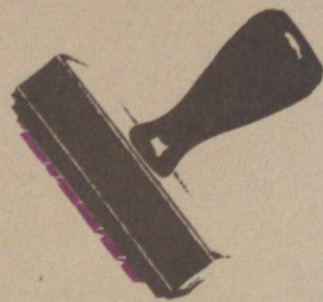




# BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

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COMMENT



#156 - December 1975

## COUNTY SCHOOLS: THE EFFECTS OF THE COUNTY SCHOOL TAKEOVER ON ONE ONTARIO TOWNSHIP

### INTRODUCTION

When the County School System was introduced in Ontario in 1969, the overall objective was *"to provide equality of educational opportunity for every child in the Province of Ontario"*. Equal opportunity implied equal ability of people to pay for education and, to the Provincial government, this required larger units of administration. The consolidation of the almost 1,500 local school boards, then in existence across Ontario, was deemed necessary for two reasons: larger units would have the advantage of a broader tax base to provide a more complete school program; they would also facilitate a new provincial grant plan designed to distribute costs more evenly.

Linked to this overall purpose were two other major objectives. These were:

- first, to increase the quality of education by better meeting the needs of individual students; this meant, for example, a more comprehensive range of programs including kindergarten, music, art, guidance, physical education, science, home economics and industrial arts; special programs to help the handicapped; teachers with special skills and training; and improved learning resources.
- second, the provision for sound planning; by giving more responsibility to the new larger boards, the Department of Education hoped that there would be greater independence and initiative at the *"local"* level. In the words of Ministry officials, the new boards would,

*"be capable of assuming the degree of autonomy required to meet the needs of their particular areas..."*

The purpose of this *Comment* is to examine the impact of the consolidation of school districts into county units. It looks at the effects on a single Southern Ontario township, namely Oro Township in Simcoe County. As a case study, it offers a snapshot view of what the county plan means for one township in one county. While there are limitations to this approach, we suggest that this *Comment* might provide a basis for comparison with the findings for other municipalities, with varying characteristics, across the province.

With the stated provincial objectives in mind, we have attempted to evaluate both the "*costs*" and "*benefits*" of the new system. From the vantage point of a single township we obviously cannot judge the extent to which the new scheme has succeeded in equalizing costs across the province. This approach does permit us to consider whether or not the provincial goals for improving the quality of education are being realized. It also suggests that attempts to equalize the delivery of a service can have important negative side impacts, which may in the long run prove more significant. Above all it points up the difficulty of trying to reconcile two potentially conflicting goals: equalizing educational opportunities on the one hand and encouraging local autonomy on the other.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the research for this study, information was gathered by means of in-person interviews and open-ended questionnaires from a number of people representing a range of viewpoints and backgrounds. Among those canvassed were former members of the local Oro Township school board, the present representative on the Simcoe County Board, principals, teachers, parents, and senior administrative officials of the Simcoe County Board of Education. Participants represented a geographic cross-section of the township. In addition the BMR staff reviewed the provincial justification for the 1969 reorganization and the local press on the subject.

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1. This point was emphasized in a paper delivered by Professor Brock Ridout of OISE, last March 1974: "*Equality of Educational Opportunity Versus Local Autonomy -- The Dilemma Facing North American Education -- the Ontario Experience*".

## II EDUCATIONAL REORGANIZATION IN THE 1960'S

### Costs of Education

During the 1950's and 1960's Ontario's educational system underwent a massive expansion. Many factors combined to raise the costs of education to unanticipated heights. These were the so-called "*golden years of education*" when the children from the post-war "*baby boom*" entered secondary schools and then universities or new community colleges. In addition to increased enrollments, lower teacher:pupil ratios resulted in a greater number of teachers (from nearly 18,000 in 1946 to close to 60,000 in 1970). Changes in teachers' salaries and financial benefits accounted for a large part of the rise in costs and was tied to the more general factor of inflation.

After World War II there was a growing demand for new school facilities and programs. Flushed with post-Sputnik enthusiasm and encouraged by a federal school-building program, Ontario built hundreds of new vocational and technical schools (278 new schools by 1967). At the same time there were demands for more extensive and specialized services (e.g. kindergarten programs, special education, new teaching methods and resources). All of these developments and pressures help explain the rapid rise in school board expenditures which climbed from \$68.4 million in 1946 to over \$1.9 billion in 1972!

During the same period the provincial government's share in bearing these costs increased. In 1952 the provincial grant of \$54 million covered approximately 34% of the total cost, with the rest of the funds derived from the local property tax. By 1970 the Province was assuming 51% of the costs (in 1972 the provincial grants provided over 60%) which were rising at such a rate that spending "*ceilings*" were required. The Ministry of Education had an obvious and growing financial stake in how educational programs and services were to be provided and funded.

