Twinned Schools in Ontario: A Description and a Comparison

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When resources become scarce, people or organizations become more competitive to vie for them or they work cooperatively, sharing those resources. In the face of decreased school funding, many schools and school districts in North America and the United Kingdom are experimenting with clustering, *a proactive measure taken to contend with the resource dilemmas confronting rural education (Honeyman, Thompson, & Wood, 1980). This article describes a type of clustering in the province of Ontario that is known as* twinning, *a practice whereby schools share administrative personnel, usually a school principal. The findings of two exploratory studies conducted in Ontario are described, with the purpose of (a) providing some base-line data about resource sharing in Ontario schools, (b) comparing and contrasting these findings with those in the United Kingdom and the United States, and (c) identifying areas that require further clarification and investigation.*

The Literature on Clustering

Berliner (1990) defined clustering with reference to U.S. schools as the joint commitment to sharing resources for mutual benefit and, in particular, to promote school improvement. Clustering, he said, is "a feasible way to ensure autonomy and preserve the local school without sacrificing educational equity or operational efficiency" (1990, p. 5). Hargreaves defined clustering as it occurs in the U.K. as "a group of two or more small schools [defined as schools with fewer than 100 pupils on roll] which have agreed to cooperate with each other . . . for children's social development, joint financial benefit, teachers' professional development, the sharing of resources, or a combination of these" (1996, p. 22). These U.K. schools are contending with not only fiscal challenges, but also a nationally imposed demand for increased specialization in curriculum (Galton & Hargreaves, 1995, p. 179).

Shared resources in clustered schools include staff, materials, equipment, services, facilities, and programs. In terms of shared staff, a wide variation exists, but commonly clustered schools initially share the schools' administrative team, for example, assigning one principal to two or three grouped schools. With time, other resources follow: first, other personnel are shared, then materials and equipment. Part-time teachers, substitute teachers, and specialist teachers (music teachers, foreign language teachers, etc.) have also been shared in clustered schools, and some schools have been known to share secretarial and custodial staff.

Clustered schools have also shared computers, subscriptions to data base services, and audiovisual equipment.

Joint business services have been undertaken, such as purchasing, transportation, and data management (Nachtigal, 1990). Students from separate schools have been joined together to share in-school or extracurricular activities that might not otherwise be offered: for example, field athletic teams, bands, drama productions, music events, and student enrichment activities (Nachtigal, 1990). Collaborative professional development activities for teaching staffs also have been implemented in clustered schools.

The literature identifies economic, educational, social and political advantages in clustered schools. The economic benefits of clustering are usually the central reason for entering into this arrangement. At the outset, clustering results in an immediate salary savings. Cost reduction also results when redundant efforts and duplicate equipment and services are eliminated (Nachtigal, 1990).

Academic advantages identified in the literature include a wider ranging and enriched curriculum; more firsthand experiences and more manipulation activities for students; a regular exchange of ideas, expertise, and new knowledge; a reinvigorated teaching staff; support for creating and testing restructured or alternative delivery systems; and increased involvement of parents (Galton, 1993; Nachtigal, 1990). Galton and Hargreaves (1995) also identified the advantage to teachers of increased opportunity for joint planning. Moreover, a teacher from one of the schools in the cluster can act as a specialist to coordinate the work of colleagues in a subject area across schools.

Social benefits for those involved in clustered schools have been identified by Nachtigal (1992, 1990): students are able to participate in in-school and extracurricular activities that they would otherwise be denied; the school retains its uniqueness, but it can extend its own sense of community to the other school(s) within the cluster; students realize that they are part of a larger community of

learners; a rural school (and teaching staff) can be revitalized and end its perceived isolation; resource sharing can expedite the exchange of ideas; and it can provide the moral support and accountability necessary for change to take place.

Finally, political benefits are also attributed to clustered schools. Nachtigal (1992, 1990) associated clustered schools with the following benefits: encouraging a climate of cooperation and mutual benefit rather than competition and control; improved educational equity; providing opportunities for reciprocal relationships between/among schools; and providing an opportunity to form political alliances to head off school closure. Pipho (1987) asserted that through collaboration, schools gain in long-term stability rather than just short-term improvements.

Few disadvantages were found in the literature on clustered schools. DeYoung (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995), however, advised caution about entering into a clustering arrangement, as did Haller and Monk (1988). Streifel, Foldesy, and Holman (1991) identified some possible disadvantages: increased costs of transportation (moving students, equipment, staff, and principal between the schools); a higher rate of vandalism; increased salaries due to higher salary schedules; and a more specialized staff to offer the promised programs. Another drawback, noted by Nachtigal (1990), is the outlay of time required by members of clustered schools for discussions and meetings, particularly at the outset of collaboration. Ornstein (1993) was concerned that an unfavourable political climate might prevail if schools (and their communities) are forced to restructure. It is this latter disadvantage that has drawn the attention of the public to Ontario's twinned schools.

