SCHOOL CLOSURES & COMMUNITY HUBS

Examining Livability in Ontario through School Closures and the Community Hub Framework

A Master’s Report submitted to the School of Urban and Regional Planning in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Planning (M.Pl)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the issue of school closures, an issue that is “high profile, high impact, contentious and increasingly common in Ontario’s communities” (Irwin & Seasons, 2012, p.46). Between 2009 and 2012, 172 elementary and secondary schools in Ontario were closed, or recommended for closure and a further 163 schools were under review (People for Education, 2009). Despite the prevalence of the issue, however, there is a dearth of research on the impacts of school closures (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). This work aims to contribute to the existing research gap, and will analyze the potential of the Province of Ontario’s Community Hub Framework to remediate some of the impacts of closures experienced by Ontario communities.

In March 2015, the Province of Ontario published the Community Hubs Strategic Framework, which is intended to adapt existing public properties to become community hubs. Community hubs are a central access point for a range of needed health and social services, and act as gathering places to facilitate community growth. No two hubs are alike, as each provides a variety of services, programs and activities reflecting the needs of the immediate community. The goal of the Strategic Framework is to identify barriers to the implementation of hubs in Ontario, so that greater coordination can be achieved across government bodies and programs (2015). Additionally, the Strategic Framework works towards providing community-focused service delivery in places such as closed schools. After examining issues that arise from school closures, the community hub model was analyzed for its potential to address threats to neighbourhood livability that are experienced when a public school closes.

The report addresses the following research questions:

1) What scholarly evidence exists on the impacts of public school closures, and how have scholars framed the potential impacts of these closures?
2) How has the issue of public school closures been framed in newsprint media in Ontario?
3) What is the community hub model, and what are its prospects for addressing the impacts and issues raised in the literature and Ontario news media?

To answer the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Media content analysis was performed using quantitative methods to assess the most pressing concerns of Ontario residents who have opposed closures in their respective communities. Qualitative data was gathered through key informant interviews and policy analysis, in order to explore the community hub model in depth. The conceptual framework of livability was used to determine whether community hubs are able to address some of the issues associated with school closures brought forth from the literature review and media analysis.

The findings of the research demonstrate there are numerous potential impacts of public school closures, and scholars have framed these impacts of closures negatively. Scholars have argued that schools are key public assets that build community cohesion, and permanent closures of these institutions threaten this cohesion. Similarly, analysis of Ontario newspaper coverage demonstrated that the issue was framed predominately negatively between 2010 and 2015, with the most commonly cited concerns being threats to neighbourhood cohesion and social capital, potential for neighbourhood decline and disinvestment, and threats to student health and well-being.
The study also found that community hubs offer potential to address some of the impacts raised in the literature and news media, primarily by providing space to uphold social capital, and by preventing neighbourhood decline. A viable method to address the impacts of school closures, whilst attaining more coordinated service delivery, is to co-locate schools and hubs within the same building. A co-location model would take the onus of building operation and maintenance off of school boards, and would allow more small schools in Ontario to remain open. Furthermore, reimagining community hubs to include operational schools would make the publicly owned infrastructure inclusive and beneficial for all members of a community, rather than just for students. At this time, however, a lack of coordinated planning and policy makes the creation of hubs a difficult and timely process, and prevents closed or threatened schools from transforming efficiently into hubs. Until other frameworks or more concrete policy exist to support the conversion of school buildings into hubs, saving publicly owned assets for conversion into hubs remains a complex and challenging issue.

To conclude, the report offers five recommendations to offer guidance for the creation of community hubs in Ontario, as follows.

**Recommendation 1: Create a Provincial Lead for Community Hubs**

The siloed, fragmented nature of the provincial planning system is a major barrier to the creation of more community hubs in Ontario. As stated in the *Strategic Framework* (2015), there needs to be a provincial lead in order for community hubs to be successful. The Lead would sit above and work across the ministries, to make planning for hubs more cohesive and less complicated. Structural realignment of resources and accountabilities would be required across ministries to ensure effectiveness of the role (*Strategic Framework*, 2015).

**Recommendation 2: Move Towards Municipal Ownership of School Buildings (Model 2)**

In the interviews, it became apparent that “there is no structure that makes saving a school and turning it into a community hub a choice” (Respondent 2). Furthermore, if a main reason for closing schools is surplus space, there should be a way in which school boards could continue to allow part of the building to be used as a school, and the other space be used as a community hub. To best facilitate efficient use of publicly owned space, Ontario municipalities should begin to assume ownership of closed schools, or schools slated for accommodation review, that are important for communities but too expensive to be maintained by the school board. This would facilitate greater integration of Model 2, where education delivery and community hub programming could be co-located in the same building.

**Recommendation 3: Create a Framework to Measure the Socioeconomic Benefit of a School**

Currently, there exists no framework to measure the socioeconomic benefit of schools for a local community. To ensure processes and planning are more reflective of the value of public properties to communities, there needs to be greater communication of existing properties that are underutilized or no longer needed for their original use (*Strategic Framework*, 2015). A framework that measures socioeconomic benefit could help decide when sale of a school at fair market value may not align best with public interests, and whether the economic and community benefits warrant an investment on the part of the government for property acquisition (*Strategic Framework*, 2015).
**Recommendation 4: Retrofit Existing Schools to Protect Student Safety**

A major barrier for the co-location of education and community hub services is student safety. If the province wants to maintain and upgrade their existing public infrastructure, attention and funding must be prioritized to upgrade existing schools with greater student safety measures (should the school and hub be co-locating in the same building). The province, local municipalities and school boards should re-evaluate their accountability and fiscal plans to provide funding to assist with retrofits, so existing building stock can be repurposed and maintained for community benefit.

**Recommendation 5: Create Local Community Hub Committees**

In order for community hubs to become a reality in more Ontario communities, it is recommended that local community hub committees be created in communities that are considering a hub. The Province could lead this initiative by classifying which Ontario municipalities are either in most need of a community hub, or areas that have an abundance of unused public infrastructure that could be transformed into a hub. The municipalities, in conjunction with the school boards, could scout local residents to act on a board of directors, who would be responsible for finding volunteers interested in contributing to the local community hub committee. The group could fundraise, find community partners interested in locating in the hub, educate other residents about the benefits and need for a hub in their locale, and establish friendships that could be upheld through use of the hub.
1.1 Problem Statement

This report explores the issue of public school closures in Ontario, and the viability of the Province’s recently introduced Community Hub model to address some of the problems associated with school closures (herein also referred to as closures). Declining school enrolments and fiscal strains have led to an unprecedented trend towards school closures and the amalgamation of schools across Canada (Schmidt et al., 2007). Between 1997 and 2007, 192 schools closed in Ontario (Schmidt et al., 2007), whilst 125 schools were slated or recommended to close between 2012 and 2015 (People for Education, 2012). While the dynamic nature of school closure review processes makes it difficult to enumerate the exact number of schools that have closed or will close, it is clear that this phenomenon is widespread in Ontario.

There are a number of reasons for school closures in Ontario. Changing neighbourhood demographics, cumulative maintenance expenses, restrictive provincial funding models, and the modernization of education delivery have all contributed to the growing trend of local school closures. The widely adopted solution to the loss of these schools has become amalgamated campuses that purportedly educate a greater number of students through a more efficient use of public resources.

School closures can be problematic for their surrounding communities because they represent more than a loss of a building (People for Education, 2009). In addition to their role as an educational institution, schools are foundational to building strong neighbourhoods and are a contributing factor to resident’s well-being by providing accessible community space. Schools support an array of community activities during and after regular school hours, and by providing space for such activities, contribute to the development of positive, healthy neighbourhoods (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). By closing schools, the livability of neighbourhoods that were once served by them is threatened. School closures will continue to be problematic for municipal planning and Ontario residents should they continue at their current rate.

While the issue of school closures has grown in Ontario, the Province has also launched an initiative to support the development of community hubs. In March 2015, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne created a community hub advisory group to develop a framework to enable the creation of community hubs in Ontario. Premier Wynne and her team, through analysis of policy, best practices, and stakeholder engagement, created a framework to adapt existing public properties, such as closed schools, into community hubs (Strategic Framework, 2015). In order to achieve greater coordination across government bodies and programs, and provide community-focused service delivery in places such as closed school sites, the barriers to the implementation and operation of community hubs was required (Strategic Framework, 2015).

Although community hubs can take many forms, schools and repurposed schools are frequently referenced as the ideal location for a collection of public services (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). The use of a school for a community hub is an effective use of publicly- owned,
centrally located assets, and makes the school more relevant to the local community (Social Planning Toronto, 2013).

This report examines the social issues that arise from a school closure, and whether the newly-introduced community hub model can address any of the threats to neighbourhood livability that are posed when public schools close.

1.2 Research Questions
This report will address the following questions as the primary focus of the research:

1) What scholarly evidence exists on the impacts of public school closures, and how have scholars framed the potential impacts of these closures?
2) How has the issue of public school closures been framed in newsprint media in Ontario?
3) What is the community hub model, and what are its prospects for addressing the impacts and issues raised in the literature and Ontario news media?

1.3 Research Scope & Limitations
In light of the high number of public school closures in Ontario, as well as the catchment area of the Community Hub Strategic Framework (herein referred to as the Strategic Framework), the geographic focus of the research is Ontario. However, in order to determine the concerns of closures articulated by researchers, the literature used for this report will be international in scope. Because the Strategic Framework is a relatively recent initiative, there were limited publications that spoke to the Canadian/Ontario context at the time of study. The research, therefore, takes an exploratory rather than confirmatory approach. The goal of this report is to answer fundamental questions regarding the objectives of the community hub model, what the model attempts to solve, and whether any of the ramifications of school closures can be remediated through its implementation.

1.4 Relevance of the Research
The research comes at an important stage for Ontario, as schools continue to close and the community hub model gains greater public awareness. When a school is slated for closure, school boards are often met with strong resistance from families and local community groups. This report provides relevant stakeholders with information on how the community hub model may (or may not) alleviate concerns associated with a school closure. It also sheds light on the role of provincial funding models on closures, describes the opportunities and barriers regarding community hubs, and offers a critical evaluation of the newly introduced framework.

1.5 Report Outline
Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature concerning school closures and livability. The Strategic Framework is also introduced and briefly outlined in this chapter. Chapter 3 details the study methodology and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 offers the results of the research, organized by data collection method. The final chapter, Chapter 5, synthesizes and draws conclusions from the study findings, and offers recommendations for the introduction of community hubs moving forward.
2.1 Introduction
Ontario’s public schools are important elements of public infrastructure, in both a physical and social sense. However, there seems to be a disconnect between broader municipal planning and recognition of public schools as essential elements of public infrastructure. This chapter will provide a brief review of literature pertaining to Ontario school closures and the community hub model. It is hoped this chapter will legitimize the importance of Ontario’s public schools, highlight the school closure process and its ramifications, and lastly introduce the community hub model and livability as potential solutions to closures.

2.2 Schools as Community Anchors
Municipal planning practices have recognized the importance of schools as the centre of the neighbourhood as early as the 1920s. Popularized by Clarence Perry, the ‘neighbourhood unit’ conceives schools and other communal institutions (churches, community centres) as anchors of the community by placing them at the centre of the neighbourhood (see Figure 2-1). Within modern urban planning and design, no single practice has had greater influence as a standardized increment of urban structure (Mehaffy et al., 2015). Perry’s perspective was that all children residing in the neighbourhood should be within walking distance of the school, and that facilities and amenities associated with the school should service the entire community (Perry, 1929). He long argued the benefits of the neighbourhood-unit interior, including its ability to support a local school within walking distances, its social cohesion, and profitable mix of amenities (Perry, 1929b). This model, while almost a century old, is still widely influential in modern planning practice and has had historic influence in shaping contemporary suburban land planning norms (Mehaffy et al., 2015, Brody, 2013).

