

## OPPOSITION DAY

### RURAL SCHOOLS

[http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/house-proceedings/house\\_detail.do?Date=2008-06-03&Parl=39&Sess=1&locale=en#P678\\_186226](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/house-proceedings/house_detail.do?Date=2008-06-03&Parl=39&Sess=1&locale=en#P678_186226)

Mr. Robert W. Runciman: I move that, whereas Ontario's rural schools are the hub and heart of their communities; and

Whereas, in September 2007, the McGuinty Liberals promised they would keep rural schools open because, in the words of Premier McGuinty, "For rural kids, few things are more important than being able to go to school in your own community, with your own friends. Rural schools help keep communities strong, which is why we're not only committed to keeping them open-but strengthening them"; and

Whereas, in less than nine months after the Premier made this promise, over 50 rural schools are slated for closure;

The Legislative Assembly of Ontario calls upon Premier McGuinty to suspend any and all board-recommended rural school closures until both the funding formula review and a thorough assessment of alternate uses for rural schools have been completed.

This is addressed to the Premier of Ontario.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Mr. Runciman has moved opposition day number 4. Mr. Runciman.

Mr. Robert W. Runciman: This is an important debate. Rural, small-town Ontario is under siege and this Liberal government seems unwilling or unable to come to its aid.

Since July 2004, we've lost over 207,000 manufacturing jobs in Ontario, many of them in smaller communities, which also impacts surrounding rural areas. The government's response to the job crisis is essentially, "Don't worry; be happy. This too shall pass." That attitude of complacency is in many respects even worse when it comes to the closure of rural schools. I say that because of comments and promises made by Mr. McGuinty over many years, up to and including last year's provincial election, when he said he would not only save rural schools but he would strengthen them, no ifs, ands or buts-a clear, unequivocal promise. Eight short months later, with a re-election victory and a majority government in his pocket, over 50 rural schools are slated to close, with many more on the chopping block.

The man who likes to describe himself as the education Premier: What's his reaction? His reaction is silence-utter and complete silence. He simply refuses to answer questions in this House, and we saw another example of that today. He refers them to his Minister of Education, who dispenses the usual party spin: a touch of baffle-gab, along with a dose of blaming others. Of course Premier McGuinty can't stand up and answer, because he would once again be exposed as someone prepared to say or do anything to get elected, and when successful, betray that trust with the contemptuous and cynical view that voters will forget.

It is an approach all too common in politics, one that has brought disrepute to people serving in public office and one that Mr. McGuinty has set a new standard for, not one to be proud of. We all remember his no-new-taxes pledge and at least 50 other broken promises in their last term.

Another cause of lack of respect for parliamentarians that's endemic in this Liberal government is the acquiescence of Liberal backbenchers to any and every breach of promise or offensive decision taken by the Premier and his cabinet. We saw that recently with the suggestion that the Lord's Prayer be removed from our proceedings and that the government will start funding sex-change operations. On those pronouncements, the Premier and his minister never even consulted their own caucus, let alone looked for approval. Like everyone else, they were blindsided. That's much more than being taken for granted; that's contempt. That's disdain for the role of backbenchers. But if it bothers them, it's never reflected in votes. We hope that changes today.

Prime Minister Trudeau once said that backbenchers were nobodies once they left the Hill. Well, Premier McGuinty has refined that: Government backbenchers are nobodies even when they're in this Legislature. That can all change, and it can change today, with Liberal MPPs representing rural ridings finally standing up to their autocratic, arrogant and condescending leadership and instead standing up for the good, hard-working people who put them in office, their constituents.

The vote today is not draconian, it's not partisan; it's calling for a fair shake for rural Ontario, a moratorium on closures until an appropriate funding formula is developed and a plan is put in place to develop alternative uses for school properties facing closure-alternatives that will minimize or eliminate the collateral damage that flows from a closure: property values dropping; banks, grocery stores and gas stations closing.

A few weeks ago, the Ottawa Sun ran an outstanding piece on the rural school issue. I have the front page of the paper with me: "The Final Bell: Despite a pledge by the McGuinty Liberals to save rural schools, they're being closed at an alarming rate, leaving communities broken and dying." That line truly sums up the situation: "leaving communities broken and dying."

The article references the Rideau Lakes village of Delta and the erosion of its economy following the closure of its elementary school: property values down 19%; three restaurants, two gas stations and a bank all closed in the wake of that school closure, along with other amenities available to the community. That's the reality of school closure impacts in small rural communities.

This is an opportunity-

Interjections.

Mr. Robert W. Runciman: -including the members interjecting here today-for rural Liberal members to join with us, to do the right thing. Show that you believe in the promise that Mr. McGuinty made during the election campaign. Show that the students of rural Ontario are not out of your sight. You see them every day. They're our sons and daughters, grandchildren, neighbours and, most importantly, our constituents.

The students of rural Ontario are not out of our sight or mind. We in the Progressive Conservative caucus are always mindful of the fact that our job here as representatives is to represent the people of Ontario, no matter how far away from downtown Toronto they might live. The students of rural Ontario will never be out of sight or out of mind on this side of the House. We will fight to keep those schools open, so help me.

The official opposition, the Progressive Conservative caucus, will keep standing up in this House and keep this issue on the front burner. The Premier may want to keep the students of rural Ontario out of sight and out of mind, he may want the residents of rural Ontario to forget his spurious promise to save and strengthen schools or his counterfeit concern for the well-being of rural

communities, but he won't get away with it as long as we are here to stand up for them. He won't get away with it.

Today, Progressive Conservative MPPs will be voting for the students of rural Ontario. To my colleagues from all parties, whether you represent rural Ontario or not, remember this: Our job here is to represent all Ontarians, even the students of rural Ontario and the communities they live in. Colleagues and friends, it's time to stand up for students, to support education and to keep those rural schools open.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Thank you very much. Further debate.

1550

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I'll be sharing my time with my colleague from Hamilton East-Stoney Creek. I want to welcome the citizens of Ontario to this political forum. We're actually on live in the afternoon, as well in the morning at 9:00 when you get up, bright and early, fresh with your coffee in hand. Now fresh with your beer in hand and popcorn, it's 10 to 4. We are on live.

Interjections.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You've got to get it on channel-I don't know; here in Toronto it's 105. You've really got to go up to get it. In some places you can't. I'm sure it's a program that a lot of people would like to see if they're not able to see it. I'm sure of it because there are so many great speakers here in this House.

Speaker, I want to tell you I support this resolution by the member from Leeds-Grenville and-

Hon. Jim Watson: Oh no, Rosie.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I do. And I'm going to hurt them a little bit and I'm going to hurt you a little bit, too.

Interjections.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: No, because I like distributing the weight around a little bit in the entire House. I have grown fond of the Conservative Party in opposition, I have to admit.

Interjections.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I do. I have to admit this because, when they were in government, I've got to tell you, I had no love for Mike Harris whatsoever. I had no love whatsoever, not even any warm feelings towards him-not much. And in terms of how they governed, God forgive them. I'm telling you, it was tough.

