

## "Nothing in my years of community organizing has affected me as deeply as this closure did"

### A critical exploration of the socio-spatial consequences of public-school closures in Ontario, Canada

### « Rien dans mes années d'organisation communautaire ne m'a affecté aussi profondément que cette fermeture l'a fait »

### Une exploration critique des conséquences socio-spatiales des fermetures d'écoles publiques en Ontario, au Canada

Samantha Leger , Patricia Collins , Jennifer Dean  et Carise Thompson 

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#### Résumé de l'article

Les écoles publiques sont plus que des institutions éducationnelles; elles sont des biens publics qui sont des composantes essentielles de communautés saines, durables et complètes. Pourtant, des écoles élémentaires publiques ferment en permanence à travers le Canada, particulièrement dans les milieux urbains et ruraux en Ontario; une tendance qui a des implications importantes pour l'équité sociospatiale et la justice environnementale dans les communautés aménagées. L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer les impacts perçus de fermetures d'écoles élémentaires publiques pour les résidents et les communautés en utilisant une approche à méthodes mixtes incluant des enquêtes auprès des ménages et des entretiens approfondis. Les résultats ont indiqué que les résidents ne se sentaient pas comme s'ils avaient l'occasion de participer significativement dans le processus de fermeture d'école et que leur voix n'a pas été entendue à travers le processus d'engagement. De plus, les résultats illuminent les impacts persistants de la décision de fermer les écoles sur les communautés avec des conséquences physiques, sociales, politiques et économiques dans les quartiers locaux. L'étude illumine l'importance critique de la pratique d'aménagement responsable dans la compréhension de la valeur d'écoles communautaires locales et la contribution communautaire dans les examens portant sur les installations destinées aux élèves en cours.

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# "Nothing in my years of community organizing has affected me as deeply as this closure did": A critical exploration of the socio-spatial consequences of public-school closures in Ontario, Canada

Samantha Leger<sup>1</sup> , Patricia Collins<sup>2</sup> , Jennifer Dean<sup>1</sup> , Carise Thompson<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Waterloo

<sup>2</sup> Queen's University

## Abstract

Public schools are more than educational institutions; they are public assets that have long proven essential parts of healthy, sustainable, and complete communities. Yet, public elementary schools are being permanently closed across Canada, particularly within urban and rural settings in Ontario; a trend that has important implications for socio-spatial equity and environmental justice in planned communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceived impacts of elementary public-school closures for residents and communities using a mixed-methods approach including household surveys and in-depth interviews. The results indicated that, overwhelmingly, residents did not feel that they had the chance to meaningfully participate in the school closure process and that their voice was not heard throughout the engagement process. Further, the findings illuminated the lasting impacts of the school closure decision on the communities with physical, social, political, and economic outcomes in local neighbourhoods. The study illuminates the critical issue of responsible planning practice in understanding both the value of local community schools and local community input in ongoing pupil accommodation review processes.

## Résumé

Les écoles publiques sont plus que des institutions éducationnelles; elles sont des biens publics qui sont des composantes essentielles de communautés saines, durables et complètes. Pourtant, des écoles élémentaires publiques ferment en permanence à travers le Canada, particulièrement dans les milieux urbains et ruraux en Ontario ; une tendance qui a des implications importantes pour l'équité sociospatiale et la justice environnementale dans les communautés aménagées. L'objectif de cet article est d'explorer les impacts perçus de fermetures d'écoles élémentaires publiques pour les résidents et les communautés en utilisant une approche à méthodes mixtes incluant des enquêtes auprès des ménages et des entretiens approfondis. Les résultats ont indiqué que les résidents ne se sentaient pas comme s'ils avaient l'occasion de participer significativement dans le processus de fermeture d'école et que leur voix n'a pas été entendue à travers le processus d'engagement. De plus, les résultats illuminent les impacts persistants de la décision de fermer les écoles sur les communautés avec des conséquences physiques, sociales, politiques et économiques dans les quartiers locaux. L'étude illumine l'importance critique de la pratique d'aménagement responsable dans la compréhension de la valeur d'écoles communautaires locales et la contribution communautaire dans les examens portant sur les installations destinées aux élèves en cours.

## Keywords:

School closures; environmental justice; neighbourhood planning; public engagement; mixed methods

## Mots-clés:

Fermetures d'écoles; justice environnementale; planification de quartier; engagement publique; méthodes mixtes

\*Contact: Samantha Leger, University of Waterloo, School of Planning, 200 University Ave. West, Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G1 Canada

Phone: 519-888-4567 x49107

Email: [sjleger@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sjleger@uwaterloo.ca)

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## Introduction

### Overview

Public schools are more than educational institutions; they are crucial social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019) and public assets that have long proven essential parts of healthy, sustainable, and complete communities (Collins et al., 2019; Vincent, 2006; Gibbons & Machin, 2008). Yet, public elementary schools are being permanently closed across Canada, and particularly within urban and rural settings in the country's most populated province of Ontario. These closure decisions are often made by school boards facing low enrollments and inadequate financial resources (Andreas, 2013; Vincent, 2006), with minimal or no consideration of how closed schools will impact the local community socially, physically, or economically (Collins et al., 2019).

This study explores the impacts of school closures on residents in communities where schools have been shuttered using an embedded comparative case study of two urban and two rural communities in Ontario. We collect perceptual and experiential data from residents using household surveys and in-depth interviews to shed light on how the closures affect communities in terms of fair decision-making process and just outcomes. More specifically, our results explore the consequences of closed schools for students and communities, the fight against the closure, and the justice implications of the decision-making process and closure outcome. With a moratorium on school closure decisions currently in place in Ontario, these findings offer important insights for provincial policy makers who are tasked with amending the decision-making guidelines, to ensure they create more just processes and outcomes in the management of these important community assets.

### Background on Public School Closures in Ontario

Since 1997, funding for public education (K-12) in Ontario has been tied to student enrolments (P4E, 2017). As such, the confluence of shifting urban and rural geographies, an aging population, declining birth rates, rising operating costs for aging school infrastructure, and provincial funding cuts have placed pressures on school boards to close schools permanently (Andreas, 2013; Vincent, 2006; P4E, 2009). Public schools situated within urban as well as rural settings have become targets for closure in Ontario (P4E, 2017) because both contexts face the double burden of declining enrolments and aging infrastructure within a provincial context of suburban growth. While the provincial government instituted a moratorium on closure decisions in 2017, 121 Ontario public schools were still slated for closure between 2017 and 2020 (P4E, 2017). This number is in addition to the 354 schools that have been closed across Ontario between 2010 and 2016 (Snow, 2019).

To direct school boards through the decision making process for which schools to close, the Province's Ministry of Education (MoE) developed the Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) model. Employed by board-appointed accommodation review committees, the model is driven by guidelines also established by the MoE. Earlier versions of the review guidelines required school boards to examine the potential impacts of school closures within four domains: students, school board, community, and local economy (MoE, 2006; MoE, 2009). Despite criticism from various stakeholders about the lack of attention paid to the broader community-level impacts of school closures (Brillinger, 2015; Irwin 2012; P4E, 2017), the MoE chose to limit the scope of decision-making for review committees to just

two domains: students and school boards (MoE, 2015). The complete exclusion of community-level impacts from the decision-making guidelines has created a process that entrenches the positions of school boards as public asset managers and empowers accommodation review committees to commodify public schools as mechanisms for reducing deficits created by government cutbacks. This approach to decision-making in turn created tension between the school boards, that prioritize regional concerns, and residents who focus on the local-needs of their community.

This disconnect between these two very different agendas and sets of priorities has been particularly apparent in both rural and low-income urban settings where schools play a crucial role as local community assets. Yet, under the PAR process, school boards disproportionately identify schools in rural and low-income urban communities as candidates for closure due to their lower enrolments and lack of financial resources to maintain schools (Jull, 2018).