Schools can also be viewed as the anchor of a community because of their heritage and long standing presence in the neighbourhood. Schools have symbolic value as the heart of the community, and as markers of community history (Kearns et al., 2009). Michael Seaman (2015) contends that “perhaps more than any other historic building, schools are intractably intertwined with the history of the [local] community” (p.19). Schools hold a special intrinsic value because generations of people (sometimes from the same family) have passed through their doors, which creates notions of communal ownership of the building. In many older

![Figure 2-1: Perry's Neighbourhood Unit](image-url)
Ontario communities, schools have provided the primary community recreational space, such as sports fields and gymnasiums, for generations (Seaman, 2015). Traditional recreational venues are just as much a part of a community’s heritage as the school itself. Historic schools were often built with the intention of establishing a community landmark; their stature, similar to that of historic lighthouses, railway stations or municipal buildings, represent the visual face of the community (Seaman, 2015). While their original function may be obsolete, schools are key landmarks that are important to preserve to reinforce a sense of community, identity and historical character (Seaman, 2015). “The presence of a school suggests the future, while the loss of a community school symbolizes a community in decline” (Kearns et al. 2009, p.136).

### 2.3 The Value of Schools

“Public schools are a unique kind of infrastructure - both physical and social” (Vincent, 2006). They provide physical value to a community by comprising a great amount of land and physical building stock within cities (Vincent, 2006). Schools also contribute to the social viability and health of a broader community, by functioning as quasi-public places where people meet, greet, and nurture social relations (Witten et al., 2001). Valencia (1984) offers a definition of community, which was developed at neighbourhood meetings held to address school closures (Irwin, 2012, p.7). He suggests a community is best understood as having a relationship with local cultural activities, is marked by short distances from home to school, and provides a sense of neighbourhood (Valencia, 1984, p.19). Therefore, the quality of Ontario communities, depends, in part, on the quality of its schools.

Ontario’s schools are valuable for a community because they provide space for people to gather and participate in a range of activities (Ministry of Education, 2008). Schools serve a varied function in providing space for programming and activities outside of school hours. The Province already recognizes the important role of schools, and supports initiatives such as the Community Use of Schools Program, which began in 2004 (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). This program provides funding to all school boards to make school space affordable for after-hours use. Both indoor and outdoor school space is available for not-for-profit community groups at reduced rates, outside of regular school hours (Ministry of Education, 2008). In addition, 220 schools in high-needs neighbourhoods province-wide offer free after-school access to school space for not-for-profit groups to offer more affordable or free programs in communities where the need for access is greatest (Ministry of Education, 2008). Some examples of programs include sports teams/clubs, cooking classes, homework help, arts and crafts etc. “Publicly funded assets, such as schools and municipal facilities, are important places where people can gather together and build stronger neighbourhoods” (Social Planning Toronto, 2013, p.3). Thus, these spaces have social value for a community and must be maintained to uphold neighbourhood livability (see Section 2.7).

Schools also function as important social portals for the families of students (Witten et al., 2001). Schools are important public assets for a local community because they provide a meeting place for parents and local residents. Their social significance expands beyond the network of students attending the school, and impacts the community at whole. Witten et al. (2001) studied the effect of a school closure on urban families in New Zealand. Their research found that the closure of a local school, and therefore the loss of a meeting place, led to a more isolated life for a number of parents who were re-interviewed nine months after the closure (Witten et al., 2001). These results have been echoed by Autti & Hyry-Beijhammer
(2014), who studied school closures in rural Finnish communities. The authors support that schools maintain social capital because they bring people together and provide continuous social contact. The research concluded that closure of rural Finnish schools decreased the opportunities for social contact in the local communities, and therefore lessened social capital in the affected areas (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014).

Schools (and other publicly funded assets) are valuable for communities because they help determine what opportunities are available locally, and impact how people identify with and experience the world (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). These are important places where people can get together and build stronger neighbourhoods. Social Planning Toronto (2013) asks us to imagine these kinds of spaces: diverse groups sharing stories about their cultures; children learning to cook while developing their math skills; and parents uniting to improve the quality of life for their children and the community. It is important the educational and non-educational value of school buildings be made known in order to maintain their communal presence moving forward.

2.4 School Closures in Ontario
School closures are on the rise in urban and rural communities across Ontario (People for Education, 2009). Between 2009 and 2012, 172 elementary and secondary schools in Ontario have been closed, or were recommended to close (People for Education, 2009). In 44 of these 172 cases, the schools were deemed outdated and too expensive to repair, and were or are being replaced in close geographic proximity to the closed school (People for Education, 2009). When a school is beyond repair, it can be both an economic and educationally sound decision to open a more modern institution and amalgamate education delivery. In most cases, however, schools in Ontario are closing in response to declining enrolment levels and an outdated provincial funding formula (People for Education, 2009).

2.4.1 Funding Models
School closures in Ontario can be largely attributed to the Province’s outdated school funding formula (People For Education, 2009). Introduced in 1997 as Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act established a standard per-pupil allocation grant for all school boards (Irwin, 2012). As such, funding for teachers, librarians, guidance counselors educational assistants, building maintenance, and operations are all connected to enrolment. Crucially, Bill 160 marked “the end of the ability of local school boards to levy education taxes themselves, with the Province assuming this role” (Irwin, 2012, p.83). The funding formula, which was touted as a means for greater educational equity, has actually exacerbated a situation of inequity (Irwin,
School boards are no longer able to generate revenue (via local tax base) that could be used to financially assist their schools with declining enrolments. The continuation of the province-wide funding formula, and the failure to reinstate the ability of local school boards to levy property taxes, has greatly restricted the ability of boards to act in a manner consistent with provincial policy directions (Irwin, 2012).

Per pupil funding from the Province means that school board budgets are based on student enrolment levels, without regard for the number of schools operated by a board. This is especially challenging for old, small, and/or rural schools, whose staffing, curriculum development, and programming are compromised by a funding scheme nearly two decades old. Currently, the average elementary school in Ontario has 310 students, compared to an average of 365 in 1997/1998 (People for Education, 2009). Enrolment in Ontario’s secondary schools has declined by 14% since 2002 (see Figure 2-2), yet Bill 160 has remained unchanged since its inauguration.

Furthermore, the provincial funding structure is biased towards building new schools, rather than modernizing older ones. If the cost of renovating a school is comparable to building a new one, often boards will choose the latter to make the most use of their limited funding. The provincial funding formula continues to be the significant contributing factor to school closures (People for Education, 2009). When determining future viability of a school, the decision is purely fiscal; little else really matters (Irwin, 2012).

### 2.4.2 School Closure Process

In Canada, school boards exist wholly at the discretion of their respective provincial governments, who can modify and configure the size, funding, operational mandate, and resource allocation of school boards as they see fit (Irwin, 2012). In 2006, the Ministry of Education introduced the *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* to provide direction to school boards for public accommodation reviews that are undertaken to determine the future for a school or group of schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). “Given the absolute authority the Province has over school boards’ [actions], the Province chose to present [them] with guidelines when it comes to the issue of school closures, not directives or standards” (Irwin, 2012). The guideline has been criticized for its vagueness given the importance of the issue, and reads more as a suggested course of action rather than an absolute (Irwin, 2012). The *Guideline* (2006) itself states that its purpose is to provide direction for accommodation reviews (Irwin, 2012).

When closing a school, there is considerable tension between school board officials, who have legal and administrative authority to run the schools, and the communities who perceive themselves to be the real owners of schools (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). Community engagement processes are not as transparent as widely perceived. Public participation in the form of consultation is often used to create the impression that a school closure is community business, and that impacted community members could influence the outcome of a closure decision (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). While concerned citizens are provided with opportunities to express their concerns to school boards regarding closures, citizen input often has little bearing on final decisions (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). In this way, the school closure process is often experienced as a top-down, one-way communication channel, rather than a process of open engagement, dialogue and deliberation (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). Community residents
often feel powerless with the school closure process; research by Irwin (2012) described community members’ reaction to the closing of a local school as akin to the five states of grieving a death.

Regardless of the levels of public involvement or local opposition against a closure, school boards ultimately have the political power to close schools in order to achieve their economic goals (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). “Municipal governments in Ontario cannot challenge school board decisions because the bodies are governed by different provincial legislation” (Irwin & Seasons, 2012, p.52). This demonstrates the fragmented planning by the Province, municipalities, and school boards, which is referenced throughout this report as a major impediment to the creation of community hubs in Ontario.

2.5 Impact of School Closures

Closing a school has an impact beyond the simple loss of a building, and has negative repercussions for urban, rural, and suburban Ontario communities. In urban areas, despite having a greater number of schools in close proximity, “closing a school may mean the loss of a potential hub for the community” (People for Education, 2009, p.3). “Urban neighbourhoods, particularly those with less access to community programs and resources, will be disadvantaged by the loss of their local school” (People for Education, 2009, p.3). A school closure can be particularly devastating for the students and families of inner city communities, which are often transitional in nature and delicately balanced in social and economic terms (Irwin & Seasons, 2007). These neighbourhoods become less attractive to families that have school-age children; their residents can lose their sense of identity and confidence with the loss of a school building (Witten et al., 2001). From a planning policy perspective, school closures are a major concern for municipal governments whose planning objectives for inner cities (intensified forms of urban development, downtown revitalization, complete communities, etc.) are undermined when schools close (Ministry of Education, 2012; Filion & Bunting, 2010).

In small towns, rural areas [and northern Ontario], closing a local school can affect the viability of the community as a whole (People for Education, 2009). Schools often evolve into a centre for other activities of the community; if that school is closed, the community has lost its centre (Reycraft, 2016). The threat of a closure can cause a decline in municipal investment and economic development, as parents may be reluctant to enroll their children in a school that may soon be closed.

“What is happening in many small town, rural and Northern communities in Ontario is that many small schools are being closed, with their students consolidated into larger ones. For small towns with only a single school, the consequence for the community, and for its students, is dramatic. Students are required to spend many hours a week on a bus travelling to a school in another community, instead of short walks or rides to school in which they study and learn with their neighbours. If the school is a secondary school, it reduces the student’s opportunities for after-school extracurricular activities and an after-school job. It really changes students’ lives. An education funding formula intended to improve the school experience for students actually has a negative effect on the lives of many of [Ontario’s] youth.” (Reycraft, 2016).
Ontario has seen the widespread closure of neighbourhood and community schools in favour of large campuses located on the edge of the community, caused by fiscal strains and the desire to make education more efficient by amalgamating campuses. Despite prevailing fiscal rationales, the long-term social impacts of keeping small schools open can potentially offset the short-term costs that often warrant a closure (Schmidt et al., 2007). There is a growing body of research in both Canada and the U.S. that finds that small schools promote higher educational attainment through a cohesive sense of community (Schmidt et al., 2007). Small schools facilitate more intimate student relations with their schools, classmates and teachers, and creates a participatory learning environment (Schmidt et al., 2007). Furthermore, small-school culture promotes social equity, narrower academic achievement gaps, reduction in student drop-out rates, higher attendance levels, safer schools, character development, and increased student, parent and community satisfaction (Wasley et al., 2000, Schmidt et al., 2007). This research suggests it is important to acknowledge the value of small schools in non-fiscal terms, and recognize schools as more than places that deliver a curriculum.

“The few studies that have examined the correlation of school closures and community impacts have established that there are potential societal consequences to the decision” (Irwin & Seasons, 2012, p. 49). Research on rural schools in the United States demonstrated that closures resulted in higher social costs by reducing parental involvement in their children’s education, increasing the flight to private schools, and decreasing public support for educational bonds and levies (Valencia, 1984, Irwin & Seasons, 2007). Egelund and Lausten’s (2006) Danish study concluded that there have been very few systemic attempts at mapping the effects of school closures on local societies. They did find, however, that in general, school closures are followed by reduced socialization and social control at the local level (Egelund & Lausten, 2006).

