

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS?

THE CLOSURE OF HUNTER
SCHOOL:
A CASE STUDY

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SUMMARY

In New Zealand, small rural schools situated away from cities have falling rolls due to changes in population. While these schools are under pressure to amalgamate or close, small schools are viewed by principals, teachers, parents and trustees to be effective at utilising resources available to benefit educational opportunities for students and providing rewarding experiences for teachers.

For the subject of the case study, Hunter School, the contributions made by the school's community due to a feeling of ownership were the major contributing factor to its financial and educational success. The contributions, through fundraising, school fees and voluntary help made it possible to purchase assets and undertake educational programmes that would otherwise not be available. The community will feel a sense of loss when the school closes, which will affect their feeling of ownership.

The author proposes that small schools be the preferred primary school format and that government consider capital input into a network of small schools to maintain cost-effective quality education for rural, small town and urban areas.

- **More than one third of New Zealand's schools are located in rural areas**
- **Approximately 1 out of 10 students attend a rural school**
- **The average roll size of all rural schools is 72**
- **The average roll size of rural primary schools is 60**

SOURCE: NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS 1994

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Over the past century, many rural districts have had at their heart a small rural school. In some cases, several generations of farming children have been educated at the same local school. However, that era may be coming to an end as changes in rural communities and in society itself mean that rolls are falling at these schools. Increasingly, government is drawing attention to these schools as being too expensive to run and putting pressure on them to close voluntarily or closing them forcibly.

The loss of a rural school can sometimes come about naturally, as the school gets so small that it closes voluntarily. In the past, small schools knew they were likely to be closed when the roll reached 7. But the advent of Tomorrow's Schools and the changes to the Education Act that resulted meant that there was no longer a clear benchmark roll level for closure but instead gave the Minister power to close any school after consultation with its community.

What does it mean to rural communities when their schools are closed? Are they different from other schools? If so, is it because they are small, rural, or both? Should rural schools be retained? Are they more expensive to run than other schools? Is there something special about small rural schools that contributes at least as much to the nation as it costs to run them? Or are these schools similar to others and rural communities are only worried about the loss of something they have grown used to?

In 1994, the proposed closure of Hunter, Hook, Otaio, Makikihi and Waituna Creek schools in South Canterbury produced a wealth of opinion on the value of small schools (5). The Minister of Education, Dr. Lockwood Smith, wrote to the schools involved suggesting these schools were too expensive to run and that educational opportunities in small rural schools was not as good as in larger schools (2). Are there any facts and/or figures to back up this opinion? Will schools that replace these small rural schools be any better or cheaper?

This study attempts to answer some of these questions in relation to Hunter School, a small rural school that will close at the end of 1997.

HUNTER SCHOOL: A DESCRIPTION

Hunter School is a new entrant-Std 4, contributing primary school in a rural area of South Canterbury. It is situated near the centre of the district of Hunter, with most households within a 10-15 kilometre radius. Hunter is 20 kilometres north of Waimate, a rural town of 2940 people, and 10 kilometres inland from Makikihi on State Highway 1. Timaru (population 27,323) is 50 kilometres to the north (3). Paved roads run through the district and many smaller gravel roads interconnect.

The district is made up of approximately 50 households, predominantly sheep and cattle farmers. Crop is grown on the better land and in the past decade there has been diversification, mainly into deer or pig farming. There is an organic poultry farm in the district and a few lifestyle blocks have been surveyed off and sold as the "married couple's cottage" is no longer needed. Some farms include one or more forestry blocks. Dairy conversions have begun in a neighbouring district and dairy grazing has become common in Hunter. Dairy farming seems likely to become an important occupation in the district in the next ten years. There is a growing trend toward lifestyle blocks in the district which also brings children to the area but the land use is still predominantly farming.

The school occupies a 2.47 ha site through a property occupancy agreement with the Ministry of Education. The site is well-sheltered, part of it being planted in radiata pine trees owned by the Hunter district. The remainder of the site is developed with a sports field, paved playing area/tennis court and an adventure playground. There are substantial gardens, planted and maintained by the community, which include a special native area containing a Maori carving and commemorative trees planted by the community to remember particular people or important events.