I recall Liberals saying, "Break ranks from Mike Harris" on this and that issue-as if you could ask Liberals to break ranks. They're not going to do that, right? They're not going to do that. Tories didn't do it, Liberals are not going to do it, and most New Democrats didn't do it either, except we had some folks with some intestinal fortitude from time to time who did do it. But on the whole, asking Liberals to break ranks just doesn't work. It doesn't make any sense because nobody does it.

So I tell you, no fondness for Mike Harris-God bless him, wherever he is. I'm sure he's doing well on whatever board he's sitting on, making some good bucks, left with a fairly good buyout, leaving the rest of us here alone, fending for ourselves. God bless him too in that regard.

But I have to say, on this resolution-

Interjection: There are others with buyouts.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: This is true. Some people did well. Some people did very well.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Including you; you got some.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I was the youngest of the group. If you were a young member of that cabinet crowd, you didn't get much. The ones with experience, long experience in cabinet and serving a lot of years in this place, did okay, leaving the rest of you newcomers to fend for yourselves-little, next to nothing.

But with respect to this resolution, it's reasonable, I have to admit. It's not often I agree with Tories. I have to admit that too, publicly. I know the Liberals want to have us collude on many issues. I understand why you would do that. But on the whole, we are in polarity most of the time politically; you know that.

But on this one, when they say, "The Legislative Assembly of Ontario calls upon Premier McGuinty to suspend any and all board-recommended rural school closures until"-here's where it gets even more reasonable-"both the funding formula review and a thorough assessment of alternate uses for rural schools have been completed," it's going to be very difficult for Liberals to disagree, because it is eminently reasonable. It's tough when you say that of Tories, a resolution being eminently reasonable, but it is.

I have to put this in context because I got a few quotes from mon cher ami M. McGuinty. I know it's hard for Liberals to hear these things because they said a lot of things. They did. And now, of course, in government, they hate to hear it. They hate to hear themselves heard.

Hon. Jim Watson: Rosie, did you support the social contract?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Oh, dear, you've got to go all the way back there, too? Pretty soon you're going to go to Confederation, for God's sake. Come on.

Here's what mon ami Dalton, the Premier, said on October 22-it's not news to you, but just to refresh in your mind. Dalton McGuinty said to the then Premier, "Premier, I'm sure the people of Ontario are going to want to know the basic difference between you and me when it comes to school closures. Here is the difference: You took \$2.2 billion out of public education, forcing school closures. We are going to invest \$1.6 billion in public education to enable small communities to keep the rural schools open. That is the fundamental difference," said mon ami McGuinty in this place.

Interjections.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: The Liberals acknowledge that he did say that. Okay. Let me quote further: October 22, the same day. God bless. "But we on this side of the House," meaning he and the Liberals, "in this party," meaning the Liberal Party, "happen to value smaller communities and rural Ontario.

"I ask you once again, why is it that you continue to have in place a funding formula that is biased against rural schools in small-town Ontario?" he said. It was a very reasonable statement that he made and it was a reasonable question.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Who said that?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Mon ami M. McGuinty, the then leader of the opposition Liberal Party. But there's more.

Mr. Khalil Ramal: We have a different structure now.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: No, no, there's more. He asks, "Why can you not agree to put a moratorium on any school closures at this time, until such time as the funding formula has been fixed?" Sounded reasonable in 2002; seems eminently reasonable in 2008.

He goes on. Everybody-

Interjection.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Pardon?

Hon. Madeleine Meilleur: The funding formula has been fixed.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: The funding formula has been fixed: I'll get to that in a second.

"Everybody knows that repairing the funding formula is going to entail putting more money into public education." And you have-

Interjection.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I'll get to that in a second.

"Why would you not agree that the sensible thing to do in the circumstances is delay closing any schools until we've had the opportunity to fix your broken funding formula?" Sound familiar?

Let me go on. This is October 8. I should have gone the other way, but it doesn't matter. Monsieur McGuinty asks, "Why would you not place a moratorium on school closures until you've had an opportunity to fix your broken funding formula?"

There is more. On June 10, 2002, Monsieur McGuinty again asks, "Will you put a stop to school closures that are being driven not by a desire to improve learning but rather by a desire to save money at the expense of learning?" Again, sounds eminently reasonable, almost intelligent. That's why he became the education Premier. And he asks some tough questions on education. Oh, if uttered by a New Democrat, as we have, or a Tory, as they have-God bless them, because they sound reasonable in opposition, as I was saying earlier. If uttered by us, we get laughed at by the government, but when uttered by Liberals in opposition then, they presumably sounded intelligent, except until you get into government, and then it changes.

I've got one final one on June 10: "It is your funding formula that is driving school closures in the province of Ontario. They're here to ask for your help. They want to know whether or not you're going to help them. These are good schools where good learning is taking place. Your funding formula is closing small schools in particular, where studies are telling us very good learning is taking place."

I needed to put that on the record. It ought to teach us, in opposition, because we all go around this circle here eventually.

If you're brave enough to say certain things in opposition, you ought to be brave enough to say them when you're in government, to keep the promise vis-à-vis your statements and your questions. If you don't do it, you look bad, you sound bad, you are bad. It doesn't cut it to say, "No, but we Liberals are different. The Tories were bad and everybody knows that, but we Liberals are different because we fundamentally, innately, are better. It doesn't matter what we say, what we do, as Liberals we are innately, philosophically, ideologically"-by the way, you have no ideology but I shouldn't have said it-"better than the rest of you Tories and New Democrats."

That's what I have difficulties in and with as an argument. It seems that they can argue anything, as the minister does-and I like the minister; this is not the issue. The minister then provides a multitude of rationales for it. She says, "We have lost thousands of students in the system." That becomes the rationale for everything they do, good or bad. In fact, she doesn't even say they're doing anything. She argues, "We're not going to take the right of any school board to do what they need to do. If they need to close schools, that is a right of school boards, and we don't want to interfere."

But Monsieur McGuinty had no problem demanding that the Tories have a moratorium; that they do a funding review before they closed any schools, in particular rural schools. He had no problems with it. So when you're in opposition, it's okay; when you're in government, "Oh, we don't want to interfere with school boards, oh no, because it's an inalienable right. We wouldn't take that right to close schools away." God bless. God knows. That's something they have been elected to do, and if they close schools, then that's something they have to do.

The problem we've got is that the current provincial funding formula does not sufficiently recognize or fund the unique needs of northern Ontario. Yes, the Liberals have done a few things here and there, and they make them sound like they are huge, as if they saved the northern Ontario community or saved all of the northern Ontario schools. They are unique, and what makes them unique is geography in particular, but it speaks to the unique problems they face, not just in terms of geography, not just in terms of lacking the specialist teachers and lacking access to special education, and yes, even today, fewer full-time principals. The large geographical area makes them very special in terms of why we need to intervene as governments to make sure that rural schools keep open.

