



Planning for Student Accommodation: A Primer on School Board Planning

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School board planning is a delicate balancing act influenced by evolving land use policy and political mandates, but centred on providing sustainable, appropriate, and fiscally responsible accommodation solutions to students across the province. Establishing where publicly funded school boards provide school-facility accommodation for millions of students is a core responsibility of school board planners and other officials, and typically includes projecting student enrolment, optimizing facility capacity and utilization, and striving to harmonize these variables through dynamic accommodation planning.

Recognizing and adjusting projections and accommodation plans for transitions in land use planning and the emerging settlement patterns, alongside demographic change, is an exercise enhanced through synergic relationships with municipal partners, the development industry, community organizations, and other stakeholders.

The Province's 2018-2046 population projections outline a familiar reality for planners across Ontario: a population pyramid characterized by an aging boomer generation, where negative or minimal natural increase is supported by migration and immigration to facilitate overall population growth. As the demographic characteristics and needs of communities change and evolve, school boards face increasing pressure to maintain facilities and preserve or enhance access to educational and programming opportunities. A significant number of school facilities across the province were located and constructed based on settlement patterns from over 50 years ago, and this has resulted in an imbalance between supply and demand – the locations of school facilities and student populations are not always in alignment.

School board planners typically have a range of options available in their planning toolkit to facilitate permanently addressing or temporarily mitigating student accommodation needs. Attendance area or boundary reviews can re-designate portions of a catchment area to assist with balancing enrolment and available facility capacities, while identifying and redirecting areas of planned residential development can provide interim accommodation during periods of expected growth and capital investment. Portable or modular classroom structures placed on existing school sites can be used to supplement existing space while longer-term student accommodation solutions are developed and implemented. As the province-wide moratorium on pupil accommodation reviews remains in place, school boards are without the ability to contemplate school consolidations or closures as a means to reducing sub-optimally located school facilities in poor condition or with surplus space.

To advance the efficiency and effectiveness of student accommodation planning in a time of province-wide transition and growth, school boards are in need of connected and community-based approaches to student accommodation planning best facilitated through interdisciplinary and multi-jurisdictional collaboration, open communication, and transparency.

PLANNING ACROSS THE VALLEY

Not so long ago, Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB), a district covering approximately 7,000 square kilometres, could be characterized as a school board with declining student enrolment and a surplus of unused space in a number of school facilities. More recently, a different picture has begun to emerge, one that has resulted directly from the changes brought about by a demographic shift occurring across southwestern Ontario. Migration and immigration to the London Census Metropolitan Area and Census Agglomerations across Oxford County are key drivers behind the current trends in population growth, economic stability, and a strong development industry.

The TVDSB includes a vast geographic area with diverse landscapes, including urban areas and prime agricultural lands, which are locally governed by two single-tier, three county-level upper-tier, and 23 lower-tier municipal governments. Without a formal regional governance structure (or structures), it is challenging to efficiently collect data and develop long-term accommodation plans fully appreciative of local context for Thames Valley's 159 elementary and secondary schools. To encourage iterative and progressive student accommodation planning across this large district, a key question is used to explore the system-wide school facility needs through a student accommodation planning lens: *What does TVDSB need, for what purpose(s), in which locations, and in what timeframe?*


Responding to this question as a school board alone is challenging;

however, capitalizing on the expertise, knowledge, and observations of planning colleagues and other professionals across the district and beyond has proven invaluable to the planning team at Thames Valley.

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PlanED: A LOCAL INITIATIVE

In August 2019, TVDSB welcomed over 40 planning professionals from across southwestern Ontario to participate in an interactive workshop focused on knowledge-sharing, reciprocal learning, and relationship-building. In partnership with staff from Watson & Associates Economists Ltd., WSP, the City of London, Elgin County, and a team of academic researchers, attendees had the opportunity to learn about school board accommodation planning, local growth-management strategies, and development trends and engage on the topics of perceived impacts of school closures and future professional collaboration opportunities.

With London as the host city for OPPI's 2020 Conference: Finding a Place in Evolving Communities, TVDSB looks forward to welcoming planners from across the province to the district and connecting with colleagues at the interactive session *Managing Space, Recognizing Place and Having What It Takes: The Realities and Challenges of School Board Planning at Thames Valley.* 



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