2010

Northern Alberta Development Council
Rural and Remote Education Report

Government of Alberta

Northern Alberta Development Council

Contents

Executive Summary

Small school closures throughout rural and remote communities in northern Alberta are a growing worry among northern stakeholders. As such, the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) has heard concerns about the sustainability of rural and remote education in Alberta's north.

The intent of this report is to identify the challenges facing northern school divisions and possible programming alternatives. The report is based on data collected from interviews with 11 northern school division superintendents and staff, community survey responses, and a literature review on rural and remote primary/middle school (kindergarten-grade 9) education. Demographic forecasts for the region derived from Alberta Education's *Student Population Projection and Teacher Forecasting Model* are also included.

Based on the school division interview results, school administrators have growing concerns about the province's student funding formula and the inequalities that it promotes between rural and urban students. Secondary challenges identified by the divisions included declining student enrolment and engagement, lack of interest by staff in careers in school administration and governance issues within school systems. Increasing student transportation times were also of concern. With up to 14 northern schools facing uncertain futures, transportation times are likely to become even longer.

Communities, however, were more concerned about student welfare and engagement. They were also aware of the likelihood of school closures within their community and the potential negative effects on the community. Dissatisfaction with student transportation times was also raised through the community surveys.

The Alberta Education *Student Population, Teacher Workforce Projection Model* generated a series of scenarios for each northern school division for this year (2010) and for future years (2012, 2022). The results predicted by the model show overall declining fertility rates, student enrolment and high out-migration. All of these factors have the potential to contribute to increases in school closures and the centralization of schools in small towns throughout rural and remote regions of the north. Essentially, the model confirms many of the challenges and concerns voiced by stakeholders.

In order for northern small schools to remain viable and continue to deliver high quality education opportunities, they will need to adapt. Several best practices for rural and remote schools were identified both locally and internationally in the report. In response to the importance of literacy and numeracy, many northern school divisions have invested in professional development and additional aids for students in grades Kindergarten to three. The investment has proven profitable, as numerous school divisions have improved literacy achievement, and in turn overall student performance, throughout their schools.

The importance of literacy translates well into the paradigm presented by Alberta Education in their vision for learning in *Inspiring Education* (2010). The evolving role of technology and community support in rural and distance learning is also apparent alternative programming for northern classrooms.

The following are a selection of recommendations from the report. These are some of the possible improvements to rural and remote education that the NADC could pursue:

- Make adjustments to the *Northern Student Teacher Bursary* to improve relevancy and to include school administration experience to build capacity.
- Help communities promote themselves and the quality of life they offer in order to retain and attract residents. Also help communities and school divisions to find a common direction and facilitate their partnership.
- Engage families in education to improve student participation rates. Focus on growing populations and the incorporation of their culture into the school environment and curriculum.
- Encourage cooperation between communities and school divisions to fill empty infrastructure space in underutilized schools.
- Facilitate post-secondary training and recruitment of special needs service providers. This includes professionals and assistants. By securing these positions within a division, student achievement will increase, teacher workload (and stress) will decrease and they will help promote an inclusive school environment. This could be an extension or partner of the *Northern Student Teacher Bursary* program.

In addition to implementing recommendations based on this report's findings, there is the potential to explore further details of rural and remote education issues in the north. This report does not investigate high school issues, or those of northern urban centers (Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray). Supplemental views from northern students, school board trustees and other educational professionals on rural and remote education in the north could also be useful.

Introduction

Building strong and vibrant communities and providing the necessary infrastructure to meet the growing needs of the economy and population are two priorities of the Government of Alberta. Improving rural and remote education in northern Alberta is part of these priorities. In April 2010, the *Inspiring Education* Steering Committee presented the province with Albertans' vision for education. The large investment by Alberta Education in this initiative demonstrates their commitment to improving education for all Albertans. This should include those in rural, remote and northern regions of the province.

Within the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) jurisdiction, education is a key public service. But it can present special challenges for providers in northern rural and remote communities. These community schools struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff and special needs professionals, transport students millions of kilometers each school year and fund/staff specialized and optional programming to keep students engaged and on the cusp of educational developments. In spite of the challenges rural schools face, the subsequent closure of one of these schools undoubtedly impacts the community. Increased transportation times for students and the loss of important services and infrastructure for the community are only some of many possible effects on a community following a small school closure.

Since 2006 the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) has heard from northern leaders and stakeholders that the implications of small school closures in northern communities are of concern. This report focuses on school division and community concerns with the current state of northern education. By exploring possible alternative models for education, this report may serve as a springboard for discussion to enhance the delivery of education in the north.

Rural and remote communities struggle to recruit and retain residents, despite an overall population increase from 295,000 to 321,000 between 2002 and 2008 (GTS Inc. 2009). Compared with Alberta's overall population, the north is relatively young. The young families residing in the region require accessible, quality primary and middle school (Kindergarten – Grade 9) education options. Access to quality education is a must for communities to be competitive in attracting skilled professionals and new residents to the rural areas in the region.

Challenges facing rural and remote areas are common in many areas across the globe. Studies from across the world have probed the differences in rural and urban education. An Australian study found that rural and remote students faced a "substantial disadvantage" when compared with their urban counterparts (Doolan and Zimmer 2002). Rural students were less likely to participate, achieve school completion and pursue post-secondary education and more likely to be absent from school than their urban counterparts. Levels of inequality are even higher among Aboriginal children. The study found that the main concerns for rural school divisions were teacher retention, long travel times for students and other transportation problems and restricted programming options for students. The study also described a "roll-on effect" initiated by declining school enrolments, leading to funding cuts and the eventual closure of a school.

While the definition of "rural" and "remote" fluctuates between groups, common agreement on a definition across all those invested in northern education is necessary. In order to impact legislation and policy development, common language is required. The 2010-2011 Funding Manual for School Authorities in Alberta defined rural district as: "A district or division that is not an urban district." An urban district is defined as: "1. A city district which is not included in a school division or regional

division; and 2. A district, division or regional division, or portion thereof, designated by the Minister as an urban district." There is no definition for a remote district.

Rural schools are facing closures due to low enrolments. The closure of local rural schools presents a number of challenges for rural families. Schools in small communities act as a meeting place and often provide services outside of education (libraries, daycares). As well many young students are forced to ride the bus for over an hour (one way) on rural roads and highways to get to their current school. The closure of more rural schools may mean lengthening bus trips and forcing residents out of the community to access basic services.

This report is based on data collected from interviews with 11 northern school division superintendents and staff, community survey responses, a literature review and demographic forecasts derived from Alberta Education's *Student Population Projection and Teacher Forecasting Model*. The model's data is intended to give northern municipal leaders and other northern stakeholders a snapshot of what is happening in northern schools. Some of the items reviewed are teacher attrition, school capacity and student participation.

This report considers all school divisions serving rural and remote communities in northern Alberta. The school divisions of the urban centers of Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray were excluded from the school division interviews, community survey and model forecasting.

Survey Methods
In order to gather information on schools and their communities, two different surveys were administered. Northern school division superintendents and staff were interviewed in person or over the phone and northern communities were invited to complete an email survey.

Prior to each interview the interviewee(s) was informed of the study's parameters and was reminded that their participation in the interview was voluntary. Each interviewee(s) was also informed that their responses would remain confidential and would be aggregated within the final report. Specific answers remained confidential.

Any discussion that emerged outside of the generic question responses was also recorded (and included in the report) for further detail.

A literature review was also conducted to gather insight on rural and remote education issues and practices within and beyond Alberta's borders. The majority of the literature reviewed is from Australia and the United Kingdom. These education systems are similar to Canada's and provide applicable examples for education improvements and reform.
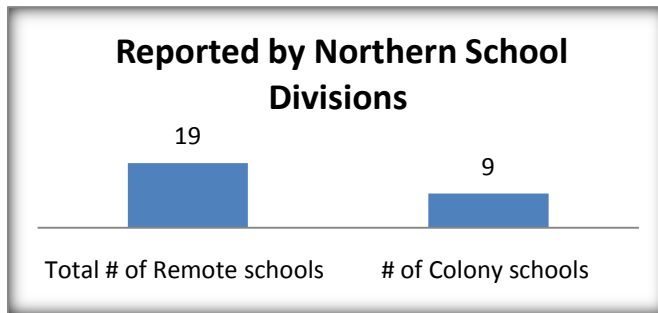
Survey Responses
Survey responses are based on the data gathered during one on one or small group interviews (in person or over the phone) with 11 Superintendents of Schools (or representatives) for Alberta Zones 1 and 2/3. Responses have been generalized and grouped. Consult Appendix 3 for a complete list of participating school divisions and interview questions.