### Existing Knowledge on School Closure Impacts and Study Objectives

Current trends in school closures in Ontario suggest they occur disproportionately in socio-spatially disadvantaged settings (i.e., urban inner-city neighbourhoods and rural areas) (P4E, 2017; Snow, 2019); a reality that will likely be exacerbated by the updated MoE review guidelines that have eliminated community-level impacts as a consideration for school closure decisions (MoE, 2015). This creates significant challenges for communities who aspire to achieve contemporary planning ideals for the creation of healthy, sustainable, and complete places (Collins et al., 2019; Vincent, 2006; Gibbons & Machin, 2008). However, there is a paucity of research examining school closures within the Canadian context, with virtually no studies to date

examining the consequences of closures on the communities left behind.

The limited body of knowledge on school closures in Canada examines the issue along political, historical, and socioeconomic lines of inquiry, informed primarily through policy review and key informant interviews (Basu, 2004; Butler et al., 2019; Fredua-Kwartang, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Only one study surveyed residents about the decision to close a school in their community, but the school in question was still open at the time of the study (Collins et al., 2019). Understanding the lived experiences of community residents who have had to grapple with the uncertainty and eventual closure of a school in their community is critical to a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of the decision to close a school. The absence of this data reinforces the MoE role as public asset manager and neglects the reality that schools are a crucial piece of social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019).

### Theoretical Framework

This study uses an environmental justice framework to illuminate the voids that school closures leave behind to build an evidence base for how and why community impacts need to be included in decision-making processes for school closures. More specifically, our theoretical framework aligns with the conceptualization of environmental justice proposed by political theorist David Schlosberg as “equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities, and participation in the political processes which create and manage environmental policy” (Schlosberg, 2004, p.517). To Schlosberg and others (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1998), environmental justice scholarship has historically placed too much emphasis on distributional justice (i.e., patterns of disproportionate harm), at the expense of a more critical examination of the

procedures that lead to inequitable resource distribution and a lack of recognition of group differences that ultimately shape ‘who gets what’. In the context of this study, we contend that the equitable distribution (e.g., geographic location) of public schools can only be enabled through collaborative and inclusive decision-making processes that allow for careful consideration of the potential impacts of those decisions on affected stakeholders, including community members (Schlosberg, 2004; Masuda et al., 2010).

## Methods

### Methodological Approach

This paper reports on the findings from a mixed methods embedded comparative case study (Yin, 2009), which sought to expose the consequences of the decisions to close public schools in four communities in Ontario. Household surveys followed by semi-structured interviews were carried out with residents from urban and rural locales in two public school board districts in southwestern and southeastern Ontario, respectively. The four communities were purposively selected to enable comparisons of residents’ attitudes and perceptions of school closures across different geographic and school board contexts. Household surveys were conducted to capture perspectives from a range of residents in each community, followed by semi-structured interviews to explore emergent themes in greater depth. This research was conducted with approval from the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board and the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board.

### Site selection

School closures have been taking place in every district in Ontario over the past decade. Most school board districts in Ontario have either a primarily

urban/suburban profile, or a primarily rural/small town profile (OASDI, 2022). Since the study aim was to capture residents’ perspectives of school closures in the communities where these phenomena have been unfolding, case study sites were limited to those districts with significant urban and rural/small town profiles. The choice to explore urban and rural communities was purposefully made to reflect the uneven impacts of school closures across communities.

With this selection criteria in place, eligible school districts were those that had an elementary school closure in an urban and a rural community within five years prior to the study and wherein some members of the team were geographically embedded. As planned, the two school board districts that were selected as the focus of the study represented an array of urban, suburban, and rural communities, with each district serving an urban area of fewer than 500,000 residents. Two communities from each district – one rural and one urban – were selected for inclusion in the study.

As of 2022 School Board A represents a total of 162 elementary and secondary schools and over 80,000 students. School Board B represents 70 schools of approximately 20,000 students. Board A is governed by 13 elected and 3 student trustees, and Board B is governed by 10 elected and 3 student trustees. School board trustees act as public education advocates for the local areas within the district that they represent, while supporting the boards they serve in their fulfillment of the Education Act of Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2020). When compared to the Ontario average, the two urban areas represented by the boards had lower household incomes, while the two rural areas had much lower levels of post-secondary education, higher household incomes, and lower rates of households with low-income. Three of the four communities experienced either decline or

low rates of growth in total population in the census periods prior to the closure, but the percentage of children aged 0-14 in all four communities was strikingly similar to the provincial average (See Table 1).

### Data Collection

Invitations linking to an online survey were distributed to all households located within the catchment areas for each school. Canada Post's Admail service was used to deliver postcards and target populations were determined by calculating the total number of households on each street of the designated Canada Post delivery route. The surveys were hosted on the Qualtrics platform from late-October to mid-December 2019, and 333 completed surveys were received during this period (2.2% overall response rate). The surveys captured data on various themes, including residential tenure,

household composition, and location choice; connections to the closed elementary school in their community; attitudes towards the closure of this school; perceived impacts of the school closure on their household and the wider community; and demographics. The survey consisted of 34 questions, including demographic, screener questions, and question branches. The survey was formatted using multiple choice, open responses, and Likert scales. Interested participants left their contact information at the end of the survey if they wanted to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

A total of 20 interviews were conducted with community members from October to December 2020, representing urban (n=11) and rural (n=9) locales (Table 2). Participants were recruited from the neighbourhood; specifically 15 were survey

**Table 1.** Characteristics of school sites prior to closure (Statistics Canada, 2016).

	<b>Board A Urban</b>	<b>Board A Rural</b>	<b>Board B Urban</b>	<b>Board B Rural</b>	<b>Ontario Average</b>
Population Change, 2011-2016	+4.8	-1.1	+0.4	+1.9	+4.6
Population density per square kilometre	913.1	45.0	274.4	10.9	14.8
Average household size	2.3	2.5	2.2	2.5	2.6
Population 0-14 years	16.1%	15.7%	14.6%	16.2%	16.4%
Percent with bachelor's degree or higher	25.3%	16.0%	27.7%	13.4%	26.0%
Median total household income	\$62,011	\$88,765	\$67,485	\$77,520	\$74,287
Percent low income	11.6%	2.4%	9.5%	2.6%	9.8%
Trustees	13 elected 3 student		10 elected 3 student		



participants who were interested in taking part in a follow-up interview, and an additional five participants were recruited via snowball sampling (Patton, 2014). In total, 38 residents who completed the survey were contacted for interviews via email, of which three declined due to 1) Zoom fatigue, 2) unavailability, and 3) unwillingness to revisit the “pain and exhaustion” associated with the school closure decision. Another 20 of the potential participants did not respond to our invitations. All interviews were conducted on Zoom or phone call and ranged from 20 to 40 minutes in length. Each participant received a \$30 honorarium.

### Data analysis

Survey data were downloaded from the Qualtrics website and imported into SPSS software for analysis. Datasets were anonymized, and descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency distributions, cross-tabulations) were generated for each community individually and based on pooled data. Given the low response rates for the survey, no significance testing was performed. The descriptive statistics were used to identify common and emergent themes, and to develop interview questions.

To analyze the qualitative data, the Framework Approach was adopted (Gale et al., 2013). First, each interview was transcribed using artificial intelligence features on Zoom or NVIVO software, followed by manual edits to resolve technical errors, ensure accuracy, and re-familiarize the researchers with the data (Patton, 2014). After familiarization, interviews were coded using deductive (i.e., pre-defined) themes derived from the research objectives and literature review, and then for subsequent rounds of analysis using inductive (i.e., emergent) approaches to identify themes within higher-level codes (Gale et al., 2013). A coding scheme was then created to organize data using a standardized set of codes and refined by two members of the research team who co-coded

six transcripts to ensure consistency and rigor during the analysis stage. The final version of the coding scheme was then used to assess the remaining transcripts. The data were then charted into a framework matrix based on (i) themes identified and (ii) case classifications, to enable researchers to easily recognize patterns and summarize the data. Weekly meetings were held with all members of the research team to discuss emergent themes and interpretation of the data in alignment with the theoretical framework (Patton, 2014; Gale et al., 2013).

Results from the surveys and interviews are discussed in tandem in the following section as the qualitative data was designed to expand and extend the quantitative findings from the surveys. The results are presented according to three overarching themes that align with the just outcome and fair process components of Schlosberg’s environmental justice framework: 1) the perceived value of the school and consequences of closure (outcome), 2) the fight against the closures (process), and 3) connecting the pupil accommodation review process with decision to close (process-outcome interaction).