The buildings on the site consist of a well-maintained concrete block school built in 1957 containing two classrooms of 72 square metres each. These are able to be joined by opening wide wooden folding doors. There is a library area, storage and photocopier area, a staff room and staff toilet within the building. The student toilet block is outside, and sheds provide ample storage. Many rural schools throughout New Zealand are very similar to Hunter School.

The school is well-resourced, with substantial, modern library, two state-of-the-art computers and resource materials. Hunter is situated in a desirable location in relation to Christchurch, Dunedin, Timaru and Waimate and this, along with the pleasant school environment and country children, has been an important factor in the success of the school because it has been able to attract excellent principals and staff over the years.

The school house, built of Summerhill stone in 1970, has three bedrooms and is situated in the school grounds. A garage and bus shed are adjacent to the house. The school house has nearly always been occupied by the principal and his/her family, who often become actively involved in the affairs of the district.

While the school property is owned by the Ministry of Education, the development of the grounds has been funded by the community. There is an adventure playground and a concrete in-ground swimming pool, which was built by the community. The community continues to use and help fund 10% of the pool today.

The Hunter Community Bus Trust owns a 30-seat Micanta school bus which operates a door-to-door bus service for school pupils. This service is contracted by the Hunter School Board of Trustees, who receive funds under the Direct Resourcing option of school transport from the Ministry of Education.

The school has served as a binding element for the district and has enjoyed excellent community support over the years. The school children use the local community hall, domain and tennis courts. The people of the Hunter district contribute significantly to the success of the school with financial support, voluntary work, fundraising and the use of machinery. The community owns assets that are kept at the school for pupil and community use. District members are all invited to the school's major events. The school has been the centre of the district.

Because of the declining roll of Hunter School and because the proximity of four other similar schools in the area in the same situation, the Ministry of Education targeted all these schools for closure. After fighting unsuccessfully to obtain one merged rural school to service the entire area, Hunter School will close at the end of 1997.

The roll at the end of 1997 will be only 12 pupils from 8 families. The school roll fell below 20 pupils for the first time in 1996. One nearby school will merge with a larger school to the north in a rural township, St. Andrews. Of the remaining four, the Ministry of Education chose to keep two schools open. Both have expected pupil numbers only just over the level required for 2 teachers, which is 29 pupils. The future for both these schools looks very uncertain and the Ministry has said they will remain only as long as they have healthy two-teacher rolls.

COMMUNITY REACTIONS

The closing of a school that has been such a central part of a community means that children, parents and community members must come to terms with a loss and manage change. In the case of Hunter School, the change was not chosen by the community but forced upon it, making it more difficult to accept. The school was still vital and functioning well. The Board was cohesive and dedicated, and staff gave much more than duty required, the children were happy and learning, the school was managing its finances well, and parents gave freely of their time and money. The community was not ready for it to be closed. Other schools in the area have closed voluntarily and their passing has been easier for their communities to come to terms with.

At Hunter, the community, including many without children attending the school, were involved in the very stressful and time consuming process of trying to work with nearby communities to obtain a merged rural school for all. Divisions developed between districts during the process of deciding which schools should close and which remain. These have begun to heal, but a great deal of anger with the Ministry of Education remains, especially amongst Board of Trustee members who had to deal with the Ministry.

The uncertain future of the school over the past two years was the deciding factor in two families with young children leaving the district, contributing to the drastic drop in the roll. How this affects the future make-up of the district remains to be seen. This may be a further disincentive for people with young families to live in the area.

There is sadness that the loss of something that had held a very special place in many lives could not be replaced by something better. The fact that the two schools remaining in the area have such a shaky future has meant there is nothing positive for trustees and parents to work towards. Teachers and staff members will lose positions. The principals of several of the schools involved have taken the closures very hard and several have since found other positions as the stress became too much. Trustees have had subsequent health and relationship problems. Parents are now faced with the difficult task of choosing a new school for their children. All are left with the sad responsibility of closing the school.

