

ACCOMMODATION REVIEW COMMITTEE

FOR

ST. PATRICK'S CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL
AND
ST. CHRISTOPHER CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY PRESENTATION



PROCESS

- **Monday, December 15, 2008 - Eleven focus groups were completed with St. Patrick's stakeholders. A focus group of various leaders of Board Teacher Federations, unions and staff associations was also held that day as a twelfth session.**
- **Tuesday, December 16, 2008 - Eleven focus groups were completed with St. Christopher stakeholders.**
- **In total, twenty-three focus group sessions were held with ninety-eight individuals participating in the focus groups at St. Patrick's and eighty-nine stakeholders in the focus groups at St. Christopher for a total of 187 individuals.**

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

- **Grade 9 and 10 students;**
- **Grade 11 and 12 students;**
- **Grade 7 and 8 students who currently attend partner schools for each of the secondary schools;**
- **Grade 9 and 10 student parents;**
- **Grade 11 and 12 student parents;**
- **Grade 7 and 8 student parents from the partner schools for each of the secondary schools;**

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

- **Secondary school teachers;**
- **Grade 7 & 8 teachers from partnering elementary schools;**
- **Secondary school administrative staff;**
- **Alumni;**
- **Community partners who engaged with the school via the delivery of social services, co-op placement programs, police services, facility utilization and other points of contact.**

SESSION FORMAT

- **A framework tailored to the specific perspectives of each group was used involving:**
 - **An overview of some of the key statistics and information that precipitated the Board forming an Accommodations Review process;**
 - **Development of a strengths and weaknesses profile for the secondary school of the stakeholder group;**
 - **A strengths and weaknesses assessment of various future options, including a request for participants to identify additional options.**

SCHOOLS' STRENGTHS & CONCERNS SUMMARY

- **The long and evident history, tradition and community presence of St. Patrick's school over seventy-five years compared to the more emerging but strengthening thirteen year presence of St. Christopher;**
- **The strong community engagement of both schools through the Irish Miracle and Cyclone Aid, plus other initiatives;**
- **The historical athletic strength of St. Patrick's, and the current notable athletic capacities of St. Christopher;**
- **The southern service area linkage and high pedestrian access associated with St. Patrick's compared to the North Sarnia and County focus and high bussing requirements of St. Christopher;**
- **St. Patrick's exists within a mature residential area of the City on a smaller site with a high value track and field facility. St. Christopher location is in a residential growth area, with improving road access, exists on a larger site but has less developed outdoor facilities;**

SCHOOLS' STRENGTHS & CONCERNS SUMMARY

- **The excellent teachers and staff that exist at both schools who are committed to serving the two school communities;**
- **The high academic achievement of both schools, though St. Patrick's has a broader focus of academic, developmental / special needs and applied learning, serving a broader social demographic profile. St. Christopher has a narrower educational services profile within a strong academic stream;**
- **An aged, tired and limiting physical plant at St. Patrick's compared to a relatively new, high quality, and for the Sarnia-Lambton area, state of the art facility at St. Christopher School;**
- **A strong, engaged and supportive alumni at St. Patrick's, many who live in the community, are community leaders and teach within the Catholic school system compared to a significantly more limited alumni group due to the age of St. Christopher, many who have left the community for post-secondary education or employment;**
- **A series of magnet programs and courses that are bringing the two school communities together at the senior grade levels for specialized and often unique topics.**

ONE CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL APPROACH ALTERNATIVES

- **Close one of St. Patrick's or St. Christopher and consolidate on one site**
- **Two schools within one facility - Guelph**
- **St. Christopher / St. Anne Campus**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE NON-SITE-BASED COMMENTS

Strengths

- **A larger student population which will potentially result in more extracurricular activities and curriculum programs and courses due to the number of students available;**
- **One strong, comprehensive Catholic secondary school that will be more competitive academically, athletically and in terms of quality of student life compared to two secondary schools that will have significantly smaller student populations in the future;**
- **Potential for a stronger drama, music, arts and related programs and facilities;**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE NON-SITE-BASED COMMENTS

Strengths (Continued)

- **Will result in a contemporary, high quality facility and infrastructure that will better support student learning;**
- **Overcome some of the student volunteer challenges that are beginning to emerge for some of the larger events;**
- **Ability to offer two or three major community engagement programs / events each year which will provide a broader presence and value for the Catholic secondary school in the community;**
- **Potentially reduces school operational, overhead and related costs;**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE NON-SITE-BASED COMMENTS

