

## **The Closure of Rideau High School: A Case Study in the Political Economy of Urban Education in Ontario**

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### **Abstract**

In 2017, school board trustees in Ottawa, Ontario, voted to close Rideau High School, an urban secondary school in a historically marginalized neighbourhood. The school board had argued that low enrolment at Rideau HS, and the resultant inability of the school to offer a full range of course choices, made closure the only viable option. To many people in the affected communities, however, the closure decision was seen as a form of discrimination against the school's marginalized student population, which included many new immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous students. This article draws upon research from the US and the UK that emphasizes the spatial dimensions of urban education, along with the existing research on school closures in Ontario in order to explore this particular school closure decision from an urban, political, socioeconomic, and historical perspective. By focusing on a case study area in eastern Ottawa, this article incorporates both a narrative history of Ottawa school board policies and a quantitative analysis of local demographic data. The argument here is that the closure of Rideau HS should be understood in the context of a series of interconnected challenges faced by the school, including a marginalized student population, a negative reputation, and low student enrolment. In turn, these challenges should be understood in the context of socioeconomic disparities between neighbourhoods in the area and a history of ineffective policies at the school-board level, including relatively lax student transfer policies. These findings indicate the inadequacy of the narrow economic measures that Ontario school boards use to determine school closure decisions, and suggest that school boards should engage in more robust community engagement before closing marginalized urban schools. A proposal to establish an official "community hub" within the active high school, which was supported by the community but not by the school board, is examined as a concrete alternative to closure.

The importance of the obvious has been overlooked by research. The rapid growth of bureaucracies recruited from highly specialized social sciences has brought the rapid growth of ecclesiasticism and the rapid decline of scepticism. Democracies are becoming people who cannot understand, run by people buttressed and protected by the ramparts of research.

-Harold A. Innis, "Political Economy in the Modern State" (1944, p. 334)

*Keywords: school closure, Ottawa, Ontario, school boards, public policy, equity, urban education, residential concentration*

### **Introduction**

On March 7, 2017, school board trustees in Ottawa, Ontario, voted to close Rideau High School, an urban secondary school in a historically marginalized neighbourhood. The decision followed a long and

emotional public meeting of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), in which community members pleaded with the board to let them keep their school (Miller, 2017a). The OCDSB (2009a; 2017a) has consistently argued that low enrolment at Rideau HS, and the resultant inability of the school to offer a full range of course choices, made closure the only viable option. However, to many people in the affected communities, the closure decision was seen as a form of discrimination against the school's marginalized student population, which included many new immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous students (Miller, 2017a; 2017b).

This article is part of a more extensive study that seeks to understand the closure of Rideau HS through an analysis of the local historical, cultural, and political circumstances within which the OCDSB made their decision. While other articles are planned to explore different aspects of the closure decision, our goal here is to establish the local historical and socioeconomic context<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we explore the differential privilege of neighbourhoods and schools in eastern Ottawa and how these disparities align with the stigmatization and under-enrolment of schools in less affluent areas. Patricia Irving, a former principal at Rideau HS (as well as at the more prestigious local schools Lisgar Collegiate Institute and Colonel By Secondary School), wrote an op-ed on the closure of Rideau in *The Ottawa Citizen* that raised important questions about the wider socioeconomic context of the decision. In particular, she suggests that the closure decision was shaped by a pattern of disparities between schools and neighbourhoods in the area:

If only all parents could see other children in the same light as they see their own, there might be less “siphoning off” of their children in search of a more homogeneous population. If this were the case, enrolment at this school would remain healthy and a full range of programs could be offered. The rich multicultural environment would benefit their children, to boot. (Irving, 2017, para. 9)

While the motivations suggested by Irving are beyond the scope of this paper, our historical and demographic analysis indicates a pattern of underlying disparities similar to what she describes. This finding points to a broader socioeconomic context that should have been accounted for in the school board's decision.

In what follows, we first present our case study area in eastern Ottawa, consisting of the residential area surrounding Rideau HS. We then provide a narrative policy history of decisions affecting Rideau HS and the case study area by the successive school boards that have administered Rideau HS. Finally, we present a quantitative analysis of the historical disparities related to residential population patterns in the case study area, based on data from the Canadian census. We argue that the closure of Rideau HS should be understood in the context of a series of interconnected challenges faced by the school, including a marginalized student population, a negative reputation, and low student enrolment. In turn, these challenges should be understood in the context of socioeconomic disparities between neighbourhoods in the area and a history of ineffective policies at the school-board level, including relatively lax student transfer policies. These findings indicate the inadequacy of the narrow economic measures that Ontario school boards use to determine school closure decisions and suggest that school boards should engage in more robust community engagement before closing marginalized urban schools. A proposal to establish an official “community hub” within the active high school is examined as a concrete alternative to closure that was supported by the community but not by the school board.

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<sup>1</sup> The local and socioeconomic focus of this article inevitably excludes other important factors in understanding the closure of Rideau HS. Most importantly, we acknowledge that the voices of the students and community are critical to understanding school closure decisions and, in a forthcoming article, we prioritize these voices. In this article, however, we rely on publicly available data and historical documents as the basis of analysis, in part because this enables us to engage publicly with this controversial decision. Additionally, the closure decision should be understood more broadly through the policies of the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), which has a longstanding pattern of encouraging school closures as a means to cut educational expenditures (Irwin & Seasons, 2012). This has been achieved, in part, through the centralization of control over educational finance, including a 2002 incident in which the OME temporarily supplanted the democratically-elected board of the OCDSB over its refusal to submit a balanced budget (Sattler, 2012). Nonetheless, the OCDSB has a history of directly defying the OME on school closures, both refusing to close schools when expected to do so, and closing schools when directed not to (Green, 2005; Rosen & Associates Limited, 2002). The provincial policy context is important, therefore, but the closure decision must also be understood within the local political and socioeconomic context explored here.

## The Political Economy of Urban School Closure in Ontario

Since the 1980s, declining enrolments and restricted budgets have forced school boards in Ottawa and elsewhere in Ontario to close and consolidate schools, often in the face of strong resistance from affected communities (Basu, 2007; Doern & Prince, 1989; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). As Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) suggests, school boards historically have served two parallel functions: democratic and administrative, which are often in tension. With the increasing centralization of educational policy across Canada, school boards have been placed under considerable pressure to prioritize administrative functions over democratic ones. While Ontario school boards continue to be governed by democratically-elected trustees, the range of decisions left to these trustees have become restricted, and in many ways school boards have become simply implementers of provincial education policies (Galway, Sheppard, Wiens, & Brown, 2013; Manzer, 2003).

As various scholars suggest, the conflicts resulting from increasing numbers of school closures have created a crisis of democratic legitimacy for Ontario school boards (Basu, 2007; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). These conflicts involve, first, the question of whether school boards can adequately represent the needs of their local communities while also serving as implementers of provincial policies (Galway et al., 2013). More specifically, however, there is a growing perception that school closure decisions are made in ways that neglect, or even override, the legitimate concerns of communities (Basu, 2007; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005). This critique goes beyond concerns over the centralization of education policy within provincial governments and addresses a tendency within school boards themselves to privilege narrow and technocratic decision-making over genuine community consultation and consideration of broader urban social, political, and economic contexts (Basu, 2007; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). Drawing on different theoretical traditions, Fredua-Kwarteng (2005), Basu (2007), and Irwin and Seasons (2012) all contend that school boards must engage more broadly with both community perspectives and social policy factors in their school closure decisions in order to maintain public trust in their democratic function.

Our study of the closure of Rideau HS also draws on recent US research emphasizing what the authors refer to as *the political economy of urban education* (Lipman, 2011; Rury & Mirel, 1997; Scott & Home, 2016). These scholars critique the previous research on urban schools for separating schools from the political, economic, and spatial contexts of cities. Instead, they propose a research program that unites urban education scholarship with urban research more generally in order to develop a situated and complex understanding of the dynamics shaping urban schools (Dougherty, 2008; Rury & Mirel, 1997). This research program has been particularly effective at developing a more nuanced analysis of educational segregation in US cities, including the role of “good” schools in attracting affluent and white families to particular suburbs (Dougherty, 2012; Erickson, 2012), and the role of underfunding and closure of urban schools in the displacement of racialized urban populations (Lipman, 2011; Scott & Holme, 2016). A similar spatial approach to understanding the educational effects of poverty in urban contexts has been taken up by scholars in the UK (Lupton, 2005; Raffo, 2011; Raffo et al., 2010). We propose that such a focus on the spatial dimensions of cities has much to offer the study of urban education in Canada, including research on urban school closures in Ontario. While a few scholars have taken up spatial theory to study education in Canadian cities (e.g., Butler, Kane, & Morshead, 2017; Gaskell & Levin, 2010; Gulson, 2011), it remains true, as Daniel (2010) suggested a decade ago, that the spatial dimensions of urban education in Canada are undertheorized.