Kearns et al. (2009) provide insight as to why there is such sparse research on community impacts of school closures. Schools are elements of social infrastructure that are taken for granted; their value is not realized until they are placed under threat of closure or amalgamation (2009, p.132). This idea is supported by Irwin (2012), who notes that “it does not appear that research on the consequences of the current round of school closures in Ontario on affected communities is being undertaken” (p.35). The lack of literature regarding community impacts of school closures underscores the importance of this report, and also presents a limitation to this research.

### 2.6 Community Hub Model

In August of 2015, the Province of Ontario released the *Community Hub Strategic Framework*. Although the idea of community hubs is not new, the concept as it relates to planning, service delivery, and community building is just now coming to the forefront of Provincial agendas. Community hubs provide a central access point for a range of needed health and social services, along with cultural recreation, and green spaces to nourish community life (Strategic Framework, 2015). They are gathering places where people come together to receive services and socialize, and help communities to live, build, and grow together (Strategic Framework, 2015). No two hubs are alike, as each provides a variety of services, programs, and activities reflecting the needs of the immediate community. A hub can take the form of a school, a neighbourhood centre, a library, community health centre, old government building, or another public space (Strategic Framework, 2015).
“Community hubs are a concept that both communities and policy-makers agree make sense” (Strategic Framework, 2015, p.7). There are many fine examples across the province of locations from which a variety of public services are offered and delivered (see Appendix D in the Strategic Framework, 2015). “The hubs demonstrate that great fiscal and social benefits are realized when a public asset is used for multiple purposes” (Reycraft, 2016). Especially in suburban and rural neighbourhoods that are often challenged by a lack of local services, community hubs are growing in popularity as a way to provide a ‘one-stop-shop’ to address local needs (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). There are additional fiscal benefits for service providers who choose to co-locate, who share an administrative backbone, operation, and maintenance costs. Hubs are vibrant centres of community life that enable greater school-community partnerships, more efficient and sustainable service delivery, and improve access to services for their users (Strategic Framework, 2015). As such, the province wants to see the number of community hubs increase, primarily by making better use of existing publicly owned facilities that have surplus space (Reycraft, 2016).

Community hubs relate to school closures because schools are currently recognized as hubs in the community; schools are conveniently located spaces that are acknowledged and valued by local residents. “Although community hubs can take many forms, schools and repurposed schools are frequently referenced as the ideal location” (Social Planning Toronto, 2013, p.2) and “communities have expressed that schools serve as natural Community Hubs” (Enabling & Celebrating Community Hubs, 2016, p.12). “Not only is this effective use of these publicly-owned, centrally-located assets, it also makes the school even more relevant to the community” (Social Planning Toronto, 2013, p.2). In response to increasing surplus space in Ontario schools, the Strategic Framework was intended to help the Provincial and municipal governments make decisions about how to best use a property, as well as how to give more consideration to community needs. This is particularly important for properties that are underutilized, or no longer needed for their original use, like many Ontario schools that are closed or slated for future closure.

While the benefits of hubs are clear, it is equally clear there are numerous rules and constraints that prevent the creation of hubs in suitable sites such as closed or operational schools (Strategic Framework, 2015). Currently, “provincial ministry policies on education, infrastructure and urban planning are not coordinated in Ontario; the ministries responsible for these portfolios and their staff operate in organizational silos” (Irwin & Seasons, 2012, p.52). Provincial policies are often complicated and fragmented, and leaders of community hubs say that they face a daunting landscape of multiple contact points and a maze of incompatible policies and processes for service delivery integration and capital planning (Strategic Framework, 2015). The Strategic Framework is therefore also intended to identify existing barriers, bridge the fragmented ministries, and work towards more coordinated community development at the provincial level.

The Strategic Framework is barely a year and a half old. While it does acknowledge the importance of schools in a community, the problems of surplus space and of closures, little is known whether community hubs could alleviate the concerns of school closures. This research aims to address this knowledge gap, using the conceptual framework of livability to determine
whether community hubs can contribute to the development of positive, healthy communities that have experienced the loss of a school.

2.7 Livability
Livability has been a central issue for [North] American city planners since the emergence of the profession in the early twentieth century (Whelan, 2012). Historically, urban planners have had outspoken visions on environmental qualities that contribute to livability (Corbusier, 1935; Jacobs 1961). Underlying the City Beautiful movement, plans such as Daniel Burnham’s for Chicago embodied a desire to make the city a more livable place by providing recreational, space and by creating more attractive streets and public spaces. These ideas were later echoed through the publication of the classic, Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs, which advocated for eyes on the street, mixed land uses, and cultural diversity.

Robert Whelan (2012) introduces the idea of community livability as a concept “that does not come packaged in a single accepted definition” (p.1). The organization Partners for Livable Communities defines livability as “the sum of factors that add up to a community’s quality of life, including: the built and natural environment, economic prosperity, social stability and equity, and educational, entertainment and recreation possibilities” (Garnett, n.d). The concept of livability has emerged in public discourse and planning as a guiding principle to measure the quality of life in urban areas (Ruth & Franklin, 2004). It firstly addresses a city’s ability to provide basic goods and services such as shelter, food and water, education and healthcare. Once basic human needs have been fulfilled, higher-level wants and aspirations move into the forefront of planning and decision-making, focusing on issues such as public safety, social engagement and urban design (Ruth & Franklin, 2004).

Smith et al. (1997) reviewed traditional urban planning visions (City Beautiful, New Urbanism etc.) to summarize the quality and need principles that an urban environment should fulfill. In their research, livability was used as one of six criteria to assess the social and physical elements that contribute to the quality of a community. Livability represents the basic qualities that must exist for a community to be successful: survival, personal health, comfort, safety, and security (Smith et al. 1997). A livable community provides: opportunities for physiological and psychological development, comfort through proximity to a community core where services are readily available, and a layout that makes people feel safe and secure (Smith et al., 1997).

Lastly, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands (RIVM) performed a major literature review (Van Kamp et al, 2003) to identify various concepts in the literature concerning livability, quality of life and quality of environment. The literature review revealed that the concepts overlap and that they all refer to the relationship between people and their local environment (Van Kamp et al., 2003). Livability is reflective of many aspects of the local environment, and influences people’s perception of their quality of life (see Figure 2-3). Notions of livability and quality of life are co-dependent; planners should be aware of the effects of planning and design decisions for the quality of local environment and the well-being of citizens (Van Kamp et al., 2003).
Livability will be used in this research to determine whether community hubs can address some of the issues associated with school closures highlighted in the literature review and media analysis. Livability will be used to determine the prospects for community hubs to create and/or uphold healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods that promote overall well-being among residents following a closure.

2.8 Conclusion
As noted in this literature review, schools are the anchors of communities, and serve a much larger role than just the delivery of education. Schools contribute to creating a good quality of life by providing accessible community space, and fostering social relations for both students and their families. “While declining enrolments and aging infrastructure are important considerations, the [closure] of schools, the heart of the community, must be understood as more than a short term means of balancing a [school board] budget” (Social Planning Toronto, 2013, p.20). The impacts for a community, specifically the loss of the hub of a community, cannot be underestimated. Better coordination between school boards, and provincial and municipal planning is required to ensure opportunities for social cohesion, public space, and liveable neighbourhoods remain a public priority.
The purpose of this research was to examine the potential of the community hub model to address school closure-related concerns that have been raised by scholars and the general public. To achieve this, a mixed methods study was employed. Quantitative methods were used to broadly comprehend the most pressing concerns of Ontario residents who have opposed closures in their respective communities. Qualitative methods were used to explore the community hub model in depth.

3.1 Data Collection & Analysis

3.1.1 Literature Review
A comprehensive review of academic literature was conducted to develop a broader understanding of the reasons for school closures, and to identify the concerns raised by scholars about the impacts and implications of school closures (Objective 1). The literature review drew from books and peer-reviewed articles from relevant journals (e.g., *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, the *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, etc). Graduate and doctoral-level theses and reports from Queen’s School of Urban and Regional Planning as well as Western University were also used for the research. Websites and reports from notable stakeholders including the Ministry of Education, People for Education, and Social Planning Toronto were also reviewed. The literature was searched using key words to explore various databases, such as: ‘school closure’, ‘community hub’, ‘enrolment’, ‘service delivery’, ‘livability’, ‘Ontario’ etc. To ensure the relevancy and accuracy of the literature review, the material dates back to 1984, however, most of the presented findings are from the year 2000 or later. While the full literature review can be found in Chapter 2, the key concerns mounted by scholars are reiterated in Chapter 4.

3.1.2 Newspaper Media
To capture concerns of the general public regarding school closures (Objective 2), an analysis of Ontario newsprint media was conducted. This analysis drew from an existing dataset that was developed by Drs. Patricia Collins (the report supervisor) and Megan Gaucher. The dataset contained 293 Ontario newspaper articles, retrieved from LexisNexis, that were published across 9 newspapers between 2010 and 2015. Articles that mentioned the permanent closures of public schools were eligible for inclusion in the dataset, and were coded for a range of variables (both quantitative and qualitative), such as ‘newspaper in which article appeared’, ‘what year did/will the school close’, and ‘did the article discuss the decision-making process?’

Four frequency distribution tests and two cross-tabulation tests were completed to create a profile of school closures, as represented in Ontario newspaper media, between 2010 and 2015. These tests were undertaken to determine:
- Whether school closures were reported in a predominantly positive or negative tone;
- The key arguments reported in opposition to school closures;
- The tone of school closure coverage over time, and;
• The distribution of arguments in opposition to closures over time

The first frequency distribution test, of the variable *framing of school closure*, was undertaken to determine the overall tone of school closure reporting between 2010 and 2015. The 293 articles were coded into ‘positive’, ‘negative’, ‘both’, or ‘neither’. For the purpose of clarity and analysis, articles that were coded as ‘neither’ were excluded from the sample.

Next, three frequency distribution tests were undertaken to determine the predominant concerns with the loss of a school. The variables used for these tests included: *1st Argument in Opposition (of closure), 2nd Argument in Opposition (of closure) and 3rd Argument in Opposition (of closure)*. The three variables were coded in the dataset into five arguments: commuting distance, student health/well-being, neighbourhood cohesion/social capital, neighbourhood decline/disinvestment, and space for community services. Articles that did not present an argument in opposition to school closures were coded as ‘N/A’ and were excluded from the sample.

To further establish the profile of school closure newspaper media, cross tabulations were performed to determine changes in reporting over time. The first cross-tabulation of the variables *Framing of Article* and *Year* was performed to show whether the tone of closure reporting changed within the five-year time frame. The second cross tabulation of the variables *First Argument in Opposition* and *Year* was undertaken to demonstrate the distribution of opposing arguments over time.

### 3.1.3 Interviews
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information about the origins, purpose, and operations of community hubs, and to assess their potential to fill the void left in communities where schools have closed (Objective 3). The researcher sought information from two primary stakeholders: employees in existing community hubs in Ontario, and members of the Premiers Advisory Group. It was hoped that employees in existing Hubs would provide information on the day-to-day functioning of a hub, the types of programs and services delivered, their successes and challenges, the most prevalent demographics of people using the hub, and funding models. From members of the Advisory Group, it was hoped more information could be gathered on the origins of community hubs, motives for publishing the Strategic Framework, efficiencies offered by the community hub model, implementation strategies, and planning and regulatory barriers.

Potential interviewees were identified from Appendix D of *the Strategic Framework* (2015), which includes a table of roughly 60 existing community hubs in Ontario. Because the newspaper media dataset focuses on urban neighbourhoods in Ontario, the search for interview subjects was narrowed to employees in urban community hubs. After nine attempts by phone and email to recruit such employees, the researcher successfully recruited three individuals working in community hubs in Toronto, Ottawa and Guelph. Interviews were also sought with members of the Advisory Group to foster a better understanding of the founding principles and administrative efforts behind the provincial initiative. Through recruitment emails, the researcher was able to connect with two members of the Advisory Group, and was referred by a member to speak with an employee of the Provincial Community Hubs Division, working
in Kingston. In total, six semi-structured phone interviews were conducted between September 29th and October 20th, 2016.