The board of trustee members have been the most affected. Hunter School has a very dedicated, cohesive, pro-active, hard working board. Only one board member is even considering standing at their child's new school in the triennial trustee elections in 1998; that member was not on the board during the most difficult discussions and deliberations. This represents a loss of experience and knowledge to the trustee system. The Board is presently undergoing further difficulties trying to establish new arrangements for the transport of the children to other schools and housing the combined schools' resources. The valuation and dispersal of the school's assets and organising the closing function are also Board responsibilities.

The school children have been purposely insulated from the controversy. The board decided long ago to let the teaching staff remain as uninvolved as possible to help the children get on with their learning and to keep them reassured that their future would be secured no matter where they went to school. As the closure approaches the children are feeling quite sad and worried about their new school. They are presently working on a study unit about coping with grief and change, again emphasising the positive aspects of something new and

different. The schools are working together at times to help the children get to know each other and a special day is set aside for them to each visit their new schools.

Next year will be difficult for the merged schools. It will take time to establish a new "school climate", an elusive concept but one that has a tremendous effect on the learning that takes place in a school. Children who are not settled and happy do not learn as well as those that are, and all children in the new schools, including the ones who were already there, will take time to meld into new groups. It will take extra work by staff and trustees to ensure that the new schools function well.

IS A RURAL SCHOOL DIFFERENT?

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research has compiled valuable data regarding schools from an important series of surveys designed to monitor the changes brought about since the advent of Tomorrow's Schools in 1989 (6). Surveys were undertaken in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993 and 1996. These surveys questioned principals, trustees, teachers and parents from a cross-section of New Zealand Schools on their perceptions of resources, principal/parent/teacher partnerships, classroom learning, changes in schools, parental satisfaction and more.

In some cases, a rural perspective was compared to an urban one, giving insight into differences or similarities between rural and urban situations. While perceptions are relative to any respondent's background, they provide valuable insights into differences between school types and changes over the survey period. Some relevant results are summarised.

PROPERTY AND RESOURCES- HOW DO RURAL SCHOOLS COMPARE?

Since 1991, school boards have identified financial management and property maintenance as the two areas that take up most board time. All boards are responsible for property spending that comes within a ten-year cycle, like painting. The Ministry being responsible for "capital" items; those that happen in a greater than ten-year cycle, like carpet replacement. Some interesting results regarding property and rural schools from the survey series follow.

- Rural trustees were half as likely as others to say their board had a problem with property and deferred maintenance
- Rural trustees were least likely to say their board had a problem with vandalism, with no vandalism occurring at 41% of rural schools
- Most rural teachers thought their school's recreational space was adequate, while the greater the roll a school had, the less likely its teachers considered the space adequate.
- 54% of rural teachers said their classroom resources were adequate compared to 34% of urban teachers and 44% of small town teachers.
- Rural teachers were less likely to identify a shortage of resource materials in mathematics, technology, audio/visual materials, tapes/videos/records, art, special needs resources, English as second language resources and classroom stationery.
- Teachers with less than 20 students in their class were less likely to say their resources were inadequate.

SOURCE: NZCER SURVEY: SELF-MANAGING SCHOOLS SEVEN YEARS ON

The findings of the NZCER surveys are similar to the situation at Hunter School. Deferred maintenance has been an ongoing issue at the school due to the substantial list of items identified as deferred maintenance in the original property agreement with the Ministry of Education. Rural people tend to be astute business managers and the inaugural Hunter Board was not prepared to take responsibility for any long term maintenance problems in 1989. To date,

only one major item remains on the deferred maintenance list, which is the replacement of concrete paths and drives around the school. Successful lobbying by the board of trustees is the reason that the rest of the deferred maintenance items have been completed. Some have been major expenses for the Ministry, such as the re-sealing of the tennis courts.

