

“I AM DESIROUS THAT SHE
SHOULD HAVE AS GOOD AN
EDUCATION AS POSSIBLE”¹:

*A Century of Parental Advocacy for
Rural Education in British Columbia*

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BOTH POLICYMAKERS AND scholars have long discussed the state of rural education in British Columbia. Even after consultation, they have tended to overlook or ignore the voices of parents who are both benefactors and participants in the provision of education. This article focuses on the long relentless history of parental advocacy for rural education in the province. We focus on letters written between 1919 and 1950 by rural parents whose children were enrolled in the BC Elementary Correspondence School (ECS), the first distance education program in Canada. We highlight the main themes that arise from these letters and compare them with a BC government-sponsored community consultation that took place in 2016 and 2017. A consideration of both sources shows that parental advocacy is a vibrant part of the history of rural education and that parents’ perspectives on the education of their children are an important, yet often ignored, part of conversations around rural education. We begin by introducing the two datasets at the centre of our analysis – the BC Government consultation and the parental letters to the ECS. We then present the main themes expressed in both datasets and discuss them to exemplify the importance of parental advocacy in conversations around rural education.

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¹ A. Witonson to James Hargreaves, 11 October 1919, Elementary Correspondence School Collection (hereafter ECSC), British Columbia, Department of Education, file 11, box 16, GR-0470, British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA).

THE 2016–2017 CONSULTATIONS

Between November 2016 and January 2017, the Liberal government introduced a broad process of community consultation in rural school districts asking residents “to paint the picture of rural education as it exists today ... in order to guide next steps in planning for the future of rural education.”² These consultations, undertaken amid the threat of numerous school closures in rural districts,³ were facilitated in several ways. Open houses in nine communities sought the opinions of parents and an online discussion forum generated almost one hundred printed pages of comments. The consultation organizers also reviewed technical surveys from eighteen rural school districts; eight letters from professional educational associations, including the BC Teachers’ Council; and ten from rural municipal governments.⁴ The public forum made clear that rural participants resented that the government did not give them the same educational resources enjoyed by urban families.⁵ Rural parents specifically mentioned the unequal allocation of funding, a lack of course diversity, challenges of geographic isolation, and the disadvantages of long school bus rides.⁶ A broader consultation on rural problems initiated a year later by the newly elected New Democratic Party (NDP) government also found that improved education was critical for youth skills training and diversification of the rural economy.⁷

² Government of British Columbia, *A Status Check on Rural Education*, January 2017, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/resource-management/k12funding/funding-model-review/stakeholder-perspectives-and-reports/bc_k12_draft_rural_education_report.pdf.

³ See for example, Justine Hunter, “More Schools in Rural British Columbia Communities Set to Shut Down,” *Globe and Mail*, 20 June 2016, theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/more-schools-in-rural-british-columbia-communities-set-to-shut-down/article30533197.

⁴ Government of British Columbia, *Status Check on Rural Education*, 24. The NDP government (elected in 2017 in a power sharing arrangement with the BC Green Party) made similar commitments to improving the state of rural education by listening to those in rural districts. For a critical analysis of the rhetoric of school closure debates in rural districts, see Michael Corbett and Leif Helmer, “Contested Geographies: Competing Constructions of Community and Efficiency in Small School Debates,” *Geographical Research* 55, no. 1 (2017): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12209>.

⁵ “District Stakeholder Submission to the BC Rural Education Consultation, 2016–2017,” author copy (hereafter referred to as “District Stakeholder Submission”). While submissions to the consultation have since been taken down from the BC Government website, Mona Gleason downloaded a copy of all stakeholder submissions and the online comments. They are available upon request in PDF format entitled respectively “District Stakeholder Submissions to Rural Education Consultation, 2016–2017, from BC Gov’t website” and “Draft Discussion Paper – Rural Education in BC – Citizen’s Online Commentary, August 2017.”

⁶ “Draft Discussion Paper – Rural Education in BC – Citizen’s Online Commentary, August 2017.”

⁷ Between December 2017 and March 2018, face-to-face sessions and interviews undertaken by the NDP government, through the Ministry of Forest, Lands, Natural Resource Operations

The 2016–2017 consultations followed a decade of school closures in rural BC districts.⁸ Amid threats of closures and community consultation in 2016, the government initiated the Rural Education Enhancement Fund (REEF) which “recognize[d] the importance of preserving schools in small rural communities.” School districts could apply for REEF funding if their school was at risk of closure and met certain other criteria.⁹ The REEF, however, was far from a panacea since it applied only to rural schools faced with imminent closure, not those that were merely endangered.¹⁰

In April 2018, the BC Rural Centre, a volunteer advocacy organization supporting various aspects of rural life, including education, produced a brief on the successes and challenges of rural schools. It noted that between 2001 and 2012, the closure of sixty-four schools in six rural school districts affected forty-six communities.¹¹ The Rural Centre blamed the closures mainly on the 2002 educational funding formula change, instituted by the BC Liberals and then under review by the NDP government. The formula tied financial support of schools to per-pupil

and Rural Development, in rural districts across the province, similarly asked rural citizens for their “input on the priorities and actions that would unlock opportunities and address some of the issues facing rural communities.” In this consultation, issues in relation to rural education, while not the focus of consultation, garnered 9 percent of the comments. This is according to the consultation report: Government of British Columbia, *Rural Development in BC: What We Heard*, 9 March 2018, 3, 8, <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/impact/rural-development-results/>.