Model Methods

Alberta Education's *Student Population, Teacher Workforce Projection Model* generated a series of scenarios for each northern school division for this year (2010) and for future years (2012, 2022). The model relies on historical data patterns to calculated predictions for future population demographics. The data comes from a variety of sources. Two of which are Alberta Finance and Enterprise and Alberta Health and Wellness. The output data in Figures 1-4 in Appendix 1 should only be considered in isolation. It should be noted that the data's applicability is limited and only considers the factors within the model.
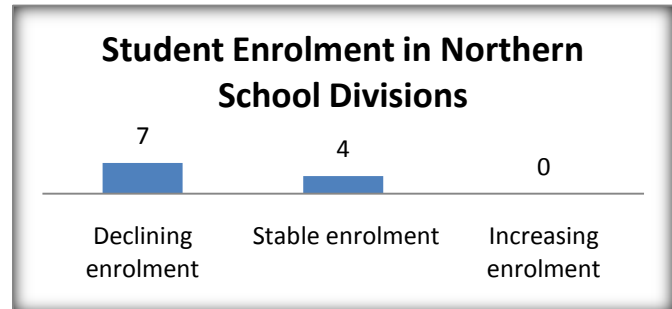
School Status

All respondents identified their division as 'rural'. They also agreed that within rural divisions there could be town centers; any town that offers services and amenities. The only exception being the city of Grande Prairie, which respondents labeled an 'urban' center. All divisions considered the majority (or in some cases all) of their schools to be rural.

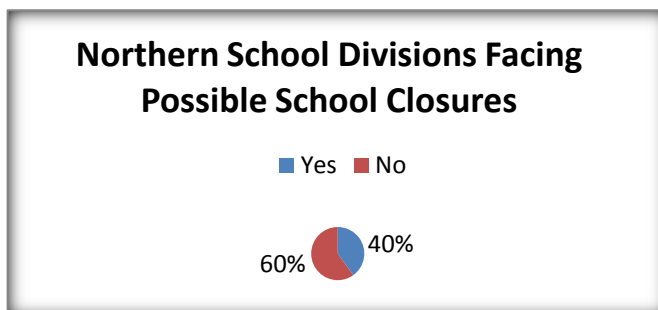**Reported by Northern School Divisions**

The definition of remote was however, varied among respondents. Some considered schools to be remote if they were more than 50km from their division office. Others extended this distance to 45 minutes to a 2 hour drive. Others still had schools that were only accessible by air. The majority of respondents only considered a school remote if it could not be reached by a main road (typically paved). Only 19 schools throughout the north were considered "remote", 9 of which serve Mennonite colonies.

Student enrolment for the north is considered 'steady' to 'declining', based on individual community circumstance. Some reasons cited for enrolment statuses were declining industries (oil and gas, forestry), changes to traditional farming family structure (larger farms, fewer children), out migration of young families from the north to city centers and the overall transient nature

Student Enrolment in Northern School Divisions

of most northern communities. Steady, and some increasing enrolments at specific schools, are mainly characterized by growing Aboriginal and Mennonite populations throughout the north or the proximity of the division to an urban center (i.e. Grande Prairie).

Northern School Divisions Facing Possible School Closures

Based on Alberta Education's definition of the 'school closure', 4 divisions identified a total of 14 schools either in the process of closing, consolidating or under school closure reviews. One division chose not to comment. Prior to school closure,

5

communities are consulted (in some cases the community approaches the division first) to discuss possible actions that could stem declining enrolment or enhance programming. Some divisions hesitate keeping a shrinking small school open because of concerns with multi-grade instruction, inadequate programming, and potential decline in overall quality of education. Although, once a school closes, other issues appear, mainly for the students and families: increased bussing times, out-migration, and communities losing a central meeting and activity venue. Many commented that school closures lead to ongoing debates of the school's (or Alberta Education) role and responsibility in community economic development.

Transportation

All divisions with transportation responsibilities reported maximum allowable bus times for students between 60 and 90 minutes one way. Based on the responses, the average one way bus time is 30 minutes (over an average of 30km), putting most students on the bus for an hour each day. The longest ride any individual student may take across a northern school division is upwards of 100 minutes one way. School closures and the growing size of family farms severely impacts the distance students must travel for school. Several respondents commented that ride times are a significant factor for families leaving the community.

> One division proposed a provincial transportation grid that would standardize the funding formulas for riders based on actual distance rather than population density.

Transportation routes constantly evolve in an effort to maximize efficiency and reduce costs. Changing student distribution also requires annual transportation updates. Changes that benefit the overall system usually imply negative effects on the outliers and cause ride times for certain students to be much longer than the average. Provincial transportation funding formulas do not reflect the unique and onerous northern transportation routes that many divisions must provide. One division proposed a provincial transportation grid that would standardize the funding formulas for riders based on actual distance rather than population density. Alberta Education's fiscal recovery in 2009-2010 created urban and rural inequalities, according to some divisions. These inequalities make it difficult for divisions to run their transportation systems without a deficit.

Technology

All divisions reported using video conferencing (VC) for instructional, special needs or administrative purposes. Most schools only use VC for instruction at the high school level. Few utilized the technology to teach junior high. Most divisions reported using programs (such as Moodle) for instructional exchange and support for teachers and to encourage a team teaching approach. Several divisions offered 1-on-1 laptop programs for students in junior high.

> The major concern (from school divisions) was not about (internet) reliability, but about current bandwidth availability.

In addition to VC instruction, most divisions access distance learning supports to supplement their on-site curriculum. The Alberta Distance Learning Center and other distance learning and on-line programs and supports are frequently used throughout the north.

All divisions have access to the supernet and reported generally reliable use. The major concern was not about reliability, but about the current bandwidth availability. All divisions expressed an immediate

need for increased bandwidth. It is also anticipated that future needs will increase. An increase in bandwidth also signals an increase in cost to schools.

The major barriers to technology integration in schools are technology funding, effective use by staff and connectivity of rural students at home. The sustainability of technology in schools is dependent on adequate funding and planning. The student funding formula does not specifically account for technology costs. Some suggested funding for technology outside of instructional funds. Teacher training and integration of technology in classrooms is a large part of professional development for certain divisions. For technology to work in the classroom teachers must become efficient, but not reliant on, new methods to improve instruction. Two divisions talked about improvements to rural community high speed internet connectivity and the effort by some municipalities to establish high speed connectivity for their ratepayers.

In order to keep pace with rapid changes in technology, most divisions have an evergreening fund and many have long-term technology plans in place. Ensuring the use of technology enhances learning is a concern for all divisions. Education delivers the curriculum, technology is only a support. It is the effective pairing of the two that will enable northern divisions to deliver high quality alternative schooling options.

Staffing

The recruitment and retention of qualified teaching and support staff is an issue throughout the north. Recruitment seems to be slightly easier, while retaining teachers across divisions for more than three years is challenging. When a teacher is originally from the north this challenge is substantially reduced. Divisions reported that support staff is easier to recruit and retain, since they are usually local; although typically they are hired below the necessary qualifications. This trend seems to intensify has you move out from the towns into less populated areas. The divisions reported distance from an urban center, rural workload, cultural differences, lack of accommodations and lack of personal connection to the community as reasons for difficult recruitment and/or retention of staff.

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Divisions generalized that unless a teacher is originally from northern Alberta they come north looking for experience. Typically they are working towards a position in the Edmonton-Calgary corridor. One superintendent remarked that new teacher retention during their first two consecutive years of teaching is very steady. This is the time necessary to receive a permanent teacher's certificate in Alberta. Subsequently, the out flux of new teachers after three to four years in the north is very high. In spite of this trend recent annual turnover rates have fallen, in general, across divisions. Some divisions boast tenure rate averages as high as seven years. Many of the respondents suspect this trend to continue through the current economic climate.

Mentorship (formal and informal) programs for teachers have been very successful for most northern schools. These programs help to build a sense of community and belonging in new teachers. They focus on improving new teachers instructional and planning abilities. One division also spoke about focusing on "catching teachers doing something good" helping to build capacity and leadership in staff. Ongoing professional development for rural and remote teachers focuses on building skills to help them address local diversity and rural demands. Divisions offer development opportunities for advancements

in technology, FNMI history and traditions, and basic skills for helping special needs students, since many are not be supplied with full time educational assistants and other necessary supports.

Special Needs Services

The lack of access to special needs services was highlighted in every northern school division Annual Education Results Report (including divisions that were not interviewed) and was reiterated during each interview. Northern students (and residents in general) do not have adequate access to services that lie outside of, but are inherently connected to, education and learning. Speech pathologists, audiologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and other mental health professionals are extremely difficult to recruit to the north. In most cases divisions acquire the professional services listed above through city centers (usually Edmonton) and are rarely visited onsite.

Is access to special needs professionals a challenge for your school division?

■ Yes ■ No

0%

100%

Several divisions commented on the lengthy turnaround times for student assessments and how they contribute to lower levels of learning until they are completed. Several divisions provide speech language services through video conferencing. This lack of access to services for northern divisions is compounded by the fact that the ratio of special needs students in the north is typically higher than the provincial average. Teachers are expected to take on additional roles outside of educator, and students may no longer have access to equitable learning opportunities. With limited availability to such services and their inflated costs in the north, schools face challenges in providing inclusive and welcoming learning environments. Some students have to be moved to centralized (and in some cases isolating) facilities where their needs can only be met if they are removed from their school and community.

