaries like the school district, and because there are a large number of summer residents in the area, meaning the population fluctuates throughout the year.[5]

In its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, Petite was a busy fishing, farming, and boat-building village and the "commercial outlet for the upriver mill villages of Crousetown and Conquerall Mills" (Mennel, 2018, p. 20). Of the many small settlements along the Petite River, the village named after the river was the largest.

[5] For the purposes of this dissertation, I use data from Statistics Canada's 2016 and 2021 Census of Population, and I use the aggregate of three dissemination areas— 12060172, 12060120, and 12060186. Together, these roughly correspond to the Petite Rivière Elementary School but do not exactly match.

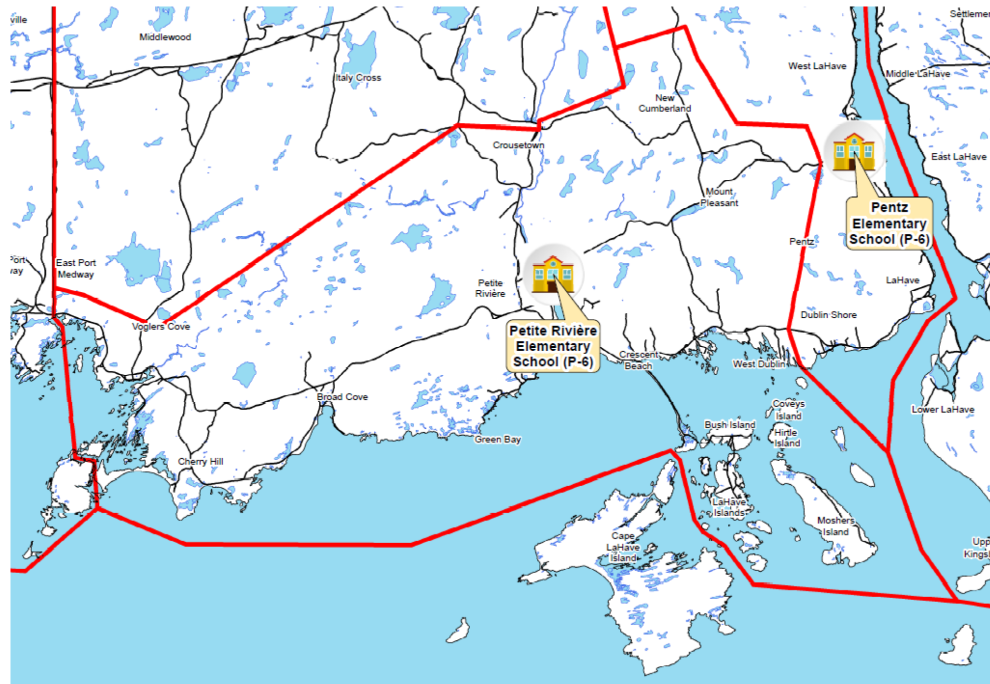

Figure 12. Catchment area for PRES. Source: South Shore Regional Centre for Education

Today, Petite Rivière—typically called the shorthand "Petite" by locals—is about a 25-minute drive from the commercial centre of Bridgewater, or about 35 minutes from the commercial centre of Liverpool, each town with access to supermarkets, healthcare, and other services. In Petite itself, the services are limited to a general store (including a liquor store and a gas station), a fire hall, an elementary school, two churches, and a restaurant. Along the roads there are also shops, many with arts and crafts, serving the tourist population. Some of the most popular beaches in the province—Rissers Beach and Crescent Beach—are in the area and see many visitors in the summer. Up until 2008, there was a successful boat-building company based in Petite Rivière, but after a fire the headquarters moved to Lunenburg. Today, the year-round residents of Petite typically commute outside the community for work, or work

from home. There is a large population of artists and others doing creative pursuits in the area, as for many years, housing was relatively cheap compared to other places in Canada, and the charm of the coastal community drew young, creative people. From around 2006 to 2016, a group in the community presented the Little River Folk Concert series, drawing folk artists to perform in the area. In the course of my research, I spoke with people who had moved to Petite for all kinds of reasons—because they were born there, because they had family in the area, because there was good surfing, because there was cheap housing, because they heard the school was good, or because they were offered a job in the area—and typically more than one reason. The fact that people, especially young people, were moving *to* rather than *from* this rural Nova Scotian community in the 2010s made it an anomaly compared to rural Nova Scotia as a whole.

The area around Petite Rivière is a traditional vacation destination for people from elsewhere. For some, summer homes have been in the family for generations, and the attachment to place is strong. For community members I talked to in interviews, this was an important aspect to place in Petite, because it seemed to resist the "come-from-away" effect. This colloquialism is worth unpacking. Outsiders to Atlantic Canada who move to the region often feel alienated by their new community because of their status as outsiders, and the "come from away" (CFA) concept connotes the way that this outsider status remains for years—sometimes for life—despite the newcomer's best efforts to fit in. People in the region joke about the CFA concept, and while many

experience and witness it, nobody seems to actually admit to agreeing with it. In 2016, then-federal cabinet minister Scott Brison suggested that the concept was antithetical to economic growth; he and others stressed that “Atlantic Canadians must learn to embrace newcomers if they hope to offset the economic fallout caused by a rapidly aging population” (M. MacDonald, 2016). The perceived insularity of Atlantic Canada—especially *rural* Atlantic Canada—has long been seen as a barrier to much-needed population and economic growth.

Figure 13. Postcard from Petite Rivière. © His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, Nova Scotia Archives Photographic Collection, date unknown

From all accounts, however, Petite has been successful in welcoming those “from away.” Whether it is young families moving there to raise their children, summer residents there for tourism season, or a Syrian refugee family sponsored by community groups, Petite seems to be a community that embraces change. And the addition of new businesses in the past few years—including a bakery in nearby West Dublin, a

restaurant, and a veterinarian's office—shows that Petite's story is far from the declining narrative of many rural Nova Scotian communities. Data from the 2021 census shows that in the greater Petite area—total population of 1,191—235 had moved from elsewhere within the past five years. Of these, 100 people moved from another province. That is, nearly 1 in 5 Petite residents was "from away", inasmuch as they had newly moved to the community.[6] Residents of Petite felt that the stereotypes of Atlantic Canadian rural communities—being stodgy, closed to outsiders, unwilling to change, and aging—just didn't hold true in their area. As area resident Sheila said in an interview with me, "there's an openness to change and a willingness to embrace that change and to adapt, which not all communities are able to do." Other community members spoke about the "mix" of people in the community. As a predominantly White community, Petite is not very diverse racially, but community members saw diversity in life stage, in length of time in the community, and in education and occupation. This quote from Rachel, a local parent, is characteristic of participants' views of their community:

> There's this knowledge that there are people who have lived here their whole lives, there's people that have lived here for the last 20 years, there's people who have moved to the community in the last five years, but everyone seems to share a certain progressive stance on a lot of issues. There's an appreciation for the art

[6] Some of these newcomers may have come as a part of COVID-19-related counterurbanization, a phenomenon that S. Ashleigh Weeden, Jean Hardy, and Karen Foster have studied (Weeden et al., 2022).

> and artisans. There's an appreciation for music, and there's definitely, I think the thing that ties it all together is the beauty of the area.

For many in the Petite area, shared values make them feel part of a community. This perhaps made the proposed school closure even more painful. At the time of the school closure decision, there were new residents, new businesses, and the prices of houses and land were increasing. In the view of residents, Petite is a desirable place to live, and this is borne out in the population data. This is opposite the trend in rural Nova Scotia as a whole in the 2010s. It made the school board's decision for closure baffling. Petite residents had seen how a closed school in other nearby communities—like Riverport, near Lunenburg—had devastated those places. They spoke about how they saw the school closure in Riverport as "suck[ing] the life force out" of the community (Andrea, school staff) and how "within months or years, it was a very different community" (Erik, parent). They connected elementary school closure with community decline, and that didn't fit their present idea of Petite nor their vision for its future.

Figure 14. Petite Rivière Elementary School, August 2023

7.2 Introduction to PRES

Petite Rivière Elementary School (PRES) opened in 1961, replacing the two-storey Sea View School in Petite Rivière and one-room schoolhouses in surrounding communities. At the time of opening in the early 1960s, the school had over 200 students in grades primary to 6. Since then, the school population has declined, reaching a low of 71 students in 2017, at the height of the school closure struggle. Today, the student population in grades pre-primary to 6 is 107 students.

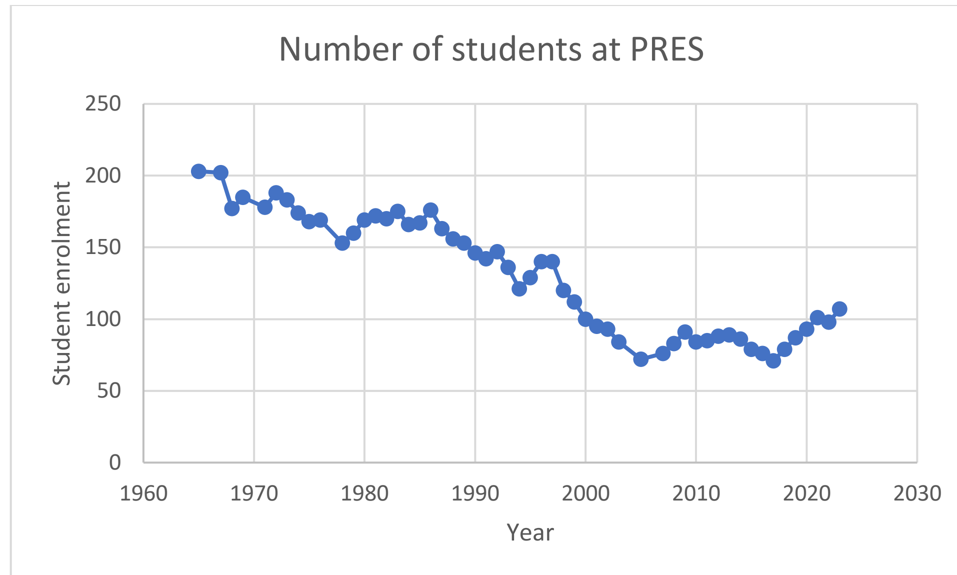

Figure 15. Number of students at Petite Rivière Elementary School. Source: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

The catchment area of PRES stretches from West Dublin and the LaHave Islands in the east to Vogler's Cove in the west, and inland to Crousetown. The school is located near the middle of the village of Petite Rivière and is on the Petite River, but many of the students from the school do not live in Petite itself, but instead in one of the many communities in the catchment area—West Dublin, Crousetown, Mount Pleasant, New Cumberland, Green Bay, Broad Cove, Cherry Hill, or Vogler's Cove.

The school's location, in the centre of the village and on the river, is perfect for embracing place-based principles of education. Place-based education is simply, education wherein "teachers and students turn to phenomena immediately around them as the foundation for curriculum development (Smith 2002, p. 593). For Smith (2002), this is beneficial because it:

> serves to strengthen children's connections to others and to the regions in which they live. It enhances achievement, but, more important, it helps overcome the alienation and isolation of individuals that have become hallmarks of modernity. By reconnecting rather than separating children from the world, place-based education serves both individuals and communities, helping individuals to experience the value they hold for others and allowing communities to benefit from the commitment and contributions of their members (p. 594).

Gruenewald (2003) further argues that "a critical pedagogy of place ultimately encourages teachers and students to reinhabit their places, that is, to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future" (p. 7). For theorists of education, place-based education has the potential to mold students into more connected, compassionate, and aware people, and this benefits not just the students themselves, but also the community in which they are rooted. However, as Corbett, previously cited in this dissertation, says, "rather than support place-based ways of knowing and established social, economic and cultural networks in rural and coastal communities, the school has typically stood in opposition to local lifeworlds" (Corbett, 2007, p. 10). While many agree that place-based education has a number of pedagogical benefits, in practice it may conflict with standardized curriculum requirements.