We accept that declining enrolment has happened. We understand that. The question is, do you accept it as a challenge to do positive things or do you use it as an argument to close schools? It seems to me that the government has chosen the latter. It has become an argument to close schools, not an argument to say, "It is a unique opportunity for us to review how it is that we save small schools."

I said to the minister, in a question that I put to her just last week, why would you not talk about the fact that you cut \$60 million of the declining enrolment grant just last year? Why wouldn't you speak to that? I say to you, 60 million bucks is a whole pile of money, and that was designed to allow boards to deal with declining enrolments. The Tories did it-

Interjection.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: I know.

Hon. Kathleen O. Wynne: They didn't have declining enrolment; neither did you.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: There was a declining enrolment grant. They did that, to be fair to them from time to time. The Liberals continued with the declining enrolment grant, because presumably they too understand that if there's declining enrolment, you've got to help with the grant. But not once did the education Premier or the minister say, "We've had to cut the declining enrolment grant." They often refer to the \$420 million or \$460 million. They throw out numbers, neglecting to say that the large bulk of that funding is simply to pay their collective agreements with teachers at the secondary and elementary levels and to pay the collective agreements with non-teachers. The bulk of that money is to make sure the collective agreements are paid. You would expect that you would flow money to pay the bills.

The remaining money is to pay for the promise they made, which is to cap the primary grades-under grade 3-at 20. To a large extent, that promise has been kept. There are still lots of schools that don't reach the capping promised by the Liberals, but that was a very expensive promise. That promise, plus paying for the collective agreements that were negotiated by this government-mostly, generally-that's where most of the money goes.

But do you Liberals know the chaos we have in all of our boards across Ontario-not just in the north, but across Ontario? Do any of you Liberal MPPs understand what kinds of pressures boards are under? My sense is that you don't, and those of you who do are zipping your mouths, and hoping that you're never quoted by anyone or asked by a newspaper to speak to any particular problem that your board may be having. If you did, you would have to dissemble by way of a response, because there is no proper response to the fact that most boards can't balance their budgets.

The Toronto Catholic District School Board, whatever you or others might say about some of their expenditures, which is a separate matter in terms of how the board and the minister is dealing with that, whatever you might say about that, the way that they're dealing with their deficit is by cutting 83 teachers-

Interjection: It's 85.

Mr. Rosario Marchese: You have to be accurate-85? They are cutting educational assistants, those who work with primary teachers-

Interjection: EAs?

Mr. Rosario Marchese: Educational assistants, otherwise known as EAs. They're cutting youth workers. They work with troubled kids, kids at risk.

It's a very convenient thing for the government to have a board-this particular board-be embroiled in another problem, because it conveniently gives the ministry, the minister, mon ami M. McGuinty and all of the Liberals a way out of that problem, and then the public can say: "Oh, look at all the problems that this board has. Look at all the money they're wasting here and there. No wonder they've got a deficit."

Nah, they're two separate issues. The expenditures are not excusable. The government has made that clear and the public has made that clear, but in terms of the deficit, it's a separate matter.

We were talking \$11 million, \$12 million, \$13 million, \$14 million, and they can't make ends meet, so they are firing 85 teachers, beyond what the enrolment requires-so says the teacher federation representing teachers. And they're firing youth workers and educational assistants. How can the government, the minister and the Premier be happy to accept those kinds of cuts? Oh, because they're required by law to do so? Yes. But is it right? Ah, but does that not speak to the millions of

dollars the government is giving? If the government is giving all those huge amounts of dollars, why is this one particular board required to fire teachers and assistants and youth workers? Why?

Maybe the government has a different kind of option to propose to the boards by way of what it is that they could cut. But how can the government sit there content that they're balancing the budget on the backs of people who are desperately needed in the educational system? How could you feel good? How could you justify it?

1610

Then, hearing a report on the CBC-"The government hasn't yet declared whether or not they are going to take the school board over." Sorry, take the school board over? For what? They already made the cuts. They already have done the dirty work for the government. Why would the minister take over a board at a time when the board has made the cuts and has done the dirty work for the government? It's silly when the arguments are made that the government hasn't yet made up its mind as to whether or not they're going to take the board over. It doesn't make any sense. Why would they take them over? Speaker, you understand; you've been here for a while. No government is going to take any board over, because to do so would be to accept the responsibility for the cuts. Not doing so says, "Well, you know, it's not my problem." The government can argue, "It's not mon problemo. The problem is with the board. Boards have to decide how to balance their budgets, and if this is what they do, that's what they do."

So I argue with any citizen watching this political program: Does it sound like a government that's giving adequate dollars to our boards-southern, northern, eastern and western-to be able to balance their budgets without hurting teachers and our students? I argue they're not.

So we say, with respect, and with respect to school closures, that there has to be a better way. Schools are an important hub for a great deal of community outreach and community work. Schools are a part of how economies grow in those small communities. We all know that. Even Liberals know this. They made those very arguments in opposition. Schools are for community use after school, and northern schools are used for community use after school. So why would we not be creative? Why wouldn't we use it as an opportunity?

When the minister agrees with People for Education, as they propose that we have to become more creative and we have to look at ways of keeping schools open-and People for Education argue that we have to integrate services better; i.e., not simply use schools from a Minister of Education perspective and forget all of the other uses of a school. So we say, why couldn't we use schools and have parenting centres in them, child care centres, community kitchens, public meeting space, even public libraries, health clinics? They all add to the life of a school and strengthen the community sense of connection to their local schools. If that is true and if the minister thinks it's a good idea, then how fast are we moving toward that goal?

This is why I said to the minister, quite apart from what the Tories said in the past, you're doing a review of your funding formula in 2010; by that time, most schools will be closed. If you're going to do a review, do it today. Don't wait until 2010, because by then most of the schools will have been closed. At least 50 school closures have already been recommended, and many reviews are not yet complete. More recommendations for closures are inevitable. Therefore, I argue, like the Tories, put that on hold.

The minister has put together a little group to do the review. Good. God bless. Are there any timelines? We don't have a clue. Why aren't there timelines? Because, I submit to you, as lawyers would say, they have no interest in saving schools. They want school boards to move on school closures quickly, make the savings, and then, by 2010, be able to recommend something new and a

new direction for the government, so that as they head into the next election, they have a new proposal: "This is how we're going to save schools from now until the next four years," as you fine people elect you fine Liberals for another four years. That's the plan.

If that were not the plan, the minister would do the following: Tell the working group that by the time we come back-maybe in September; it's hard to say-we're going to have a recommendation that deals with this problem, and we're going to review the funding formula by September so that schools have a better sense of what might be coming by September. If we do not have that commitment, it is very clear to me that they have no interest in taking up the challenge of saving small schools.

New Democrats say, "We want to save as many schools as we possibly can." Some schools we cannot save; I admit that. Some schools may be just too small to save. But what strategy do we have to save most schools? That's the argument. There is no strategy. That's the problem: We don't have a strategy.

