

Questions and Answers regarding school closure

Some of these questions were asked at recent public meetings in the communities of Round Hill, Holden / Ryley or Hardisty. Others have been received via email or letter. All are relevant to the issue of school closure.

If you are looking for answers to questions that are specific to any one of the school communities currently under discussion by the BRSD Board of Trustees (Round Hill, Holden / Ryley or Allan Johnstone School in Hardisty) please check the school closure section of the website that is in that school's name. There is information posted regarding Round Hill and will be information about the other two school communities very soon.

Please note that the school division is answering questions on an ongoing basis. If you do not yet see the answer to your question, please check again in a few days. We are committed to answering all questions and will have them posted as soon as possible.

The questions are divided into the same sections as were used at the Public Meetings:

- Finance
- Buildings
- Transportation
- Educational program
- Staffing
- Other / General

Finance

Question: *Has BRSD considered the cost savings of a four-day week.*

Answer: Yes, we have been looking at that. Right now, our School Division follows basically a 9-day schedule, with students out of class about every second Friday. This allows us to keep up on the Professional Development needs of staff without incurring costs for subs. It also allows us to save a bit on bus driver salaries, wear and tear on buses, etc. Edmonton Public is considering moving to this system as well. Moving totally to a four day week does not provide real savings on instructional staffing, which is the biggest part of our spending, because school staff work the same number of hours, condensed into four days. It does allow us to save on other costs, but we've also been told that it will be harder to recruit bus drivers if the salaries are lower, so that's an important consideration as well.

Question: *Why can't parents pay fees for school? Why can't fees be paid for busing? How can the school division be considering closure of schools at the same time as not charging fees?*

Answer: The Board did not want to bring in school fees in the middle of the school year. But school fees, including fees for busing, are definitely one of the things being considered for next year. Decisions about school fees will be made before the end of June.

Question: *If funding increases after the budget is announced, will that impact any decisions made by you?*

Answer: We have been told not to expect any increase in funding. But if there is, in fact, a funding change for the better, it will certainly impact the decisions we make. We know that the budget is being announced on February 27, so we will have full information available to us shortly after that.

Question: *If you close the school can I expect a decrease in my school taxes to cover the loss of my house value?*

Answer: BRSD has no taxation authority. Education taxes are set by the provincial government and property assessments are made by local municipalities.

Question: *Has the Board considered asking rate payers for temporary taxes to cover shortfalls?*

Answer: The School Division does not have taxation authority. Only the provincial government can do this.

Question: *Who sets the Superintendent's salary?*

Answer: The Board of Trustees.

Question: *How much does Battle River get from property taxes?*

Answer: Property taxes are collected by municipalities and sent to the provincial government. The province then adds those funds to education funding and distributes the funds back to school jurisdictions. The School Division does not get any property tax revenue directly from municipalities.

Question: *Why did you use all the reserves without consulting parents?*

Answer: We were anticipating using only a portion of our reserves for the current school year. In September it became clear that enrollment had dropped further than expected. We were also notified of a nearly \$1 million increase to insurance premiums. We did not receive budget information from the province until 8 weeks after school had started. As a result the Board felt it was necessary to use reserves rather than institute fees or make staffing changes in the middle of the year.

Question: *Why did you decide not to implement school fees?*

Answer: We felt we did not want to institute new fees part way through the school year. But we are definitely considering charging school fees next year.

Question: *Has the board considered all the other administration costs, etc.*

Answer: Yes, the Board is exploring all ways of reducing costs but still providing the best education for students.

Question: *How much is spent on administration of the School Division?*

Answer: We are not permitted to spend more than 3.6% of our overall budget on administration of the school division.

Question: *What can we provide through fundraising or donations? Can we pay for boilers or flooring? Can volunteers do the work?*

Answer: BRSD's Administrative Procedure 107 outlines the items that can currently be provided through fundraising. In general, fundraising and donations can be used to provide items that benefit students' education and are supplemental to the educational program. We will have to ask the provincial government if they would consider allowing fundraised dollars to be used for items like boilers, because the government does provide funding for this purpose. There are legal and liability issues surrounding volunteers doing custodial or maintenance work.