In Petite, though, the school has successfully carved out a place for place-based education within the provincial curriculum. In my research, examples of this included

students doing oral history with seniors in the area, a school garden and chicken coop, and a ‘mindfulness area’ near the river. While PRES shares curriculum requirements with the rest of the province, educators there value local knowledge and ecology and have created pedagogical space for it.

7.3 Timeline of the school review process

Inklings of a possible school closure began in 2011 when the South Shore Regional School Board (SSRSB) identified Petite Rivière Elementary School (PRES) as a school to review (see section 5.2 for background on the school review process). Along with Petite, Pentz Elementary—the neighbouring district’s school—as well as Mill Village Consolidated School, Gold River Western Shore Elementary School, the elementary school at Hebbville Academy, and New Ross Consolidated School, were all identified for school review.

At this time, the “school review” process was a euphemism for the school closure process. It was a long process, but even the beginning of it put Petite community members on high alert. Members of the home and school association and other concerned parents at PRES began what would be 7 years of resistance by calling individual board members to lobby to get PRES off the school review list. They also created a Facebook group to begin organizing online.

Some on the school board were sympathetic to Petite’s cause. In a board meeting on March 30, 2011, board member Karen Reinhardt motioned that the board stop the school review process altogether. The motion passed. However, the vote had

been added to the meeting agenda at the last minute, and some school board members had seemingly been prepared for it while others were taken by surprise. To investigate whether there had been misconduct surrounding this vote, the Department of Education engaged consultant firm Deloitte to do a review of the SSRSB. Deloitte's review, published in November 2011, concluded that board members had been "colluding in an inappropriate manner to stop the process of School Review" (2011 Deloitte SSRSB Review, p. 3). From interviews and correspondence obtained through FOIPOP requests, Deloitte found that the lobbying by parents and associations against school closures may have been prompted by a school board member. They concurred that the vote to stop school reviews was a surprise to some board members, but others had discussed it privately beforehand, making sure they would have the votes for it to pass. Deloitte's report concluded that by colluding to put a stop to the school review process, members of the school board were not fulfilling their responsibilities as set out in the Education Act:

> It is clear via the FOIPOP emails that one or more Board members deliberately set out to gather support for abandoning the process and succeeded in doing so. This "success" was celebrated in subsequent emails between these Board members. Their zeal to protect rural schools or to defend schools in their district against the possibility of closure undermined the process, and others went along. The personal agendas of some of the Board members appear to have trumped their responsibilities to the Board and the region as a whole. (p. 11).

According to Deloitte's report, the school review process was a procedure meant to help boards make efficient use of their resources. In the report, Deloitte's consultants emphasized that a school review process did not necessarily end in a school closure.

However, it is clear that many SSRSB members saw that as the purpose of the school review process, and in their lobbying against the process they felt they were lobbying against school closure. In emails about the vote to end the school review process, one member wrote:

> When they closed the Blandford school, I said nothing. Blandford is not my community and those are not my kids. So 5 year olds, who use [sic] to walk to school now travel an hour on a bus.
>
> When they closed Lunenburg High, I said nothing. I don't live in Lunenburg and those are not my kids. So those students are bused to Bridgewater.
>
> When they closed Riverport, I said nothing. Riverport is not my community and those are not my kids. So those kids are bused out of their home community.
>
> Now they want to close my school! Who will speak for me! (2011 Deloitte SSRSB Review, p. 31-32)

Clearly a riff on Martin Niemöller's Holocaust exhortation ("First they came for the socialists…"), the quote shows how some board members saw themselves—working on behalf of children and communities to resist school closures. But the "they" in the poem

was clearly referencing the school board. Though these members were representatives of the school board, they also saw their own board as opponents.

A week after the publication of Deloitte's report, Education Minister Ramona Jennex fired the entire South Shore Regional School Board and replaced them with one single appointed board member. School board elections would happen in October 2012, but until then, there would be no elected school board on the South Shore. The board's conduct during the school review process was cited as one reason for firing the board.

While school board members at the time unquestionably *did* act in contrary to bylaws and had conflicts of interest around the school review process, little attention was paid at the time to the school review process itself, and the reasons that the board began the process in the first place. In 2011, the school board's budget was cut by the Department of Education, following cuts of the provincial education budget. The catalyst for the school review process was the need to save money by closing some schools. Nowhere in the Education Act are school boards required to undergo the school review process—but they chose to go through the process because of budget cuts. As the Deloitte report explains:

> It is important to note that the purpose of School Review is not to close public schools. The review could result in a decision to maintain status quo, consolidate the school, or a part of the school, with another public school, or make any other decision authorized by the regulations pertaining to the Act. School Review is an important tool that Boards can utilize to contain expenses and optimize the

educational resources at their disposal, which is particularly important during a time of generally rising costs and falling enrollment. (p. 8).

For the school board, school review was a tool to help optimize resources in a time of cost pressure, and the process did not necessarily end in a school closure. For people in rural areas, though, consolidation of schools necessarily meant that one school would be closed and the students bussed to another. And if the process could result in a decision to maintain the status quo, then the entire exercise felt pointless. For the school board members who voted against continuing school review, they evidently saw the school review process as a threat to rural schools in their districts.

The firing of the school board in 2012 did not bring a reprieve to the fight to keep a school in Petite Rivière. Passionate Petite parents were an integral part of the 2012 creation of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative, a group that brought advocates for rural schooling in the province together. This group held meetings around the province and shared research about the value of small schools and resources to help communities fight to keep small schools open. Meanwhile, Judith Sullivan-Corney, the sole appointed SSRSB school board member, resumed the school review process soon after she began her role.

In the identification report for PRES prepared in February 2012, school board staff note four potential options for the future of PRES: continue to operate the school but upgrade the building, move the students to Hebbville Academy (17 kilometres away), consolidate Petite and Pentz elementary schools, or build a new school to

combine Petite, Pentz, and Hebbville. The reasons for considering Petite for school review seemed to have to do with declining enrolment and issues with the building—the gym was small and there was no cafeteria area. In the neighbouring district, the identification report for Pentz Elementary School was nearly identical and included the same possible options.

Following the identification report, the school board—still comprised of just one person—continued the process. For Petite, this meant Deloitte was again consulted, this time to prepare an Impact Assessment Report (IA report). To prepare the IA report, Deloitte received input from a number of stakeholders, including municipal representatives, the principal of the schools, and SSRSB staff. This report outlined five options for the future of the Petite school: keep all students in PRES, close the school and transfer all students to Hebbville Academy, close the school and split students between Hebbville Academy and Pentz, consolidate the school with Hebbville Academy and Pentz Elementary (PES) into a new school (P-5), or consolidate the school with PES into a new school.

Table 10. Options for PRES

Options identified in ID report	**Options identified in IA report**	**Additional option identified by PRES Study Committee**
Continue to operate the school and upgrade the building	Keep all students in PRES (no mention of building upgrades)	"Petite Plus": Alteration and addition (A&A) to the existing school to continue to operate the school, bringing it up to

Options identified in ID report	**Options identified in IA report**	**Additional option identified by PRES Study Committee**
		modern standards while adding community uses.
Move the students to Hebbville Academy	Move the students to Hebbville Academy	
Consolidate Pentz and PRES in one building	Consolidate school with Pentz Elementary School into a new school (P-6)	
Construct a new school to accommodate Pentz Elementary, PRES, possibly Hebbville Elementary, and possibly Newcombville Elementary	Consolidate school with Hebbville Academy and Pentz Elementary School into a new school (P-5)	
	Close school and split students between Hebbville Academy and Pentz Elementary School	

Deloitte's Impact Assessment report was published in September 2012, and in October 2012, eight school board members were elected in the municipal elections. They were sworn in in November. The newly elected board were all first-time members, except for former board chair Elliott Payzant, who had been part of the 2011 board that was fired by the province. The new board continued where the school review process had left off.

Meanwhile, the PRES Study Committee, made up of School Advisory Council (SAC) members at the school, shared their own vision for the future of the Petite school

with the board. Looking beyond the options identified in the school board's reports, they proposed a new option: "Petite Plus." Petite Plus was a proposal to keep PRES open in the same location but build an addition to bring it up to standard, while adding community uses such as space for fitness classes and a YMCA after-school program. While the study committee did not use the language of "hub school," the proposal fit the hub school idea. This vision had the support of the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, to whom, according to provincial regulations, the school building would be transferred upon closure. At SSRSB's request, the PRES study committee provided additional information about the Petite Plus Vision in the winter of 2013.

In February 2013, public hearings were held in communities under school review, giving an opportunity for community members to offer input on the closure process. Many in the Petite community spoke passionately against the school closure. For example, local parent Michelle Wamboldt said:

> I urge you to listen to the people who elected you - the people whom you were elected to represent. We want to educate our young children in our own community. Please work with us to make this possible.

While school boards are required to hear from study committees and do public consultation, it is unclear the weight these consultations have on ultimate decision making. Evidently, it isn't much: despite strong public support against closure, the school board approved a motion to close and replace the Petite and Pentz schools.

On March 27, 2013, the school board unanimously voted in favour of the following motions:

> MOTION SS037-13 by Board Member Payzant, seconded by Board Member Simms, that Pentz Elementary School permanently close and that a new school be requested to replace Pentz Elementary School and Petite Rivière Elementary School.
>
> And
>
> MOTION SS038-13 by Board Member Payzant, seconded by Board Member Fougere, that Petite Rivière Elementary School permanently close and that a new school be requested to replace Petite Rivière Elementary School and Pentz Elementary School.

It is recorded in the meeting minutes that "Vice Chair Payzant clarified that Pentz Elementary School and Petite Rivière Elementary School would remain open until a new school has been completed to replace both Pentz Elementary School and Petite Rivière Elementary School." However, this clarification was not part of the exact wording of the motion. The phrasing of these two motions were at the centre of the school closure debate in Petite Rivière.

The problem for the school board was that capital projects—including the building of new schools—was not in their purview, and was instead a responsibility of the provincial Department of Education. While school boards could make capital

requests to the Department of Education, and often did so strategically, they did not have the final decision on which new schools would be built, where these schools would be placed, or which schools would have major capital improvements. This was decided at the Department of Education level, and the school boards did not always have insights into the decision-making process or why some things were funded and others weren't. So while the language in the 2013 motion did specify that a new school be *requested*, this left no guarantee that a new school would actually be built.

The community of Petite, including parents and others fighting for the school closure, were not reassured by the "request for a new school" caveat in the motions, and continued discussing next steps with each other, letter-writing, attending meetings of the school board, and contacting elected representatives. In the midst of this uncertainty, after a series of public consultations, the provincial Department of Education published the "School Review Process Study: Report and Recommendations", otherwise known as the Fowler Report, in 2014. One important outcome of the Fowler report was the development of hub school guidelines and the opportunity for more public consultation at all stages of the school review process.

In a special board meeting on January 21, 2015, the SSRSB, along with representatives from PRES and PES, discussed the 2013 motion about the two schools. The board's legal counsel had clarified that the SSRSB could not rescind the motion to close the schools. Under regulations governing the school board, this meant that the

school board had five years after the date of the motion to close the school—early 2018. During this special board meeting, superintendent Geoff Cainen was blunt:

> The cold, hard reality is that we haven't been given any money so those schools will close, we just haven't set a date. If the community wants to take on other ideas they can do so. Keep in mind we are two years in to a five year process.

