

Grande Yellowhead Public School Division Niton Central School's Grade 9 Program

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REPORT

If you have any questions regarding the information captured in this report, please email communications@gypsd.ca.

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Background

The Grande Yellowhead Public School Division (GYPSD) is a rural school division in West Central Alberta. The Division is divided into five zones, each representing an electoral wards established by the province. The most eastern ward, the Lobstick Zone, currently has four schools. One of these schools is Niton Central School, which offers junior kindergarten to Grade 9 programs. Over the past few years, there has been an increased awareness of the shrinking enrolment at Niton Central. Since 2016 the Grade 9 population has dropped by 77%. One possible explanation for this downward trend relates to a change in Board policy regarding “School of Choice” bussing out of the Lobstick Zone. Following the completed K-12 amalgamation and modernization project in Evansburg in December 2025, the Lobstick Zone will have two schools: Grand Trunk School (K-12) and Niton Central School (currently K-9).

Following Lobstick Community Engagement in the spring of 2023, the GYPSD received a request for a conversation specifically addressing the future of the Grade 9 program at Niton Central School.

Engagement Overview

The GYPSD is committed to improving the educational experience for all junior high students in the Niton Central School area. The purpose of the Community Conversation for the Niton Central School’s Grade 9 program was to gather community input on the benefits, issues, and concerns related to possibly moving the program out of Niton Central. The options being considered by the Board were:

- Maintain the Grade 9 program at Niton Central School.
- Transition the Grade 9 program into a high school: either Grand Trunk School in Evansburg or Parkland Composite High School in the Edson zone.
- Hold additional discussion about the future of the entire junior high program.

Engagement related to the Grade 9 program had two parts; pre-engagement surveys and the Community Conversation. The survey results were used to help design the Community Conversation. Survey results were shared at the Conversation event and on the GYPSD website.

Pre-Engagement Surveys - Spring 2023

Pre-engagement surveys were sent to parents, students and staff of Niton Central School. The survey was open for 11 days in April 2023 and the surveys varied slightly for each group. The purpose of the survey was to gain a preliminary understanding of the benefits, issues, and concerns related to possibly moving the Grade 9 program out of Niton Central. Participants were not asked if they supported or opposed the program being moved. A follow up meeting scheduled in May, 2023, to address the future of the Grade 9 program at Niton Central School was delayed then canceled due to wildfires.

The largest response came from the students, with 36 completed surveys. This represents 100 % of the Grade 6 - 9 students at the time. A slightly smaller number of parents – 29, responded to the survey. Completed surveys were received from parents with children in all grades – kindergarten through Grade 9 responded to the survey. There were 9 responses from Niton School Staff.

A summary of the survey results, as shared at the Community Conversation, can be found in **Appendix A**, and on the GYPSD website at: <https://www.gypsd.ca/our-board/communications-plan>.

Community Conversation

The Community Conversation was held at Niton Central School, on Tuesday, January 30, 2024, from 6:30 – 8:30 pm.

The event was designed to meet the following objectives:

- Provide information on school population trends and the catalyst for this meeting.
- Present results of the Spring 2023 survey.
- Discuss the benefits, concerns, and other issues related to moving the Grade 9 program out of Niton Central School.
- Provide information on the implications to Niton Central School, and its junior high program, if Grade 9 is moved; and discuss related issues.

Through not all participants signed in, it is estimated that 45 people attended. These included parents, students, and Niton Central School staff. Yellowhead County Councilor, Penny Lowe, and West Yellowhead MLA, Martin Long, also attended.

All seven members of the GYPSD Board of Trustees were in attendance, with Board Chair, Dale Karpluk and Trustee for Lobstick, Melodie Bobilek speaking at the event. Other Board members were there as observers.

What We Asked

When participants arrived, they were seated at one of seven discussion tables. A number of the GYPSD Central Office staff served as Table Hosts to lead and record table discussions.

The event started with a presentation of current school and community data. This data showed the significant drop in Grade 9 enrolment since 2016, while the population of Niton Junction has grown. Because the Community Conversation was meant to build on the 2023 surveys, these results were shared with the group via info-graphics on each table (**Appendix A & <https://www.gypsd.ca/our-board/communications-plan>**).

As the name of the event suggests, majority of the meeting time was spent in conversations. The “Benefits, Issues, and Concerns” exercise included two rounds of discussion; each with two questions (see below).