As this component of the study involved research with human subjects, ethics approval was sought and granted by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board in October 2016. In accordance with the conditions and methodology submitted as part of the ethics approval, the interviewees were provided with a letter of information and consent form (Appendix A) which outlined the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation status, benefits of participation, how the results would be used, procedures for withdrawal, and assurances of their confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview transcripts from employees of existing hubs and members of the Advisory Group were reviewed in conjunction and coded for key themes. Six themes emerged from the analysis and the information was organized into the following categories:

- Definition/Purpose/Benefits of Community Hubs
- Incentives for the creation of the Strategic Framework
- Schools as Ideal Locations for Hubs
- Schools as Poor Locations for Hubs
- Barriers
- How Community Hubs Address School Closures

The findings of the interviews helped dictate the later policy analysis, and allowed conclusions and recommendations to be drawn. The findings from the key informant interviews can be found in Section 4.2.

### 3.1.4 Policy Analysis

The policy documents analyzed in this report were collected after the key informant interviews had been completed, once the researcher had better comprehension of the basic origins, purpose, and operations of community hubs. The purpose of the policy analysis was to assist in the development of the recommendations, using the insights gained from the interviews regarding regulatory barriers. The policies chosen for review were derived from the interviews, specifically those that were most frequently mentioned by interviewees in the context of school closures. Further regulatory barriers such as funding schemes and guidelines were also alluded to in the interviews and included as part of the policy analysis. The researcher collected and analyzed the Education Act, the Ministry of Education’s Accommodation Review Guidelines and Community Planning and Partnerships Guidelines, and Ontario Regulation 444/98. The funding and planning schemes included as part of the policy analysis are the provincial education funding scheme (delivered through the Ministry of Education) and the cross-ministerial provincial planning system.

When analyzing the content of the policies, regulations, and funding and planning schemes, the themes examined were based on the findings from the interviews, and the area of focus was unique for each evaluation. For example, the Education Act was analyzed for policies regarding student safety and the role of the school board, whilst the Accommodation Review Guideline was examined for its portrayal of a school’s value to a community. The primary keyword searches used for the content analysis included ‘(school) closure’, ‘community’, ‘hub’,
‘funding’, ‘school board’, ‘safety’, ‘health’ etc. The results of the policy analysis and the implications for neighbourhood-level planning can be found in Section 4.3.

3.1.5 Methods Reflection

In the researcher’s opinion, the most effective research method was the interviews with key informants. Because community hubs are novel in Ontario, very little has been formally published or studied about them, particularly detailing their strengths, weakness, challenges and opportunities. The interviews were a crucial aspect of the data collection for this report, because the key informants’ realized experience with hubs allowed the researcher to obtain information and opinions that would otherwise been unattainable through literature or policy. Furthermore, no research has been done on hubs’ ability to address school closures in Ontario. Thus, the key informant responses allowed to researcher to make inferences on such topic, using information provided by the informants. The results of the interviews additionally helped determine the content for the policy analysis, and enabled report recommendations to be drawn. The shared experiences and opinions of hub employees and members of the Advisory Group were a unique and helpful addition to the research.

The research method most difficult for this report was the policy analysis, as it became evident through the analysis that there are many regulatory barriers preventing community hubs, and not many immediate prospects as to how these barriers can be resolved. Although O-Reg 444/98 has been positively amended in favour of hubs, it was the only regulatory piece analyzed that is supportive of hubs. From the policy analysis, it seemed that most of the existing regulatory frameworks in Ontario are preventative of hubs, and will need major structural readjustments, to facilitate their integration into Ontario neighbourhoods.
This chapter presents the results from the analysis of three sources of data: Ontario newspaper media, key informant interviews, and policy documents. In general, the findings suggest that newspaper media coverage of school closures between 2010 and 2015 was negative, and opposed closures because of the ramifications for a community’s cohesion and social capital. Key informant interviews highlighted how hubs offer efficiencies for both users and service providers, how they uphold social capital, and the need for greater cross-ministerial planning and funding in Ontario to facilitate their creation. The interviews also offered insight into reimagining the community hub model; the *Strategic Framework* infers that schools can only become community hubs once they are closed by the school board, sold, and repurposed. The informants, however, suggested reimagining community hubs as having operational schools within them. Lastly, the policy review calls attention to the many barriers preventing the creation of hubs in Ontario, namely: problematic funding, complex planning, the role of school boards, student safety, and misunderstandings of the benefit of a school to a community.

4.1 NEWSPAPER MEDIA

A combination of frequency tests and cross-tabulation tests were undertaken to create a profile of Ontario newsprint media coverage of school closures between 2010 and 2015. The tests and their results are described below.

4.1.1. Framing of the Issue

The first frequency test was performed to understand the overall tone of school closure news coverage during the selected five-year time frame (Figure 4-1). The results of this test were used to identify the articles to be included in subsequent frequency distribution tests, specifically to identify whether future analyses would be of articles that supported or opposed closures.

![Figure 4-1: Frequency Test Results for the Variable Framing of School Closure](image)
The test assessed the variable *Framing of Article*; articles that employed neither a positive nor a negative tone in their coverage of school closures were excluded from this analysis. Of the remaining 177 articles, 141 (80%) framed the issue of school closures in a negative way, 7 (4%) positively, and 29 (16%) framed closures both positively and negatively (see Figure 4-1). It can therefore be concluded that school closures were reported in a predominantly negative manner between 2010 and 2015.

### 4.1.2 Arguments in Opposition of Closures

Considering the predominantly negative tone of the coverage, the remaining analyses focused on understanding the primary arguments in opposition to closures. To determine the most prevalent opposing arguments in the coverage, three frequency tests were completed of the variables 1, 2, and 3: *Argument in Opposition of School Closures* (Figure 4-2). The variables were modified to exclude articles that could not be categorized into the five most-reported arguments, as categorized in the original dataset. After applying this exclusion criterion, 128 articles remained.

The most commonly reported argument in opposition to closures was the threat of ‘diminished neighbourhood cohesion and social capital’, with 57 (45%) of the articles reporting this point. The next most commonly reported argument in opposition was the threat of diminished student health and well-being representing 32, or 25% of the articles. A total of 57 articles articulated at least two arguments in opposition to closures, and 17 articles articulated at least three arguments in opposition.
4.1.3 Framing of Issue Over Time
Section 4.1.1 established that newspaper media coverage of school closures was predominantly negative during the five-year time frame; a cross tabulation was then performed to demonstrate yearly coverage trends, and changes to the tone of school closure coverage over time (Figure 4-3). Articles that had neither a positive or negative stance towards closures were excluded, while articles that were coded as having both a positive and negative tone were included.

Each year between 2010 and 2015, there were more negatively framed articles than positive. The greatest among of reporting of school closures was in 2012, representing 55 of the 177 articles (31%). In 2012, 81% of the articles framed closures negatively, 14.5% both negative and positive, and only 3.6% positive. The lowest prevalence of negatively framed articles (9 or 5% total) was in 2010, and this was the only year when a negative stance was not the primary representation of closures. In 2010, 47.4% (9) articles framed closures negatively whilst 52.6% (10) articles embodied a neutral stance. Lastly, framing of closures became more negative with time. There were no articles in 2014 or 2015 that had a positive or neutral stance towards closures; 100% of the articles were framed closures in a negative manner.

4.1.4 Distribution of Opposing Arguments Over Time
To determine the distribution of arguments in opposition to closures over time, a cross tabulation was performed (Figure 4-4). The variable First Argument in Opposition was chosen for analysis because it had the greatest sample size (compared to second or third arguments in opposition). The variables were modified to exclude articles that could not be categorized into the five most-reported arguments, as categorized in the original dataset. The primary argument in opposition was cross-tabulated with the variable Year to determine the number of articles that reported an argument in a given year.
Each year, the most commonly reported argument in opposition to closures was the threat of diminished neighbourhood cohesion and social capital, representing 57, or 44.5%, of the total 128 articles. Opposing arguments were most prevalent in 2012 and least prevalent in 2015. Concerns about 'Neighbourhood Cohesion/Social Capital', ‘Student Health and Well-Being’, and ‘Commuting Distance’ were the most prevalent arguments from 2010 to 2015.

In contrast, ‘Space for Community Services’ was the least frequently used argument in opposition to school closures, representing only 6.3% of the total 128 articles. This finding was surprising considering accessible community space was cited in both the literature review (Section 2.3) and the interviews (Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.3) as a way that schools positively impact local communities.

![Figure 4-4: Cross Tabulation Test of the Variables 1st Argument in Opposition and Year](image)

### 4.2 Interviews

The material from the six interviews with community hub employees and members of the Advisory Group was coded into eight themes, which are each described in turn below.

#### 4.2.1 Definition, Purpose and Benefits of Community Hubs

Although each respondent had a slightly different definition of a community hub, they all referenced a hub as a focal point of the community; a single location (‘one stop shop’) from which a number of programs and services are available to the general public. Community hubs are shared spaces that evoke “a sense [that] as a community member, [you] can go to that place and there will be an entry point to access [and navigate] many services” (Respondent 2).
Every community hub is unique, and is designed to fit the needs of the community it is intending to serve. As such, the number and variety of services will vary by location. One commonly mentioned purpose of hubs, however, is to provide affordable rental space to tenants, either community groups or service providers. Community hubs are a sensible way for service providers to do their work because of the opportunities for cost savings from a shared administrative backbone (Respondent 3). For example, money required for building maintenance, supplies and equipment, or for a receptionist’s salary, could be pooled and split between service providers rather than each of them paying on their own. Such monetary efficiencies allow service providers to establish themselves with fewer financial concerns, and also helps attract community organizations that wouldn’t be able to rent out space in a commercial building (Respondent 1). This is especially favourable for non-profit and charitable organizations “that would be hard pressed to continue their good work in the same capacity, if they hadn’t gone belly up already” (Respondent 1).

Increased service coordination also offers synergies for users of community hubs. This is especially true for people living in rural or remote communities, or more secluded suburban neighbourhoods, where accessing resources can be cumbersome for local residents (Respondent 3). As a result of dense downtown growth in cities like Toronto, lower income groups have been pushed to the suburbs, which weren’t planned to support such demographics and diversities (Respondent 3). Ontario suburbs are seeing high percentages of youth, low-income residents, and immigrants; as such, it is important that community hubs provide programs and services tailored to changing neighbourhoods (Respondent 3).

Groups of tenants that can provide programs and services for newcomers, food banks, and employment and second language education support programs are especially useful for residents in rural, remote, and suburban Ontario communities (Respondent 3). Furthermore, community hubs are advantageous for people who don’t drive, who take public transit, or who need access to services in languages other than English (Respondent 4). One respondent detailed a hypothetical situation as to how service integration can help Ontario residents:

“A mother who isn’t from Canada, who doesn’t have a family doctor, brings her sick child into a hub. In the same visit, the child can get medical attention, and somebody from the hub [would recognize the situation and] say hey, have you registered your child for school?” (Respondent 2).

Beyond functional descriptions of community hubs that focus on square footage, shared operating costs, and co-location of services, interviewees also described a more emotional definition of hubs. Hubs act as a focal point gathering point, where often people end up wanting to spend time there rather than needing to spend time there (Respondent 5). “It’s not just programs and services people need, they want community, social structure, family; that’s what our space truly provides” (Respondent 1). All the interview respondents from existing community hubs made reference to how their space improves local social cohesion. By providing space and resources for to bring people together, hubs “empower people to have a role in their community” (Respondent 1). Additionally, community hub employees alluded to how hubs can enhance notions of community outside of the building itself. “People start to recognize each other outside of the hub, which can create inclusiveness in their neighbourhoods” (Respondent 5). Although user identification can be problematic for
confidential services such as mental health or employment assistance, the respondents discussed measures to protect user privacy, their implementation, and importance. Community building outside of a hub was mentioned in the interviews in wholly in a positive manner. When asked what their hub brings to the community, one interviewee responded “try not to think of what we do provide, think of what would happen if we didn’t exist; there would be an obvious fracture in the social fabric of our community” (Respondent 1).