Northern schools provide space free of charge to community groups. It's the only place, in some cases, where local communities can assemble. The high number of small communities and the great distance between those communities make the provision of adequate transportation service a constant challenge for northern schools. Transportation has been a problem for years. This government has promised to do a transportation review for years.

I remember mon ami M. Kennedy, who said he did a review, and I said to him, "Gerard, with all due respect, you've already made up your mind. You took some money from some boards and gave it to other boards." That was the extent of his review on transportation. "Oh, no," he argues in this place. "Everybody got an increase." "Of course you did, Gerard. You gave every board a 2% increase. That doesn't make it any better." What you did, by way of what the minister then did, is to take money from some boards and give it to others. Does that sound to you, Speaker, who have been here in this place, like much of a plan or strategy, stealing from some to give to others? It doesn't sound like much of a strategy. You're stealing from one group to give to the other group.

I argue, if you're going to do a review, make sure you do it fairly for everybody. This is not about taking from the rich to give to the poor. We have one public system here. It's about fairness for all. It's not like we've got loads of money in one area and less in the other. We've got a funding formula now that's supposed to treat everybody equitably, and everybody is getting equitably whacked in Ontario.

When you close schools in northern Ontario, transportation becomes a serious disaster. Some kids have to travel for hours-two or three hours. Maybe they're walking, running or using Rollerblades on those northern boards; I don't know what they use to get around, but it's tough. Maybe some kids still use horses to get around; I don't know. It's tough to get around. You can't close the schools. If there are only 25, okay, it's a problem. If it's 50 or 60 or 70, it's a problem. But you've got to use this as an opportunity to be able to save schools, use them as a hub and make sure you coordinate services with other ministries to be able to save those schools and save those communities.

It's for those reasons that I support this resolution.

Hon. Kathleen O. Wynne: It gives me great pleasure to have an opportunity to speak to the opposition day motion, which I think is fundamentally based on assumptions that are not true.

I want to first of all acknowledge the importance of our publicly funded education system. Every school obviously has a school community surrounding it. When there's change, there's always the potential for concern and turmoil. Both the elementary and the secondary schools that I attended in what was the small town of Richmond Hill are no longer housed in the buildings that they were

housed in. There is always change; there's constant change. But in the end, as I've said before, those local program decisions must rest in the hands of the boards of education. It is impossible for the Ministry of Education at the corner of Wellesley and Bay in Toronto to make decisions about schools in northern Ontario, in rural Ontario, in other urban centres, so we have been, since we came into office, committed to supporting school boards in those decisions.

1620

When we first came into office, we put a moratorium on school closures for two years while we did exactly what the members opposite are asking us to do now—we have already done it. If we look at the funding changes, we have made significant funding changes. We've increased funding to rural schools by \$632 million. Had we not changed the funding formula, rural schools would have had to cut \$650 million from their budget. So in fact, we have significantly changed the funding formula.

The other things we've done have been to introduce a school foundation grant. That guarantees that all schools that boards deem to be viable will have a principal and a secretary. That's the board deciding that the small elementary school in Sioux Narrows, which has 16 students, will have the leadership that it needs, as the 1,900-student elementary school in my riding of Don Valley West will have adequate administration. We put that school foundation grant in place to allow boards to have that administration and secretarial support in all of their schools.

We also introduced the supported schools grant, which means that the 300 most remote schools—those are northern and rural schools—receive a special grant of \$63 million. That allows those rural and remote schools to have extra staffing in order to be able to deliver programming.

What all of this means is that our smallest schools—as I said, we have schools in Ontario that are fewer than 20 students and they are viable. They are in place because boards have deemed that it is too far for those little children to go to the next town for those early elementary years. Those schools are supported and those boards are buffered against the declining enrolment that we are seeing across the province. We've changed the funding formula to put those buffers in place.

The second thing we've done is that we've put in place pupil accommodation review guidelines to allow boards to assess the value of schools to their communities. In the process that is in place now, we asked boards to assess schools according to the value of the school to the student, the value of the school to the community, the value of the school to the school board and the value of the school to the local economy. So we've actually put in place the kind of assessment mechanism that the members opposite are asking for. That has already been done.

The thing that has not yet been done—and I have to say it was not done by the New Democratic Party and it was not done by the Progressive Conservative Party—is to have a rational discussion about how we deal with the fact that demographics in Ontario are changing. We all know that people my age and a little older, the baby boom generation, are aging. We are not being replaced in the population to the extent that we would need to be in order to keep every single school in the province open and not have that demographic shift. We have not had that discussion.

So I have set up a declining enrolment work group, led by the member for Brant, Dave Levac, who was a former educator and who lives in a rural and urban community. He's going to be working with Eleanor Newman, who is a director in the eastern part of Ontario. They're going to be looking at the kinds of recommendations that, over the long term, will allow us to plan for the decline in enrolment.

The member from the third party talked about schools as hubs. He didn't use that language, but that is the language that we use, starting with our Best Start program, where we have child care spaces located in schools. I've asked the declining enrolment work group to look at the alignment of school

board cost structures with reduced enrolment and to look at the other agencies and the other ministries of the government that might have a role to play. These entities will include, but are not limited to: municipal government, so that could be public libraries, it could be other municipal services; provincial government services, so that could be health centres, it could be other services that are provided by the provincial government located in schools; and volunteer organizations, so other community agencies. So in fact we are asking this group to help us develop a plan that will look at the opportunities in our schools.

I want to share my time with other members of the caucus, but I want to close with a quote from the Brockville Recorder and Times, which I believe is a news outlet that the member-

Interjection.

Hon. Kathleen O. Wynne: That's right-that the member for Leeds-Grenville is familiar with. I think he's familiar with it. What this editorial said is:

"As enrolment continues to decline, Ontarians need to disabuse themselves of the notion that closing a school is bad for education. We've seen two examples in Leeds county in recent years where arguably students are better served after school closures, since they are now housed in far better facilities, namely Meadowview and Thousand Islands elementary schools.

"Facilities such as libraries, gymnasiums and science and computer labs are likely to be vastly improved when students are moved to schools that are somewhat larger.

"Premier Dalton McGuinty is correct when he argues that academic achievement, rather than the number of buildings, is the real measure of the province's school system.

"In fact, the money needed to keep open half-empty buildings would be far better spent in the classroom. It's the children, not the buildings, that matter most when it comes to education."

It gives no one in our government pleasure to cause distress in communities. What we want is the best programming for our students. We want programming that's going to allow our students in our publicly funded education system to be the best citizens that we can have in this province. That's the work that we're doing on this side of the House.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Before I recognize the member for Burlington, I wish to inform the House that the member for Beaches-East York, who previously had indicated an interest in an adjournment debate this evening, has withdrawn that request. So there will not be a late show tonight.

I recognize the member for Burlington.

Mrs. Joyce Savoline: I'm pleased to follow my colleague from Leeds-Grenville and support this particular opposition day motion today.