What We Heard

Benefits, Issues, & Concerns Exercise

The first round of questions focused on benefits. Question 1 was: **“What are the benefits for the students of moving the Grade 9 program out of Niton Central School?”** Input received for this question has been categorized into the following themes:

- **Educational Benefits** – Participants felt that by moving Grade 9 to a high school early, students would get more options, specialized teachers, and no split classes for Grade 9.
- **Easier Transition** – Many responses suggested students would have an easier transition to high school if they joined a school in Grade 9.
- **Social and Extracurricular Benefits** – The opportunity to make new friends with common interests and the diversity of students were seen as benefits for the Grade 9 students if they moved to a high school ahead of schedule. There were also a number of comments about the increased availability of sports and extra-curricular activities.
- **Other** – A couple of table groups indicated that they saw little or no benefits to moving the Grade 9 program.

Participants were also asked to consider the benefits that might be gained by Niton School if it no longer had Grade 9 students. Question 2 was: **“What are the benefits to Niton Central School and the remaining students of moving the Grade 9 program out?”** The comment themes for this question are similar to those for Question 1:

- **Educational Benefits** – Many of the comments focused on the teachers: participants suggested students would get more one-on-one time with the remaining teachers; and, fewer grades may mean teachers have fewer subjects to teach.
- **Social, Extracurricular and Community Benefits** – Participants provided comments related to the community as well as the school. Others suggested there would be more leadership and extracurricular opportunities for the remaining students.
- **Other** – Again, a couple of table groups indicated that they saw little or no benefits to Niton Junction, the school or the remaining students if the Grade 9 program was moved.

The second round of questions focused on issues and concerns. Question 3 was: **“What do you see as issues or concerns for the students if they were to attend a high school for Grade 9?”**

Input received for this question resulted in some very different themes than for the two previous questions. There are also more themes associated with this question than the previous two. Comments received have been categorized into the following themes:

- **Student Wellbeing** – Participants were concerned about how the Grade 9s would cope in a high school. There were concerns about maturity level, getting lost in the shuffle, less connection, and negative influences within the new peer group.

- **Educational Concerns** – Many participants expressed concern about the potential loss of one-on-one support for students. They were also concerned about larger class sizes and students having to compete for spots in options.
- **Transportation** – Longer bus rides was a concern for many participants. Others expressed concerns about transportation safety, students transferring busses, and the challenge to locate bus drivers.
- **Extracurricular** – Concerns around extracurricular activities focused on the increased competition and resulting loss of opportunity for some students. Other concerns regarding extracurricular activities were the potential loss of leadership and mentorship opportunities.
- **Splitting Cohort / Loss of students** – Since not all Grade 9 students would attend the same high school, a number of participants expressed concerns about splitting up students that may have been together since kindergarten. The issue of losing more students was raised; some may move to homeschooling or leave the Division.
- **Other** – Other concerns included loss of family time due to more travel, and the impact on the community.

Participants were also asked to consider the issues and concerns for Niton School if it no longer had Grade 9 students. Question 4 was: **“What do you see as issues or concerns for Niton Central School and the remain students related to moving the Grade 9 program out?”**

Again, there were some different themes for the responses to this question than had been seen for the previous questions. Comments have been categorized into six themes:

- **Impact on Junior High Program & School as a Whole** – Many participants expressed concerns about the loss of other grades, the longevity of the junior high program, and a possible school closure. As grades leave, participants were concerned about the viability of the remaining programs and grades.
- **Educational Impacts** – Many of the comments focused on the loss of options and supports for students, including teachers with skills in specific subjects. There were also concerns about split classes and lack of consistent leadership.
- **Sports and Extracurricular** – Many participants were concerned about the viability of sports programs and not having the numbers to create sports teams. Others commented on the loss of mentorship and leadership opportunities.
- **Funding and Staffing** – Participants expressed concerns that the reduced enrolment would lead to reduced funding, which in turn would lead to the loss of teachers and support staff.
- **Impact on Community** – Some participants commented on the implications to the community if Niton School did not have a Grade 9 program. Some felt that having less grades at the school could make the town less attractive to new families.
- **Other** – A couple of the other comments related to busing and overall uncertainty.

Appendix 2 contains more detail on the input received through the “Benefits, Issues and Concerns” exercise. Input has recorded and then grouped by theme. Minor changes in wording and spelling have been made for clarity.

Question Period

The Question Period resulted in close to 40 questions, ideas, or comments. Some questions were submitted on cards, while others were asked aloud. A GYPSD Central Office Staff members wrote down the verbal questions, so that they could be included as part of the record. At the end of the meeting some participants wrote ideas or comments on the cards. These were collected and submitted by the Table Hosts.