4.2.2 Incentives for the Creation of the Strategic Framework

In order to facilitate the creation of community hubs across Ontario, the Province created the Community Hubs Strategic Framework in 2015. When asked to describe the rationale behind the Framework, one interviewee replied that the Province is aiming to “address economic challenges, the duplication of services, and unfavourable outcomes for clients who have to visit multiple locations for programs and services” (Respondent 5). The Province has also realized there is a surplus of public space that could be used more efficiently, and that a framework was required to maintain or acquire public ownership of surplus property.

On the question of Provincial government motives, another interviewee noted that it’s not a coincidence that the Strategic Framework came about at a time when school boards were perplexed with declining enrolments and surplus space (Respondent 5). Since provincial funding of education limits the capacities of school boards to retain school properties in need of repairs and/or renovations, the only way they have been able to raise money to finance such work is through the sale of their excess properties (Respondent 5). Consequently, a priority for most school boards in Ontario is to dispose of surplus space that they can no longer afford to maintain. Thus, the Strategic Framework has emerged at a time when provincial and school board interests are somewhat aligned; school boards are looking to get rid of their surplus property while the Province is exploring how to maintain them.

“Although schools are not the only municipal/provincial buildings that are empty, they are low-hanging fruit…School boards want to do something with their properties, and it makes sense for the Province to hold on to publicly owned properties that offer potential for service delivery” (Respondent 5).

The concern that surplus schools and vacant properties be sold for private ownership was also alluded to as an incentive to create the Strategic Framework by a couple respondents. The Framework was created to better manage public assets, which are not being used effectively. Thus, the Framework’s benefits are twofold; first, for making more efficient use of public infrastructure, and secondly, to avoid the loss of valuable real estate to the private sector. Indeed, as one interviewee noted, the community hubs concept is right now “very much about real estate”, but hoped that eventually the Province could think more about how to integrate services for better public delivery (Respondent 2).

As noted in the review of the literature, schools are proximal, well-located buildings that already naturally act as hubs (see Section 2.3). Also noted are how social relations, academic achievement, and the health and well-being of students and their families alike can be compromised by a closure (see Sections 2.3 and 2.5). It is therefore integral that the school continue to serve its community, and the opportunity of using schools in a more efficient
manner be recognized. The Province should continue to strengthen the Strategic Framework, so schools can be repurposed or co-located with hubs in an uncomplicated manner.

4.2.3 Schools as Ideal Locations for Community Hubs
Schools were discussed as good locations for future community hubs because they are proximal, well-located buildings within a neighbourhood. Thus, transforming schools to community hubs would leverage their location to maximize community benefit (Respondent 5). The repurposing of closed schools could additionally prevent valuable real estate from being redeveloped for private means, which would retain the properties as public assets for community benefit.

Schools are currently recognized as favourable locations for gathering and programming because of the various amenities they provide (e.g., gymnasiums, recreational fields, classrooms, etc.). Indeed, operational schools across Ontario are regularly used after school hours, and on weekends by local community groups. For instance, one interviewee detailed how a school in Southwestern Ontario is used for monthly bingos, sporting events, and by seniors on winter evenings as walking corridors (Respondent 6). School boards also leverage their amenities through programming after school hours. For example, the Toronto District School Board offers ‘Beyond 3:30’: after-school activities for grade 6-8 students every day of the week, tailored to the needs of the neighbourhood (Social Planning Ontario, 2013). Thus, in their present forms, many schools already, “function as a hub for the community; more than education is delivered in those doors” (Respondent 6).

It was highlighted through the interviews that the Strategic Framework “tends to infer that schools can only become community hubs after a school is permanently closed” (Respondent 6). Another viable method for the creation of community hubs is by co-locating service delivery into operational schools. As described by one interviewee, “instead of changing schools into community hubs, we should begin to think about how we can have community hubs with schools in them” (Respondent 2). The interviewee went on to say “this would require shifting our thinking from trying to save schools slated for closure, to saving the hub of the community [which] has a school in it” (Respondent 2). This second model, which imagines schools and community hubs under one roof, would ideally be managed privately, or by the local municipality. School boards could lease the space necessary for education purposes, while the deemed ‘excess’ space could be leased to community groups for programming (Respondent 6). In this model, the onus of property management would be taken off of school boards, who are not adept at running spaces for purposes other than education, and better connect municipalities to the operation of their local properties (Respondent 2 & Respondent 6).

4.2.4 Schools as Poor Locations for Community Hubs
Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the incompatibility of school sites as future community hubs, both for repurposing and co-location. In contrast to the romanticized notions of public schools as community builders, multiple interviewees mentioned that schools and school boards are often unwelcoming environments for non-pupils. School boards and their administration guard their territory defensively, and are often not open, or are reluctant, to enter into agreements with the local community or municipality (Respondent 6). This stance was attributed to the priority of school boards to “keep students safe” (Respondent 2). In other
words, school boards tend to be leery about allowing the general public to access school building during school hours because of perceived threats to student safety (Respondent 6).

Another scenario in which schools may not be ideal locations for hubs is when there is considerable social stigma associated with the site. One interviewee who worked in a closed school (now functioning as a hub) mentioned that their location was viewed negatively by some community members, particularly among those with low literacy skills (Respondent 4). The interviewee spoke about the challenges in having people overcome their resistance to come into the space, but admitted that once they were in, there were no further problems (Respondent 4). In these cases, renovating the interior of the building to make it look less like a school and more like a home was acknowledged as a critical step in attracting hub users (Respondent 4).

4.2.5 Barriers
The last major theme that emerged from the interviews were barriers that prevent schools from being repurposed or co-located with hubs. The barriers will be discussed in depth through the policy analysis in Section 4.3.

4.2.6 How Community Hubs Address School Closures
Taken together, these emergent themes highlight the potential and the limitations of community hubs to address the community-level challenges associated with public school closures. By converting a closed or operational school into a community hub, the public asset remains in place for the benefit of the entire community (Respondent 5). At this time however, repurposing or co-locating schools and hubs as a provincial initiative is not viable. As one interviewee put it, there is "no structure that makes saving a school and turning it into a [hub] a choice" (Respondent 2). Currently, without such policy direction, the only way schools can be saved and transformed into hubs is if an individual, non-for-profit organization, a charity, or philanthropist purchases and transforms it on their own financial terms. As aptly described by one interviewee, "school closures and community hubs are related simply by the fact that [Ontarians] are not skilled at thinking in advance and planning for the future; it requires a school to be subject to the accommodation review process or be slated for closure for people to think about how the school could be used in other ways" (Respondent 2). Thus, community hubs cannot fully address school closures until more coherent policy and planning, and horizontal funding exists to make repurposing a closed or functioning school site an option.

As raised in the literature, there are many benefits of upholding local schools in Ontario’s communities. These include: upholding the use of amenities for community use, maintaining heritage and notions of local ownership of schools, greater neighbourhood investment, creating opportunities for socialization and the development of networks. Simply by ensuring the physical building is not lost, community hubs have the ability to address some of the above-noted issues often experienced with a school closure. This can only be achieved, however, once the conversion process from school to hub is streamlined. This is crucial to be able to recognize the potential of a school building before it’s too late; right now a school’s potential to serve another purpose is often only realized when it is threatened or slated for closure. It is integral that the importance of hubs in offering both real-estate efficiencies and community-building opportunities be recognized so that hubs become a provincial priority.
Recommendations to facilitate greater integration of community hubs in Ontario are discussed at length in Chapter 5.

4.3 Policy Analysis
The purpose of this section is to provide a summary of the regulations that are working against the introduction of community hubs in Ontario. The materials chosen for this analysis was based on the discussions with the key informants.

4.3.1 Ministry of Education Funding Scheme
In 1997, the provincial government developed a funding formula for education, to make funding more equitable and uniform across the province (People for Education, 2015). Prior to the funding amendment, education was paid for through a combination of provincial funding and funding from local property taxes (People for Education, 2015). This meant that school boards with bigger tax bases, such as large urban centres, had more money to spend on education than boards with smaller tax bases. Although slight adjustments have been made since its adoption, the basic structure of the funding formula has remained unchanged, and school boards receive their funding according to the size of their student population (People for Education, 2015; Reycraft, 2016).

This presents many challenges for Ontario school boards because of recent declining enrolment trends. Since 2002, the average enrolment in secondary schools has declined 14% (see Figure 2-2) (People for Education, 2009). School boards are provided funding for staff, building maintenance, and operations based on the number of students and a set allowance of square footage per student. As a result, school boards that have more 'square feet' than what their enrolment levels prescribe, has meant that maintenance of their so-called ‘empty space’ is unfunded (People for Education, 2009). Furthermore, maintenance of non-classroom spaces are unfunded; thus, computer labs, community kitchens, parents’ meeting rooms etc. all appear as ‘empty space’ and exacerbate the funding issue. Thus, while a school can support its local community by sharing its space with non-pupils, school boards often end up subsidizing these community uses, and may eventually have to declare the space ‘surplus’ to the needs of education (Strategic Framework, 2015).

As illustrated above, the MOE funding scheme does not recognize and value of community partnerships and community uses of school spaces. As the number of pupils decreases, and as ‘excess space’ and maintenance costs increase, the Province recommends to school boards that they sell the property. Rather than reimagining how the excess space could be used to serve the community, school boards are encouraged to dispose of it as quickly as possible. Having no other policy or structure that “makes saving a school possible” (Respondent 2), school boards are often forced to put valuable public property on the market. The funding formula is therefore problematic for two key reasons. Firstly, it is not reflective of changing demographics, and forces school boards to think negatively about small student populations and ‘excess’ school facilities. Secondly, without supporting policies or frameworks to reimage a school’s ‘excess space’, school boards are offered no other choice but to close the school. Being responsible for both education delivery and real estate management has proved difficult for Ontario school boards, and as a result, more Ontario schools are facing the popular fate of permanent closure.
4.3.2 Provincial Funding & Planning Scheme
As stated in the Strategic Framework (2015), the current planning structure at the Province results in ministry planning that is done vertically, not horizontally. Each ministry’s planning process is developed for its specific mandate, whether it be education, health and long term care, children and youth services, Aboriginal affairs etc. (Strategic Framework, 2015). There is currently no single place in government to bring together all the community planning conducted at the provincial level, which makes initiatives such as community hubs extremely difficult to implement. “Leaders of community hubs face a daunting landscape of multiple contact points with the Province, and a maze of incompatible policies and processes for service delivery integration and capital planning” (Strategic Framework, 2015, p.21). Furthermore, agencies report that they have to deal with multiple ministries, and in some cases, multiple programs within the same ministry, which have separate funding and administrative requirements (Strategic Framework, 2015).

The Advisory Group’s foundational recommendation for the Premier was for a Provincial Lead for community hubs; a person or team of people that would sit above all the ministries, but work across them to implement the Action Plan recommended in the report. The leader would be responsible for the fiscal plan of community hubs, ensuring stewardship of public funds, and leading government efforts on accountability, openness, and modernization (Strategic Framework, 2015). This would require resources and accountabilities to be aligned across ministries, and potential structural realignment to ensure effectiveness of the role (Strategic Framework, 2015).