> Without early and consistent intervention, the focus on special needs students shifts from prevention to treatment based.
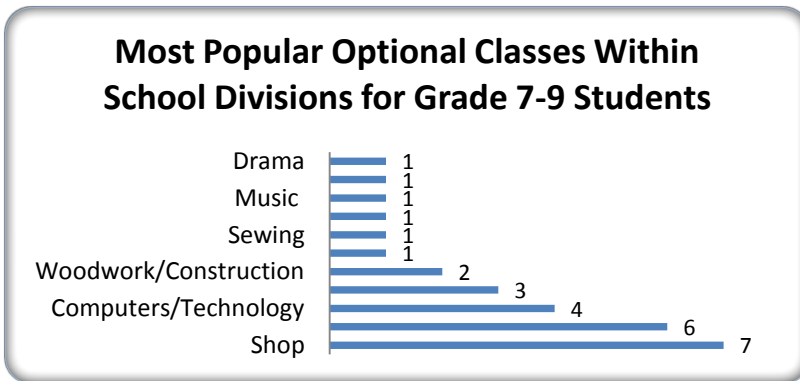
Many divisions spoke about the lack of coordination between Alberta Health and Wellness, Children and Youth Services and Alberta Education. The distribution of children in care, the availability of mental health (and other professional services) and their implications on school services creates conflicting environments, detrimental to the student's learning. The disconnect between Ministries leads to students being bombarded with aids and assessments or lost within the system. Without early and consistent intervention, the focus on special needs students shifts from preventative to treatment based. Divisions expressed concerns on how this may be detrimental to student learning and development.

Two divisions explained how they offer their special needs services contractually over 10 month periods. Professionals are attracted to the 10 month work schedule and the contractual flexibility. This option seems to be working well for them and allows them to offer some special needs services on a consistent basis throughout a school year. One division also spoke about the success of the "asset building" approach to building relationships. The approach is successful with all students, but in particular those with special needs waiting for or in between professional treatments.

Several divisions spoke of the continuing success of their Mental Health Capacity Building programs. The Mental Health Capacity Building program is a successful community partnership initiative that improves the health and wellbeing of children, youth, and their families, and strengthens communities. It includes contributions from professionals and the general community to help children learn how to self-protect their mental health from an early age. School staff, health care professionals, parents, and community organizations partner to provide this programming. Unfortunately, not all northern divisions have access to this innovative program.

Programming Options for Junior High

All divisions felt they provided at least some variety of optional programming for students in grades 7 to 9. Most agreed that the options they provide were likely less than what was provided in an urban center. The options available in northern schools are based on the abilities and interests of the teachers already within the schools. Providing the materials and space for instruction has proved to be easier than finding specialized teachers for

Most Popular Optional Classes Within School Divisions for Grade 7-9 Students

Class	Count
Drama	1
	1
Music	1
	1
Sewing	1
	1
Woodwork/Construction	2
	3
Computers/Technology	4
	6
Shop	7

most divisions. Through teacher sharing and bussing students within the division to access programming, divisions have found ways to provide more optional programming.

All divisions agreed that offering practical and engaging options helps to keep students interested in school. Among the most popular courses are shop, cosmetology, foods, sewing, arts and courses associated with technology.

Divisions were also asked about programming in place at the primary and middle school education level (K-9) that builds

> Early exits from school are not events, they are processes. By building personal relationships with students from the onset, the schools can intervene in this process.

foundations for students' success and high school completion. Many spoke about relationship building and helping students through transitional periods in the form of mentoring, support teams and counselors. If a student successfully completes life transition(s), their potential for success is higher. This includes high school completion. Such relationships start as soon as students enter school. It was mentioned that early exits from school are not events, they are processes. By building personal relationships with students from the onset, the schools can intervene in this process.

Some divisions introduce experiential learning in early grades to engage and excite students about learning. Others monitor student attendance and ensure that students who are missing school are monitored and re-engaged in their school. And many suggested better building relationships with local business communities to reinforce the importance of finishing school prior to entering the workforce.

Relationship with the Community

Most of the interviewees described joint use agreements with their surrounding communities. Some described their relationship with the municipalities to be excellent, and that facility (especially) agreements worked very well. It is clear to the divisions that certain communities want their youth utilizing community resources and building a strong relationship with their community. A variety of partnerships outside of the municipality were also described. Most often they included playschools, pre-schools and daycare societies using school space to house their services.

Some community businesses contribute to schools financially, but also provide career mentorship programs and volunteer within the school shops and other practical curriculums. One division described the work that their partnership facilitator (working out of the division's central office) does to combine community interests with the school division's mandate. Their programming has been extremely successful and lead to a variety of experiential learning opportunities and improved student achievement.

> All school divisions described joint-use agreements with their local communities. The partnerships varied from playschools and daycares to libraries and recreational facilities.

All interviewees agreed that school closures, particularly in rural and remote communities where the school is typically the hub of activities, have devastating effects on their communities. While not all divisions are dealing with actual and potential school closures, they could all relate to the effects that a closure would have. Two divisions talked about the impending growth that industry is bringing to their communities and how demands on infrastructure will soon begin to exceed resources and space. The NADC is also aware that schools in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray are facing similar pressures.

Several divisions noted that their schools provide a sense of community all their own. Caring teachers, local culture and a sense of belonging is more powerful and, some argue, easier for students to access, in small community schools. One example of how a school can transform student attitudes is described briefly in Alberta Education's new report: *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education 2010). The Caslan School, within the NADC boundary, provides an overwhelmingly successful story of how incorporating local culture and people into the small school setting can improve not only student achievement, but also family engagement.

Several divisions gave other examples of incorporating art and local culture into their schools to improved student attendance, achievement and interest. One described planning alternative school curriculums with the community. By asking the community what they want in a school they are engaged in an important conversation. Once in agreement on a school mandate they can document their objectives and apply for school board approval. The community and school then become bound by the deliverables and work towards community goals and needs. A successful plan could then become a template for schools throughout their division.

Divisions were also asked a hypothetical question about community involvement in education. Could a community house and administer its own school and hire its own teachers (as some do for health clinics and doctors)? The respondents had varying opinions. Overall they suspected that it would be

too tedious a task for a community to comply with Alberta Education's guidelines and strict School Act regulations. Community teachers would also have to be "housed" by the division and the school administered by them too. Some commented that if a community had the necessary resources and interest in keeping a small school from closing, that they could simply work with the school division to keep the school operational.

Other options for communities include developing private (e.g. Cold Lake) or chartered (e.g. Valhalla) schools. These types of schools are administered outside of the established school divisions by separate boards and resources. Although these schools may be better prepared to incorporate many of the alternative ideas of *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education 2010), some of the divisions speculated that the administrative issues (e.g. transportation, infrastructure) will eventually be problematic for the smaller boards. Several divisions also argued that schools outside the traditional system create inequality between school systems based on the differences in funding formulas.

Improvements

Each division was asked to suggest overall or specific improvements for current northern education. They include:

- Improve the relevancy of programming for students and update the funding formulas that accompany it.
- Focus on recruitment of new teachers to replace retirements and to improve the quality of education. Develop high school teacher programming in the north (ex. adding to the elementary school teaching degree at GPRC) and place emphasis on "growing our own" teachers, educational assistants and administrators.
- Continue to offer agreements such as the *Northern Student Teacher Bursary*, but make eligibility criteria more specific to meet regional needs.
- Continue to cooperate and enrich programs to attract teachers to the north.
- Improve the promotion of northern quality of life.
- Enhance VC programming for junior high level.
- Develop a provincially standardized transportation grid in order to ensure transportation funding equity.
- Community based partnerships should take the place of government in providing 'wrap-around services' to students. By building community 'hubs', not just schools, most student services could be housed under one accessible roof.
- Improve programming for students (examples include improvements to practical curriculum and infrastructure and investing in arts programming like Artists in Residency).
- Change the funding formulas for rural schools. There is greater expense running a northern school, and it is in Alberta Education's mandate that every child in Alberta have access to equitable basic education.
- Organize housing co-ops (or alike) to address housing issues for professionals in remote communities. By partnering with all recruiting community stakeholders (teachers/RCMP/industry) housing co-ops may offer opportunities for young professionals to enter the real estate market, and attract them to remote northern locations.
- Change the funding formulas for "small schools by necessity" (schools located at a distance where transportation to another school is not practical, i.e. 25 km by road in rural areas and 6 km in metro-urban and urban areas and if there are no schools within the minimum distance that can accommodate the additional students, due to capacity or grade level considerations). If a school chooses to remain open, then it should continue to be funded accordingly. Their funding

should not be reduced because they no longer meet the (above) criteria. Allow communities to decide if the school is by necessity.

- Improve funding generalities and ensure that the government is aware that the small school by necessity funding is inefficient. Families will continue to leave the north while education is perceived as 'lower quality'.
- Follow through on improvements to infrastructure (as suggested in the Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan (CRSIP) report).
- Organizations need to cooperate to provide distance/alternative education opportunities. Build a single affiliation for the various distance education provider organizations. This will save money and provide higher quality instruction and resources to students. One possibility could be for school divisions to partner with local colleges that serve the same geographical area through distance learning.
- Encourage local municipalities to improve their image and marketing to promote the north as a good place to live and raise a family. Some municipalities lack vision and forward planning, which impact community growth and professional recruitment and retention.