Question: *Is some of the \$4 million deficit caused by having to maintain schools that have been closed in the past?*

Answer: We do continue to incur costs for utilities, insurance and grass cutting.

Question: *Can busing be contracted out? Would this save money?*

Answer: Many school divisions do contract out their school busing. In Battle River we determined that it was more cost effective to own and maintain the buses ourselves, and pay a salary to drivers.

Question: *Does the School Division have to own the school building? Could you rent a building that was privately owned? Would this help save dollars?*

Answer: No. The Board could consider a property that was privately owned. However, savings could be minimal, as we would not receive funding to cover a rental payment.

Question: *How can we guarantee that there has been no mis-management of funds? Should we ask for an audit?*

Answer: Battle River School Division is required by law to have an external audit every year. Our fiscal year-end is August 31 and our audit information must be submitted to government by the end of November. The last audit results are posted on our website.

Question: *How many management bonuses were paid from the \$4 million?*

Answer: None.

Question: *Where did the reserve dollars come from that we have been relying on?*

Answer: The School Division has a policy which requires us to keep between 1 and 5 percent of our budget aside to offset any emergent needs. We have used up the funds available. We also had dollars set aside for planned expenditures, such as technology upgrades, that we have used to offset our instructional deficit.

Question: How much money is left in reserves?

Answer: About \$60,000 in the Division's Operating Reserves.

Question: *Is the main way that closing schools saves money because it would mean you need less staff?*

Answer: Yes. We would have some savings on utilities and maintenance of buildings, but the primary savings would be in staffing.

Question: **If there was funding for an after-school program, could it be done?**

Answer: Yes. The School Division does not operate after school programs, but has made the school building available in several communities, for local groups to offer this service.

Buildings

Question: *If the division is concerned about rural education, why do we close the rural schools and then plan to turn around and spend millions of dollars building new schools in Tofield and Camrose?*

Answer: Battle River does not provide the dollars to build new schools. This is managed by the provincial government. We have requested replacement of two schools (CW Sears and Charlie Killam) but have not received approval for our request. Both schools are highly utilized and have had multiple modulars attached over the years.

Question: *How much will it cost to upgrade the schools that would be receiving additional students, if some schools are closed?*

Answer: We do not anticipate significant upgrading will be required at any of the receiving schools.

Question: *What happens to a school building after it is closed?*

Answer: When a school is closed, the school division meets with the local municipal authorities and asks how they would like the school division to dispose of the property. Sometimes the municipality wishes to take on the building and sometimes they suggest the building be sold. In other cases, the local government requests that the building be demolished. Whatever the wish of the municipality, BRSD then makes that request of the Alberta government and waits for permission to move forward. It can be a slow-moving process.

Question: *There's a playground in our school yard? What would happen to it?*

Answer: Typically, the School Division would continue to maintain the playground until such time as the equipment was past its useful life, or until the school site was sold.

Educational Program

Question: *I'm concerned that if my children go to a different school they will be in a big class.*

Answer: We are really conscious of class sizes and work hard to keep them reasonable. Students will be in larger classes than they are now but, even though the provincial government no longer provides funding based on class size guidelines we try to maintain reasonable sizes.

Question: *How will you meet my child's specialized learning needs in a bigger school?*

Answer: Wherever they go to school, we work to ensure the supports are in place to ensure students' needs get met.

Question: *If our school closes, what would be the transition plan for students?*

Answer: Students would have the opportunity to visit their new school, meet the staff and students, tour the building and get acquainted. Parents would have the opportunity to do this as well.