### The Case Study Area

To examine the residential population patterns in eastern Ottawa, we have narrowed the scope of our analysis to a particular case study area covering an urban and inner-suburban region of eastern Ottawa. This area was chosen to include the full Rideau HS catchment area<sup>2</sup>, both current and historical, along with adjacent neighbourhoods to the west and east that have been affected by school board decisions related to Rideau HS. In particular, these include the key neighbourhoods that were part of the student accommodation reviews in 2009 and 2017 that considered the closure of Rideau HS. At the same time, we delineated our study area using significant structural boundaries that shaped historical residential development in the area, including the Rideau and Ottawa Rivers to the west and north and the old Canadian Pacific Railway

<sup>2</sup> Since the amalgamation of school boards in Ottawa in 1970, students have been assigned to secondary schools based on their residential location, according to catchment areas defined by rigid boundaries drawn on a map (e.g., OBE, 1971).

line to the south. To the east, our area is bounded by the Greenbelt, which encircles the urban core of Ottawa to the west, south, and east, and has long served as a functional division between “inner” and “outer” suburbs (Runacres, 1980).

The resultant study area, while presenting a coherent and finite area of fairly consistent residential development, also presents a productive demographic case study in that it includes some significant internal socioeconomic disparities. The study area also incorporates several important administrative divisions, including parts of what were, up until the amalgamation of the City of Ottawa with its neighbouring municipalities in the year 2000, four different municipalities. Along with the northeast portion of the pre-amalgamation City of Ottawa, it also includes the former small urban municipalities of Rockcliffe Park and Vanier in their entirety, as well as a northwestern portion of the former suburban municipality of Gloucester. Figure 1 shows the case study area (in grey) in relation to the pre-amalgamation municipal boundaries of Ottawa, Gloucester, Rockcliffe Park, and Vanier. Figure 1 also shows the locations of a selection of current and historical publicly-funded secondary schools that have included parts of the case study area in their catchment boundaries.

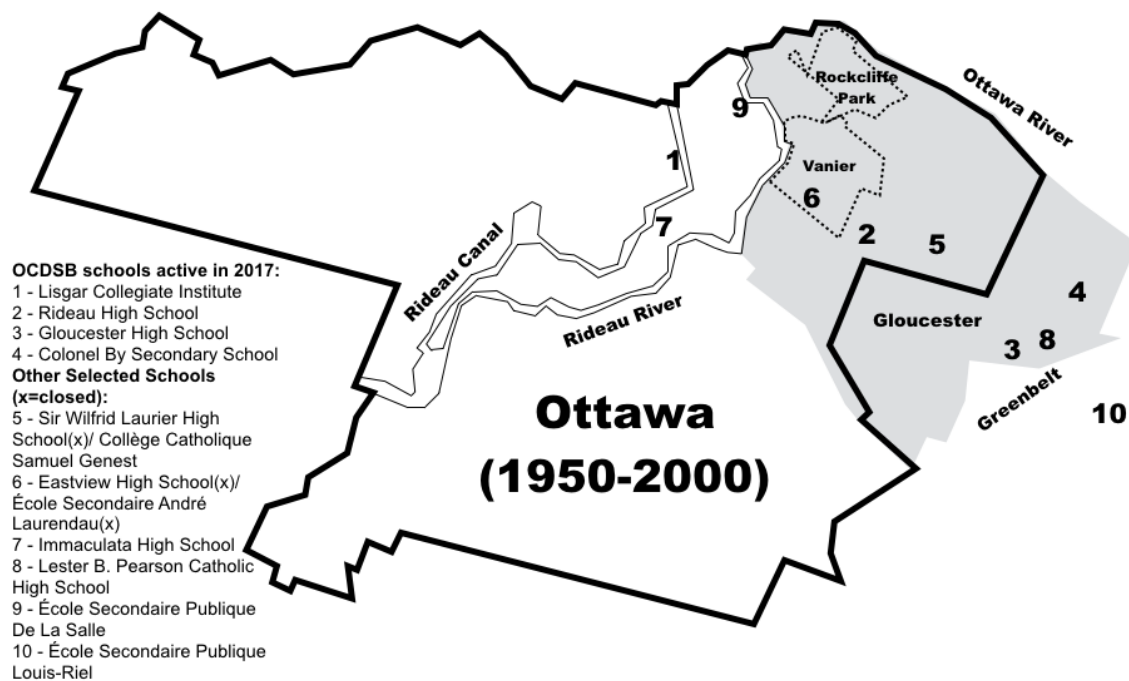


Figure 1. The Case Study Area (in Grey) in Relation to Pre-Amalgamation Ottawa Municipal Boundaries, with Selected Publicly-Funded Secondary Schools Serving the Area<sup>3</sup>

Once our case study area had been established, it was then subdivided into six zones, based on the historic boundaries of public-school catchment areas in the region. These subdivisions can be seen in Figure 2. Zones 1 and 2 cover much older residential districts than the rest of our study area, but they are very different in character. Historically, Zone 1 has been a prestigious residential area. This zone includes Rockcliffe Park, which until 2000 was a separate municipality and home to a small and affluent population of Ottawa-area elites (Woods, 1980). Zone 2 covers Vanier, which was also a separate municipality until the year 2000, but historically has had a predominantly francophone and working-class population (Benali & Parent, 2007; Shea, 1964). Zones 3 to 6 were sparsely populated until Ottawa expanded its municipal boundaries in 1950. The 1950 annexation of land into Ottawa included Zones 3 and 4 in the new city (Jones, 1965), but the rapid suburban population growth that followed affected Zones 3 to 6 similarly, with parallel suburban developments growing up on either side of the Ottawa border (Runacres, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> This map was drawn by the authors, with information adapted from the following maps: Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (1972), City of Ottawa (1980), Ottawa Board of Education (1971), Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2016), Statistics Canada (2016).

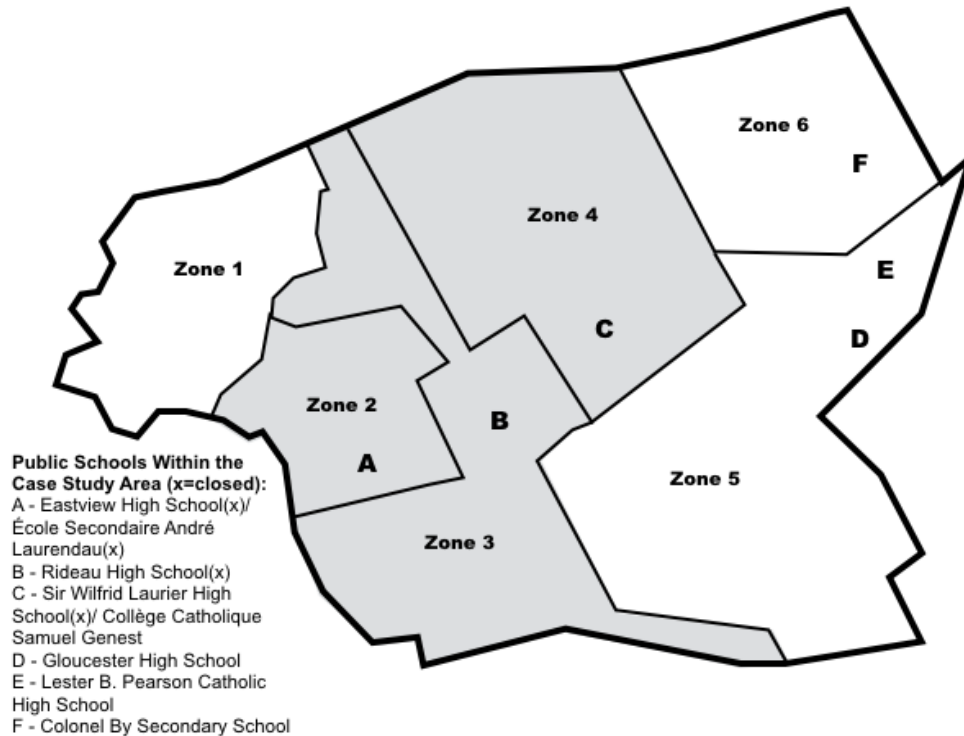


Figure 2. The Case Study Area, Showing the 6 Zones, the 1983-2017 Rideau Catchment Area (in Grey), and a Selection of Local Secondary Schools<sup>4</sup>

Zone 1, an older residential region, was historically included in the catchment of Lisgar Collegiate Institute in downtown Ottawa, the oldest secondary school in the city (Keith, 1969). The collegiate institute system, which separated academic from technical high schools, fell out of favour after the second world war due to perceptions of elitism and inequality (Manzer, 1994). Nonetheless, Lisgar retained its name and a reputation for elitism, including the Gifted program it currently hosts (Green & Cain, 2007; Ottawa Citizen, 2009; Woods, 1980). Vanier (Zone 2) established its own bilingual secondary school, Eastview High School, in 1949 (Shea, 1964). As Zones 3 to 6 began to see residential development in the 1950s, Rideau HS was established in 1957 to serve the region and was one of the first composite high schools in Ottawa (Keith, 1969). Composite high schools were intended to replace the collegiate institute system by combining academic and technical programs within all local secondary schools (Manzer, 1994). With the suburban population in the area continuing to grow, additional composite high schools were constructed. Gloucester High School was built in 1963 to serve students in the municipality of Gloucester to the east of Ottawa, including Zones 5 and 6, and Sir Wilfrid Laurier High School was added in 1965 to serve the area of Ottawa east of Rideau HS, in Zone 4 (Keith, 1969; OBE, 1971). Colonel By Secondary School was built in 1970 and took over Zone 6 from Gloucester HS (Carleton Board of Education [CBE], 1989).