⁸ BC Rural Centre, *Rural Schools – Successes and Challenges: A BC Rural Centre Brief*, April 2018, <https://bcruralcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/RURAL-SCHOOLS-Successes-Challenges.pdf>.

⁹ Criteria for receiving REEF funding includes the following community attributes and funding conditions regarding the threat of closure: (1) the request must come from a rural community outside Greater Victoria, the Lower Mainland (including the city of Vancouver), and Kelowna areas with a population less than fifteen thousand and where isolation creates demonstrable challenges, and (2) the potential school closure would leave the community with no school; (3) funding through the REEF program must be used to keep the school open and not in cases where facility conditions were the primary driver of a potential closure; (4) the funding is contingent upon closures having a detrimental educational impact on students and/or a social/economic impact on the community. For more details on REEF, see “Students Benefit from Rural Education Enhancement Fund,” *BC Gov News*, 5 April 2017, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2017EDUC0086-001055>; <https://www.ubcm.ca/convention-resolutions/resolutions/resolutions-database/rural-schools>.

¹⁰ See for example, Mike Chouinard, “Campbell River School District Passes on Grant Opportunity,” *Campbell River Mirror*, 17 February 2019, <https://www.campbellrivermirror.com/news/campbell-river-school-district-passes-on-grant-opportunity/>. It is also significant to note that there was a temptation for districts to threaten school closures to leverage REEF funding. The Campbell River trustees, for example, expressed no interest in pretending to consider closing another school to leverage funding. As Campbell River school trustee, John Kerr, noted in Chouinard’s article, “We’re not prepared to put our communities through that trauma. It’s dishonest.”

¹¹ BC Rural Centre, *Rural Schools*, 3.

enrolments.¹² Rural advocates charged that this formula ensured that they received far less than their fair share of the education funding pie. The brief concluded that “low enrolments and a failure to recognize the broader socioeconomic importance of rural schools” had forced the closure of rural schools.¹³

Failure to recognize the “socioeconomic importance of rural schools” is not a recent phenomenon. Nor is disquiet regarding the state of rural education and efforts to advocate for rural educational equity. Throughout the twentieth century, governmental surveys and school inspectors and teachers in the field have articulated some of the serious challenges in securing high quality, stable, and sustainable public schooling in rural areas. Our findings demonstrate that, much like contemporary rural parents, parents in the first half of the twentieth century identified inadequate government resourcing – which takes many forms beyond monetary support – as a major challenge to their efforts to ensure a quality education for their children. Their advocacy efforts make clear that a well-supported public education system has been of paramount importance to rural BC citizens for over a century, even though it has proven itself to be quite elusive. It also underscores the need for educational officials, policymakers, and historians to listen intently to the perspectives of rural families.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF ELEMENTARY CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL LETTERS

The perspectives of rural settlers in the past may be found in approximately one hundred letters parents wrote to the ECS, in related departmental reports, and in departmental correspondence. The ECS, a division of the Department of Education, began operations in 1919 and reached its peak enrolment of 1,969 students in 1951–52.¹⁴

¹² <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/k-12-funding-general>; Alex Hemingway, “*What’s the Real Story behind BC’s Education Funding Crisis?*” (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – BC Office, August 2016); Michal Rozworski, “How BC Is Short-Changing Schools and How We Can Fix It,” <https://www.policynote.ca/how-bc-is-short-changing-schools-and-how-we-can-fix-it/>.

¹³ BC Rural Centre, *Rural Schools*, 2.

¹⁴ The ECS was officially active until 1969. The family files, however, survive mostly for an early period, ending in the 1930s. While some letters from parents are included in the family files after 1930, the archival finding aid states that the collection is not complete. See “Series GR-0470 – Correspondence School administrative records,” BCA, <https://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/correspondence-school-administrative-records>. On enrolment numbers in the ECS, see Tara Suzanne Toutant, “Equality by Mail: Correspondence Education in British Columbia, 1919 to 1969,” MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1994, Table 1, 142.

At the end of its first decade (1928–29), 455 students were enrolled. By 1930, that number had risen to 593 and by the end of the Second World War, to 1,563. In 1950, the year that marks the end of the period under study here, 1,624 enrolled.¹⁵ Our study builds on articles by Mona Gleason; Mona Gleason and Claudia Diaz; and Tara Toutant's magisterial thesis which offers a very useful overview of the organizational growth of the ECS.¹⁶ We, however, ask new questions: What were the perspectives of parents who took advantage of the ECS? And, what do these unique perspectives reveal about the history of rural education and advocacy in the province?

The ECS mainly assisted BC families whose location made it impractical or impossible for their children to attend a physical school.¹⁷ Indeed, the ECS only enrolled students who lived more than three and a half miles, or 5.6 kilometres, from the nearest school, faced difficult terrain, or had disabling physical conditions.¹⁸ This stemmed from the understanding that correspondence education was less desirable than classroom instruction and, except in extreme cases, should only be used as a stop gap until children could attend a physical school.¹⁹ Advertisements in local newspapers and word of mouth promoted the school. Registration was free but parents had to pay for postage, including that associated with returning textbooks, and provide some supplies. Most important, parents were expected to supervise their children's education as "home instructors" but were offered little or no additional assistance. Lessons, once completed, were mailed back to ECS teachers in Victoria, with

¹⁵ Toutant, "Equality by Mail," 142–43. High school correspondence courses were offered beginning in the 1929–30 school year.

