

What happens when schools close? What can planners do?



Canadian Institute of Planners 2019

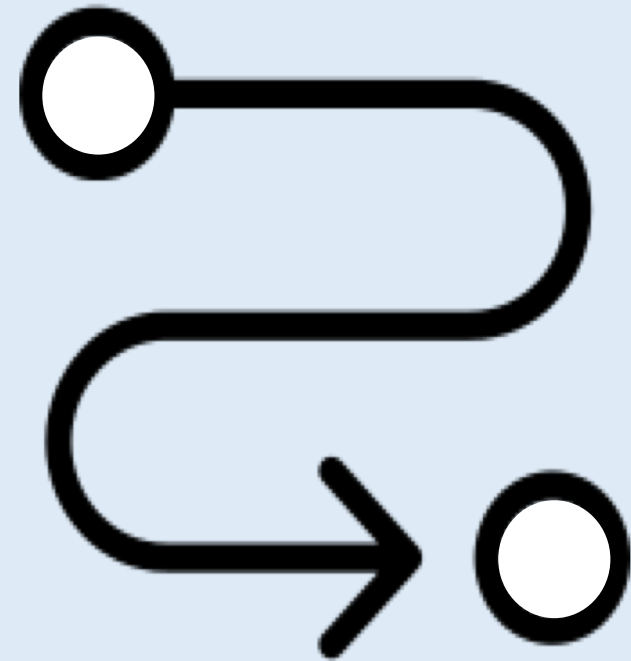
Panelists: Mark Seasons, Patricia Collins, Bill Irwin, Gabrielle Snow

Discussant: Wayne Caldwell



Overview

- Why schools matter
- Processes for closures
- Scope of closures
- Media coverage
- Experiences of closures
- What can planners do



Why Schools Matter



Schools Make Communities Liveable

Schools are critical for fostering...

- Complete Communities
- Walkable Communities
- Healthy Communities
- Sustainable Communities





Importance of Schools to Various Community Types

Rural Communities

- High reliance on schools
- Key to future growth and prosperity

Urban Communities

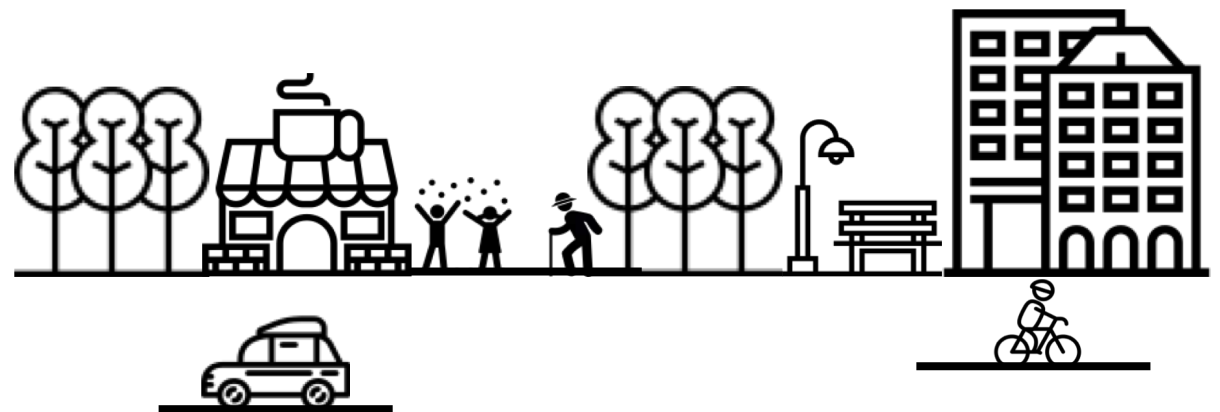
- One of few recreational venues
- Role of community hub + service provider

Low-income Communities

- Emotional and informational support
- Financial + mobility barriers to other resources

General

- Encourages physical activity
- Promotes community cohesion
- Central to community identity and pride





School Closures Threaten the Health of Communities

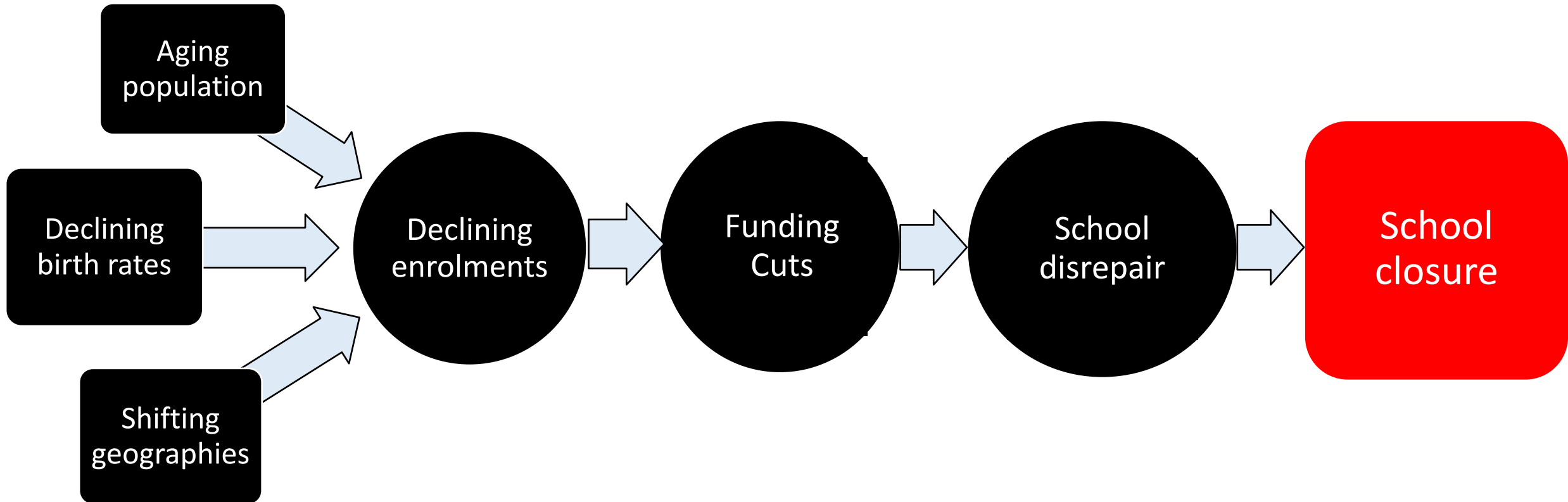
Healthy community characteristics:

1. A common **sense of community**, including its history and values that are strengthened by a network of leaders
2. People and community groups who feel empowered and have a **sense of control**
3. An **absence of divided turf, conflict** and polarization,
4. Structures where people from diverse groups can **come together to work out decisions about the community**
5. Leadership that functions both from the top down and the bottom up,
6. Effective channels for networking, **communication and cooperation** among those who live and lead there.