The school has never made an insurance claim for vandalism and does not have special security systems of any kind. The fact that the principal lives on the school site means that it is an unlikely target for opportunists. The strong community ownership of the school means children and people of the district are unlikely to vandalise the school property, even though they swim and play tennis over the summer holidays at the school.

Recreational space is not a problem at Hunter School. The grounds are so large that the community planted trees on approximately 1 acre to reduce the area to be mowed. The second crop of trees is now approaching 20 years of age. The proceeds of this, as with the first crop, were to be used for the school's needs at the time of harvest. They have an added spin-off that they add greatly to the creative play opportunities the children enjoy. The community built an adventure playground for the children in the early 80's, and local families have gifted other play equipment.

Classrooms spaces are large and the addition of the folding doors between them allows the two classrooms to be used together, creating sufficient space for activities that require it. The Hunter Hall is directly across the road from the school grounds and is used for activities, such as indoor hockey or drama, that require these facilities. Classroom furniture is old but in good order, and a programme to slowly replace furniture has been in place for several years. Because of the small numbers involved, furniture replacement is affordable and the furniture lasts much longer.

Classroom resources have been a spending priority at Hunter School for years, and most of the community's fundraising activities have been directed into this area, with special emphasis on the library, technology and playground equipment. The fact that the school is small and the way that children treat the resources as their own means that they last longer. Less total resources are needed in order for all children to have equal opportunity to use them than in larger schools. This means each child has a greater exposure to a wider range of resources or the school is able to purchase more expensive resources that would be beyond the reach of a school that needed to buy a number of the same item.

For example, the school has two Macintosh computers, both purchased in the last 3 years. The range of software on the computers is comprehensive, and Hunter School has been connected to the Internet for several years. One computer has special hardware and software capabilities to produce video presentations. At purchase, this was only matched in the South Island by Selwyn House, a private girls' school in Christchurch. Because of the small numbers of children at the school, each child is able to have as much time with a computer as s/he wants. Because the school doesn't need to own a large number of computers, their purchase has been within reach of a school fundraising project.

Most importantly, the point of the school having such a great range of resources for the teachers and children means that staff are able to offer exciting, fruitful learning programmes that the children enthusiastically embrace.

FUNDING- HOW DO RURAL SCHOOLS COMPARE?

The change from central administration of schools' finances to self-managing schools was brought about by allocating each school with an operations grant. This is based on a formula which allocates money to each school. Part of the grant is per school as a base grant, while the other part is per pupil and is based on the number and ages of the pupils attending the school as well as their socio-economic status. Because of the effect of the base grant, small schools receive more per pupil than other schools. The more pupils the base grant is spread across, the less it costs for each child's education. This is because the base grants contains amounts that must cover certain fixed expenditures, that is they must be done no matter how many children are in the school. These are largely property-based. A good example might be painting school buildings. It costs the same no matter how many children are taught in the building.

Here are some important facts the study found regarding funding:

- The Ministry's own figures show a decline after inflation in government spending per pupil from 1991-1995, corresponding with an increase in 54.5% in the funds primary school communities have raised themselves.
- Parents are now spending an average of \$491 each year on a child's education, an increase of 163% since 1991.
- Ministry of Education figures estimated schools had lost 10% of their purchasing power from 1989-1995.
- Administration costs per student rose 48% from 1992-1995, spending on learning resources went up by only 0.15%, property management costs declined by 6% and depreciation rose by 47%.
- Rural school trustees and principals were more satisfied with their funding than others.
- School fees were less likely to make up the main source of local funds in rural schools, with schools under 100 pupils being more successful than larger schools in collecting school fees.
- 36% of rural schools surveyed reported no school fee.

SOURCE: NZCER SURVEY: SELF-MANAGING SCHOOLS SEVEN YEARS ON

Table 1 shows Hunter School's funding amounts and asset values from 1989 to 1996. It also shows the value of assets purchased in each of these years and the public equity in the school.