Given the number of questions, participants clearly were looking for information. While many of the questions were at least partially addressed at the meeting, a number will need to be followed up on in the near future. Many of the questions could be categorized into the following themes:

- **“School of Choice” & Attendance Area Boundaries** – Participants questioned whether the “School of Choice” policy could be reversed or boundaries changed to increase the number of students in Niton Central School. There were questions about what the new boundaries would be for the modernized Grand Trunk School.
- **Staff Stability** – Some asked about what the Division was doing to retain teachers and principals at Niton School. Some asked what incentives might be offered, while others asked what the community could do to help with retention. There was also a question about government funding of small rural schools.
- **Retaining Students** – There were questions about the 35 students that lived within Niton’s boundaries but were schooled elsewhere and about retaining current students. A couple of comments were made about families choosing homeschooling.
- **Program Viability** – Participants asked questions about the viability of Niton School in the long-term. Questions were asked about Board policies and review processes, student-teacher ratios, and staffing at other small rural schools. Ideas were submitted around ways Niton Central School might offer activities and programs that would attract more students.
- **Community Support** – Some participants suggested that the community could do more to support the school, such as volunteers instructing option programs.

At one point during the question period the Superintendent of Schools asked how many attendees would prefer the Grade 9 program stay at Niton Central School. The majority of attendees were in favour of this.

Appendix 3 contains the comments of the various cards submitted. They have been divided into five groups:

- Questions submitted on cards and addressed at the meeting
- Questions ask verbally
- Questions that may need follow-up
- Ideas submitted
- Additional comments

Evaluation

Participants

Participants at the Community Conversation were asked to complete an evaluation form. The majority of participants submitted completed forms. This 66% return rate demonstrates this group's desire to participate.

The majority of respondents felt the meeting objectives were clear, information presented was easy to understand, and participation and interaction were encouraged. Most also felt they now have a better understanding of the school population trends and implications of moving the Grade 9 program.

However, roughly half of the respondents did not feel they had sufficient information to provide meaningful input. It should also be noted that only 42.9% of respondents believe Grande Yellowhead Public School Division will consider community input in any decision regarding Niton Central School's Grade 9 program. A similar number (42.8%) responded "Strongly Disagree" or "Disagree", while the remaining 14.3% indicated "Not Sure".

Slightly over half of the respondents felt participating in the meeting was a good use of their time, and 64% rated the meeting overall as "Average" or "Good". A full transcription of the evaluation forms can be found in **Appendix 4**.

Staff

A debriefing of Central Office staff was conducted virtually during the week after the meeting. Eight people responded to the questions provided. **Appendix 5** contains the staff feedback.

Overall, the staff felt the event had a good turnout, was well organized, and people had an opportunity to be heard. A number of staff indicated that participants were passionate about the subject and wanted the Grade 9 program to stay at Niton. A couple of staff noted that the meeting might have been more productive if the additional information on the implications of moving Grade 9 had been presented before the "Benefits, Issues, and Concerns" exercise (i.e., smaller budget, loss of staff).

Staff also provided input on what needs to happen next. Staff responses can mostly be categorized in three main suggestions:

- **Review School of Choice Policy** – While the future of Niton's Grade 9 program was the catalyst for the Community Conversation, many staff felt the "School of Choice" policy was an issue that needed to be addressed first. Since this policy may be impacting the viability of Niton School, the policy should be reviewed and the Niton community should be made aware of the review.
- **More Communication & Engagement** – Six out of the eight staff members included communication and additional engagement as suggested next steps. Many felt it was important to get back to people as soon as possible with this report, or a recap of the event. This would help people to feel heard, and in the loop. Staff felt communication should include timelines and next steps.
- **More Data** – Some staff echoed meeting participants' feelings that more data and information was needed. Data regarding the viability of Grade 9 is essential. Staff suggested having examples of data related to different scenarios, and sharing next year's preliminary budget information. Some staff felt more data and preparation is necessary before another meeting with stakeholders is held.

What Will Be Done with The Input Received

Input received at the Community Conversation will be used guide next steps in the discussions around Niton Central School's Grade 9 program. This report will be provided to Grande Yellowhead Public School Division (GYPSD) the Board of Trustees and Central Office staff.

The Board and leadership have expressed their commitment to use the input received through the Community Conversation as they work to provide the best learning environment and educational programs for the students in the Niton area.

In Closing

Those at the Community Conversation strongly supported leaving the Grade 9 program at Niton Central School. Numerous participants are concerned about the viability of the program and the school as a whole. Many would like more data on funding and enrolment. The "School of Choice" policy is seen as being one of the main issues and a lot of participants felt it should be reviewed.

The evaluation forms showed that about half of the respondents did not feel they had sufficient information to provide meaningful input and a similar number were skeptical that their input will be used. These responses underline the need for timely, effective, and transparent communication.