Best Practices

The interviewees provided examples of programming they offer that they consider a best practice and a possible template for other divisions. The examples below are generalized.

- Providing daycare before and after school.
- Improving literacy and numeracy professional development for instructors.
- Improving speech language pathology services through new VC camera technologies.
- Utilizing the mentorship program for new staff (provided through Alberta Education workforce planning).
- Offering great inclusivity in special needs programming.
- Providing full time kindergarten programming and including kindergarten, pre-school and daycares in small schools to build student relationships with teachers and the schools very early on.
- Helping FNMI liaison workers excel through supported education and training.
- Increasing parental involvement.
- Looking at jurisdictional habits and trying to implement improvements, by specifically focusing on one skill that could improve all other skills. Literacy is the underlying factor in all learning and one division has increased the percentage of students reading at the appropriate level, and mapped students' progress individually to confirm steady improvement.

Challenges

Below are the single greatest challenges facing our northern schools, as chosen by the interviewees:

- Funding and the applicable provincial funding formulas. Six of the ten interviewees described inadequate funding for their division and how the current per-student funding formula causes inequalities between urban and rural divisions. A continual decline in student enrolment will substantially limit provincial funding for rural and remote schools and the services they can provide. In turn, the quality of the education rural students receive would be limited. After the province's fiscal recovery of 2009-2010 and the necessary ATA salary adjustments, many divisions will be running deficits in 2010-2011 and resorting to cutbacks within one year. Divisions fear the inability to remain accountable to their mandates without sustainable funding.

- Administrative recruitment and development of leadership within the division was the number one challenge for two of the interviewees. Finding qualified principals for northern schools remains a challenge, and without strong school leadership, schools are less likely to succeed. The same can be said for recruitment to the divisional offices.
- One interviewee commented on the lack of expectations for students by the division. Communities hold much higher expectations for students than the administrators. They suggested listening to parents' hopes and desires for their children and help them attain these goals. Children need to be involved in learning before school and continue learning once they have completed school.
- One interviewee described the necessity of improving student achievement and engagement. Their division is working hard to improve student engagement, but without parental involvement or support to curriculum changes the division's impact is limited.
- And one other interviewee described political uncertainties and school system governance as their division's major challenge. The division of public, separate and private schools adds to the level of educational discrepancies that students face. The interviewee also stated concerns about the lack of general agreement between the federal, provincial and FNMI governing bodies on educational matters and funding.

Community Survey

Response levels for the community survey were extremely low. Only 3 of the 44 communities contacted responded to the survey questions. Of the three responses, all the communities described recreational use agreements with their schools. They also agreed that any school closures within the community would be devastating and imply prolonged bus rides for students. Along with more time on the bus, communities discussed the economic implications of a school closure. Small schools provide not only education, but opportunities for extra curricular activities and bring new residents in to the community.

Respondents agreed that distance education may meet curriculum needs, but rarely meet the needs of a student as a whole. One community referred to the Valhalla Community School as a best practice, and a possible model for schools in similar situations to use as a template. They also suggested capitalizing on growing Aboriginal populations, encouraging them to attend and complete school. Another idea to increase school completion was to partner with organizations to promote trades development and education for students.

One community discussed efforts to re-instill the value of education within northern families. By concentrating on Early Childhood Services (ECS) programming and literacy they engage students and their families earlier and help them succeed in the future.

Focusing on trades and bringing training to rural high school students could also help raise school completion rates.

Another community described the importance of partnerships between the community, school division, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), Children and Youth Services and other stakeholders. Their cooperative programming is lead by FCSS and focuses on students. This community uses community members to build capacity in students from kindergarten to grade 9.

> Education is the key stone! Instilling a value on education in the family unit is paramount.
> -Community Survey Respondent

One major concern that all three communities shared was transportation. They all described long ride times for students and its affect on school performance and attendance. They all noted that by closing any existing small schools in their communities, it would further impact the amount of time students spend on the bus.

Appendix 2 provides a complete list of the community survey questions and the communities contacted in the survey.

Additional Considerations

The timing of this report coincides with other Alberta Education initiatives that may impact planning and recommendations developed by the NADC.

Changes to the School Act (Education Act)

The timing of this study aligns with the re-drafting of Alberta's School Act to the Education Act. Based on the suggestions forwarded to the Minister of Education from northern divisional boards of trustees, several common threads emerge that reflect similar concerns and ideas to those expressed in this report.

Some suggestions from submissions include: improvements to special education direction, student inclusivity and "wrap around services", assuring excellence in teaching, having meaningful alternative forms of education, and a review of transportation policies. The most common suggestions focused on equality between all Albertan students, the concept of fairness in education and the implications of per student funding for northern school divisions. Most divisions also described the need for local autonomy at the governance level.

Northern Tier Initiative

Alberta Education has identified school divisions with specific issues that are affecting student achievement outcomes. These divisions are all rural, sparsely settled and located north of Edmonton. Eight of the 11 divisions that make up the Northern Tier group participated in the NADC Rural and Remote Education Survey. Hence Northern Tier schools account for more than 70% of the data presented. The analysis of the issues or specific concerns of these divisions factored key variables including sparse populations, indicators of low socio-economic status, student transiency, a high proportion of FNMI students relative to total student populations and weak teacher recruitment and retention. The results of the analysis of the Northern Tier Initiative are not available to the public, but may be reflected in some of the data gathered in this survey. This initiative also indicates that the province recognizes some of the difficulties in education delivery that are unique to the north.

Discussion

Alternative Programming

Alberta Education has recently released a new take on the future of education in the province. *Inspiring Education: A Dialogue with Albertans* describes possibilities for provincial education reform and the effect that such reform would have on students and communities alike (Alberta Education 2010). The report concedes that rural and remote communities in Alberta will

> "Education can take place in any setting, not only the classroom. A class of 30 could see 15 learning in the classroom, five learning on the farm, five learning at home and five learning in the community."
> -Alberta's Inspiring Education (2010)

continue to face declining populations and declining school enrolment in the years to come. The report assumes that adding flexibility to the education system will enable communities to better deal with such changes (Alberta Education 2010).

The values described in the report underpin the province's future vision of education, and how it will apply to every learner, including rural and Aboriginal (Alberta Education 2010). Within the report there are different scenarios describing what the school rooms of the future may look like. One Alberta school trustee described this scene: "Education can take place in any setting, not only the classroom. A class of 30 could see 15 learning in the classroom, five learning on the farm, five learning at home and five learning in the community" (Alberta Education 2010).

Some of the school divisions interviewed in the Rural and Remote Education Report are already implementing features of the futuristic classroom. One division described incorporating high yield instructional strategies into their curriculum for students in kindergarten to grade 3. These students are divided by ability, not grade, for literacy and numeracy subject matter, material integral to student success. Through professional development for their teachers, the division is starting to understand the relationship between education and culture, especially for Aboriginal students. They feel their annual investment in professional development of $125,000 to $150,000 has paid off. They are also looking at a flexibility and enhancement schedule for high school students. If it is successful they will incorporate it at the junior high and elementary levels.

Canadian schools have focused significant resources to build strong literary skills in their students. It is generally accepted that a sound focus on literacy, (possibly beginning in mandatory full-time kindergarten), could offset the costs of reading recovery in schools and future learning disabilities (Wallin 2009). Some examples of differentiated instruction for elementary school literacy initiatives throughout Canada include:
- team teaching
- literacy circles
- guided reading
- growing book resources
- portfolios for student work and conferencing
- flexible grouping
- small group instruction
- literacy centers
- word walls
- classroom charts for sight word knowledge
- information and communications technology (ICT) strategies
- trait writing and writing labs
- homework bags of literacy games for parental reinforcement of school content
- user-friendly homework logs for parents

Examples of differentiated instruction for middle-high school literacy initiatives throughout Canada (primarily supported through technology) include:
- interactive television (ITV)
- podcasting
- e-learning platforms (WebCT, Moodle, Bridges)
- teaching tablets with presentations

- portfolio work related to career development programs
- modular coursework
- school-community partnerships for work placement
- self-directed learning (Wallin 2009)

Research at Athabasca University is also exploring the role of technology in alternative programming. The project is based on developing new technologies specifically designed for a collaborative learning environment (Alberta Education 2010). One possible benefit of the project would include the opportunity for K-12 students in rural and remote communities, where school enrolment is declining, the ability to access high quality programs. As well, Alberta has provided special funding for the Alberta Distance Learning Strategy, Career and Technology Studies mobile labs and additional initiatives to study how technology affects pedagogy, student retention and completion (Wallin 2009).