Table 1. Value of income and assets of Hunter Primary School

YEAR	PUBLIC EQUITY	GRANTS+	COST/ PUPIL~	LOCAL FUNDS	WORKING CAPITAL	FIXED ASSETS	ASSETS PURCHASED
\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$
1996	46934	99156	3996	6994	15673	31261	4859
1995	49303	118599	4744	4148	16121	33182	15368
1994	44810	96185	3847	8191	21263	23664	7888
1993	42142	78920	3157	3114	20023	22119	11950
1992	38640	115764	4631	3443	23815	14825	2994
1991*	31734	42348	--	3224	16477	15257	2575
1990	24861	33472	--	2760	8925	15936	5878

*1991- due to change in balance date, period is for 11 months

+1990 and 1991 figures do not include teaching salaries

~Cost per pupil are calculated using an average roll of 25 pupils

SOURCE: HUNTER PRIMARY SCHOOL ANNUAL FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

Table 1 shows that Hunter School has no definable trend over time in the level of its government grants. This is easily explained by the fact that when any school roll reached 26 pupils (the level has since been increased to 29), the school received entitlement and funding for another full-time teacher. The school roll has fluctuated around the 26 level, sometimes with entitlement for two teachers and sometimes for one. The years that the school received funding for two teachers were high income years for Hunter School and the years the school lost its second teacher entitlement, the funding dropped accordingly. However, the funding a school receives for teachers' salaries is the amount the teachers are paid. Therefore, the changes in funding level due to teacher entitlement amounts do not provide any discretionary spending power and are only a consideration in that the board chose to fund an additional 0.5 teaching position when the teacher entitlement was less than 2.0.

It is difficult to assign a specific cost per pupil to any particular year because rolls fluctuate. The roll at Hunter School for the period reported was between 28 and 20 pupils. Using an average roll of 25 pupils, grant funds per pupil averaged \$4075 for the period 1992-1996, with the highest cost in 1995, where it was \$4744 per pupil. This compares to an average for all primary schools of \$3200 and a high of \$9000 per pupil per year reported in 1994 (1). It would appear that the funding levels of Hunter School are not abnormally high when compared to the average of all primary schools.

The public equity figures show that even though the government grant levels fluctuated, the public equity in the school increased steadily, with it dropping away slightly in 1996. Over this time, local funds had increased steadily, with an outstanding year in 1994. 1996 fundraising levels were more than twice those in 1992. These funds have been consistently used to purchase assets for the school.

Hunter School charges school fees of between \$50-100 per year. The amount is dependent on extras and activities that children undertake during the year. Since 1992, there have been children who have been unable to pay for these extras and activities. These costs have always been paid from operational

funds, or more recently, from a Trustbank student hardship grant given to schools for this purpose. There is no problem with collecting school fees.

The way Hunter School's income is spent is presented in Table 2. Expenditure division by the categories of curriculum, administration, property, depreciation and local funds is done so the Ministry of Education can calculate these figures for the school sector. Other categories not included here are interest, which is reasonably static at approximately \$1500-2000 per year, and local fund costs, which are minimal at Hunter School.

Table 2. Expenditure by categories for Hunter Primary School

YEAR	% CURRIC	% ADMIN	% PROPERTY	% DEPN	% LOCAL FUNDS
1996	79.3	8.1	6.8	5.8	6.5
1995	78.5	10.9	6.0	4.7	3.3
1994	75.3	10.4	9.1	5.0	7.7
1993	71.2	12.4	10.6	5.1	3.7
1992	76.5	9.3	11.1	3.0	2.9
1991*+	21.0	22.6	47.9	8.1	--
1990+	26.6	38.4	31.9	10.0	--

*1991- due to change in balance date, figures are for 11 month period
 +1990 and 1991 figures do not include teaching salaries

SOURCE: HUNTER SCHOOL ANNUAL FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

These figures show that 70-80% of Hunter School's income has consistently been spent on teaching salaries and curriculum costs. The School Sector report 1994 show that nationally 76% of schools' incomes were spent on curriculum costs. Hunter School is similar. The curriculum costs fluctuated slightly but did not show any real change.