Sharing this report, or portions of it, would be a good first step to building trust and demonstrating transparency. Providing some of the specific data requested would also demonstrate that participants were heard.

Appendices

1. Summary of April 2023 Pre-Engagement Survey Results
2. "Benefits, Issues & Concerns" Exercise Flipcharts
3. Questions, Ideas & Comments from Cards
4. Feedback Forms
5. Staff Feedback

**Grande Yellowhead Public School Division
Niton Central School's Grade Nine Program**

**Community Conversation
January 30, 2024**

Summary of April 2023 Pre-Engagement Survey Results

Pre-engagement surveys were sent to parents, students, and staff of Niton Central School. The purpose of the survey was to gain a preliminary understanding of the perceived benefits, issues, and concerns related to possibly moving the Grade 9 program out of Niton Central. A summary of the results of the survey were shared during the Community Conversation. The full results are available on the Grande Yellowhead Public School Division's website.

Parent Survey (29 respondents)

Top 3 Benefits

- Begin high school courses same time as peers
- Niton Central can focus resources on K – 8
- More extra-curricular options

Top 3 Issues & Concerns

- Protection of small rural schools
- Smaller school population for Niton
- Future of junior high program in Niton

Sample of Comments

- Expose students to multiple teachers, specialized teachers
- Already registered child to attend Grade 9 elsewhere
- Rural communities just as important as urban
- Fear for the kids left behind – loss of programs & leadership

Additional Notes

- Three parents commented that they saw no advantages to moving the Grade 9 program

Student Survey (36 respondents)

Top 3 Benefits

- More educational options
- Not in split classes
- More extra-curricular options

Top 3 Issues & Concerns

- Longer bus rides
- Uncertain of impact of change
- Future of junior high program in Niton

Sample of Comments

- Better social opportunity / easier to make friends
- Bigger school can prepare me for future & challenge me
- There could be more bullying
- Lots of kids don't ever want to leave Niton Central – want a high school here

Additional Notes

- Parents, students, and staff all had the future of the junior high program at Niton in their top three concerns.

Staff (6 respondents)

Benefits

- Meet peers before starting high school
- Niton Central can focus resources on K – 8
- Not in split classes

Issues & Concerns

- Future of junior high program in Niton
- Protection of small rural schools
- Smaller school population for Niton

Comments

- Possible reduction in staff will limit opportunities for all students
- Larger class sizes = less one-on-one support

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Recorded "Benefits, Issues & Concerns" Exercise Flipcharts

For each of the four questions from the "Benefits, Issues and Concerns" exercise, this document includes:

- The Conversation Question
- Flipchart Comments by Theme – This section brings together all the comments captured on the flipcharts for each of the 7 discussion tables. These comments have been categorized into themes.
- Additional Comments – This section is for any comments captured that are tangential to the main question

1. What are the benefits for the students of moving the Grade 9 program out of Niton Central School?

Themed Comments

Educational Benefits

- More options
- Variety of option classes
- More course choice-options variety
- More option courses
- Specialized teachers (2)
- Full Grade 9 program (no splits)
- No split class (2)
- No Grade 9 splits

Easier Transition

- Transition times as other students
- Big jump academically into Grade 10, but is a big jump anyways
- Moving early eliminates 'high school culture shock'

Social / Extracurricular Benefits

- More opportunities to meet other like-minded people
- New friends with common interests
- Potential social opportunities
- Diversity
- Sports
- Extra sports available
- Increased extra-curricular

Minimal Benefits

- See no benefits
- See very little

Other

- Removes the choice of staying at Niton or moving - everyone will move
- Bigger school

Additional Comments

Factors that may have led to decreased enrolment

- Turnover of staff/administration change
- School Choice/old attendance area boundaries
- COVID

Issues that may have impact in the future

- Grand Trunk School (K-12) Attendance Area and Transportation Service Areas

2. If the Grade 9 program moves out of Niton, what are the benefits for Niton Central School and the remaining students?

Themed Comments

Educational Benefits

- Potential for more one-on-one for K to 8 (teacher/student ratio)
- Teachers who know students from multiple years
- Prepare Grade 8 for larger school transition
- 6, 7, 8 middle school concept
- Possibly no splits? If there are enough 7s/8s/6s
- More focus for K to 8s
- Fewer grades/ subjects to teach - this may attract more teachers
- If money/student numbers do not decrease - staff numbers can stay the same

Social / Extracurricular / Community

- More access to community sports ex. basketball
- Sense of community in Niton and county
- Kids get to be kids for one more year
- More leadership opportunities
- Extracurricular opportunities for Grade 6s

