

**STUDENT ACCOMMODATION STUDY GROUP  
FINAL REPORT**

Victoria South Family of Schools

December  
2014

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Principles the Guide Us .....	4
Beliefs/Values.....	4
Proposed Options.....	4
Initial reaction.....	4
Strengths /Weaknesses of the Proposal.....	5
Unknowns.....	6
Information Required.....	7
Impacts on Students/ Program Delivery/.....	7
Community /Staffing	
Alternative Proposal /Rationale.....	9
Public Input Session .....	10
Post Public Input Session .....	11
Appendix A (Disposition of Scenarios).....	12
Appendix B (Committee Members).....	16

## ***Introduction***

The Looking Inward document was drafted in the fall of 2012 and released for public review and input in April of 2013. Public information sessions, information sessions for the NSTU and CUPE Unions, School Advisory Council focus groups, student focus groups, Principal's information and input sessions and public input sessions in each of the seven Families of Schools marked the efforts of the Cape Breton Victoria Regional School Board to engage the educational stakeholders in this planning process.

Looking Inward is a planning framework for long term facility provision and system sustainability in a time of changing demographics.

The original document contained 32 scenarios designed to start the conversation with respect to long term facility requirements within the School Board. With the completion of the first round of consultations fifty additional scenarios were put forth for consideration. These were generated from the SAC focus groups, school based administrators and public input sessions. Two web based surveys generated another four hundred responses to variables associated with attempting to establish a long range plan that would be responsive to the challenges facing the School Board.

Staff reviewed all the scenarios, generated a series of proposals for further consideration, shared the input received with the School Board, and in April of 2014 released a document entitled "Looking Inward- Disposition of Scenarios to Family of Schools Suggested Solutions". The document also contained proposals as to how school facilities within each Family of Schools could be configured to accommodate students on the long term.

Public reaction to the proposals for each Family of Schools was sought by once again engaging stakeholders in the process. Student Accommodation Study Groups were established in each Family of Schools. The mandate of each Student Accommodation Study Group (SASG) was threefold:

- a) To continue the multi-part conversation of stakeholder engagement by soliciting input from educational partners on proposals designed to sustain required school facilities and to protect/maintain programs and services for students.
- b) To provide the Family of Schools Student Accommodation Study Group with an opportunity to reflect on the proposals with a view to commenting/recommending the identified proposal or suggesting viable alternatives.
- c) To afford educational stakeholders the opportunity to generate a response document on the evolving plan including recommendations for the consideration of the Board.

## ***PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE US***

Our group's primary guiding principles were responsiveness, sustainability, and transparency. We acknowledge the need for educational requirements to be met, we wish to be sensitive to the community's needs, and we support the effective and efficient use of Board resources.

## ***BELIEFS / VALUES***

Our family of schools recognizes the challenges facing the Board but strongly contend that the existing schools should be maintained in our communities. We value the ability, as parents, to play a role in our children's schools and we cherish the role our schools play in our communities. We believe that the negative consequences of longer bus rides should form part of any discussion about excess building capacity in the already-expansive Victoria South region.

Key values identified:

1. Maintain a school in a community
2. Student learning and achievement is our primary concern
3. Engaged parents help improve the focus on education
4. Transportation of students should be a major consideration
5. The stock of buildings must be managed
6. Parents and community members should be engaged in addressing issues facing the Board

## ***PROPOSED OPTIONS***

The Board has asked our group to consider the following proposal:

Make Middle River Consolidated a P-5 school, and move its Grade Sixes to Baddeck Academy, which would then be configured as a P-5, 6-8 (middle school), and 9-12 facility.

## ***INITIAL REACTION***

Many participants reacted, initially, by expressing relief that the proposed scenario would keep Middle River School open, and off the Review for Closure list. Participants also questioned whether such a move would provide any real benefit to Middle River students. Some expressed concern that losing the Grade Six class would result in a reduction of student numbers, which might eventually jeopardize the school's viability (as student numbers have, in the past, been a trigger for review).

### ***WHAT ARE THE STRENGTHS OF THE PROPOSAL?***

Participants were able to identify some potential value in the proposal. Possible strengths identified included:

- Middle River students might transition more smoothly to Baddeck Academy if sent in Grade Six
- Middle River's senior class teacher would have fewer grades to instruct
- If the entire Board is eventually embracing the Middle School model, this move would ensure that all Grade Six students have the same type of experience
- Moving to a Middle School model would mean Baddeck Academy could provide one teacher for each grade (6,7,8)
- Moving to a Middle School model in Baddeck would provide a better experience for Grade 9 students

### ***WHAT ARE THE WEAKNESSES OF THE PROPOSAL?***

Initially, the group identified potential weaknesses related to the proposal's impact on Middle River School and its students. As the discussion unfolded, participants began to identify broader challenges posed by the anticipated move to a Middle School model.