In the superintendent's point of view, the PRES and PES school closures were already in process—the decision had been made, and they had until five years after the original motion to finalize the closure. Cainen's comment also suggests that the schools would not be in danger of closing if the school board had received provincial funding for renovations or a new building. In another special meeting on March 31, 2015, the school board met (separately) with representatives from PES and from PRES. In this meeting, the legal counsel for the board, John MacPherson, explained that the March 27, 2013 motion to close PES and PRES could not be changed. SSRSB board members added that they were continuing to apply to the province for a replacement school. The representatives from the PRES SAC who were at this meeting pushed back against the limited possibilities that the board seemed to be working on. They were skeptical that the motion *really* could not be changed, and they wondered why a renovation—or an "alteration and addition" (A & A) was not an option for the school.

In November 2015, then-Minister of Education Karen Casey wrote a letter to SSRSB confirming the government's support of an A & A for PRES *or* PES, if the school board did a building needs assessment and requested it. The school board then engaged

consulting firm StanTec to assess buildings and land of the schools.[7] While both PRES and PES parents and community members were advocating for keeping their schools open, Minister Casey's indication of support for *one* of the two buildings put these two communities in a difficult position.

Based on the StanTec reports of both schools, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal recommended in a February 2016 report to SSRSB that:

> It is the opinion of the review team that, relative to a new school project, an Addition & Alterations project at either school building would provide the best value to the Province and the communities served in this area.

Despite this, the board continued to prefer the option of building a new school to replace both Petite and Pentz, and continued to submit this for consideration to the province. The most likely reason for this preference was the legal counsel the board received that the 2013 motion could not be changed—they had made the decision to close the two schools and build a new one, and they did not believe they could rescind that decision. In January 2016, the province's capital plan was released with no funding for a new school in Petite or Pentz. This worried parents and community members.

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[7] Between the two Deloitte reports and the StanTec report, the SSRSB engaged private consulting firms throughout the PRES school review process. I was unable to find information about the cost of these consulting contracts to the school board (and thus to the pubic), but I am interested in further research on the use of private consulting firms by public institutions.

Although community members had been working to make sure the school stayed open, they officially incorporated into a society in March 2017. The new Greater Petite Area Community Association (GPACA) was formed by parents and other individuals who were interested in keeping the school open. Rather than work within the School Advisory Council (SAC) within the school board, this society could have a broader membership and could act as an adversary to the school board.

It was under the name of this society that parent Stacey Godsoe, chair of GPACA, became the primary applicant requesting a judicial review of SSRSB's 2013 motion to close PRES and PES. This came after an enormous amount of community organizing. According to GPACA leadership, in the course the campaign to keep the school open, there were over 100 public and community meetings, 1,500 signatures collected in a petition to the provincial legislature, and $20,000 raised. The judicial review—which involved hiring a lawyer and taking the school board to court in the hopes that the judge would throw out the original motion—came only after other avenues were exhausted.

According to Christa Brothers, the provincial judge who wrote the judicial review, "This court should review whether the administrative decision maker was reasonable, not correct" (*Godsoe v South Shore Regional School Board*, 2018, p. 6). That is, the review of the 2013 decision was not going to say whether or not PRES or PES should close, but rather the review would determine whether or not the 2013 motion was reasonable, given the information the board had and their responsibilities. The judge was looking for procedural fairness: did the board do their duty to consult community

members and stakeholders, and did they follow the school review process as legislated? Brothers wrote, "the Board is interpreting its own enabling statute and regulations. In doing so, the Board does not have to be correct, it just has to be reasonable" (p. 10). But even with the bar seemingly lowered, Justice Brothers' conclusions were cutting:

> The Board is responsible for managing resources, including properties. The Board made a decision in 2013 and then asked legal counsel what the Board meant by its own motion. The Board should not have abdicated its duty to interpret its own motion. The Board went further than seeking legal advice, it relied exclusively on that advice. The elected Board is tasked with overseeing and making decisions with respect to school infrastructure. The Board must make decisions. It is unfathomable that a board would pass a motion so unclear that it required legal advice to interpret the affect [sic] of the motion. How were stakeholders to know what was decided if the board did not know? It is confounding that the Board would so poorly compose a motion that it required legal advice to interpreting its own words (p. 18).

According to the judicial review, it was unreasonable of the school board to think they could not rescind or revisit the 2013 motion. The board had not had legal advice when making the motion, and they relied too heavily on the legal advice that they received later, interpreting the motion as a decision to close the schools regardless of whether a new school was built. As such, Justice Brothers concluded "the 2017 motion closing

Petite Rivière is set aside as a violation of the duty of procedural fairness" (p. 34). This was a victory for GPACA.

The 2017 motion setting a date of the school closures was based upon an earlier motion that was not understood by everyone in the school board as a school closure motion. The school board did not appeal Justice Brothers's decision, which was given in February of 2018. But in the meantime, another dramatic change was unfolding in Nova Scotia. A few weeks prior, on January 24, 2018, the provincial government had received the results of education consultant's Avis Glaze's report, and announced that they would dissolve elected school boards. This officially came into effect on March 31 of that year.

The fact that the 2011 board was fired for what was seen as a failure to understand or work within the school review process, and that the 2013 board—made up of different people—was later found to not fully understand the motion they made concerning school review, suggests that it may not be the board who were completely to blame. The process itself was inherently obscure. And despite the fact that GPACA won their fight to keep the school open, the years-long process was not easy.

7.4 Why did residents of Petite resist the school closure?

Interviews with students, parents, community members, and school staff, as well as school board minutes and media coverage of the Petite school closure, all paint a picture of an engaged community that was determined to keep its school open. Of course, there may have been people in the community who were not engaged and who

did not care whether the school stayed open or closed—but if there were, they did not agree to an interview with me, or did not want to admit to it. Some of the people I spoke to might have been expected to be neutral on the issue—for example, school board staff—but they still spoke to me as if they wanted the school to remain open. Others were members of the community who were seniors, who would not have been involved in a school for many years. Even these residents were involved to some degree in the activism to save the school. And, by all accounts, there was a broad base of support within the community for the people fighting to keep the school open. Those who spearheaded the organizing, though, were primarily parents of school children. For the Petite community, there were a few main reasons for fighting against the school closure: they saw the Petite school as uniquely good, they saw the community as growing and valued the school not just for education, and they saw the whole school closure process as fundamentally unfair.

7.4.1 Petite school as a utopia

People in Petite Rivière did not just see value in rural schools in general—they saw particular value in Petite Rivière Elementary School, and believed children there were receiving a unique education that they would not get elsewhere. There was a combination of reasons for this. For one, it was a relatively small school, with about 80 students at the time of the school review process. This was valued by parents and students because it made children feel safe and comfortable, as Jill, a parent who wrote a letter in support of keeping the school open, articulated:

> Next year my youngest daughter will start school at Petite. Although she is a quiet, shy child she will be happy to start at Petite because it is a small and peaceful environment. She already knows half of her class and her teacher for next year. She knows most of the kids in her school, has worked in the garden, played on the playground, and been part of most of the events happening at her future school. Going to school is not scary for her as it's part of her community already. This is why we moved here; so that she would not have to be shipped off to a school of 400 students and lost in the crowd (Swaine, 2017).

Here, knowing most of the kids in the school, before even starting school, is contrasted with being "lost in the crowd" at a school with 400 students. For the school board, a school that size becomes challenging for the budget, but for the people who experienced the school on a daily basis, the smallness was part of its appeal and part of what made it desirable. This became a source of tension during the school closure conflict, as parent Kim says:

> We wanted to draw a lot of families here and enlarge the school population in order to make the rationale that we needed to save it, and at this point we're trying to fight for a renovation of the building, so that it will be sustained and secure in a more concrete way... literal concrete way. But something that comes up a lot is that bigger isn't necessarily better. We don't want to grow beyond the unique aspects of what a small school can bring.

On one hand, the community activists felt like they needed to demonstrate population growth in the community and in the school, because at the time that was important for the school review process—schools with more students were less likely to come under review, and thus could be safe from closures. On the other hand, part of what made them so motivated to save the school was how small it was.

But the size of the school was not the only thing that set Petite apart from other schools, according to opponents of school closures. The school's idyllic riverside location in the centre of the village was also seen as an asset.

> And right here in Petite, they're actually sitting on the most wonderful site you could ever have for a school. It's on the river, but we haven't lost a kid yet, so that's all good, and it's off the main route. It's off the Lighthouse Route which is a busy road. And you have to come and turn up Wentzell Road and it's kind of... it's this little idyllic setting, with a farm with sheep up on the right hand... who the kids go and visit and see the sheep being born and stuff. So we didn't want to lose that. All we wanted was an addition. Because it desperately needs a renovation (Andrea, PRES admin).

The school board was more willing to close the school than to renovate it, despite the need for a renovation. By not doing much-needed renovations, the school board at the time was sending a message that they did not see a future for this school. While the school board may have saved some money by not doing necessary maintenance and

renovations, this would leave them with a higher bill for repair in the future—one that may serve as an example of how expensive the rural school is, and an excuse to close it.

For residents of the community, the setting of the school allowed for greater learning opportunities. The large outdoor space meant there was room for more place-based education. This was a consistent theme in interviews, from parents, students, and staff alike. In Petite, an emphasis on place-based education created a school culture that was described by participants as “kind and thoughtful” (Kim, parent), “forward thinking, innovative” (Dennis, SSRSB staff), and a “utopia” (Brian, PRES admin). When I asked a student at PRES what she remembered about the time when the school nearly closed, she shared that:

> Well, I was very sad that it would close, because I would have to take the bus to Hebbville, and it's just a different school there and not the same as Petite. And just like... we get to play in the woods, and [...] at Hebbville you don't really get to. I don't know. It would just be sad. (Elsa, student).

For this student, there were two main factors setting PRES apart from other schools in her mind: the place-based education (“we get to play in the woods”), and the bus ride that she would have to do to Hebbville. Should PRES close, her two-minute bus ride each way would increase to a 45-minute bus ride each way.

The siting of the school was important, not only because of the place-based education opportunities it provided, unique to PRES, but also because a closure of the school meant that children would be spending more time on buses each day. The PRES

catchment area was quite large to begin with, so there were fears that in the event of a school closure, students living on the edge of the district would have up to an hour bus ride to get to school and back. Research on school commutes shows that longer travel times on buses have negative effects on student wellbeing and school attendance rates (Austin et al., 2019; Blagg et al., 2018; Cordes et al., 2022; Henderson, 2009). As one participant shared:

> But I thought: 'I am not... there is no way I will put my daughter, four years old, on a bus for an hour to go to school. I just won't do it. Like if that's the option, I will homeschool, I will do something different. I'm not doing it. It's just so unfair (Rachel, parent).

While Nova Scotia education regulations stipulate that student's travel to school should never be more than one hour each way, something just shy of an hour was still seen as undesirable for parents and students.

7.4.2 The community was thriving

Opposition to school closure in Petite was not limited to just parents, students, and staff at the school. Even people with no connection to the school contributed to the effort to save PRES, whether through signing petitions, writing letters, donating to fundraisers, or volunteering with GPACA or its predecessor. Many community members saw the loss of a school as a loss of a community institution, and thought that its loss would mean a loss for the entire community.

Janet, a summer resident of Petite, put it like this:

> The concern around rural depopulation, to actually make the decision to close the school in which, actually, the numbers of young families and children was growing, and a school which was heavily supported by its community, and where people were doing very innovative things in the school, it could only be seen to be crazy to want to close it.

Like Maitland, people in Petite felt that a closure of the school would be “a death knell for the community” (Sheila, community member). But while Maitland was in a period of sustained population decline, the same was not happening in the Petite area. In the 2016 census, the total population of the greater Petite area was recorded as 1071, and this increased to 1191 in the 2021 census. Meanwhile, the population of children aged 14 years and younger increased from 145 in 2016 to 170 in 2021. While many rural areas in Nova Scotia were facing population decline, this was not the case in Petite. There were a number of new businesses in the community; a new subdivision was being built. Not only that, but there were growing numbers of children. Even though 2017 saw the low point of school population, community members doing ‘informal’ counts of population saw that there were many young children in the community who would be PRES students in the future. The population growth in Petite, while small, was not just a growth in the number of retirees or seasonal residents—there were growing numbers of residents who would be going to school. And some community members saw the school as contributing to sustaining the community population:

> And it was also just... it was frustrating to think of a school that was doing everything right as an educational institution, it was doing everything it should do, but it was also spearheading community growth. People were coming here for that, and the community was thriving, and more businesses were starting up, and the thought of just crushing that felt so wrong that it was worth getting involved and fighting for (Stephanie, parent).