## Results

### Demographics of Survey and Interview Samples

In all four communities, the survey samples were overrepresented by women, homeowners, and higher income earners, when compared to the populations from which they were drawn (see Table 1). Despite some variability between communities, overall, survey participants also tended to be older than their target populations.

Interviewees (n=20) included 2 former teachers of the closed schools, 7 volunteers who contributed to various programming at the closed schools, 8 parents of children who attended or would

have attended the school, and 3 community members who had never entered the school themselves. The participants were also sorted by their length of residency within the community, ranging from less than 5 years to more than 10 years. Overall, our interview sample reflected mostly residents who had lived in the neighbourhood for more than 10 years (n=14), followed by residents who had lived in the community for 5-10 years (n=5) and then participants who had lived in the neighbourhood for less than 5 years (n=1).

### Theme 1: Perceived consequences of the school closure (outcomes)

This theme focused on outcomes, specifically what was lost when schools closed. Perceived value of the school was explored in the resident survey through a question that asked about level of agreement with potential impacts that a school closure posed for students (Figure 1) and for the broader community (Figure 2). In terms of impacts for students (Figure 1), most respondents agreed that the closure would

increase students' reliance on motorized transportation to school, the time they would be away from home, and the size of their classes, while the majority disagreed with statements that students would be exposed to greater diversity, more modern facilities, better extra-curricular opportunities, or specialty programming at their new school. These findings are a stark contrast to dominant messages commonly conveyed by school boards and the MoE to emphasize the benefits of school closures for students (MoE, 2015); a contradiction that was further explained in the interviews.

In terms of impacts for the broader community (Figure 2), most survey respondents agreed that the closure decision has made residents in the community angry, and that the loss of the school has translated to having fewer children around the community during the day, as well as fewer opportunities for parents to socialize. Rural respondents had greater concerns than urban respondents about retaining and attracting families in the community, and more than 90% of respondents

**Table 2.** Descriptive Summary of Study Sites, Survey Sample, and Interview Sample.

School Board	Description	Survey Sample	Interview Sample
Urban		182	11
A	Closed in 2016. Site is being repurposed for single-family housing and a public park.	79	8
B	Two schools in same community; both closed in 2016. One site has been repurposed as an alternative school; the other is slated for redevelopment as housing.	103	3
Rural		151	9
A	Located in a rural village. Closed in 2018. The site has been repurposed as a French immersion public school.	91	4
B	Located in a rural village. Closed in 2018. The site has been repurposed as an early childhood education centre.	60	5
TOTAL		333	20

disagreed that the closed school is being used for a better purpose now.

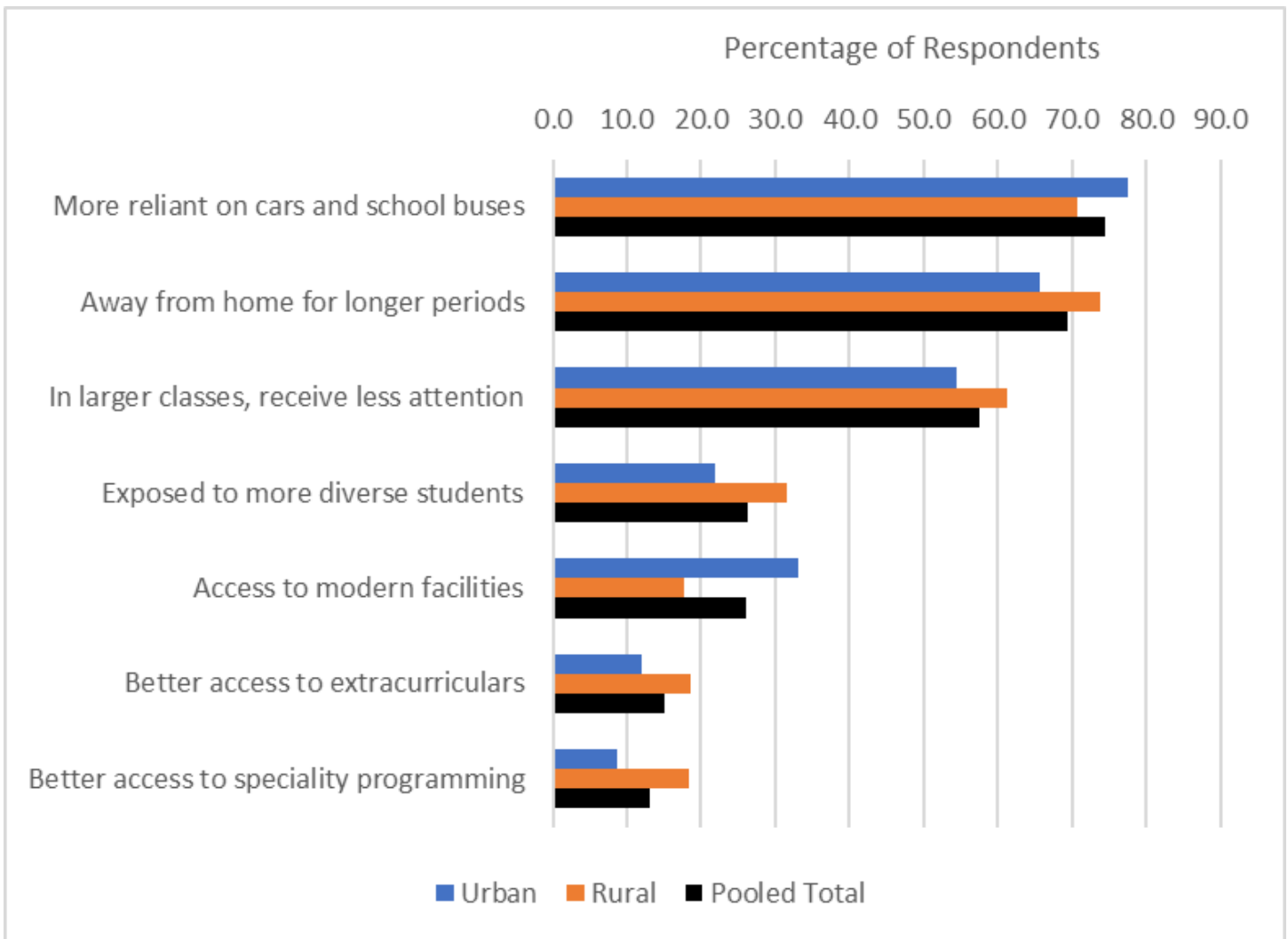
Interviewees emphasized that the school closure has led to an increase in bussing, changes to community cohesion, and turnover of residents within the community. These consequences were articulated by all interviewees, regardless of their geography, school district, or how connected they were to the public school.

The subsequent increase in bussing following school closure was the most obvious change for