Processes for Closures



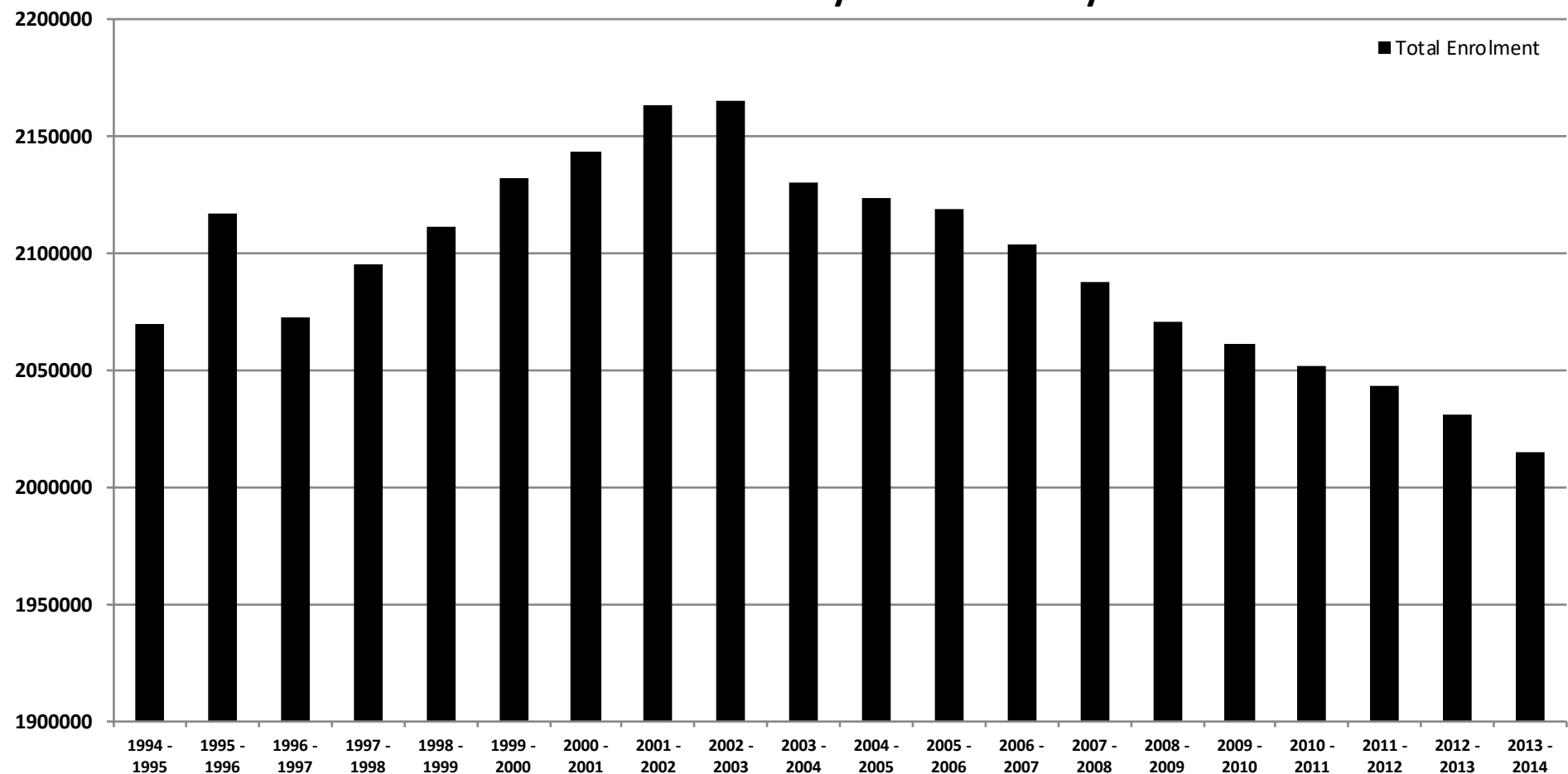
Determinants of School Closures in Ontario





The Looming Challenge of Declining Enrolments

Enrollment in Ontario Elementary and Secondary Public Education





Ontario's School Closure Decision-Making Process

- Ministry of Education's **Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR)** guidelines, applied by board-appointed **Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs)**
- First released in 2006, ARCs mandated to study potential impacts to *students, school board, community, and local economy*
- Revised in 2015
 - ARCs mandated to study impacts to *students and school board* only
 - Less time for PAR, fewer public meetings and community representation on ARCs, and no decision-making authority for ARCs