Multiple community members alluded to people who had either moved away because of the school closure conflict or who would move away if the school closed.

> And I've certainly talked to people who have said quite openly 'If the school's lost, we'll think seriously about moving somewhere else.' So I would say that that's very... very central to the community's well-being in the future…. People have a great concern about the future of the fire department and that connection. Some of the key people are not far short of my age. But, you need some younger people with a bit of energy and muscle for a fire department to work. So you can't have communities thriving if it's entirely retired people (Alan, community member).

Because the school did not close, there is no way of knowing how many people *would have* moved away had it closed. And researchers who study rural schools cannot agree on the population impact of a school closure—in many communities, population decline precipitates school closures, so the impact of a school closing in a community may not add significantly to the population decline that is already in motion (Foster et al., 2021;

Sageman, 2022). However, there is evidence that the presence of the school was one "pull factor" attracting people to the community. This was mentioned in interviews, like by PRES admin, Brian:

> Even this year, we've had two families that have moved-- they come here every summer, from Ontario and Quebec, and obviously they had summer homes here, and they just decided to stay. And part of the reason, obviously, was COVID, obviously, because it's not going well in those two provinces, but the other part was that they had heard so many good things about, and they loved the community, and they heard great things about the school, and they wanted their children to be able to have a year at the school.

This anecdote indicates that the school drew some people to settle in Petite when they may not have considered it otherwise.

In the midst of this research, my partner and I looked for and moved into a new home. In the course of house hunting, I spent a lot of time on real estate websites. On these websites, I noticed that real estate agents often mentioned the school district of a house in the listing, especially if the house was in a more 'desirable' school catchment within the city. If real estate agents thought the school district was an important selling point of a community, then maybe it was worth an examination. So, in 2021, I analyzed real estate listings in the Petite Rivière. Of the 42 real estate listings in the community from a year period from summer 2020 to summer 2021, three real estate listings mentioned the Petite Rivière Elementary School. Meanwhile, 36 listings mentioned

proximity to beaches in the area. So while the school was important enough to warrant a mention as a selling point in some listings, it is clear that for real estate agents, the beaches are more likely to pull people to the community. People in the community held their school in high regard, but perhaps for people thinking of moving to the Petite Rivière area, it was important just that there *was* a school nearby at all.

7.4.3 The unfairness of it

Even as the above reasons pushed people into action to prevent Petite school from closing, those reasons may not have been sufficient to sustain a years-long community effort. In interviews with community members, it became clear that they were motivated and spurred into action by a deep sense of injustice. Those who paid attention to the school board's decision-making felt it was unfair and they were the undeserving victims of poor governance.

The residents of Petite Rivière that I spoke to were all White, middle class, university-educated homeowners. While they were aware of injustice in general, they were not usually the victims of injustice. Because of this intersection of identities, the decisions of the government usually worked on these residents' behalf. In the case of the school board's decision to close the Petite school, though, community members felt like they had been wronged. Looking back on the school closure conflict, a community member who supported the cause, but was not involved in the leadership of it, reflected:

> First of all, there was a strong feeling in the local area that their views were not being taken into account by the school board. And indeed, lots of people said, what is the point of having a local school board, if they don't seem to take any notice of what local people feel (Alan, community member).

It is important to note here that members of the Petite community were sure to let the school board know their views. For this project, I collected school board minutes from late 2012 to early 2018. From my analysis, there were at least 21 meetings during that time where there was some representation from the Petite community, either speaking up for public comment or sending letters. The Petite community was ready to organize and mobilize to sway the school board's decisions, but the school board remained in control of the process. As John Gaventa, who studied power relationships in an Appalachian region in the 1970s, writes:

> The process of raising challenges is a dynamic one. Overcoming one facet of powerlessness may serve simply to reveal another. For a relatively powerless group, the combination of articulating grievances and organizing action upon them does not necessarily mean that the grievances will merit response—or even entry to the decision-making arenas (Gaventa, 1982, p. 227).

While community members could make their views known to the school board, they could not control the mechanisms of power within the school board. From the point of view of residents, the school board's conduct throughout the school closure conflict was unprofessional:

> And it seemed as if there was some sort of funny arbitrary sense of how... even how rules of orders worked in committees, which was at play, and seemed simply wrong. Robert's Rules of Order, you could certainly change your mind (Janet, seasonal resident).

> Also, there were some really reprehensible tactics done by the school board, including bullying tactics on some of the key individuals involved in the process. I mentioned in the timeline, at one point the school board had suggested that it might be good to have a separate not-for-profit organization that could speak on the part of the broader community. You know, without the restraints place on the SAC. So that's what we created, and they really didn't like it when we created it, and were lobbying (Sheila, community member).

The way these community members described the school board's conduct—"arbitrary", "simply wrong" and "really reprehensible"—made many community members not only felt like they were fighting for the school, but also feel like they were part of an idealist fight for what was right and morally good. A family who was very involved in the process said:

> So there was a little bit of treachery, and this basic fundamental wrong that had been committed, well, also for me, fairness is a big value and I just didn't want to see that wrong affect us (Erik, parent).

> I think, going back to Erik's point about what's right and what's fair, and that was really big for both of us, and as parents it was really big for us to follow through

> on that in front of our kids. They heard all the sketchy stuff that was going on and the unfairness of it was really important to them, I mean as children that's huge in your life when you're a kid, and to have your parents going to bat in that way, it was really important that they saw that and that the community was rallying around them, and that we know it was wrong and we called it wrong, over and over again, publicly and in the media and until they listened to us. That was... I think you hit it there, Erik. That was probably the really central motivation." (Kim, parent).

For those actively organizing and working to keep the school open, they saw their efforts as "righteous" (Rachel, parent). The school closure fight was not only about keeping the Petite school in the community, but it also appealed to a sense of moral right and wrong. For these parents and community members, fighting to keep the Petite school open was a fight for the ideals of fairness and a fight against bullies. In any case, this is the way it was mythologized when I spoke to them a few years after the majority of the activity. In their exploration of school closure conflicts in Nova Scotia, written during the height of the Petite conflict, educational sociologist Michael Corbett and small school activist Leif Helmer write:

> Community activists derive their worldview from conceptions of local educational geography and arguments about the survival of their communities. Administrators and bureaucrats make institutional efficiency arguments predicated on wider-scale spatial framing. Each tends to construct its arguments

in terms of democracy, fairness, and equity, but in different ways (Corbett & Helmer, 2017, p. 54).

In Petite, community members *felt* that the school review process was unfair. Their concept of justice meant fighting as hard as they could to keep the school open. And as Corbett and Helmer suggest, this concept of justice was not necessarily shared by the school board. Just like CCRSB, SSRSB was accountable to the whole region, and not just the community of Petite Rivière. And they had a duty to procedural fairness—a duty that, according to Justice Christa Brothers, they failed to carry out.

7.5 Outcomes of the conflict

GPACA and other Petite community members succeeded in keeping the Petite school open. This was their goal, and the most obvious result of their efforts. However, the struggle and the favourable conclusion also had some unintended benefits and consequences: social capital within the community increased, but those who were leaders in the school closure fight experienced burnout and stress throughout the process.

7.5.1 It pulled the community together

As I previously mentioned in this manuscript, high levels of social capital—strong networks among people—lead to healthier, more resilient communities. Researchers distinguish between three types of social capital: Bonding, bridging, and linking (D. J. Peters, 2019). Bonding social capital refers to the ties among close, homogenous communities like family groups and ethnic communities—the closeness with the people

who are like each other. Bridging social capital refers to the ties connecting different social groups, and linking social capital refers to the ties connecting people to more powerful social groups like governments or business owners. As opposed to bridging social capital, which are ties with people outside of one's community in general, linking social capital refers to ties with people with more power. Peters, in studying resilience of small towns in Iowa, finds that "both bridging and linking ties are important prerequisites for collective action to address community issues, leading to improved quality of life and greater resiliency in shrinking places" (2019, p. 660). He also finds that bonding social capital "fosters social connections within the community so it is more self-sufficient from the outside world" (p. 660). All three types of social capital are important for the overall wellbeing of a community. Both the presence of the school itself and the process of preventing school closure contributed to the development of social capital in the Petite community, and data from my interviews shows that all types of social capital increased. But as I show below, the increase in social capital itself, while beneficial for community resilience in general, was not sufficient in itself to save the Petite school.

7.5.1.1 Bonding

The school closure fight strengthened bonds among people who were already naturally connected. A parent in the community, Rachel, describes the feeling after learning that GPACA's challenge against the school board succeeded, meaning the school would remain open:

> And after that, I remember there was this group of us that got together, and we just said ‘So what are we gonna do next? Because we can do anything?’ Like, this community has so much power, because of how committed and passionate we are, and how committed to each other we are, and where we live. That... we can do anything. And… we felt that way, and of course it fades, and now school's open and life just sort of continues on. But I think the lasting effect of that is that I know there are people in this community who... maybe I haven't even spoken to for a couple of years, but I know that we are on the same page, we believe in the same things, and we are willing to fight for it. [….] We can do anything. We really can. And... we all felt so empowered after that decision, that it was, I think that it was worth all the stress. Maybe not for all of us, because some of us fought that battle for a lot longer than I did. There were people who were fighting it for... six, eight years longer. They might not exactly say it was all worth it for that great feeling that we had when we won, but that feeling of being a unified community was just... it was huge. It was huge.

Rachel acknowledges the stress of the school closure fight (a topic to be revisited in more detail below), but also notes that the stress was worth it for the feeling of being a unified community. For Rachel, the level of connection was intense—she was heavily involved and emotionally invested in the school closure fight, and felt that among others who were also heavily involved, she could trust them to be “on the same page” with her.

7.5.1.2 Bridging

The school closure fight also connected people in the community who may not have been connected otherwise. Kim, a parent who was also heavily involved in the school closure fight, said:

> One positive thought is how much we all can work together. We really strengthened bonds across the generations and across the villages, and the community spirit award that we did get after the fact was quite a highlight because it was finally a celebration of something that was kind of seen as a negative by those who were decision-makers. We were kind of a thorn in their side, we were always wanting more, or crying foul, and then the flip side of that was that we worked together really well and got something nearly impossible done, through a lot of adversity, and we still... I think it's made our community much stronger, and we can kind of face new challenges. We already have faced a few small ones since then, and it's been... we learned a lot from that, I think, and people just are much relieved.

As Kim alluded to, soon after the GPACA won their case against the school board, the community of Petite won a community spirit award from the Lieutenant Governor of the province. Many people mentioned this in interviews and it was clear that it was a source of pride for the community. Kim talked about how bonds were strengthened across generations and across villages (that is, the villages that made up the school district). People who may not have previously known each other worked together help keep the school open.

7.5.1.3 Linking

The school closure struggle also had the impact of connecting the community with those who held more power than them, as Stephanie, a Petite parent, articulated:

> I feel the community came together in a beautiful way, and the decision to close the school was rescinded, so that was certainly the primary goal was to have it not close when they said. Now it's an ongoing thing to continue to demonstrate the importance of the school as the heart of the community, but certainly successful in that way. And a broader success in, as they say, how it really felt like it pulled the community together, and I don't know if you heard that the greater area of all the schools in the catchment, that go to the school, collectively put in for the Lieutenant Governor's Community Spirit Award—and won. And that's, I think, in giving that award, the Lieutenant Governor really mentioned the fact that it was a community that was doing everything that a small rural community's trying to do, which is growing, and shifting the curve of everybody leaving the country and going to the cities, and as I say, I think it was all happening anyway, but I really feel that community pride and engagement really harnessed around it, because whether you're a church community or a business community, or a family going to school, the school was really core to all that because business leaders and others got involved, because if you don't have the school for people's kids, then people won't live here, and you don't get employees, and you don't get your customers, and all those other things. So I

> think that was an extra piece of success that probably wasn't anticipated, but it was kind of heartwarming.