Method

Twinned schools in Ontario represent a particular type of clustered school in which the primary resource shared is a school principal, who typically presides over two schools. Over 200 schools have been twinned since 1990, when fiscal constraints imposed on educational institutions in Ontario pressured the province's school districts to stretch resources as far as possible. Twinning resulted immediately in numerous telephone calls from irate or querulous parents requesting information on the practice from the local college of education. A quick review of the limited and outdated literature on the subject in Ontario (Lawton, 1981; Marshall, 1988) led to the present study.

In October 1994, school district administrators (known in Ontario as *directors of education*) of all the 170 school districts were sent letters with a brief questionnaire asking about the types and range of twinned schools within their jurisdictions. After a follow-up letter, 104 responded (61%).

Of those respondents, 37 had at least one set of twinned schools in their jurisdiction; 63 directors indicated that no schools in their jurisdiction were twinned (Four of the districts did not respond to this survey item). In 1995, another survey was sent to the districts that either did not respond to the initial survey or that had indicated earlier that no schools within their jurisdictions were twinned. The 1995 survey added seven more districts that contained twinned schools. In total, 44 of the 170 school districts (26%) indicated that 206 schools were twinned into 97 sets. Virtually all of these schools are located in rural settings.

Directors were asked the reasons for twinning and both the advantages and disadvantages of twinning that they perceived. In addition, directors were asked for permission to send similar but more detailed questionnaires to every principal of twinned schools. All of the directors responded affirmatively. Subsequently, a more comprehensive questionnaire was developed to administer to these "twinned" principals. This questionnaire was first piloted by three principals of twinned schools and a revised version was sent to all 97 principals representing all twinned schools. During 1994 and 1995, 76 principals responded to the questionnaire (a 78% rate of return).

The findings here reflect the responses of the 44 directors of education and the 76 principals representing twinned schools.

Results

No school in Ontario voluntarily twinned itself to another school. All respondents indicated that central administration made the decision that schools would share a principal and then possibly other resources. In virtually all of the cases, the details of twinning were to be worked out by the principal.

Schools were grouped predominantly in sets of two (95%), but four groups (5%) contained three schools. Although schools of different sizes had been twinned, the most frequent grouping of schools consisted of a small school with one of medium size (51%). Indeed, at least one school district had developed a policy stipulating that all its small schools would be considered for twinning or else have their principal's administrative time reduced to 50% (Bochar, 1997). Almost all the Ontario twinned schools were elementary schools; only two sets of secondary schools in the study were twinned, one in the north and one in the western part of the province. Two sets of comprehensive schools (kindergarten to high school completion) were twinned.

The distance between twinned schools ranged from adjacent buildings to schools a distance of 45 miles apart. The average distance was just less than 6 miles, with a median of 3 miles. As expected, the more rural the area, the further the distances were between the twinned schools.

Of these 76 sets of twinned schools, 17 (22%) had only one principal, 54 (71%) had a principal and one vice principal or equivalent, and the remainder, 5 (7%), had a principal and two vice principals. (As provincially legislated, a school's size determines the need for and number of vice principals; small schools do not merit a vice principal, medium-size schools do.) In the majority of twinned schools, both the principal and the vice principal have their offices in the same building; only 8 (11%) principals mentioned that the principal's designate was located at another site.

Types of Resource Sharing

School district officials were asked to identify which resources were shared among the twinned schools. The responses varied considerably, from "*nothing, other than the principal*" to "*at the principal's discretion*" to "*everything.*" One principal observed that the great distance between schools was a deterrent to sharing. Where twinned schools were adjacent to one another, the smaller school (or annex) normally used the larger school for its gymnasium and library resources, and for special activities that involved the whole school. In most cases, the annex houses the primary grade students.

Similar to findings from the U.K. and the U.S., personnel shared by partner schools were the principal, vice principal, some specialty teachers (French language teacher, Technical Education teacher, Reading Recovery teacher, curriculum resource teacher), and some secretarial and custodial staff. One set of twinned schools shared the same school council.

The vast majority of the principals (95%) reported that their school budgets were not shared by their twinned schools. In general, the principal received an operating budget based on the total populations of the twinned schools and then allocated a budget to each school. Indeed, only five sets of twinned schools reported sharing a budget, and only those schools with annexes pooled community-raised funds.