As PC critic for education, it's clear to me that regardless of how much I hear in this House about what the government is doing for education, I can see that any of the assessment formulas that are being put forward don't recognize the uniqueness of communities and the character and the values of each individual community. One size doesn't fit all, and the formulas that are being put forward are expecting communities to just fit under a category and move forward. That doesn't work.

As a mother and a grandmother, I am really concerned about the sheer disregard this government has for our students in our rural communities. It's the parents who are forced to advocate and to

protect their children's right to education and a quality of life in our rural communities. If the parents of Phelps Central School in Redbridge had not ramped up their efforts and taken their objection to the school closure to that next level and created media awareness, then in the fall of 2008 their children would be travelling three hours and more in a school bus every single day just to attend school, because Phelps school would have been closed.

When asked for the list of school closures, the minister said she didn't have it. But that secret list of school closures miraculously appeared minutes after the question was asked. It did exist. Make no mistake, there are more closings on the horizon that appear on that list.

How can parents, students and school boards trust this government when they say one thing and do another? They are completely untrustworthy. Evidence abounds of the Premier's broken promises to our rural communities. The minister says one thing, but when Premier McGuinty was Leader of the Opposition, he said in 2002 that he was extremely concerned about the plight of our rural schools and the negative impact the closures are having on our communities. I quote:

"Parents and students falling within the Thames Valley District School Board awoke to some terrible news. They have learned that there are five elementary and two high schools that are on the chopping block, in small communities. These schools are absolutely integral to the quality of life those communities offer."

Today, as we sit here in this House, five elementary schools and one high school are on the chopping block in the Thames Valley District School Board. This is on Mr. McGuinty's watch.

1630

Mr. Paul Miller: The current provincial funding formula does not sufficiently recognize or fund the unique needs of northern schools. Ontario's northern schools have fewer specialist teachers, less access to special education supports and fewer full-time principals than schools in the rest of the province. Most northern boards cover very large geographical areas and their schools are, for the most part, very small and very far apart. Northern schools have a number of other unique characteristics: Their enrolment is rapidly declining, they have higher-than-average heating and busing costs, a high proportion of aboriginal students and less access to community supports. And now you're going to make things even worse for northern communities by closing more of the schools that these communities depend on.

Northern schools are well-used by their communities after school hours. A large number of northern schools provide space free of charge to community groups. In many communities, the schools represent the only place where the local community can assemble. The higher number of small communities and the great distances between those communities make the provision of adequate transportation services a constant challenge for the northern boards. Students in northern boards spend more time on buses than students in any part of the province, and northern boards struggle with very high transportation costs. Closing a northern school can mean even more hours on buses for students and increased risk to the students, particularly during the winter months. These students also find it impossible to participate in extracurricular school activities and events.

The closing of a school in a northern community can have a devastating effect on the local economy as areas are already reeling from job losses. This, combined with the hard impact on children's education, can have a significant negative impact on the social life and opportunities for many in these communities. Often in the north there are limited community social services. The closing of schools means that these already limited services are now even less accessible and less likely to be used.

Among the findings in the People for Education report, it states that:

"In four of Ontario's northern boards, enrolment has declined more than 20% since 2002.

"One northern board has 36% fewer students than it had in 2002.

"There are over 100,000 students in nearly 300 schools currently under review in the province.

"At least 50 school closures have already been recommended, but many reviews are not yet complete-more recommendations for closure are inevitable."

Accepting these recommendations for closures is accepting damage to our educational, social and community structures. New solutions are needed.

"In 2003, at People for Education's Annual Conference, Peter Gooch, then-Director of Education Finance at the Ministry of Education, said that declining enrolment was the biggest crisis facing school boards. At that time he said it was urgent that the province ... begin to develop long-term strategies to deal with it."

Simply closing schools is hardly what I call a strategy, but beyond small patches to funding formulas, few new strategies have been developed. Parenting centres, child care centres, community kitchens, public meeting spaces, even public libraries and health clinics can all add up to the life of a school and strengthen a community's sense of connection to it, and the pride in their community.

In both rural and urban areas, schools have the capacity to act as thriving hubs of activity and events for their local communities. Schools could include community centres and have extended hours in the evenings and on weekends for community use.

All of these things require greater vision-which this government doesn't have-in finally fixing the flawed education funding formula, greater flexibility in joint funding and greater co-operation across sectors, ministries and levels of government.

Next steps: Strategies to deal with declining enrolment do not necessarily cost more money. In many cases, they save money in the long run but they may involve municipalities, other ministries and sectors and will entail a funding formula with greater flexibility.

The province has said it will appoint a working group to examine the impact of declining enrolment in Ontario schools and to assess current government policies and evaluate other strategies. These names and the dates of consultations must be announced and the work begun very soon. But to be truly effective, this group must also be able to make recommendations about the education funding formula before the planned review in 2010, and it must have the latitude to suggest new thinking around the connection between municipalities and their schools and new approaches to the use of school buildings.

In the meantime, boards are making decisions that will affect hundreds of communities and tens of thousands of students across the province, now and far into the future. This government must get out from behind its rhetoric. It must announce the names of the work groups now, announce its critical path to successful resolution of this extremely serious education and social issue in northern Ontario and in rural schools and communities across the rest of Ontario.

In my community in Hamilton, we've got to a point where our board finds it necessary to sell three schools in the inner city to open one school in the suburbs. The funding formula allows for so many students, so many seats within the inner city. When enrolment declines in those schools, they're

forced to make do with busing, make do with changing teacher strategies, the board strategies, and they can't even afford to build a new school. So the older cities, with their infrastructure crumbling, and people moving to the suburbs have caused unbelievable hardship in my community.

We need this government to step up to the plate now. Change the present funding formula because it's not working and it needs to be rectified. All I can say in closing is, it's time that the McGuinty government stepped up to the plate in education throughout this province.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Further debate? The member for Huron-Bruce.

Mrs. Carol Mitchell: I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about schools in rural Ontario.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Will the member please take her seat. I would ask the members of the opposition to refrain from heckling the member for Huron-Bruce, and I return to the member from Huron-Bruce.

Mrs. Carol Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I only hope that the official opposition will stop and listen to the voice of rural Ontario. We hear the comments from across the way, comments from the member from Leeds-Grenville about arrogant leadership-"not out of our eyesight."

But I do want to say to everyone who has the TV on and those members in the House today, we just had an election. And what was the position of the official opposition? Let's all remember what their position was. Their position was to fund private schools. I think about what that would have done to rural Ontario, what difference that would have made to the landscape if the official opposition had just won the election. So let's think about that.

When the Mike Harris-Ernie Eves government was in power, what happened with the funding formula that was existing under their government at that time? I can tell you: 200 new private schools, 40,000 new private school students-a 50% increase. That was under that funding under Ernie Eves and Mike Harris. If they would have been successful in the election, the growth in private schools would have been certainly much more dramatic than that. I say to the members from across the way, were they thinking of rural Ontario when they came up with that platform, that strong plank in their platform? I don't think so. I think, once again, they turned a blind eye.