The attention from the Lieutenant Governor and from the business leaders in the community was an example of linking social capital. People in Petite got the attention of people who had political or economic power. At various points during the school closure process, they also got the attention of the provincial and federal political representatives for their area, and even the provincial minister of education. But, as I will show in section 7.6, the Petite's ability to make linking ties to those who had political or economic power was partly due to the fact that Petite residents *were* often people who had political or economic power themselves.

7.5.1.4 Impact of increased social capital

Social capital in the community was strengthened during the school closure conflict, and the lasting effects of it are still felt. A school staffer, Brian, noted:

> So I think, after the announcement, and the school was saved, over the last couple of years, the shift has just been... OK, that's great, the school's safe, but how can we continue to make the school, not better, but just keep improving the school for the quality of education for our children, and keep growing our community.

While people once coalesced around the issue of keeping the school open, they now brought the focus back to the school itself, which from the beginning had been a source of community social capital. As I write this in 2024, GPACA—the organization formed to

combat the school closure—is still a functioning society, albeit less active than it was pre-2018. This organization represents everyone in the school district, not just those who live in the village of Petite. As far as I know, no such community organization existed prior to the school closure conflict.

7.5.2 It was exhausting

The fact that Petite school is still open today is a testament to the dedication of many community members who fought for it. The effort to keep Petite school open succeeded, but it came at a cost. In the five-year period between 2013 and 2018, the future of the school was in limbo, and this uncertainty caused stress for anyone who was connected to the school.

Isaac was a student at Petite when it was in danger of closing:

> I remember being very nervous and [….] I remember talking about it a lot with my teacher in grade 6, and thinking about it a lot. It was a hard time, cause everybody was thinking the school was gonna close, and...[I wanted] to focus on different things.

This uncertainty was stressful for students, but the teachers and staff at the school were also in a difficult position. Whatever the outcome of the school conflict would be, it would affect them and their students, but they were also employees of the school board. A PRES staff member, Andrea, remembers it like this:

> It was heart-wrenching, and it was very, very... like the hours, and the times, and the meetings I sat in on was huge, and then there were meetings that the

> parents organized themselves, that because of my role, of course, I should not have gone to, and I didn't go to, if that makes sense, because I wasn't technically allowed to go. So, which was great by me, it made my job a little bit easier, but I have to tell you, it was exhausting.

People like Andrea, who had a leadership position at the school, were required to attend certain meetings where the school closure was discussed, but did not feel it was appropriate to join the community effort to keep the school open, even as they agreed with the community’s perspective. At the same time, they also were with students daily, who, like Isaac, were concerned about the possibility of their school closing. The delicacy of this situation, as Andrea mentions, was exhausting.

For many, the emotional difficulty of the school closure conflict was demonstrated on February 13, 2018—the day Justice Christa Brothers published her decision in the judicial review against the SSRSB.

> I mean, it was an emotional day for sure. It was a lot of relief and celebration, but a lot of tears, too, of joy, and it was a very unique thing in my career... for all of us to experience. It was a very emotional rollercoaster there for a few years. And then to have that date and have that decision read that way. It was pretty amazing (Brian, PRES admin).

> It was in February. And I burst into tears, because I didn't realize how much stress and weight was sort of sitting in the background, lurking all the time, that I was

> sort of putting off because life was just happening. And then to know that our righteous efforts had been successful. It was just this unleashing (Rachel, parent).

One parent, Kim, articulated one reason she found the process unfair:

> It was really consuming, took a lot of time and energy, and we felt really supported by each other and by the central group that was helping us, and beyond that, all the support we felt. It felt unfair that we had to do any of that, and that was kind of imposed on us, I don't know... not to leave on a negative, but it's something this province needs to address, the sustainability of rural communities, and the importance of rural communities. We're largely rural, and we just need to sort it out. It sort of changes with each government, they all have a different approach on it or a slightly different focus, so even to get them to focus on schools as key to economic and community wellbeing, we always felt like we were the crazy ones….

In Kim's view, she and the others who spent time and energy saving the school never should have had to do that. Besides feeling like the process was rigged at times, she felt like the process itself was counterproductive to rural development. The school closure conflict took a lot of time and energy from rural people, who also were holding down jobs, running businesses, raising families, and volunteering elsewhere in the community. And there was a cost to this, whether in time or stress.

The response of the people in Petite Rivière to the prospect of their school closing was organization and activism. A small group of parents grew into a powerful

alliance of residents who cared about their community and believed that keeping the existing school open would bring the most community benefit. The decision to close and consolidate rural schools in Nova Scotia has typically been driven by financial concerns. As costs increase and government funding for schooling remains the same or decreases, those in charge of the education system must make tough decisions about how to save money. Small rural schools are vulnerable in this situation, because these schools may cost more per student to operate and closing a rural school will save money for a school board as a whole but only affect the students and staff in one school. School closures are a neoliberal idea: a non-market public service closing because of market ideals of efficiency and budgets. As the state cuts budgets, including education budgets, this hurts people in rural areas, who are already more likely to be left behind in economic development in the first place. For people in Petite Rivière and Maitland, they felt the solution as residents was to create a hub school model—to lead as communities to make sure the cost burden for providing services to them wasn't as high. But there was no space within the education system to allow for this type of innovation. Withdrawal of public services meant that communities had to step in and lead themselves—they needed to become some sort of social entrepreneur in order to support their own community. This should be valued under the neoliberal system—the Ivany Report was released in the midst of this conflict, calling for social innovation—but they were stuck in an impossible conundrum because there was no room for considering hub schools within the bureaucracy of the government. Rural people had been forced to take action and when they did, their ideas were rejected. Petite's victory, then, is notable.

7.6 Why Petite succeeded when some other communities did not

There are many stories of committed groups in rural Nova Scotia who spent many hours in committee meetings, attending school board meetings, raising money, and otherwise organizing against school closures. But many of those stories—like that of Maitland—ended in school closure, and the public being unable to change school boards' intention. So why did Petite succeed when other communities failed?

I suggest that they succeeded for two reasons: First, the community was not experiencing the same sharp demographic decline that some areas were. While there had been some decline in the school population in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the school population stabilized during the time of the school closure fight, and grew afterwards. A school closure is far less justifiable in a school of 100 students than it is in a school of 20 students. And second, the community of Petite Rivière had access to power that other communities may not have had, through linking social capital. It is important to note that Petite's future was tied up with Pentz's future. And while people in Pentz did not want their school to close, Petite's voice was much louder. As Dennis, who worked for the SSRSB throughout the process, said:

> So the data, [their] school profiles were virtually the same, they were... both schools were part of the same motion to close. But Petite had the... the energy, the... probably the finances, and connections, to take their case to court, and stay open.

In other words, people in Petite had access to more power. Many of the people who I spoke to who were part of GPACA or otherwise actively involved in the organizing had flexible jobs that allowed them to work from home—or allowed them to attend afternoon board meetings. They were well-educated, and some had worked in government or politics. Because Petite was a traditional cottage area, there may have been more wealthy people with connections to the community than in other rural Nova Scotian places. And ultimately, the decision to hire a lawyer and file a court injunction was a potentially expensive one. The lawyer they engaged did not work pro bono, but at a reduced rate, and they raised money to hire him.

This level of access to power is perhaps unusual for a rural area. Based on research on community identification in the United States, Lyons and Utych (2023) write that:

> While we find that urban identities exist, we also find that rural identities appear to be more powerful…. While there could be a host of reasons for this, it is likely that the strength of rural identity is rooted in a group consciousness that exists due to perceived disadvantages relative to people in urban area…. People in rural places are keenly aware that economic power and prosperity are increasingly concentrated in urban locations, and that they are located on the periphery of a changing landscape (p. 98).

Lyons and Utych find that rural people identify with a 'rural' identity, in part because of an idea that to be rural is to be on the periphery. It could be argued that this is an

important part of the definition of rural—to be rural is to be outside of the urban power centre. And the people in Petite seem to feel that strongly. This was true even though many people in Petite had ties to urban centres of power, whether that was because they had previously lived in urban areas, if they were summer residents, through family connections, or if they worked in urban places. The residents of Petite Rivière were able to bridge their rural identity (with all its perceived disadvantages) with their urban connections. As Brian, a staff member at PRES, put it:

> Just, the connections and the knowledge that a lot of the individuals have in our community, it's pretty... I mean, the resumes of some of these individuals, a lot of these individuals, and a lot of these families in our area, it's just amazing. It blows me away. My first two years, sitting in meetings, like SAC-- School Advisory Council meetings-- and Home and School meetings, and I'm getting to know these individuals, and I'm just like, wow, I'm just trying to keep up with some of the language and some of their ideas and some of the ways they are able to articulate themselves to one another. Just, really well-educated, most of them have university degrees or more….

This comment by a school staff member confirms that Petite residents exceed expectations for the typical rural Nova Scotian elementary school parents in terms of their “connections” and “resumes.”

Dennis, a school board employee at the time, put it like this: “But Petite had the... the energy, the... probably the finances, and connections, to take their case to

court, and stay open." For Petite, it was not just a question of community cohesion or social capital. Like in Maitland, any proposals the Petite community group made for an alternative to closure were rejected by the school board. Like in Maitland, the Petite community group contributed to public consultations organized by the school board. However, Petite was able to successfully make what Corbett and Helmer call a "political end run" (2017). That is, by going *over* the school board—by both engaging elected officials *and* the judicial system—Petite leveraged their social and financial capital to exercise power over the school board. There were many communities in Nova Scotia where people felt strongly about their school and came together to try to protect it. But the school review process rendered these shows of support meaningless. The people in Petite did not necessarily care more or fight more for their school, but they did have the right combination of political prowess and financial support to fight more effectively.

It is true that the residents of Petite face many of the same issues that others in rural Nova Scotia face—limited options for childcare, transportation, and healthcare, for example. Petite is unquestionably rural. And, as the school closure conflict showed, they rarely held the power in the education system. The decision of whether to keep the school open or closed felt like it was out of their hands. Yet, the residents of Petite ultimately won the struggle. If there was a perceived or real lack of power because of their rurality, they made up for it in other ways.

Chapter 8. Discussion

The Maitland and Petite Rivière case studies, while different in many ways, each show us a community deeply attached to a school, and a school board constrained to make a decision they did not want to make. Even though Maitland and Petite Rivière's struggles were distinct, they also shared many similarities: first and foremost, they are within the same province, meaning that provincial education policy and budgets affected them both. In this way, we can think of the two case studies as component parts of a larger case study of the Nova Scotia education system in the 2010s. Taking these two cases into account, I now look to my original research questions.

8.1 What is the role of a school in a rural community?

In terms of the role of a school in a rural community, the Maitland and Petite Rivière case studies show that the local public school is an integral part of community identity. In interviews with participants, when asked to think of the boundaries of what they considered 'their community,' many pointed to the school district as the geographical boundary of the social community. In this map drawn by a young resident of Petite Rivière, for example, the school occupies a central role. People in both communities took pride in the local school, and there was a clear sense of ownership of it, even for people who did not have an immediately obvious connection to the institution.