Alberta Education reviewed alternative rural programming from across the province at the high school level. Many of the programs could also be implemented successfully in junior high grades to engage students in rural settings. Some examples include:
- career and technology studies
- community volunteerism
- locally developed curriculums
- use of technology (videoconferencing, laptops, information and communication technology curriculum and SMARTBoards)

These alternative programming options provide students with urban experiences and help them to build practical skill sets (Alberta Education 2006). And distance education has a positive effect on academic achievement in rural students (Hicks 2002). Students are attracted to the technological aspects to distance learning, as well as the ability to avoid long travel times to school.

Another emerging alternative school option is developing in the Peace River North School Division, in Fort St. John, British Columbia. The project has brought community and learning together in a new municipal facility. After consulting with their community and developing community based programming in their schools (for example intergenerational learning) the division developed a vision for new learning opportunities. These opportunities take place outside of the traditional classroom and within their general community setting.

Through their province's *Neighbourhoods of Learning* program, the division wanted to implement learning based activities into vacant municipal buildings. Through a good relationship with their municipality and further consultation with the community and students, the school division has successfully proposed that senior high school grades be taught within the new municipal sportsplex (personal communication Larry Espe June 18, 2010). Although still in the initial planning phases, the learning environment within the municipal facility will be a community hub and an intergenerational meeting place. The focus of the learning center will be on integrating traditional learning and alternative programming (such as hockey) (Urban Systems 2008).

As seen in the Fort St. John example there has been a recent shift in models of alternative schooling in North America. Most are based on the charter schools, home schooling and local alternative programming adapted to local conditions, culture and history (Farrell and Hartwell 2008). Common features of such models include:

- learner centered
- active learning (rather than passive)
- multi-grade classrooms
- variety of teaching figures (partially trained, community members)
- peer tutoring
- self guided learning
- learning materials developed within the classroom
- student governance
- use of technology
- robust professional development for teachers
- ongoing program evaluation
- intergenerational relationships that are fluid through school and community environment
- healthy living for all children, including those pre-school aged
- locally adapted scheduling throughout the week, month or year
- focus on learning, not teaching

> "We are part of the community and the community is a part of what we are…"
> (Wallin 2009)

Charter schools are a part of Alberta's education legislation and in recent years have made their first foray into Alberta's north. Charter schools are considered an attractive option for student, parents and teachers. They tend to provide features like small class sizes, high achievement and specialized curriculum. While charter schools still remain accountable to Alberta Education (and are considered public schools, with limited enrolment), their overall administration and organization are quite flexible relative to traditional school settings. Some consider these schools to provide more innovative and enhanced learning opportunities for students, and operate more at the community level, since there is one board overseeing one school, quite unlike the traditional school board setting.

The charter school may be hosted in a community building and supported by community infrastructure, outside of Alberta Education facilities. While the majority of charter schools operate with great success, the onerous review process (which occurs every five years) can be a daunting task for a small board (Ritchie 2010). On average charter schools appear to "cater to families with a slightly higher than average socio-economic status" and operate based on provincial funding that is highly skewed, relative to the same public school per-student funding (Ritchie 2010). Their achievement results tend to be higher than those of public schools as well. Ritchie (2010) concluded that charter schools demonstrate some inequalities between education systems, but also highlight potential innovation and improvements to the school community.

Community Relationships

Overall the use of school infrastructure by community groups builds trust and relationships between the two groups. This is especially important for schools with declining student populations, facing potential closure. By partnering with the local community, schools can ensure facility utilization without student enrolment at full capacity. The ties between the community and school become stronger, which is seen as particularly important in rural and remote communities. "We are part of the community and the community is a part of what we are" (Wallin 2009).

Transportation

Very little mention was made of transportation issues for rural students in a nationwide study (Wallin 2009). Only one Alberta respondent (out of 23) mentioned concerns about transportation times and associated costs. It was stated that long bus rides are tolerated by rural parents in order to keep their local schools open.

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta (PSBAA) believes that, in the absence of public transportation, it is up to the local public school jurisdiction to provide student transportation to and from school. They also suggest that the local community decide on and impose "reasonable" travel times for students via school transportation (PSBAA 2010).

Local Governance

The PSBAA also describes governance and accountability for local schools as under the discretion of the locally elected school board. This also includes financial matters. Local school boards require more independence with respect to resource allocation and other financial decisions. This is essential to ensure that local schools meet local needs (PSBAA 2010). In some cases however, Albertans are challenged by local decision-making, particularly when it comes to matters of special education. In Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction Framework* Albertans viewed local decision-making as a challenge, resulting in inconsistencies in policies, procedures, services and supports across the province (Alberta Education 2009). This is an interesting paradox, since the northern school divisions Annual Education Results Reports and the Rural and Remote Education Survey expressed concerns about accessing special needs services. They reported that northern school divisions require more control at the local level.

Based on the ideas from *Inspiring Action* Alberta Education proposes new legislation that would make more young people eligible for public education and cater to individual student needs (Alberta Education 2010b).The anticipated impacts of such new legislation surround improved accessibility of education for all Albertan students and the development of stronger stakeholder relationships. A main principle of the potential policy focuses on the accessibility of equitable, inclusive and responsible education. Learner's access to quality education should not be limited by their location (among other factors) (Alberta Education 2010b). Included in this is the flexibility for communities to lead the direction of their education programming, building their autonomy and their reputation as local learning centers. The stakeholder relationships featured describe supports between levels of government that are responsible for child welfare, including Children and Youth Services, Alberta Health and Wellness and community specific groups (i.e. Ministerial First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Partnership Council and related MOU). *Inspiring Education* describes education lead by engaged communities. Community governance by 2030 is seen as more consensual and allows for greater flexibility and discretion within the local body (Alberta Education 2010).

Staff Recruitment and Retention

Teacher recruitment and retention is a major issue for rural and remote schools across the world. An Australian study discovered that urbanely educated teachers had negative views of rural schools and lifestyle (Sharplin 2002). These teachers experienced difficulty adjusting to rural settings and community expectations, although they anticipated the opportunity to bond with the community. The primary reasons for teachers not wanting to teach in a rural setting were:
- concerns about isolation

- lack of resources
- access to professional and personal support
- standards of housing
- cultural differences

Many of these concerns mirror those of Alberta teachers. The study went on the show that giving all education students access to rural experiences; in the form of course work, while pursuing their degree improved the information and perception that teachers had about rural and remote areas. This change in curriculum allowed the program to cater to more students than rural practicum placements, where seats were limited.

Farrell and Hartwell (2008) promote the "grow your own teacher" concept. Teachers are recruited locally to meet local teaching demands. This technique has shown to work best to retain professionals and ensure their success as educators. Farrell and Hartwell (2008) also describe classrooms where multiple teachers work with several grades to build lasting relationships and encourage student learning.

Alberta plans to improve teacher recruitment initiatives for those pursuing education careers in northern, rural and remote areas (Alberta Education 2009b). Teachers are not recruited solely as teachers, but as a professionals, volunteers and important community members.

In addition to difficulties recruiting teachers, encouraging local school council membership remains a widespread challenge in Alberta (ASCA 2008). Without adequate school councils, the community's role in local education is compromised. The school council can be an avenue for communities and school divisions to develop good working relationships and common goals.

School Closure

To understand school closures and its effects on the community, several issues must be examined. International research on rural education focuses on these major issues related to school closures (Wallin 2009):
- challenges offering educational excellence in rural settings
- reduced access to specialized services
- teacher and support staff recruitment and retention
- decreasing student enrolment
- inadequacies in provincial/territorial/jurisdictional education funding formulas
- unrealistic community expectations

Many provinces and territories face similar educational struggles within their rural and remote communities similar to Alberta. Their Ministries are developing innovative approaches to dealing with rural and remote educational concerns (Wallin 2009):
- development of specific strategies for dealing with rural issues
- development of critical recruitment and retention measures
- redesign of funding structures
- committing to rural education through funding and support
- encouraging cooperative partnerships to improve rural education
- promotion of local flexibility in programming options (including cultural input)

- development of post-secondary opportunities for career and service provision

The PSBAA outlined its vision for excellent education in Alberta (PSBAA 2010). Among the essential elements for excellent education were two important factors for rural students:
- access (to education) for all children no matter where they live in the province and no matter what their circumstances
- reasonable travel time to school so that the child arrives ready to learn and relate well to others

The PSBAA framework provides clear direction for all communities and their role in education and public school access, for all children, regardless of their circumstance. It stipulates that resources allocated to public school education are the wisest investment a community can make (PSBAA 2010). Among the benefits if a community were to implement the framework are:
- excellent opportunities would be available for children regardless of their location in the province
- communities would be reassured that the quality of education would be comparable between communities regardless of size or location

In response to school accessibility, the PSBAA believes that there should be no pre-conditions or barriers to students accessing public schooling. Where there are insufficient numbers for school-based education, alternate learning experiences must be provided. Examples of such experiences include home schooling or boarding away from home to attend school (PSBAA 2010).

The PSBAA also asked a poignant question relevant to the questions currently being asked throughout the NADC region: "Is the neighbourhood community school still important and, if so, why? Is it equally important for all children and communities, or is it more important for some children (such as K-3) or some communities (such as new neighbourhoods or small communities with limited infrastructure)" (PSBAA 2010)? Some of the guiding principles of Alberta Education's report *Inspiring Education*, paint an equitable picture for rural and remote students. They describe fair and reasonable access to education for every learner (regardless of location) and include opportunities for experimental and community-based learning (Alberta Education 2010).

