

■ EDUCATION: Thames Valley District trustees voted Tuesday night to close three rural schools

# Trio of London schools next on hit list

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London could be next to feel the effect of school closings.

The fate of three London schools could be decided next month as trustees with the Thames Valley District school board will discuss the future of Brick Street, Woodland Heights and Manor and Highland Park schools.

Senior administrators have already recommended combining the three schools at Woodland Heights and closing Brick Street and Manor and Highland Park. If that recommendation goes through, Woodland Heights would be renovated and portables added.

An accommodation review committee recommended closing Brick Street and combining it with Woodland Heights by September 2009.

Manor and Highland Park school would be kept open under that plan.

Trustees won't make a final decision until Nov. 11.

They voted Tuesday to close Caradoc South school in Melbourne and Metcalfe Central in Strathroy in September 2010, and M.B. McEachren in Lambeth in June 2010.

That decision frustrated Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft, a defender of rural schools, who said the board ignored a unanimous recommendation by an accom-

modation review committee to keep the schools open.

"We're very disappointed with the decision," he said.

Caradoc South, he said, is the only elementary school in Melbourne and pupils there will be forced to travel to Glencoe or Mt. Brydges.

"For junior kindergarten or senior kindergarten kids, that's a significant trip for them to make," Reycraft said.

The two key reasons for school closings provided by the board — low enrolment and programs inferior to larger schools — don't apply to Caradoc South, Reycraft said.

"It really doesn't cost the board any money to keep a partially occupied rural school

open," he said, adding the provincial Education Ministry tops up funding for operating costs of rural schools so the board gets the same grant as if the school was full.

Many parents, he added, are also prepared to trade off inferior programs such as smaller gymnasiums and libraries for a school in their community.

But Kristina Nairn, school council chairperson of M.B. McEachren, said the decision to close that school did not come as a surprise.

"It's been a long process," she said, adding the school has known it would be closing for some time after it lost a teaching position and saw smaller kindergarten class sizes.

The proposed closings are part of a long process to deal with declining and shifting enrolment across the four-county school board.

Lucan, Prince Andrew, Plover Mills, Biddulph Central and Leesboro public schools were recommended for closing last June, after others in St. Thomas, Drumbo and Princeton met the same fate.

At Tuesday's meeting, trustees heard from concerned parents from Brick Street, Woodland Heights and Manor and Highland Park schools who pleaded with the board to keep those schools open.

*Kelly Pedro is a Free Press reporter.*