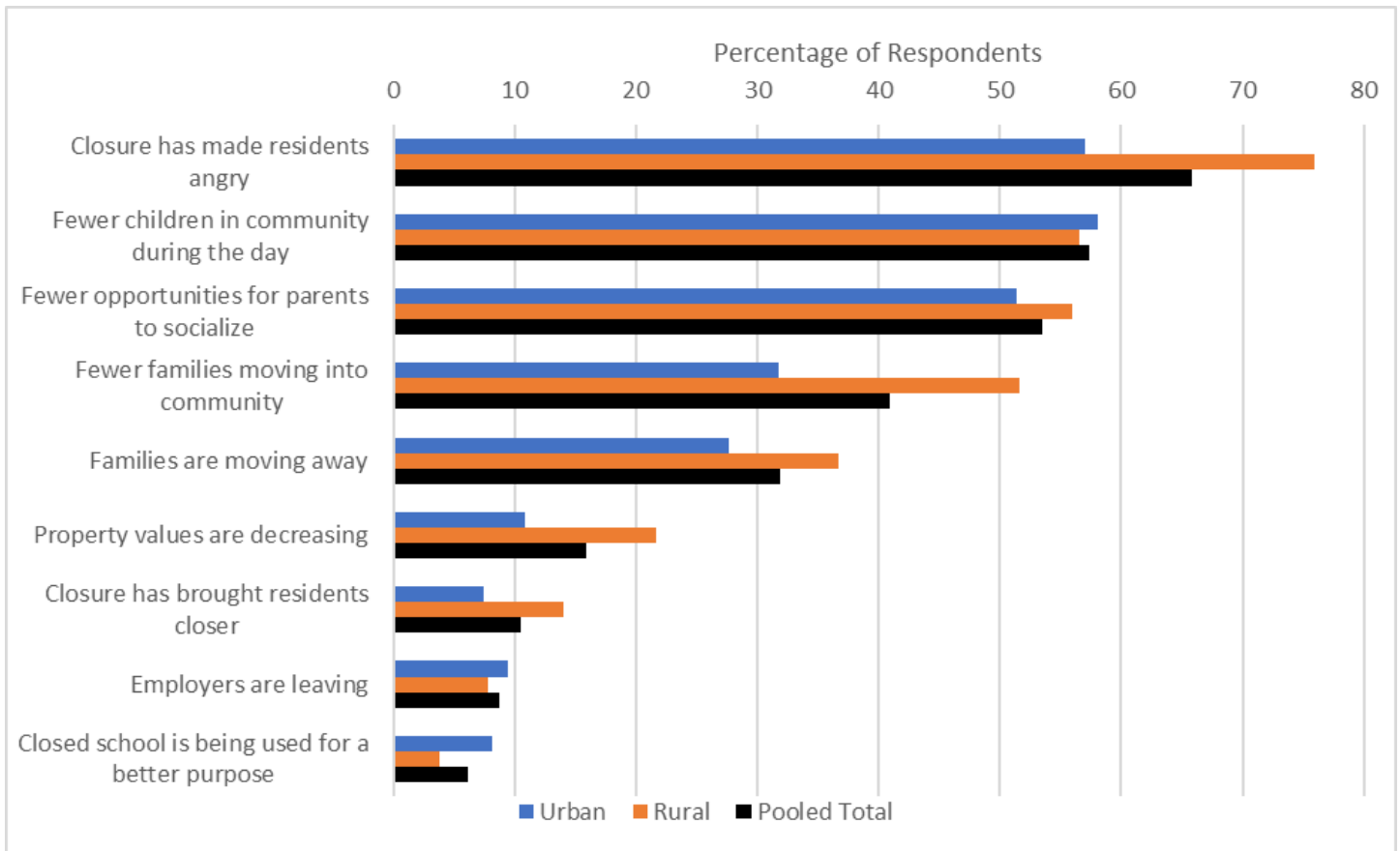
residents. School closures meant longer bus rides for most students, but especially those dwelling in rural communities:

*“The school bus ride is 10 times what it used to be. They used to be on the bus less than five minutes and now they’re on the bus for 45 to 50 [minutes].” (Parent 1, Rural School)*

Parents expressed frustration with the increased time their young children now spent on the bus and how this contributed to “wasted time”, and increased



**Figure 1.** Perceived Agreement among Survey Respondents with Various Statements about Potential Impacts of School Closure to Students in the Community



**Figure 2.** Perceived Agreement among Survey Respondents with Various Statements about Impacts of School Closure to the Broader Community

potential for misbehaving and bullying (Parent 2, Rural School). For many urban interviewees the mere presence of school buses in their community physically and visually represented a community change that was widely discussed in the interviews, especially in reference to the notion of a walkable neighbourhood that was lost. One participant articulated the culture of walking in the community prior to the school closure:

*“It would just be a whole lot more vibrant... The people that live here would stay in the community, they’d be able to walk to community events, and there wouldn’t be a big push to have cars to go over to events...And there’d be a whole lot less buses. You can be more active in*

*the neighborhoods, like they used to have a cool thing...a walking bus...one of the seniors in the neighborhood would be the walking bus with their block. They would stop and pick up all the kids on that walking bus and the kids would go off to school. And so, there’s these things that aren’t happening. And so, it would be a whole lot more active.”* (Volunteer 1, Urban School)

The new mobility patterns of students were often associated with a decrease (as opposed to the widely promoted increase) in extracurricular involvement for students. As school busses do not accommodate late departures for after school activities, this meant parents were required to do more chauffeuring for

students attending schools outside of their local community. Rural participants reported less extracurricular involvement among students simply due to increased driving demands in these less dense areas. Rural participants also perceived greater access to extracurricular programming in smaller schools versus the larger amalgamated schools:

*“They kept telling us, “Oh, your child is going to have access to a bigger music room. Your child is going to have access to all these other sports teams”, and my husband kept saying, “Right now my child is guaranteed a spot on the soccer team because there's only 12 kids”. (Parent 3, Rural School)*

Many interviewees disagreed with the ‘larger is better’ argument touted by school boards stating that smaller schools facilitated community cohesion. The importance of smaller schools was especially salient for participants in rural communities:

*“There's something so special about a child feeling at home within their little school and being connected and supported to the people within their community.” (Parent 3, Rural School)*

Participants perceived their children as receiving more attention in smaller schools, as teachers would know each of the students in the school and collaborate with co-workers to help students succeed over the long-term (Parent 1, Rural School; Parent 2, Rural School; Parent 3, Rural School). Interviewees emphasized the connections that students had with parents and school staff in their former school, especially through daily drop-off and pick-up routines that facilitated frequent interactions between parents and teachers that indirectly benefit student development and academic

outcomes. Even the engagement of community volunteers was reported as declining after school closures with potential impacts on student success:

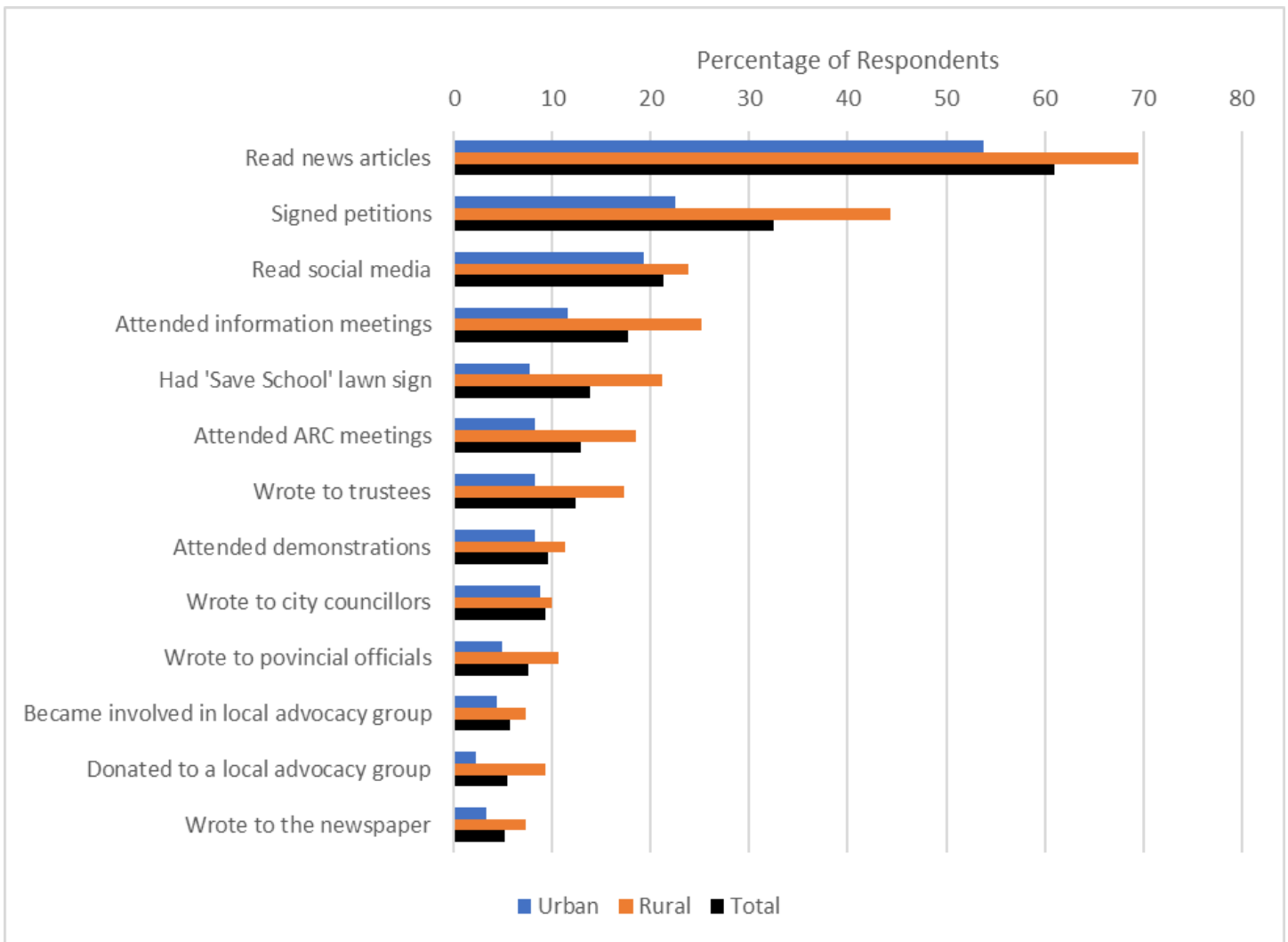
*“Volunteer parents and volunteer grandparents always came in and helped with children struggling with reading or whatever. We had a lot of help that way in the school...And it's just it's not easy to do from the distance they live.” (Teacher 1, Rural School)*