Conflicting Views of the PAR Model

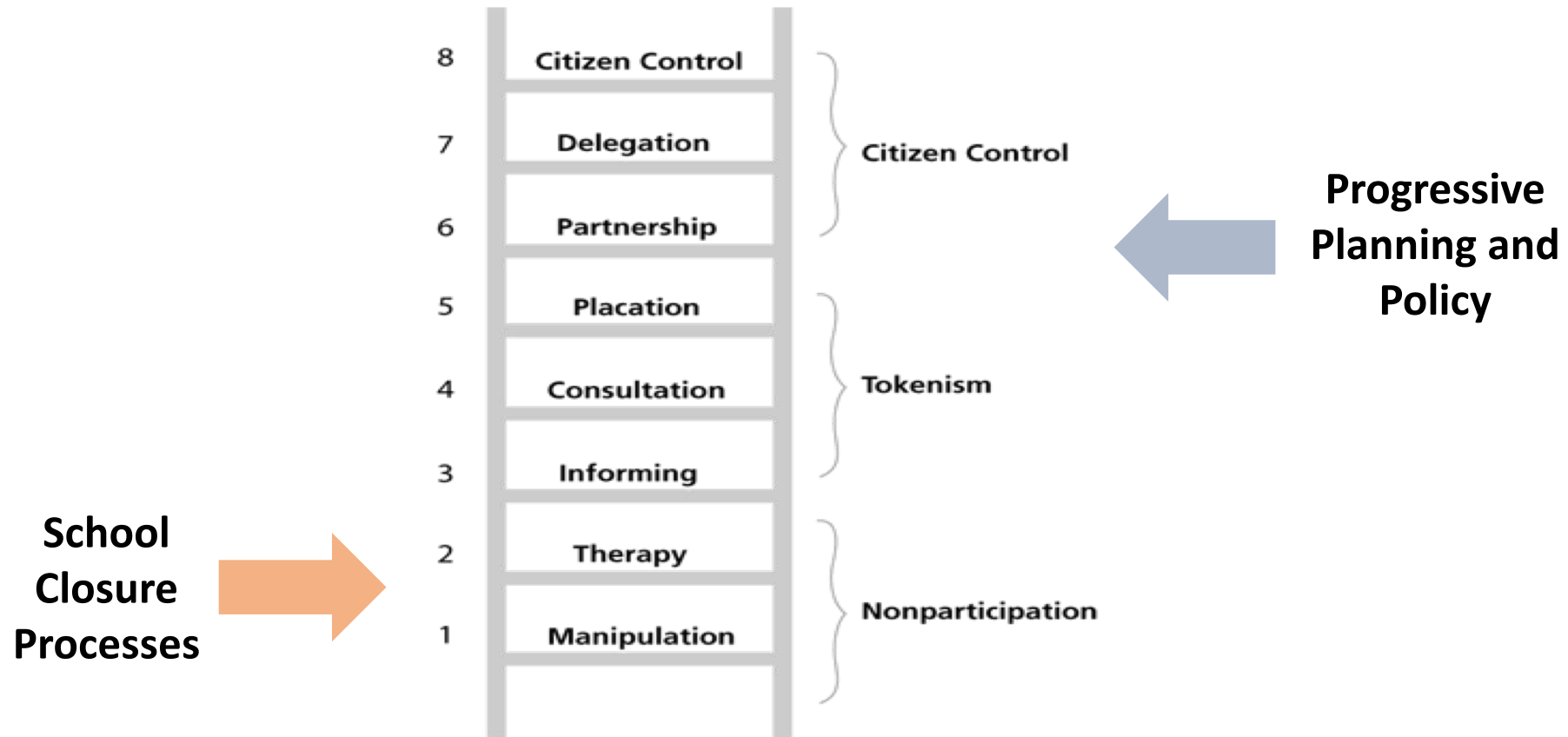
MoE, SCHOOL BOARDS:
Adequately consultative
Creates cost savings for boards
Enhances student learning



COMMUNITIES:
Tokenistic, not collaborative
Creates winners and losers
Threatens community liveability



Situating consultation



Arnstein's Ladder (1969)
Degrees of Citizen Participation



Evaluating the School Closure Process

1. The school closure process **favours** the **institutional position**
2. It **fails** the test of **citizen participation**
3. Champions the **managerial** and **business** approach to school closures (think consolidation!)
4. **Ignores** community **consequences** of school closure

(Irwin 2014)



Reactions from Media

How rural school closures are 'ripping the heart out of the community'

People for Education has forecast 121 closures in Ontario, with the majority in rural areas

News / Toronto

Ontario urged to overhaul 'flawed' approach to funding education

Report says funding formula lies 'at the heart' of core problems in schools, from lack of special education resources to crumbling buildings, and needs urgent fix.

CANADA

June 28, 2017 4:30 pm

Ontario pauses school closure reviews, but 124 schools still on chopping block

By Staff The Canadian Press



School Closures: An understudied phenomenon

- Little formal evaluation of the school closure decision-making process in Ontario
- Short-term economic imperatives vs. the longitudinal societal consequences of the decision
- Decades of research on the long-term educational and psychosocial values of small schools discounted or ignored

Project Objectives

1. To verify the dynamics and shortcomings of existing school review processes as employed by two selected boards in Ontario;
2. To expose the consequences of these processes and the resulting school closures in the four selected communities; and
3. To collectively interpret the implications of these processes and consequences for an improved decision-making model

Scope of Closures

Are deprived communities in Ontario at increased risk for public school closures?

**Results from a socio-spatial analysis of closures
from 2010 to 2017**



Gabrielle Snow, Patricia Collins

Queen's University

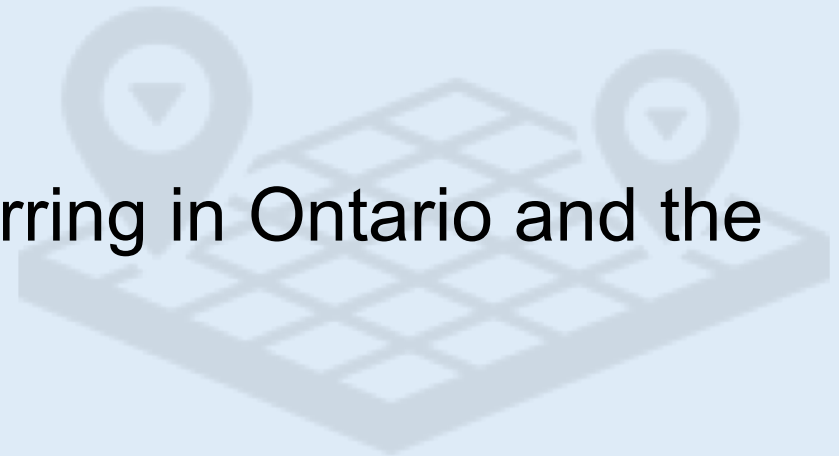
Kingston, Ontario

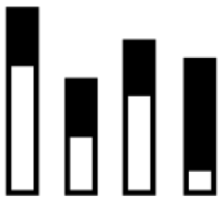


Study Objectives

Create a comprehensive dataset of Ontario public school closures

Understand where closures are occurring in Ontario and the characteristics of affected communities





Study Variables

Ontario Schools

School Status

(Open – Closed)

School Type

(Public – Catholic)

School Language

(English – French)

Publicly-available online
FOI request

Geographic Profiles

CSizeMIZ

'Community size classification, with level of metropolitan influence (MIZ)'