Despite the recommendations of the Advisory Group, a Provincial lead for community hubs has not been created. Instead, the Province created the Ministry of Infrastructure (MOI), which is responsible for decision-making for capital and service planning to support community hubs (Ministry of Infrastructure, 2016). Furthermore, the MOI’s role is to improve the government’s process for assessing, circulating, and divesting surplus public properties, and develop a ‘one window’ inventory of public property, including surplus properties (Ministry of Infrastructure, 2016). Allocating these responsibilities to the MOI is problematic for the ongoing development of community hubs because they remain a single ministry’s responsibility, which upholds a lack of coordination between ministries. As described by one interviewee, “without a hammer at the provincial level, cooperation between the ministries sideways and up and down is impossible” (Respondent 2). The viability of community hubs is dependent on streamlining administration navigation; with no provincial-level regulation and cross-ministerial oversight, the provincial planning and funding barriers that exist will continue to inhibit the emergence of community hubs. Furthermore, by allocating such responsibilities to the MOI, community hub implementation has unwittingly adopted a real estate and property management focus. What remains missing from comprehension and implementation of hubs is cross-ministerial cooperation, and the importance of coordinating education, health, and social services. In sum, an uncoordinated and siloed provincial approach to funding and planning within the provincial government will continue to challenge the widespread introduction of community hubs. This report upholds the Advisory Group’s primary recommendation; that there be a Provincial Lead for community hubs, as discussed in Chapter 5 (see Recommendation 1).
4.3.3 Accommodation Review Guideline

The *Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline* serves as a province-wide minimum requirement guideline for school boards to develop their own policies for pupil accommodation reviews (Ministry of Education, 2006). A pupil accommodation review is the public consultation process undertaken when a school board is deciding how to reorganize their group of schools to best serve student achievement and well-being, education delivery, and to manage underused school space (Ministry of Education, 2006).

A keyword search for themes was conducted for the *Accommodation Review Guideline* document, to highlight the guidelines that are problematic for the implementation of community hubs, either by way of closing and repurposing a school, or by housing education and service delivery under one roof. The words ‘community’, ‘co-locate’, ‘facility’, and ‘partnerships’ were used to find themes in the text. Table 4 provides a brief overview of the problematic guidelines for retaining ‘surplus’ space for community use.
From the content analysis of the *Accommodation Review Guideline*, it became apparent that the Ministry of Education’s (and school boards’) interpretation of community use and community benefit of schools is purely fiscal, and is embedded with their framework for renting space. Thinking about community and school relations in this way is problematic because it fails to consider the social and emotional ramifications of the loss of a school building. This is especially true for schools in Northern and rural Ontario, where “there [may be] only one school
in the community, and the school often [evolves] into a centre for other activities of the community. If that school is closed and sold, the community has lost its centre” (Reycraft, 2016). Without strict requirements to quantify and qualify a school’s value to the local community, or the impacts to the community if a school is lost, the decision to close a school becomes strictly financial. The guidelines are additionally problematic for community hubs because it implies that community uses of school buildings need to be at full cost recovery for them to be of benefit (to the school board) and/or retained. Nowhere in the document is the potential for repurposing or co-locating as a community hub mentioned. A possible solution to this problem, the creation of a framework to measure the socioeconomic benefit of a school, can be found in Chapter 5 (see Recommendation 3).

### 4.3.4 Education Act

The final policy mentioned in the interviews that inhibits relationship-building between schools and their local communities is the *Education Act*. When speaking with the key informants, the primary problems associated with the *Education Act* pertain to the role of school boards and student safety. A content analysis highlighting the problematic policy is included below, using keywords such as ‘school board’ ‘responsibility’ ‘role’ and ‘safety’.

#### Table 4-2: *Education Act* Content Analysis- Role of School Boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Policy/Guideline</th>
<th>Why Problematic for Community Hubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>169.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Board responsibility for student achievement and effective stewardship of resources</td>
<td>• Board is only responsible for the delivery of education, student achievement and well-being, resource management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1)(a) Promote student achievement and well-being</td>
<td>• School board is not responsible by law to engage or support the local community or form partnerships with the community/municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Ensure effective stewardship of the board’s resources</td>
<td>• May be reluctant to enter into agreements with the community because their mandate does not require them to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(c) deliver effective and appropriate education programs to its pupils</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(d) develop and maintain policies and organizational structures that,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(i) promote the goals referred to in clauses (a) to (c) and (ii) encourage pupils to pursue their educational goals;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4-3: *Education Act* Content Analysis- Student Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Policy/Guideline</th>
<th>Why Problematic for Community Hubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>305</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Access to school premises</td>
<td>• School boards often quote these policies as reasons not to enter agreements with the municipality/local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) No person shall enter or remain on school premises unless he or she is authorized by regulation to be there on that day or at that times</td>
<td>• Leery about allowing the general public access to school buildings during school hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Under law, they are required to keep the students safe, sharing of facilities/amenities could threaten student safety and therefore are declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>305</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Access to school premises, board policy</td>
<td>• Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3) A person shall not enter or remain on school premises if he or she is prohibited under a board policy from being there on that day or at that time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These policies demonstrate why school boards guard their territory defensively; under law, it is their sole obligation to manage resources effectively and provide education to their pupils. They are not required to foster community engagement, and often prohibit activities or programming of such nature because of potential threats to student safety. Although these policies inhibit the co-location of schools with community hubs, the concern put forward by school boards is not unreasonable. If a hub and school were co-located, the uncertainty of who was in the building at a given time would prove challenging because of the intermittent nature of service delivery. Ideally, community hubs should be places anyone can visit during reasonable hours; this is not compatible with school boards’ duty and desire to have an accurate account of everyone in the building at all times. Student safety is certainly a notable barrier for community hubs if program and service delivery are to be provided in the same building as a school.

It is noteworthy that although the *Education Act* can be referenced as means to distance a school board from its local community, it also does enable the possibility of co-building (new renovation, not repurposing) a school and community hub facilities on the same property. School boards currently have the authority to co-build schools with other entities and enter into a variety of facility partnerships through license or joint use agreement as outlined in:

- Paragraph 44 of subsection 171(1);
- Paragraph 4 of subsection 171.1(2); and
- Section 183, 194 and 196 of the *Education Act*
4.3.5 Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPPG)

The CPPG is meant to establish a more formal consultation process between school boards, municipal governments, and other community organizations in the planning process around potential underused school space (Ministry of Education, 2015). The purpose of the guideline is to encourage school boards to reach out to community organizations to share planning information on a regular basis (Ministry of Education, 2015). This is intended to assist school boards to support student needs and encourage stronger community planning processes, while ensuring fiscal sustainability (Ministry of Education, 2015). By doing so, it is hoped schools can be used more frequently by the community, so that school boards can direct more funding toward education rather than maintaining excess space. Although this mandate does, in theory, sound advantageous, similar to the Accommodation Review Guideline, the core rationale to use schools more efficiently is purely fiscal.

Although the general intents of the CPPG - to share planning information and make planning more transparent - are favourable practices, there exists a major complication with the guideline itself. In the overview section of the document, it states:

“The Guideline focuses on facility partnerships, and does not address the service or program exchanges between boards and community organizations or other entities. Strong partnerships between boards and service providers can and do exist without co-location. At the same time, experience demonstrates that the sharing of facilities may create opportunities for coordination and collaboration in service and program delivery, so boards are encouraged to build relationships with their facility partners.”

This paragraph is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it implies that the CPPG is focused on facility partnerships, not service or program exchanges between school boards and community organizations. This further instills notions of how school boards interpret community benefits of the use of a school building. Secondly, it suggests that partnerships between boards and service providers can, and have been formed, by remaining in separate locations. Furthermore, this paragraph (and the rest of the CPPG) suggests that the co-location with service providers is only possible by separating the spaces used between partners and students. The CPPG does successfully acknowledges how “co-location represents an opportunity to leverage other infrastructure investments by co-building with entities that provide services and programs for children, their families and the broader community” (2015b, p.6). However, it fails to acknowledge the importance of leveraging Ontario’s existing infrastructure, specifically, how those entities could work alongside school boards to purchase or lease surplus space for continued public benefit and community use.

Lastly, in the section titled ‘Sharing Unused Space in Existing Schools with Community Partners’, the CPPG communicates that school boards should implement some criteria to determine the suitability of their underutilized space for partnerships.

“The Ministry [of Education] recognizes that available space is not the only criteria to selecting schools for partnerships. Boards will also consider issues related to student safety, the board’s student achievement and pupil accommodation strategies, zoning and site use restrictions, facility condition, the configuration of space and the ability to
separate the space used by partners from the space used by students, among other factors.” (2015b, p. 7)

The CPPG also states in section two:

“When developing criteria regarding the eligibility of partners, boards are expected to consider the value of the partnership to students. Boards, in compliance with local bylaws, may consider both for-profit and non-profit entities, as they see fit. Boards will also incorporate the following requirements:

- Health and safety of students
- Partnership must be appropriate for the school setting
- Partnership must not compromise the student achievement strategy” (2015b, p.4)

Sharing unused space in an existing school has become a momentous task because of the criteria to find suitable partners as demonstrated in the above noted quote. Advocating for student safety is a viable argument presented by school boards, however, it seems there are many reasons or intentional barriers as to why facilities cannot be shared. Specifically when speaking to facility condition, configuration of space, and the ability to separate the spaces, school boards will not incur any additional costs to support facility partnerships. Furthermore, the issue of creating partnerships is exacerbated by the required retrofitting of excess space to meet the boards’ health and safety standards. Interested community partners are often deterred from entering into partnerships with the school board, as they are unwilling or unable to incur the costs associated with retrofitting. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the criteria used by school boards to determine suitable partnerships is quite limiting, and also deterring for stakeholders who may not have the capital necessary to facilitate such partnerships.

The CPPG demonstrates how school boards are unwelcoming partners for community collaboration (see Section 4.2.4). By implementing such strict criteria to partner with community groups, school boards are trying to attract programs and services that are not threatening for student safety, such as daycares, sport programming, or education services. At the same time, boards are preventing programs and services related to physical and mental health, employment support, immigrant support etc. by citing their duty to protect student safety and host partners that will benefit the pupils. It is difficult to critique school boards’ intentions of upholding student safety, and their concerns of sharing space in this regard, as their intentions and reasoning are rational. However, if public assets are to be used more efficiently in a fiscal sense, ways to uphold student safety whilst finding community partners that are suitable for the needs of the community must become a priority for both the Province and school boards.

The CPPG has favourable intentions of greater planning with communities, making better use of underutilized space, and re-imagining new schools in the future being co-located with community partners. However, the issues of: student safety, criteria for finding community partners, and encouraging service delivery through co-location rather than retrofitting, all provide significant barriers for community hubs. Stronger partnerships between the municipality and school boards should be explored, to take the financial burden of operating a building off of school boards, and to ensure underutilized space can be used in a way that
benefits all demographics of a community. Options to separate the school space from excess space, and extra security measures should be explored to make efficient use of existing schools. Rather than writing off the possibility of co-location in existing infrastructure, as the CPPG seems to imply, efforts should be focused on how a school building can be preserved and improved to build an array of services around the needs of students and their families. More about this approach can be found in Chapter 5 (see Recommendation 2).

**4.3.6 Ontario Regulation 444/98**

By law, Ontario school boards must follow policies stated by *Ontario Regulation 444/98 Disposition of Surplus Real Property*, found within the *Education Act*, when undertaking the sale of their properties (Hutton, 2014). This policy requires that school boards sell their surplus property at the assessed market value, and that priority for purchase be given to preferred agents. The preferred agents, in order, are: other local school boards, local educational institutions (colleges and universities), the municipality, and other levels of government (Hutton, 2014). By selling surplus property at fair market value, the provincial government helps ensure that taxpayers receive the highest value for the property (Strategic Framework, 2015). The regulation additionally outlines that a circulation notice of the property’s availability must be made known to these agents, for which they have 90 days to respond with a proposal/binding to offer to purchase or lease the property at the assessed market value (Hutton, 2014).

As reported in the Community Hubs Strategic Framework, there were two primary issues associated with the circulation of a surplus school property. First, the circulation list was limited and did not include all the potential users and interested stakeholders, such as Public Health Boards and Indigenous organizations (Strategic Framework, 2015). Secondly, the amount of time to review a property as listed in O-Reg 444/98, 90 days, is a short period. For school buildings specifically, the Advisory Group heard that the current process for reviewing schools does not give potential partners/bidders enough time to develop plans and proposals for the use of the property (Strategic Framework, 2015). Lastly, the fair market value price of a school is often beyond the financial means of stakeholders interested in the property.