¹⁶ Toutant, "Equality by Mail"; Claudia Diaz Diaz and Mona Gleason, "The Land Is My School: Children, History, and the Environment in the Canadian Province of British Columbia," *Childhood* 23, no. 2 (May 2016): 272–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568215603778>; Mona Gleason, "Families Without Schools: Rurality, Correspondence Education, and the Promise of Schooling in Interwar Western Canada," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 03 (August 2017): 305–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2017.14>. See also Thomas Fleming, ed., *School Leadership: Essays on the British Columbia Experience, 1872–1995* (Point Roberts, WA: Bentall Books, 2001), for a contextual discussion of the evolution of school leadership, including the roles of inspectors, principals, and superintendents over this period.

¹⁷ Isabel Bescoby, *Lone Pupils in British Columbia, 1935*, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 3, file 4, GR-0470, BCA; M.C. Hunson to James Hargreaves, 4 December 1919, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 16, file 11, GR-0470, BCA; A. Kidner to James Hargreaves 19 March 1920, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 17, file 8, GR-0470, BCA; C. Vetta to James Hargreaves, 13 July 1920, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 17, file 15, GR-0470, BCA.

¹⁸ Bescoby, "Lone Pupils."

¹⁹ A.B. Miller, *Elementary Correspondence School Year – Report of Anna B. Miller, Director, 1949*, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 41, GR-0470, BCA.

new lessons and corrections to previous ones sent in return.²⁰ The school created a file for each student that included letters from their parents. Although some Indigenous children may have been enrolled, the files, for the most part, do not record the students' race or ethnicity.²¹ The exception are Japanese Canadian students who were identified by race and were excluded from participation in the ECS during the Second World War period.²² As far as we can ascertain, white settler parents wrote most of the letters.

²⁰ In addition to teachers and administrators, the ECS depended on the volunteer labour of parents, particularly mothers. For more context on the ECS, see Diaz and Gleason, "Land Is My School," and Gleason, "Families without Schools."

²¹ For Indigenous children, scarce evidence from the ECS archive suggests that the decision to include or exclude Indigenous learners from the ECS was at the discretion of ECS officials. On one occasion, a settler parent in Butedale, BC, wrote to ECS officials that, while Indigenous children could go to school in Kitimat – 102 kilometres away – settler children should be provided with a solution in their own community. On another occasion, ECS officials made an ad hoc decision to provide ECS instruction for Indigenous children and adults in Indian hospitals in the province. See Fred Covent to J. Hargreaves, 28 November 1927, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, BCA, box 25, file 35, GR-0470, BCA; A. Plows, "Re: Conference between Mr. A.V. Parminter, Inspector of Indian Schools, P.O. Box 70, Vancouver 2, BC, and the Director," ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, September 1952, box 4, file 126, GR-0470, BCA. Helen Raptis and Members of the Tsimshian First Nation, *What We Learned: Two Generations Reflect on Tsimshian Education and the Day Schools* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Helen Raptis, "Blurring the Boundaries of Policy and Legislation in the Schooling of Indigenous Children in British Columbia, 1901–1951," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 27, no. 2 (September 2015): 65–77, <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v27i2.4415>; John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879–1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999); Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, *Stolen from Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1997).

²² For Japanese Canadian children during the Second World War, the policy of exclusion was much stricter, at least on paper: they could only gain access to ECS curriculum on the condition that they purchase it from the British Columbia Security Commission. They were not, however, officially eligible for instruction or any services by teachers. See Anna Miller to C. D. Ovans, 20 February 1945, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, BCA, box 3, file 1, GR-0470, BCA. On the educational experiences of Japanese Canadians in BC internment camps see Patricia E. Roy, "The Education of Japanese Children in the British Columbia Interior Housing Settlements During World War Two," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 4, no. 2 (October 1992): 211–31, <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v4i2.969>.

"I HAVE FINALLY GATHERED ENOUGH COURAGE TO ASK YOU FOR HELP":²³ PARENTAL LETTERS TO THE ECS

We use the parental letters to ask new questions: What were the perspectives of parents who took advantage of the ECS? What do these unique perspectives reveal about the history of rural education and advocacy in the province? The letters exemplify a dominant theme: a call for more adequate resources to ensure a high quality of education. As the examples to follow reveal, parents worried that they lacked the skills or the time to supervise their children's schooling; they called for more supplies such as papers, books, and blackboards; and they explained how isolation was a significant barrier to education. In addition, since they contributed to the provincial economy, they wanted the same facilities and attention enjoyed by other British Columbians, a proper school building and a professional teacher.

Parents' expectations were not unrealistic. As one of its first acts, the legislature of the new province of British Columbia in 1872 recognized the importance of education and the government's responsibility to provide it by passing a Public Schools Act. However, the revised School Act of 1888 put considerable responsibility for education on local governments and local boards, which were mainly in towns and cities. The exception were small rural schools designated as "assisted." These schools were in impoverished communities, where the government provided funds to pay a teacher's salary on the condition that the community was responsible for a school building and its upkeep.²⁴ As we shall see, this did not mean that qualified teachers were easy to come by, since working conditions in rural areas were very challenging.

Parents often referred explicitly to their isolated conditions, far from a physical school, to ensure their children qualified for ECS registration. Mrs. A. Witonson, for example, wrote in October 1919:

I have a daughter age 15 who is unable to attend school as the nearest school is 30 miles away. I am desirous that she should have as good an education as possible and would be much obliged if you would forward full particulars of the government's Correspondence Courses in Public School work.²⁵

²³ R.F. Meynard to A.B. Miller, 12 April 1934, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 2, GR-0470, BCA.

