

Minority Report of the School Options Committee¹ for the Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School Feeder System

March 15, 2017

The following constitutes our School Options Committee Minority Report to the Strait Regional School Board (SRSB). This report is not associated with any community, political, or special interest group, and it is submitted **Without Prejudice**.

The Issue

Should Antigonish Education Centre (AEC) be closed and the lease be given up, or should the School Board recommend that the province buy the school for \$5.9 million?

Background

Student enrollment is continuing to drop in the Strait Region, but Antigonish proper retains some of the highest enrollment numbers in the district. AEC utilization rate is at 69%, and is among only 9 of the schools in the SRSB district that are above 60% utilization rate. The Dr. J. H. Gillis High School, while its capacity is 53%, is showing the effects of being in service for the long period of 46 years. The high school continues to require repairs to deal with moisture infiltration, mainly in the rear section that abuts the hill off Xavier Drive and suffers from the effects of the water runoff from the Xavier Drive subdivision. There is also water ingress at various other points requiring replacement of mortar and caulking.

Recent "testing [by Pinchin LeBlanc Environmental Limited] suggests that higher than ideal amounts of moisture are moving through the concrete slab from the underside" and recommends that "further work is considered". Classroom 1010 is currently closed due to **organic smells from moisture infiltration**. In response to a question from an SOC member, an engineer from Pinchin LeBlanc acknowledged that there is no guarantee that installing better drains around the back of the high school will solve the problem. We ask the Board: Is it healthy and in the best interest of students to pack more children into this space?

At this point, the Strait Regional School Board should purchase AEC and consider building a new smaller high school rather than spending millions of dollars doing another upgrade on the old high school. School Board staff say the Board can save \$750,000 a year by consolidating schools. This money could be reallocated to school improvements or programs in the Antigonish catchment area. Or this money could go to the Board office in Cape Breton and be used to sustain the numerous half-full schools outside of the Antigonish catchment area. There is nothing equitable about stuffing

¹ Please note that all documentation relating to this School Options Committee (SOC) Review is available online at: <https://srsb.ca/content/school-review>; click on the middle green tab "Dr. J.H. Gillis Regional High School Feeder System".

students into classrooms in the Antigonish catchment area and leaving half-full (or less) schools open in other communities in the SRSB district. It seems that saving dollars is a greater priority than the health of our children.

The Nova Scotia Auditor General has just released his Report this February. He speaks to the flawed process put in place by the provincial government and school boards. The province is building new schools, required or not, but school boards are asking community members to close their own schools. School boards have had nearly 20 years to address the termination of P3 school leases. In many cases, school boards have already missed deadlines and have had to ask for extensions as this board. The Auditor General says the average School Options Committee (SOC) deliberation takes about nine months and that is not enough time.

If we close AEC, it is lost to us forever; our most modern facility is GONE via a flawed process. The current SOC review has been rammed through in four months one week, in spite of the fact that many SOC members felt they did not have enough time to undertake adequate due diligence in formulating their recommendation.

Key Dates for the SOC

October 5, 2016 –Motion to initiate review approved by SRSB

October 26, 2016 –School Options Committee established

January 24, 2017 –Earliest date review can be completed (90 days)

March 25, 2017 –Latest date review can be completed (150 days)

We note that the SOC reviewing the Dalbrae Academy feeder system has requested and received an extension from March 26 to April 25 for submission of their final report to the SRSB. Our SOC was told that we could not request an extension. The work to rule necessitated the absence of principals and board staff from the majority of our SOC working meetings. This meant that we did not have the advantage of their expertise during some very crucial deliberations.

The SOC requested, but was not given, solid evidence that a capital analysis was completed to justify the required expenditures to maintain the 46-year-old Dr J. H. Gillis High School or the 53-year-old H. M. MacDonald School. Do these costs exceed the capital required to purchase and maintain AEC? How do they compare? The Auditor General's Report states that "the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has not given adequate attention to capital planning. There is little information on the general conditions of the almost 400 schools in the province and no long-term plan for the provincial school system."