Minimal Benefits

- See no benefits
- See very little

Other

- Maybe bus times can be shorter?
- Grade 6 will not be part of junior high
- If parents know students will go in Grade 9, they may stay for Grade 8

Additional Comments

Issues that may have impact in the future

- Less friends
- Less funding

3. What do you see as issues or concerns for the students, if they were to attend a high school early?

Themed Comments

Student Wellbeing

- Coping with larger groups of peers/cohorts
- Used to smaller groups/connections
- Student readiness (little fish, big pond)
- Culture shock
- Age/ maturity level is a concern
- Younger concern/maturity level
- Immaturity
- Big jump from Grade 8 to Grade 9 to Grade 10
- Getting lost in the shuffle
- Large school = kids slip through cracks
- Less connection
- Sense of chronic unease at high school
- Exposure to negative influences that don't exist in Niton/county community
- Negative influences in community and within peer group
- More/different peer pressures

Educational Concerns

- Less opportunity for one-on-one support
- Less one-on-one
- Less one-on-one help
- One-on-one time with teacher
- Larger classes, less one-on-one
- Larger classes
- Larger junior high classes - concern especially for Grade 9 grades, which determine Grade 10 courses
- Competing with more people for spots in programs
- More options yet not all will be available to students who may want certain ones

Transportation

- Long bus rides/transportation (lack of buses currently)
- Bus ride- long
- Longer bus rides (x 2)
- Longer bus rides-less time at home
- Transfer bus (Lobstick or Edson)
- Transportation safety
- Bus times/ duration- safety on roads (students' parents)
- Bus driver concerns (numbers)

Extracurricular

- Competition - limited team sports opportunities
- Athletic opportunities decreased for Grade 9s (due to competition)
- Limited access to sports/extracurricular as not legal driving age and cost
- Tougher to make sports teams -parents travel to support their practice
- Harder to get onto sports teams
- Grade 9 leadership opportunities potentially lost
- Loss of mentorship opportunities

Splitting Cohort/ Loss of Students

- Split students who have been together k-8 to different schools
- Splitting up a cohort (HRH, PCHS, GT, YKCS)
- Dividing Grade 9 class to high schools
- Parents moving to homeschooling
- Moving

Other

- Availability/space in other schools
- Less family time because of more travel
- If Grade 9s go, not attracting families to Niton
- Community effect and viability

Additional Comments

- Put school of choice limits back like before
- Once Grade 9s are gone, even more funding is gone for Niton because there are few Grade 8s without the 9s

4. If the Grade 9 program moves out of Niton, what do you see as issues or concerns for Niton Central School and the remaining students?

Themed Comments

Impact on Junior High Program / School

- Possible school closure
- Longevity of the junior high
- Loss of Grade 7 and 8 program
- What does Grade 9 leaving mean for 7s and 8s in years to come (staffing)
- Viability of the remaining programs and grades
- What grade next?
- 1 grade goes then junior high then elementary - “domino effect”
- Chain reaction (loss of students/families)
- Snowball effect-reduce grades
- Encourage more migration out - grades leaving at earlier level
- Losing Grade 9s may mean siblings leave too

Educational Impacts

- Loss of options (i.e. home, shop)
- Drama program for junior high (need numbers to make this successful)
- Loss of Drama program
- Less FSL or consultant time resources
- Lack of consistent leadership-teachers
- Lose teachers with specific skills to teach subjects
- Less teachers for students to connect with
- Continued splits due to less students and budget
- Reduced staffing- quality of programming and education
- Loss of staff=loss of programs potentially

Sports / Extracurricular

- May not have numbers to create sports teams
- Loss of sports programs
- Loss of sports
- Athletic competition- will teams need younger players?
- “Limited to no” extracurricular sports
- Loss of mentorship opportunities
- Loss of student leadership/ mentorship for younger kids
- Loss of leadership for younger students (i.e. Reading buddies)

Funding/ Staffing

- Lack/reduced funding
- Loss of teachers and support staff
- The whole school- staffing
- Less kids/ less funding
- Less money due to less students
- Loss of staff and/or hours

Impact on Community

- Loss of community events
- Community implications/future growth
- Less attractive for people to move/come to the community
- If no school/closure down the road happens, no community

Other

- What does bussing look like? Less routes/ longer times. Number of transfers?
- Cockier younger students (top dogs)
- Uncertainty
- Families of Grade 9's to town (sports, events)

Additional Comments

- Long bus
- Maturity at right level, leadership role model down to younger students

**Grande Yellowhead Public School Division
Niton Central School's Grade Nine Program**

**Community Conversation
January 30, 2024**

Recorded Questions, Ideas and Comments from Cards

During the Question Period, some questions were submitted on cards, while others were shared verbally. Verbal questions were written on cards by a GYPSD Central Office staff member. At the end of the meeting some participants supplied ideas or comments on the cards. These were collected by the Table Hosts and submitted to the Facilitator.