Question: *When there was a population problem (low enrollment) in Camrose, you made the decision to look at the boundaries and enforce this. You also brought in pre-K programs and full day, every day Kindergarten. What have you done for rural schools that face the same challenge?*

Answer: The population problem in Camrose was not low enrollment, it was high enrollment. Elementary school attendance boundaries were enforced because several schools could not accommodate more students. The school division also moved grade 6 students from their elementary schools to a centralized middle school, in order to ensure there was enough space at the elementary level. Now that school populations in Camrose have been balanced out, the attendance boundaries have been opened up. BRSD did offer pre-K programs in five schools (four in Camrose and one in Tofield) and also pilot full day, every day Kindergarten in two schools but, based on funding realities, will likely not be able to offer those options in the same way next year.

Question: *Can the School Division make better use of technology in order to offer classes to students?*

Answer: Battle River does offer programming through video conferencing, as well as through Battle River Online School. Many high school students have been served this way. But not all students find online learning opportunities beneficial and it is important to ensure we are also able to have teachers in front of students, in order to meet their learning needs. In addition, many core classes have components that are best done in person, such as the lab components of Biology or Chemistry, or the debate aspects of Social Studies.

Question: *How do you plan to ensure kids don't fall through the cracks in a bigger school? In my small school, everyone knows and supports my child.*

Answer: Staff Collaboration Days create an ongoing opportunity for staff to meet together and talk about the needs of students and how staff can work together to ensure those needs are met.

Transportation

Question: *How do you transport students with special needs?*

Answer: *If the student requires specialized transportation, such as a wheelchair accessible bus, we make one available to them. If the student requires additional support, such as an aide to accompany them on the bus, we will provide that. This service can be available no matter what school a student attends.*

Question: *What are the guidelines for bus ride times?*

Answer: The province of Alberta does not have a guideline for bus ride times. In Battle River, we are always working to make bus routes as efficient as possible. We do not currently start any bus routes prior to 7:00 a.m.

Question: *How many students do we need to get into this school to save it? Can we bring students in to this school that should be attending here but are going other places? Can we bring them back?*

Answer: The Board of Trustees has established Critical Minimum Enrollment guidelines to help ensure that schools have adequate student numbers to support the costs of operating. We cannot dictate where people choose to have their children attend school – Alberta promotes freedom of choice.

Question: *By closing the school you would be telling us we can't have the school we choose. How can you tell us where to send our students?*

Answer: We are not telling you what schools to send your students to. We are presenting a suggestion for which schools students might be directed to if your school were not open, but whether or not you choose to have your children attend that school is up to you.

Question: *If you are adding bus routes to go to other schools how much are you losing in transportation costs?*

Answer: As there are existing bus routes to take high school students from two of the areas under discussion to other schools, we would not be adding any additional buses or incurring any additional transportation costs. Bus routes would be redesigned in the Holden / Ryley area and we do not anticipate adding any routes in order to continue serving those communities.

Question: *If we take our children in the morning, can they still ride the bus home? Will there be help for the little ones when transferring to a new bus? What happens if they get on the wrong bus?*

Answer: Yes, students are welcome to ride the bus home, even if you drive them to school in the morning. Most students do not have to transfer from one bus to another – their bus usually takes them directly from their pick-up location to their school. If students do have to transfer, or even when they are getting on the bus at school, both school staff and bus drivers are always on hand to help ensure students get on the right bus.

Staffing

Question: *Why so much central office staffing and so called “specialists”.*

Answer: Battle River School Division has many schools that do not have the student numbers to support full-time “specialists” in areas such as literacy, numeracy, career counselling, technology or inclusive education support. Several schools used to have a small increment allocated in their budget, and some had no allocation at all. But our school division believes that all students should have access to the services they need, regardless of the size of their school. In order to ensure that access, the school division pooled all the allocations together and created some full-time positions that could support the entire division. Due to the fiscal realities we are experiencing, positions such as Literacy Lead, Numeracy Lead, Educational Technology, have been eliminated this year.

Question: *Do we need overload of staff at administration or repair?*

Answer: We do not feel there is excessive staff anywhere in the division. Even so, all schools and departments have been asked to plan for an 8% reduction in funding for next year.