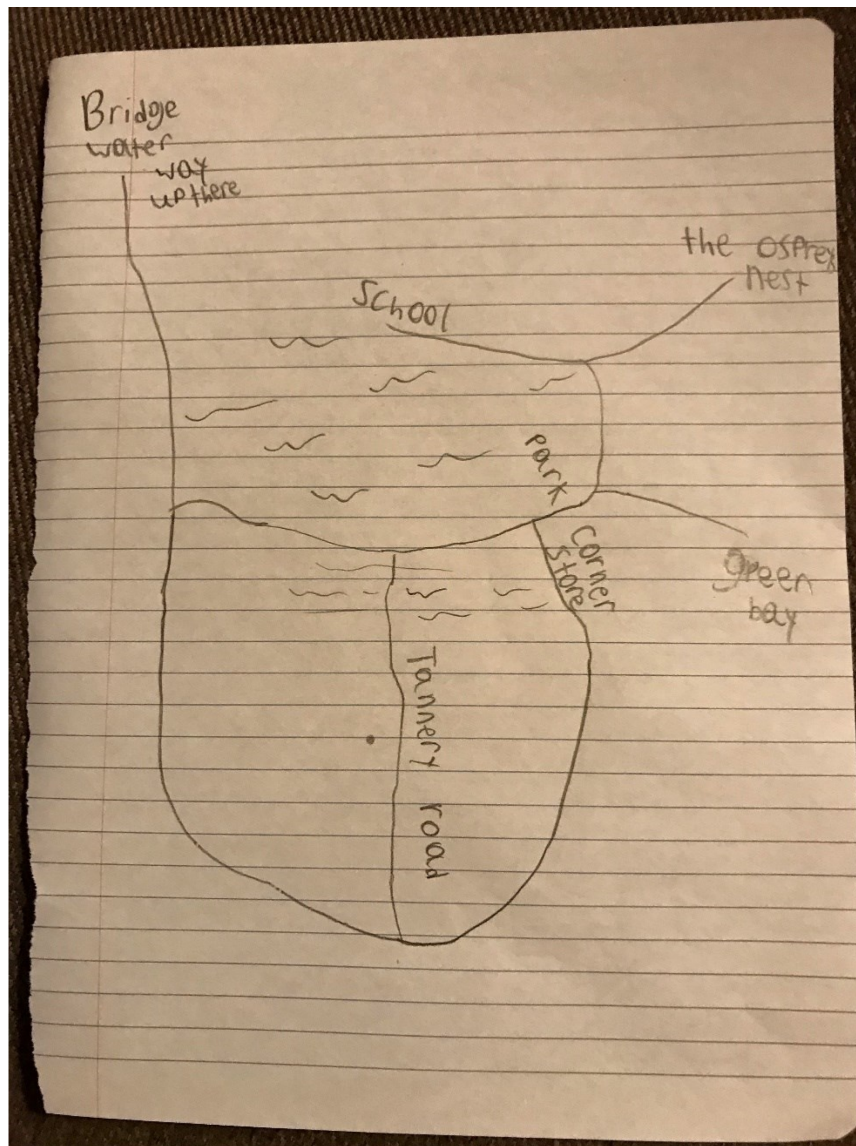

Figure 16. Map of Petite Rivière community by a child in the community.

In each case study, participants spoke about the role of the school in the social life and identity of the community, especially the events and volunteer opportunities at the school. These events and spaces for volunteering, such as concerts, bazaars, and hot lunch programs, were not part of the provincial school curriculum, but for many, they made the school special. For participants in each community, they saw the school as

integral to stemming rural decline. In Maitland, this was because people believed that if there was no school, people would not move there in the future. Others argued that even when there *was* a school, people were not moving there. Overall, though, there was agreement that the presence of any school at all represented a benefit in terms of potential population growth. In Petite Rivière, community members also believed that the presence of the school would stem rural decline, and they also argued that Petite Rivière Elementary School, specifically, attracted people to the community because of the compassionate, place-based education happening there. Mary Anne, a parent in Maitland, put it like this: “[Students] were learning community in their schools. And you take the school out of the community, and you take the community out of the community.” For people in Maitland and Petite, the local school was not just a place where curriculum was delivered. It was a place where community values were inculcated and transmitted to the next generation.

These community roles of a rural school are not easy to measure, but they are highly valued by community members, who, in both villages, were highly engaged in the school closure conflict. Some researchers have attempted to quantify the impacts of a small or rural school, as noted in Chapter 3. But even if the community impacts of a school were quantified, this does not guarantee that policymakers would consider them. In fact, trying to objectively quantify the impacts of a school includes a process of selecting and weighing the evidence that is relevant—a process that necessarily requires subjective choices about what evidence should be included (Corbett & Helmer, 2017).

Through the course of research in this dissertation, I found that what the residents of Maitland and Petite valued about their communities often had little to do with the economic development or ‘growth’ of the community, but rather the resilience of the community. Community members spoke of being proud of living in a welcoming community, of the physical beauty of their areas, and in both communities, they shared examples of how people had come together for common cause. In both Maitland and Petite, people acknowledged that life was different than in urban areas, but that they accepted the challenges of living rurally because they were attached to the place, and felt like they could rely on their neighbours.

When asked about the strengths of the community, participants primarily mentioned the physical characteristics of their village and the people of the community. In both Maitland and Petite Rivière, this was phrased many different ways by different people: “a high level of volunteerism”, “connectiveness”, “how people help each other”, “people have always been supportive”, “responsive to anyone in need”, “sense of commonality, of the common good.” While these sentiments may not be unique to rural Nova Scotia—many of us could say the same thing about our city blocks—these sentiments were often the first thing people pointed to about their communities. What was *not* mentioned as much was the economic development of the area or local amenities. While I cannot make assumptions about rural culture in general, this focus of community resilience and connection is of note, and perhaps gives a clue why community members in each place saw themselves as adversaries of the school board.

Difference in values between rural and urban places means that rural places may seem to be backwards or anti-progress, if only because ‘progress’ tends to leave them worse off than before. For people in Maitland and Petite Rivière, valuing a sense of community is not just a perceived strength of the community—it is a necessary worldview needed to survive. This worldview is entwined with the very definition of rurality.

Rural school closure conflicts like the ones over the Maitland and Petite schools reveal problems with the rural imaginary. Rurality is associated with ethics that prioritize community. In Nova Scotia, this association is strongly connected with nostalgic ideas of the ‘folk’, but also with derisive ideas of rejection of ‘come-from-aways’ and being resistant to economic development. This dual image of the rural is conceptualized by Johan Fredrik Rye as the rural idyll and the rural dull (J. F. Rye, 2006). The rural idyll is an image of “the countryside as a place where people stick together and care for each other in quiet and peaceful surroundings” (p. 416), while the rural dull is an image of “the countryside as characterised by boredom, a lack of opportunities, and non-modern features” (p. 417). And as Rye points out, these are not opposite ideas, but rather two dimensions of rurality. In Nova Scotia, the idea of the rural idyll and folk culture is powerful, creating the basis for a tourism industry in communities that otherwise may be economically struggling, as George and Reid find in Lunenburg:

> Culture as a resource, like ore, timber, oil or fish, that has evolved naturally, is now explicitly exploited for economic gain. Not only is culture being capitalised and treated like other ordinary commodities it is presented as a ‘snapshot in

> time' – a composite of a particular period – and not as a living culture which normally changes through time. Through tourism, local culture has become a main asset for economic generation in expectations of providing a continuous stream of benefits to the community that will help maintain its economic viability now and into the future (George & Reid, 2005, p. 96)

The idea of Nova Scotian rural culture as idyllic is beneficial for those selling tourism products (McKay & Bates, 2010). At the same time, the people living rurally *actually* fit some of the images of the rural idyll, as strong bonding social capital is necessary for their own survival within an uncertain global economy. And this social capital is built at places like rural schools.

The image of the rural dull complicates the rural idyll. What looks like strong community cohesion to some people looks like insularity to others. What looks like a quiet pastoral scene to some looks like lack of development to others. And what looks like a community institution to some looks like a surplus school building for others. American education researchers Catherine Biddle and Amy Azano remind us that "the lived realities of students, teachers, administrators, and community members happen within the context of a school, situated in a place" (Biddle & Azano, 2016). For many in Maitland and Petite, the context of the schooling their children was just as important as the schooling itself. For efficiency-minded bureaucrats, constrained within a system that privileged cost savings, the rural context of schooling was irrelevant, or even a deficit.

Many of the things that Maitland and Petite residents valued about their communities and their schools were also the things that made them vulnerable to closure.

When I spoke to residents in interviews, people in Maitland were far more likely to admit that the school should have closed, while everybody in Petite celebrated the school there and spoke of how they had been in favour of keeping the school open. While this is probably reflective of public opinion about the schools in general, it may also be reflective of the ways in which community members mythologized these conflicts, and used narrative to justify the present situation.

8.2 Why do school boards close rural schools?

In terms of the reasons why school boards close rural schools, evidence from Maitland (CCRSB) and Petite Rivière (SSRSB) shows school board members felt divided between their roles as elected officials serving a large region, and their role supporting specific communities. For both CCSRSB and SSRSB, the decisions to close schools were presented as inevitable and necessary. Closing schools was tough, but it needed to happen. For the CCRSB, this was because of budget cuts. For SSRSB, their motion to close the Pettie school was ultimately because of a misunderstanding of the legal obligations of the school board. These school boards each had a duty to the public. A primary duty, for them, was efficient management of taxpayer resources, and, in the SSRSB’s case, to make decisions consistently and with integrity. In their quest to serve the public, though, the school boards forever altered some communities they served.

This leads to the question: Who is the public? The situations in Maitland and Petite Rivière show that in the equation of serving the public versus serving individual communities, some communities—especially the smaller, rural communities in the province—end up losing out. What is good for the public as a whole is not always the same as what is good for small communities. In school closure conflicts, this problem is laid bare. The situations of Maitland and Petite Rivière make us question the *actual* necessity of school closure decisions. If public policy is not serving the entire public, then who does it serve?

For the public in Maitland and Petite Rivière, their role in the school review process was one of *participation without power*. While there was ample opportunity for community members to share their feedback and ideas about the school review process, this was not given the same weight in the school review decision-making process as questions of building quality and budgets were. The case studies in this dissertation show community members who value rural schools for more than just the curriculum. In Maitland and Petite Rivière, the school was seen as vital for community identity and resilience. While school board members understood the importance of the school to the local community, and thus felt reluctant to close the school, this reluctance was irrelevant to the ultimate decision-making. Budget cuts to the education system and perceptions of governance constraints ultimately were more relevant in decision-making. In Maitland, school board members explicitly communicated the belief that closing small rural schools was necessary to continue offering education for all

students in the region. Closing rural schools was an unfortunate but necessary sacrifice for the good of all students. School boards decision making was influenced by 'quantitative creep' in decision making, a factor in neoliberal governance. For school boards, the right decision to make was the 'evidence-based' decision. And whether the evidence used for decision-making was related to education performance metrics or budgets, it reflected an urban-centric bureaucracy's goal for education rather than rural people's interests.

Understanding the rural school closure conflict as a conflict between equity and efficiency, we accept that rural schooling as it is today will never be as 'efficient' in terms of budget and resources as urban schooling. Small schools will always be at a disadvantage in terms of budget. If policymakers want to keep small, rural schools open, they must choose between equity and efficiency: the equity choice generally means keeping schools open, no matter how small. The efficiency choice generally means continuing processes of closures and consolidation. But in his chapter in the Right to be Rural volume, Ray Bollman suggests a third choice: the use of "differentiated universalism" in rural policy. This is "a recognition that equity does not… mean the same delivery mechanism for everyone" (R. Bollman, 2022). For rural schools, this means taking community's leads and broadening and rethinking ideas of what a rural school could be. It may be unreasonable to imagine that 20 children in a small community like Maitland should be educated in a building constructed at the height of the baby boom. Population trends change over time, and public institutions like schools should be more

flexible to respond to these changes. And across the country and the world, there are examples of schools that are able to survive and thrive despite small populations. Being small does not have to be a deficit—in fact, it can often result in a more quality education for students (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006). In Greenfield, Nova Scotia, for example, residents saved their school through partnerships and through a reimagining of what could be included in the school building. In Altario, Alberta, a school of 49 students was in danger of closing before the school began an agricultural program. By keeping livestock and growing food, the school provides place-based education for the students while using the profits from agriculture to help keep the school open (Labby, 2022). These are just two examples that reflect the diversity of rural communities and thus the need for rural schooling to reflect the local context.

