

Ontario municipalities asked to support moratorium that could save NDSS

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Municipalities across the province are being asked to support a moratorium on disputed school closings.

Lord Mayor Gary Burroughs and Councillor Jim Collard are members of the executive of the Community Schools Alliance, which has drafted the resolution being distributed to Ontario municipalities.

It asks the province for a “smart moratorium” to buy time for the Ministry of Education, school boards and municipalities to develop policies addressing issues such as declining enrolment, an accommodation review process that all can agree on and a review of funding to rural and small community schools.

The group of politicians who make up the alliance are from municipalities opposing board decisions about school closures, mostly in rural areas, similar to the situation of NOTL trying to save its only high school.

The group also hopes to establish a working relationship between municipalities and school boards that provides transparency and accountability.

In a letter to municipalities, Doug Reycraft, founder and Chair of Community Schools Alliance, Mayor of Southwest Middlesex and former president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) wrote, “As municipal leaders, we believe our community schools are vital pieces of our public infrastructure; our schools are as important to our communities as the municipal infrastructure for water, transportation and recreation that we build and maintain.”

Clearly, said Reycraft, “we would not allow our municipal water systems to be taken away without strong public input into the decision-making process. Likewise, we believe municipalities, parents and students should have a strong voice at the table where school accommodation decisions are made.”

Members of the alliance believe the present accommodation review process developed by the province is flawed.

They are asking municipalities to support the resolution whether they are dealing with school closing issues at this time or not.

Declining enrolment is a fact across Ontario. There are 100 schools in the province currently undergoing accommodation reviews and 146 schools closing or recommended to close, according to a 2009 report from People for Education.

Last year, 16 schools closed in Ontario and more than 150,000 students are enrolled in Ontario schools now under review for possible closing, the report says.

Kathleen Wynne, the Minister of Education, has been sent an invitation to address the alliance in Ottawa on Aug. 17 during the annual AMO conference, but has not confirmed whether she will attend.

Burroughs says the resolution from the alliance must be voted on by council, and he believes it is important enough to call a special council meeting if necessary. However he expects Monday’s council meeting will provide the opportunity to discuss and vote on the resolution.

He says he has found it interesting to learn about challenges with the accommodation review process across the province, similar to the experience of the NOTL community and the school board.

“Our community is looking forward to working with the Community Schools Alliance to resolve this issue,” he said.

The Community Schools Alliance believes a better system is needed and can be developed during the moratorium to:

*Ensure that school boards and municipal councils work together on decisions regarding education infrastructure,

*Provide greater accountability for school board decisions on student accommodation, including school closures,

*Review the governance model for school board decisions on student accommodation which must include the opportunity to appeal those decisions,

*Respect and value the input of students, parents, the communities and municipalities during the accommodation review process.

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