²⁴ Donald J. Wilson and Paul J. Stortz, "'May the Lord Have Mercy on You': The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," *BC Studies* 79 (Autumn 1988): 29–32, <https://doi.org/10.14288/BCS.V0I79.1301>.

²⁵ A. Witonson to James Hargreaves, 11 October 1919, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 16, file 11, GR-0470, BCA. All proper names of parents and children have been changed to protect anonymity.

Each student was assigned an instructor in Victoria, but parents were expected to support and monitor their children's learning. For younger students, this meant a great deal of hands-on teaching by parents who themselves often had no, or very little, formal schooling. Despite being referred to as "home instructors," with textbooks written with them in mind, parents, predominately mothers, received no training and felt inadequate to the task. They often expressed doubts about the quality of the education they could provide and were quick to point out that they were not professional teachers.²⁶ Charles Saltun, writing to the ECS in 1921, noted: "Your system is still too complicated for the average person ... I think the [ECS] is put where it is doing the least good for there is no change in the rural districts."²⁷ Mrs. M. Weber, a German immigrant who lived in Quatsino, underscored a host of challenges that complicated ECS instruction, including language, culture, and level of education of parents:

I would like you to excuse me on account of this arithmetic. We are Germans and our children have attended a good school and have done this arithmetic as home lessons. We were obliged to put it down in writing in this way. I did this in order to teach my children because I knew no better way. Besides I have no neighbours to advise me. I will however, from now, follow your instructions.²⁸

Other parents also realized their own shortcomings in relation to ECS expectations and requested physical schools and access to in-person teachers and tutors. Mrs. Theodore Waldron revealed in 1933 that she was ill-equipped to educate her son: "it being forty years since I left school, I do not grasp the ways of these lessons as I ought; which makes it all the more difficult for Ned."²⁹ Similarly, Ella Boyden, a mother writing from the Salmon Valley in 1935, complained that she was unable to assist her daughter in arithmetic unless she herself took the course and had more domestic help:

²⁶ N. Emmerson to J.D. McLean, 17 May 1927, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 1, GR-0470, BCA; H. Slate to James Hargreaves, 1 December 1925, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 17, file 14, GR-0470, BCA.

²⁷ It is not clear what Saltun means by "no change in rural districts" although we suspect he was referring to the fact that many districts continued to lack physical schools. See Charles Saltun to James Hargreaves, 31 January 1921, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 16, file 6, GR-0470, BCA.

²⁸ M. Weber to James Hargreaves [translated from German by J.M. Williams], 31 December 1924, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 23, file 28, GR-0407, BCA. Note that the original version written in German is not included in the file.

²⁹ Mrs. T. Waldron to Isabel Bescoby, 21 September 1933, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 2, GR-0470, BCA.

I am the mother of Anna Boyden whose Arithmetic you mark, I believe in Grade V. She does not seem to get the sense of the decimals in her work. I do not try to help her because I did not like the sums when I went to school and did not understand them. It would mean studying her book completely, and really, I haven't the time.³⁰

Mrs. Boyden's letter makes fundamental arguments about why rural parents wanted more support from the ECS. Not only did lessons rely on a relatively advanced level of education, but they also demanded time and attention from the "instructor" – precious commodities that mothers, who most often fulfilled the role of home instructor, often didn't have.³¹ Letter writers rarely questioned the pedagogical and curricular choices of ECS teachers, opting instead to trust their expertise. Mrs. Weber, for example, was willing to forego her own education in the service of the pedagogical approach of the ECS.

Letters that pertained to parents' capacities as teachers offer a glimpse of the ECS's perception of parents' roles in formal education at this time. As we elaborate later, the lack of consultation with rural families represented what Jennifer Tinkham calls a "thin democracy" approach whereby decisions are made for rural families without consultation. In this case and in the following examples, this lack of consultation meant that the ECS offered pedagogical and curricular approaches that were difficult, if not impossible, to implement as rural parents had neither the means, nor the qualifications, to help their children learn the material expected of them by ECS instructors.³²

Parents also protested other expectations of the ECS. Not only did ECS administrators expect parents to be active participants in their children's education, they also advised them to provide a dedicated space for schoolwork. Such a request suggested that ECS administrators had little understanding of the often modest, if not impoverished, living conditions of most rural families.³³ Mrs. Porter, for example, wrote

³⁰ Ella Boyden to Miss Thompson, 19 July 1935, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 27, file 13, GR-0470, BCA.

³¹ See similar concerns regarding complaints from parents in a letter by Frank Meany to Anna Miller, 20 April 1935, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 26, file 3, GR-0470, BCA.

³² Jennifer Tinkham, "We're Small Enough to Close but Big Enough to Divide: The Complexities of the Nova Scotia School Review Process," *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 60, no. 4 (2014): 733–735, 737, <https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v60i4.55984>.

