

Options to Solve the School Space Issue in Yellowknife

Keeping the Interests of Students Front and Centre

Introduction

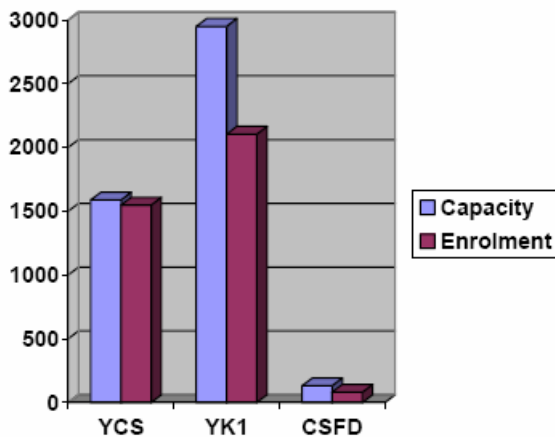
Education is one of the most important services a government can provide its citizens. Education lays the foundation for young people to be successful as they become adults by ensuring everyone has the best chance to reach their potential. Elected officials and administrators are entrusted with providing the best education possible for children. This includes a responsibility to make the best use of resources to ensure that every student has the best opportunity to succeed.

In Yellowknife, we have two public education systems that provide quality education programming for our students. There are many good things happening in our schools. We also have one school board at almost 100% of its capacity while the other board is operating well below the capacity of their schools.

The Minister and the Department of Education, Culture and Employment have launched an initiative to bring together parents and stakeholders to discuss the need to rationalize space use in Yellowknife schools in a way that focuses on the best interests of students and their education needs.

The Two Challenges

There are two immediate challenges facing Yellowknife when it comes to the utilization of space to deliver the best quality education programs and services to students. First, there is the ongoing need to make effective and efficient use of resources at a time that there is under-utilized school space. Second, there is a short-term need to accommodate students who will be impacted by planned renovations to École St Joseph and École JH Sissons.



Overall, Yellowknife schools are under-utilized. As this graph indicates Yellowknife Catholic Schools (YCS) currently operates at 96.6% capacity while Yellowknife Education District #1 (YK1) operates at 70.5% of its schools capacity. Taking École

Sir John Franklin School out of the mix, the rest of the YK1 school utilization rates range from 51.9% to 63.2%.

There are, by Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) standards, 843 empty spaces among YK1 schools, the equivalent of 33 empty classrooms. This compares to 55 empty spaces in the YCS schools. There are still over 400 spaces available in YK1 schools before the 85% utilization rate ceiling recommended by ECE is reached.

This means the equivalent of more than one whole school is not being used but is still eating up dollars in operational, maintenance and administrative costs. The underutilization of schools in the YK1 system means they are paying hundred of thousands of dollars on administrative and operational costs that could be used instead on more or improved school programs and for additional school activities for students.

This is all happening when the Government of the Northwest Territories has made substantial new investments in education across the Northwest Territories. Since 2003, the GNWT has added \$30.4 million for operation of schools in the NWT, including an additional \$8.0 million for schools in Yellowknife operated by YCS and YK1.

History

In 2005, ECE prepared a detailed study of Yellowknife school infrastructure and resources as well as the trends expected over the next several years. The *Ten Year Education Facility Plan – Yellowknife* can be viewed at <http://www.ece.gov.nt.ca/>. That study showed that parents place the highest value on programs that each school offers when choosing a school. It also showed that the re-distribution of students among available space is required in Yellowknife.

Attempts have been made to deal with the challenge of rationalizing school space in Yellowknife.

Minister Dent set up a Committee of Stakeholders to find a viable solution for the utilization of school space. When that did not result in any agreement on space utilization, a mediator was hired to work with the two Boards. The Minister then personally met with the Board Chairs to find an acceptable compromise. To date, there has been no agreement on how to make the best use of existing space in Yellowknife schools.

The Government of the Northwest Territories is concerned about the lack of an agreement between the two Boards.

We need to move forward and look at what's best for students.

The Options

There are several options that have been suggested to deal with this challenge.

1. Share Space

Some people have suggested that the two school boards should share space

Benefits

- Increases use of collective space across the two school systems
- Eliminates the need to spend precious resources on a new school

Weaknesses

- Does not address issue of overall under-utilized school space in YK1
- Does not address issue of effective use of public funds
- Does not provide a distinct setting for YCS students
- Increases costs to NWT taxpayers because of duplicated administration

2. Build a New School

Some people have suggested that we simply build a new school in Yellowknife

Benefits

- Students are not displaced
- Helps address situation of YCS

Weaknesses

- Does not solve the issue of under-utilized school space in YK1
- Not fiscally responsible with more than 850 empty spaces in Yellowknife schools
- Competes for precious resources needed to address other pressing needs including a school in Inuvik and Aurora College facilities
- Increased cost to NWT taxpayers for no justifiable reason

3. YCS Manage its Enrolment

Some people have suggested that YCS limit enrolment by giving preference to Catholic students and accommodating non-Catholics only if space allows

Benefits

- Reduces excess space issue at YK1 and space needs at YCS

Weaknesses

- Reduces choice for Yellowknife parents between Boards
- Caps YCS enrolment

4. Consolidate School Boards

Some people have suggested that we have only one school board in Yellowknife

Benefits

- One Board allocates space within school system for everyone
- Some reduction in overall administration costs
- Eliminates “turf war”

Weaknesses

- Cannot be done under the NWT Act
- Eliminates choice parents currently have between Boards

5. Consolidate YK1 Schools

Consolidation of schools in YK1 is another option. This would also free up a school that could then be leased to YCS for a short period during the renovation of École St Joseph (two years).

Benefits

- YK1 can generate savings by optimizing the use of its space and its human resources
- YK1 can increase the funds allocated to school programs and activities
- YK1 can generate revenue through the lease of a school
- YCS space issues will be solved by leasing the school

Weaknesses

- Students from one school will need to be re-deployed to different schools
- Causes concern for YK1 over losing students to YCS - balanced by YCS not having extra space after construction

The Proposed Solution

The Government of the Northwest Territories feels that of the options proposed, the best solution is for YK1 to consolidate its schools on a long-term basis and to lease a freed up school to YCS for a two-year period. A decision to consolidate space must be made by YK1 as they have the authority to manage their facilities.

The benefits of this option outweigh the benefits of any other option when we look at what make the most effective and efficient used of school facilities. This option increases the ability to maximize the availability of resources that can go into the classroom for the education of children while keeping the administrative costs to a minimum.

If you have questions, or would like to present an alternative solution to this issue, we would like to hear from you.

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