Question: *What division-wide positions have been reduced? How many positions have been added?*

Answer: In the last two school years, we have reduced about 11 positions from Division Offices, which is a reduction of about 26%. The reductions have included one Assistant Superintendent, a Director and an Accounting Clerk, as well as several positions from the Learning department. There used to be 40 staff in Division Office and now there are 29. We’ve also reduced a position in each of the Facility, Technology and Transportation offices. We have not added staff, although we have hired people to fill existing positions that became vacant.

Question: *Have you considered sharing administration between smaller schools as a cost-saving option?*

Answer: This option was used for a few years in the Bawlf / Rosalind area. BRSD is willing to look into the possibility of doing this again.

Question: *Will superintendents or other division staff get a pay cut?*

Answer: it is not our intention to cut the salaries of any employee group. However, it’s possible we may be ordered by the provincial government to do this.

Question: *How much did it cost to have 14 Admin to direct the Board tonight?*

Answer: Each of the staff people who attended the public meetings are paid a monthly salary. It did not cost the school division any additional dollars for them to be present.

Question: *Do we need all of the Educational Assistants we have?*

Answer: Educational Assistants support the specific needs of students – both for learning and physical care. Their role is important.

Question: *Can support staff be volunteers?*

Answer: We welcome volunteers to do some tasks, yes. But many support staff roles are not appropriate for volunteers.

Question: *Why don't Principals teach? Why were there no Principals in classrooms for years? How did those extra teachers get paid for?*

Answer: In all but our largest schools, Principals are also classroom teachers part of the time. However, the Province of Alberta is implementing new Leadership Quality standards, that have come into effect this fall. We felt it was important to provide learning opportunities for our Principals, so they could be prepared for the new expectations and meet those standards. For two school years we kept Principals out of classrooms, in order to provide more learning time for them. We set aside dollars for this purpose. Principals have been back in classrooms again since the fall of 2018.

Other /General

Question: *Would there be a choice of what school my children would attend?*

Answer: Each school would continue to have attendance boundaries and students would have a "designated" school based on where they live. But, as is currently the case, every family can make its own decisions about what school their children actually attend.

Question: *Is the number of Trustees going to decrease if schools close?*

Answer: The Board of Trustees has already voted to reduce the number of people on the school board from eight to five at the time of the next election. That's a reduction of 37%. This will happen whether schools close or stay open.

Question: *Why not consider joining two school boards together to save on staffing, etc?*

Answer: This is not a decision that Battle River School Division can make, but would be a decision of the provincial government. Currently, Alberta has three main school systems: Public, Catholic and Francophone.

Question: *We want an opportunity to present our view on school closure.*

Answer: We are welcoming presentations at the Board Meeting on February 27th, 2020. Those interested in presenting were to contact Shirley Fairall by February 13 to make arrangements. We will also welcome people to share written submissions (either by email or letter) right up until the end of the day on March 18, 2020.

Question: *How can you show declining enrollments over the last ten years, where has the preparation for this been over the last ten years? Now all at once you are closing three schools. What is the long term plan? This seems like a knee-jerk reaction.*

Answer: We've been told about minimum enrollment over the last four years and tried to do our best. We have sent Critical Minimum Enrollment letters every fall to the schools who fell below the CME numbers. This fall we also sent letters to all high schools with a population of less than 75 students. We have used reserves to keep small schools going, and we've also worked with the Alberta School Boards Association Rural Caucus, which includes 40 other school divisions, to lobby government for a different funding model for rural schools. We've made reductions in many areas. But this year the cost issues we are facing are very substantial.

Question: *With the increased cost in insurance charges are you shopping around for a different insurance company.*

Answer: Yes, we are. On Monday, February 3, Board Chair Norm Erickson and Assistant Superintendent Imogene Walsh attended a meeting with other school boards to look at a new provider but it is not as easy as you think.

Question: *Was the school closed in Sedgewick after the fire?*

Answer: Not permanently. The school was closed for several weeks in order for smoke and water damage to be cleared. Students attended classes in trailers on the school grounds. Elementary students were able to move inside in November and we expect the junior / senior high students to be back inside in about April.