A variety of materials and supplies were shared by the Ontario twinned schools: instructional supplies, teacher resource kits, testing kits, textbooks, computer software and other resources, and staff professional development materials. Twinned schools also shared computers, video camera recorders and other audiovisual equipment, and some musical instruments.

Commonly, the gymnasium and the library were the main school facilities shared. Playing fields were also used for communal outdoor school activity days. Overall, however, not many communal activities have been undertaken as yet in these Ontario schools. Outdoor activity days, a school newsletter, shared planning between staffs, a joint staff meeting, and joint professional development sessions were activities undertaken collaboratively between/among the twinned schools. These findings are consistent with those in the literature.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Ontario directors of education and principals of twinned schools were asked, in separate questionnaires, to identify first the positive and then the negative aspects of twinning. Interestingly, the advantages of twinning differed considerably between the two groups of educators.

In rank order, the directors named the following advantages: cost savings, keeping small schools open, and an improved quality of programs for students. The majority of these officials (76%) identified the fundamental advantage of twinning schools as the cost savings resulting from a reduction in the number of principals (and vice principals), but other savings were mentioned, including savings in transportation costs and secretarial/support staff costs. The next advantage, keeping small schools open, was mentioned by many fewer directors (25%). These directors felt that twinning was positive because it secures a public school presence in a small community; moreover, as one director said, twinning brings two small communities together. The third advantage given in support of twinning, by 23% of the directors, was the enhanced quality of student programs. Examples described in their responses were more and diverse programs; more uniformity in program delivery; participation of the smaller school in programs, events, and activities previously offered only in the larger school; more resources, such as a gymnasium; redistribution of the larger school's excess equipment to the smaller school; optimum use of available space for instructional purposes; a consistent focus on the curriculum across the set of twinned schools; increased flexibility for grouping students; and in twinned schools that are divided by grade levels, a smooth transition from the primary school to the twinned junior school.

As Table 1 indicates, principals of twinned schools ranked the advantages differently. The main benefit from the principals' perspective was increased collegiality among the teaching staff (an advantage not mentioned explicitly in any literature to date), and then improvement in programs as a result of access to additional resources. Fiscal issues other than preventing school closure did not seem to be paramount to these principals.

Of the 44 directors who responded, 7 (16%) found no disadvantages. Three stated that, as twinning had only recently occurred (within the past school year), it was too soon to comment. One quarter of the directors mentioned a negative reaction in the communities of schools that were to be twinned, but the two main disadvantages identified

Table 1
Advantages of Twinning

Description	Frequency	%
Staff development; collegiality	27	28
Sharing of & increased access to programs, resources	19	20
Sharing of staff responsibilities	15	15
No change in school site; no closures	16	16
Improved reorganization of grade levels	12	12
Cost savings	6	6
Better sized schools	2	2
Total	97	99

Note: Error in total percentage due to rounding. Some principals provided several advantages, others gave one advantage of twinning, and others did not respond or said no advantages were apparent.

centered on the principal's inaccessibility and the increased costs associated with twinning. Both reasons were mentioned by over 75% of the directors.

While some schools equally share the principal, other schools have the principal on-site in direct proportion to their school size; that is, the larger school has the principal on site more often. Consequently, it is not surprising that five directors (12%) noted that the smaller schools reported feelings of isolation, poorer community relations, and a perceived concern by the community that the central administration "*doesn't value the local small school.*" Literature on twinning in Ontario's schools indicated that the absence of a full-time principal as the on-site administrator had an adverse impact (Bochar, 1997; Rees, 1996). In the present study, both directors and principals were concerned that the principal was often absent from school and that, at times, no school administrator was available to deal with school emergencies as they arose. Legally, someone has to be in charge when the principal is away from the building, but often that person is a teacher with classroom responsibilities. Five directors observed that twinned schools had less stringent supervision in reference to both students and staff, and that the principal had, in general, less "*control,*" that is, less detailed knowledge of the day-to-day activities in the schools.

One issue raised concerned the splitting up of the school's administrative team (in cases where the principal and vice principal resided in separate school sites), which appeared to diminish the potential for collaborative leadership. Some respondents reported that twinning demanded an experienced and nonteaching vice principal at the alternate site. However, in more and more schools in Ontario,

the vice principal in other than large elementary schools has minimal administrative time: In the principal's absence, the vice principal may be in charge of the site, but is occupied at least half of the time as a teacher.