One teacher (Teacher 2, Rural School) was uniquely positioned to draw comparisons because of her employment status at the closed school followed by employment at the newly amalgamated school. This teacher noticed a decline in volunteering among families that previously volunteered on parent council, which they attributed to increased driving distance for rural families.

Most interviewees also noticed a change in community cohesion following school closure. After one rural public school closed and the building was used as a French school, one parent reflected on how the simultaneous bussing of public-school students out of her community and the arrival of French Immersion students into her community is affecting the sense of connectedness:

*“Well, we just don't seem to have the same kind of connection, because most of the children that come to the school now aren't residents of [community].” (Parent 4, Rural School)*

The notion of ‘displaced children’ (Parent 3, Rural School) prevailed in each of the case study communities following school closure, resulting in feelings of disconnection for students and community members alike. Many interviewees also shared a concern for larger demographic changes



**Figure 3.** Level of Survey Respondents’ Involvement in the Decision-Making Process for the Closure of the School in their Community

and turnover of homeownership within their communities following school closure. Rural interviewees commonly worried that their community was less attractive to young families without a local school, while urban participants noted that there has been an influx of young families into their community following the school closure, leading them to conclude that the closure decision was short-sighted.

In both rural and urban settings, schools were described as hubs for community gathering and an

important piece of social infrastructure that enhanced community cohesion. More specifically, schools provided services beyond public education of students; they operated as childcare centres for preschool aged children and caregivers, offered English language classes to newcomers, and other diverse programming that brought together different generations of community members, even for those without children attending the school. These services and programs were also lost when the schools closed:

*”There were many community*

*partnerships, we ran a 16-year capacity building and student support programs about everything from nutrition programming...to training opportunities for neighborhood residents, some parents to upgrade their skills to make them more employable, marketable. We had an intergenerational program in the school...We had a weaving program that brought seniors and kids in the neighborhood together...so, there was not an empty classroom in the building.” (Volunteer 2, Urban School)*

Most survey and interview participants expressed overall dissatisfaction with the school closure decision and articulated negative consequences for students, schools and communities. However, the sense of frustration among participants was exacerbated by the perception that the value of the schools to community members were not accounted for within the school closure decision-making process.

### Theme 2: The fight against the closures (process)

Theme two focused explicitly on residents’ perception of the process of school closure decision-making, which was often described as highly confrontational and a “fight” (Parent 1, Urban School; Volunteer 2, Urban School), “frustrating experience” (Parent 1, Rural School), or “defeating” (Parent 3, Rural School; Parent 4, Rural School). The household survey explored residents’ engagement in political activities associated with local effort to prevent the closure of the school in their community (Figure 3). While the most common forms of engagement among survey respondents were more passive in nature (e.g., reading relevant news articles and social media), there was a notable

number of respondents who were more actively engaged, such as signing petitions, attending meetings, and writing to their school board trustees. It is also noteworthy that, for every activity, respondents from rural communities reported being more involved than respondents from urban communities.

Among the interviewees, parents, and long-term residents (i.e., resided in community for more than 10 years) were most closely involved in the decision-making process. In particular, many were part of community associations or parent council groups, and some were also members of the accommodation review committees. Their involvement ranged from attending board meetings, documenting other parents’ concerns, mobilizing the broader community, working with local politicians, and delivering presentations at accommodation review meetings. Community engagement also meant coordinating with parent teams at other school locations within the municipality to “try to have a united front” when interacting with the school board (Parent 4, Rural School), despite the problematic PAR process that “pitted communities against communities” as various schools competed to remain open (Volunteer 1, Urban School).

Interviewees described the passion and commitment to ‘save the school’ (Volunteer 3, Urban School) that was present in both urban and rural communities. One urban participant stated: “You’ve never seen anything like the community mobilization that happened in our neighborhood” (Volunteer 3, Urban School), while a rural participant noted:

*“The parent committee worked with both of the local MP [elected member of federal parliament] and their local MPP [elected member of provincial parliament], and there were newsletters sent out. They did such an amazing job*

*to keep people engaged in the process.” (Parent 4, Rural School)*

Despite their determination, interviewees commonly expressed how exhausting this engagement was; a sentiment most acutely expressed by parents who were members of the accommodation review committees, who describe presenting “pitch, after pitch, after pitch” (Parent 1, Urban School). One parent summarizes the perspectives of many committee members juggling parenting with the demands of their volunteer membership on the accommodation review committee:

*“It’s a lot to expect a group of six people... a community group, for a bunch of parents, who have little children... to go write a report that’s going to be fit for the auditor general to review.” (Parent 5, Rural School)*

The community presented a plethora of creative solutions to the school board during time allocated for community presentations. One parent recounts their community’s final meeting with the school board, noting that there were over 50 presenters offering a range of reasons why their school should not be closed:

*“Ultimately, we didn’t feel that we’d left anything unturned, that we came at it from every possible angle: from a heritage angle, from an economics angle...” (Volunteer 2, Urban School)*

Moreover, the participants noted how they intentionally raised critical questions about the deficit-oriented (i.e., neoliberal) logic behind the closure by arguing whether closure was truly the best economic decision for the school board:

*“We tried to have open conversations about, you know, if they’re saving two hundred thousand a year by closing the school, what is the value of that? What are they paying to bus these kids? What is the upkeep [cost] of the facility? What are the taxes like? [...] We tried.” (Parent 3, Rural School)*

Interviewees commonly referred to the perseverance that community members and groups had throughout the decision-making process. In the face of an undesirable outcome, participants often looked to the positive impacts that this level of community organizing might have in the future:

*“Well, I think that because of the strong voice of our parent group and their constant follow up, even after the decision was made, their constant follow up with members of parliament was instrumental in having the Ministry look at rural school closures and what that does to communities.” (Parent 4, Rural School)*

Overall, the survey and interview participants reported active and creative engagement in the decision-making process, but this did not change the outcome: schools slated to close by the school boards, did in fact close. Participants engaged in the ‘fight’ to save local schools felt distraught by the outcome and deeply betrayed by the flawed decision-making process.