But don't take my word for it. What does Mr. Tory have to say about our education system? Despite what the Conservatives are saying today, in April 2008-because I know the member always asks-John Tory told the Sudbury Chamber of Commerce that Ontario has an education system that is doing a good job. He understands. He gets it. If he was here, he could share that with them. In April, John Tory also said that Ontario has one of the best education systems in the world. And where was that speech made? That speech was made to the Brampton Chamber of Commerce. So we know that the leader of the official opposition understands and knows that if he had been successful going forward with private schools, I tell you, rural Ontario would have been damaged much more severely. But then, what can one expect from a group who certainly turned a blind eye to rural Ontario the whole time they were in government? There certainly has been no change from that side of the House.

1640

But I do know that everyone is anxious to hear how the schools are affected in funding in Huron-Bruce, and I want to share that with you. As you know, I am from a rural riding. My largest town is

just over 7,000, so that gives you a sense that it is all rural, not how some members would liken themselves to rural when they really represent large urban areas.

I have four school boards in my riding. I have shared those in the past with the member from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound, the Leader of the Opposition and the member from Simcoe-Grey. Some of that has changed since the election, but I will share that with you.

First of all, there is the Bluewater District School Board, that being Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound. They have seen a 15.6% increase while having declining enrolment. I don't have the per capita numbers, but that is a significant number that one should look at as well, and I know there are other members who will add that. We also have the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Catholic board, and they saw a 22% increase. The Avon Maitland school board, which I share with the member from Perth-Wellington, had an over 18% increase. The Huron-Perth Catholic: an over 20% increase. These are all during declining enrolment. We know that it is very difficult to provide the level of education in rural Ontario because we understand in rural Ontario how important education and skills are.

One of the other things that I know the members from the official opposition will be anxious to hear: Two of my schools within Huron-Bruce also have high skills majors-

Interjections.

Mrs. Carol Mitchell: They just don't want to listen to rural Ontario. Two of those high skills majors are with agriculture. One is in St. Anns, which is in Clinton, and the other is in Chesley, which is in Bruce county. Both of those schools receive the Premier's agriculture awards. I share this story with the members from the opposition-not only are we respectful of our rural communities; we also understand what our rural communities need. I hope you're aware that in our agricultural communities, it's very difficult-as I know that you know, Mr. Speaker-to attract our young people and to retain them. By putting back what was taken out by the previous government and giving the ability for the agricultural community to go into our schools and get our young people engaged-I can tell you, being a rural member, how important that is. We know that in order to engage our young people in the future for agriculture, we must start at a younger age. So when the previous government withdrew so much of that, it really was difficult for our communities to go forward.

Also, within our agricultural high skills majors, one of the things that we've been able to do is to introduce agribusiness into that as well as our equipment dealers. They are providing the equipment. It's also a sub-branch, obviously, of agriculture. As we know, agriculture is the second-largest industry in the province of Ontario.

So I say to the members across the way: I know that during the election they went out and talked about private schools. But do you know what? In my riding of Huron-Bruce, my neighbour, he got it. The member from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound, he knew it. He had the same position that I did on education. And so I say to the members across the way: Listen to your own members. Listen to the member from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound about education. Listen to your leader about education. Listen to rural communities. You have not in the past; I hope you do in the future.

I do want to thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak to this very important issue.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Thank you very much for the opportunity to quickly debate on this motion today, a motion put forward by our leader, Bob Runciman, with respect to rural school closings. It seemed to be something that this government was very much opposed to when they were in opposition. If we go back to 2003, you'll remember when Gerard Kennedy, then Minister of Education, promised a moratorium, and in fact said he'd delivered a moratorium on the closing of rural schools. All the

while, schools were closing, so his word wasn't any good then. The words of the Premier in 2007, they're no good either. In 2007, just prior to the election-

Hon. John Wilkinson: Why did people vote for him?

Mr. John Yakabuski: Well, they voted for him because they believed him, and they shouldn't have believed him.

"For rural kids, few things are more important than being able to go to school in your own community with your own friends," said the Premier at Newburgh Public School. "Rural schools help keep communities strong, which is why we're not only committed to keeping them open, but strengthening them." On September 18, 2007, that's what Dalton McGuinty said. A mere eight months later, we're now looking at 50 schools in the province of Ontario that are slated to close-rural schools-and 300 schools that are under review, including schools in my community of Petawawa.

During that moratorium, when then-Minister Gerard Kennedy said we weren't closing any rural schools, five schools in my riding closed, and now we're looking at the family of schools in Petawawa, including General Panet High School, General Lake Public School, Pinecrest Public School, Herman Street Public School and Pine View Public School, which are all being reviewed as we speak; this from a government that promised they were going to keep rural schools open-and the importance of rural schools and how much they mean to communities.

Where we have seen rural schools close, we have seen communities suffer. The editorial from one of the newspapers that the education minister read was only about the facilities and what's offered to students at a bigger school. We're not dumb. We recognize that a bigger school has more facilities, but what about those communities and the effect on those communities? This government, because it can't keep its word, is not delivering on the promise that it made in 2007, not delivering on the promises it made in 2003, not delivering on the commitments that Dalton McGuinty made as an opposition leader in 2002-the importance of rural schools.

What we're asking for is that you put a moratorium in place until such time as you establish a new funding formula, which has been promised and promised and re-promised.

Hon. Kathleen O. Wynne: Done that.

Mr. John Yakabuski: It's not done; you say you're going to have a new funding formula in 2010.

Interjection.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Don't talk about envelopes money-a new funding formula for rural schools that includes transportation so that we can get on with the job of giving the best possible education for our children here in the province of Ontario. This government has not delivered on its commitments. It has only broken promises, broken its word and-oh, I can't say that, Mr. Speaker, but when you say you're going to do something and you don't do something, some people would call you something. In this House we can't say it, but that's what this government continues to do, and it continues to do it on the backs of rural schools.

In rural communities, we're trying to keep schools. In Toronto, they worry about pools; we worry about schools. Do something. Put a moratorium on this until a new funding formula is in place.

Mr. Pat Hoy: I'm pleased to join in this debate this afternoon on the very important subject of rural schools. My riding is largely rural. It has some small urban centres, but there's a lot of rural in Chatham-Kent-Essex. We recognize how important our schools are to our communities in the rural

area. If you close a rural school, they may have to travel 10, 20, 30 miles to another school, or more, perhaps, so we know how fundamental they are to our communities.

What I find very, I'll be polite and say "interesting," in this motion coming from the Conservatives is their past history. They've suddenly gotten this new idea about rural schools. Let me tell you that Romney Central School, a rural school in Chatham-Kent, was the very first school to fall under the axe of the Harris government's short-sighted policies—a government that admittedly set out to create a crisis in our schools.