Possible weaknesses related to Middle River School/students:

- Middle River students might face a more difficult transition if required to move to a new school one year earlier.
- Middle River's senior class teacher does not want to lose her Grade Six class.
- Middle River Grade Sixes would lose the benefits of a unique learning environment, in which they step into increasing leadership roles as they mature in a multi-age classroom.
- Students would miss out on the unique learning opportunities presented by being part of a school gardening/entrepreneurship program, in which the Grade Sixes now play a significant role.
- Students would experience a much longer bus ride to school, one year earlier.
- Reduction of Middle River School's numbers might eventually be used as a rationale for review/closure.
- Middle River parents value keeping Grade Sixes with the younger elementary students, rather than hastening their transition to junior high.
- The loss of Grade Six might affect the school's desirability to new families moving to the community.
- There is no obvious educational gain in moving the Grade Sixes, but there are identifiable losses.
- Parents who see a value in moving students to Grade Six in Baddeck may already make that choice. It seems better to allow families to decide what's best for their children.
- The proposed move seems to be mainly about building configuration, and not about educational benefit to children.

Weaknesses related to Baddeck Academy and the Middle School concept in Victoria South:

- Baddeck Academy's ongoing renovation was designed to accommodate a P-6, 7-9, 10-12 model school. Reconfiguring the space to accommodate a Middle School could be challenging, and the building would not be ready for that model in the near future.
- The current Grade 2 classes at Middle River and Baddeck are large enough that there might be an accommodation issue if the groups are combined in Grade Six.
- Given that both Baddeck Academy and Rankin are already small, P-12 schools, the Middle School model could present challenges related to staffing, scheduling, and space. The change could conceivably result in additional cost to the system.

### ***WHAT ARE THE UNKNOWNNS WITH RESPECT TO THE PROPOSAL?***

The group expressed a great deal of concern about the unknowns related to this proposal. The two primary concerns were:

#### **1. We do not know enough about the proposed Middle School model.**

We have, as yet, no solid description of Middle School philosophy or pedagogy as it will be practiced in our Board, and we have no concrete plan regarding teacher training and inservicing. Furthermore, it is unclear how this model can be made to work in Baddeck and Iona, given that these schools are P-12 facilities, and already face staffing challenges.

#### **2. Can Baddeck's ongoing renovations be made to accommodate the Middle School model?**

The ongoing renovation has already been quite disruptive for many students, and this group has raised serious questions about how the building would have to be configured in order to accommodate the Middle School model.

#### **3. Does the Board intend to adopt the Middle School model throughout CBVRSB?**

Victoria South, as a family of schools, is unique in the Board, comprising a P-6, multi-age elementary school, and two P-12 facilities. Both P-12 schools already face staffing challenges under their current configurations, and their principals question the viability of the Middle School model within their buildings. Is wholesale adoption of the middle school model an inevitability, or is there room within our unique environment to maintain a status quo which is working well?

In short, our group has grave reservations about moving the Middle River Grade Sixes into a partially finished building, and consigning them to an ill-defined system of instruction that isn't yet operational.

### ***WHAT INFORMATION IS REQUIRED TO ASSIST IN GENERATING A RESPONSE?***

Specific and detailed information regarding staffing, scheduling, and building space would be necessary in order to fully understand the ramifications of moving to a Middle School model in Baddeck and Iona.

At this time, the group has enough information to support maintaining the status quo at Middle River School. We understand and value the Grade Six experience available in Middle River. Regardless of whether the Middle School model is adopted in Baddeck and Iona, Middle River parents feel strongly that Grade Six in Middle River should remain an option.

### ***WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS THE PROPOSED OPTION ON THE FOLLOWING:***

#### **A) STUDENTS**

- Middle River Grade Sixes would lose a unique learning environment, experience a longer bus ride one year earlier, and possibly enter a school undergoing renovation.
- Middle River grades p-5 would miss the leadership and companionship of the Grade Six class.
- Baddeck Academy students could face further disruption if Middle School configuration caused additional renovations to be necessary.
- While it is possible that the Middle School environment could have beneficial impacts for some students, it is difficult to assess that without additional information.