1,500,000 +
500,000 – 1,499,999
100,000 – 499,999
Any CMACA < 100,000
Non-CMACA, Strong MIZ
Non-CMACA, Weak / No MIZ
Non-CMACA, Weak / No MIZ,

PCCF+ generated

Socioeconomic Profiles

Deprivation Index Quintiles 2006

Quintile 1 = least deprived
Quintile 5 = most deprived

Material: education, income & employment

Social: household characteristics & relationship status

National Public Health
Institute of Québec

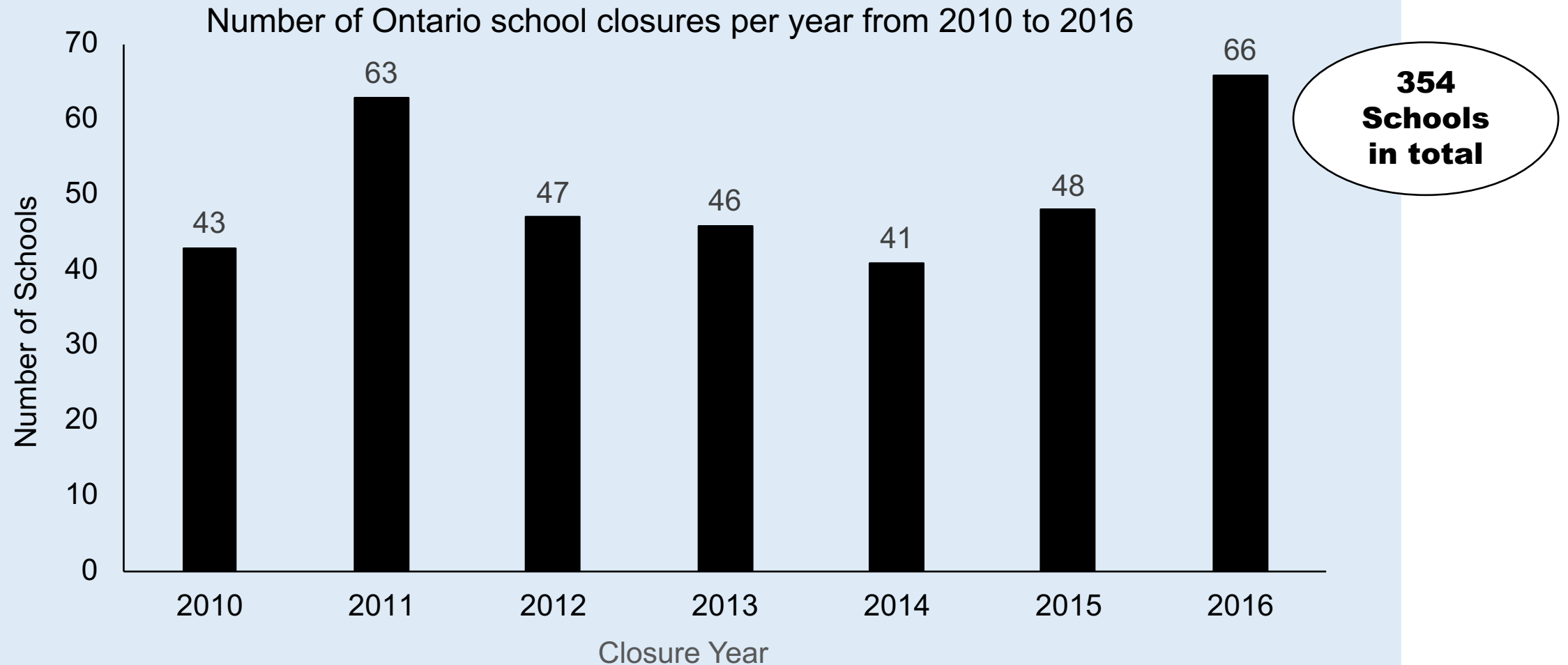


Locations of School Closures in Ontario



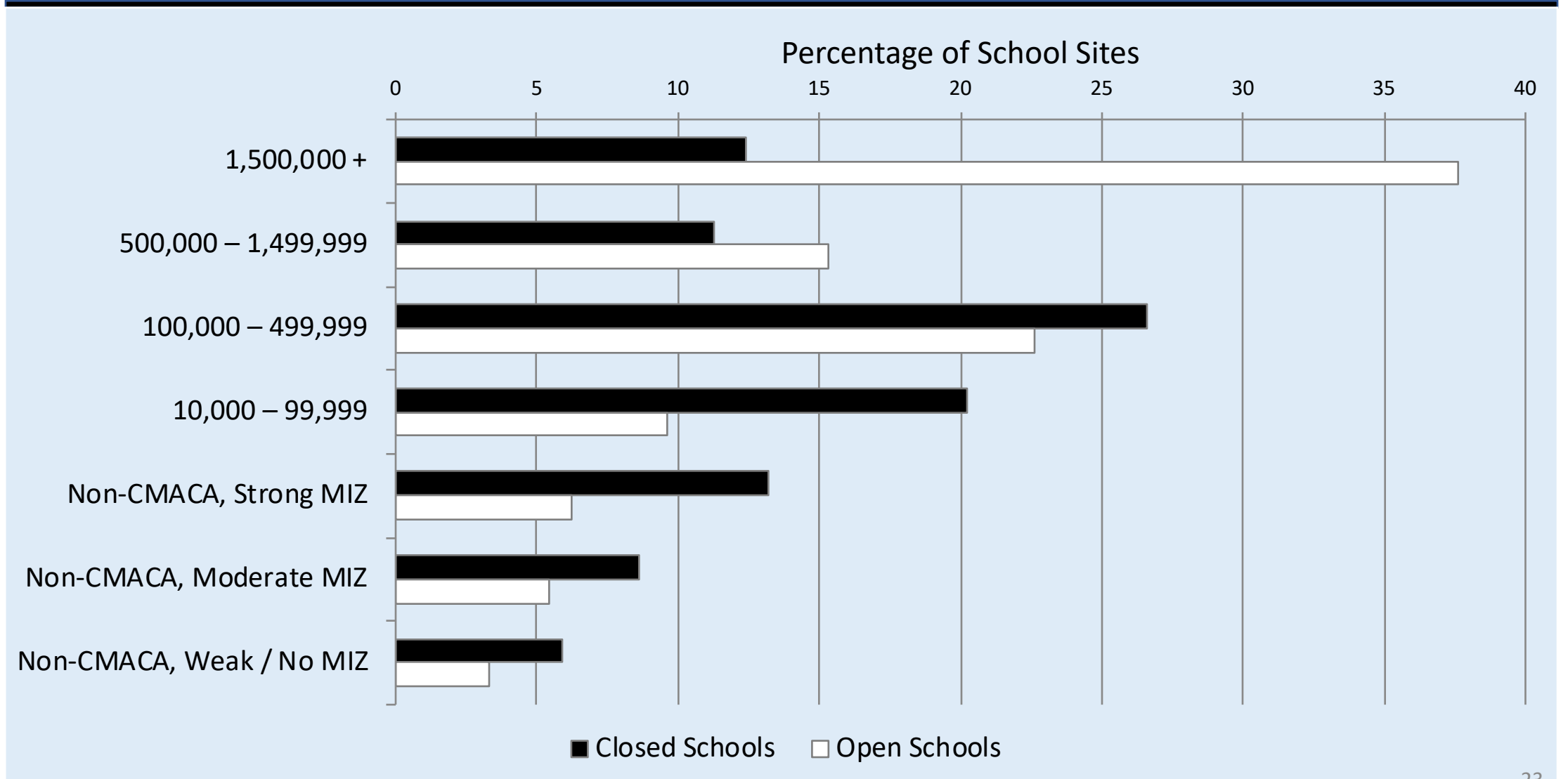