1650

I worked with a lot of parents from the schools on the Mike Harris closure list. I worked with Romney Central. I asked questions in the Legislature urging the former government to reconsider the funding formula, which lacked the flexibility to meet the disparate needs of communities around Ontario. This inflexibility was ripping the heart out of rural Ontario. I attended many, many parent meetings and board meetings. One thing was very clear: The former government's funding formula was forcing the closure of rural schools.

Romney Central was in a location where there were virtually no houses around it. There were fields of various crops growing all around the school, and from time to time, I was told, there were deer running through the backyard. And guess what? This school, in that setting, did not meet the "rural" definition as put forward by the former government. So the parents, teachers and supporters of Romney Central travelled here to Queen's Park back in those days and begged the government to change the formula to at least recognize what "rural" meant.

Romney Central School was not a little red schoolhouse. It was the first graded school in the county; it was opened by William Grenville Davis and Darcy McKeough, who applauded the foresight and courage of residents in forming a township-area school. And the former government caused it to close.

Small schools, like small churches, are the primary threads that weave through the fabric of rural community and rural life. Mike Harris's then government didn't understand that one size does not fit all. He governed by what he could see from the CN Tower, and he could not see Romney Central or rural Ontario from there.

Ridgetown high school was a school also, at the time, talked about for closure. The former minister, Mr. Kennedy, came to Ridgetown and told them that he had a plan, a plan that is further carried on by the current minister. Ridgetown, in a location next to the Ridgetown agricultural college, was in fear of closure under the previous government. I'm proud to say that Ridgetown high school remains viable. Our government's commitment to rural Ontario and an outstanding publicly funded education system remains unwavering.

I'd just remind the members opposite that when the Tories were in power, 506 public schools closed while enrolment was going up and over 200 new private schools opened.

I find the motion put forward today by the opposition to be somewhat incredible.

Mr. Ernie Hardeman: I'm pleased to rise today in support of the motion to save our rural schools.

When he thinks it will get votes, Dalton McGuinty claims that he recognizes the importance of rural schools. During the election, he said, "Rural schools help keep communities strong, which is why we're not only committed to keeping them open—but strengthening them." Unfortunately, we know what a promise from Dalton McGuinty is worth. Eight months later, 50 rural schools are slated to

close and hundreds more are under review. Small towns are in danger of losing part of the foundation of their community, one of the things that attract people to live there.

I know how important these schools are to the future of our small communities. I've heard from many people who are concerned about the impact on their town and their children.

In Oxford, it was recently announced that Princeton Central public school will close in June 2009. I met with the people from Princeton, who told me how important it was for them that their kids learn close to home and be part of the community.

Other schools in Oxford, from Norwich District High School to Sweaburg Public School, are still under review. I've heard from many parents, teachers and local business owners in Norwich who are afraid that their high school will be next.

I've also received hundreds of great letters from students of Norwich District High School about what their school means to them. One of the students called it "the heartbeat of the community." Another said, "Even though NDHS is a small school in a small community with a small amount of students, it has a big impact with its big challenges," and helps create a big future.

Some of the letters spoke about the academic achievements and of the great sports programs. They pointed out that Norwich offers the only agricultural skills program within the entire board of the Thames Valley. Another letter talked about the contributions the school makes to the community. It is clear from all the letters that the students are committed to their education, their community and to participating in everything that the school has to offer. Is this really the kind of school we want closing?

It is not just residents in Oxford who are concerned about their schools. Across southwestern Ontario people are worried about the impact of school closing on their communities, schools like Metcalfe elementary school in the municipality of Adelaide Metcalfe, Caradoc South elementary school in Melbourne and Glencoe District High School.

I heard from one successful Glencoe graduate, Monte McNaughton, who said that, "Glencoe high school is the hub of the community. Families depend on having a secondary school in the Glencoe area so students can participate in the community and all the school activities instead of spending an extra hour a day on the school bus."

Mr. McGuinty needs to follow through on his commitment to rural schools and communities. Our students, our schools and our rural communities just can't afford another broken Liberal promise.

Thank you very much for allowing me to speak today, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. John Wilkinson: I'm delighted to join in this debate. I want to tell the good people at home who are watching this, these are the things you have to remember: Under the previous government, enrolment went up, the amount of money spent went down and therefore the funding per pupil went down. In our government, enrolment has declined but funding has gone up, so we are spending more per pupil. That's the first fact we have to get on the table.

The second fact is, I want to talk about my own riding of Perth-Wellington and about two communities in the midst of accommodation review. One is the great stone town of St. Marys, the place worth living in. In that community there are two elementary schools: Arthur Meighen, named after the famous Prime Minister who hailed from St. Marys, and also St. Marys Central Public School. Both are very old schools. In rural Ontario many of our schools are quite old, and as a result those two schools have been declared prohibitive to repair. It makes more sense to build a new

school than trying to keep an old school up, particularly when it cannot be retrofitted to ensure that it is accessible to all children. I'm sure all of us in this House would agree that schools should be accessible and they should have the modern amenities available to them.

So that school board has decided that, with the two schools to be closed, they're going to build a new school. Yes, there will be one fewer school in St. Marys, and one could criticize us for that, but we are providing the money for a brand new, modern school to be built in the town of St. Marys, one that is right-sized for the community given the fact that the children of school age are declining. Though some people would say there should be a moratorium so that those two schools that are prohibitive to repair could be kept open in rural Ontario, I believe in a future for our students and I believe we should build that new school. We went through a process that was quite lengthy.

Next door in the community of Mitchell, they are doing an accommodation review. I want to read a letter from the chairman of the Avon Maitland District School Board, Meg Westley. What does she write? She writes Minister Wynne, and copied me-and I see the minister here.

"As the Avon Maitland District School Board approaches the end of its first accommodation review using the new guidelines"-those would be the guidelines set out by our government-"we would like to provide you with some feedback on the process...."

"This accommodation review, in the town of Mitchell, has been a much more positive experience for all concerned than any in our last round." That would be the round under the previous government. "The longer timelines have allowed for in-depth community consultation, and we've had the opportunity to engage in a good deal of open, frank discussion with the community, and especially the ARC"-the accommodation review committee.

"All of our communities recognize the challenge posed by declining enrolment in our district. Although the prospect of closing a school continues to evoke a strong emotional response, our communities"-our rural communities-"know schools will have to close, and even recognize that spending money to keep half-empty schools open is not the best way to use taxpayers' dollars, nor the best way to ensure students receive a quality education."

When we first formed government, when enrolment had gone up and funding had gone down, when this funding formula we inherited was leading to the closure of schools, we imposed a moratorium. We changed the funding, and now we have to look at the reality of the situation. By working with the community, we have to look at what's best. What the proponents of the past want to say is that somehow we should keep the school open even when there are no students in it. God love us all, a school has to have pupils in it. A school has to have pupils who have teachers who can provide the kind of education that they are going to need to succeed in the 21st century.