#### **B) PROGRAM DELIVERY**

- Although it is arguably true that moving the Grade Sixes from Middle River might simplify the job of the senior grade teacher, it is worth noting that the school's long-time senior grade teacher supports keeping the Grade Sixes in the school. The multi-age environment has proven to be enriching on many levels for the students, and the teacher considers the Grade Six class to be an important component of the classroom.
- Moving to a Middle School model would significantly impact program delivery in the affected schools. Staff would require significant inservicing and support in order to understand, embrace, and implement the new model.
- The adoption of a Middle School model would result in serious staffing challenges in both Iona and Baddeck, which are already struggling to cover core program delivery with the current staffing complement.

## **C) COMMUNITY**

Moving the Grade Sixes could reduce parent access and opportunities for participation. The contribution of the Grade Sixes to projects like the school garden, entrepreneurship program, and Green School program would be missed by the wider community, which is involved in the school.

## **D) STAFFING**

The movement of Middle River Grade Sixes would not, in and of itself, affect staffing levels at either Middle River or Baddeck. The adoption of the Middle School configuration in Baddeck and Iona could potentially have significant impacts on staffing; however, this committee is unable to determine what those impacts would be.

## **WHAT COSTS ARE INVOLVED**

Again, moving the Middle River Grade Sixes, in and of itself, would have little impact in terms of cost. However, the costs of adopting the Middle School model might be significant, as this could involve renovations or retrofits in Baddeck (and possibly Iona) and staffing changes. These costs are beyond the ability of this committee to determine and must be examined by the Operations Department.

The Operations Department's initial review of costs related to moving the grade sixes (but not including the costs of moving to a Middle School model in Baddeck and Iona) indicate no impact on operating capital, and possibly a small impact on transportation depending on the home address and transportation requirements for grades sixes each year.

## **ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL**

### **ORIGINAL PROPOSAL**

Make Middle River Consolidated a P-5 school, and move its Grade Sixes to Baddeck Academy, which would then be configured as a P-5, 6-8 (middle school), and 9-12 facility.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL**

Because the schools in Victoria South are truly unique learning environments, we believe it is best to maintain the status quo in Victoria South. Middle River would continue as a P-6 facility, and Baddeck and Iona would retain their current configuration.

### ***RATIONALE FOR ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL***

Victoria South families value the unique learning environments provided by their schools. Middle River families value the advantages of the multi-age classroom, and prefer to retain the option of having their sixth graders stay at Middle River School. Given that the adoption of the Middle School model in Victoria South will likely result in a greater net cost to the system, without a tangible net benefit to the students, it seems unreasonable to make this change.

In the words of one of the Victoria South committee members: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”

Student Accommodation Study Group Draft Report  
Victoria South Family of Schools  
Public Input Session

Baddeck Academy

November 16, 2014

Participants: 17

Participants involved in the public input session in response to the Student Accommodation Study Group Draft Report for the Victoria South Family of Schools made input on five (5) themes and an “Other” category.

1. Grade Configuration

As two of the three schools in Victoria South are currently configured as P-12 schools, the grade level configuration discussion centered around the middle school concept.

Two individuals spoke to the importance of staff being ready to embrace the approaches to teaching in a middle school setting.

One individual spoke of research on middle schools noting that the achievement of outcomes for students was better in P-8 settings.

Two individual questioned how middle school students would be accommodated with existing spaces in the P-12 buildings.

One participant wondered whether the middle school transition could be introduced with ease.

School administrators noted that there is a comfort level with the middle school concept and they believe that the elements that need to be “tweaked” could be accomplished.

Two Middle River participants spoke to the multi-age instruction strategies utilized at Middle River School. Many of the elements that characterize the philosophy, curriculum, and instruction strategies of a middle school are comparable to those employed in multi-age instruction.

One participant suggested the existing configuration should be maintained.

2. Small School Sustainability

One individual raised the issue of small school sustainability given the existence of funding to support small rural school sustainability. This funding remains “grandfathered” for Middle River under the existing funding formula to finance School Board operations. Concern was expressed that such funding could be removed and jeopardize the continuation of small rural schools currently receiving such funding.

It was acknowledged that both Rankin School of the Narrows and Baddeck Academy benefit from the new isolated rural school funding allocation.

3. Facility Improvement

As the public session was held at Baddeck Academy, participants were cognizant of the extensive renovations carried out at that facility.

One participant asked if the Board has done a formal study to see what is needed at the Middle River School to improve the facility. Participants were advised that when public scenarios were developed, suggestions came forward from the community as to how some of the facility improvements could be addressed as funding for school improvements becomes available.

One participant noted that, while improvements to Middle River would be welcomed, not all facilities need to look the same.

4. Student Services

One participant suggested that the Schools Plus option should be explored as an option for improving services to students in the Victoria South Family of Schools.

5. Staffing Challenges

Two speakers addresses the impact declining enrolment was having on staffing and the subsequent challenge staffing reduction had on sustaining the quality of program offerings for students in a P-12 learning environment.