Concerns

- **Potential loss of students to other school systems from the north or south depending on the site selected;**
- **Increased bussing costs, especially in regards to the St. Christopher site;**
- **Fewer students would get to participate in higher level athletic programs, as where there are currently two Catholic secondary school teams there would only be one Catholic secondary school team per sport;**
- **A larger student population which could diminish the sense of community that exists in both schools currently;**
- **Integrating two unique student cultures, backgrounds and experiences which will require an effective transition plan which many believed did not occur as well as required when St. Christopher was formed;**
- **A series of operational challenges in regards to the school name, team name and logos, staff and teacher leadership roles, uniforms and other considerations that could create a win-lose environment;**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. PATRICK'S

Strengths

- **A central location with a continued presence in the South area of the City where there are more high need families;**
- **Continues the tradition of St. Patrick's Catholic High School as a highly recognized, valued and visible institution within the community;**
- **Is the current site of the valued and important developmental / special needs and technical programs;**
- **Strong perspective that any loss of students would likely be more limited if a south area Catholic secondary school was sustained compared to a northern school;**
- **In the end, a higher proportion of pedestrian students accessing St. Patrick's resulting in potentially reduced bussing costs in total;**
- **Has access to the premier track and field facility in the region;**
- **The sustaining of community use of the school, particularly with the Strangway Community Centre and other community groups.**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. PATRICK'S

Concerns

- **Significant concerns over the level of capital funds required to renew St. Patrick's before an addition is considered, and the age of the building in which such a renewal would take place;**
- **The smaller site, area traffic congestion and parking challenges which would be heightened with a larger school population and staff;**
- **The potential loss of North Sarnia students who may move to public secondary schools that are closer or for which they feel more comfortable with in terms of where their friends go;**
- **More difficult for County students to access the Catholic secondary school relative to location.**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. CHRISTOPHER

Strengths

- **Builds on newer, more state of the art infrastructure and technology with considerably less overall capital investment;**
- **A larger site that has improving access and is more effectively linked to the County;**
- **Can build on the strong academic capacity of the school and provide a more integrated and comprehensive set of learning experiences;**
- **School located in one of the few emerging residential neighbourhoods within the Sarnia community.**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. CHRISTOPHER

Concerns

- **Significant increase in bussing requirements. Virtually all the 50% of students who currently walk to St. Patrick's would need to be bussed;**
- **Potential loss of the St. Patrick's "brand" that has a long presence and depth in the community, though most people identified that St. Patrick's has been in three different schools, and therefore, it is not about the building, but about the school community;**
- **Transportation considerations would be a particular concern the Port Lambton area students where some parents believe their children could be on busses for over one and one-half hours to St. Christopher and would consider the high school in Wallaceburg, or potentially asking to attend the Pines in Chatham.**

**ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE
A GRADE 9 AND 10 SCHOOL & GRADE 11 AND 12 SCHOOL
IN ONE FACILITY – GUELPH MODEL**

Strengths

- **Sustains the names of both schools and their legacies / traditions;**
- **The future of St. Patrick's track facility would need to be resolved;**
- **Creates a larger student body that would sustain and / or expand extracurricular, academic and other programs and services;**
- **A contemporary secondary school facility that would likely be the most state of the art of the current secondary schools in the area.**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE A GRADE 9 AND 10 SCHOOL & GRADE 11 AND 12 SCHOOL IN ONE FACILITY – GUELPH MODEL

Concerns

- **The Grade 9 and 10 school never has alumni as they immediately move into the Grade 11 and 12 school, therefore likely no continuing sense of community;**
- **Increased bussing requirements if the St. Christopher location was selected which was almost universally seen by focus group participants as the preferred site;**
- **A larger student population which is seen as less preferred than smaller more close-knit school communities, though the two Catholic schools in one building alternative may dissipate some of this concern with the two differentiated school names and populations;**
- **Potential loss of students in either the north or the south Sarnia areas due to consolidation;**
- **General confusion amongst focus group participants as to what this strategy actually delivers. Many people saw this alternative as a transitional approach related to school naming challenges and not a substantive alternative.**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. CHRISTOPHER / ST. ANNE

