

EXECUTIVE SUMMAR

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:

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

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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.

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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.