In 1970, the multiple local school boards in the Ottawa region were amalgamated into the urban Ottawa Board of Education (OBE) and the surrounding suburban and rural Carleton Board of Education (CBE). At this time, Eastview HS in Zone 2 was made an exclusively French school, and anglophone students in Zone 2 were sent to Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS in Zone 4 (OBE, 1971; Ottawa Journal, 1968). In 1983, Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS was transferred from the OBE to the CBE to become another French high school (CBE, 1989), and Zones 2 and 4 were added to the Rideau HS catchment (OBE, 1985a). These motions established the catchment boundaries for English public schools (i.e., those administered by the OBE/CBE and after 1998 by the amalgamated OCDSB) in the case study area that remained stable until 2017. Namely, Zone 1 forms part of the Lisgar catchment; Zones 2, 3, and 4 make up the (former) Rideau

<sup>4</sup> This map was drawn by the authors, with information adapted from the following maps: Ottawa Board of Education (1971), Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2016), Statistics Canada (2016), Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (1972), City of Ottawa (1980).

catchment; Zone 5 forms part of the Gloucester catchment; Zone 6 covers the Colonel By catchment<sup>5</sup>. Table 1 summarizes the relevant characteristics of each zone included in our case study area as a reference for the analyses that follow.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Case Study Area Zones*

<b>Zones</b>	<b>Catchment</b>	<b>Geopolitical Characteristics</b>	<b>Historical Characteristics</b>
Zone 1	Lisgar CI	Urban; neighbourhood of New Edinburgh, former municipality of Rockcliffe Park (amalgamated in 2000)	Older, prestigious residential district; small, affluent population
Zone 2	Eastview HS, 1949-70; Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS, 1970-83; Rideau HS, 1983-2017	Urban; former municipality of Vanier (amalgamated in 2000)	Older residential district; historically a predominantly francophone, working-class population
Zone 3	Rideau HS, 1957-2017	Urban/Inner-Suburban; neighbourhoods of Overbrook and Manor Park; area stable since annexed into Ottawa (1950)	Sparsely populated until residential development following 1950 annexation into Ottawa; internal socioeconomic disparities
Zone 4	Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS, 1965-83; Rideau HS, 1983-2017	Urban/Inner-Suburban; neighbourhood of Viscount Alexander Park; area stable since annexed into Ottawa (1950)	Sparsely populated until residential development following 1950 annexation into Ottawa
Zone 5	Gloucester HS, 1963-present	Inner-Suburban; neighbourhood of Beacon Hill South in former municipality of Gloucester (amalgamated in 2000)	Sparsely populated prior to residential development in the 1960s; Gloucester HS built to serve Zones 5 and 6
Zone 6	Gloucester, HS, 1963-70; Colonel By SS, 1970-present	Inner-Suburban; neighbourhood of Beacon Hill North in former municipality of Gloucester (amalgamated in 2000)	Sparsely populated prior to residential development in the 1960s; Colonel By SS took over Zone 6 from Gloucester HS (1970)

Our ability to speak directly about the student populations of these schools is limited, as the OCDSB does not collect much school-level population data beyond raw enrolment numbers. Some basic school-level population data, however, is provided by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2016) on its School Information Finder website. Table 2 copies relevant data on schools serving the case study area (as of 2017), with OCDSB schools in white and schools in other coterminous school boards in grey<sup>6</sup>. Based on this data, Rideau HS seems to be uniquely marginalized among the case-study-area secondary schools across three different indicators: students living in poverty, new immigrants from non-English-speaking

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Zones 1 and 5 are part of school catchment areas that extend beyond the case study area. The full Lisgar CI catchment extends beyond Zone 1 to the west past the Rideau River to include areas of the downtown core (e.g., the neighbourhoods of Centretown's Golden Triangle) that are not directly affected by the eastern Ottawa student accommodation policy decisions described in this paper. The full Gloucester catchment extends beyond Zone 5 to the east and south, and includes a large suburban and rural area past the Greenbelt that was excluded from our case study area due to the urban focus of our study.

<sup>6</sup> We downloaded the data on particular schools in spring of 2018, but the available student test score data was from 2015-16, which suggests that the data had not been updated recently. The data was updated later in 2018 (with 2016-17 test results), but by that time Rideau HS had been removed. As a result, we have kept the earlier data from all schools, for the sake of consistent comparison. The uncertain dating of the data suggests that it should be used and interpreted with caution, but we include it to give a sense of general demographic patterns.

countries, and success rates on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test.<sup>7</sup> This data suggests that low enrolment numbers at Rideau HS should be understood within the context of a student population that was also marginalized along multiple socioeconomic measures.

Table 2  
*Selected OME School Population Data (Accessed 2017)*

School Name	School Board	Zones in Attendance Boundaries as of 2017	Student Enrolment	% in Low-Income Households	% New Immigrant, non-Eng. Countries	% Passed Literacy Test on First Try
Rideau HS	OCDSB	2 3 4	455	45.47	25.7	59
Lisgar CI	OCDSB	1	982	28.95	5.5	96
Gloucester HI	OCDSB	5	694	25.27	7.6	70
Colonel By SS	OCDSB	6	1099	15.95	3	96
Immaculata HS	OCSB	1 2 3	633	32.55	2.8	84
Lester B. Pearson CHS	OCSB	3 4 5 6	588	29.02	15.5	77
ÉSP de la Salle	CEPEO	1 2 3	740	30.01	8.6	94
ÉSP Louis-Riel	CEPEO	3 4 5 6	536	25.68	4.9	93
CC Samuel-Genest	CECCE	1 2 3 4 5 6	680	31.24	9.3	94

### The Closure of Rideau High School: A Narrative Policy History

In its early years, Rideau HS benefited from the positive demographic pressures of rapid post-war growth. Ottawa's secondary school enrolment increased from under eight thousand in 1956 to 18 thousand in 1964 (Keith, 1969). Originally built in 1957 to house 750 students, Rideau HS was quickly expanded to accommodate the growing population in the region, and maintained a capacity enrolment of around 1400 students throughout the 1960s (Keith, 1969; Ottawa Citizen, 1982).

Shortly after the OBE was formed in 1970, however, student enrolment began to sharply decline. The OBE's secondary enrolment peaked at 27 thousand in 1972, but from this peak the OBE lost ten thousand secondary students by 1984 (Doern & Prince, 1989; OBE, 1981). As Doern and Prince (1989) note, these demographic patterns were further complicated by the decline of the community high school, with approximately half of Ottawa students transferring out of their local high school in the mid-1980s. Declining enrolments across OBE secondary schools impacted the ability of schools to offer a full range of course options. In response, the OBE in 1981 developed a minimum standard of 122 course options that each school should be able to offer to its students. The enrolment at Rideau HS had dropped to 757 by 1981, and in that year they were providing the minimum of 122 course options (OBE, 1981). The sale of

<sup>7</sup> The low-income statistics are derived from the Low-Income Measure used in the Canadian census, which indicates households making less than 50% of adjusted median income after tax (see <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/fam021-eng.cfm>). The immigration statistics are drawn from Canadian census data on immigrants arriving in the last four years from countries other than the US, the UK, Ireland, Australia, or New Zealand. The literacy test statistics are indicative of those who were successful on their first attempt at passing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, a mandatory test of reading and writing in Grade 10.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS in 1983, and the absorption of Zones 2 and 4 into the Rideau catchment, appears to have mitigated Rideau's declining enrolment somewhat. Nonetheless, by 1985 Rideau was down to 655 students and 114 course options (OBE, 1985a).

In 1985, an OBE report recommended that secondary transfers be limited by dividing the city into four zones. By limiting student transfers to the schools within their zone, the OBE hoped to stabilize student enrolment and course options while still allowing students a limited choice of schools. After several proposed school closures, students in each of the three zones covering the centre, west, and south of Ottawa would have a choice of either three or four high schools, each with sufficient enrolment numbers to maintain the OBE standard of 122 course choices (OBE, 1985a). The Rideau catchment area (Zones 2, 3, and 4 of our case study area), meanwhile, was designated as the "north-east zone," in which Rideau HS was the only secondary school included. Additionally, Rideau's declining enrolment meant that, by 1990, it would only be able to provide an estimated 97 course choices (OBE, 1985a). In this proposal, therefore, students in Zones 2, 3, and 4 of our case study area would be the only OBE students provided with *neither* a choice of schools nor an adequate range of course choices. Not surprisingly, this proposal was modified before implementation, based on the recommendation of school board trustees, with Zones 1, 2, 3, and 4 joined with downtown Ottawa into one large zone (OBE, 1985b; 1986).