Recommendations
The following recommendations describe how the NADC could partner with northern stakeholders to improve rural and remote education:
- Facilitate the amalgamation of distance education providers in Alberta. By bringing entities together, programming is more effective for students and more financially efficient.
- Lobby Alberta's universities to incorporate rural learning and experiences into their Education curriculums (similar to medical student rural clerkships).
- Make adjustments to the *Northern Student Teacher Bursary* to improve relevancy and to include school administration experience to build capacity.
- Help communities promote themselves and the quality of life they offer in order to retain and attract residents. Also help communities and school divisions to find a common direction and facilitate their partnership.
- Lobby for a review of the student based funding formula and its effect on small northern schools. Strive for urban/rural equity for all educational aspects (transportation, programming, technology, quality of instruction).

- Lobby for additional technology funding for rural and remote schools that deliver relatively high proportion of their curriculum by distance and alternative education options.
- Engage families in education through conversation. Focus on growing populations and the incorporation of their culture into the school environment and curriculum. Incorporate community goals into provincial curriculums.
- Encourage cooperation between communities and school divisions to fill empty infrastructure space in underutilized schools.
- Lobby for full day kindergarten to encourage early engagement and to improve future success rates. Full day classes would also double enrolment for that grade, since students attending half day classes are only considered as half of one student enrolment.
- Facilitate post-secondary training and recruitment of special needs service providers. This includes professionals and assistants. By securing these positions within a division, student achievement will increase, teacher workload (and stress) will decrease and they will help promote an inclusive school environment. This could be an extension or partner of the *Northern Student Teacher Bursary* program.

There are questions the NADC should consider prior to action: What role does the NADC want to play in education development and facilitation? Should the NADC bridge school divisions and municipal governments and better enable them to share values and visions for their communities? How can the NADC encourage all northern stakeholders to engage with their local schools and help northern students succeed?

Next Steps

Throughout the conversations with northern school division superintendents (and staff), additional educational issues and concerns were raised outside of the scope of this particular report. Primarily, these issues occur at the high school level and include student retention, completion and achievement. Based on the Fraser Institute's *Report Card on Alberta's High Schools 2010*, only 3 of the 35 northern high schools ranked appear in the top half of the list (Cowley *et al*. 2010). It is obvious that changes to high school delivery in the north are necessary in order to improve student achievement and quality of education.

It would also be prudent to engage in discussions with northern students about their current or previous experiences within rural and remote schools. From a student perspective, are small schools engaging or would they prefer being bussed to a larger school and community? And what are the concerns of northern school board trustees? They may also provide insight on education issues that related to community interests.

The NADC has also heard about education issues within northern urban centers. The urban schools are experiencing stark contrasts to their rural counterparts with increased enrolment and lack of infrastructure for student populations. Their unique situation in the north cannot be overlooked because they have a growing population and filled schools.

There is the potential to explore the details of rural and remote high school improvements, other stakeholder perspectives and urban education in the north in a secondary phase of this report.

APPENDIX I

Model Predictions

The Alberta Education *Student Population, Teacher Workforce Projection Model* predictions describe changing demographics for students and teachers. These changes will affect school closures and quality of education throughout rural and remote communities in the north.

Scenarios are grouped based on school division zones and survey participation. In Figure 1, half of the school divisions show declining enrolment and all have declining fertility rates. Four of the six divisions also show high out migration. The divisions where enrolment and in-migration continues to increase either surround or are located within the City of Grande Prairie.

With increasing enrolment comes increasing utilization. The Grande Prairie Roman Catholic Separate School Division is expected to surpass its infrastructural capabilities by 2022. The only other division expecting increased enrolment is the Fort Vermillion School Division. Eventhough fertility rates in this region are predicted to decline over the 12 year period, their rates are consistently ahead of all other jurisdictions within the group.

There are small variations in student participation, teacher attrition and student to certified staff ratios across the divisions. Student participation is relatively low in Catholic (and in later Figures in francophone divisions) because they 'compete' with the regional public division for students and their regional reach is much wider. By considering the diversity in size of the divisions, the actual rate of student participation for a region becomes clearer.

Figures 2a and 4a show enrolment increases in the francophone divisions. Even with increasing enrolment, they continue to show relatively low student to certified staff ratios. Figure 2 also shows steady enrolment, migration and fertility rates for the Northlands School Division. However they also predict the highest teacher attrition rate for any northern division (in Zone 1 or 2/3).

Results in Figures 3e, 3f and 3g and 4e, 4f and 4g are very similar to those in Figures 1 and 2. The only anomaly is student participation in the St. Paul Education Regional Division. At higher than 100%, it predicts that all students within and some from outside the division are attending their schools. This is also reflected in the dramatic increase in enrolment in 2022 in Figure 3a. All other divisions described in Figure 3 have decreasing enrolment and fertility rates and high out-migration. Similar results are described in Figure 4.