Strengths

- **May require less capital investment as a smaller addition would be needed to St. Christopher, though additions may be required on some of the elementary schools involved;**
- **Has the potential to sustain one or two elementary schools that may need to close in the future;**
- **Places more emphasis on using existing total school system student placement capacity;**
- **Creates one strong Catholic secondary school community with the benefits of a stronger curriculum, extracurricular activities and student life opportunities.**

ONE SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE ST. CHRISTOPHER / ST. ANNE

Concerns

- **No Catholic elementary school within one of the only growing, new residential areas of the City;**
- **Potential elementary school student losses could be significant as all the St. Anne's children would need to be bussed and parents may choose to have their children go to public elementary schools in their neighbourhood;**
- **Students would need to go in and out of doors through the winter and across an increasingly busy street which may create safety concerns;**
- **The St. Anne's community has gone through a series of elementary school closures, and for some focus group participants, have just finally found a home. They view this alternative as disruptive and as a strategy to solve the secondary school challenges by reconfiguring the elementary schools which impacts those students, some for a second time.**

TWO CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVES

- **Sustain the two Catholic secondary schools;**
- **Two Grade 7 to 12 schools;**
- **A junior secondary school for Grade 7 to 9 students and a senior secondary school for Grade 10 to 12 students;**
- **St. Patrick's and a public secondary school in one building (Strathroy model).**

SUSTAIN TWO CURRENT CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Strengths

- **Allows two successful Catholic secondary school communities to be sustained, one in the north and one in the south area of Sarnia;**
- **The smaller student populations provide enhanced learning environment and student life experiences;**
- **Fifty percent of the students who walk to St. Patrick's would still be able to do so;**
- **The strengths of each school in terms of academics, athletics, community events and related perspectives would remain;**
- **The developmental / special education and technical programs at St. Patrick's would remain;**
- **Represents the least amount of transition and change in terms of physical venues and school communities;**
- **Loss of Catholic secondary school students to the other school boards is not a factor.**

SUSTAIN TWO CURRENT CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Concerns

- **The potential impact on the quality of the educational and student life experiences when the student populations fall below the 80% student capacity threshold and funding is reduced which could limit program offerings, extracurricular activities and other important school community opportunities;**
- **Reduced enrolment could result in more significant declines in course selection, extracurricular activities;**
- **The level of investment in St. Patrick's for some focus group participants was difficult to rationalize, especially in light of the age of the building, along with site and parking constraints, local traffic congestion, etc.;**
- **For some, seen as more of a deferral strategy than a permanent solution.**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOLS ALTERNATIVE GRADES 7 TO 12

Strengths

- **Sustains a secondary school in the north and the south areas of Sarnia due to higher student levels when Grades 7 and 8 students are added;**
- **Creates a larger student population resulting in potentially sustained and / or enhanced curriculum and extracurricular opportunities;**
- **For some teachers and a few others, removes Grades 7 and 8 students from the elementary schools where they are seen as not fitting as well.**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOLS ALTERNATIVE GRADES 7 TO 12

Concerns

- **Increased bussing as Grades 7 and 8 students who would come from throughout the County, being bussed longer distances to Sarnia;**
- **Concerns that there could be substantive losses of rural and City Grade 7 and 8 Catholic students who would go to public schools;**
- **Almost a universal perspective amongst parents that they do not want their child, 11 to 13 year olds being in schools with 17 and 18 year olds due to the unique differences in maturity, behaviours, lifestyles, etc.;**
- **Some potential concerns about mixing the teacher populations that currently operate under different working conditions;**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOLS ALTERNATIVE GRADES 7 TO 12

Concerns

- **The closure of three to five elementary schools was seen as significant, and for some, simply placing the secondary school challenge on “the backs” of the elementary schools;**
- **A number of elementary schools in Sarnia have gone through consolidation programs over the last number of years and some of these challenging decisions would need to be reopened even though implementation is completed or underway;**
- **Still requires a significant capital investment at St. Patrick’s which many focus group participants had trouble rationalizing;**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE JUNIOR AND SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Strengths

- **Sustains a south and north Catholic Secondary School in Sarnia;**
- **Removes the Grades 7 and 8 students from the elementary schools which is desired by a number of teachers, and also separates the Grades 7, 8 and 9 students from the Grades 10, 11 and 12 population which is seen as a more reasonable separation in ages, interests and perspectives;**
- **Creates potential for more targeted extracurricular activities, academic programs and related services based on the interests of similar age groups compared to the Grade 7 – 12 alternative.**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE JUNIOR AND SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Concerns