While the zone system proposed in the OBE (1985a) report can easily be critiqued for confining students in the Rideau catchment to one secondary school, it can also be understood as an attempt to sustain the enrolment of a school out of which too many students were transferring by compelling students in the area to attend their local high school. Similarly, the modified, three-zone system that was implemented gave students in Zones 2, 3, and 4 the right to transfer. However, this change likely exacerbated both the decline in Rideau's enrolment and the marginalization of its student population. Under the new system, students seeking to transfer to a different school within their zone still needed to justify this transfer based on the programs provided in each school. It was reported at the time that families wanting their children to attend Lisgar Collegiate, due to its prestigious reputation, would strategically register them for specialized programs simply in order to justify a transfer (Campbell, 1986). Once the transfer was completed, there was no obligation for the student to enrol in those specialized programs (Laucius, 2010). It is likely, therefore, that the transfer policy allowed students from higher-income families—who were more likely to have the social capital to navigate the system in this way—to transfer out of the Rideau catchment area, leaving Rideau HS with an increasingly marginalized student population. The increasing socioeconomic marginalization of the Rideau student population would, in turn, likely reinforce the desire of more privileged students to transfer out into more prestigious schools.

In its brief discussion of the impact on Rideau HS, the OBE report had acknowledged the problem of declining enrolment and resultant lack of course choices. The section concluded: "The Board will ultimately be faced with the option of closure, significant staffing support for programmes, or of relocating the traditional Lisgar/Rideau High School boundary line to provide a larger base of students in the attendance area" (OBE, 1985a, p. 14). This observation appears to be a fair assessment of the policy options that were theoretically possible. The range of feasible options, however, was further constrained by the social, political, and economic context, including the differential privilege and political leverage of both neighbourhoods and schools. This point is made by Doern and Prince (1989) in their analysis of school closures in Ottawa in the 1980s:

These schools were not just program entities. They were also socio-economic institutions embedded in the Ottawa educational, political economy. Two of the schools, Glebe and Lisgar, were de facto untouchables in that they had good enrolments but were also known as elite schools backed by middle or high income parental clout. The High School of Commerce, Ottawa Technical, and to a lesser extent, Rideau and Laurentian, were in lower income areas of the city. (p. 461)

Notably, with the closure of Rideau HS in 2017, all four schools identified by Doern and Prince as lower-income have been closed, repurposed, or relocated.

Even though the OBE had been drawing attention to low enrolment at Rideau HS since at least the early 1980s, it was only after the amalgamation of the OBE and the CBE into the OCDSB in 1998 that closure began to be seriously considered as a policy option. It was considered and rejected in a 2003 OCDSB report, in part because of the relatively good condition of the building and the lack of nearby schools to which Rideau students could be transferred. The primary reason given for not closing Rideau



HS, however, was a simple mathematical calculation: “Rideau H.S., with a capacity of 966, does not meet the study mandate to close between 1000-2000 secondary spaces” (OCDSB, 2003, p. 45). The impersonal nature of this calculation is indicative of the bureaucratic logic of the newly-formed OCDSB, which had to negotiate both a large and diverse jurisdiction and the encroachment of the provincial government into school board finances.

In 2008, a volunteer Accommodation Review Committee (ARC), made of up representatives of local schools and community associations, was assembled to examine the sustainability of Rideau HS, Gloucester HS, and Colonel By SS (Beacon Hill – Ottawa East Accommodation Review Committee [BHOEARC], 2009). Rideau’s enrolment had been low for decades and had recently dropped from around 700 at the turn of the century to 504 in 2009 (OCDSB, 2009a). Gloucester’s enrolment had also been dropping in recent years. Colonel By had a small catchment area with a limited local student population (Zone 6 of our case study area), but it maintained a capacity enrolment through transfers into its prestigious International Baccalaureate (IB) program (OCDSB, 2009b).

The final report of the ARC recommended against closure of any of the three high schools, and instead argued that any policy decisions on student accommodation in the area must be preceded by “a robust community consultation process with the geographic and student-specific communities intended to be served by the schools of all Ottawa East” (BHOEARC, 2009, p. 8). In particular, this consultation was intended to develop a better understanding of the underlying issues affecting enrolment, including what students and families in the area wanted from their local schools, what motivated cross-boundary transfers, and what factors shaped the stigmatization of specific schools. Furthermore, the report critiqued the OCDSB for failing to collect necessary data to inform their decisions and for trying to “implement short-term responses to long term issues” (BHOEARC, 2009, p. 13). Four months after receiving the ARC report, the OCDSB staff produced its own report on student accommodation in eastern Ottawa which recommended the closure of Rideau HS. While acknowledging the reasons that had been presented to keep the school open, the board report contended that the school enrolment was too low to provide a full range of programs and that this issue overrode all other concerns (OCDSB, 2009a).

While the Rideau community quickly organized to resist the closure of their school, they were helped by a separate public controversy that arose. The board report recommended that most of the students in the Rideau catchment (Zones 2, 3, and 4) should be transferred to Gloucester HS, but that a small number of students from Zone 2 be sent to Lisgar Collegiate. Lisgar would receive up to 65 Rideau students in their first year, then just 15-20 annually (OCDSB, 2009a). Parents from Lisgar publicly opposed the closure, suggesting that it would limit the number of gifted students able to transfer into the school and thus threaten the viability of their Gifted program (Laucius, 2009a; 2009b). This issue became a fairly significant public controversy in the city, with an *Ottawa Citizen* editorial accusing Lisgar parents of elitism for not wanting Rideau students in their school (Ottawa Citizen, 2009).

When the proposal to close Rideau HS came before the trustees, certain trustees advocated that the ARC recommendations be taken seriously, while others endorsed the closure recommendation. Ultimately, the trustees deferred the decision, voting that the ARC recommendations “be referred to staff for further consideration” (OCDSB, 2009c, p. 10). One possible outcome of this consideration is that, in 2010, the OCDSB restricted their student transfer policy with the explicit goal of limiting transfers out of Rideau and other under-enrolled schools (Curry, 2010; Pearson, 2012). By 2012 Rideau’s enrolment was back up to 588, possibly as a result of this policy (Pearson, 2012). However, by 2015, enrolment had dropped again to 418, and was projected to remain around 400 until at least 2020 (OCDSB, 2017a). Notably, the ARC had recommended a review of student transfer policies but had specifically warned that the board should pursue this policy change *after* the recommended consultation—and in conjunction with additional measures—since this complex issue required a nuanced approach that accounted for the needs of specific communities.

In 2016, the OCDSB undertook another accommodation review of Rideau, Gloucester, and Colonel By. Gloucester had experienced a sharp decline in enrolment similar to Rideau’s, with both schools enrolled at just above 40% of their capacity (OCDSB, 2017a). Colonel By had a capacity enrolment of 1142 but was included in the review due to geographical proximity (OCDSB, 2017a). Notably, however, around 700 students attending Colonel By HS were in its separate IB program, leaving a little over 400 students in its regular program—roughly equivalent to Rideau’s student population. When asked at a public meeting why Rideau’s enrolment was being presented as a crisis but Colonel By’s was not, school board staff said

that Colonel By students mostly enrolled in academic courses while Rideau students mostly enrolled in applied courses (the “upper” and “lower” streams in the Ontario curriculum; see a detailed discussion of this policy in Pinto, 2012). Since academic courses are less expensive to run than many applied courses, and require a lower teacher-student ratio, they argued that these courses make a small student population more sustainable (OCDSB, 2017b, 00:15:10).

Due to a change in policy, the OCDSB no longer required an ARC report written by community members. Instead, the accommodation review report could be written directly by board staff, with the community committee reduced to an “advisory” capacity (OCDSB, 2015, p. 5). The board staff again recommended the closure of Rideau HS. In a change from 2009, however, they recommended transferring the entire Rideau catchment (Zones 2, 3, and 4) to Gloucester HS, thus removing the controversial transfer of Rideau students from Zone 2 to Lisgar (OCDSB, 2017a). As in 2009, a movement developed to defend the school, bringing together students, parents, and staff from Rideau HS, along with allied community groups from the area (Miller, 2017c). However, this time there was no coordinated resistance to the closure from Lisgar Collegiate. In a narrow vote of seven to five, trustees approved the closure recommendation, while asking staff to monitor the impact of the closure over the next three years (OCDSB, 2017c).

The first OCDSB report following up on the Rideau HS closure was presented to the board in May 2018. The OCDSB staff reported that the enrolment of the amalgamated Gloucester HS (1031 in September 2017) was roughly equivalent to the combined enrolment of the two former schools, and that the higher concentration of students allowed for an increase in the number of unique course options, from 202 in 2016 to 219 in 2017 (OCDSB, 2018). Of 399 Rideau students in June 2017, 262 transferred to Gloucester, and 77 graduated. However, this finding leaves 60 students who did not return—at least 50 of whom transferred to other OCDSB schools. While there does not appear to have been a significant dropout rate following the closure, as some feared, the 19% attrition rate among non-graduating students raises questions about the net benefit to the Rideau community of increased course options at Gloucester.