### Theme 3: Connecting the pupil accommodation review process with closure decision (process-outcome interaction)

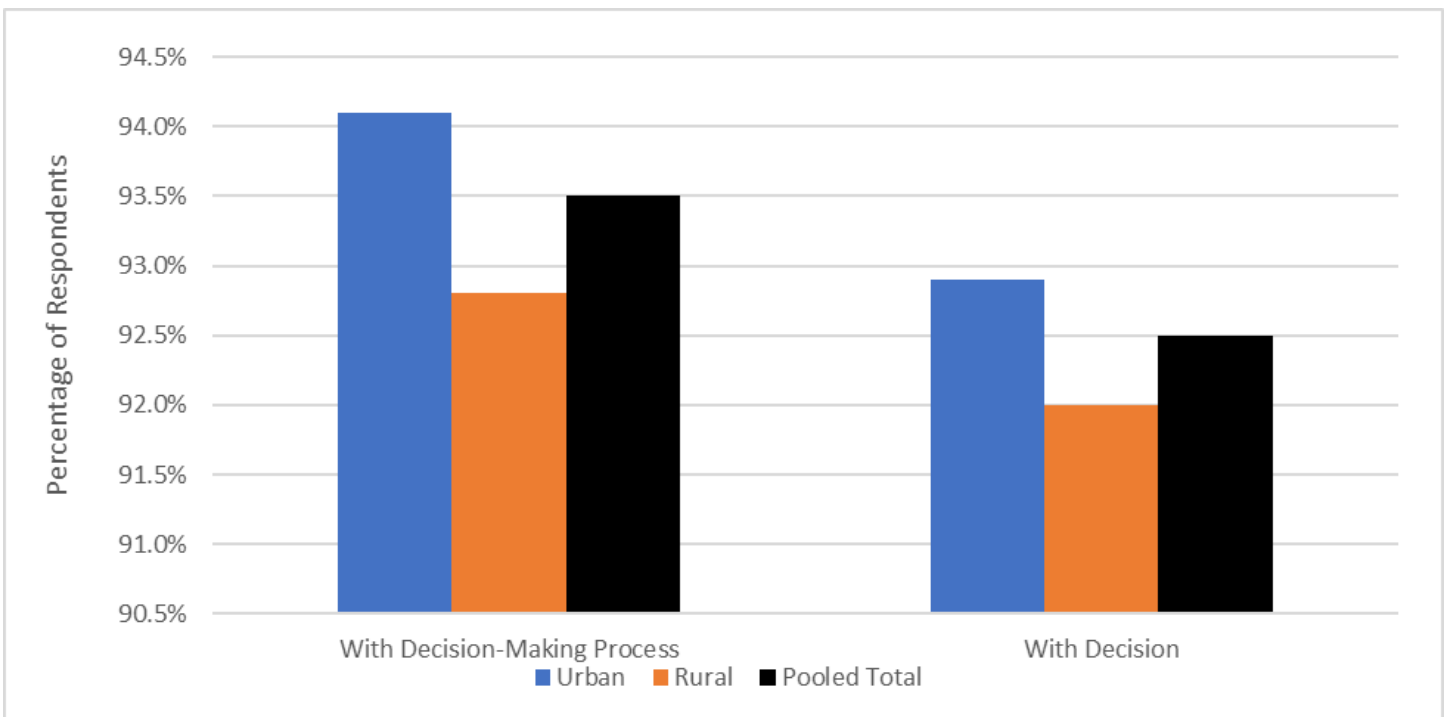
The third theme for discussion is the interface between the decision-making process and the decision to close; that is, the perception that an unfair process led to an unjust outcome in the four



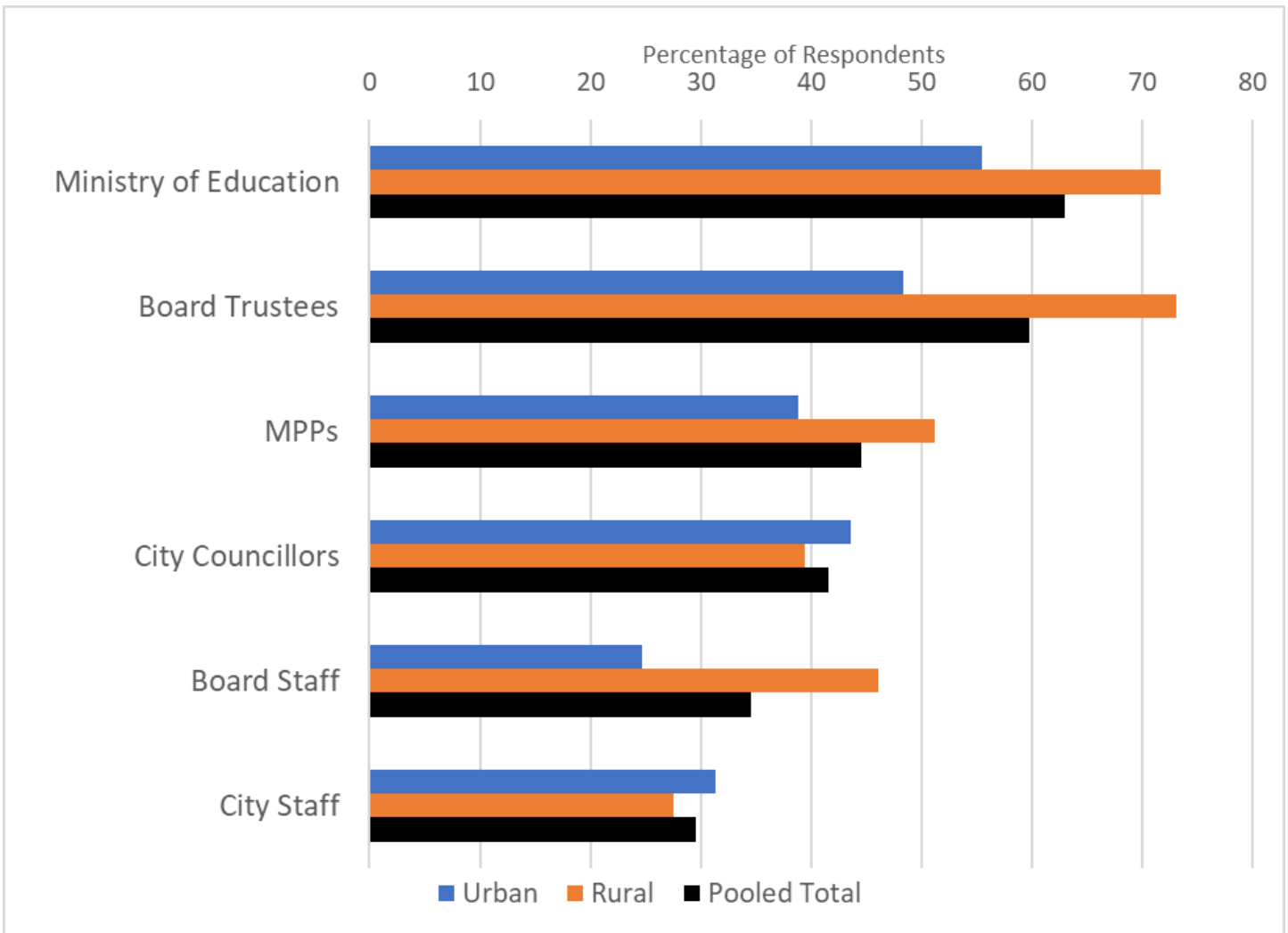
communities studied. The household surveys noted there was widespread dissatisfaction with both the decision-making process as well as the final decision to close the school in respondents' communities (Figure 4). Over 92% of survey respondents- rural and urban alike- were dissatisfied with the decision-making process, as well as with the final decision. This dissatisfaction may have also provoked a decline in the level of trust survey respondents feel towards various stakeholders, with the greatest decline in trust observed for Ontario's Ministry of Education and school board trustees (Figure 5). It is noteworthy that, apart from municipal councillors and municipal staff, the decline in trust was higher among respondents from rural compared to urban communities.

The interviews were used to further explain the survey findings by asking participants about their sense of satisfaction and trust after the decision to

close was made. As noted in the section above, interviewees described a high level of engagement in the decision-making process, where they put forward compelling arguments opposing closure based on the stated decision-making framework: the value of the to further explain the survey findings by asking participants about their sense of satisfaction and trust after the decision to close was made. As noted in the section above, interviewees described a high level of engagement in the decision-making process, where they put forward compelling arguments opposing closure based on the stated decision-making framework: the value of the school as a community asset, the detrimental impacts of closure on student education and experiences, and the fiscal implications of closure for the school board. The reality that the schools were closed despite residents' best efforts and deep engagement in the regulated engagement process left communities feeling "unheard" (Volunteer 3, Urban School),



**Figure 4.** Percentage of Respondents who were Dissatisfied with the Decision-Making Process and with the Final Decision to Close the School in their Community .



**Figure 5.** Percentage of Respondents Reporting a Decrease in Trust for Various Stakeholders

“defeated” (Parent 3, Rural School) and “disheartened” (Volunteer 2, Urban School).