### Reorganizing and Consolidating the System

In the second half of the 1960's, the Ontario government moved towards a comprehensive reform of the educational structure. Although the consolidation of public school sections in Ontario began some 40 years before the township legislation was passed, Ontario

still had over 3,000 school districts in 1964. It also had a system of provincial aid which, though it helped the poorer half of the districts to provide school services, did not offer anything approaching equal educational opportunity to the students of Ontario. By this time there was general agreement that the days of the "little red school house" were gone and that the system of public education needed to be reorganized.<sup>1</sup>

### Township School Areas

In 1964 the government took the first step in mandating structural reform of the school system when legislation was introduced establishing each township as a township school area (effective January 1, 1965). The legislation required all village and town school districts with populations of less than 1,000 or fewer than 100 pupils to merge with the adjacent township school area. Over 1,600 small school areas were thus eliminated and replaced by 255 new township areas. By this time, too, district high school boards had been formed throughout Ontario, each consisting of a number of townships, towns and villages. By 1967 there was a total of 1,446 operating school boards, roughly half the number that had existed prior to the change.<sup>2</sup> This township reorganization set the stage for further centralization of the system and established the right of the province to prescribe local units in subsequent legislation.

#### Reduction in School Boards in Ontario, 1945-1967

SCHOOL BOARDS	1945	1960	1964	1965	1967
Elementary (Public and Separate)	5,506	3,462	3,010	1,467	1,259
Secondary	261	265	257	257	235
Total Number of School Boards	5,649	3,676	3,216	1,673	1,446

1. The most thorough explanation of the reorganization of Ontario's educational system in the 1960's can be found in David Cameron's Schools For Ontario (Toronto: U of T Press, 1972).
2. See The Reorganization of School Jurisdictions in the Province of Ontario: A Guide for Southern Ontario (Ontario Department of Education, January, 1968).

### Bureaucratic Changes

The second stage in the consolidation process was an internal reorganization of the Department of Education. It took place in 1965-1966 and was intended to delegate many of the traditional departmental functions to the local school system. Considerably increased responsibility for the operation of elementary and secondary schools was to be assigned to the local educational authorities, supported by competent professional staffs. However, this change implied the creation of larger, more encompassing local school boards.

### County Restructuring

The 1969 consolidation of school districts into county units in the south and district units in the north was the third and final step in the structural reform of the provincial school system. The reorganization was very far-reaching. In southern Ontario all school boards were consolidated along county lines into thirty-eight county boards of education. The larger cities, namely, Metro Toronto, Hamilton, London, Windsor and Ottawa were excluded from this reorganization and continued to operate their own schools.<sup>1</sup> In northern Ontario, where county organization does not exist, ten large school divisions were created composed of cities, towns, villages, rural municipalities and unorganized territory. As a result of the 1969 legislation there were only 75 public elementary and secondary school divisions in Ontario, except for a group of small public school sections in the north which were too isolated to be included in a school district.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The cities of Hamilton, London, Ottawa, Windsor and Metropolitan Toronto were to continue with the boards of education as they existed in 1968. (Hamilton, London and Windsor each had a single board of education, while Metro Toronto had a two-tier system.)
  2. There were a number of other important changes resulting from the new system: it made all school boards elective (high school boards had previously been appointed); it provided for the direct election of separate school representatives on the boards for the first time; it changed the system of capital financing, authorizing school boards to issue their own capital debentures (current funds still had to be requisitioned from municipal councils); it transferred all responsibility for the inspection of schools to the enlarged boards.

### III A PROFILE OF ORO TOWNSHIP

The township selected for our case study is Oro Township, located between Barrie and Orillia with Lake Simcoe forming one of its borders. Incorporated in 1851, Oro is a township with deeply-rooted traditions and community ties. Because of this we assumed that the effects of restructuring would be easily seen in Oro.

Oro was suitable for the project for a second reason. Because Oro had already centralized its rural schools by 1965 we were able to better isolate the impact of the County school board takeover in 1969. In the case of other townships, the centralization of schools took place after the County restructuring so that the impact of the merger was blurred.

We also had the benefit of two carefully researched and interesting books detailing the history of education in Oro and the history of the township itself.<sup>1</sup>

Before the four new elementary schools of Oro Township were built during the decade 1955-65 there had been nineteen school sections.<sup>2</sup> Because Oro had centralized and "modernized" its school system before 1969 it naturally could not expect to benefit from restructuring to the extent that a "poorer" area would. In selecting Oro we were, therefore, aware that we were choosing a township that had demonstrated a commitment to education. In other words, Oro was typical of those school boards which were operating with apparent efficiency before the county boards took over.

