

The Enterprise-Bulletin

Board holds off decision on school closings

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Parents and students at Elmvale District High School and Stayner Collegiate came to get answers at a Simcoe County District School Board meeting, Wednesday night.

But those those answers will have to wait until Monday.

Board trustees extended the meeting twice, but could still not come to a decision about whether the two high schools should remain open. That will be made on June 22.

An accommodation review committee -- known as ARC 'B' -- was struck earlier this year to make a recommendation to the Simcoe County District School Board about how to handle the future of five area high schools: EDHS, Stayner Collegiate, Penetanguishene Secondary, Midland Secondary and Collingwood Collegiate.

The board says it would cost more than \$23 million to bring the Elmvale, Stayner and Penetanguishene schools up to snuff, and, after numerous meetings, the ARC recommended a five-school option, which would keep all five high schools open, including a replacement school in Elmvale.

But a staff report delivered to the board following the presentation of the ARC recommendations suggested three schools would be enough: Collingwood Collegiate, Midland Secondary, and a new school serving Wasaga Beach and Elmvale. That would mean the closing of high schools in Stayner, Penetanguishene, and the existing one in Elmvale. A bus load of EDHS students attended last night's meeting along with scores of other students and parents.

"If it closed I'd feel awful," said Nadia Graham, an EDHS Grade 11 student and vice-president elect.

"We don't want it to close because it's important to everyone in our community that our school stays there. Smaller schools support larger successes," she said.

"It's important for businesses in the town, for after-school programs and for co-op students in senior grades who go out into the community for work placement. I transferred from St. Theresa's (Catholic) High School (in Midland) and EDHS is the greatest ever," she added.

Michelle Hunter was EDHS valedictorian in 1988 and, if the school remains open, her daughter will be in her grad year in 2025.

Hunter was disappointed no decision was made, but remains optimistic.

"We're almost there. We'll help the school board find solutions which support the ARC recommendations and keep Elmvale's high school open," she said, after the meeting finally ended around 11 p. m.

"It's a long process filled with difficult decisions. Ultimately, the trustees will have to make a decision," she said, adding that closing the school would have devastating effects on the village."

"It'll harm the students and the community tremendously."

Hunter said EDHS is "an over-populated school with high measures of success that is in dire need of having a retrofit.

Despite the physical limitations, it has one of the highest graduation rates in the county," she said.

"Saving EDHS just makes sense, the message can't get any clearer than that," she added.

Tom Cave, of the group called Springwater Elmvale Rural Voices for Education (SERVE), was very happy with the turnout of parents, students and staff at the meeting.

"This is Elmvale and Elmvale supports their own," he said prior to making a deputation to trustees.

"The major contributor to the success of Elmvale, Stayner and Penetanguisene high school students are their communities and the caring, rural, small-town network of support that they provide," Cave said.

"EDHS has grown to be the integral component of what defines community in Elmvale. With these exceedingly strong ties, the school has become the single most important piece of infrastructure in our village."

Cave asked why board staff and trustees were not advocating for some kind of rural school funding from Queen's Park.

"I request that you accept our assistance in helping you to take this matter of supporting rural education to the provincial government," he said.

Hunter said there was "unanimous support" for Simcoe County Warden Tony Guergis' offer to go to Queen's Park with the board to look into rural school funding options and EDHS open.

"We need to be part of those discussions with the province for more funding (for rural schools)," Guergis said.