Timing of School Closures in Ontario



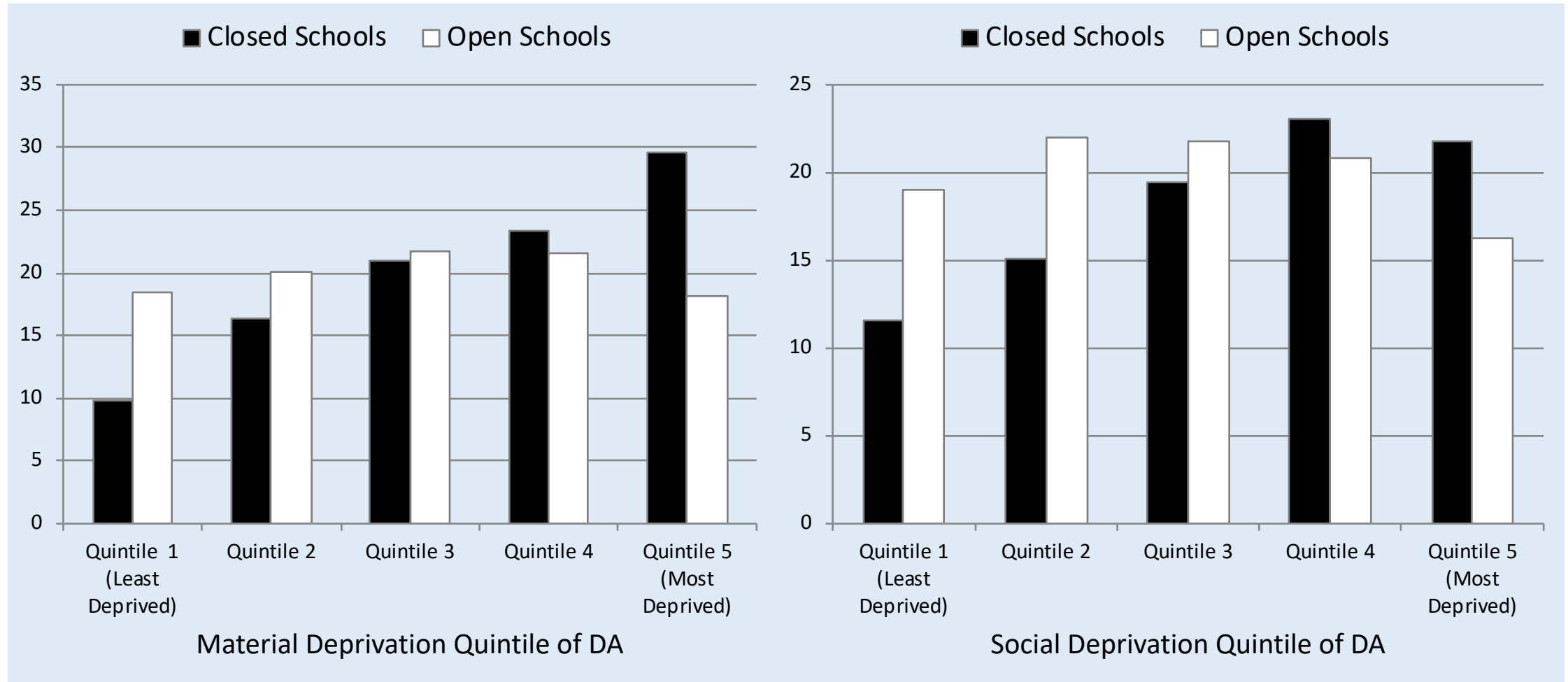


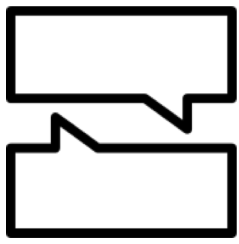
Geographic Profiles of Open and Closed School Communities





Deprivation Profiles of Open and Closed School Communities



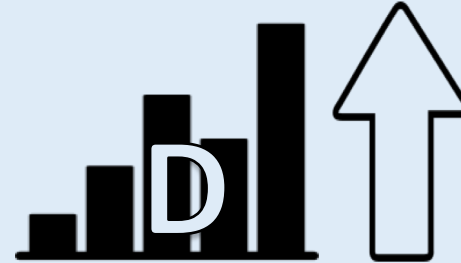


Implications

Small, rural communities disproportionately affected by closures



Larger proportions communities with closed schools in Quintiles 4 and 5



Geography and deprivation quintile are strong predictors of closure status



Closure increases deprivation?