As a rural township adjacent to the two largest municipalities<sup>3</sup> in Simcoe County, Oro Township has a population comprised mostly of farmers; perhaps 20% of the permanent population are middle-class professionals and business men who are tied occupationally to Barrie or Orillia and are more urban in lifestyle.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Howard Campbell et al, A History of Oro Schools (1967) and Wallace Key et al, The Story of Oro (1972).
  2. As a small rural municipality, Oro has no secondary schools. Simcoe County's high schools are located in or near the larger centres-- Barrie, Orillia, Midland, Collingwood and Bradford.
  3. Barrie has a population of more than 31,000. Orillia's population is 24,000.
  4. The year-round population of Oro Township is presently 5,693, and there are an additional 4,000 summer residents. The figures of 65% and 20% are based on an informal evaluation of the assessment roll done by staff of the Oro Township office five years ago. At that time, the evaluation showed 69% of the permanent population involved in farming, an additional 5% in rural-nature work and 10% retired. The trend since then has been one of a slow decline in the number of farms being worked and a proportionate increase in the percentage of residents who work in town.

#### IV INITIAL REACTION TO THE COUNTY SCHOOL TAKEOVER

In January 1969, one public school board replaced 37 boards that had existed in 33 municipalities in the County; the number of elected school trustees was reduced from 234 to 18. The new distribution assigned six representatives for the sixteen rural municipalities. Whereas Oro ratepayers had previously had a five-member school board, including the Chairman, they now shared one representative with the neighbouring township of Vespra. This new board of eighteen people had an extensive jurisdiction: Simcoe County, one of the largest counties in the province, encompassed six major municipalities each with its own peculiarities, and almost 38,000 students being taught in some 112 schools by 1,750 teachers.

The reaction to the change in Simcoe County generally was mixed. Many municipal councillors and trustees were opposed or at least apprehensive. To some it signalled the end of "*local control*" of education. There was a feeling that the new county board would not be as "*close to the people*" as the old boards. Rural councillors were critical of the proportion of the representatives assigned to rural municipalities. Teachers across Simcoe County were concerned about such issues as the possibility of arbitrary teacher transfers. A common complaint was that the county board system had been "*sprung*" upon the people without adequate warning.<sup>1</sup>

Spokesmen for the Barrie public and collegiate boards were more receptive. Although some feared that centralization might lead to less efficiency, certain Barrie spokesmen saw the reorganization as a positive move to build up the system and provide more equal opportunities. Others, however, felt that centralization would be disadvantageous for Barrie, where educational standards were thought to be the highest in the County; they feared that equalization would mean leveling out to the lowest common denominator.

The Barrie Examiner described the county school board as a "*natural development*" and found the arguments in its favour "*most impressive*".<sup>2</sup> It would have greater borrowing power, a stronger hand in dealing with the province and could improve the facilities and opportunities for the entire area.

In Oro the County school takeover was widely viewed as another attempt by government to centralize power by weakening the control of local administration. There was some concern about the effect of restructuring on local taxes.

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1. Barrie Examiner, articles and editorials during January and February, 1968.
  2. Barrie Examiner (March 24, 1968).

Part of the initial resentment in Oro was caused by the fact that the original proposal for school reorganization as presented to Oro board members and residents was based on the existing high school districts. This would have meant six boards in Simcoe County instead of the centralized arrangement. Several of the Oro residents interviewed for this study were of the opinion that restructuring would have been more acceptable then and satisfactory today if it had been based on the old high school areas. One single county-wide board was, for many, simply too big to be responsive to local Oro needs.

#### V THE "COSTS" AND "BENEFITS" OF COUNTY RESTRUCTURING FOR ORO TOWNSHIP

##### i) The Economic Advantages and Disadvantages of Consolidation

It is interesting that economic arguments have been used by both defenders and opponents of County restructuring. When the County board reorganization was announced in 1968 the province was hoping primarily that the broader tax base afforded by the new larger units would provide for a fairer distribution of educational costs. It did not claim that integration would produce cost savings. However, the notion of efficiency was implied in the government's stated objectives. As the Department of Education explained, the new boards would be able to make better use of financial resources to provide for better planning and to improve the quality of educational services.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the people of Oro were wary, and some feared that the new system would mean higher taxes in the long run.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Reorganization of School Jurisdictions in the Province of Ontario *op.cit.*, p.5.

2. The Oro reeve expressed the opinion of many when he deplored the trend to centralization at a council discussion shortly after the plan had been announced: *"By moving the administration away from the local level they have increased the cost substantially without regard to the ratepayers. They are now about to do the same thing with education, doing everything possible it seems to get the administration farther away from the people who have to pay for it all. And make no mistake about it, it costs them more."* *"Bureaucratic Control Under Attack in Oro"*, Barrie Examiner, February 6, 1968. Also *"Says Oro is Opposed to Any Amalgamation"* Barrie Examiner (January 8, 1969).



Did reorganization increase total education costs?