The cards received have been divided into five groups:

- Questions submitted on cards and addressed at the meeting
- Questions asked verbally
- Questions that may need follow-up
- Ideas submitted
- Additional comments

The card comments were recorded. However, some editing has been done for clarity. Every effort was made to retain the original thought & intent.

Questions submitted on cards and addressed at the meeting

- Is there consideration of the changing of "School of Choice" boundaries due to shown impact to small schools?
- What is the timeline? If the Grade 9s leave in September, is there is discussion about the viability of the of the remaining junior high, when does that happen? (what parameters start the discussion)
- Are our Division and Trustees advocating to our Provincial Government to change funding formulas? Small rural school should or could have a different funding structure compared to city schools.
- The message from this crowd is overwhelmingly in favour of keeping Grade 9. Will this meeting have any impact on the decision or did we waste our time tonight?
- Are Edson's numbers going up or down in the High School? If numbers are too high, will they continue to keep Grade 9 in the High School or move them?
- What are the chances of going back to delegated school: if Niton is where you live, that's where you go to school?
- What are the actual zones for bussing – Lobstick vs. Edson?
- Has the stability of staffing been looked at? We have heard a lot about how the community is not keeping kids. What is the Division doing to help? 13 teachers have left and 5 principals.

Questions asked verbally

- How do we retain the staff? What is the community going to do? What is the Division going to do?
- How do we get an answer about removing “School of Choice”?
- When will you get back to us on our questions?
- Board policy 15 – the critical number in the policy. Why did you not address this in 2022?
- 35 students in designated area that are not here. Are they home schooled, at HRH, or PCHS? Is that where you expect them to go?
- Not a fan of having a meeting for having a meeting. When are we getting info?
- What is the viability? What can we do to bring others back?
- Most people don’t want to move the Grade 9s. What do people who want it to move see as the benefits?
- What needs to be done to keep the program viable?

Questions that may need follow-up

- Is there an option for a hybrid model? Could a student be enrolled in Niton for Grade 9, but have some at home learning and some in-class learning? Would that bridge the gap with people moving out of the school to homeschool option?
- Niton’s junior high numbers for the past 2 years and this year are at the threshold that the Board policy has as a signal to review the viability of a school. Specifically, 1.1.2 critical enrolment and 1.1.2.2 junior high, 7, 8, 9 (30) students. When will this review happen?
- How are kids doing that have already transitioned from Grade 8 at Niton to a high school elsewhere? Are their grades consistent? Do they feel they have more/less opportunities? Are they adjusting to the larger schools well?
- More information needed. What has been done to retain students in Niton – by the school and by the Division?
- What are the division-wide student teacher ratios by schools?
- Why don’t you offer incentives – with support from the community? (E.g., locals charge minimum room and board to new teachers that don’t want to relocate.)
- How many of the 35 students not enrolled in Niton are homeschooling rather than transferring schools? How many students in Evansburg? Do Niton students stick with current students from Niton?
- Do students who leave early flourish or fall behind?
- Where are the parents that called for this conversation?
- Why are staff leaving?
- How does the GTS K – 12 affect boundaries?
- What development is being done in Niton community for more families to move here?

Ideas submitted

- Specialty ideas: consider out of the box education programming:
 - E.g., Irvine AB rural school set up a live farm school. Can we?
 - E.g., Can we look at junior high options (like the Green Cert. program for Grades 10-12)
- Allow choice schools from outside Niton boundary to attend our school
- Small schools are very isolated. Collaboration days with other schools? Shop class – 1 per week.
- Collaboration between Niton and other schools. For example: have a bus take students for shop or other optional or collaboration activities.
- Bring volunteers in to teach option classes

Additional comments

- I have home schooled my kids for the last 4 years: all 4 of my kids for a year; 2 years just my older 2; and this year all 4. No one has contacted me to find out why.
- Partial funding for bringing homeschool families utilizing extracurricular activities. Homeschool families in traditional model can choose where they use their funding. Would they be willing to use some of their funding (paid to the school) for some classes/activities?
- You do not try to bring in community members to help with anything. There used to be reading and math blitzes that many people volunteered for. Moms could mark math/spelling, help with math, reading, activities...
- Full time kindergarten should be five days a week.
- We wanted to know the viability of the Grade 9 program.
- The Board provides "School of Choice" out of Niton [Lobstick], but not [out of other wards]. Example: the bus will go to Edson [ward], but Edson does not go to [Lobstick]."

