

Rural schools lifeblood of community: Dombrowsky

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There is no doubt that schools play an important role in the economic well being of rural communities, the minister of rural affairs says, but this must be balanced by every child's right to have the best education possible.

"Our government has recognized that in small communities (schools are) a community hub," said Leona Dombrowsky. "We also have to acknowledge that the very purpose of schools is to educate children. The school must be able to provide the best programming. A school needs a critical mass to do that. It's about balancing (those needs.)"

Many rural communities face losing their schools because of declining enrolment. In Haliburton County, the schools in Wilberforce and Cardiff are under review because there aren't enough students to keep both open. There are already split grades and in future, one teacher might have to teach three or four grades.

Earlier this year, the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board approved the closure of Bancroft Public School, moving students to the current North Hastings Senior Elementary, following an Accommodation Review Committee process.

At a recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) conference in Ottawa, the minister of education rejected a request from a coalition of rural municipalities to impose a moratorium on school closures.

However, Kathleen Wynne thrilled local delegates by announcing she's instructing her ministry to work more closely with community partners to make better use of schools.

"I came away very encouraged," said Hastings Highlands Mayor Ron Emond, who is also the warden of Hastings County.

"She's given the mandate to all boards to co-operate and possibly partner with municipalities," he said.

For instance, "if there's an empty classroom and the Children's Aid Society needed space, then they are to co-operate. (The mandate) will be more community-oriented than ever before."

Emond, a member of the Community Schools Alliance, is more hopeful than ever that his council's decision to build a new gymnasium as part of a community revitalization project will ensure that the Madawaska Public School will never close. The school is right next door to the new municipal centre.

Dombrowsky noted that the \$55 million the province is giving to eastern Ontario to bring high-speed Internet service to 95 per cent of the region will also go a long way to strengthening rural economies.

"People want to get out of an urban setting and come to a place where the pace is more calm," she said.

The Community Schools Alliance is advocating a "smart moratorium" on all school closings disputed by municipalities. The goal is for the ministry, schools boards and municipalities to work together to develop policies for such issues as declining enrolments, a review of funding to rural and small community schools and defining the working relationship, transparency and accountability between municipalities and school boards. The alliance has been circulating a letter to Ontario municipalities seeking support.

With files from Janet Richards