A common charge made about county boards is that they are responsible for an "astronomical increase in the cost of education". However, this argument is rebutted in a recent report of the Committee on the Costs of Education.<sup>1</sup> The Committee examined the comparative expenditure figures for the province as a whole for the years before and after the reorganization. It found that while expenditures have risen every year from 1966, the percentage increase was smaller in 1969 and 1970 than in the two years preceding the establishment of the new boards. In 1969, in spite of additional costs associated with the creation of the new county and district boards, the rates of increase declined. At the elementary level the rate of increase was seven percent less than in 1968<sup>2</sup>, and the overall effect was a decline in the rate of increase of five percent.

In 1970 the rate of increase in total costs declined further, even though ceilings had not yet been established by the government. In 1971 further declines were achieved, undoubtedly helped by the spending ceilings. On the basis of the expenditure figures and taking into account enrollment statistics, the significant impact of inflation and the additional costs associated with the reorganization, the Committee on the Costs of Education concluded:

*"We can find no justification for the claim that the new county and district boards were responsible for inordinate increases in the rate of expenditure. On the contrary, it is our view that, if the former boards had continued in existence, the increase in expenditures would have been even greater ... We conclude, therefore, that the decision to create the county and district boards was financially justified, particularly in view of the extension of programs that they have been able to achieve within the lesser rates of increase when compared with the boards in existence prior to 1969."*

In spite of these assurances, doubts about the economic consequences of reorganization persist. While no data exists to "prove" that the pre-1969 pattern of rapidly rising local school board costs would have been modified, certain questions come to mind.

1. T.A. McEwan, et al, Financing Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools, Interim Report, number 7 (Committee on the Costs of Education, June, 1975).
2. In part, this decline can be explained by a stabilization of enrollment at the elementary level. However, at the secondary level there was a small decline in rate of increase (of 2.1 percent) in spite of a six percent increase in high school enrollments, where the cost per pupil is greater.

To what extent would the pressures influencing expenditures, notably salaries and the extension of programs, have been less if school boards had not been consolidated? Is the lower rate of increase in school board costs after 1969 necessarily conclusive evidence that economies of scale were being achieved, given the fact that each year increases were being calculated on an ever-rising base? Since the purpose of reorganization was to reduce and eliminate, if possible, the inequalities in educational opportunity and the inequities in the distribution of the tax load, it was to be expected that total costs would rise. Whether or not the increase was warranted in terms of both efficiency and quality of service provided is an enormously complicated question which defies a simple answer.

Looking at the Simcoe County experience, it can be shown that in spite of the claim that the new boards had too heavy an administrative structure, the annual cost in salaries paid to administrations did not increase.<sup>1</sup> The structural impact of the changeover can be summarized as follows:

	<u>1968</u>	<u>1969</u>
Boards	37	1
Trustees	234	18
Annual cost - for each Oro Trustee	\$300	
- for each County Trustee		\$3,000 <sup>2</sup> .
Business Administrators or Senior Staff	35	12
Annual cost	\$175,000	\$143,000
Academic Supervisors	10*	10
Annual cost	\$199,900	\$234,000
% of salaries paid by Province	80%	47%

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The total education budget for Simcoe County printed below does show that the costs of education rose sharply in 1969 -- 22% over 1968. There were, however, several reasons given for this increase,

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1. One difference with the new system, of course, is that the County board was required to pay for its supervisory officers, whereas inspectors had previously been paid for by the Province.
  2. In 1975 County trustees received a major increase in salary. The basic honorarium rose to \$4,200 per year; an additional amount of up to \$3,000 could be earned by attendance at committee meetings, conferences, etc.
- \* Barrie and Orillia had their own supervisors, in addition to the Provincial inspectors.

including significant salary increases, the cost of eighty additional teachers needed to look after the increase in enrollment experienced in 1969 in Simcoe County and the shift in responsibility for educational supervisory salaries, formerly paid for by the provincial government.<sup>1</sup> After 1969 the rate of increase in expenditures resumed more reasonable proportions, understandable in view of the pressures of inflation, salary increases, improvements in teachers' working conditions and educational services discussed earlier.<sup>2</sup>

EDUCATION BUDGET FOR THE SIMCOE COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

<u>Year</u>	<u>Elementary</u>	<u>Secondary</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Increase</u> %
1968	\$ 9,939,972	\$11,100,196	\$21,040,175	
1969	12,227,510	13,381,776	25,609,286	21.7%
1970	14,333,963	14,988,480	29,372,443	10.7%
1971	16,875,360	16,936,584	33,812,444	15.1%
1972	19,087,136	18,387,158	37,474,294	10.8%
1973	21,096,358	18,897,034	39,993,392	6.7%
1974	24,090,877	21,200,104	45,290,981	13.2%
1975	29,942,806	26,824,374	56,767,180	25.3% <sup>3</sup> .
Percentage Increase over 1968				169.8%

The Effect on Oro Taxpayers

Those who claim that Oro has suffered economically from restructuring point to the mill rate as one indication. The mill rate pattern shows a steady increase since 1969. While the rate of increase is significantly less than it was in the period from 1966 to 1969, taxes have continued to rise.