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Recorded Feedback Forms

30 Feedback Forms were returned. However, on two forms the agree/disagree columns were not filled out. Therefore, each row adds up to 28 responses.

Some participants had two responses per statement (i.e., Agree and Strongly Agree). In this case, you will see 0.5 in each of those columns.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements.

		1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly Agree	5 Not Sure
1.	The objectives of the meeting were clear.	3	9	13	2	1
2.	The information presented was easy for me to understand.	2	4	17	4	1
3.	I had enough information to provide meaningful input.	5	8.5	13.5	1	0
4.	Participation and interaction were encouraged.	3	3	17.5	4.5	0
5.	I now have a better understanding of the school population trends and implications of moving the Grade 9 program.	4	5	17	2	0
6.	I think GYPSD will consider community input in any decision regarding Niton Central School’s Grade 9 program.	6	6	7	5	4
7.	Participating in this meeting was a good use of my time.	4	7	12	3	2
		Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Not Sure
8.	How do you rate the meeting overall?	6	9.5	9.5	0	3

Comments

- Not all families live in Niton. We are a family far north. So, we are a 50-minute drive to the school. We have 4 kids that went to Niton until Grade 9. Having our children at a school so far away has many disadvantages. Currently, our Grade 10 student is on the basketball team. His practices start at 6:30 p.m. So, he is done school at 3:15 and hangs around until 6:30. He gets home at 9:00.

- To help with programming, the [K-12] school should have been built CENTRAL instead of on the out edge of the district. So many of the rural schools that are central would have benefited from a [K-12] school being central. Niton School has more to offer, pool, full library, county playground.
- School of choice needs to be clear as to—> choice to ALL schools, or is it [only] into Edson. Until boundaries are decided, no decisions should be made. Boundaries with school of choice and with Grand Trunk [need to be fixed]. The numbers of students have dropped and some students' movement has been due to them being the youngest students and parents pulling those kids to Edson. The current Grade 7 class is full of many eldest kids and won't be moved early [as those with older siblings].
- Looking into promoting the benefits of rural schools will be greatly beneficial. Also, boundary issues are HUGE because if we [keep] more students then it 'fixes' the problems that we're having.
- We never asked for Grade 9 to close, we as parents just asked about the viability of it. We never wanted it closed. We as a community wanted to know how to keep it.
- Need follow up from this meeting.
- I think if this is still a democracy, then maybe you should have a vote, that is, if majority still rules- teacher incentives - ask the community!
- Maybe if it is a school of choice, families can also choose to go to Niton, and can have bussing to Niton. That would bring the numbers up in Niton.
- Reevaluate school of choice for rural schools.
- School of choice needs to be for all schools, not just for Edson. Boundaries need to be set again. Would be nice to have a meeting again and hear results from the board.
- Waste of everyone's time.
- Informative but there was a shortage of information to answer questions asked.
- Gather statistics on how Niton students are doing (grades, mental health) that have moved to larger schools early.
- I strongly believe that if Niton School had consistent leadership, things at this school would be different.
- Talked around questions. There were no facts.
- The meeting was good, but things did seem to get away from the agenda due to a takeover of the conversation by a few groups. But this might just be the nature of the topic.

**Grande Yellowhead Public School Division
Niton Central School's Grade Nine Program**

**Community Conversation
January 30, 2024**

Staff Feedback

A debriefing of Central Office staff was conducted using a Google form. Staff input has been captured with only slight editing for clarity.

What were your general impressions of the Niton Community Conversation?

- The event was well organized with many participants. The majority of participants asked good questions and were respectful.
- Well organized. Excellent choice to have an independent facilitator. I really enjoyed the conversation with my group. It included a variety of stakeholders, Grandparents (3rd generation Niton students), a former Niton teacher, parents (one with a Grade 9 student at Parkland and 2 others who are hesitant to move grades out of Niton)
- The evening was well set up, moderated and managed throughout the Rounds and question period. I feel that the voices in the room were heard and that the discussion was fruitful. My table group was respectful of each other and all members were able to add to the conversation.
- There were a lot of passionate community members that came out to voice their opinions and perspectives. I think it's better to have people show up [at meetings] than to have few people representing the "voice" of the community, so regarding getting the word out about the event, it worked!
- I got the impression that people wanted to look at the data (which I believe they really appreciated having the population statistics as my table referenced them many times throughout the night) and to better understand what goes into making these decisions. I got the impression that they genuinely wanted to better understand the facts around making this sort of decision.
- Well organized. Clear focus and objectives. Excellent turn-out which is evidence that the community is engaged and wants to keep lines of communication open and flowing. The feedback collected will reveal themes for the Board of Trustees to consider when making their decision.
- I thought that my table was very passionate about keeping Grade 9 at Niton Central. They made several comments that did not address the specific questions but asked that I write them down, which I did.