Question: *Can you contact the Minister of Education and say we want money to stay open? If we wanted to live in the city we would be living in the city.*

Answer: School boards have lobbied the last three provincial governments for a different funding model for rural education. Reps of our Board, and our Superintendent, met with the Minister of Education and our MLA on Monday, February 3 to share our realities.

Question: *Is closing this school really going to make a difference? Why not look at increasing funds not just decreasing costs?*

Answer: The Board has had many discussions on how to keep students in Battle River School Division, especially at the high school level. We are trying to understand why they leave, provide the options and opportunities they need in order to stay and continue to look for solutions. But the reality is that there are less students overall, throughout rural Alberta and that means we have fewer dollars as well. We need to look at all possible alternatives in order to reduce costs.

Question: *With low enrollment in older grades, would moving junior high grades and keeping elementary here be an option? Young kids on buses for hours is not ideal.*

Answer: This is an option the Board could consider.

Question: *Are you prepared to lose kids to other school divisions or private schools? Actions speak louder than words. Do you care about my kids or dollar signs?*

Answer: We are trying to find solutions to the enrollment issues that will ensure all BRSD students are well served. We hope those solutions will make people want to stay in Battle River schools, but we recognize that everyone is free to make the choice that works best for their family. We care very much about your kids – and all kids. If this conversation were only about dollars it would be simple. We've been subsidizing small schools for many years because we want to support our rural schools and communities.

Question: *Is it not possible to do a combination of solutions rather than just one?*

Answer: Yes. It will be necessary to do a combination of things to meet our \$4 million shortfall. There is no single \$4 million solution.

Question: *Has it been looked at how "school of choice" has damaged our attendance levels? What does it cost a "school of choice" student to attend a non-designated school?*

Answer: We are aware there are families in every attendance area who choose to have their children attend a different school. Alberta is a "school of choice" province, which means we cannot mandate which school a child attends. The only time we could refuse to have a child attend a non-designated school is if the school was full. In Battle River, we do not provide transportation for a student to attend a non-designated school, unless they meet a bus enroute or pay a fee, so there are no additional costs to our school division for a child to attend a non-designated school.

Question: *What about other alternatives instead of school closure? I would bet that the people who voted that way aren't affected by the result.*

Answer: The alternative to school closure is keeping the schools open. We shared information at each of the public meetings about how the school staffing could look next year if the school remains open. We are also asking every school and department to reduce their spending by 8%.
In addition, there may be changes in programming considered for other schools. Any other changes that are going to be made for next year will be announced by the end of June.

Question: *Have you ever considered the impact that closing a school will have on a community or the businesses? Do you know that you will kill our community if you do this?*

Answer: We recognize there are many aspects to the decision of closing a school. As a rural school division, we want to be supportive of rural areas. But we also recognize that rural communities have fewer people than they used to have. Fewer students means fewer dollars. Our primary focus must be on ensuring we can provide quality educational programs for all students. We cannot make decisions based on the number of buildings we want to operate.

Question: *Why was Policy 15 changed at the same meeting these potential school closure motions were passed?*

Answer: The Board is reviewing all of its policies, to make sure everything is in line with the new Education Act that came into effect last fall. Plus, we made additional updates to Policy 15 to reflect the fiscal realities of how many students are required to ensure adequate programming is available at a school. The potential school closure motions were made based on the guidelines of the former policy.

Question: *We feel we haven't had enough notice for this. Why is it moving so fast?*

Answer: The school division has been sharing information about its realities for some time. Two of the schools under consideration have received notice of being below the critical minimum enrollment numbers for several years. All the schools under consideration were notified last November that changes could be considered. After the motions are voted upon on March 19, there are still a number of decisions and actions required. If the Board votes "yes" to these closures / consolidations, there are many staffing and transition issues to work out before the end of the school year. Whether the Board votes "yes" or "no" to these closures / consolidations, there are many other decisions that will have to be made, in order to achieve a \$4 million reduction in spending starting next school year.