1. This 22% increase amounted to approximately \$4,650,000. The largest single factor by far was teaching salaries which rose by \$2,400,000. Sizable increases also occurred in administrative supplies and expenses (\$407,000), teaching supplies (\$395,000) and fringe benefits (\$315,000).
2. Salaries including fringe benefits account for roughly 70% of the total county board budget. Salaries from 1970-75 have risen at virtually the same rate as the total budget.
3. Of the \$56,767,180 total expenditure, approximately \$19 million is raised through local taxes and over \$35 million funded through provincial grants. For Simcoe County taxpayers the 1975 increase was 12.2 percent.

The following chart shows the residential mill rate for educational purposes for Oro Township, area "A".<sup>1</sup>

RESIDENTIAL MILL RATES FOR EDUCATION, ORO A.

	Elementary Public School	Secondary School	Combined
1966	15.88	17.64	33.48
1967	17.37	23.76	41.13
1968	22.005	28.908	50.91
1969	26.60	34.80	61.40 <sup>2</sup> .
1970	33.93	37.70	71.63
1971	33.96	29.085	63.05
1972	36.256	32.139	68.39
1973	38.902	30.025	68.92
1974	39.513	31.969	71.48
1975	45.831	35.227	81.06

The total percentage increase in the Oro educational mill rate from 1968 to 1975 was approximately 60%. Comparing this to the 169% jump in overall County education costs, we can see that Oro taxpayers did not pay for much of the cost in their property taxes. With provincial support of education growing steadily (from roughly 39 percent overall in 1963 to close to 60% by 1972) we can conclude that a considerable part of this increase was borne by provincial grants.

To senior administrative officials the essential point is that the rate of increase in Oro taxes had dropped from an average of 26.95% per year (from 1966 to 1968) to an average of only 5.3% per year since 1969. Yet, this reduced rate of increase was due to the fact that the Province was paying an ever-increasing share of the cost of education.

1. Prior to 1969 there were six different educational mill rates in Oro, corresponding to the various combinations of elementary and high school districts. Oro A section represented 85% of the elementary school taxpayers of the township.
2. The 1969 residential public mill rate was not reduced to reflect the 1968 operating surplus of the Oro school board of \$21,741. This surplus was returned to the taxpayers in 1971.

It is not possible to assess whether Oro benefited or suffered economically from restructuring without a thorough cost analysis which is beyond the scope of this *Comment*. Such a study would need to examine and correlate many variables, including: mill rates, pupil enrollment figures, per pupil costs, changes in the grant formula, and the changing pattern of provincial financial support over the past six years. Then, to determine "*cost effectiveness*" the conclusions from this study would have to be weighed against the benefits in services provided.

In certain areas there appear to be cost savings due to consolidation. For example, insurance is more economical and the scope and level of coverage is superior. According to Board of Education officials, the tendering and purchasing of larger quantities is more effectively undertaken and offers savings in the provision of goods and services. Similarly, with the concentration of effort in one location (i.e. Barrie) the use of more modern machinery such as computers is made possible, which can increase administrative efficiency.

On the other hand, there are probably additional costs where the purchase of a small item(s) for one school is involved, in which case the cost of processing the purchase order would be unwarranted. Further, some teachers complained that the advantages of common purchasing were minimized by the difficulties created.<sup>1</sup>

It is our impression that if there are economic advantages for Oro, few residents are aware of them. Apart from Board of Education officials or citizens who have had direct dealings with the Board, we did not interview any Oro residents who were aware of economic advantages of restructuring. On the other hand, while some citizens "*felt*" that there "*must be*" diseconomies of scale, few could cite specific economic inefficiencies.

## ii) The Quality of Education

In evaluating "*costs*" and "*benefits*" we tried to come to some conclusions as to the effects of restructuring on the quality of educational services. This proved to be difficult. One obvious problem was how to measure the present quality and scope of programs

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1. For example, common tendering and purchasing results in an extensive time lag between the drawing up of budgets and their processing. This can lead to inaccurate estimates of quantity of supplies. In some cases the items ordered from the common list prove to be unsatisfactory. Another complaint was that common tendering leads to frequent changes in the make and model of equipment, which poses difficulties.

against what might have been introduced by the Oro Township board. A second major difficulty was selecting valid criteria for evaluating the quality of specific programs. Several of the programs to be discussed in this section were chosen because they had been viewed as important by the Province under the original definition of objectives. These include: kindergarten, music, art, physical education, special education and improved learning resources. The third and overall problem was determining which yardsticks were most significant in measuring impact.

The matter of assessing quality was further complicated by the number of variables at play. For example, a recent test by the Simcoe County Board of Education showed that throughout the county basic skills have gone down a whole grade level as compared to ten years ago.<sup>1</sup> However, this decline in standards was explained in part as the result of the failure of the new schooling methods (i.e. open classrooms, new math, etc.) to teach basic skills. In addition, changes in values and lifestyle may have affected how children approach learning. Administrative reorganization probably had no bearing at all.