Interviewees noted a lack of transparency and accountability, and reported bias within the decision-making process, which was described as a “predetermined process” by many of the participants.

Concerns about a flawed process focused on the type and timing of information shared by the school board or Ministry of Education with the public, and methods for calculating school capacity that were used to justify school closures. For

example, one resident (Parent 6, Rural School) reported submitting a Freedom of Information Request to obtain data on school spending and budgets, only to receive the requested information after the decision to close the school had been finalized.

Interviewees discussed the power held by school boards to strategically control and report enrollment numbers or “create empty space” (Volunteer 2, Urban School) in order to demonstrate a school was operating ‘under capacity’ and thus needed to close. Many participants questioned the school capacity calculations noting

that lower enrollment could be caused by changing bus routes, or the result of a recently built addition to the school (Teacher 2, Rural School). Most interviewees felt that the school boards' justification for school closure due to low enrollment was unfair and lacked supporting evidence:

*“It was a school with a capacity for eight hundred students and it had less than four hundred students. So that meant it needed to be closed. But that was an unfair measurement for multiple reasons. For one thing, there was no empty space in the school. There was the daycare and the English as a second language school paying rent to the school board for their space in the school. So, the truth is, all the square footage of the school was accounted for and the school board wasn't losing money, like they were collecting rent for the space that didn't have students. The math was bad.”* (Parent 1, Urban School)

The perception of 'bad-math' was often attributed to the population projections completed by the school boards as well. Participants felt that school boards were not held accountable for decisions that ended up being inaccurate or more costly in the long-term:

*“Simple things like asking for what's the current registration? They could tell you. But, what's your five-year projection? They gave us a number that had no semblance in reality. And we see it now. The repurposed school is over capacity.”* (Parent 1, Rural School)

The lack of transparency and accountability within the process led to one of the most heard sentiments from the participants: feeling unheard. To

explore these feelings, participants were asked (i) whether they felt there were adequate opportunities to voice their opinions during the decision-making process, and (ii) if the decision-makers were open to hearing these opinions. As noted in the previous section, many participants felt that they had an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and most interviewees described their high level of engagement in various parts of the decision-making process. It was the second point that had participants feeling unheard and betrayed. Specifically, participants felt that when they did meaningfully participate in the process, their input was neither acknowledged by decision-makers nor incorporated into the final decision:

*“It was exhausting, but it felt like no matter even if we put together the golden egg of solution, it didn't seem to matter and it all fell on deaf ears, which was so frustrating.”* (Parent 3, Rural School)

This left community members feeling that bias was interfering with their efforts to negotiate with the school boards during the accommodation review process. Some noted differences in resource allocations and were suspicious of ulterior motives driving the school closure decision:

*“They weren't keeping the school up-to-date in the kinds of repairs and upkeep that other schools were getting. They were ready for this school to close for whatever reason. I do not know exactly, is it that it was an inner-city school with lower average grades and they wanted it off their roster?”* (Parent 1, Urban School)

Many residents found the schools slated for closure remarkable due to socio-demographic circumstances and income disparities:

*“And I would venture to say that many of these decisions and decisions like this are an injustice that’s inflicted on a community, you know, communities that can’t fight for themselves for whatever reasons, it could be economically stressed or socially stressed...because they’re easy targets.”* (Volunteer 4, Urban School)

Some interviewees argued that community cohesion was eroded due to the PAR process that “pitted communities against communities” as various schools competed to remain open (Volunteer 2, Urban School).

Stemming from residents’ dissatisfaction, interviewees were then asked for their suggestions on how to improve the decision-making process. Three main improvements were proposed: better accuracy in population projections, evidence-based decision making, and a more accessible and accountable process. In addition, many participants felt that municipal governments should have more involvement in the decision-making process.

When asked specifically if their experiences impacted their desire to participate in future public engagement, responses were mixed. Some interviewees still felt compelled to be involved in their communities, while others did not, as the experience of the pupil accommodation review was too draining and disappointing. Indeed, some potential participants for our study stated that they had no energy left to partake in research about the school closure, the flawed process and unsatisfactory outcome left them exhausted and disillusioned as articulated by one potential participant:

*“Thanks for the opportunity to participate in this study. Nothing in my*

*many, many years of community organizing here has affected me as deeply as this closure did. I have zero interest in revisiting this issue. I’ve said enough words already and have no more words to offer.”* (Potential participant, Urban School)

## Discussion

This study used an environmental justice approach to examine perceptions of just outcomes and fair processes in school closure decision-making. Using a comparative case study design of four communities in Ontario, Canada, we make contributions to our understanding of the impact of school closures on local communities, the perceptions of decision-making processes among residents left behind as a tool of procedural justice and highlight the inseparable connection between unfair processes and unjust outcomes in relation to school closures. We conclude the paper with a discussion of key findings, study limitations, policy implications, and future research needs.

## Key Findings

This study has added to a small but growing body of work examining the impacts of school closures on communities. We paid particular attention to the unique challenges faced by urban and rural communities, many of which have faced disproportionate impacts due to the PAR process that undervalues communities with lower-student enrolment.

Through this lens, this research builds on emergent work on the intersections between school closures and spatial injustice (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Tieken et al., 2019). The distribution of these closures is not neutral, with low-income and rural communities most at-risk of closures and by the negative impacts of flawed engagement processes. As studied by Tieken et al. in 2019, school closures

are disproportionately impacting lower income communities; a trend which is noted in our interviews and echoed in other Canadian school closure research (Snow, 2019). Further, rural communities also face disproportionate school closures (Jull, 2018), and, as noted in our interviews, the impacts are felt deeply within the community. Rural and low-income communities also perceive the most benefit from public schools. In this study, the rural communities felt there was less social connection and community cohesion after school closure while the urban communities highlighted that the loss of diverse programming in schools derailed community connections and supports that had been fostered in the community over many years.

Evidently, public schools carried important meaning for these communities in terms of social connection and community cohesion. This finding mirrored similar research noting the importance of schools for community value (Vincent, 2006; Andreas, 2013; P4E, 2009; Witten et al., 2001), especially in rural communities where schools are often fundamental to community viability (Miller, 1995; Hill, 2017; Gollom, 2017). In both urban and rural areas, schools operated as a community hub for community connections beyond the student population. For instance, each of the examined schools acted as a site for community programming which permitted members of the community to gather and connect in a central location, much in line with historic literature acknowledging the importance socio-spatial centrality of schools in local communities (Perry, 1998). In this, schools operated as more than just educational infrastructure and were instead key community assets which supported community cohesion and social activity between residents.

Although disproportionate closures affect both urban and rural schools facing underfunding and low enrollment, this study shed light on an important

difference between the community experiences. Specifically, the closures resulted in transportation impacts in all communities but were exacerbated in rural areas wherein increased commute (i.e., bussing) times impacted student involvement in extracurricular activities, in-school volunteerism, sense of community cohesion, and the overall attractiveness of rural communities for new families. Conversely, in urban communities, transportation impacts were also discussed not to time-space restrictions and commute times but with respect to physical activity levels of student pedestrians and increased safety concerns due to rise in automobile and bus transport.

Our study also examined participants' involvement in the decision-making process for the closed schools in all four communities. Participants reported strong community mobilizing, active and creative efforts to oppose the closure of the school, and strong social connections among organizers and allies fighting for the school. These findings echo extant research that highlights the longstanding benefits of community organizing including enhanced social capital and a sense of community cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). However, our participants noted that the fraught process also resulted in deep distrust for decision-makers and at times a division between communities simultaneously fighting to keep their schools open in what was framed by school boards as a zero-sum game.

Most notably, the participants acknowledged their own strategies to convince decision-makers to keep the schools open, using the logic and rationality of neoliberalism. Specifically, when it was clear that the promotion of social values of the school as a community hub and site of social connection were not compelling to decision-makers, they used the economic and demographic arguments that were being prioritized. There is significant research noting

the uptake of neoliberal arguments to advocate for social services in the not-for-profit and civil service sectors including homeless and housing-first, immigrant settlement services, social and environmental justice initiatives, and public transit services (Evans et al., 2016; Hasenfield and Garrow, 2012; Linovski et al., 2018; Mukhtar et al., 2016), noting that global restructuring is too entrenched to undo but that aligning and/or adopting logics can contribute to at least some meaningful change. For participants in this study, the school closures were approved even when compelling neoliberal arguments were presented by residents (i.e., bad math, incomplete population projections), leading to interpretations of the decision-making process as flawed and predetermined and their overall experience of being unheard by decision-makers.