Too early to conclude

Media Coverage



Study Design

- Comprehensive analysis of print and on-line media
- Content analysis based on 80 mutually exclusive variables
- LexisNexis, spanning 2005-2018
- 15 print publications, 4 national media outlets, plus 13 highest circulation newspapers
- 144 newspaper articles reviewed in total



Key Findings

- Media coverage peaks when school closure imminent
- Coverage stops once decision made
- Coverage regionally focused; reflects readership profile/reach
- Consistent tone of neutrality in reporting (not editorials)
- Rural/small town experience under-reported
- Superficial understanding of complex issues (students/parents)



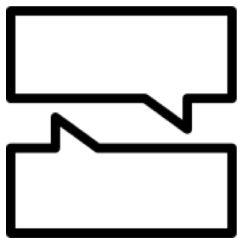
Key Findings

- Question whether/how representative voices are
- Positioning: David (community) versus Goliath (school board)
- Public schools receive most attention (greatest frequency)
- Community consultation highly represented in coverage
- Point of reference: school board policy



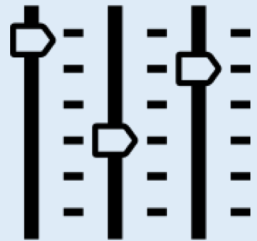
Key Findings

- Parents seek voice; Boards “encourage” (as per policy) but don’t engage meaningfully
- Primary stakeholders’ perspectives dominant
- Loudest voices receive most coverage (i.e. against closure)
- Conversely, those without power under-represented
- Minimal coverage/analysis of policy context – major oversight



Implications for Media Coverage

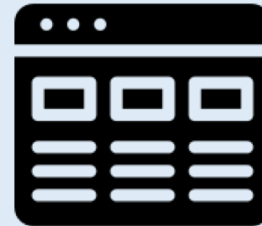
Cannot control, but can inform,
reporting style



Importance of
context and history



Op-eds, letters to editor,
backgrounders, websites



Experiences of Closures



Study Objectives

Explore the consequences of the decision to close Ontario's oldest high school on the current and future liveability of the communities situated within the school's catchment area.





Case Study Context & Methods

Ontario's Oldest High School



Located Downtown Kingston



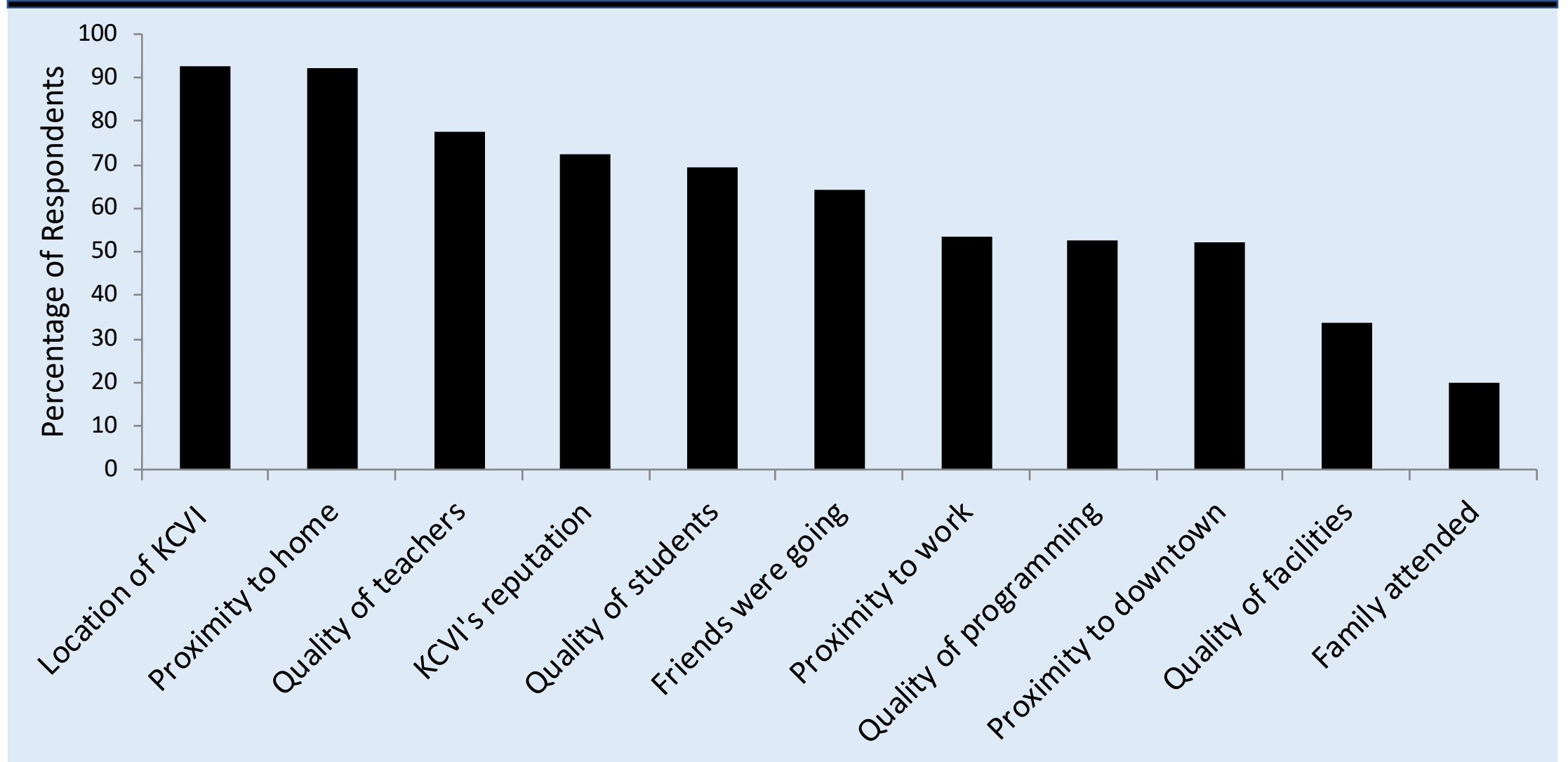
1. PAR is launched in 2011
2. Board decides in 2015 to close KCVI
3. KCVI scheduled to close late 2019/early 2020