6. Other

One participant expressed disappointment that School Review is still touted as an option for Middle River.

**Post Public Session Input**

There were no additional comments or alternatives.

APPENDIX A  
Disposition of Scenarios

VICTORIA SOUTH

**Scenario 1**

As Baddeck Academy is positioned to accommodate all 22 students currently attending Middle River Consolidated School, identify Middle River Consolidated School for inclusion in the School Review Process.

*Disposition*

Scenario 1 is not included in the suggested solution for Victoria South. With the \$150,000 grandfathered small school funding and the loss of revenue from the reduced square footage, the operating cost savings were judged of not enough significance to warrant placing the school under review for permanent closure.

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**Scenario 2**

Consistent with the ideology to protect rural schools that benefit from financial resources designed to support sustainability, retain Middle River Consolidated School as a rural community school.

*Disposition*

Scenario 2 is suggested in the solution for Victoria South Family of Schools. This should be re-evaluated should the Hogg I funding be eliminated.

**SAC Scenario 19**

Examine the option to develop Middle River School as a Teaching Center for Multi-Age Instruction.

*Disposition*

SAC Scenario 19 could become a consideration within the suggested solution.

**SAC Scenario 20**

Establish Middle River School as the first Green-powered elementary school in Nova Scotia, and continue to develop its sustainability focus.

*Disposition*

SAC Scenario 20 will require an examination of energy solutions.

**SAC Scenario 21**

Building on Middle River School's entrepreneurial experiences, examine the option to develop and pilot an elementary entrepreneurship curriculum unit as a locally initiated pilot project.

*Disposition*

SAC Scenario 21 could become a consideration within the suggested solution.

**SAC Scenario 22**

As Middle River School is unique and the Middle River School Community prides itself on developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning explore the option of establishing the Middle River School as a teaching center for multi-age instruction.

AND

Examine the option of establishing Middle River School as the first green-powered elementary school in Nova Scotia that can serve as a model for educational facility sustainability in rural Nova Scotia.

AND

Consistent with the entrepreneurial skills and practices that characterize Nova Scotia communities like Middle River, examine the option of developing and implementing an entrepreneurial skills curriculum unit to promote entrepreneurial skills development at an early age in rural communities to enable school children to make choices with respect to life in rural communities.

*Disposition*

SAC Scenario 22 could become a consideration within the suggested solution.

**Public Scenario 18**

To examine the option of establishing an early French Immersion Program at Middle River School.

*Disposition*

The board is not considering adaptation to the current French Immersion Programming. Public Scenario 18 will not receive further consideration at this time.

**Public Scenario 19**

To examine in more detail the cost efficiencies of sustaining smaller school facilities as opposed to consolidating small school student populations with other school facilities within the Family of Schools.

*Disposition*

The suggested solution for Victoria South is based on the evaluation suggested by Public Scenario 19. In particular, with respect to the small net gain in operating cost reduction which would result from closure of Middle River.

**Public Scenario 20**

Examine the option to establish Middle River School as a Model Rural School to spur on rural regeneration and social sustainability while building on the School Board's primary mandate -the delivery of programs and services to its anchor constituents- the primary to grade 6 student population at the Middle River School.

*Disposition*

In Public Scenario 20, Victoria South Family of Schools solution will require this examination to assist in the review of this solution.

### **Public Scenario 21**

Examine the option of reconfiguring the Middle River School as an alternative small Primary to grade 12 facility to serve students whose academic needs and learning styles can flourish in a small school setting.

#### *Disposition*

In considering Public Scenario 21, the small number of students in grades 7-12 was reviewed. While an argument can be made to allow the students to be educated in their community with the high tech classrooms, the board judged that the cost to create the space necessary, 2 virtual classroom and 2 secondary classrooms, along with the difficulty to provide Tech Ed, Family Studies and physical education would not be appropriate in this setting.

This scenario is not receiving further consideration.

APPENDIX B STUDY

GROUP MEMBERS

VICTORIA SOUTH

**Study Group Members:**

Juanita Romard (Principal 2013-2014)	Middle River Consolidated
Pam Marston-Berk (SAC Chair)	Middle River Consolidated
Janice Ross (SAC member)	Middle River Consolidated
Kate Oland (SAC member)	Middle River Consolidated
Barb MacDonald (Principal)	Baddeck Academy
Lynn Myers (SAC Chair)	Baddeck Academy
Dori Delaney (Teacher)	Baddeck Academy
Dave Parkinson (SAC member)	Baddeck Academy
Theresa MacNeil	Rankin School of the Narrows

**Coordinator:** Cathy MacNeil