The third major finding of this study was the importance of understanding the perceived outcomes through the lens of the fraught decision-making process. More specifically, it was equally the perceptions of a flawed process and the undesired outcome of the school closure that had residents feeling a sense of dissatisfaction, distrust and ultimately betrayal. Here we again return to our framing of school closures as an environmental justice issue (Schlosberg, 2004) that moves beyond solely considering justice through a distributive lens (where schools have closed) and towards an understanding of procedures that more equitably distribute schools in communities (Schlosberg, 2004; Masuda et al., 2010). Our study has documented a deeply flawed process in four communities that operate under the same PAR guidelines set out by Ontario's MoE.

This study aligns with both distributive and procedural justice principles with reflections on participatory process by Just City scholars. Of note, Susan Fainstein argues that just processes do not necessarily result in just outcomes (2010), but this

study underscores that the reverse is most certainly true; unfair processes do not result in just outcomes. Specifically, the sense of injustice felt by residents when the local schools were closed (outcome) is exacerbated by the perceived unfairness of the decision-making (process).

This is in large part explained by research documenting the importance of neighbourhood social capital that gives communities a sense of control over their own future (Kawachi, 1999). Due to this, the closure of the school signifies not only the loss of the school itself, but also a sense of distrust with those responsible for the closure and a reduced sense of control over future community decisions. This has implications for not just social capital in communities but for the functioning of democracy itself (Innes & Booher, 2004). Thus, this study highlights that while school closures have community impacts beyond schools and students, so too do the flawed processes through which schools closure decisions are made. As participants noted, the consequences of an unfair and fraught process had resulted in anger, apathy, and a deep distrust of decision makers and their future processes. These flawed processes undermine and dissolve the existing social relations and capital that are crucial for a sense of inclusion in communities (Quick & Feldman, 2011).

### Study Limitations

We must first highlight some of the study limitations. In the survey section of this study, the response rate reflected 2.2% of overall residents who were sent the household survey. As such, the sample is not a reflection of the entire community and could reflect bias with those who responded being motivated with anger of frustration with the closure decision. Our qualitative interviews were sourced from those who responded to the household survey and as such could also reflect bias towards those who felt more significantly impacted by the closure.

Moreover, due to the on-going pandemic the recruitment of participants for the interviews was limited. Within the recruitment process, Zoom Fatigue contributed to rejected requests for interviews. This same online exhaustion led to all participants choosing a one-on-one interview, as opposed to participating in originally scheduled online focus-groups. The flexibility of the one-on-one interview allowed participants to opt for phone-interviews which proved more popular than videoconferencing. Despite this barrier, sampling continued until saturation in the interviews was met, which reflected a diverse group of residents across the four case-studies.

### Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research

Prior to discussing the contributions in more detail, The schools included in our study represent the emerging trend in school asset management within Ontario: closing local schools in communities and concentrating students into larger schools, often in suburban or periphery locations (Andreas, 2013). Indeed, past research has noted that there has been a push from decision-makers to fund suburban schools over their rural or urban counterparts (Daniel, 2010).

The results of resident interviews in this study highlight some of the differences between local schools and larger out-of-community schools and add another layer to the school closure debate. Specifically, community members noted that the closure of a school had implications beyond the educational function in the building. Closure meant a loss of physically activity opportunities for students who walked to the local school, multi-function community space for seniors and other vulnerable community groups as well as a space to forge meaningful connections within the community. According to our participants, many of these functions were lost with the transition from a smaller, local school to a larger “mega-school” on the periphery of the

community (Andreas, 2013). This is especially exacerbated for declining rural communities where the location of new schools can involve significant impact on student travel time.

There is a need to broaden the decision criteria for school closures to incorporate the broad range of school functions in community, and the variety of impacts of closures on students and families across geographies. Given the COVID-19 induced changes in residential relocation urban to rural mobility patterns in many Canadian geographies- there is a need for future research to consider whether larger “mega-schools” serve the potential growing demand for schools in communities with previously declining populations.

School closures have impacts on communities that currently fall outside the mandate of the MoE and local school boards. Our results specifically highlight the on-going tension between local residents and school boards during the PAR process, where the conflicting priorities and values lead to residents feeling unheard, angry, and forgotten by the school boards. The local-needs of communities are undervalued in the current PAR process, with regional-level considerations given higher priority. Not only are the community impacts ignored, but the decisions to close undermine other initiatives designed to improve quality of life for residents and enhance community well-being in local communities. For example, school travel planners have long promoted active and safe routes to school to improve the health and well-being of students (Ramanathan et al., 2014), while walkability in urban communities has been a prominent planning paradigm for decades (Dean et al., 2020).

Further, rural communities in Canada and elsewhere have actively sought to reverse their ‘shrinking’ status through strategic demographic and economic growth initiatives (Hartt, 2021) that target new families, while concomitantly reflecting on age-friendly policies that support older adult residents through various activities including formal volunteerism

(Skinner and Joseph, 2019). Despite these initiatives, municipal planners are not involved formally in the PAR process. The unilateral and siloed decision-making of school boards negates their role as community-builders in a ‘whole of community approach’ that is increasingly demanded in community planning initiatives such as healthy communities (Vincent, 2014) and age-friendly communities (Menec et al., 2011) among others. Better integration between land-use planning processes and school closure processes is warranted, to achieve these important community well-being goals.

Calls for governance actors to collaborate across silos is by no means novel; in the case of the school closure process in Ontario, the review guidelines had previously stated that ‘impact to community’ is one of three pillars of decision-making. The school boards need only to reapply that policy to their own practice, either through initiative of the MoE or through incentives offered by parallel ministries for whom schools also matter (i.e., Ministries of Children and Youth; Seniors and Accessibility; Municipal Affairs and Housing; Rural Affairs; Economic Development).

As an exploratory study into resident perceptions of school closure processes, this paper offers many avenues of future research. Firstly, there is a need for research to examine the politics of school closure decisions at the provincial level, specifically a critical examination of how the MoE responds to school board decisions and rationales for closure. In addition, we need to better understand whether democratic and collaborative decision-making occurs among the MoE and adjacent ministries that are dependent on schools to meet their core mandates. Further, our participants noted a lack of trust between community members and the decision makers at the school board and MoE. Future research needs to explore the broader societal implications of the 2015 updates to the PAR process that resulted in community impacts no longer being included in decision-making, and whether future

iterations of PAR guidelines can more formally incorporate resident opinions.

## Conclusions

This study adds to the growing evidence-base that schools are important for local communities, and the consequences of their closure extend beyond the balance sheets of school boards. For participants in this study, the flawed processes of the school closure added an additional layer of injustice and mistrust to an already painful loss. We argue that future researchers and policymakers should situate debates about school closures within an environmental justice framework that allows for the co-consideration of process and outcome, as well as inclusion of broader community impacts into the decision to shutter schools.

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## Notes on contributors

Samantha Leger is currently a PhD student at the University of Waterloo, a graduate of the University of Waterloo’s School of Planning. Her research interests are focused on active transportation, social connectivity and inclusion. with a Master of Research in Interdisciplinary Urban Design from the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London.

Dr. Patricia Collins is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning, cross-appointed to the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies. Her research includes healthy and sustainable community planning, inequities in, and threats to the liveability of neighbourhoods and cities. She serves on the board for the Kingston Coalition for Active



Transportation including the City's Active Transportation Master Plan Technical Advisory Group (since 2017), Age-Friendly Advisory Committee (2013-2014), and Waterfront Advisory Committee (2015)

Jennifer Dean is the Associate Director of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Professor University of Waterloo's School of Planning. She is a member of GoHelp (Geographies of Health in Place, Planning and Public Health) Lab.

Carise Thompson is a Research Coordinator in the School of Urban & Regional Planning at Queen's University. She completed her MA in the Department of Geography and Environmental Management at the University of Waterloo.

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