³³ See Paul James Stortz, "The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," unpublished MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988, <https://doi.library.ubc.ca/10.14288/1.0055733>; Wilson and Stortz, "May the Lord Have Mercy on You': The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," 24–58.

to the ECS director in 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, to explain why her children had stopped turning in their lessons. Her ailing husband could not work so there was no money to pay for postage and the children had to do his chores such as clearing snow and gathering firewood. Mrs. Porter promised that if their circumstances improved, they might resume ECS lessons.³⁴

Another key challenge to families especially in the earlier period, and reflective of the isolation of some, was mail service. Erratic mail service sometimes meant that students went many weeks without formal lessons as they waited for assignments to be checked and new assignments to be issued. Parents urged instructors to send large quantities of lessons to occupy students' time for as long as possible. The difficulty in establishing a workable rhythm of lessons caused much anxiety. This was the plight that Mrs. A. McNichol, writing from the Alliford Bay Cannery in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), experienced in 1920:

We have been having very uncertain mail service lately, with the result that we would miss two weeks without lessons for the children and the following boat would bring a double dose. I had the children use up the slack time recently with writing exercises, reading, etc. Two writing exercises books were finished and sent to you last mail, which you no doubt have received.³⁵

Such challenges regarding mail delivery and supplies encouraged some parents to seek more specific support. Mrs. Myers, for example, lamented in April 1934 that since she lacked a blackboard, she could not get her children to practise their lessons as much as they should, and she asked ECS instructors to send her one.³⁶ Another mother, Mrs. Rybell, in January 1938 articulated the general frustration that parents felt at attempting to supervise their children's correspondence education:

I am trying very hard, under difficult conditions to keep the children's lessons up to average, but it seems they are still below average. I was very hurt indeed when the welfare worker from Salmon Arm told me, that the school thought they were not doing as well as other students ... Teaching for children, in different grades, is work for an experienced teacher, let alone an untrained person.³⁷

³⁴ Mrs. C. Porter to Isabel Bescoby, 1 November 1935, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 24, file 51, GR-0470, BCA.

³⁵ A. McNichol to James Hargreaves, 20 March 1920, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 15, file 20, GR-0470, BCA.

³⁶ D.R. Myers to James Hargreaves, 1 April 1934, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 2, GR-0470, BCA. The file does not indicate whether Mrs. Myers was successful with her request.

³⁷ W.S. Rybell to Anna Miller, 27 January 1938, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 25, file 44, GR-0470, BCA.

Education officials were not oblivious to such complaints, although official recognition came late. In early March 1949, for example, Harold Campbell, the Department of Education's curriculum director, asked Kamloops school inspector H. McArthur to present a paper at a forthcoming Inspectors Conference on the question "how to provide for the education of children in remote districts where it is not practical to establish a school or to provide transportation to an existing school." McArthur immediately asked ECS director, Anna Miller, "What grades, in your opinion, require the parent's help, what in a general way, the parent is expected to do and about how much time per day is necessary?" He clearly acknowledged parental frustration over lack of adequate support:

You are doubtless aware that since the formation of larger school districts, parents in communities where no schools exist are objecting to the time and work which they state are required of them in assisting their children who are taking correspondence courses. They state that since they are paying the same taxes as parents residing in communities where schools are open, if they are expected to perform this work, they should be reimbursed for it.³⁸

In her reply, Miller saw the logic behind parents' protests, and found it reasonable to offer some compensation to "home instructors."³⁹ There is no evidence, however, of any follow-up on this course of action.

As early as 1921, some ECS parents pointed out the unfairness of receiving little support for educating their children while filling up government coffers with the fruits of their labour. W.S. Carson from Skookumchuck, for example, cited his community's economic contributions to the province as leverage for more governmental attention. In a letter of 1 August 1921, he demanded that Victoria support his initiative to build a school for his and other children in his community:

The building would cost the Government nothing and as [*sic*] teachers are transient. I cannot understand why we cannot have a school and

³⁸ Here, McArthur refers to the consolidation of schools that occurred in 1946 because of the recommendations of the Cameron Commission of Inquiry into Educational Finance. Six hundred and forty-nine school districts were consolidated into 74 larger units. On the consequences of the Cameron Commission's recommendations, see Helen Raptis, "Bringing Education to the Wilderness: Teachers and Schools in the Rural Communities of British Columbia, 1936–1945," *Historical Studies in Education* 31, no. 1 (May 2019): 22–44, <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse-rhe.v31i1.4659>. H. McArthur to Anna Miller, 10 March 1949, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 2, file 2, GR-0470, BCA.

³⁹ A.B. Miller to H. McArthur, 16 March 1949, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 2, file 2, GR-0470, BCA.

a duly qualified teacher here if we have ten pupils to attend. As the Government gets a royalty out of every carload of timber we ship, the workers in the woods have certainly a right to schooling for their children. We are paying a higher tax than many families close to conveniences.⁴⁰

Mr. Carson assumed that the government was not interested in quality education for his children but, rather, was motivated solely by financial considerations; an argument that was also heard elsewhere and at different times.⁴¹ Despite such parental attempts to reason with and cajole the government, trying conditions facing rural parents sometimes caused frustration to boil over in anger. Frances A. Lowman, for example, made her displeasure with repeated refusals on the part of the ECS officials to send her more school supplies very clear in her 1951 letter:

Come out and try the soil yourself for a week. I will bet I would get you up in the morning 2 hours earlier than you are now. It will do you more good than harm.

And if you missed the bus by a half second you can walk back home again. We have snow here that isn't [in] Victoria.⁴²

The palpable sense of frustration in Lowman's letter was undoubtedly compounded by the serious isolation that rural settler dwellers continued to experience, even into the second half of the twentieth century. It also alludes to rural parents' understanding that decisions are made for them – an example of Tinkham's "thin democracy" – without consideration of their plight. Some parents and administrators addressed the practical results of distance from educational resources, while others focused on the effects of isolation on rural families. Mary J. Wilbers, again referring to erratic mail service, asked her children's ECS instructor for books, arguing for his consideration due to their isolation: "We are terribly isolated here. The government tenders are our only means of

⁴⁰ W.S. Carson to James Hargreaves, 1 August 1921, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 20, file 21, GR-0470, BCA. While the building of a school would not be free, as Carson seems to suggest in his letter, the cost to the government would have been important in relation to what little the community could provide without assistance.