The 2018 OCDSB report also notes that, of the post-amalgamation Gloucester student population, 43% live in the former Rideau catchment, compared to 37% living in the former Gloucester catchment. Even before the amalgamation, however, more than a quarter of the students living in the Rideau catchment were already transferring to Gloucester (OCDSB, 2018). This data paints a complex picture, in which the Rideau catchment appears to have had a relatively large student population, but many of these students chose to transfer elsewhere. The core question that must be answered regarding the fate of Rideau HS, therefore, is how and why large numbers of students chose to transfer to a school outside of their catchment area. Unfortunately, the OCDSB report does not fully engage with these issues, as they do not include data on how many students live in the Rideau and Gloucester catchments but attend other schools. In the next section, we present a longitudinal quantitative analysis of population patterns in our case study area in order to fill in some of this context for the closure decision.

## **Residential Population Patterns in Eastern Ottawa: A Quantitative Analysis**

This section uses data from the Canadian census to describe residential population patterns in the case study area. Drawing on research from US cities, we are particularly interested in socioeconomic and racialized<sup>8</sup> disparities in the region as context for understanding the history of Rideau HS. While Canada has not developed the extreme patterns of socioeconomic and racialized segregation found in many US cities, the existing research still indicates relatively high concentration of populations along both socioeconomic and racialized lines in major Canadian cities, including Ottawa (Ades, Apparicio, & Séguin,

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<sup>8</sup> “Race” is, of course, a problematic topic. However, we felt it needed to be accounted for in this study as it has been an important element of the public debate around the closure of Rideau HS. For instance, one community activist publicly referred to the closure as “an act of systemic racism” (Miller, 2017b, para. 3). In what follows, therefore, our discussion of race is focused exclusively on data indicating the self-identification of individuals as part of particular racialized communities (Black and Indigenous). While self-identification data brings its own methodological issues, we felt this data to be a more ethical way to engage with these issues than data that assigned people to categories based on “objective” criteria.

2012; Balakrishnan, Maxim, & Jurdi, 2005).<sup>9</sup> While concentrations of residential populations along socioeconomic and racialized lines are not consistently correlated in Canadian cities, stronger correlations have been found in relation to certain racialized groups, especially Black and Indigenous populations (Fong & Shibuya, 2000; Walks & Bourne, 2006). These findings suggest that socioeconomic residential disparities, including concentrations of certain racialized populations, are important factors that Canadian policy-makers, including school boards, must consider.

### *Quantitative Data and Methods*

We have utilized data from the quinquennial Canadian census for all longitudinal analyses, focusing on ten-year periods between the census years 1956 and 2016. Data for our case study area was gathered using census data at the tract level, which breaks down neighbourhoods into census tracts based on a relatively consistent population size. The mapping of census tracts has remained relatively consistent over time, though tracts are periodically subdivided when their population increases. By careful study of the census tract maps from 1956 to 2016, we selected groupings of census tracts to contain the same geographic areas over the entire period, while mapping as closely as possible onto the historic school catchment areas that were used to develop our six zones<sup>10</sup>.

Inevitably, there were ways in which the census tract map did not align perfectly with the school catchment area map. For example, due to the low population in Zones 3 to 6 in the early years of our study data on certain zones was not available in certain years, and both Zone 3 (original Rideau HS catchment) in 1956 and Zone 5 (Gloucester catchment) in 1966 could only be mapped by including tracts that covered additional areas. We include these numbers because, even as high estimates, they illustrate the low population in these zones and rapid development in subsequent years. Several other minor anomalies emerged in mapping the census tracts onto the school catchment areas. However, these anomalies primarily relate to areas with little or no residential population, including parkland along the Ottawa River and the Greenbelt. As a result, they can be expected to have minimal impact on the reliability of our analysis of population patterns within the school catchment areas.

As this is a longitudinal study, we chose our indicators carefully to allow for consistent data across the longest possible periods. While we were able to extract general population data for our full 60-year period, other indicators were only consistently available over shorter periods. In particular, our analysis of racialized disparities is based on self-identification data for Black and Aboriginal<sup>11</sup> populations, which was only implemented in the 1990s and therefore does not allow for reliable longitudinal analysis<sup>12</sup>. As a result, we have included this data for only the 2016 census year. Additionally, data on household income was not consistently available on a decennial basis, so we were compelled to use 15-year intervals for the sake of consistency. Following from these considerations, descriptive statistics were generated for our case study area based on the following variables: total high-school-aged population across zones (1956-2016), estimated anglophone and francophone high-school-aged population within the Rideau catchment area (1976-2016), average household income across zones (1971-2016; 15-year intervals), and self-iden-

<sup>9</sup> In what follows, we avoid the language of “segregation” in the Ottawa context, as it is not clear this term (with its very specific history in the US) applies in a Canadian context. While certain of the patterns we describe parallel what has been called “de facto segregation” in the US, these patterns do not build on the types of explicit policies to exclude populations along racialized lines observed in the US context. The closest parallel in Ottawa history is likely the initial separation of the francophone and Catholic working class in the east of the city (Taylor, 1989), which arguably established the original context for some of the residential disparities we are exploring in eastern Ottawa.

<sup>10</sup> The census tracts included in each Zone are as follows. 1956: Zone 1 (3, 4, “Rockcliffe Park”); Zone 2 (“Eastview”); Zone 3 (2, 5); Zone 4 (1). 1966: Zone 1 (3, 4, 79); Zone 2 (70, 71, 72, 73, 74); Zone 3 (2, 5, 41); Zone 4 (1); Zone 5 (86). 1971-2016: Zone 1 (57, 58, 110); Zone 2 (100, 101, 102, 103, 104); Zone 3 (59, 60, 61, 12, 13); Zone 4 (62 [62.01, 62.02]); Zone 5 (121 [121.01, 121.02], 122 [122.01, 122.03, 122.04]); Zone 6 (120 [120.01, 120.02, 120.03])

<sup>11</sup> The term “Indigenous” (or, more specifically, “First Nations,” “Métis,” or “Inuit”) is generally preferred to “Aboriginal” in Canada. However, we use this term in a technical sense, as it is the term used for census self-identification. It should be understood to mean “those who chose to self-identify as ‘Aboriginal’ in the census.”

<sup>12</sup> Along with the short time period available, longitudinal self-identification data presents the additional challenge of potentially conflating changing attitudes to self-identification among the population with actual demographic changes (see, e.g., Butler, 2015).

### Quantitative Findings

**Population change and enrolment potential.** Figure 3 traces general changes in the high-school-aged population across the six zones and across the 60 years since Rideau High School's opening. This data is derived from the census indicator for the population aged 15 to 19. While not a perfect measure of those eligible for high school, this age range provides a functional proxy for overall population patterns affecting secondary school enrolment. As previously noted, the first census years for Zone 3 (i.e., 1956) and Zone 5 (i.e., 1966) should be considered high estimates, for the census tracts they include extend beyond the boundaries of the zone. Overall, the high-school-aged population in the case study area grew in the 1960s and 1970s, with Zone 3 (the traditional Rideau catchment) seeing particularly rapid growth, then declined overall through the 1980s. The enrolment decline would have been exacerbated by the addition of separate publicly-funded secondary schools for French and Catholic students in the 1980s, which increased competition for a diminishing number of students (Taman, 1990).

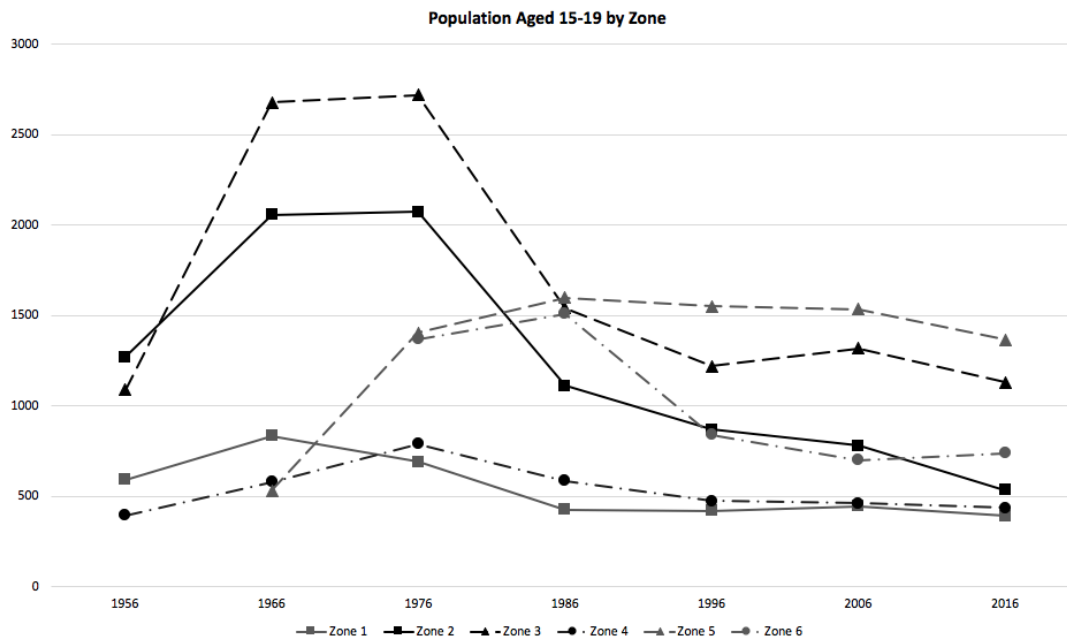


Figure 3. Population Aged 15-19 by Zone and Census Year (Zones in 2017 Rideau Catchment in Black)