As per the recommendations of the Community Hubs Advisory Group, in May 2016, the Ministry of Education announced changes to O-Reg 444/98 that took effect on September 1st 2016. The changes set out requirements for Ontario school boards, which include:

1) Doubling the current surplus school circulation period from 90 to 180 days. This provides listed entities with an additional 90 days to express interest in the property and to submit an offer.

2) Increasing access to surplus school circulation by expanding the list of entities that can place an offer to purchase before a surplus school property is placed on the open market.

O-Reg 444/98 is an example of how policy is working favourably for the creation of community hubs in Ontario. Through the expansion of involved stakeholders, and an increased timeline to examine and express interest in a property, the Advisory Group has successfully enabled community organizations to plan and explore options to purchase or lease surplus school properties for continued community use.
Despite these positive changes, one challenge that remains with O-Reg 444/98 is the sale of the surplus properties at fair market value. Currently there is no systematic cost-benefit analysis of the potential value of surplus property from a socio-economic perspective, including the social, recreational, cultural, park land, affordable housing, intensification, and health requirements of a community (Enabling & Celebrating Community Hubs, 2016). “By focusing on the sale of surplus public properties at market value, opportunities to repurpose a space and fully recognize its local economic or community value may be lost” (Enabling & Celebrating Community Hubs, 2016, p.12). Relief from fair market value sale in O-Reg 144/98 remains a working recommendation from the Advisory Group, as well as the development of a framework that measures the socioeconomic value of public properties to help decide when a sale at fair market value may not align best with public interests (Enabling & Celebrating Community Hubs, 2016). This recommendation is discussed in Chapter 5 (see Recommendation 3).

4.3.7 Policy Analysis Summary
The policy analysis was undertaken to provide a summary of regulations that are working against, and working favourably, for the introduction of community hubs in Ontario. The aim of the analysis was to undercover how such policies prevent (and in one instance, enable) the introduction of hubs, by identifying major preventative themes in the text. The findings are as follows:

• The Ministry of Education’s (MOE) funding scheme allocates funding to school boards according to the size of their student population. This is problematic for two reasons. First, school boards are forced to think negatively about small student populations and excess space. Secondly, facing such financial pressures, school boards are unable to reimagine how their space can serve communities in any way other than in fiscal terms. The funding scheme is a major cause of school closures and requires school boards to interpret a school’s value primarily in a fiscal manner.

• As noted in the Strategic Framework (2015), the lack of cross-ministerial planning in Ontario is a momentous barrier for the introduction of hubs. Stakeholders interested in creating a hub are forced to navigate complicated ministerial policies and processes for service delivery and planning. Without a Provincial Lead for community hubs, the uncoordinated and siloed provincial ministerial system will continue to challenge local planning processes and the creation of hubs.

• The Accommodation Review Guideline is problematic because the MOE’s interpretation of community use and community benefit of schools is purely fiscal, and is embedded with their framework for renting space. Furthermore, the Guideline requires community uses of school buildings to be at full cost recovery for them to be deemed beneficial, and be retained post review. The Guidelines prevent the introduction of hubs because they enable school closures without fully considering the social value of ‘excess space’ in a school.

• The Education Act was cited in the interviews as being inhibitive for community hubs because of student safety and the role of school boards. School boards mandated to only to provide education, and are therefore reluctant entering agreements with
community groups and the municipality for other types of programming and service delivery. Secondly, their duty to protect student safety has meant school boards guard their territory defensively.

- The Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline implies that the relationship between school boards, municipal governments, and other community organizations is focused on facility partnerships. They do not address service or program exchanges, and suggest that partnerships that provide such services can exist without co-location. This is directly impactful for community hubs, as the CPPG suggests co-location is not necessary between boards, the municipality, and community partners. Lastly, the criteria outlined to find partners for unused space in existing schools is momentous and tiresome, because of reasons such as student safety, facility conditions etc.

- The only favourable regulation analyzed in this Chapter was O-Reg 444/98. As result of the work by the Advisory Group, the regulation was amended to double the current surplus school circulation period for interested buyers to express interest in the property. Furthermore, the list of entities that are circulated the properties has been expanded to allow purchases before the school is placed on the open market. Both achievements enable more closed schools to be turned into hubs as result of this regulation's amendment.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section summarizes the main findings from the preceding analysis, addresses the research questions, and provides recommendations for the implementation of community hubs to address the threats to neighbourhood livability that are posed by school closures.

5.1 Summary of Analysis
The analysis of Ontario newspaper media between 2010 and 2015 illustrated that school closures were consistently reported negatively, and that coverage became more negative with time. The most reported argument in opposition of closures was the threat to neighbourhood cohesion and social capital. The key findings from the interviews were organized into six themes:

1. Community hubs are a focal point in the community; a shared space where a multitude of services and programs are delivered to local residents.

2. Community hubs provide opportunities for social cohesion, from the co-location of services and programs and by providing an accessible meeting place for community members.

3. The Strategic Framework was introduced by the Province to better coordinate the delivery of services, better manage surplus public properties, and initiate cross-municipal horizontal planning in Ontario.

4. Schools can be ideal locations for community hubs because of their centrality, and have favourable facilities such as gyms, classrooms, and field space. Key informants favoured a model in which services are co-located into operational schools. Ownership of the school would be transferred to the municipality, and education and services would be delivered in the same building.

5. Schools can also be unsuitable locations for community hubs, as they are often run-down and in disrepair. Additionally, stigmas of schools can present challenges attracting hub users.

6. There are many barriers that prevent the introduction of community hubs, namely policy, funding, and a lack of horizontal planning within the Province.

7. At present, community hubs cannot address the threats to neighbourhood cohesion posed by school closures because there is no framework in place to save a school and turn it into a hub. Existing community hubs located in closed school buildings were only made possible through private purchase (and later transformation) by individuals, non-profit charities, or community groups.

The policy analysis highlighted noteworthy barriers for community hubs, as well as a regulation that has made positive headway for the development of hubs. The policy-related barriers for
community hubs include:

- An outdated Ministry of Education funding scheme;
- Lack of horizontal planning across Provincial ministries;
- Accommodation review guidelines that discredit the importance of a school for a local community;
- The sole responsibilities of school boards to supply education and uphold student safety; and
- Strict criteria to determine suitable partners to share unused space in an operational school.

Despite the existing barriers, the Community Hubs Advisory Group has made positive progress on O.Reg 444/98. The circulation period of surplus school information has been doubled from 90 to 180 days, allowing interested stakeholders more opportunity to express interest in the property and submit an offer for purchase or lease. Secondly, the list of entities circulated regarding a surplus school, and who can make an offer before it is listed on the open market, has expanded.

5.2 Key Findings for Planning

From the research, it is evident that current planning systems in Ontario do not recognize the importance of schools. Ontario’s school boards are encouraged, but not obligated, to integrate their facility planning objectives with those of the municipal government. As such, planning between the Province, municipalities, and school boards happens in isolation of each other. “The critical problem in the separation of school facility planning for municipal land use planning is that there is often no institutional framework that creates space for these planning entities to plan together” (Vincent, 2006, p. 434). The Community Hubs Strategic Framework is a Provincial response to such problem, and through its Action Plan, is working towards bridging the divide between major planning parties.

The Strategic Framework, and community hubs more broadly, have the potential to enhance livability in Ontario communities. By keeping school buildings open for community benefit, hubs can provide space and programming necessary to facilitate community and personal development, the provision of services, and improved health and well-being. Schools contribute directly to the quality of a community; as such, maintaining the building (with or without education delivery) is necessary to maintain livability in Ontario. Urban, suburban and rural Ontario communities are all affected by school closures and require proximal service delivery. Community hubs offer great potential for effective land use planning in Ontario, by aligning municipal and school board objectives more closely, and by ensuring important infrastructure remains for community benefit. By integrating public schools, their infrastructure, and capital planning into broader planning and policy making, schools can be more greatly legitimized as essential elements of public infrastructure (Vincent, 2006).
5.3 Summary of Research Question Findings

First Question: What scholarly evidence exists on the impacts of public school closures, and how have scholars framed the potential impacts of these closures?

As noted in the literature review, although a school’s original function may be obsolete, schools are key landmarks that reinforce a sense of community, identity and historical character (Seaman, 2015). As such, when a school closes, the physical and social contributions of the building community are compromised. Namely, the loss of a communal gathering space means the overall social capital of a community is undermined when the building is deemed obsolete. Communities lose the ability “to get together and build strong neighbourhoods”, especially when the school evolves into a centre for other activities in the area (Social Planning Toronto, 2013). The social implications of a school closure are experienced by students, their parents and families, and the community at large.

The school closure process has been criticized for poorly considering the value of a school to the local community, for not considering resident needs and objections, and for being a top-down process rather than a dialogue of open communication. Closures also present challenges for student health and well-being and academic achievement; the non-fiscal value of small schools in terms of lower dropout rates, higher attendance rates etc. is often not considered in the face of short-term fiscal efficiencies. There has been sparse research on school closures and community impacts of a closure, namely because “[a school’s] value is not realized until they are placed under threat of closure or amalgamation” (Kearns et al., 2009, p.132).

Second Question: How has the issue of public school closures been framed in newsprint media in Ontario?

Between 2010 and 2015, school closures were reported in a predominantly negative manner in Ontario newspapers, with the most prevalent concern (argument in opposition) reported being the threat to neighbourhood cohesion and social capital. The issue of school closures was predominantly negatively remained for the duration of the five-year period, and reporting became more negative as time passed. A surprising finding of the newspaper media analysis was how little the argument ‘space for community services’ was reported; only 6% of articles reported it as their first argument in opposition of closures. This finding contrasted with observations gathered from the literature review and interviews, in which there was far greater focus on the value of school spaces for community use. It could be that this discrepancy was found because the loss of space could have been argued primarily as a reason for neighbourhood decline associated with a school closure, rather than its own argument.

Third Question: What is the community hub model, and what are its prospects for addressing social concerns raised in the literature and Ontario news media?

The community hub model, although already informally in practice in Ontario, was introduced in 2015 by the Province’s Premier and her appointed Advisory Group. A community hub provides a central access point to a range of health and social services and programs, and is a communal gathering place. As became clear in the interviews, community hubs can address the issue of school closures by ensuring public assets remain for community benefit. A primary
concern associated with closures raised in the literature and Ontario news media is the threat to a neighbourhood’s cohesion and social capital. The closure of a proximal, publicly-owned asset represents the loss of an accessible gathering space for pupils and their families alike. Community hubs do exhibit potential to address this concern by maintaining space for communal use; whether that means closing the school and repurposing as a hub, or co-locating the services together. By saving a school, which often has importance for a community’s heritage and notions of self-ownership, a community’s decline can be mitigated.

Community hubs also have the potential to help keep small schools open, which would mitigate some of challenges associated with amalgamated campuses including increased travel time for pupils, wider academic achievement gaps, and less participatory learning environments (see Section 2.5). To keep small schools open, the operation and maintenance of the building would likely have to be the responsibility of a body other than a school board, such as the municipality. The landlord would rent only the space required for education delivery to the school board, and the surplus space to other stakeholders to generate revenue. By taking the onus of building maintenance off the school board, there is potential for smaller schools, co-located with hub services, to be upheld. More about this model can be found in Section 4.2.3, and in Chapter 5 (Recommendation 2).

While community hubs do offer potential to address school closures, at this time the model is not able to wholly do so. Provincial funding for education reinforces school sites as “disposable public assets…which pose a potential if they do not yield a return on their investment” (Clandfield, 2010, p.10). This is because there exists no framework or policy that enables an easy repurposing of a closed school, or that measures the socioeconomic benefit of a school building. Often, a school’s repurposing potential is realized too late, and the transformation is no longer possible. Community hubs do offer prospects to address prominent social concerns, however, their integration into Ontario communities will remain challenging until stronger guiding policy, improved funding schemes, more coherent planning, and strengthened relationships between schools and the local communities are realized.

