

Book Review

The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia

Paul W. Bennett

Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2013

Reviewed by: Heather E. McGregor
University of Ottawa

Paul W. Bennett's small book *The Last Stand: Schools, Communities and the Future of Rural Nova Scotia* is a study in publication-as-advocacy, providing both a short history of the advocacy movement in question and contributing to the movement's aims. For educational researchers, administrators, and leaders interested in policy, society, and the urban/rural divide in school systems, his work provides a detailed snapshot of a moment in time within a changing space. It holds the mark of a historian writing for the future, offering a perspective that has not been sobered by the passage of time. Inherent in that paradox is the book's strength as a tool for contemporary use and its weakness in offering a limited scope. Still, advocates for small schools and other increasingly unpopular educational models will find helpful suggestions in terms of both logic and logistics contained in Bennett's treatise.

Bennett documents the controversy surrounding the closure of small rural schools as a co-founder of the Nova Scotia Small Schools Initiative. Evidently, his primary audience is Nova Scotia's electorate, and individuals participating directly in the dialogue about this particular but significant educational policy debate. As someone interested in the issues but uninvolved in the context, I read *The Last Stand* partially for Bennett's insights into broader questions relevant to other jurisdictions. Questions such as: How well can small schools in rural communities educate youth for the changing opportunities available to them as adults? What is the role of communities that have only marginal political and economic clout in decision-making associated with school administration? How do provincial and territorial governments engage communities respectfully in establishing and implementing operational policies and practices? What recourse do rural, small, or minority communities have when their educational values are not reflected in public institutions? And how can the call for efficiency and expediency be negotiated by advocacy organizations that wish to attach value to non-monetary aspects of schools, such as positive relationships between teachers and students? Some evidence and strategies useful to answering these questions can certainly be found in *The Last Stand*.

At the heart of Bennett's behind-the-scenes story about grassroots mobilization to defend small schools are the twin issues of school consolidation and rural depopulation. Nova Scotia's population is divided evenly between communities designated as urban and rural. Rurality in Nova Scotia is of an extreme nature in comparison to other parts of Canada. Most towns have less than 5,000 inhabitants and are dealing with poverty, unemployment, and population decline. Declining student enrolment leads to surplus school building space, which has in turn

become a drain on school boards and the provincial government. This context has led to a school review process experienced by communities as, according to Bennett, “promoting adversarial relationships and undermining confidence in school boards and the entire public school system” (p. 2).

The arguments against school consolidation are clearly laid out: long unsupervised bus rides that waste student time; issues of eroding educational quality associated with larger schools where students are more easily lost in the shuffle; diminishing parent and community involvement; short-term costs associated with disposal of existing schools; and long-term costs associated with the loss of social capital when a community does not have a school. Positioning schools at the heart of rural communities and the prospects for families to stay in rural Nova Scotia, Bennett passionately claims:

This book demonstrates conclusively that, without a province-wide movement pushing for a fundamental re-thinking of our model of schooling, the trend toward a centralized, bureaucratically driven school system will not be halted, let alone reversed. Indeed, the relentless force of school consolidation . . . will in all likelihood still spell a death sentence for what’s left of rural Nova Scotia. (p. 6)

Having established the context, Bennett goes on to build his arguments for alternatives to rural school closure. He endorses a vision for reworking existing school buildings into a *community hub* school model, integrating seniors programs, day care centres, adult education, or family services under the same roof with public school programs. He insists that this approach could provide social and financial sustainability and better quality education. Touching only too briefly on issues of school leadership, curriculum selection, and social sustainability in school programs, Bennett calls for acknowledgement of the right of rural people to maintain their own world view through education. Again centering the urban/rural divide, Bennett’s representation conveys a homogeneous rural population that holds a high level of consensus. His demographic indicators focus on population growth and decline, age, and income in rural spaces, but Bennett does not adequately address other forms of difference, such as how ethnic and cultural diversity factor in rural perspectives on schools, employment prospects, and the future of Nova Scotia.

With a distinct tone of condemnation, Bennett documents the events that led to animosity among grassroots school organizations, school boards, and the provincial government through a plagued, tense, and poorly designed school review process. In summary, he finds: “Provincial education policy remains essentially blind to the realities of rurality and to the unique interests and needs of Nova Scotia’s rural students and teachers” (p. 54). In my own view and according to Bennett’s evidence, this accusation warrants serious consideration in Nova Scotia, as well as by provincial and territorial governments elsewhere in Canada.

A missed opportunity, in my reading, is Bennett’s lack of elaboration on one of the most intriguing and potentially provocative examples of a Nova Scotia community that successfully kept its small school. Referring to a school in Kings County, he explains: “In the case of Cambridge School, the Annapolis Valley First Nation played a critical role in blocking the board’s clumsily worded proposal ‘not to include this building in future planning’” (p. 58). Bennett goes on to cite a newspaper article in which Mi’kmaq Elder Gerald Toney is quoted as saying “Successful schools are not the result of successful buildings,” and “it is unacceptable to move and divide our communities” (p. 58). Then, Bennett concludes, “Faced with combined

Mi'kmaq and parent opposition . . . the school board relented, sparing that school" (p. 58).

In reading this excerpt to a colleague, we wondered if it could be likened to the unassailable power found in one eagle feather raised by Elijah Harper in the Manitoba legislature, bringing down the Meech Lake Accord. Was this action a form of Aboriginal veto or something else? Bennett does not tell us. The details of the scenario, its political antecedents, ramifications, and the possible relevance of this hasty government capitulation to other rural communities, remain mysterious. This seems to mark again the advocacy purposes of the book. Readers might have benefitted from following this line of inquiry to understand better how First Nations education engages what appears to be a constricted urban/rural binary in which rural people have little political leverage as a rule. It seems that because the school was not closed, Bennett does not see it worth featuring in any greater detail. First Nations schools are often located in rural areas, they also currently and constantly face negotiations with governments, and are likewise perpetually advocating for their own educational values and purposes. Why not delve into these resonances?

The Last Stand provides an insider's view and portions of the book focus on local events and correspondence that are undoubtedly more important to the cause than to a general audience. It is bolstered by a great deal of evidence, statistics, and research as well as the voices of others involved in the movement. I found repetitiveness when it comes to the book's main messages but beneath this, the reader finds a compelling engagement with the pains of setting educational policy in uncertain and unpredictable times. In particular, Bennett illustrates the importance of accounting for factors in school administration that cannot as easily or directly be quantified monetarily. He says, "The quality of education, student engagement, and strengthening school-community relations are the fundamental goals of Nova Scotia education, but those goals do not factor in the current planning model embodied in reducing the 'overhead' (overgrown structures and administration) and school consolidation" (p. 55).

Consultation processes have often precluded or failed at facilitating responsible, fulsome, and genuine school or community self-determination in rural jurisdictions. Documenting such failure and crying foul, as Bennett does, sets the stage for further coalition-building. I only wish that there had been greater articulation of the relevance of Bennett's publication-as-advocacy, both to Indigenous concerns and beyond Nova Scotia's shores.

References

Bennett, P. W. (2013). *The last stand: Schools, communities and the future of rural Nova Scotia*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing. Available as download from the author's website: <http://smu-ca.academia.edu/PaulBennett/Books>

Dr. Heather E. McGregor holds a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the University of Ottawa. Heather is from Nunavut, and her research interests include Nunavut's curriculum and educational policy history, residential schools history, history and social studies education, historical consciousness and decolonization. In 2010 she published *Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic* with UBC Press.