We did question the high school staff at Eastview Collegiate in Barrie, which receives the vast majority of Oro elementary students, whether Oro pupils seemed better prepared generally for secondary school than they had been prior to 1970. The consensus was that there has been no appreciable change in student preparedness that has any relationship to the educational structure.

The overall picture with respect to program changes is mixed -- some gains, some losses. However, while reorganization has been responsible for certain improvements in Oro schools, these are not necessarily seen as significantly valuable to the school program. Certainly, many Oro parents do not feel that the quality of education in Oro schools has substantively improved. Above all, many feel that the loss in access, responsiveness and local control far outweigh the benefits.

#### kindergarten program

A kindergarten program was introduced in Oro schools after restructuring in 1970. However, the Oro township board had planned to introduce this to the system and would have done so even if amalgamation had not occurred.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The Canadian Test of Basic Skill Program purports to measure the level of skills in such areas as reading, arithmetic, spelling and grammar.
  2. Other areas which had not centralized under the township legislation would not necessarily have introduced kindergartens for quite some time.

### teaching standards and quality

Opinion on the matter of teaching quality is mixed. Simcoe County administrators believe that Oro pupils now have access to a larger and better trained staff recruitment and therefore have better teachers, by and large. They also point to the benefits of increased association of Oro teachers and principals with other staff in Simcoe County for professional development.

This view was challenged by certain Oro spokesmen who emphasized the negative impact that rapid teacher turnover has had on the quality of teaching. Because staff is now hired by the central County board, they say that there is an increased tendency for teachers to accept positions in townships outside of the main centres as a first step in climbing the county ladder; in their view, this leads to greater staff turnover. Others emphasize that turnover can be beneficial; new teachers can mean a wider range of experience and talents. At any rate, the situation does appear to be stabilizing in Oro schools.

Most respondents feel that the quality of teaching in the classroom has had little to do with the administrative set-up; the effectiveness of the teachers is related more to provincial policy and the quality of teaching graduates generally.<sup>1</sup> They did not notice either significant improvements or deterioration in Oro schools after 1969.

### special education

With regard to special education needs, the effect of restructuring has been positive and services have been extensively improved. For example, remedial reading teachers are now employed at Oro schools, on the basis of one remedial teacher per two elementary schools, half-days at each. Prior to amalgamation, children with special education problems, if severe enough, were sent to a public school in Barrie.

There is also a speech therapist who visits the schools on a regular weekly basis. The current program is considered very effective, with a light work load permitting adequate coverage per student; for example, in Shanty Bay the speech therapist spends 1 afternoon a week helping seven pupils.

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1. In 1970 only 1 teacher in Oro's 4 schools had a B.A. degree. In 1975 there are 14 elementary school teachers with B.A.'s and one specialist. This was the result of a change in provincial standards.

Under the old system there was no speech therapy service provided by the board. Speech therapy problems were handled by the teachers unless the school nurse felt they were medical problems.

Audio-visual facilities and qualified personnel to assist in their use are now available to Oro teachers and pupils.

A Superintendent of Student Services has been hired at the county level to coordinate special education needs.

Oro schools still do not have home economics or manual training programs, although these had been mentioned originally by the Province as examples of how reorganization would increase the quality of education.

In summary, the most significant accomplishments of the new County board for Oro schools have been in the area of special education.

#### integration of elementary and high school programs

There is evidence that coordination between the elementary schools of Oro and the high schools in Barrie has improved since 1969. This coordination is being brought about by the use of the "*family of schools*" concept, whereby a number of elementary schools work with the appropriate secondary school to integrate their curricula.

A Superintendent of Schools administers a number of these families of schools, with meetings of elementary and secondary school principals on an on-going basis. Subject councils were tried as a means to improve each subject area; however, because of the lack of follow-up to assure that the job of coordination was being done and that recommendations were being implemented, these councils are not operating. Some secondary school department heads do meet with elementary school staff to work on common educational goals. Thus, presently, certain department heads from Eastview Collegiate in Barrie are working with Grade 7 and 8 Oro school teachers on curricula and methods.<sup>1</sup> Professional Activity Days are planned so that communication and coordination takes place between elementary and high school teachers. It seems that the teachers and principals from Oro are getting to know their colleagues elsewhere in the county, especially in Barrie, due to reorganization.

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1. This integration is not occurring in all subjects. While some liaising is occurring in history, for example, there is no coordination in science or physical education.



### French

Another positive innovation that has taken place due to consolidation is that French is being taught in Oro schools, beginning at the grade six level.

### changes in physical and technical facilities

The main change in the physical facilities of Oro schools since restructuring was an addition to Guthrie Public School; it provided a gym-auditorium; a library-resource room; health, guidance and administration areas; and two classrooms.<sup>1</sup> The intention was that the pupils of three Oro schools would use the Guthrie gym and library. While this sharing has taken place in the use of the gym, the library-resource room is not used by the other Oro schools.