Online survey to 4500 households in KCVI catchment area, 10% response rate



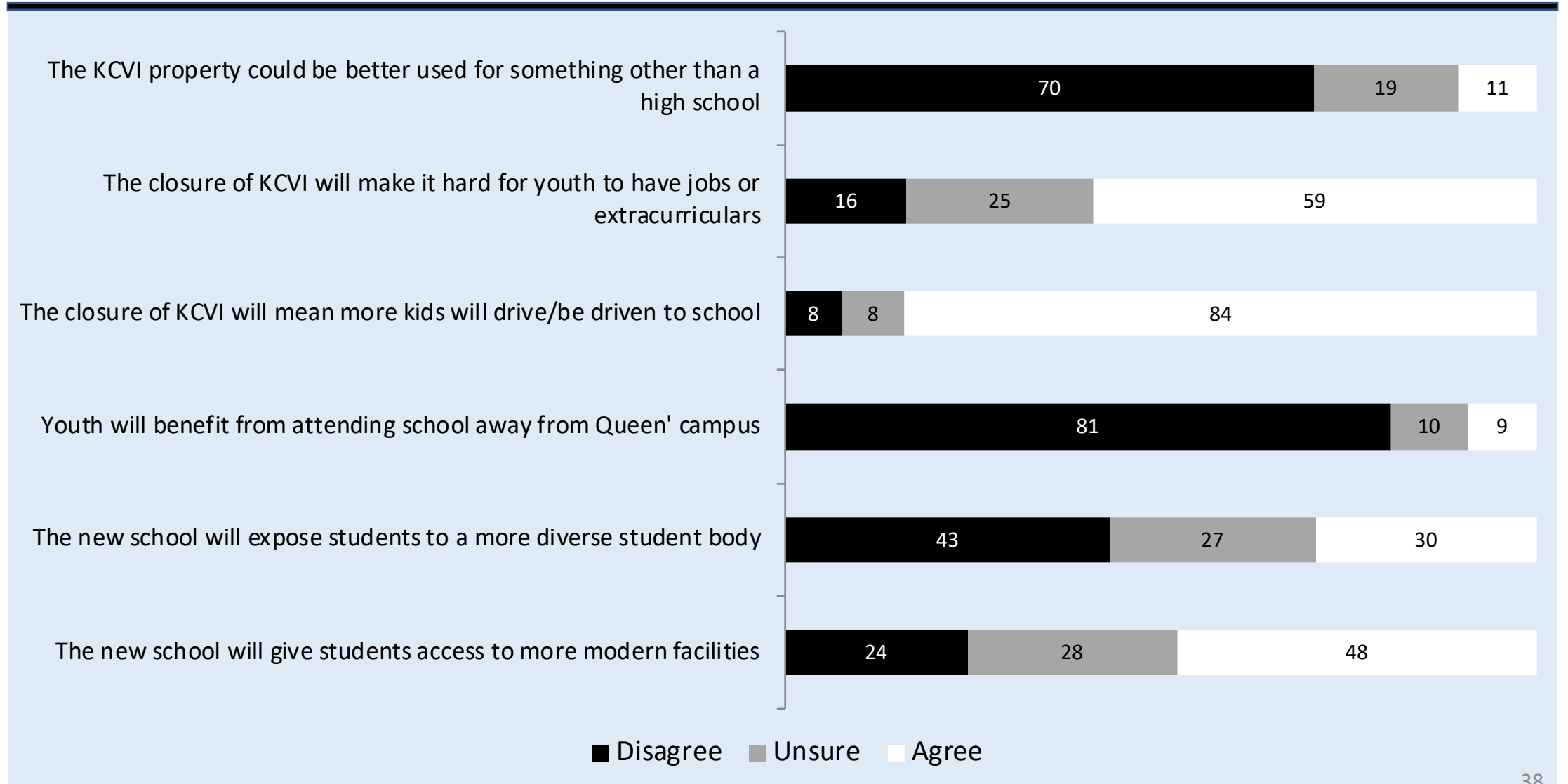


Reasons for Enrolling Children at KCVI





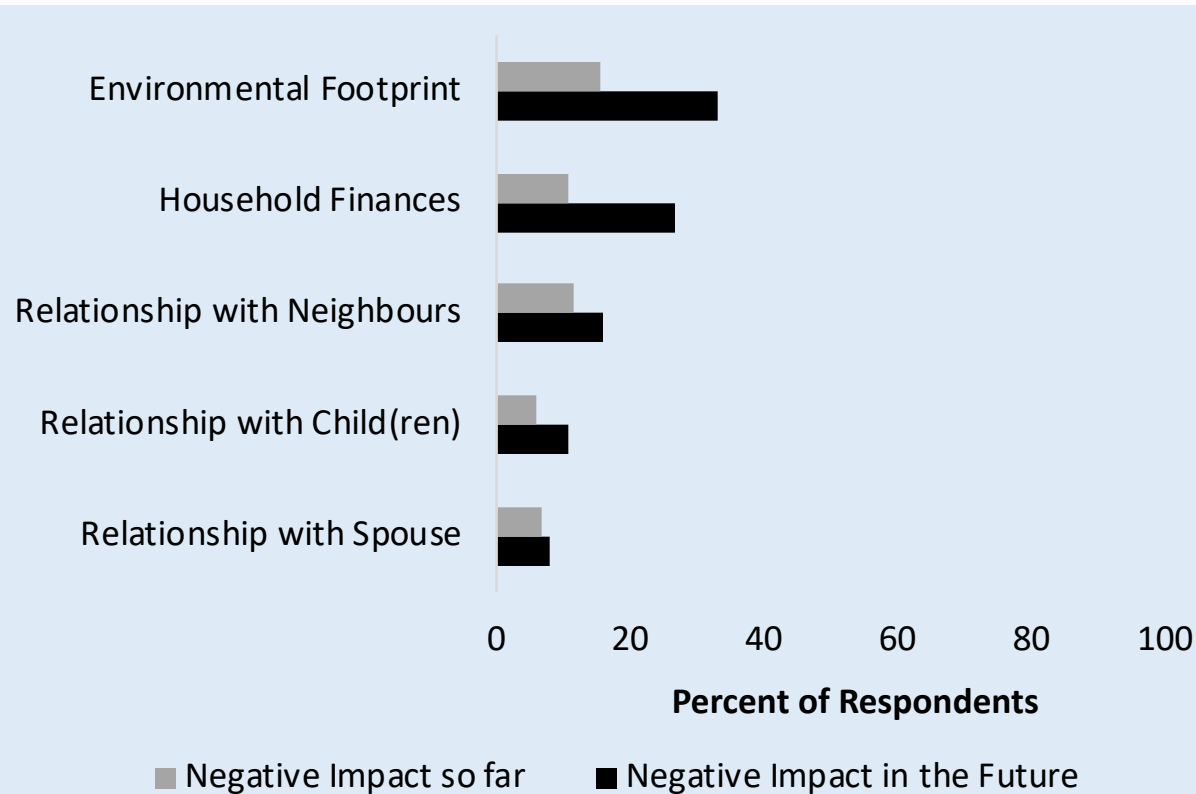
Perceived Implications of KCVI's Closure