The results predicted by the model show overall declining fertility rates, student enrolment and high out-migration. All of these factors have the potential to contribute to increases in school closures and the centralization of schools in small towns throughout rural and remote regions of the north.
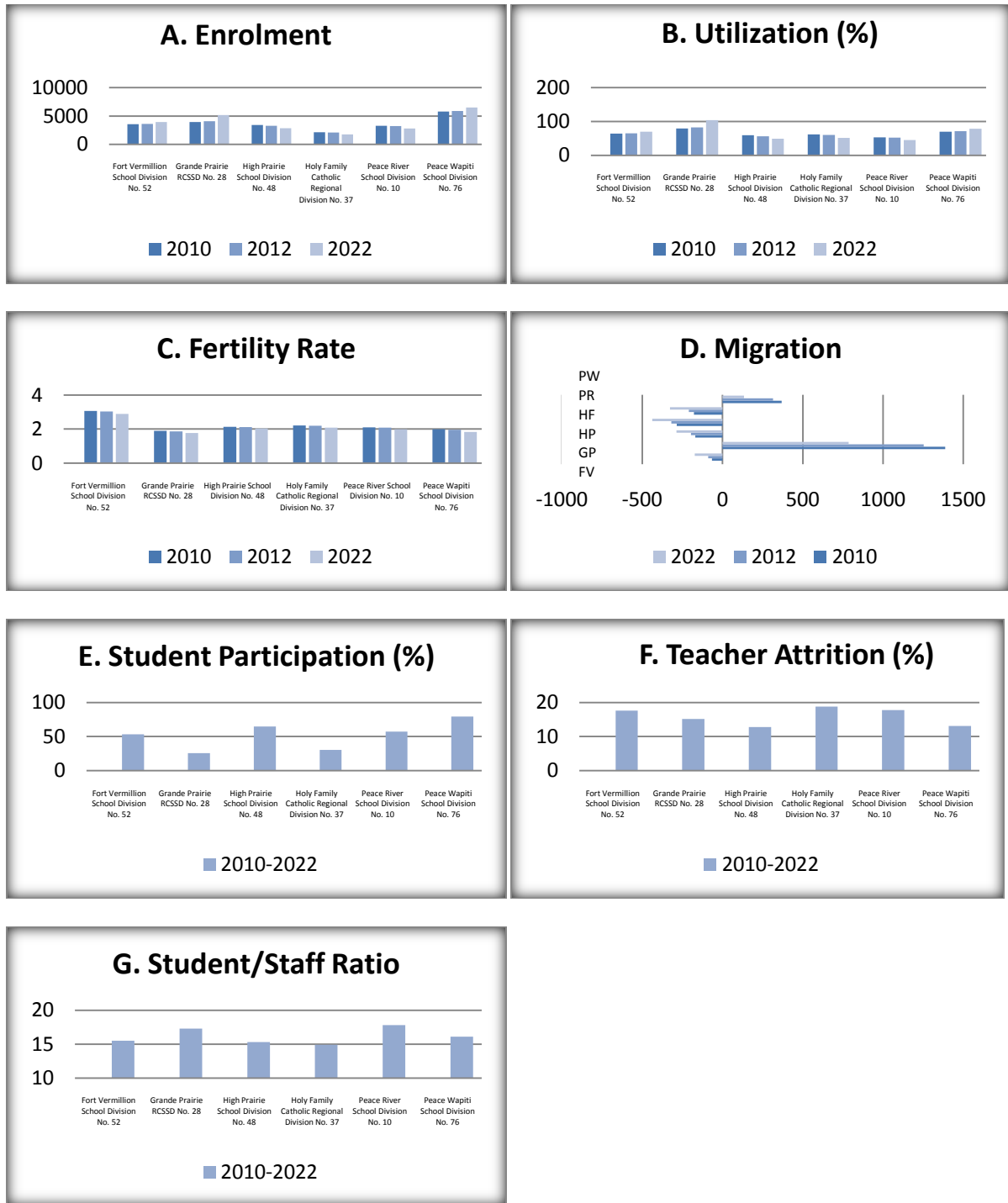
Figure 1. Modeled scenarios for Zone 1 school divisions surveyed in the *Rural and Remote Education Survey*. Figures a-d describe student enrolment, utilization of division infrastructure based on capacity (%), fertility rate based on new births within the former health regions and net-migration within the division. Figures e-g describe the average rates of student participation (percentage of all eligible students accessing provincially funded education in their region), teacher attrition (based on the percentage of those not reported in the Teacher Registry System for one year or more) and the ratio of students to certified staff to from 2010 through 2022.
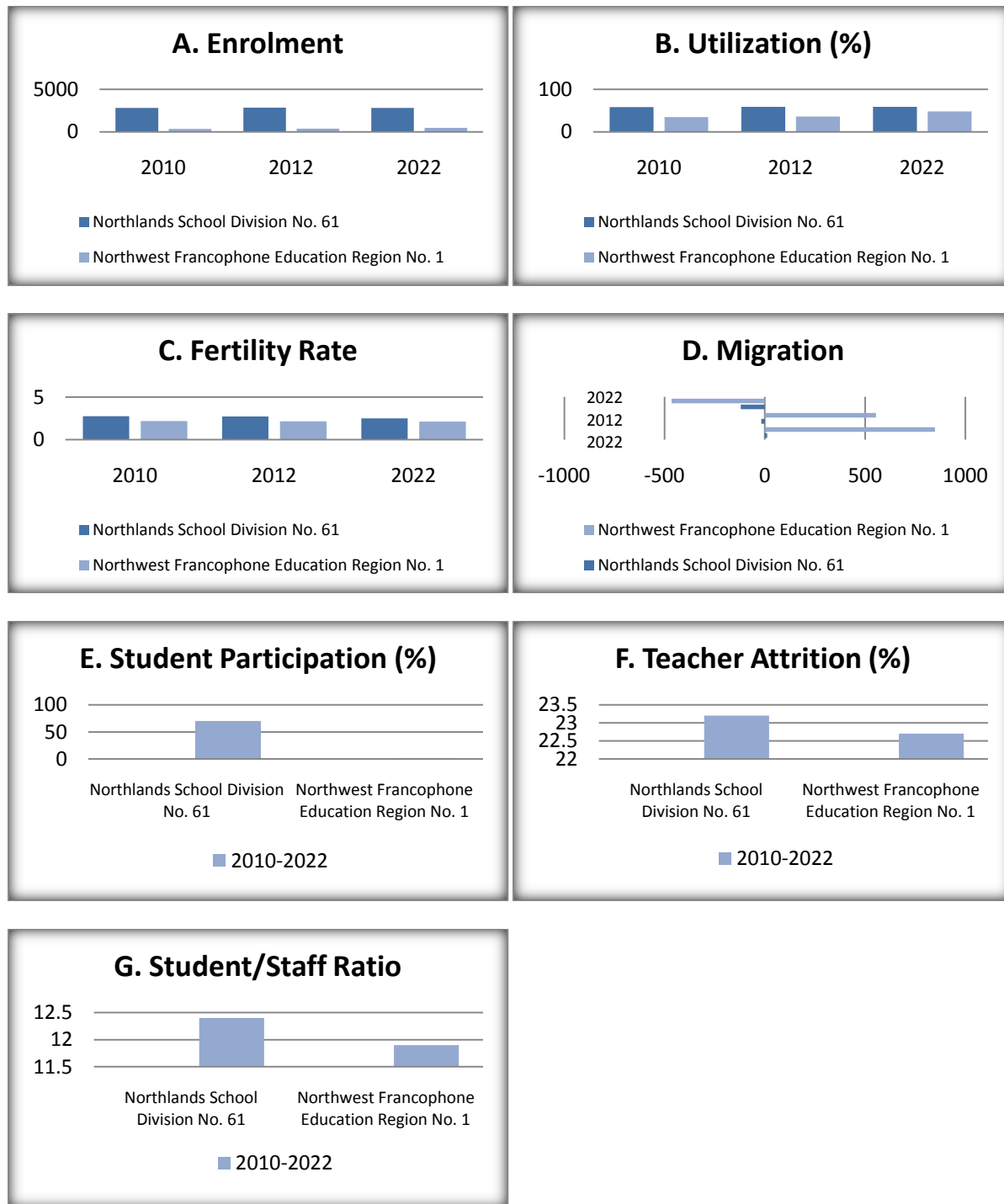
Figure 2. Modeled scenarios for Zone 1 school divisions not surveyed in the *Rural and Remote Education Survey*. Figures a-d describe student enrolment, utilization of division infrastructure based on capacity (%), fertility rate based on new births within the former health regions and net-migration within the division. Figures e-g describe the average rates of student participation (percentage of all eligible students accessing provincially funded education in their region), teacher attrition (based on the percentage of those not reported in the Teacher Registry System for one year or more) and the ratio of students to certified staff from 2010 through 2022.
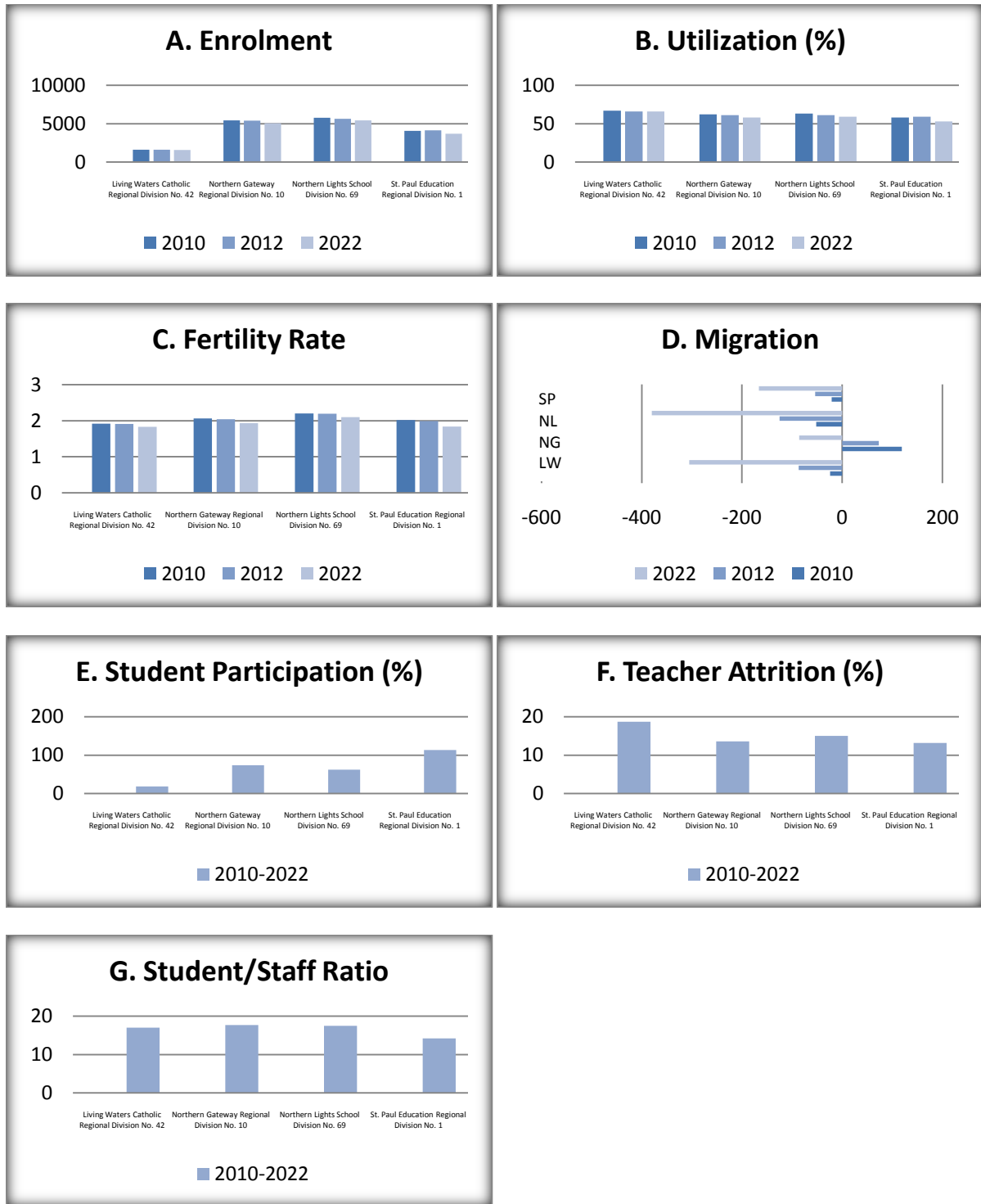
Figure 3. Modeled scenarios for Zone 2/3 school divisions surveyed in the *Rural and Remote Education Survey*. Figures a-d describe student enrolment, utilization of division infrastructure based on capacity (%), fertility rate based on new births within the former health regions and net-migration within the division. Figures e-g describe the average rates of student participation (percentage of all eligible students accessing provincially funded education in their region), teacher attrition (based on the percentage of those not reported in the Teacher Registry System for one year or more) and the ratio of students to certified staff from 2010 through 2022.