An essential qualification to be noted about this addition at Guthrie is that new physical education facilities had been planned by the former township board.

### maintenance of the schools

While most Simcoe County administrators felt that physical maintenance of the local schools must have improved due to the county takeover, the majority of Oro parents and teachers interviewed felt it has stayed the same.

### art, music and physical education

There is a clear split of opinion on whether or not these programs have improved. Simcoe County administrative officials believe that the impact of restructuring in all three areas has been positive. Parents, teachers and principals tend to disagree.

art - Most agreed that the quality of the content of the art program has not changed.

music - Music was cited by many as an area where the program has definitely deteriorated. One example is the discontinuing of the annual Oro spring music festival which included all four public schools. Under the County set-up the music resource person serves eighteen schools and therefore has little time for each school. This compares with a music supervisor serving just the four Oro schools under the township board.

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1. Another addition is being planned for East Oro school which will provide similar facilities.

physical education - Certain gym programs which have been discontinued since 1969 are missed by Oro residents. These include: an excellent gym program utilizing the Orillia YMCA, swimming classes, and notably, a track and field program which previously allowed and encouraged every pupil in Oro to participate; the present county-wide program is far more competitive and permits just one or two children from each school to compete per event.<sup>1</sup>

While the new gym at Guthrie was intended to serve three of the four Oro schools, the trend has been one of only limited sharing, mainly in winter, due to transportation costs.

#### learning resources

Improved learning resources was one of the "promises" of the new system. In Oro, however, only one of the schools, Guthrie, has a functioning resource centre staffed by a qualified teacher-librarian. The other three schools do not have a satisfactory arrangement; they depend upon the principals (untrained in library work) to serve as half-time librarian-resource staff.

#### iii) Attitudes of Teachers, Principals and Parents

Initially, the reorganization had a rather negative impact on the morale of teachers and principals in the Oro schools. This, however, has improved as the staff has accepted and become accustomed to the new system.

Some recent articles on Ontario's school system have argued that since county consolidation, principals and teachers are increasingly frustrated because of more red tape. They connect the current feelings of malaise among teachers to the larger units, which they suggest, burden staff and especially principals with too many "guidelines, directives and programmes". Our own research did not confirm this. Principals feel that there is more "red tape" and that they must spend a greater amount of time doing administrative work, which in turn requires greater secretarial help; but this does not seem to be particularly oppressive.<sup>2</sup> The morale of many of the teachers with whom we spoke was evidently high. This was particularly true of teaching staff who had arrived after reorganization.

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1. In fact, this year Oro school principals together with staff and some parents arranged a field day similar to the ones that had been held prior to restructuring with full participation by Oro pupils.
  2. For example, some staff complained that the amount of red tape involved to obtain certain custodial services was excessive; they found it irritating but not burdensome.

In the spring of 1973 an incident occurred which crystallized much of the underlying resentment in Oro towards the County board. The incident arose out of a county administrative policy which stipulated that school principals should be periodically rotated. When the Board tried to implement this policy in Oro, the citizens rose up in opposition; a large number of Oro residents marched into the board meeting in Barrie to demand that the shuffle not take place. As a result the Board backed down and only one principal was replaced. The comments made at the time revealed the resentment of the rural people towards "*the city slickers on Ferris Lane*". A major contributing factor to the conflict was undoubtedly the lack of communication between the administration and the community; the parents had heard about the proposed shuffle indirectly and the Board had not explained the policy to the people.

Since that incident resentment has somewhat abated. For some, this event has continued to colour their view of the county system.

The attitudes of Oro parents are difficult to categorize. Certainly some parents feel uneasy about the impersonality and vastness of the county system; they resent the loss of local responsibility and local control over the development of education in Oro. They feel that the Oro Township Board had been operating successfully before restructuring; they had built four new schools, raised enough taxes to pay their principals and teachers amply, and had a local elementary school system which served their community well.

Others are not dismayed at all by centralization. They feel just as close to their school as ever; they point out that the home and school associations are still active.

#### iv) Effects on Oro's Sense of Community

In general it appears from the overall response to our questionnaires that reorganization has somewhat undermined feelings of local identity and community in Oro Township. The following direct quotes from the responses are indicative of the concerns expressed:

*... the dropping of township school events has resulted in people not knowing each other as well.*

*... under the Township Board all areas ... were equally treated. Under the County Board ... only one school has been given increased facilities which ... has resulted in feelings of resentment.*

... The field day, music festival, gym programme, Oro Fair (which is still held, but no longer run by the Oro Board) all (used to give) the parents a chance to participate in school activities.

... As everything was so much on a smaller scale, identity with the community of Oro was extremely strong.

... People used to know the whole board on a first-name basis -- now they only know one representative and feel he carries little weight.