Ironically, one of the main reasons for twinning given by the directors was to save money, but the second main disadvantage they associated with twinning was its cost! Ten of the directors (23%) mentioned that the costs of keeping a small school open exceeded the costs (salary, maintenance, and capital) of closing it. Costs included transportation and courier costs to move the principal, teaching staff, students, equipment, and material from site to site. Extra travel, many more meetings, and increased communication needs within and between school sites were identified by 23 (52%) of the directors as causes of increased stress on the principal.

The disadvantages of twinning identified by principals appear below in Table 2. Principals were concerned about the public and community having a poorer image of the school and, in particular, of the administration at the school. The majority of principals identified the principal's absence from the school as the main disadvantage, and gave as the second most common disadvantage the increasingly complex communication issues at both schools as a result of more meetings with parents and staff, new communication needs between schools, and weakened communication within the school.

The Ontario findings clearly reveal that principals of twinned schools have extra work due to multiple staff meetings (one for each site), multiple school council meetings (one for each site), driving between school sites, multiple school concerts and evening performances (again, one for each site), and larger staff in more than one location.

Twinning appears to have repercussions for staff, too. Teachers have reported that they have additional responsibilities and additional work-related stress at twinned schools. The staff of the smaller or annexed school is said to feel isolated or forgotten. Teaching staff sick days and staff turnover were reported by one district official as being high. Two custodians who were moved to the other school of the set of twinned schools grieved the reallocation.

A recent article (Bochar, 1997) by a principal reporting on a review of clustered schools in one large Ontario school district identified similar concerns among principals. Bochar cited a negative impact on student learning, staff development and supervision, maintaining program integrity, supervision, school safety and liability, maintaining and enhancing community relations, fulfilling contractual obligations to educators and support staff, and working conditions. In that same study (Bochar, 1997), 12 (11%) principals reported that some school staffs, the principals' association, and local teachers' federations were pressuring their school districts to return to the status quo-one prin-

Table 2
Disadvantages of Twinning

Description	Frequency	%
Principal absent from site	41	26
Communication duplication, meetings	25	16
Difficulty joining 2 or 3 school communities	20	13
Not enough administrative time and support	20	13
Difficult to administer two sites	19	12
Disruption due to travel, bussing	18	11
Isolation of smaller school community	8	5
Coordinating the sharing of facilities	4	3
Loss of continuity between grades	4	3
Totals	159	102

Note: Error in total percentage due to rounding.

cipal for every school building. Furthermore, two directors mentioned that, in the future, schools in their district would no longer be twinned.

Principals in twinned schools in Ontario were asked to respond to the question: *"Having had experience with twinning, what suggestions would you offer?"* Almost two thirds of the principals offered multiple suggestions. Their responses have been divided into the following categories: communication links, administration issues, secretaries, staff, school issues, and a final section entitled *"Reasons not to twin."* Interestingly, 13 (20%) of the respondents explicitly said *"Do* not *twin."* Categories and suggestions are summarized in Table 3, in rank order.

Because the principal was often absent from one or more of the school sites, over 20 educators, both directors and principals, recommended that the school's administrative team and especially the principal have certain management skills: excellent communication skills, time management skills, ability to delegate, and a collaborative leadership style. Also recommended, quite emphatically, was a principal for each school site or at least another full-time school administrator. Furthermore, some arrangements were recommended to assist teachers and parents in communicating with the principal in an expeditious manner (for example, by using pagers and fax machines).

Comparing Twinning and Clustering

Twinning in Ontario schools usually involves two schools, whereas in the U.K. three to eight schools are clustered together; in the U.S., the trend is more toward school

closure and consolidation. In U.K. schools, each school retains its own headteacher and governing body (Galton & Hargreaves, 1995), but in Ontario all twinned schools share a principal. In the U.K., clustered schools operate under informal arrangements: "there is no formal or legally binding agreement linking the schools" (Galton & Hargreaves, 1995, p. 174). However, in Ontario the terms of the linkage are articulated formally in policy documents and even in some school districts' collective agreements; Fullan (1982) observed that it is not unusual to see a clustering agreement move from an informal to a formal one as it becomes institutionalized. Finally, more of Ontario's twinned schools are further apart than the rural clustered schools in the U.K., but not as far apart as clustered schools in the U.S. (Galton & Hargreaves, 1995).

The advantages and disadvantages of twinning as identified by Ontario principals and their directors of education are similar to those reviewed in the literature, as are the differences between the two groups in terms of their perceptions of positive and negative effects. Nachtigal's (1992) allusions to potential disadvantages were echoed by the Ontario directors and principals, and Ornstein's (1993) warning of the political fallout of mandated clustering was relevant in the case of many of Ontario's twinned school communities.