The school boards' decisions in Maitland and Petite Rivière cases represented a lack of imagination around the kinds of possibilities available to rural communities. This is to be expected: they were not in charge of rural development. Even when presented with hub school proposals, these proposals were outside their area of expertise of school governance. Both school boards were constrained in their thinking by the neoliberal imaginary, prioritizing efficiency, economies of scale, and generally running government like a business. But this imaginary has proved to be detrimental for rural communities. Shucksmith (2018) points to the importance of utopian imagination for rural communities today. His argument draws on Ruth Levitas's work on the "imaginary reconstitution of society" (Levitas, 2013). Levitas calls sociologists to "utopia as method"

to interrogate the assumptions about the good life that are built into governance. And she also calls for a method of utopia as architecture, to “imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable deeper and wider human happiness than is now possible” (Levitas, 2013, p. 198). A rural school closure conflict presents an opportunity to examine assumptions about the public good, and to begin imagining new futures.

As I write this in 2024, rural school closure conflicts in Nova Scotia seem like things of the past. Early 2018 saw both the victory of Petite school advocates and the abolition of elected school boards in Nova Scotia. As far as I know, no school review processes have begun since then. Elected school boards ostensibly existed to help protect the rights of communities, giving the public a say in the administration of the education system. However, community members in Maitland and Petite Rivière did not feel like their point of view was being taken into account. Whether or not this has changed in the new Centres of Education system remains to be seen. There could be many reasons why school reviews have not happened in the past few years—demographic changes in the province means that Nova Scotia is seeing higher population growth than previous years, and overcrowded schools are becoming more of an issue than surplus schools (Thomson, 2024). The provincial education budget has been trending upward, not downward, indicating political will to invest in education. There may be other political explanations, as well. Throughout the school closure fights of the 2010s, elected school board members took the brunt of the public’s displeasure

about school closures. Now, there is no such body to absorb the public's ire. Ironically, it is possible that the end of school boards has actually resulted in *more* public power. The provincial government is now directly accountable for unpopular school closure decisions.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

The school closure conflicts in Maitland and Petite Rivière happened within a context of underdevelopment in rural Atlantic Canada, the withdrawal of the state from the work of social reproduction, and an education system that consistently prioritized centralization over local concerns.

The historical resistance of many rural Nova Scotians to a centralized public education system seems rational when considered in the light of rural school closure decisions. Perhaps these 19th century rural residents understood that as soon as a centralized government takes over rural schooling, that urban-centric government also has the power to take it away. On one hand, the public school system offers rural schools funding, facilities, and opportunities that a small school isolated without support would not be able to access. On the other hand, this access can be revoked at any time.

In both Maitland and Petite Rivière, the decision to close the school was met with resistance by members of the community. For those who resisted it, they anticipated that the school closure would have long-term negative effects in terms of the population of the community and the social and economic well-being of the community. At the same time, the fight against school closure in each community has contributed to strong social capital and a sense of resilience in the face of challenges. In Petite, the success of the activism galvanized people—they have increased trust in their neighbours and they feel as if they can do anything they put their mind to. In Maitland, the failure to save the school confirms a truth that Maitlanders have long suspected:

that it is local residents themselves who must organize and fight for their own interests. In Maitland, residents continue to support one another. They see this as one of the foremost strengths of the community. And it's necessary: when services exit the community, the people who live there must fill the gaps themselves. However, this kind of resiliency cannot last forever. People age; and the burden of needs exceeds the capacity of the community to fill those needs.

And this deep belief in the power of community gives us insight into why people in Maitland and Petite fought so hard to save their school. In rural Nova Scotia, a "have-not" area, trusting one's neighbours is a must for survival. This means that a place where that trust is built—like the local school—is central to one's sense of self and community. And the decision to close the school represents another situation where community members must come together for their common good. This is not to say that the people living in these two communities did not understand the precarity of their situation. In Maitland, even the people who fought to save the school understood that they lived in a declining community, and that the number of students in the school was probably not enough to keep it open in its current iteration. So they were creative, using the hub school idea to imagine ways to use the space innovatively. Similarly, in Petite Rivière, residents refused to meekly accept the school board's seemingly arbitrary decision to close their school. People were passionate about their schools, but they were not unreasonable. Community resilience does not always interfere with values of economic efficiency and bureaucracy, but in these cases it did.

This is the paradox that rural communities face. The rural idyll presents an image of a rural place as a vestige of a more communal time. These values are lauded, celebrated nostalgically, whether they exist or not. And where they do exist, they are seen as quaint, behind the times. But this discourse about rurality ultimately makes itself true: By seeing rural places as behind the times or outside of economic growth and development, policymakers (like school boards) are more willing to sacrifice rural services in pursuit of greater efficiency or productivity in a region as a whole. While some people in rural places accept their community's demise as inevitable, others respond to decline and loss of services by drawing on the support of other rural residents. To an outsider, this may look like insularity, or failing to be a team player in the zero-sum game of economic development. But for rural residents, the habitation ethic or subsistence ethic becomes relevant again in the face of austerity.

Drawing on the Maritime political economy school of analysis—which understands the underdevelopment of the Atlantic provinces as a feature, not a bug, of the Canadian capitalist economy—I view rural school closures in Nova Scotia as part of a larger pattern of government disinvestment in peripheral areas. Meanwhile, scholars of neoliberalism in Canada show a pattern of austerity budgets, and the government withdrawing from public services in general. And while Canada as we know it today began as a rural country, with the majority of population spread out across the vast territory, the trend has been towards urbanization for at least the past hundred years. The proportion of the population who lives rurally is less than it once was, and in most

areas, continues to fall. Rural schools in Nova Scotia are vulnerable to these related forces.

But as the literature from around the world reveals, rural school closures are not a phenomenon unique to Nova Scotia. While the stories of Maitland and Petite Rivière are singular, these types of stories have been occurring for decades, repeated across the countrysides of the world. GDP growth tends to be connected with urbanization, and with fewer people living in rural areas, governments must make decisions about how to provide public services—like transportation, schooling, or critical infrastructure—to those areas. Increases in GDP are connected with urbanization because increases in productivity are associated with consolidation—not just consolidation of schools, but consolidation of capital in general. Studies elsewhere in Canada, for example, show increasing concentration of investor ownership in farmland (Desmarais et al., 2015, 2017). Land that once supported a variety of small farm families now supports smaller numbers of investors who often do not live rurally. Inequality in general is increasing, with any benefits of increased productivity landing in the hands of a smaller group of capital-owners (Piketty, 2014). The same processes that lead to rural depopulation also lead to increased inequality in general.

While rural industries like forestry, fishing, mining, and farming often form the basic building blocks of economic development, rural settlements are more expensive to maintain because of economies of scale. Rural people typically have lower incomes compared with people in urban areas. As rural areas have become less efficient to

maintain for governments, governments must find ways to allocate funding and services to all people. The trend towards urbanization continues, so rural schools will continue to pose a problem for efficiency-minded bureaucrats. New, creative ways of delivering rural services—like the hub school model proposed for Maitland, Petite, and other schools in Nova Scotia—are necessary to ensure equity.

While this study only gives a small glimpse into two Nova Scotian communities, the ideas raised in this dissertation suggest that rural public schools have a greater community role than has been taken into account by policymakers. This raises a number of questions for future research. First, there is need to account for community uses of schools. Both the CCSRB and SSRSB used impact assessment reports and other evidence to account for school closure, but this evidence did not take into account everything that mattered for the community. Though the public had plenty of opportunity to comment on the school review process, their comments were not given the same weight as other evidence. The tight budgets given to the school board undermined the democratic role of those institutions, as they saw themselves as being faithful to the goals of efficiency and optimization first, and supporting individual communities second. And this is not only an issue with schools. Other community institutions in rural areas, like churches and fire halls, are also vulnerable to austerity policies. Further research should be done on how these and other non-market institutions in rural areas work together to create an ecosystem of care, creating the kind of resilience that allows communities to survive amidst economic and ecological uncertainty.

Ultimately, the studies in this dissertation underscore the need for imagination and creativity in the way that public services are delivered in rural areas. These services—like schools—have high community significance even in places where the population is declining. As long as rural decline is seen as inevitable, it will be.

9.1 Epilogue

When the Maitland and Petite Rivière school closure conflicts occurred, they were just two schools among many in Nova Scotia that were in danger of closing. Meanwhile, the Ivany Report and associated consultations started a province-wide conversation about rural decline in the province. In an editorial published by CBC News, I wrote about what it felt like to be a young person at this time:

> And you drive in the countryside and you pass countless abandoned homes and businesses with 'for sale' signs in the window, and you feel helpless, like you are a passenger on a sinking ship. But you love this ship. And with your bailing bucket you try to fight the ocean (Main, 2015).

While dramatic, this sentiment reflects the attitude towards rural Nova Scotia at the time. But since then, the proverbial tides have turned, and the problems at the centre of this dissertation—rural decline and rural school closures—have been supplanted by questions of how to handle population growth and school overcrowding.

As far as I am aware, since 2018, there have been no new rural school closures in Nova Scotia. When interview participants mentioned this, I followed up and asked them why

they thought this might be the case. I propose four possible reasons that may explain why rural school reviews have not begun since 2018. The first possibility is that school boards in Nova Scotia *already* closed all the schools possible. As I show in this dissertation, school consolidation has been a part of Nova Scotia education policy for decades. It is possible, then, that the last wave of school closures reached peak consolidation. More likely, though, is that the drop in school closures has to do with the events of early 2018. The success of GPACA's court challenge to SSRSB may have served as a deterrent to school board or governments who were tasked with school review—the Petite court injunction was costly in both money and credibility for the school board. Meanwhile, in early 2018, the provincial government adopted the Glaze Report's recommendation to abolish elected school boards. Now, instead of a non-partisan, elected school board being responsible for school review, the task falls on appointed provincial government officials. Previously, the provincial government set the budgets for school boards, and the school boards had to make cuts to services in order to balance their budgets. It was school boards who made unpopular decisions like school closures, and it was school boards who absorbed most of the anger of the public who reacted to unpopular decisions. Now, in the absence of school boards, it is the provincial government who must bear the full brunt of the public's displeasure. The lack of school closures since 2018, then, might represent a political calculation.

The final possible reason for a lack of recent school closures is the population surge in Nova Scotia since 2020. From 2019 to 2023, the population of Nova Scotia

increased by 8 percent, and in 2022 the population crossed the 1 million people threshold. While much of this population increase was felt in the capital of Halifax, every census division in the province saw a population increase (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Now, instead of rural decline and school closure, problems include increasing housing costs and overcrowded classrooms (E. Smith, 2020; Thomson, 2024).

When I chose this dissertation topic, I chose a topic that was relevant to the rural places I cared about. But as the research process continued and as the context of rural Nova Scotia shifted, I wondered whether this topic is still relevant. But the problem of overcrowded classrooms and rapid population change is precisely the reason why rural school closures *should* be reconsidered: while a rural school closure is not an easily reversible decision, rural population change can happen rapidly and unexpectedly. Policymakers must respond to the challenges of both population decline *and* population growth—by designing the type of infrastructure that is there when communities need it, but can change use according to how it is needed.