⁴¹ In their study of contemporary rural parents' engagement with decision-making around school closures in Atlantic Canada, Michael Corbett and Leif Helmer found that a common tactic among parents was an appeal to the right of people to receive services on account of their contribution to the economy of their region. See Michael Corbett and Leif Helmer, "Contested geographies: Competing constructions of community and efficiency in small school debates," *Geographical Research* 55, no. 1 (2017): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12209>.

⁴² F.A. Lowman to Anna Miller, 1 January 1951, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 25, file 44, GR-0470, BCA.

communication and they do not call more often than once a month – sometimes it will not be so often, so books will mean a great deal.”⁴³

Settlers had a complicated relationship with isolation. They recognized its negative aspects, but in some cases also welcomed living away from densely populated areas. A good example that highlights the gap between government officials’ and parents’ understanding of the conditions of rurality is the example of the N family, as U.P. Burns, a social worker, reported to the ECS director on 26 June 1949:

When questioned about the lack of schooling for his children Mr. N. said he wanted them to have an education. He had been educated but his wife had not and when he broached the matter at home it only precipitated a row as Mrs. N. did not see the value of it ... He said the children did not do well with correspondence courses as his wife was unable to help and he was away so much fishing. He said he could not afford to board the children away from home and in any case did not want to break up his family.⁴⁴

The predicament of the N family’s children, ten overall, nine of whom were living with their parents, was a direct result of both governmental policy and their isolated living conditions. Mr. N’s occupation warranted a rural lifestyle with a united family unit. Yet, his work often took him away from home and yielded only a modest income. His family’s isolation meant that, although his children could not go to school, correspondence schooling was offered. Mrs. N, however, had no desire to assist their children. As with other settler families, parents themselves were often completely ill-equipped to teach their children and received little in the way of training.

⁴³ M.J. Wilbers to James Hargreaves, 2 April 1921, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 17, file 20, GR-0470, BCA. It is noteworthy that the ECS collaborated with the Travelling Library, not only in supplying books to families in remote areas, but also in purchasing books according to students’ needs and the ECS curriculum. See Isabel Bescoby, *Annual Report of Elementary Correspondence School for School Year 1934–1935*, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 2, GR-0470, BCA; Anna B. Miller, *Elementary Correspondence School, School Year 1938–1939. Report by Miss Anna B. Miller, Officer-in-Charge Correspondence School for year 1939–1940*, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 6, file 3, GR-0470, BCA; R. Bernard to J. Hargreaves, 15 January 1920, ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 16, file 9, GR-0470, BCA.

⁴⁴ U.P. Burns to ECS Director, 26 June 1949. ECSC, British Columbia, Department of Education, box 4, file 8, GR-0470, BCA.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE ECS IN THE HISTORY OF RURAL EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The BC historiography dedicated to rural education has tended to focus particularly on one-room schoolhouses and their teachers. Paul Stortz and J.D. Wilson drew from school inspectors' reports, teacher surveys, and teachers' personal diaries to describe the exceedingly challenging social and physical conditions of rural schools in the early decades of the twentieth century. Small rural communities in the 1920s were often hard pressed to support schools.⁴⁵ Teachers, mostly young women, complained about very poorly built schools and accommodation that lacked running water, indoor plumbing, and adequate heat and lighting. They endured shabby living conditions, the unwanted and dangerous attention of men, isolation, and loneliness.⁴⁶ As Stortz and Wilson show, the degree of isolation was so severe in some communities that it was impossible to secure a teacher.⁴⁷

These beleaguered circumstances sharply contrast with the recommendations of the influential report on the provincial school system produced in 1925 by John Harold Putman and George Weir. Putman and Weir were staunch advocates of a progressive educational philosophy that would replace strict discipline and learning by repetition with expanded curricular offerings, including health, home economics, manual training, fine arts, and "life skills." Progressives maintained that teachers, the keys to transforming the classroom, were to be wise counsellors and mentors, not figures of discipline.⁴⁸ Putman and Weir scathingly concluded that

⁴⁵ Stortz, "The Rural School Problem in British Columbia," Stortz found that rural schools (and communities) that were not designated as "assisted" schools – those that were so impoverished that the teacher's salary, erection of a school building, and school supplies were unwritten entirely by the provincial government – still struggled to provide adequate resourcing of their school building and personnel. See Stortz, iii, 5, 30, 88, 97, 110, 120, 207.

⁴⁶ For more information on the experiences of women teachers in rural BC, see J. Donald Wilson, "I Am Ready to Be of Assistance When I Can": Lottie Bowron and Rural Women Teachers in British Columbia," in Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald, eds., *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 202–30, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442683570-011>.

⁴⁷ Paul James Stortz and J. Donald Wilson, "Education on the Frontier: Schools, Teachers and Community Influence in North-Central British Columbia," *Histoire Sociale – Social History* 26, no. 52 (January 1993): 265–90, 278, 280, 283.