Nonetheless, several factors suggest that the student population eligible to attend Rideau HS has not declined as much as these initial numbers would indicate. First, the closure of Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS meant that Zones 2 and 4 were added to the Rideau catchment in the early 1980s when Zone 3 was experiencing a rapid population decline. Secondly, census data indicates that the population decline in the area has primarily affected the francophone population, with the proportion of the Rideau catchment identifying French as their mother tongue dropping from 45% in 1986 to 32% in 2016. While the census tract data does not allow for cross-tabulation of age and language indicators, we developed an estimate of the high-school-aged population eligible to attend Rideau HS by deriving the percentage of the total population that identified French as their mother tongue, then subtracting this percentage from the 15-19 cohort. Figure 4 illustrates our estimate of the eligible high-school-aged population in the Rideau catchment boundary from 1976 to 2016, with the Rideau catchment understood to include Zone 3 in 1976 and Zones 2, 3, and 4 from 1986 to 2016. This estimation suggests that the eligible population in the Rideau catchment has been

<sup>13</sup> Historical census data was drawn from a series of Statistics Canada publications detailing population characteristics by census tract for the city of Ottawa (Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1956, 1966; Statistics Canada, 1971, 1976, 1986a, 1986b, 1996, 2001). Data for each census tract from 2006 and 2016 were extracted from relevant datasets on the Statistics Canada website, namely: Census Tract Profiles, 2006 Census (<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-597/index.cfm?Lang=E>) and Census Profile, 2016 Census (<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>).

relatively stable over time and that the enrolment decline at Rideau HS cannot be understood solely as the mathematical outcome of longitudinal demographic changes in the area. As we suggested in the previous section, the Rideau closure must also be understood within the context of the transfer of many eligible students from the Rideau catchment to other schools.

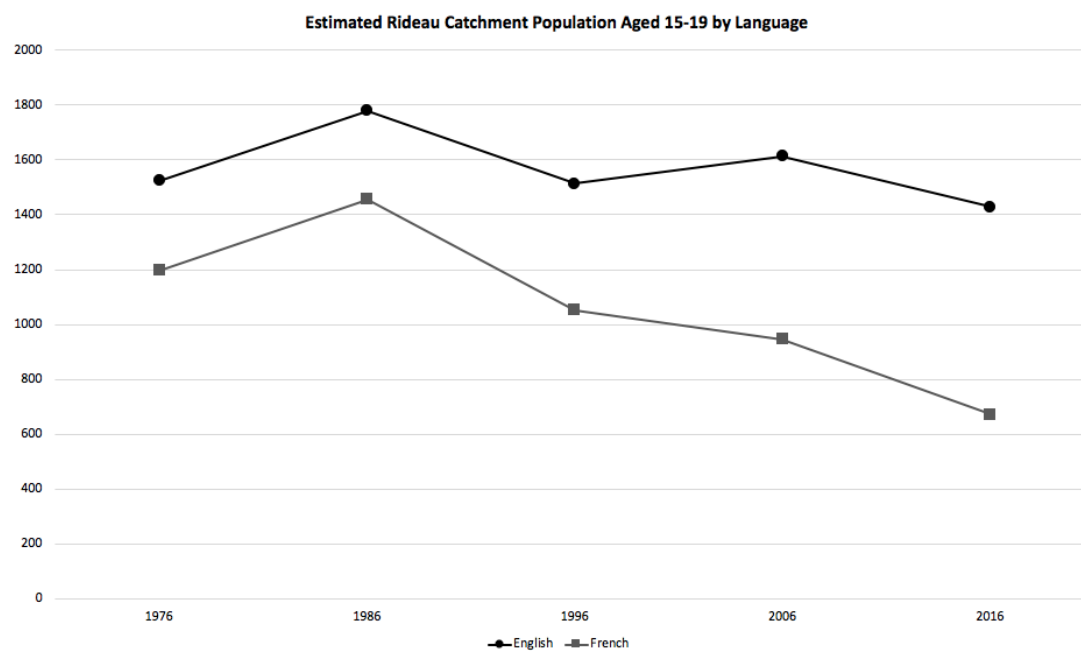


Figure 4. Estimated Population Aged 15-19 in the Rideau Catchment by Mother Tongue

**Socioeconomic and racialized disparities.** As is well established in the US literature on educational segregation, school enrolment patterns, particularly among affluent white families, are often shaped by the desire for (perceived) upward social mobility through access to prestigious schools populated by other affluent white students (Dougherty, 2012; Lipman, 2011; Scott & Holme, 2016). While the Canadian context is generally different, the low enrolment at Rideau HS relative to the eligible student population in its catchment raises the question of whether comparable patterns are at work.

Figure 5 illustrates the average household income of the six Zones, indexed to the average for the Ottawa Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), over 15-year intervals from 1971 to 2016. Over the past half-century, Zones 1 and 6 have both enjoyed average incomes well above the CMA average, and in 2016 were at 195% and 127% of the CMA average, respectively. Zones 3, 4, and 5, as new suburbs in 1971, had average incomes close to the CMA average, but have since declined and now sit well below it. Zone 2, comprising the historically working-class community of Vanier, has sat well below the CMA average for this entire period, and by 2016 was at only 60% of the CMA average.

For over thirty years prior to its closure, therefore, Rideau HS served a catchment area comprised of the three lowest-income Zones from the case study area. Upon its closure, these three economically disadvantaged districts were consolidated with the Zone with the next lowest income (Zone 5), expanding the catchment for Gloucester HS. In contrast, Zones 1 and 6 have maintained both a high degree of relative affluence and consistent access to prestigious secondary schools—Lisgar Collegiate and Colonel By Secondary, respectively.

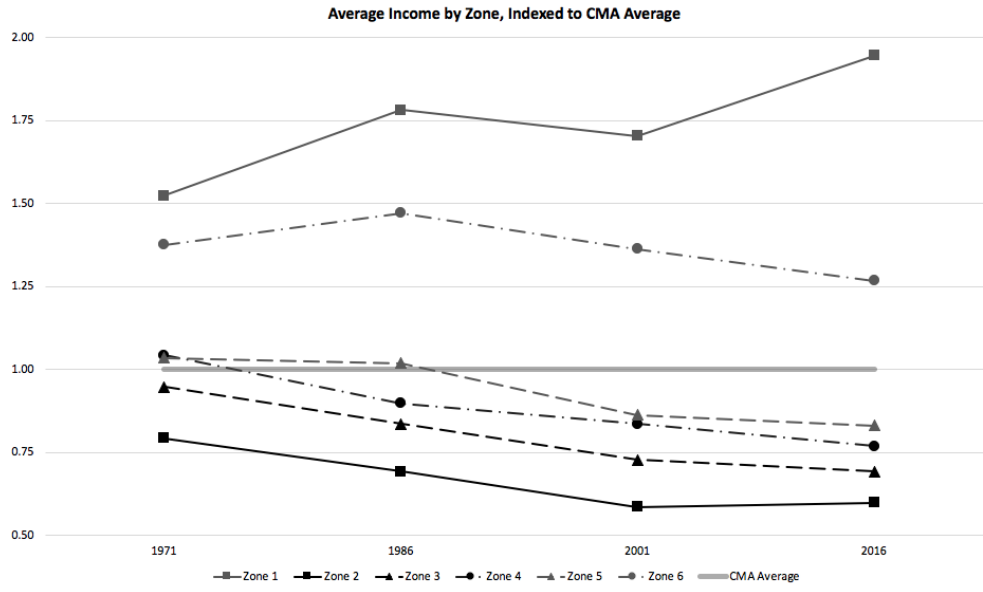


Figure 5. Average Household Income by Zone and Census Year, Indexed to CMA Average (Zones in 2017 Rideau Catchment in Black)