As I write this epilogue, workers in the Halifax Public Library system—which includes both branches in the city central and in suburban and rural areas—are striking. On the picket line, I heard striking workers claim that the library was the heart of the community. Meanwhile, in a casual chat with neighbours over a local public walking trail that is under threat of closure, a neighbour said, “this trail is the heart of our community.” The language of “the heart of the community” is not exclusive to schools. That language may simply be a rhetorical device used when an institution is under

threat. Schools, libraries, and public park land, for example, all may have important roles to play in communities. To name any "the heart of the community," does not mean that it is the *only* place that helps build community resilience, but this language can be employed powerfully to protect public institutions. When I began this research, I wanted to know, "Is the school *really* the heart of the community?" But as I finish writing, the more relevant question seems to be: "*Why* do community members have to make these claims in the first place?"

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A. Appendix

A.1 List of Nova Scotia Department of Education documents

2009 Annual Accountability Report
2009 Business Plan NDP
2009 Business Plan PC
2010 Annual Accountability Report
2010 Government's Back to Balance Plan Takes Next Step - Government of Nova Scotia, Canada
2010 Statement of Mandate
2011 Annual Accountability Report
2011 Deloitte SSRSB Review
2011 Levin Report
2011 SAC Handbook
2011 Statement of Mandate
2011 Update on Auditor General Recommendations
2012 Act Amendments
2012 Kids and Learning First
2012 October Update on Auditor General Recommendations
2012 School Board Size Amendment
2012 Statement of Mandate
2012 Update on Auditor General Recommendations
2013 School Review Process Discussion Paper
2013 Statement of Mandate
2014 Fowler Report
2014 Guidelines for Hub School Model
2014 Ministers Response to Fowler Report
2014 New School Review Process
2014 Report of The Ministers Panel on Education
2014 Statement of Mandat
2015 Action Plan for Education
2015 Statement of Mandate
2015 Update on Action Plan for Education

2016 Action Plan for Education Annual Report	
2016 Business Plan	
2017 Business Plan	
2017 Education System Administrative Review Terms of Reference	
2017 School Review Policy	
2018 Education Reform Act Presentation	
2018 Focus Groups on SACs	
2018 Glaze Report	
2018 Glaze Report Directive	
2018	Response to Glaze Report

A.2 List of South Shore Regional School Board Minutes and Documents

Year-Month-Day of meeting
2012-11-14-AGM
2012-11-28
2012-12-12
2013-01-09
2013-02-04
2013-02-11
2013-02-13
2013-02-27
2013-03-20
2013-03-23
2013-03-27
2013-04-02
2013-04-10
2013-04-11
2013-04-24
2013-05-08
2013-05-22
2013-05-29
2013-06-12
2013-06-26
2013-07-09
2013-07-14
2013-08-23-b
2013-08-28
2013-09-11
2013-09-25
2013-10-09
2013-10-23
2013-11-13

2013-11-13-AGM
2013-12-10
2014-01-08
2014-01-24
2014-02-05
2014-02-12
2014-02-12-b
2014-02-26
2014-03-07
2014-03-24
2014-04-09
2014-04-09-b
2014-04-09-c
2014-04-11-b
2014-04-16
2014-04-23
2014-05-07
2014-05-14
2014-05-14-b
2014-05-21
2014-05-28
2014-05-28-b
2014-06-04
2014-06-11
2014-06-11-b
2014-06-18
2014-09-10
2014-09-24
2014-10-08
2014-10-22
2014-11-12
2014-11-26

2014-11-26-AGM
2014-12-10
2015-01-14
2015-01-21
2015-01-30
2015-02-11
2015-02-26
2015-03-11
2015-03-25
2015-03-31-Pentz
2015-03-31-Petite
2015-04-15
2015-04-20-b
2015-04-22
2015-04-29-b
2015-05-13
2015-05-20
2015-05-27
2015-06-10
2015-09-09
2015-09-23
2015-10-14
2015-10-28
2015-11-18
2015-11-25
2015-11-25-b
2015-12-15
2016-01-27
2016-02-10
2016-02-24
2016-02-24-b
2016-03-01

2016-03-01-b
2016-03-09
2016-03-09-b
2016-03-23
2016-04-27
2016-04-28
2016-05-11
2016-05-12
2016-05-25
2016-06-08
2016-06-15
2016-06-17
2016-06-25
2016-06-29
2016-07-14
2016-09-07
2016-09-14
2016-09-21
2016-09-28
2016-10-05
2016-11-02-AGM
2016-11-09
2016-11-09-b
2016-11-16
2016-12-07
2016-12-14
2016-12-21
2017-01-18
2017-01-25
2017-02-15
2017-02-21
2017-02-22

2017-03-08
2017-03-22
2017-04-17-b
2017-04-19
2017-04-26
2017-05-17
2017-05-24
2017-06-21
2017-06-28
2017-09-20
2017-09-27
2017-10-18
2017-10-25
2017-11-15
2017-11-22
2017-12-13
2018-01-24
2018-01-24b
2018-02-16
2018-02-28
Catchment-Area-April-2021 (SSRCE)
Draft-Stantec-Report-Petite-Riviere
Pentz-and-Petite-Riviere-Education-Delivery-Overview
PRES-ID-and-IA-Reports

A.3 List of Chignecto-Central Regional School Board Minutes and Documents

Year-Month-Day of meeting
2009-09-09
2009-10-14
2009-11-04
2009-12-09
2010-01-13
2010-02-10
2010-03-10
2010-04-14
2010-05-12
2010-06-09
2010-06-23
2010-07-14
2010-09-08
2010-10-06
2010-10-13
2010-10-27
2010-11-10
2010-12-08
2011-01-13
2011-02-09
2011-03-09
2011-04-13
2011-05-11
2011-06-08
2011-06-27
2011-07-05
2011-09-14
2011-10-12
2011-11-09

2012-01-18
2012-02-15
2012-03-21
2012-04-11
2012-05-09
2012-06-13
2012-06-27
2012-09-12
2012-09-26
2012-10-10
2012-11-14
2012-12-12
2013-01-16
2013-02-05
2013-02-13
2013-03-20
2013-04-17
2013-05-15
2013-06-12
2013-09-11
2013-10-09
2013-11-13
2013-12-11
2014-01-15
2014-02-12
2014-03-19
2014-04-09
2014-05-14
2014-06-11
2014-09-10
2014-10-08
2014-11-12

2014-12-10
2015-01-14
2015-02-11
2015-03-11
2015-04-08
2015-04-15
2015-05-13
2015-06-10
HUB SCHOOL CCRSB EVALUATION CRITERIA-FINAL
Maitland District Elementary Impact Assessment 2012
School Closure Report - March 2-16 COW Report-FINAL
School Review Process - Identification Report - February 2012

A.4 Interview guide: Parents, adult community members, secondary-school aged children

Question	Justification
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself(ves) and your family?	Allows the participants to share what they think is important.
Do you work? If so, what is your job and where is it?	Helps us to understand the employment situation in the community.
How long have you been living in this area?	Gives insight on how established families may be in the community (may have bearing on level of social capital, etc).
[If haven't lived here their whole life] Why did you decide to move here? [If have lived here their whole life] Why have you stayed here?	Rural areas in general are experiencing decline; it helps to understand *why* people live there.
What are the boundaries of [place name]? Probe (would you consider people who live on such-and-such road to be Maitlanders, for example).	Helps us to understand the geographic boundaries of the community.
From your perspective, what are the strengths of the community?	Shows how families see the community.
From your perspective, what are the weaknesses of the community?	Shows how families see the community.
What changes have you noticed in the community over the last 10 years? Probe (economic changes; social changes; environmental changes)	Shows how families see the community changing. May or may not include school closures.
What do you think this community will be like 10 years from now? Probe (economic changes; social changes; environmental changes)	Shows how families see the community changing. May or may not include school closures.
Do you volunteer locally? If so, can you tell me about it?	Shows the level of community participation.
Tell me about the challenges and benefits of raising a family here.	Shows how families see the community.

Question	Justification
Tell me what you know about the local school.	Gives data on the school/school closures.
[If school has closed]. What do you remember about the time when the school closed?	Shows how families see the local school.
[If school has closed]. I know many people in the community protested the school closure. Were you among them? Why or why not?	Shows how families saw the local school at the time of its closure.
[If school has closed]. Do you think the community efforts succeeded? Why or why not?	Shows how families saw the local school at the time of its closure.
[If school has closed]. Have you family's routines changes since the school closed? If so, how?	Gives insight on the impact of school closures.
[If school has closed]. Have you noticed a change in your child's education since they went to a new school? If so, what?	Gives insight on the impact of school closures.
[If school is still open]. What do you remember about the time when the school was under review?	Shows how families see the local school.
[If school is still open]. I know many people in the community protested the potential school closure. Were you among them? Why or why not?	Shows how families see the local school closure.
[If school is still open]. Do you think the community efforts succeeded? Why or why not?	Shows the family's idea of success and failure in terms of community action.
Is there anything else you think I should know?	Gives an opportunity for participants to share what is important to them.

A.5 Interview guide: Elementary school-aged children

Question	Justification
[For children <10]. Can you draw a map of the community where you live?	Helps us to understand how children see their community. Paper and drawing implements will be provided by the researcher.
Tell me about what's on your map.	Helps us to understand how children see their community.
Tell me about school—what grade are you in?	Helps us to contextualize the conversation.
How do you get to school each day? About how long does it take?	Gives details about how students experience school.
Do you have friends at school?	Gives details about how students experience school.
Are there things you do at school other than classes, such as after-school programs or sports? If so, tell me about them.	Gives details about how students experience school.
[If school has closed]. What do you remember about the time when the school closed?	Helps us to understand how the students experienced the school closure.
[If school is open]. What do you remember about the time when school nearly closed?	Helps us to understand how the students experienced the [near] school closure.
What do you want to be when you grow up?	Helps us to understand student's aspirations; this may be connected to how they experience school.
Do you think you will stay in [community name] to do that? Or will you go somewhere else? Why?	Helps us to understand student's aspirations; this may be connected to the future of the community.
What do you think this community will be like 10 years from now?	Helps us to understand how children see their community.
Is there anything else you think I should know?	Gives an opportunity for participants to share what is important to them.

A.6 Interview guide: School board staff and officials

Question	**Justification**
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your job?	Helps us to contextualize the conversation, and helps us understand the limitations of the interview.
How long have you been living in this area?	Gives insight on how established participants may be in the community (may have bearing on level of social capital, etc).
[If haven't lived here their whole life] Why did you decide to move here? [If have lived here their whole life] Why have you stayed here?	Rural areas in general are experiencing decline; it helps to understand *why* people live there.
What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the community of [community name]?	Helps us to understand participant's knowledge of the communities where schools were closed.
What are the boundaries of [place name]? Probe (would you consider people who live on such-and-such road to be Maitlanders, for example).	Helps us to understand the geographic boundaries of the community.
From your perspective, what are the strengths of the community?	Shows how community members and other stakeholders see the community.
From your perspective, what are the weaknesses of the community?	Shows how community members and other stakeholders see the community.
What changes have you noticed in the community over the last 10 years? Probe (economic changes; social changes; environmental changes)	Shows how stakeholders see the community changing. May or may not include school closures.
What do you think this community will be like 10 years from now? Probe (economic changes; social changes; environmental changes)	Shows how participants see the community changing. May or may not include school closures.
Tell me any background you know on how school closure decisions are made.	Gives details from participants on how they see school closure decisions.

Question	**Justification**
Tell me any background you know on how school board budgets are created and approved.	Gives details from participants on how budgets are formed (these budgets ostensibly have a bearing on school closures as well).
Tell me about what you remember about the school closure decisions around [Maitland or Petite Rivière].	Helps us to understand participant's understanding of the school closure decisions.
Do you see any ways that the school closure decision process could be improved? If so, how?	A gentle way to ask about ways the school closure decision process may have failed.
Is there anything else you think I should know?	Gives an opportunity for participants to share what is important to them.