School sector reports show that from 1992-1995, average school administration costs rose by 47%. They also show depreciation rising by 48%; Hunter School's administration was static and depreciation rose 93% over the same period. School sector reports show property costs declining by 6% over the period. Hunter School's costs declined 39%. Local fundraising rose 124% at Hunter School while increasing 54% nationally.

These changes show that Hunter School is quite different from other schools in some of these aspects. Administration costs have been successfully held, leaving money to be spent elsewhere. This is due to the work by board of trustee members in this area and the efficiency of teaching principals involved. Systems have been developed to minimise paperwork.

While the trend towards increasing depreciation and fundraising, and decreasing property costs are the same, these trends are accentuated at Hunter School. Property costs are also successfully reduced due to these tasks being accomplished by volunteer labour. The level of depreciation is indicative of the purchase of assets, which is not included in expenditure on curriculum. An increasing level of depreciation shows an increasing investment in assets, which is the case at Hunter School.

The high level of asset purchase has been funded through local efforts in two ways. The first is reflected through increased fundraising, but the source of the real savings is the voluntary contributions of parents and community members. Parents, as trustees and as voluntary helpers, accomplish many tasks that would require a paid staff member in larger schools. Key areas are financial management, library responsibility, grounds and building maintenance, school transport and classroom help. In a larger school, it would be beyond the abilities of parents or the community. The tasks are too large to expect anyone to do it on a voluntary basis. But at a small school that is special to its community, people feel they can make a difference and have done so at Hunter School. The savings made in these areas are funnelled into the purchase of assets that enhance learning opportunities. Grant money can then be used for other purposes, creating a rich learning environment in the classroom and providing interesting learning opportunities with activities outside the classroom.

STAFFING, PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND SATISFACTION

One of the key features of Tomorrow's Schools was the involvement of local communities, parents in particular, in the governance of schools. Community "ownership" of schools was to help improve the parental involvement in children's education and give parents more control over the learning of their children. All this was meant to improve education in New Zealand.

Here are some findings of the NZCER Survey series regarding staff and parent views of education:

- Parental involvement in schools is high, with 71% of parents in 1996 reporting some involvement in school activities, down slightly from other years.
- Fathers were nearly twice as likely as mothers to have no involvement with their child's school.
- Parents who worked part-time or mothers not in paid employment had highest levels of contact with teachers, principals and school boards.
- Only 29% of trustees questioned in 1997 were satisfied with the parental involvement at their school, falling from earlier surveys.
- Trustees in schools over 100 pupils wished for more parental involvement in fundraising.
- Rural school principals were least likely to describe the level of community support as low.
- In 1996, thirty percent of trustees at the smallest schools, compared to 9% at larger schools, reported that at least 75% of school parents took part in consultation.
- Parental satisfaction with their child's school was linked to concern about class size.

- 45% of teachers had voluntary help from parents in the classroom, falling from a high of 61% in 1989.
- Working with children is overwhelming the greatest source of satisfaction for teachers, with administration and paperwork giving the least satisfaction.
- Rural teachers and those in the smallest schools were least likely to say they had an excessive workload or that they could not make changes they wanted to in the past 2 years.

SOURCE: NZCER SURVEY: SELF-MANAGING SCHOOLS SEVEN YEARS ON

This area shows there are some real differences between small and rural schools and their larger town or urban counterparts. These differences are to do with parental involvement in their child's education. There is also an important link with smaller/rural schools and teacher satisfaction.

Hunter School has a high parental and community involvement with the school, both in fundraising and direct involvement in the classroom and on the board. Only two families with children at the school are currently not represented on the board. Both of these families are involved in other school activities. Parent satisfaction is high because of this involvement. The small class sizes that are maintained at Hunter School must contribute to parent satisfaction, as this characteristic is closely linked to parental satisfaction.