⁴⁸ The role of progressivism in Canadian education has a fulsome historiography. A small sampling of works include Theodore Christou, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919–1942* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Theodore Christou, *Progressive Rhetoric and Curriculum: Contested Visions of Public Education in Interwar Ontario* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Amy Von Heyking, "Selling Progressive Education to Albertans, 1935–1953," *Historical Studies in Education* 10, no. 2 (1998): 67–84, <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v10i1.1553>; Paul Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate: A Profile of Toronto Schooling in the 1950s," *Historical Studies in Education* 17,

rural schools were essentially a provincial disgrace, falling behind their urban counterparts not only in their physical conditions (including a lack of modern plumbing and electricity) but also in underwhelming scholarly achievement, and the employment of teachers who were not “rural-minded.”⁴⁹ Stortz and Wilson argue that Putman and Weir misunderstood (or chose to ignore) the harsh social context of rural British Columbia that made such progressive reforms unthinkable. Without more support from the government, rural communities could scarcely afford semi-reliable teachers, let alone those sufficiently “rural-minded” to make progressive changes.⁵⁰

The memoirs of Alex Lord, a provincial rural school inspector, bring to life the incredibly difficult circumstances facing rural families as they struggled to initiate and maintain a viable school.⁵¹ Parents who often relied on unstable employment in the resource industries of mining and forestry and lived in harsh physical conditions far from the amenities and comforts of more populated areas, had little to attract willing teachers. Lord’s first inspectorate was based in Prince Rupert but effectively covered the whole of the sparsely populated northern half of the province. When he arrived in 1915, it had only forty-four schools of which only three had more than one room.⁵² “The rural-school problem,” Lord wrote in his 1920 Annual Report, “is the most serious question confronting educational administration in this Province.”⁵³ Given the paucity of schools and teachers, it is not surprising that rural families turned to the services of the ECS, albeit often grudgingly. Almost fifteen years later, when his inspectorate included rural municipalities near Vancouver as well as some that were accessed by the Pacific Great Eastern Railway which ran from North Vancouver through the Chilcotin and Cariboo to Quesnel,⁵⁴ he wrote to H.B. King, who was then studying educational

no. 2 (2005): 227–41, <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v17i2.77>; Neil Sutherland, “The Triumph of Formalism: Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s,” *BC Studies* 69/70 (Spring/Summer 1986): 175–210, <https://doi.org/10.14288/bcs.voi69/70.1232>.

⁴⁹ J.H. Putman and G.M. Weir, *Survey of the School System* (Victoria: King’s Printer, 1925), 20, 128–31, 252.

⁵⁰ Stortz, “Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s,” chapter 1, 5–18; Stortz and Wilson, “May the Lord Have Mercy on You,” 27–35.

⁵¹ John Calam, ed., *Alex Lord’s British Columbia: Recollections of a Rural School Inspector, 1915–1936* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991). For an insightful analysis of rural conditions in British Columbia in relation to the rest of Canada at this time, see also Ruth Sandwell, *Powering Up Canada: The History of Power, Fuel, and Energy from 1600* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016); Ruth Sandwell, *Canada’s Rural Majority: Households, Environments, and Economies, 1870–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

⁵² Calam, *Alex Lord’s British Columbia*, 4.

⁵³ As quoted in Stortz, “Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s,” 6.

⁵⁴ John Calam, ed., “Editor’s Introduction,” in Calam, *Alex Lord’s British Columbia*, 4–7.

finance, questioning the existence of schools in communities that were “little more than a name on a map.”⁵⁵

ECHOES OF THE PAST: TALKING BACK TO VICTORIA

Letters from rural parents to the ECS show that they were acutely aware of the resources needed to secure a quality education for their children. It is significant, we argue, that these concerns echo so loudly across the decades. Some eight decades later, rural communities have much more access to goods, service, and infrastructure. New and better roads mean that many rural schools can draw students from well beyond three and a half miles (5.6 kilometres) – one of the qualifications for enrolment in the ECS. Much of the parental consultation undertaken in 2016 and 2017, however, revolved around similar issues found in earlier decades. Parents protested funding models, course diversity, bussing issues in terms of rural isolation, and a host of educational policies that signalled a fundamental misunderstanding of their way of living, their needs, and their desire for equitable treatment with urban schools and districts.

Contemporary parents and community members were extremely critical of school funding formulas. Karen Dubé, the chair of the McBride Secondary School Parent’s Advisory Council (PAC), using science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses as an example, argued that the current formula that tied enrolment to funding limited the access of students in small schools to high-level STEM courses, which meant that students’ chances of taking the courses they needed in order to qualify for higher education were contingent upon a funding formula that favoured high enrolment – something that rural schools and communities could not ensure.⁵⁶ As Mayor Hank Bood of the District of Port Hardy argued, such discrimination in access to educational opportunities forced families to relocate.⁵⁷

Transportation and access to technology also appeared in the contemporary parental comments in interrelated ways. Accessible rural schools within short bus trips, noted Karen Goodings, then director of Electoral Area “B” in the Peace River District, enabled access to internet resources and family stability:

⁵⁵ As quoted in Calam, ed., “Editor’s Introduction,” 8.

⁵⁶ Karen Dubé, “District Stakeholder Submission to the BC Rural Education Consultation, 2016–2017,” author copy (hereafter referred to as “District Stakeholder Submission”), 29 January 2017, 68.

⁵⁷ Hank Bood, “District Stakeholder Submission,” author copy, 49.

In some cases, it is the bus that takes the students to a local school where they can access the internet which provides them the opportunity to further their education without having to be separated from their families.⁵⁸

Access to the internet, however, varied even among rural schools. As reported by Andrea (no surname provided),⁵⁹ a teacher at Fort St. John, and Pat Cook, the Mayor of Mackenzie, limited access to high speed internet connectivity and technological equipment limited students' ability to take many of the courses required for graduation that were offered only on an online basis.⁶⁰ These examples show that relying on the internet to solve access in rural areas is misguided; at the end of the day, challenges for equity in education cannot be solved without a clear understanding of the physical, social, and economic conditions that characterize rural education.