5.4 Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: Create a Provincial Lead for Community Hubs**

The siloed, fragmented nature of the provincial planning system is a major barrier to the creation of community hubs in Ontario. This report endorses the Advisory Group’s foundational recommendation in the *Strategic Framework* (2015), which is the creation of a Provincial Lead for community hubs. The Lead would sit above, and work across, the ministries to make planning for hubs more cohesive. Structural realignment of resources and accountabilities will be required across ministries to ensure effectiveness of the role (Strategic Framework, 2015). Additionally, the Provincial Lead would need to “have relationships with the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Ministry of Finance, as they are responsible for the fiscal plan, ensuring stewardship of public funds, and leading government efforts on accountability, openness, and modernization” (Strategic Framework, 2015, p.36). Without provincial-level regulation above the ministries, there is less accountability to make hubs a priority, and makes “cooperation between ministries, both sideways and up and down, a near impossibility” (Respondent 2). Knowing that ministries cannot act alone on the issue of community hubs, a provincial
leadership role, and a full review of ministries’ accountability and fiscal plans are required immediately to facilitate more community hubs in Ontario.

**Recommendation 2: Move Towards Municipal Ownership of School Buildings (Model 2)**

In the interviews, it became apparent that “there is no structure that makes saving a school and turning it into a community hub a choice” (Respondent 2). Furthermore, if a main reason for closing schools is surplus space, there should be a way in which school boards could continue to allow part of the building to be used as a school, and the other space be used as a community hub. To best facilitate efficient use of publicly-owned space, it is believed Ontario municipalities should acquire ownership of schools that are closed or have been slated for closure. This would facilitate greater integration of Model 2, where education and hub programs and services could be co-located in the same building. For example, a single building could house a school, daycare centre, public library, swimming pool etc. and be operated by both the school board and the municipality (Clandfield, 2010). The placement of these services would target the needs of the community in a single building would facilitate the coordination of resources and services in a mixed-use site (Clandfield, 2010).

Debt finance acquisition would allow municipalities to begin to take ownership of local school buildings. Lease rates for space inside the hub would be determined through the municipality’s asset management plan. In this instance, the municipality would lease the space necessary for education delivery to the local school board, and the ‘surplus space’ to other community partners. With time, the revenue generated from leasing agreements would allow the building to become fiscally self-sufficient; general maintenance and operation costs would be incurred by the municipality. This model takes the onus of building operation off of school boards, “who are not adept at running Community Hubs”, and connects municipalities more greatly to their infrastructure and community needs (Respondent 2).

Every municipality will have different objectives and financial capabilities, meaning there cannot be a ‘blanket approach’ to allow local ownership of threatened schools. Municipalities should analyze and tailor their asset management plans to acquire schools that are slated for closure, and begin discussing leasing agreements with their school board and community partners who would be interested in leasing space. School boards should aim to sell their buildings below fair market value with provincial funding assistance, should the revenue of the school be imperative for the board to be able to maintain their other schools.

One of the major challenges associated with this recommendation is that “while direct transfers (of the building) to the municipality at this time is an option, [it is suspected] that some municipalities would say no thank you” (Respondent 4). Some municipalities believe property transfers are a downloaded issue; because much educational and infrastructure funding sits with the Province, municipalities are worried they will incur costs for the operation of the buildings, which should be a provincial responsibility. Many of the interview respondents noted how relationships between the Province, municipalities, and school boards can be quite hostile, and need to be more intermediary in order to work. Part of this recommendation is that the involved stakeholders work towards more compatible and collaborative working relationships, so that property transfers are not experienced as a downloaded issue from the Province. The Province should prioritize a budget to allow the municipalities to acquire the ownership of school buildings at an inexpensive rate, primarily by selling the buildings below
market value and providing financial assistance for the acquisition. Additionally, the Province could explore whether financial assistance to the municipality for building maintenance costs or retrofits that may be required. “Everybody wants schools to remain open, but no one wants to pay for them” (Howlett, 2015). It is therefore integral the Province adopts a leadership role in terms of funding in order for future education and service delivery efficiencies to become a reality. It is predicted that the funding required to effectively instigate these recommendations will be momentous, however, the Province is encouraged to remember how large upfront spending may have positive fiscal savings in the future, and make budget allocations as necessary.

**Recommendation 3: Create a Framework to Measure the Socioeconomic Benefit of a School**

Although this recommendation is already underway at the provincial level, it is a necessary and time sensitive recommendation to save schools that have been slated for an accommodation review or for closure. To ensure processes and planning are more reflective of the value of public properties to communities, there needs to be greater communication of existing properties that are underutilized, or that are no longer needed for their original use (Strategic Framework, 2015). A framework to measure the socioeconomic benefit of a school could help decide when sale of a school at fair market value (FMV) may not align best with public interests, and whether the community benefits warrant an investment on part of the government to make it possible for property acquisition (Strategic Framework, 2015). It is essential that the framework considers that the sale of a school at FMV may be required in some situations, to support fiscal needs of school boards.

The development of such framework could also be of benefit for the Accommodation Review Guideline, in helping to determine whether or not a school should be assessed for closure. “School boards’ current interpretation of community benefit is financial, and is embedded with their framework of renting space” (Respondent 5). Thus, a framework to measure the socioeconomic benefit of schools is integral to recognize them as unique elements of public infrastructure; a place that facilitates the delivery of education but also determines the quality of life in the local community.

**Recommendation 4: Retrofit Existing Schools to Protect Student Safety**

From the interviews and policy analysis, it became clear that a major barrier for the co-location of education and community hubs services is student safety. The intermittent nature of service delivery makes it challenging to know who may be in a building at any given time, which directly challenges the school board’s responsibility to protect student safety. Furthermore, the CPPG implies the co-location of education and services is to take place in newly-constructed facilities, which must separate the uses. The CPPG does not make reference to co-locating services in Ontario’s existing infrastructure, and details how students and community partners are to be separate in a building should there be co-location.

If the Province wants to maintain and upgrade their existing public infrastructure, attention and funding must be prioritized to upgrade existing schools with greater student safety measures. Greater attention needs to be given to retrofitting existing schools for the separation of uses, without being of cost to the school board. The Province should re-evaluate their accountability
and fiscal plans to provide funding to assist with retrofits, so existing building stock can be repurposed by the municipality.

Student safety is a primary reason why school boards guard their territory defensively; if the Province desires greater co-location of hub and education services, it is important that a provincial budget for retrofits to existing public infrastructure be set aside. Other safety measures once the hub is running, such as hired security guards, will also require provincial funding and attention. Student safety is a serious issue and must be appropriately funded if existing building stock is to be used for current and future service delivery.

**Recommendation 5: Create Local Community Hub Committees**

It became apparent through this research that there are often disagreements between community members, municipalities, school boards, and the Province regarding hubs. In order for community hubs to become a reality in more Ontario communities, it is recommended that local community hub committees be created in communities needing or wanting a hub. The Province could begin this initiative by classifying which Ontario municipalities are either in most need of a community hub, or areas that have an abundance of unused public infrastructure that could be transformed into a hub. The municipalities, in conjunction with the school boards, could scout local residents to act on a board of directors, who would be responsible for finding volunteers interested in contributing to the local community hub committee. The group could fundraise, find community partners interested in locating in the hub, and educate other residents about the benefits and need for a hub in their locale.

Establishing local committees will help hubs become a grassroots initiative, would tailor the hubs to address the wants and needs of the community, and establish notions of community and friendship that could progress once the hub is opened. It is hoped that by making community hubs a community initiative, they can be a more collaborative project, and help alleviate some responsibility from the Province. Greater citizen education and involvement can signify to the Province the priority that need be given to community hubs, and allow the Province to delegate some responsibility to local residents.
REFERENCES


Corbusier, L. (1967). The radiant city: Elements of a doctrine of urbanism to be used as the basis of our machine-age civilization. Orion Press.


APPENDIX A- Letter of Information and Consent Form

SCHOOL CLOSURES & COMMUNITY HUBS

Examining Livability in Ontario through School Closures and the Community Hub Framework

This research is being conducted by Sarah Cranston, an Urban and Regional Planning student at Queen’s University. The project will be supervised by Dr. Patricia Collins, a professor at the School of Urban and Regional Planning.

Purpose of the Study
This study aims to highlight the pressing issue of Ontario public school closures, specifically the importance of a school site for a local community, and how a public school closure can have negative ramifications for social relations and livability. Using literature review and media analysis, the report will introduce the school closure implications most worrisome for Ontario residents. Furthermore, key informant interviews will allow analysis of the potential of the recently-introduced Community Hub model to address the issues raised by citizens who have opposed closures in their community.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. While every effort will be made to ensure your responses remain confidential, there is risk that your identity could be recognized in the final report. Therefore, it is important for you to know that the confidentiality of your responses cannot be absolutely guaranteed. If any questions or discussions make you uncomfortable, you may withdraw your information and end your involvement at any time during the research process. It should be noted that you will be unable to withdraw your information once the research has been published.

Time Commitment
The interview will take no more than one hour, recognizing that your time is valuable. Every effort will be made to minimize disruption to your daily schedule. If clarification of your interview responses is needed, correspondence will be through email and is not anticipated to require more than an hour of additional time.

Participation Benefits
It is hoped the findings and conclusions from this report will inform future decisions regarding school closures and the implementation of the Community Hub model. The responses will give key stakeholders a better understanding of the current School Closure context, and aid in identifying barriers to the implementation and operation of Community Hubs. The recommendations may be useful for Ontario school boards and the provincial government to create and uphold notions of livability in local communities.

Responses
Responses given through the interviews will be kept confidential in a password-protected computer that only the researcher will have direct access to. Responses will be destroyed upon completion of the project. No individual, school, or school board names will be
disclosed in the final report, and coding (ex. Participant A, School A, School Board A) will
be used throughout the report. To aid with the coding, please do not put your name on any
study response sheets or materials.

Study Results
The final report will be made available to all participants interested in the findings. Please
indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive a copy of the report upon
completion.

The report will also be available on Queen’s School of Urban and Regional Planning’s
website once it has passed the school’s review process.

Concerns
Any questions/concerns may be directed to the researcher, Sarah Cranston, at
sarah.cranston@queensu.ca, or the project supervisor Dr. Patricia Collins at
patricia.collins@queensu.ca or (613) 533-6081 x 77060. Any ethical concerns about the
study can be directed to the Chair of General Research Ethics Board at
chair.GREB@queensu.ca or 613- 533-6081.

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your time and responses are greatly
appreciated. Sincerely,

Sarah Cranston, B.A. Masters of Planning Candidate 2017 School of Urban and Regional
Planning, Queen’s University sarah.cranston@queensu.ca

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of
Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.
SCHOOL CLOSURES & COMMUNITY HUBS

Examining Livability in Ontario through School Closures and the Community Hub Framework

Consent Form

Name (please print): ____________________________________________________

1. I have read and understand the Letter of Information that was given to me, and all of my questions about the research and my participation have been answered.

2. I consent to participate in the study, and understand that I will be asked to provide anonymous and general information about school closures and community hubs.

3. I understand my participation in this study is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time. I understand the responses I provide during the interview will be kept confidential in a password-protected computer. Only the researcher will have access to this information, and the responses will be destroyed upon completion of the project. No individual, school, or school board name will be conveyed in the final report, and any information I give will be wholly anonymous.

4. I am aware that any questions or concerns about the research may be directed to Sarah Cranston or Dr. Patricia Collins. Any ethical concerns may be directed to the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board.

I have read the above statements and agree to participate in this research. Participant's name (print):_________________________________________

Participant's signature:_____________________________________________

Date:_______________________________________

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen's policies.