In part, this feeling of loss has led some Oro residents to take positive steps to reaffirm their local community identity. For example, when the new County board refused to sponsor the Oro school fair, as the township had done, the Oro Agricultural Society undertook to sponsor it so that the school fair could continue as an annual community event.

Summing up, many people stated that the County board system has tended to have a negative effect on the community's sense of local identity. Naturally, this has been felt by some more than others. Recent articles on the subject have claimed that the large boards are having a "steadily centralizing and stultifying influence" on community spirit throughout Ontario. While we agree that the larger unit has alienated some Oro ratepayers, we find this kind of statement too strong to apply to Oro residents generally.

v) The Quality of Representation and the Role Played by the Central Bureaucracy

Many of the people interviewed expressed concern about the effects of restructuring on the quality of representation. This concern centered on four points.

First, because the job of trustee has expanded so greatly due to reorganization in terms of the population he/she must represent, the vast physical size and the workload, many interested and very capable individuals no longer feel they can afford the time to serve.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the greatly increased responsibilities for school trustees has resulted in far too much reliance on the county administrative staff; not all of our respondents were alarmed by this

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1. On the other hand, administrative officials pointed out that the increased trustee honorarium makes it possible for people to run for office who otherwise might not be able to afford to do so.

dependence,<sup>1</sup> but all agreed that the scope and complexity of board activities rendered the local trustee more dependent on the full-time staff. The phrase "rubber stamp" was used a number of times to describe the present role of the trustee.

Third, that because the current trustee must represent such a large area (i.e. Oro and Vespra townships), he cannot really keep in close touch with each community's needs; similarly, fewer people know him personally, adding to the sense of distance and concomitant citizen disinterest.

Finally, there is a strong feeling in Oro that as just one of eighteen board members making decisions for the whole county, Oro's representative carries very little weight.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The move to consolidate school administration in Ontario was based on three major assumptions. One was that larger jurisdictions made equal educational opportunity across the Province more likely. Another was that larger jurisdictions would raise the quality of education for most communities. The third was that larger units would give more power to local communities.

Looking at the Oro experience six years after consolidation we are able to test two of these assumptions.

With respect to the argument that larger units can afford to offer a better educational program, we find that in Oro this is true mainly in the field of special education. Services which used to be available only in the larger urban centres (e.g. remedial reading, speech therapy) are now provided in Oro schools. However, there is no evidence that the general educational program, including the teaching of the basic curriculum, has improved despite the availability of subject consultants, seminars for teachers, etc. Integration of curriculum and program is only taking place on a very modest scale. Moreover, certain parts of the program, such as music, seem to have deteriorated. Thus in terms of the classroom experience it seems that the increase in resources -- both staff and equipment -- has been of limited importance.

This, of course, is not the case for all local areas in Simcoe County. For example, a glance at events since 1969 in Vespra Township, Oro's neighbour to the south-east, offers a different

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1. A few teachers indicated that they preferred to work with knowledgeable administrators rather than with inexperienced and "parochial" trustees.

picture, with the benefits of restructuring very apparent. Whereas Vespra had eight local schools with no new schools constructed before 1969, they now have three brand new, rather "plush" elementary schools. To Oro residents it naturally appears that their schools have had to "stand still" while Vespra -- which had not made the same kind of financial commitment to education -- surged ahead.

The second assumption examined in this study -- that the larger boards increase local autonomy -- is even more open to question. While the larger county boards possess greater power than the small local boards used to have, they are not viewed as "local" in any meaningful sense; the reality from Oro's perspective is that the personal sense of community control over education has been largely replaced by a sense of distance and impersonality, with power centered in the bureaucracy, not the elected trustees.

Would another system be preferable?

In our survey we asked Oro principals, teachers and parents whether another system of school administration would be more satisfactory for Oro Township. The answers revealed a general consensus. No one felt that a return to small rural school boards was either feasible or desirable. Almost all found the present county system too big. Most opted for a modification of the present system, with consolidation of the small boards occurring along the lines of the old high school districts. This would mean six boards in Simcoe County instead of the present centralized arrangement<sup>1</sup>. It was felt that a high school district board setup would permit the integration of schooling from kindergarten to grade 13 -- a goal which is widely endorsed; and that it would offer most of the advantages of the County board system (e.g. increased resources for special education needs) without the disadvantages of excessive centralization.

The fact that Simcoe County administrators have divided the County into six administrative areas, each including one or more secondary schools, confirms the logic of this approach.

The residents of Oro Township recognize that some centralization has probably been beneficial. Our research suggests, however, that the county setup is probably too big and that it undermines the sense of local responsibility for the kind of educational services provided. While this case study does not permit any final conclusions, it strengthens the case for partial decentralization of the educational system.

Charles K. Bens, Executive Director  
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1. Another proposal was that the county be divided into two parts -- north and south, with two public boards of education instead of one.