Like ECS parents, participants in the contemporary consultation were also concerned about the effect of isolation on the prospect of securing quality education. These concerns mainly centred on a realization that government officials make decisions according to urban needs that are different from those of rural families. Doris clearly articulated this problem as she noted how she and her family contributed to the province and its economic development:

Individuals are making uninformed decisions for rural people. Though the intention is good – the depth of understanding is limited. The remarks at times are offensive – stating you chose to live where you live – so get over it ... We are contributors to the economic development of our community and are environmental stewards of our land. We contribute to making our province a better place ... The challenges we face are different than our neighbours in urban settings. It is important that we are recognized for our contributions to making our communities, province, and country a better place.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Karen Goodings, "District Stakeholder Submission," author copy, 42.

⁵⁹ In some cases, authors in the online consultation used only their first names.

⁶⁰ Andrea, "Draft Discussion Paper – Rural Education in BC – Citizen's Online Commentary," November 2016, 21; Pat Crook, "District Stakeholder Submission," 31 January 2017, 46. On graduation requirements, see "Curriculum Overview – Building Student Success – BC's New Curriculum," 2015, <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/overview>; Government Communications and Public Engagement, Ministry of Education, "Ten Things to Know about B.C.'s New Curriculum," 6 September 2016, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2016EDUC0082-001558>.

⁶¹ Doris [no surname provided], "Draft Discussion Paper – Rural Education in BC – Citizen's Online Commentary," January 2017, 3.

Similarly, Frieda objected to decision-making that excluded input from rural residents. She argued that “you need to be living rural or have lived or taught rural to know what a rural school needs.”⁶² As representatives from the District of Tofino made clear, the distance between decision makers and rural residents presented tangible barriers:

Rural school districts are governed out of the largest nearby city, which in Tofino’s case is Port Alberni, 120 km away, over a difficult and sometimes impassable road during winter. This makes for poor access to decision makers. ... with the seat of power located where the problems are different, it is more challenging to maintain our relationships, which are so necessary for building mutual understanding and policy support for helping with WCS’s [Wickaninnish Community School] issues.⁶³

These comments exemplify the distance between decision makers and rural families. By overlooking or ignoring the context in which rural education happens, and in which rural families live, such a decision-making process promotes policies that do not address needs but create frustration and mistrust.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we analyzed letters written to the ECS by parents in rural British Columbia during the first half of the twentieth century. These letters give us a glimpse into the lives and challenges of rural families who had to secure an education for their children in difficult conditions and often with few resources at their disposal. As they corresponded with ECS teachers and officials, parents communicated about issues that pertained to quality of their children’s education: from equipment, time, and funds to the pedagogical expertise of “home instructors” who had to carry the burden of instruction. Framing our analysis of these letters alongside recent responses from parents in rural British Columbia, we argue that parental advocacy for rural education has a long, if neglected, history that echoes in the present in instructive ways. Parents in the past, as well as in the recent consultation, have been vocal about the discrepancy between the kinds of access they are given by government and the support they and their children need to thrive.

⁶² Frieda [no surname provided], “Draft Discussion Paper – Rural Education in BC – Citizen’s Online Commentary,” January 2017, 14.

⁶³ District of Tofino, Mayor and Council, “District Stakeholder Submissions,” January 2017, 55.

The letters and the consultations also demonstrate the complexities of democratic citizenship, and the part that advocacy for educational equity has played over time. As Jennifer Tinkham shows, rural conversations around education tend to start from an assumption of a thin democracy in which elected decision makers, assuming that their decisions are justified because they are made within a seemingly democratic process, introduce policy without meaningful consultation. Making decisions for, rather than with, rural communities creates considerable animosities without solving problems.⁶⁴ This is easily shown through the responses to the 2016 and 2017 consultations, wherein parents demanded something that was akin to what Paul R. Carr described as a true democracy, which is “constantly worked and re-worked, with less dependence on the formal process and cycle of elections,” and which occurs beyond the “trappings of power elites and constitutional maneuvers that trivialize the legitimate aspirations of all people.”⁶⁵

While many studies have looked at the development of educational institutions, policies, and laws in British Columbia, few have deeply explored the perspectives of rural families, and even fewer have given space to the voices of rural parents during the first half of the twentieth century. In this article, we highlighted rural parents’ perspectives on education, and showed that rural parents had, and continue to have, unique and relevant perspectives on education, and on what it means to live in a democratic society. Informing our historical analysis with contemporary data, we demonstrated that attempts by rural families to advocate for themselves, their communities, and their children, have a long history and are critical to our understanding of educational equity for families in rural British Columbia.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Tinkham, “We’re Small Enough to Close But Big Enough to Divide.”

⁶⁵ Paul R. Carr, “Chapter 1: Introduction: Seeking Democracy through Critical Pedagogy,” *Counterpoints* 378 (2011): 6, 15. Yet, as rural scholars Michael Corbett and Leif Helmer have shown, even when consultations are utilized, they can often lead to more frustration. In Nova Scotia, Corbett and Helmer identified the process of school closures to first revolve around distancing communities from decision making, and then including them only to the extent that these decisions correspond with previously stipulated criteria. This contribution shows how, even if consultations are being used as part of a decision-making process with rural communities, they can still reinforce modes of thin democracy. Michael Corbett and Leif Helmer, “Contested Geographies: Competing Constructions of Community and Efficiency in Small School Debates,” *Geographical Research* 55, no. 1 (2017): 47–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12209>.