- **The senior secondary school may not have adequate students to fit within the 80% capacity threshold or to provide a wider range of academic and extracurricular programs;**
- **The junior sport teams would have a smaller pool of athletes as there would be no Grade 9's.**
- **Some better Grade 8 athletes may be recruited to other secondary schools as they could move into the sports streams earlier;**
- **The junior secondary school may have an inability to participate in sports as there is no comparable school level in the area;**

TWO SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE JUNIOR AND SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Concerns

- **Three to five elementary schools would need to be closed;**
- **There could be a significant loss of Grade 7 and 8 County and City students who would experience increased bussing to Sarnia;**
- **Potentially some challenges in terms of the different considerations for the elementary and secondary teacher panel contracts;**
- **Required capital investment in St. Patrick's, plus an addition which many focus group participants did not see as economically prudent.**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE CONSOLIDATE ST. PATRICK'S AND ONE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL INTO A SINGLE FACILITY (STRATHROY MODEL)

Strengths

- **Public secondary schools are also experiencing declining populations. Such a strategy could create a larger overall student body population and sustain a Catholic secondary school in the south area of Sarnia;**
- **Perceptions that this alternative is more efficient in that there can be extensive joint use of space, such as gymnasiums, technical classrooms / shops, auditoriums / cafeteriums, arts and drama areas, etc.;**
- **The St. Patrick's tradition and presence in the south would be sustained as a separate entity;**
- **Reduces the need for substantive capital renewal investments in the current St. Patrick's School;**
- **Potential to provide larger course selections for the combined interests of the two school populations, thus enriching the over curriculum and educational opportunities.**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE CONSOLIDATE ST. PATRICK'S AND ONE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL INTO A SINGLE FACILITY (STRATHROY MODEL)

Concerns

- **Assumes the Strathroy strategy has functioned well. (The London Catholic District School Board has not achieved its student population targets after five years);**
- **Concerns expressed in regards to the Catholic students wearing uniforms and the public school students not, which could create challenges and cause some students to gravitate to the public school;**
- **Two uniquely different populations in one building may create behavioural and other challenges;**
- **The two school boards have not previously worked at this level of integration, and combining the goals and objectives of each Board could require a significant timeframe. (The likely candidate public school would be Northern which may not be able to physically absorb a larger student population, especially considering that the French First Language secondary school is already housed in that facility);**

ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE CONSOLIDATE ST. PATRICK'S AND ONE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL INTO A SINGLE FACILITY (STRATHROY MODEL)

Concerns

- **The timelines to achieve a solution may be such that St. Patrick's would fall below the 80% capacity factor. The Board could experience an interim reduction in funding;**
- **Considerable concerns expressed that there is potential for significant loss of the presence and distinctiveness for Catholic education;**
- **In the longer term, it does not resolve student population challenges at St. Christopher School if its population were to fall below 80% capacity.**

SUMMARY OF OTHER POINTS

Naming

- **The dominant view from St. Patrick's stakeholders in the focus groups was that the consolidated school could be called St. Patrick's for the following reasons:**
 - **The seventy-five year tradition and the school's strong history and presence in the community, along with the significant alumni base, and community activities;**
 - **A belief that the name is aligned with the school community and not a facility, as St. Patrick's has been in three facilities in its lifetime;**
 - **The school has the larger, current student population;**
 - **Though St. Christopher has thirteen years of history, it is a newer community that does not have the strength of presence for Catholic education in the community that St. Patrick's does;**
 - **Most of the community and partner stakeholders identified St. Patrick's as the preferred continuing name for Catholic secondary school education in Sarnia.**
 - **Approximately one-quarter of the ninety plus stakeholders in the St. Patrick's focus group sessions felt a new name should be selected that amalgamates the two communities into one, or were indifferent on this topic.**