A. Enrolment

B. Utilization (%)

C. Fertility Rate

D. Migration

E. Student Participation (%)

F. Teacher Attrition (%)
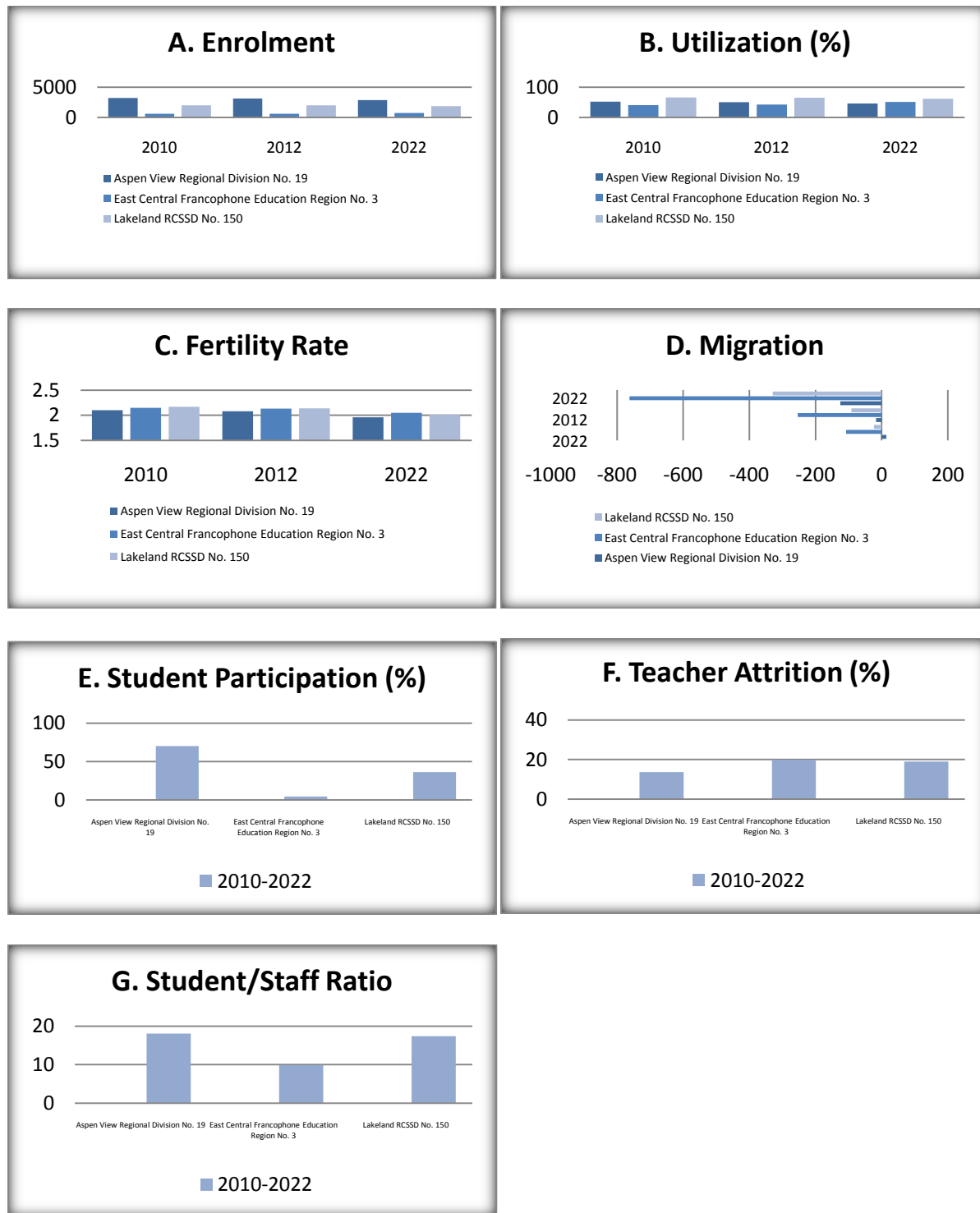
G. Student/Staff Ratio

Figure 4. Modeled scenarios for Zone 2/3 school divisions not surveyed in the *Rural and Remote Education Survey*. Figures a-d describe student enrolment, utilization of division infrastructure based on capacity (%), fertility rate based on new births within the former health regions and net-migration within the division. Figures e-g describe the average rates of student participation (percentage of all eligible students accessing provincially funded education in their region), teacher attrition (based on the percentage of those not reported in the Teacher Registry System for one year or more) and the ratio of students to certified staff from 2010 through 2022.

APPENDIX II

Community Survey

The community survey included questions about local community-school relationships. The survey was circulated via email to CAO, Reeves, and Mayors or to the jurisdiction's general email account. The questions were as follows:

Please list all primary schools (K-Gr.9) that are located within your MD, County or community. (This should include schools listed on the Alberta Education website and also schools that are not listed, but provide education services within your area.)

Are there any current partnerships between local schools in your area and the community (i.e. joint school/library, meeting rooms available to the general public, evening programming)?

How would the closure of a school in your area affect your local community?

Do you have any unique ideas for education delivery in your region?

Do you have any examples of educational best practices that other northern communities may benefit from?

Communities Contacted

Athabasca	Grimshaw	Peace River
Beaverlodge	High Level	Plamondon
Birch Hills County	High Prairie	Rainbow Lake
Clear Hills County	Hythe	Saddle Hills County
County of Athabasca	Lac La Biche County	Saddle Lake
County of Grande Prairie	McKenzie County	Sexsmith
County of Northern Lights	McLennan	Slave Lake
County of St Paul	MD Big Lakes	Smoky Lake County
Elk Point	MD Fairview	Spirit River
Fairview	MD of Bonnyville	St Paul
Falher	MD of Lesser Slave River	Valleyview
Fort Chipewyan	MD of Opportunity	Whitecourt
Fort McKay	MD Peace	Wood Buffalo
Fox Creek	MD Spirit River	Zama City
Grande Cache	Northern Sunrise County	

APPENDIX III

School Division Interviews

The superintendent (and/or divisional staff) survey was administered over the telephone or by personal interviews. The type of interview conducted depended on the superintendent's availability. The interview included 34 generic questions. Each interview also included questions specific to the school division's Annual Education Results Report. Listed below are the generic questions.

School Status
How does your division define a *rural* school?
How many *rural* schools do you have in your division?
How does your division define a *remote* school?
How many *remote* schools do you have in your division?
If you are experiencing declining enrolment, what do you think are some of the reasons?
If you are experiencing increasing enrolment, what do you think are some the reasons?
Are there any anticipated closures of schools within your division?
What actions and reactions have been taken towards any impending closures?
How many new schools have been built/opened in your division in the past 5 years?

Transportation
What is the average round-trip distance a student must travel within your division to access school (approx. in km)?
What is the average round-trip duration of a student bus ride (approx. in minutes)?
What is the longest distance/duration that any one student may be transported within your division to access their school?
Do you foresee significant changes to student transportation routes in the next 5 years?

Technology
Is technology currently being used within the division to deliver alternate education to a rural/remote school?
Do you have a reliable internet connection?
Are there specific barriers to accessing technology?
How, at the current rate of technological evolution, will your division be able to keep pace and offer the most current technology training and programming?

Staffing
Is the recruitment and retention of qualified teaching staff a challenge within your division?
Is the recruitment and retention of qualified support staff a challenge within your division?
Is it more challenging to recruit and retain qualified staff to your division's rural/remote schools than to other schools within the division?
If yes, why is it more of a challenge to recruit to certain schools?
What current programs does your division offer to recruit/retain staff?
What is the average length of stay for teaching/ support staff in your rural and remote schools?

Special Needs Services
Is access to special needs services a challenge for your rural and remote schools in your division?

Programming Options
Does your division offer a wide variety of optional courses to rural and remote junior high students?
What are the most popular non-required, course options chosen by Grades 7-9 within your division?
What type of programming is in place from K-9 that focuses on increasing high school retention and completion?

School in the Community
Are there any current partnerships between your schools and their communities?
How would the closure of any of your schools affect the community it serves? Would one closure have more affect than another?
If a rural/remote school in your division was to close, could school classes continue to be offered in a municipal building? Could a municipality hire a teacher?
Do you have any ideas to improve education delivery in northern Alberta's rural and remote schools?
Does your school have any best practices that it would like to share with other northern schools?

Challenges
What is the major challenge that your division currently faces?
How is your division coping with the challenge mentioned above?

School Divisions Interviewed
Fort Vermillion School Division No. 52
Grande Prairie RCSSD No. 28
High Prairie School Division No. 48
Holy Family Catholic Regional Division No. 37
Living Waters Catholic Regional Division No. 42
Northern Gateway Regional Division No. 10
Northern Lights School Division No. 69
Northland School Division No. 61
Peace River School Division No. 10
Peace Wapiti School Division No. 76
St. Paul Education Regional Division No. 1

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