Teacher satisfaction has been high at Hunter School. In 1989-91, there was a stage where the administrative workload brought about by Tomorrow's Schools and the board of trustee system caused an excellent principal to leave in order to go back to classroom teaching. Once the new system stabilised and the board took over much of the administrative tasks to free the principal for as much classroom time as possible, the principal was able to get a great deal of satisfaction from the role. As the survey found, reducing the time necessary for administration/paperwork gave the principal the time that teachers get the most satisfaction from: classroom teaching. Because of the small size of the school, the tasks required were within the capabilities of a parent volunteer. It would be much more difficult to get anyone to volunteer to do this for a bigger school. Then, budgeting would come down to a choice of spending more on administrative staff or having a less-satisfied teaching principal.

The previous two principals both left to take up exciting new positions teaching in international schools overseas. Both had excellent working relationships with the board and the community and many positive changes were implemented during this time, especially in the information technology areas. Both principals secured the overseas jobs on the basis of their familiarity with technology implementation in the classroom. Both eventually chose to seek other opportunities because of the uncertainty placed on the school's future by the Ministry of Education.

While parental involvement continues to be high at Hunter School, the trend towards one partner having off-farm work is having an impact on this. The survey showed that it is mothers without paid employment that make up the bulk of the voluntary help available to schools. The increase in two working parents per household in the future will mean all schools will need to address the loss of "mother helpers". Rural and small schools will not be insulated, but it takes these schools longer to feel the effects as rural people are more isolated from opportunities to take up off-farm work.

CONCLUSIONS

The changes in the Hunter district that eventually brought about the school closure are common in rural New Zealand. Rural districts are less isolated due to better roads and transportation. An ageing farming population on larger farms employing less labour mean that schools which were full in the "baby boom" years through the 50's and 60's have shrinking rolls. Lifestyle blocks or more intensive farming mean that some rural areas, especially near larger population centres are insulated from this, but generally there are less children in many rural schools.

Small schools have many advantages that are shown in teacher and trustee satisfaction levels with funding and resources, principal and teacher job satisfaction and parental satisfaction with the education their child receives. This is not merely because small schools receive more than average funding, but because of the contributions made by the school's community. I believe there is a size that is reasonably cost effective while allowing children, parents and communities to feel ownership of "their" school and feel they can make positive contributions by their efforts.

Rural and small schools are different from others in some important considerations that have impact on the level of funding and resources available for classroom teaching. I believe that this is because they are small, not because they are rural. Many of the small schools just happen to be rural. Small schools are efficient at using the government funding available to them because of community contributions to these schools, both in terms of fundraising efforts, school fees and voluntary work for the school. Children in these schools have enhanced learning opportunities because of these contributions. They have access to more resources and the resources last longer and are better cared for than in large schools.

Discussions with other trustees and teachers have led me to conclude that an ideal size for a primary school would be in the range of 3-5 teachers, that is between approximately 60-150 pupils. I do not believe that schools of this size will be any cheaper on a per pupil basis, but some savings could be made when several smaller schools merge into a school of this size. The property freed upon the closure of a rural school will, in many cases, be much less valuable on the open market than its value in the balance sheet as an educational property. By the time these factors are considered, I do not believe the savings the Ministry believes could be made by closing rural schools exist. I believe it is far more important to look towards the future. Government should be motivated by putting into place a system of small, effective community schools to take the country into the next millennium.

Consideration should be given to building modern schools to replace the buildings left behind rather than just closing schools and putting the pupils into an existing school with surplus space. Many New Zealand schools, built post-war or earlier, are reaching the end of their useful life. Education has changed dramatically since those years, and the schools need to change as well. One wonders how much better it might be if fewer education dollars were spent on maintaining and upgrading ageing weatherboard schools. Government must give serious consideration to the schools of the future. Communities and those involved in the school sector need to be part of the planning process.

Rural areas need to begin to think in terms of nurturing a healthy, functioning community school, not necessarily the local school. It is important for the

school's community to feel an affinity for the school. Forcible closures are extremely stressful on all involved and result in the loss of community goodwill, which is a valuable source of income to the school system. Communities have been running their own schools for seven years, and they have the skills and knowledge to plan for future schooling if they choose to. Rural districts need a vision, and are best given encouragement and help towards realising their vision for rural education.

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