

November 30, 2015

Jean Rooney
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Dear Members of the Anglophone West School District Educational Council,

I am writing to you with deep concern regarding Millville Elementary Community School. As a professional artist, arts educator and a community advocate, I feel passionately about our province and the arts in our community. I understand that we all have an obligation to our children and future generations to empower New Brunswick through great education.

Therefore I wanted to write and set my argument from the perspective of my own experience of Millville as a Beacon and Champion of the arts. This small school is not small by any means in its impact on the arts at large. The Council needs to know that Millville is a unique school held in high regard within the greater arts community of this province. Artists, Arts administrators and Fine Crafters have spent many years building fruitful relationships with the Millville Community through this Elementary School. It is well respected and holds a high reputation amongst the schools in our province as a unique, rich and dynamic environment that exposes the children in an extraordinary way to the arts and culture at an early age. This entire rural community and the children's lives and the participating arts professionals have been enriched and advantaged by being in this specific community school.

As one of these professional artists I have had the privilege of working with Millville as an Artist in Residence for three years, in addition to participating in their arts events for over four years. During that time I got to experience the school and community at large and see first hand the incredible closeness and caring impact of the school upon the entire community. After one visit to MECS it was evident that it stood out from all others. After 18 years experience of delivering art workshops in communities I felt so passionately about this school, I drove over two hours each way to be there and work with them. I did this over the course of 5 months (almost 4 hours travel each day I attended) to give professional and specialized art classes with the children of Millville Community School. In fact the last year we did not receive funding I volunteered to be there and work on a Claymation project. Why did I do this? Because the commitment of this school to the Arts and culture have helped brand Millville community and set it apart from others.

This ambitious scale of art projects at MECS was achievable because of the smaller numbers at Millville and the commitment of the community. There was a depth and higher level of detail to the art projects, which is not attainable with bigger numbers. We created, Claymation films, dry point etchings with a full scale etching press on site, held exhibition openings and the children took part in an art auction. This kind of art project involving professional materials over an extended period is highly sought after by professional artists who want to work to develop social cohesion and act as an incredible

force for developing a community. Millville acts as a force for civic participation in the arts.

A quote from my journal, “ Tonight we held our exhibition opening to showcase the children’s printmaking, about the generations of their community, entitled *The Faces of Millville*, and guess what? A raging success, over 100 people passed through the school in the space of the 2 hours. I was so excited for them!”

Putting this in perspective it is almost one third of the entire population of Millville. One would not expect to see this attendance on an average night at our provincial gallery in a 2-hour period. This community’s exposure, engagement and appreciation for the arts are developing because of this school. It is empowering the community. It is creating a sense of social cohesion. It is reducing isolation by helping people to network and develop socially. It is validating the community and developing intercultural contact and co-operation and contact between generations. The position of this school in its commitment to the arts has contributed to mobilizing the community. The school is a powerful tool in teaching its children leadership and activism. We want these young minds to feel the social impact of participation in their community and the Arts; it is this that will have a significant influence on their feeling of belonging. The arts' position in the school curriculum here at this school symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important.

My concern is a perspective that only considers this as schooling. Schooling on the cheap for other People’s Children. It is about education. I believe the criteria for school closure that is based on numbers and money is not addressing the most important and many complex issues that identify a quality education or a quality school or a quality school district.

I strongly believe that closing Millville is neither in the best interest of this rural community, nor its students. I am asking you to please be more forward thinking and consider the long-term effects of this school closure, rather than just focusing on the short-term bottom line. Closing this school will mean the end of music and arts educational programs for the children in their own community. This sends a message and it gives the children an indication of our willingness to abandon a school that has been there for more than 50 years. A school closure in the Millville community is a vote of no confidence in that rural community.

We all have the same ultimate goals, a quality education for every student. Millville makes a difference especially with student participation in extracurricular activities and in the breath and depth of the student’s engagement with the arts and culture. So why are we not choosing this school as a model school for arts and culture and studying its success instead, so every child in the province can benefit from its success in the arts?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jean Rooney".

Jean Rooney,
Visual Artist