SUMMARY OF OTHER POINTS

Naming

- **For St. Christopher stakeholders in the focus groups, there was considerably more diversity of opinions on the name as follows:**
 - **Some teachers and students felt strongly that the new school should be called St. Christopher because it does exist, it is the name of the school and it has growing strength in academic excellence and athletics;**
 - **Secondary school parents were considerably less worried about the name and did not see it as a major discussion point compared to other focus groups at both St. Christopher and St. Patrick's;**
 - **The Grade 7 through 12 students had mixed perspectives, with most thinking a new name strategy should be pursued;**
 - **These six alumni at St. Christopher immediately felt that the new name should be St. Patrick's due to the long presence, history and tradition of that school in the community;**
 - **The community stakeholders generally leaned towards St. Patrick's as a name.**

OTHER DISCUSSION THEMES

- **The future of the St. Patrick's track and field facility if the new Catholic secondary school is not located at St. Patrick's;**
- **The need for a very effective, well-communicated and comprehensive integration / consolidation plan that is developed and implemented on a timely basis to deal with a range of operational issues from uniforms, to school leadership positions, to integration of classes, to community-based programs and partnerships and involving other transitional needs.**

CONCLUSIONS

- **Sustaining the two Catholic secondary schools as currently operated, is appealing to focus group participants, but three impacts are of concern:**
 - **The potential impact on curriculum and extracurricular activities of funding reductions with the continuing decline in the student population;**
 - **The reinvestment scale required in St. Patrick's;**
 - **Reductions in programming, extracurricular activities and related components could cause students to leave for other secondary schools, thus increasing the rate of the student population decline;**
- **The majority of participants in the focus groups viewed one consolidated and strong Catholic secondary school as the potentially preferred outcome;**
 - **A larger student body will offer more curriculum programming and extracurricular activities than two schools can when both schools are declining in student population;**
 - **The level of capital investment in St. Patrick's for renewal and rehabilitation was a significant issue for a number of the focus group participants;**

CONCLUSIONS

- **Recognition that selecting either of the Catholic secondary school sites could result in a potential loss of students;**
- **Recognition that bussing costs will increase in either scenario, but more so for the St. Christopher venue;**
- **Limited interest in two Grade 7 – 12 schools which were primarily supported by elementary school teachers. Most parents could not conceive of this being a preferred strategy for Grade 7 and 8 students and elementary school closures would be significant;**
- **A stronger interest in the Grade 7 to 9 and Grade 10 to 12 secondary school formats, though the impact of elementary school closures was seen as problematic;**

CONCLUSIONS

- **For the Strathroy model, concern over the loss of a distinct Catholic education, when considering the two student populations in one school alternative;**
- **For the Guelph model, participants could not see why the two school alternative would have any significant benefit;**
- **Though the testing was more limited, the St. Christopher / St. Anne alternative received limited support from some secondary school teachers and virtually no support from elementary school teachers, parents or St. Christopher alumni.**

TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

- **Catholic secondary school enrollment has declined by approximately 400 students from 2,100 to 1,700 individuals over the last four or five years;**
- **Based on the projections, including current junior kindergarten, senior kindergarten and Grade 1 enrollments, Catholic secondary school enrollment is projected to decline from approximately 1,700 to 1,200 to 1,300 by the latter part of the 2010 decade, a decline of another 400 to 500 students;**
- **The stabilization level for Catholic secondary school student enrollment would likely be the 1,200 to 1,400 area between 2016 and 2019;**
- **The decline is somewhat more significant at St. Patrick's than for St. Christopher, as St. Christopher services an area of Sarnia which is experiencing growth in new residential development;**
- **In general terms, St. Patrick's Catholic Secondary School has approximately 885 students within an 1,100 to 1,200 student capacity, while St. Christopher has approximately 815 students with a student capacity of 950;**

TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK SUMMARY

- **The province has an 80% student capacity factor for funding purposes. When student enrollment falls below 80% of a school's student capacity, there is a funding reduction in support of those schools which will impact programs, operations and other key areas of school life;**
- **The rehabilitation and renewal category for St. Patrick's by the province is classified as critical, with a current renewal capital cost projection of between \$9 million and \$11 million over the next five years, compared to St. Christopher renewal costs of \$4 million over the next ten years;**
- **If a consolidation alternative were to be pursued, a building addition would need to be constructed on either of the two schools as neither has the current capacity to support a student population of 1,300 to 1,400 students. Such an addition at St. Patrick's would be over and above the facility renewal requirements. An addition at St. Christopher would need to support the developmental / special needs program, the technical program, additional academic space and track facility.**