At the SOC's working meeting of February 21, a motion recommending closure of AEC was put on the floor. The motion was defeated and the SOC went forward to the public meeting the following night with a recommendation of status quo. Some SOC members asked if the SOC could go forward with both options. SOC members were told "no, only one option". The public did not have the opportunity

to voice their views on closure of AEC. The public was misled. The SOC chair stated in an article published by the *Casket* on March 1: "We went through all the scenarios ... and the committee felt, at this point, the preferred scenario, the best one, was status quo." On March 6, the final motion was put on the floor at an SOC working meeting:

"Moved and seconded (Penny, A. / MacDonald, A.)

That the SOC support the closure of Antigonish Education Centre as it addresses the utilization question in the terms of reference."

YES (MacDonald, A.; Burke, M.A.; Penny, A.; Briand, J.; Maloney, B.; Sharma, M.; and Prasad, D.)

NO (Armsworthy, A.; Blackwell, J.; Chisholm, K.; Fraser, M.)

Motion passed."

This would result in the four remaining schools being configured as follows:

H.M. MacDonald Elementary School – Grade Primary - Six
 St. Andrews Consolidated School – Grade Primary - Six
 St. Andrew Junior School – Grade Primary - Six
 Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School – Grade Seven - Twelve.

Analytical Review

A significant number of SOC members supported the closure of the Antigonish Education Centre throughout the life of this SOC review, and opposed anything else. While we may disagree with their position, we respect their right to choose. We just think they are mistaken and did not choose what is best for our children. Some of our reasons are as follows:

- 1) The School Board's Mission Statement states, in part, "To empower our children and youth, within safe, equitable and inclusive environments". Is it in our children's best interest to pack them into Dr. J.H. Gillis Regional High School, a building with a long history of moisture issues? Pinchin LeBlanc recently conducted mould tests at the high school and concluded that "sample results suggest that airborne mould levels were acceptable in each sample location on the sampling day"; however, they also acknowledged during discussions with SOC members that **all molds have the potential to cause health effects**; this opinion is further substantiated by the United States Environmental Protection Agency's *Mold Remediation in Schools and Commercial Buildings Guide* (available online). Given that the high school's long history of environmental issues and that the health of our children is at stake, we believe that there should be more extensive testing for toxogenic moulds throughout the school. Aspergillus moulds, for example, can produce mycotoxins that are capable of causing disease and death in

humans. No tests for mycotoxins were done.

As historical context, it should also be noted that, in the 1990s, the high school was closed by the NS Department of Labour in response to complaints from staff, students, parents, and the public. **Toxogenic mould** was found. Because of the severity of the problem, NS Minister of Education John MacEachern stepped in and set up a special ad hoc committee under the Department of Education, and completely bypassed the Board. This special Air Quality Committee reported directly to the Department of Education and was made up of parents, students, teachers, staff and only one Board member. The Minister had his department research and hire the top AQ/environmental engineering firm in Atlantic Canada.

