

County vows to fight trend to close schools

BY DEBORA VAN BRENK

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Closing a good rural school, only to bus its pupils to portable classrooms in overcrowded neighbouring schools, shows a "fundamentally flawed" process, Middlesex County council says.

County councillors agreed yesterday to tackle school closings together — and to try to pull other rural Ontario counties into a proposed provincewide coalition.

"It is frustrating to me that in different locations across the province, school boards are closing rural schools just because they are small," Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft said.

School board staff recommendations to close schools are "without exception" carried, he argued, even in the face of "consistent opposition from students and parents and municipal councils."

He said one example is Metcalfe school near Strathroy. It's operating near capacity, but its pupils will have to take buses to Caradoc North school, where portables must be added for them.

It's all part of how provincial policies are consistently undermining rural Ontario communities — in hospitals, employment services and education, Strathroy-Caradoc Deputy-Mayor Joanne Vanderheyden said.

"Death by 1,000 cuts is occurring every day in our municipalities and it's time to say it's enough," she said.

The Education Ministry has repeatedly said school closings are a matter of local, not provincial decision-making.

But that's been a divide-and-conquer tactic that doesn't address flaws in the process, Reycraft said, so it's time to lobby the province to change the rules.

Middlesex CAO Bill Rayburn has been asked to prepare a strategy on how to do that. He said councillors are resolved to "go at the head of the dragon" to address basic problems in the

process.

It's believed to be the first time the county level of government, rather than the local level, has been called upon to get involved in the prickly issue of how to address declining, and shifting, school enrolments.

Thames Valley District school board director Bill Tucker said he welcomes any input and all consultation, but believes the public-consultation process is sound and has been fair.

"To my perspective, they haven't focused on the reinvestment" the board has made in some rural schools, including in Lucan, Medway and Thorndale, he said.

Tucker said he's offered to speak to county council, but

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Strathroy-Caradoc Deputy-Mayor Joanne Vanderheyden

hasn't yet received a response.

Reycraft said it's not reasonable trustees' decisions about closing schools cannot be appealed to anyone (although appeals of the process can be heard by the province), when civic politicians' decisions can be appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board.

Middlesex Deputy Warden Albert Bannister said in a letter to the education minister "words cannot describe how fundamentally flawed (the board's) thinking is". His letter also cites a Dalton McGuinty comment in which the not-yet-premier said, "There's something fundamentally wrong if a funding formula would dictate that a school should be closed and those students removed