

Good evening. We would first like to thank the dedicated group of parents and concerned community members that have given up so much family time, especially over the holidays, in order to prepare these presentations within the short time frame provided. We would also like to thank all the DEC members for their continued time, attention, and open-mindedness during this vital part of the sustainability study.

Small but necessary. You will hear this phrase often tonight, and that is exactly what we believe CIS to be. We hope by the end of the evening, you will agree.

CIS is a special place, and our first topic of discussion is the unique quality of education available here. One of benefits to the children of this school is the student-to-teacher ratio, which as we all know, is quite low. We understand that this issue is a double-edged sword, and that the current ratios make the school more expensive to run, but there is much evidence to suggest the value of low student-teacher ratios, specifically in early education. Small class sizes during the early years of a child's education have been shown to have long-reaching benefits throughout that child's life, even if their class sizes increase in middle and high school. Small class sizes early on in a child's life can also be helpful in closing the "achievement gap" that can result between affluent and lower-income students. In addition, there are many social benefits to smaller class sizes, including a better cooperative spirit and student participation. We believe all of these benefits are in evidence at CIS.

At the previous meeting in November, we were presented with class sizes for CIS and CES, as well as those for Lincoln and Geary. While Lincoln and Geary might be considered small rural schools, they differ substantially from CIS in that they are only about 8-10 km from the next nearest school. CIS is much more isolated, with the distance to the nearest schools being between 25-45 km. Also, for some reason we were not provided with the class sizes for the 3 schools in addition to CES that are being considered for CIS students in the event of closure. This information proved hard to come by, as some of the principals are apparently instructed not to share it, even though it seems like something that should be readily available to any interested parent. On further investigation, we found that while in many cases the students from CIS could be absorbed into the other schools with minimal impact, in other cases, the class numbers would approach the maximum allowed by the province. Any teacher can tell you that maximum doesn't mean optimum, and so the students who had previously enjoyed all the benefits of a smaller class size, at both CIS and whatever school they would be sent to, would suddenly find themselves in a much larger class, with less individual attention. The other possibility is that, with the enrolment of just one or two more students, the maximum class size would be exceeded, and another teacher would be required. Since teachers' salaries make up the bulk of the expense of running CIS, it doesn't make much sense to close the school and then just hire more teachers elsewhere.

In fact, we would suggest that in the event of closure, most of the staff here would be dispersed within the district. Combined with the additional bussing expenses required by closure, this may result in little to no actual savings to the district. Considering the greatly increased hardship on young children, families, and the community, this is a point that calls for further research.

One of the other great aspects of the education at CIS is our ability to organize and independently finance a large variety of extracurricular activities. As the NB Dept. Of Education and Early Childhood Development quotes on its website, from a 2010 UNESCO study, "The system must redefine what learning is and reflect that it is not simply classroom based." The administrators and educators at CIS, along with the community of Coles Island understand this, and as a result of our joint efforts, the children at the school are able to participate in numerous cultural, physical, and social extracurricular activities through local fundraising rather than government funding. A noteworthy example of this is the 10 week long swim program, which provides all the children at CIS with this important life skill, regardless of family income or transportation capabilities. And one of the most valuable aspects of CIS is evident in full force during these field trips: Since the whole school can participate together, children of all ages from K-5 build relationships with their younger and older schoolmates, and in the process, they learn important social skills, including respect, patience, and compassion for each other.

Another asset to CIS is the Care & Share program, which is set up within the school, and accommodates 18-20 kids twice a week. The NB Dept. Of Education and Early Childhood Development spent 1.2 million dollars from 2008 to 2011 to create early childhood development centres in response to research and recommendations in early learning and child care. According to the department website,

"The school is often the hub of the community and is known to parents and caregivers. The early childhood development centres will be neighbourhood hubs where children and parents can access existing programs and services under one roof. These sites will provide a venue where families can interact with other parents and forge ties with the education, health, and non-profit sectors in the local community. Having these services within local schools provides opportunities for better integration and transition into schools."

As the Care & Share program currently exists within the school, it provides children and families with many of these opportunities already, and if the government would like to provide additional services, it has a framework within which to do so. It's important to note as well that the Care & Share in Chipman is not directly in the school, and there is no longer one in the Cambridge-Narrows community, so children from that area are already coming to CIS to participate in the Care & Share here.

There is a topic with regard to the quality of education at CIS that has raised a lot of controversy here over the years, and that is the relatively low scoring of CIS students on standardized provincial tests. It would appear that CIS students, despite having all the benefits mentioned earlier, are doing poorly in literacy and numeracy compared to other students in the province. These kinds of numbers have been presented to the community for many years, and there are some parents who believe they reflect the quality of education at CIS and choose to send their children elsewhere as a result. Others who hadn't seen the numbers until they were presented at the meeting in November were shocked and confused by them. In researching this topic, we found a surprising explanation: Since the classes at CIS are relatively small, it is very easy for one test score to skew the results for the whole class. In addition, we discovered that special needs children, who are exempt from taking the tests, are in fact scored as a zero. Why the district would choose to enter a score at all for a child who didn't take the test is a mystery, as it seems that this practice only detracts from any kind of accuracy, and in fact essentially devalues the test results. So as an example, if there are 4 students in a class and one of them is special needs, there is automatically a zero entered for that student, and even if the other students score a respectable 80%, the class average will be 60%. We thought it was important to clarify this issue for everyone here tonight, as it seems that it has caused quite a bit of concern.

On a final note, we would like to suggest that CIS, while offering so many unique educational opportunities already, is also a prime candidate for future-looking programs such as distance learning. This could be an excellent and cost-effective way to provide options to our rural school. For example, in speaking with local residents recently, it seems that French Immersion is highly desired by many here, but in most practical terms, it is simply out of reach for the children in our community. Perhaps distance learning could help bridge the gaps between what is financially feasible in our rural location and what is needed to succeed as working adults in this province.

We'd like to leave you with a quote from the NB Dept. Of Education's Early Childhood Development Agenda:

“We know that the skills and abilities of our young are linked to their personal success and to the success of our society. Therefore, we want to ensure that our children are safe, healthy, and are given the opportunity to learn and develop their abilities, in loving families, supported by caring communities.”

Sounds a lot like Coles Island School, don't you think?