- 2) The AEC cost over \$12 million when it was constructed. The cost of building a comparable facility today would be approximately \$15 million. The School Board has the option to buy our newest school in Antigonish for the bargain price of \$5.9 million. The SOC voted to close our newest school and put more students into the nearly fifty-year-old Regional High School.
- 3) The SOC considered two options at their February 21st working meeting. They suggested going ahead with both options to the public to get their feedback; however, they were told by the chair that only one option would be taken to the public meeting. The public were told that "status quo" was the preferred scenario. It was not clearly communicated to the public that the recommendation for closure of AEC was still in serious play. This **dramatic reversal of the SOC majority recommendation** resulted in the public being misled. They were denied the opportunity to give any feedback on the closure of the school. We see this as **lacking transparency**. Perhaps it was convenient for the SOC to vote behind closed doors without public scrutiny and to embargo the vote for over a week, keeping the parents and public in the dark. We also see this as lacking transparency. If one cannot stand up at a public meeting and be proud of one's vote or vote in a public forum, then one's stance on this issue can be called into doubt.
- 4) The third public meeting on February 22 indicated very strong support for the status quo option (as documented in the detailed minutes for that meeting). Nevertheless, very little discussion and very little weight were given to this public support at the SOC's working meeting on March 6. There does not seem to be much point in holding a public meeting if no credence or weight is assigned to the public's input.
- 5) We had process and procedural concerns throughout the SOC review. It is telling when SOC members ask for a "secret vote". SOC members should be able to stand up and be proud and responsible for their vote. It really makes one wonder when people go to a public meeting and advocate one scenario, then turn around behind closed doors and vote the complete opposite. We see this as unethical and a **breach of public trust**.
- 6) The Auditor General's Report states that the SOC process is flawed, and so it is. The outcome of the SOC process was all but predetermined at the outset. Evidence of this was when Superintendent Ford Rice presented the possible scenario of closing AEC and moving students

to St. Andrew Junior School and Dr J. H. Gillis Regional High School at the Joint School Advisory Council meeting on February 25th, 2016.

- 7) SOC members were pressured to focus on finance first and foremost. At no point was our SOC able to discuss creative solutions to addressing building utilization rates. We were firmly told that Bus Routes (Student Transportation/Boundary Review) adjustments could not be considered. However, we feel this is a very important part of the justification for AEC. St Andrews Consolidated School (SACS) is very full at 93%, and we heard feedback from SOC members that school services are stressed due to these high numbers. Adjusting the SACS bus catchment area and moving just 30 students to AEC would change the utilization to 82% at SACS and 73% at AEC – both of which are comfortable numbers. Children who currently live in the Old South River Road / Greenwold area are bused to SACS, despite the fact that they are geographically closer to AEC.
- 8) This flawed process pits parents and schools against one another; this has a divide and conquer effect. Some SOC members seemed to be under the impression that, if they did not vote to close AEC, then their schools could go on the block instead. They also seemed to be under the impression that closing AEC would buy their schools some extra time.
- 9) As SOC members, we were frustrated by the resistance we experienced to having sufficient detail recorded in our meeting minutes, having minutes accurately reflect what was said and happened at our meetings, and resolving points of order.
- 10) Furthermore, some of the information SOC members requested was never received. Some of the questions SOC members asked were never answered. In at least one instance, we were given inaccurate information. One needs valid, reliable and complete information to determine the best recommendation for the future of our children's schools.

Recommendation

That the School Board support the "status quo" option, as it best addresses the health, education, and environmental needs of our students "within safe, equitable, and inclusive environments" as stated in the School Board's Mission Statement.

Conclusion

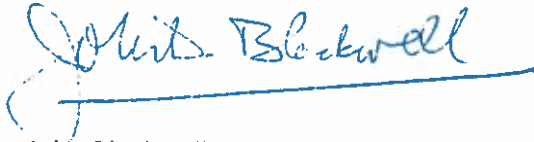
We wish to thank all SOC members for participating in this endeavor. Though we may not agree, we can respect everyone's point of view. We wish to acknowledge your time and hard work. We wish to thank you for your patience.

We thank you for accepting this SOC Minority Report and incorporating it into the SOC Final Report.

Respectfully submitted,

Handwritten signature of Allan Armsworthy in blue ink.

Allan Armsworthy, Dr. J. H. Gillis School Advisory Council Chair

Handwritten signature of John Blackwell in blue ink.

John Blackwell, Dr. J. H. Gillis School Advisory Council Parent Representative

Handwritten signature of Karla Chisholm in blue ink.

Karla Chisholm, Antigonish Education Centre School Advisory Council Parent Representative

Handwritten signature of Maria Fraser in blue ink.

Maria Fraser, Antigonish Education Centre School Advisory Council Chair