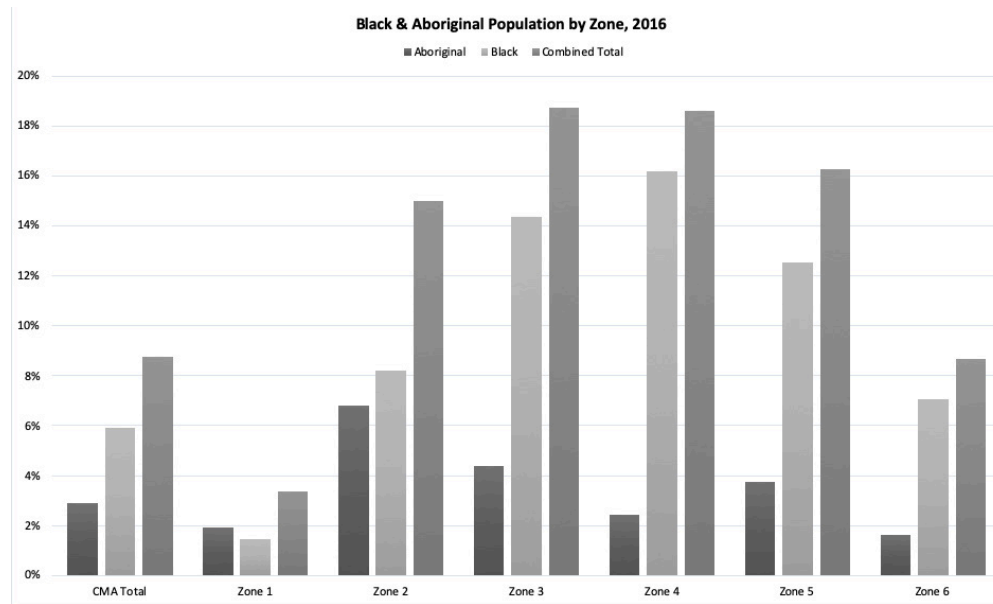


Figure 6. Self-Identified Black and Aboriginal Populations by Zone, 2016 Census

In terms of racialized disparities, Figure 6 illustrates the self-identified Black and Aboriginal populations in our case study area in 2016. When these two historically-marginalized populations are combined, the totals in Zones 2, 3, 4, and 5 (i.e., in the Rideau and Gloucester catchments) are well above the CMA total, while the total in Zone 6 is roughly on par with the CMA total and the total for Zone 1 is well below it. When these two populations are disaggregated, however, more specific patterns can be observed: Zone 2 has a particularly high self-identified Aboriginal population, and Zones 3, 4, and 5 have particularly high self-identified Black populations.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> A strong negative correlation between the socioeconomic and racialized population patterns ( $r = -0.896$ ,  $n = 7$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) was found in our case study area. While this finding should be interpreted with caution due to our small sample size, it is nonetheless in line with previous findings from the Canadian context, namely, that “spatial separation of the poor from the general non poor population is confined largely to visible minorities” (Fong & Shebaya, 2000, p. 454).

## Discussion

The political economy of urban education explored in this paper is complex and does not allow for easy answers. Nonetheless, the presented findings so far allow for some tentative claims on the closure of Rideau HS. First, our findings suggest that the closure should be understood in the context of the socioeconomic disparities of eastern Ottawa. Within our case study area, two zones have maintained average household incomes well above the CMA average since at least 1971. These two more affluent zones are also the two zones that have maintained access to prestigious public secondary schools—Zone 1 attending Lisgar and Zone 6 attending Colonel By. The four other zones started at, or below, the average household income for the Ottawa CMA in 1971 and have been steadily declining since. Over recent decades, these same four zones have been contained within the catchment areas of secondary schools with the interrelated problems of low enrolment and stigmatized reputations. The geographic disparities we are describing appear to have a racialized component as well, with both self-identified Black and self-identified Aboriginal populations living in higher concentrations in Zones 2 to 5.

These geographic disparities provide important background context, but they do not fully explain the marginalized character of the Rideau HS student population at the time of its closure. While there is very little school-level population data, the statistics provided by the OME (see Table 2) indicate that Rideau had unusually high proportions of students who were from lower-income households (45.5%) and new immigrants from non-English-speaking countries (25.7%). While the data are not directly comparable, 2016 census data from Zones 2, 3, and 4 indicate that the total population residing in the Rideau catchment had high numbers of low-income residents (25.3%) and new immigrants from non-English speaking countries (4.3%) relative to the wider context of Ottawa (12.2% and 2.7%, respectively), but well below the numbers found in the school-level data.<sup>15</sup>

Our historical policy analysis suggests that these discrepancies may be explained in part by the relatively lax student transfer policies historically maintained by the OBE and the OCDSB. These policies were restrictive enough to present administrative barriers to cross-boundary transfers, but lax enough that they could be bypassed by those with adequate time, resources, connections, and knowledge of the system. Overall, we suggest that the likely impact of these policies was to permit more affluent students to transfer out of the area while limiting transfers among more marginalized students. These policies, therefore, likely built upon the geographic disparities between neighbourhoods by enabling the concentration of privileged students in schools in wealthier areas, while schools in lower-income neighbourhoods saw both declining enrolments and increasingly marginalized student populations. In turn, these patterns would likely reinforce the stigma attached to lower-income neighbourhoods and schools.

The net effect appears to be a self-perpetuating cycle wherein socioeconomically marginalized students become concentrated in stigmatized schools that lack not only the academic prestige of Lisgar and Colonel By, but also, more practically, the educational opportunities that come with a privileged student population and a high academic focus. While Rideau HS and other composite high schools were originally intended to overcome the collegiate institute system's separation of academic and technical programs (Manzer, 1994), the “academic” focus of a school like Colonel By and the “applied” focus of a school like Rideau suggests that this stratification has simply changed forms. Meanwhile, the OCDSB's practice of treating a small student population like Colonel By's non-IB program as more sustainable (provided that students enroll primarily in academic rather than applied courses) indicates that these privileged students will also continue to enjoy greater stability while more marginalized students will continue to face a higher likelihood of displacement through successive school closures. At one extreme, anglophone students from Vanier (Zone 2) have been displaced three times in the last fifty years—first from Eastview HS in 1970, then from Sir Wilfrid Laurier HS in 1983, and most recently from Rideau HS in 2017. Furthermore, these displacements have had the overall effect of sending them both farther from their home community and farther away from the core of the city. At the other extreme, students from Zone 1 have had stable access to Lisgar CI in the downtown core since the 19th century.

## Policy Implications

The situation described here indicates the dilemma of student “choice” in contemporary educational sys-

<sup>15</sup> These 2016 data use the same measures as the OME data (i.e., Statistics Canada's Low Income Measure and new immigrants [within the last four years] from countries other than the US, the UK, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand).

tems. In the 2009 and 2017 student accommodation reviews, the OCDSB argued for the closure of Rideau HS based on a narrow understanding of student choice that prioritized a choice of course options. According to this argument, closure was the best option for Rideau students, since the amalgamation of Rideau and Gloucester would create a larger student population which would enable a broader range of course choices. This position overlooked another key aspect of student choice, which is a choice of schools. A choice of schools, in turn, has two distinct dimensions: a choice among schools based on the programs they provide and the option of attending a school that is geographically close and culturally relevant to the student. It is this last dimension that has been largely ignored by the OBE and the OCDSB. Indeed, for most of the period examined here, Ottawa public school boards have prioritized a choice of course options and school programs through lax student transfer policies that permit (some) students a wide selection of course and program options across the city. This priority has directly affected students' ability to access schools that are within close proximity and culturally relevant, particularly for students living in socioeconomically marginalized neighbourhoods with stigmatized local schools.

The complexity of the school choice dilemma is emphasized by the two attempts Ottawa public school boards made during this period to address it. The zone system proposed by the OBE in 1985 was an extreme attempt to resolve the enrolment issue at Rideau HS in particular. By isolating Rideau HS within its own student attendance zone, the system would have encouraged a stable student population at the school, which, in turn, would ensure that students from the region (Zones 2, 3, and 4 of our case study area) maintained the choice of attending their neighbourhood school. The trade-off, however, would have been too extreme, in that it would have denied students from the region both an adequate range of course options and a choice among different schools. In implementing the zone system, the board overcorrected this problem in the opposite direction; by merging the Rideau catchment with the zone covering downtown Ottawa, the OBE gave students from the Rideau catchment the option of transferring to some of the most prestigious schools in the board, with predictable results (Doern & Prince, 1989). Following the 2009 student accommodation review, the OCDSB restricted its student transfer policy with the explicit goal of balancing the choice dilemma by maintaining students' access to their neighbourhood schools (Curry, 2010; Pearson, 2012). This policy change was a more balanced approach than the 1985 zone system, but it did not sufficiently stabilize the enrolment numbers at Rideau and Gloucester required to maintain what the OCDSB viewed as an adequate range of course options.

The range of options that were available to the OCDSB in responding to the enrolment problem at Rideau HS were significantly constrained by budget considerations. A school building is expensive to maintain, and a half-empty building places a strain on the board budget that is difficult to justify. As various scholars have pointed out, these budget considerations have been further constrained in Ontario by the centralization of educational finance as part of a reform to the educational system in the late 1990s (Basu, 2007; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). At the time, the Ontario government removed the ability of school boards to raise their own revenues through property taxes and imposed a standardized funding formula based on a calculation of square-footage per student (Basu, 2004). The research presented here suggests that these challenges were further exacerbated by the streaming of students into academic and applied programs that was implemented at the same time (Pinto, 2012). The very different enrolment situations of Rideau HS and Colonel By SS suggest that, combined with lax student transfer policies, student streaming can create a stratified system with affluent "academic" schools and less affluent "applied" schools. Due to the higher per-student cost of applied courses, schools like Rideau become even less financially sustainable.