A new positive finding from the Ontario scene is the principals' observation of a greater collegiality among the staff of the twinned schools. Results also indicate that the principal's absence from the twinned school presented opportunities for a variety of staff to act in a leadership role.

Although the literature previously had identified the disadvantage of extra work for the principal as a result of clustering, this aspect was brought out decidedly in Ontario. Principals of twinned schools said that they felt overburdened as a result of twinning. Some indicated that poorer relations with staff have resulted. Two new disadvantages identified in the present study are (a) the challenge for principals to coordinate the shared facilities and (b) the isolation perceived by teachers in the smaller school. The literature also briefly mentions the cost of twinning schools, and this was a prominent concern among Ontario educators, who considered higher costs a negative effect. However, no details were provided about increased costs.

Issues for Further Investigation

No studies have been undertaken to date by Ontario school boards on the results of twinning, yet in the next few years, the number of twinned schools will likely increase: Ongoing fiscal restraint will encourage more cooperative efforts between schools and school districts. Much more research is required to determine the efficiency and the effectiveness of this trend and to reveal the long-term impact of twinning on students and their communities.

Table 3
Suggestions from Principals of Twinned Schools

Types of suggestions	Frequency	%
Communication Links	65	38
Dedicated phone line, special phone features	29	
Fax connection	25	
Link schools by computer/compatible systems	11	
Administration Issues	38	22
Allot more time/help for VP or designate	16	
Add another VP or designate	10	
Clear protocol/roles for administration	4	
Administration should be visible	2	
Monetary compensation	2	
Schools	7	4
Board should budget for expenses associated with twinning regardless of population	2	
Pay one school rate regardless of population	1	
Training for principals of "special" schools	1	
Secretaries	22	13
Full-time secretary (or extra help)	20	
Good communication between secretaries	2	
Staff	15	9
Combine/integrate staffs for certain activities	5	
Good communication/problem-solving & attitude	3	
Mature staff in small school, capable of working with parents	3	
Share part-time staff	1	
Limit the number of staff	1	
Limit time full-time staff spend in small school	1	
Pay parents to do yard duty supervision	1	
Select schools for twinning carefully	2	
One budget for twinned schools	1	
Arrange inter-school bussing	1	
Strategies to emphasize 1 school/multi-sites	1	
Ensure students are not treated as second class	1	
Combine parent councils	1	
Reasons not to twin	22	13
Do not twin	13	
Parents & students want one principal per site	6	
Not effective use of principal's time	1	
Savings do not warrant twinning	1	
Add portables instead to larger school site	1	
Totals	169	99

Note: Error in total percentage due to rounding.

No one seems to know, for example, the actual savings or costs associated with twinning. No records of new expenses are being kept by Ontario principals. One responding principal cited a personnel savings of less than $10,000, but could not specify additional expenses (such as for transportation costs). The majority of the principals surveyed did not even know if their travel costs to the other schools in their set would be reimbursed.

The Ontario findings answer some questions regarding implementation concerns, but raise others. For example, how much resource sharing realistically can be expected when twinned schools are at a great distance from each other? How can communication be improved between schools, and between the principal and the community? How can the issue of safety be addressed more proactively?

To date, twinning appears to have "costs" other than monetary ones that also warrant further investigation. Findings in the present study suggest that principals and teachers are under more stress in twinned schools, and that a higher turnover rate may be occurring. One respondent asked if more female than male principals had been discharged in the process of eliminating administrative positions, and this gendered aspect of twinning is also worth exploring further. Finally, if twinning does not succeed in rural Ontario, what are the options other than school closure?

Conclusions

The findings from the Ontario research on twinning, and in particular on the implementation of twinning, add to the American and British literature on clustered schools. Many similarities exist in terms of the types of resources shared as well as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of sharing. The distinguishing feature of Ontario's twinned schools—a shared principal—appears to be the source from which flows many of the political, logistic, and supervisory differences (and disadvantages) of twinning.

Twinning, like clustering, is a process which takes time, awareness, acceptance, and commitment from many people, not just from the shared principal. Twinning seems to represent a continuum: at one end of the continuum, there is one principal, two schools, no integration; and at the other end, there is total acceptance, total sharing, and full integration of programs, resources, and people. In Ontario, sustained commitment to twinning and sharing resources is not very evident. Few twinned schools have articulated a mutual, overarching goal, other than to survive. Many districts and school communities know little of the benefits of twinning. They can only identify a certain disadvantage—that of no longer having a principal on the school site much of the time.

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