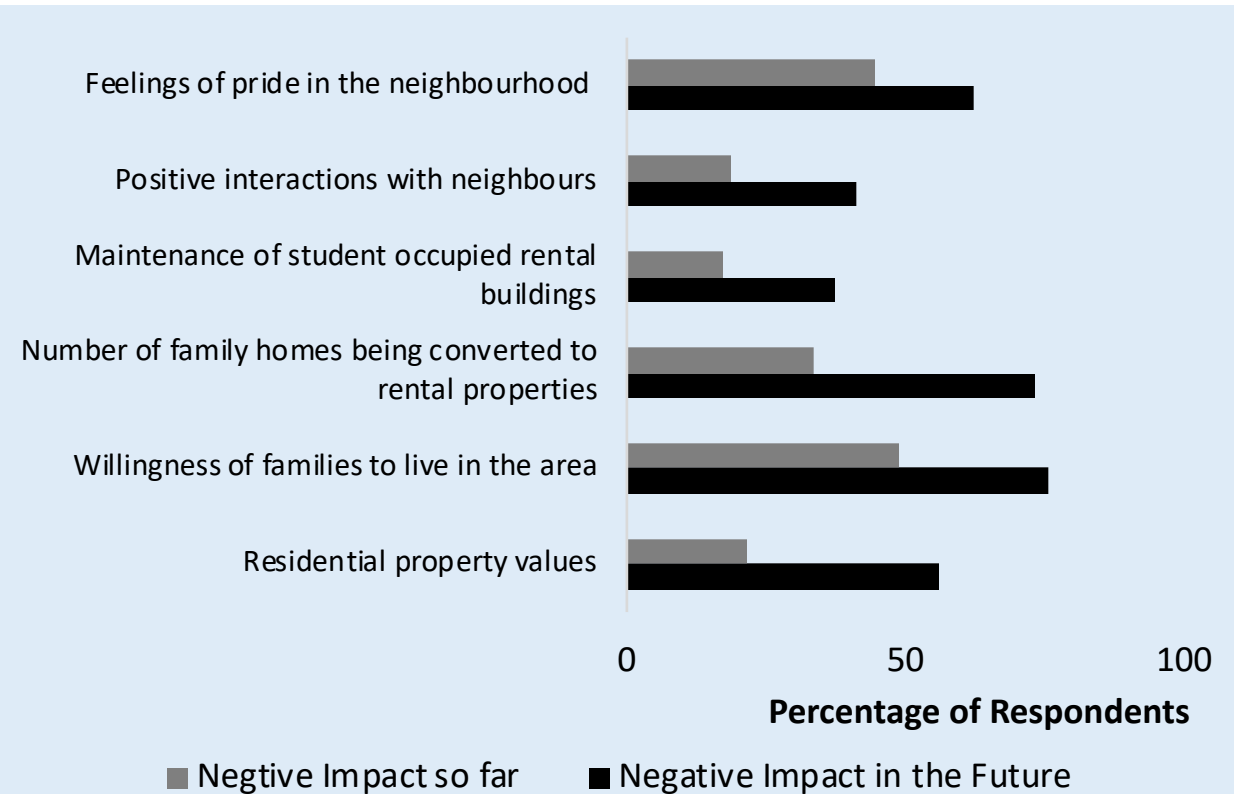


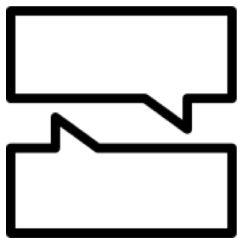
Perceived Impacts of KCVI's Closure

Household-Level Impacts



Neighbourhood-Level Impacts



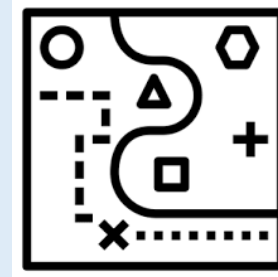


Implications

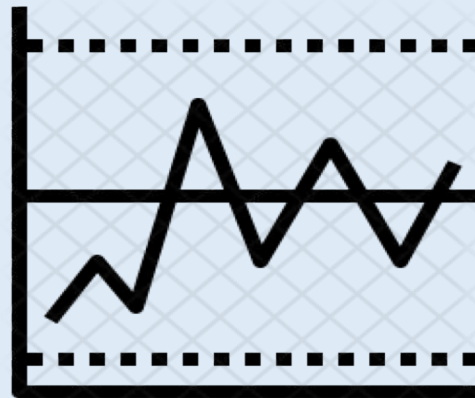
Threats to household well-being



Threats to neighbourhood well-being



Intensity of concerns are variable

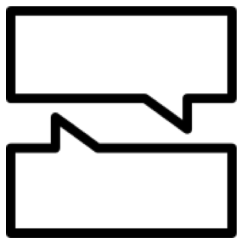


Greater integration of planning



Project Next Steps

1. Dynamics and shortcoming of school review processes → Policy analysis, media analysis, key informant interviews and focus groups
2. Consequences of school closures in four communities → Household surveys and focus groups
3. Collectively develop an evidence-informed decision-making model → Site-level and cross-site workshops



Our Team's 'Hot Takeaways'...so far

School closure policy needs more attention



Impacts, in various contexts, need to be examined



Value of schools to communities needs to be recognized



Need decision-making process that is collaborative, evidence-based



What can planners do?



How do we deal with closures?

- Do we acknowledge crucial role of schools?
- Can we influence the process and outcome?
- When do we intervene?
- Are we working collaboratively? Is this possible? With whom?
- Can a school closure be considered “good planning”?
- Where and how do we start?

Acknowledgements

SSHRC  CRSH



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