- It was great to have an excellent turnout of community members, parents, and staff members. It was made very clear that those in attendance felt very strongly about keeping the Grade 9, and junior high, program at Niton. In hindsight, it may have been beneficial to have all of the information presented first to the participants with discussions after as some of their comments were addressed later in the meeting. Instead of collecting questions to get them answered right away, perhaps in the future we just collect questions and then specify a date that administration will post answers to them.
- Good turnout; majority of attendees were not in support of the Grade 9 program moving. The main reason given for leaving early - social competence or academic preparedness is an area to address. All students are separated into different streams/courses in Grade 10. Transitions in general need to be addressed proactively. All the students disperse in Grade 10 regardless of where they're feeding from.

If the decision of what to do next was up to you, what decision(s) would you make?

- It was clear from the participants that they would like to see Grade 9 remain and are concerned about the viability as a result of the School of Choice option for parents. I would suggest that the Board review the School of Choice policy as this was highly recommended by all participants at my table and others during the question period.
- Next steps would be to gather the information from this report and work with the Board to determine the viability of having Grade 9s in Niton. The initial reaction from attending last night would be that the Grade 9s should remain at Niton. I think one thing I would do is to communicate next steps to the people who attended last night and the larger community so they feel "in the loop".
- I think I would get a recap of the event out to the stakeholders as quickly as possible so it shows we listened to all of their perspectives and views. As well, that recap would outline a timeline (one that we can carry out) and next steps so we are being transparent with the community about the information we collected and what we heard.
- Although it was represented in the survey, I think I would want to schedule a meeting to hear from staff regarding the event and the situation. They know their stakeholders best so can bring a unique and helpful perspective. Dedicating time to hear from those staff also sends a message to the community that we care about what all parties impacted have to say.
- I would also ensure that each person we said we would reach out to, is contacted within the week, even if it is just to say that we are looking further into their question and will be getting back to them.
- Inform all current NCS families that the Board is discussing removing the SoC bus option out of the Lobstick zone for the 2024/2025 school year, and will be strictly enforcing the requirement that families in the Lobstick community register at their attendance area school.

- I would want ensure we have as much data and information as we can get to support the different outcomes/situations such as what a loss of students does to next year's budget even if the enrolment in the other grades remain stable. Does this mean that a teacher will be let go or that there will be smaller class sizes? Scenario budgets with different enrolment numbers could help show the impact of not supporting the school/supporting the school to the community, and illustrate the viability of the school.
- I felt that parents had done some research before attending, so I want to honour their commitment to their community and try to provide different scenarios as hypothetical and outline variables. We live and breathe the education world so are more familiar with the "chain reaction" of different moving pieces when it comes to school operations.
- Post the report asap on the website and inform the community of next steps. This should include when it will be brought forward for discussion at a PBM. School of Choice review should be scheduled asap as this was a major concern for the evening's participants. Plan for this spring in the hopes that any change could be in place for next registration period of Feb 1/25 for the 2025/26 school year. This will provide evidence that the Board heard their feedback and are taking the next steps in looking to address this, not just in Niton, but also Fulham and [the Lobstick].
- Provide the data that they wanted.
- Share all of the collected data with stakeholders in attendance ~ or publicly via email/social media. Await the decision of the Board of Trustees. Enact/carry out any action plans as a result of the Board's decision. Be prepared to host another engagement if the Board deems it necessary.
- Immediately send a communique to the attendees to let them know the next steps: Re: the Board is going to discuss re-establishing prior ward/zone boundaries (i.e. the SoC option - which has caused Fulham and Niton to suffer. In particular, the decision to bus 'out' of the Lobstick ward - which is not done in any of the other ward/zones, or allowing kids to attend their designated high school school early - re: jumping to PG, PCHS, or GT ahead of schedule).
- Immediately begin the process of updating the Attendance Areas (AP 305) in the Lobstick to improve Transportation Service Area bus ride times for next year. Update the designated school line by distance by grade levels for the 2024/2025 school year. The current bus routes in the Lobstick are too long, unsustainable, adding significant mileage on the Fleet - not to mention, wear and tear, and required maintenance, and the challenge to add routes due to low bus driver interest.
- Begin a communication and messaging campaign to inform parents what will happen to next year's budget if the community doesn't support its school - as requested. Finance has determined the preliminary budget for NCS - share it, then pull the nines, and show the number and the implications to staff.