This broader policy context significantly constrains the options available to the school board. Nonetheless, school boards maintain both a range of policy tools and the responsibility, as local democratic representatives, to use them for the benefit of all students. The complexity of the problem calls for creative policy solutions. Unfortunately, neither the OBE nor the OCDSB has shown much willingness to attempt creative solutions to enrolment problems (with a few exceptions, such as the failed 1985 zone system). In their analysis of school closures in the OBE in the 1980s, Doern and Prince (1989) noted that "despite a wide range of possible responses to declining enrolments, school boards tend to opt rather quickly for closures" (p. 456). What was true of the OBE remains true of the OCDSB. The scholarly consensus on school closures in Ontario is that school boards need to engage in more substantive consultations with affected communities in order to maintain their democratic legitimacy (Basu, 2007; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Irwin & Seasons, 2012). It is not always clear from this literature what concrete policy alternatives are available that could satisfy both the budgetary requirements of Ontario school boards and the need for



local democratic control. In the case of Rideau HS, however, the limited public consultations surrounding the closure decision did suggest a potential grass-roots policy alternative: transforming the school into a “community hub.”

### *Community Hubs as a Policy Alternative to School Closures*

The idea of school buildings as “community hubs,” in which various community services are co-located, has been circulating in Ontario for decades (OME, 2004; Royal Commission on Learning, 1994). Along with the broader value to communities, the community hub model has the potential to reduce enrolment pressures on schools by finding new uses for underutilized school space. In 2015, the Government of Ontario appointed an advisory group to provide recommendations on policies to foster community hubs across a range of government ministries. While not the only type of community hub covered in the advisory group’s mandate, the use of schools was central to their recommendations (Government of Ontario, 2015). However, the advisory group also acknowledged that there are substantial barriers to the use of schools as community hubs, including lack of coordination between government ministries, lack of funding for non-educational uses of schools, and liability issues related to community use of school buildings. Ironically, it is often more feasible to convert a vacated school building into a community hub than to establish a hub in an active but underused school. In subsequent years, the government has taken some steps to facilitate community hubs in schools, including providing capital funding for retrofits to school buildings (Government of Ontario, 2016). While the obstacles remain substantial, a number of community hubs have been established in publicly funded schools across Ontario through the provincial government framework (Government of Ontario, 2016; 2017).

For its part, the OCDSB has also been using the language of community hubs since its formation. As described by the OCDSB’s first director of education, the board participated in a community dialogue session on community hubs in 2001:

Participants agreed that hubs share certain key features wherever they may be located (in a school, community agency, church, etc.), including family focus, continuum of services, reduction of duplication and gaps in services, collaborative funding and planning, staff training and development, and community capacity building. Following the community dialogue, the school board supported the establishment of hubs in the school system. (Chowaniec, Gordezy, & Grieve, 2005, p. 63)

It is notable that in the decade and a half since that time, the OCDSB has done very little to substantively act on its “support” for community hubs in schools. While a number of community hubs have been established in Ottawa through the new provincial framework, none of them are currently in active schools. Furthermore, at the time of Rideau’s closure, no formal community hubs existed within the substantial area of the city east of the Rideau River, including our case study area.<sup>16</sup>

During the 2017 student accommodation review, members of the Rideau community actively advanced the possibility of establishing an official community hub at the school as an alternative to closure. This advocacy took three distinct forms; (1) The community argued that such a community hub was needed in the area, and that the unique needs of that community aligned with the purpose of community hubs as advanced by the Government of Ontario; (2) Community members pointed out that the school was already functioning as an unofficial community hub, with varied activities operating out of the building, both during the day and after school hours, that served multi-generational community members (Rideau HS already had active community partnerships with the City of Ottawa, Canadian Immigrant Teachers Association, Carlington Community Health Centre, Kiwanis Club, Ottawa Public Health, St. Laurent library, University of Ottawa, Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre, Carleton University, Youth Canada [YouCan] Association, and the Wabano Centre); (3) Finally, various community organizations—namely the Rideau-Rockcliffe Community Resource Centre and Odawa Native Friendship Centre—proposed to extend the school’s existing partnerships by leasing space within the building through Ontario’s community hubs framework (Miller, 2017a).

At the final school board meeting on the closure proposal, one of the local trustees advocated the community hub proposal as a concrete alternative to closure, and asked board staff directly: “Have we taken up the efforts that have been made and have been approved by this board previously to have a com-

<sup>16</sup> See the Government of Ontario’s community hubs mapping tool at <http://gis.communityhubsontario.ca> (accessed January 25, 2017).

munity hub model school in the school board?” In his response, the board’s chief financial officer was somewhat equivocal: “Madam Chair, we don’t have one specific school. We have a number of activities in our schools that involve the community, involve community partnerships, and they are there with varying degrees of formality” (OCDSB, 2017d, 2:23:09). Therefore, while the OCDSB is open to community hubs in principle, it has not implemented this model in a specific school, even when this was widely advocated within the affected community and supported by the provincial government. Since the closure of Rideau HS, some of the same community groups that were denied the opportunity to lease space in the building, while it was an active school, have continued to pursue the establishment of a community hub in the abandoned building, with tentative support from the OCDSB (Kupfer, 2017). The Government of Ontario (2018) recently announced an initial funding grant for a community hub in the Rideau HS building.

The original proposal to establish a community hub within the under-enrolled, but still active, Rideau HS presented the OCDSB with a distinct policy alternative to school closure. From the perspective of the school board, however, it can be seen why this alternative would seem unappealing. For one thing, it would not have presented as tidy a solution as closure, at least when measured according to the board’s preferred metrics: school attendance relative to building capacity and individual course options. Secondly, it would not have solved the enrolment issue at Gloucester HS. Thirdly, partnership with community organizations would have entailed an inevitable degree of uncertainty in the OCDSB budget. However, given the broader context presented in this paper, we suggest that it would, on the whole, have been a more suitable solution that would have better balanced the many factors at play. While the limited course options at Rideau would have remained a problem for certain students, this must be balanced against the importance of maintaining the choice for students, particularly those from marginalized communities, to attend a local and culturally-relevant school. The community hub model would have made it financially sustainable to retain Rideau HS as a community school, while also providing a range of valuable community services to students. Meanwhile, the OCDSB could have maintained individual students’ course choices through a clear and balanced student cross-boundary transfer policy. As suggested by the 2009 ARC, such a policy should enable individual cross-boundary transfers that can be justified based on program options but require subsequent confirmation that the student is enrolled in the requested program.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented both a narrative policy history and a demographic analysis of local population patterns in order to contextualize the recent decision to close Rideau High School in Ottawa, Ontario. The findings suggest a pattern of demographic disparities in residential population patterns in the area that appear to be exacerbated through school-level enrolment. We argue that these patterns can be attributed, in part, to historical policy choices by local school boards, including, in particular, lax student transfer policies. These findings indicate the inadequacy of the narrow economic measures relied on by the school board in their school closure decisions—namely, student enrolment relative to school capacity and the number of course options available to individual students. Where the board’s economic analysis suggested the closure would benefit marginalized students by increasing their course options, a broader analysis informed by a sociological perspective suggests that the closure, in fact, risks exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities in the region.

However, our analysis leaves many key questions unanswered, including, in particular, the motivations causing so many students to transfer out of Rideau HS. Anecdotal evidence, including the perspective of the former principal quoted at the beginning of this article, suggests that these transfers were driven by a form of prejudice against Rideau students, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of decreasing enrolment and fewer course options. While our findings indicate a set of historical and demographic patterns that potentially align with this explanation, further qualitative research will be needed to assess its accuracy. In turn, these findings indicate that large-scale sociological analysis on its own is not any more adequate to inform complex school closure decisions than economic analysis. Both are necessary, but they must also be informed by careful, qualitative engagement with the communities affected. This observation brings us back to the community-based Accommodation Review Committee in 2009, which recommended that before making a policy decision the school board needed to conduct robust community consultation in order to understand, among other things, what students and families in the area needed from their local schools, what motivated cross-boundary transfers, and what factors shaped the stigmatization of certain schools. Unfortunately, in 2009, as in 1985 and 2017, the school board lacked the political will to undertake this

sort of in-depth community engagement process.

If, as Fredua-Kwarteng (2005) suggests, school boards are perpetually in tension between their bureaucratic and political roles, then our research indicates that the OBE and the OCDSB have erred on the side of functioning as bureaucratic institutions. In this way, they have neglected their responsibilities as political actors within the urban political economy. Gaskell and Levin (2010) describe the efforts undertaken to alleviate the educational effects of poverty in two other Canadian urban school boards (one in Ontario, one in the neighbouring province of Manitoba). They conclude:

In both cities, we can see that committed trustees who agree to share power with and engage vulnerable communities can have a very powerful and positive effect on the educational opportunities of poor children. These effects are limited by the fiscal and political constraints of a democratic system and the understanding and collaboration of educators, but they are still important. (p. 160)

The “community hub” model is a concrete example of what such democratic engagement with affected communities might have looked like, in the case of Rideau HS, if the OCDSB had embraced its democratic function. Such political engagement with marginalized communities and educational disparities is not easy or straightforward and brings no guarantee of success. Parallel efforts are required in regional and national governments if real progress is to be made. However, this work is necessary and local governments, including school boards, have an important role to play (Dyson et al., 2010; Irwin & Seasons, 2012; Scott & Holme, 2016). The decline of socioeconomically marginalized urban schools is not a bureaucratic problem that can be solved by tinkering with enrolment numbers. It is a problem embedded in the urban political economy, and it requires a political response.

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