1700

I'm not a Luddite about this; I know how difficult it is. But by engaging the community, by spending more money per pupil, we are in a position now that we can look at, for example, in the town of St. Marys, having a new school that every child-a child in a wheelchair, a child who is blind, a child who is deaf-can go into that school. That is not the case today in St. Marys.

In our communities, we are looking forward to a day when all of our rural students are welcome and accommodated in a school that is accessible for them. Therefore, I will not vote with my friends opposite, because I remember their record in government. Thank you.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: I just wanted to say that it's not limited to rural schools. Recently, we've had a number of notices in my community of Oshawa, with the Durham Catholic District School Board

announcing five closings that I will mention here, as well as some that hadn't been mentioned that I was informed of two days ago, which was quite surprising to myself.

But before we get into that, I just want to mention some of the other aspects that haven't been mentioned here. We talk about some of the changes. When there was another minister in this current government dealing with education, they made some suggestions for changes that came forward that haven't been brought up yet today. We talk, but we haven't heard about the impact.

In Oshawa, we now have portables coming out the ears in order to accommodate students. Yes, we understand the growth and the cycles of these areas, but now-which we didn't have before-we have a number of students in portables. We tried to point that out to the former minister, but it never came to fruition.

The other aspect was about the split classes now in our community. In our school, where our boys go, we saw maybe one split class, but every single grade now has a split class. What does that say? Yes, they may be under the required numbers, but lo and behold, we have one teacher teaching two different grades, with the impact that's having.

When you talk about impact, what about the impact within the schools locally: Canadian Martyrs Catholic School, Father Francis Mahoney, Holy Cross, St. Gregory, St. Michael? The number one question in the teaching community is, "What's happening? Where am I going? Do I have a job? How is it being affected?"

I think something that hasn't been brought up in the Legislature here is the capital expansion formula. I had a good relationship with the previous director, who retired in January. It came to my knowledge that there was no capital funding formula so that the school boards could actually do planning for projections in the areas.

The difficulty with that is that they have to close these before they can make announcements in coming forward, where the previous government, our government, as a matter of fact, had a capital funding formula whereby the school boards could actually look and make plans for future closures and openings. That's one of the difficulties that we're finding here, and that's one of the things I would say to the people at the Durham Catholic District School Board, that quite possibly, with the schools that are closing, we may see some changes come around in the near future. But at the current time there is certainly a strong concern within the education community.

The other aspect of concern is that the school board was approached by the city. I met with the mayor last night. The mayor specifically informed me that the school board absolutely refused to discuss any growth-plan areas in our community at all. The problem with that is that there's an intensification in the areas that all these schools are being closed down in. Brownfields are being revitalized and new development in that area is going to bring new young families into the community. Guess what? They'll be needing schools.

Lo and behold, the Durham Catholic District School Board refused to meet with the city in order to discuss some of the planning implications. The problem is obvious. Lo and behold, two or three years from now, when all this area is developed and Oshawa is growing and expanding hugely, we actually will be needing more new schools in the areas where they're being closed. I just wanted to raise that.

The one last thing I wanted to bring up before I close-because I know my colleagues are looking forward to speaking as well-is that it was brought to my attention and it appears, quite frankly, that the bureaucracy has made this decision, in that one of the schools is actually listed as Oshawa's oldest school. They're planning for a new school to be opened on Coldstream, but O'Neill is going to

be closed. It was founded in 1909. Actually, my mother went there. It's been slated to be closed once the new school opens up.

Interjection: No respect for heritage.

Mr. Jerry J. Ouellette: Part of it is the heritage in Oshawa, as the member is mentioning, as well as the families that have attended there and the traditions. Many are looking forward to having their kids attend the same school in a great facility at O'Neill. Apparently in a short time, in a year or so from now, it is not expected to be open and there will be strong concern in our community about that community as well.

Mr. Jim Brownell: I appreciate the opportunity this afternoon for a chance to speak on this opposition day motion. As a retired educator, I certainly can understand and appreciate the need and the wish to keep all schools in Ontario open, but really, it's just not the case. It's not feasible in many situations.

I look at some schools in my riding, and I'm going to give you an example of two schools, John Sandfield Macdonald public school and Bonville public school, that closed in the 1980s. Certainly, nobody was banging at the doors here at Queen's Park or at the doors of the school board to get involved. School boards made decisions then. School boards made decisions to close Finch Public School, and those two other schools that I just mentioned closed because school boards were elected to make those decisions. The minister stood up at the outset of this debate and commented about that very thing. We are not in this to micromanage our school boards; we are in this to make these elected officials make the decisions that they were elected to make, and sometimes they are very difficult decisions.

I would like to quote Greg Pietersma, the chair of the Upper Canada District School Board, who made a comment in the Brockville Recorder and Times on March 28 of this year, where he said, "We have to move from being champions of schools to champions of learning. We can keep a lot of schools open but at what cost?"

Shortly after that-it was about one month later, on April 29, 2008, in the same newspaper. I would like to quote comments made by the Leeds-Grenville member. It says:

"As enrolment continues to decline, Ontarians need to disabuse themselves of the notion that closing a school is bad for education. We've seen two examples in Leeds county in recent years where arguably students are better served after school closures, since they are now housed in far better facilities, namely Meadowview and Thousand Islands elementary schools.

"Facilities such as libraries, gymnasiums and science and computer labs are likely to be vastly improved when students are moved to schools that are somewhat larger.

"Premier Dalton McGuinty is correct when he argues that academic achievement, rather than the number of buildings, is the real measure of the province's school system.

"In fact, the money needed to keep open half-empty buildings would be far better spent in the classroom. It's the children, not the buildings, that matter most when it comes to education."

This is a quote in that member's newspaper, the Brockville Recorder and Times.

Here we have the community coming out and saying-I look in my riding at Dickson's Corners Public School. In December 2006, I went out to Dickson's Corners Public School because a young girl there designed my Christmas card and I went to present her with an award. I drove up to the school,

a very large country school with a gymnasium, and I thought I would be making the presentation in the gymnasium. I went into the school and the number of students in that school filled the library, a small classroom library. With declining enrolment, the community closed that school.

I look at Newington Public School. Shortly after I got elected-the writing was on the wall in the previous Tory government's time here at Queen's Park-once again, declining enrolment closed that school.

I look in the city of Cornwall. I'm talking about a city school in Cornwall, but many rural students are bused to a French public school in that community, Horizon-Jeunesse. Here is the situation: Right at this time, the community is working to amalgamate the students from that school over to Rose des Vents, where they will have all the students housed in one school in that community. I think that's the way communities are making decisions. The parents, in many cases, are making decisions, but it rests on the school boards to make those decisions.

When I see the help that we've given-I look at the school foundation grant, \$1.2 billion in the last two years; I look at \$3.4 billion in rural schools this year-that's a 22.9% increase since 2003. Those are the supports that we've given to the school boards, and these school boards, being elected, are making the decisions.

I rest it there. I have great faith in the school boards in my riding to do what they were elected to do.

1710

Mr. Randy Hillier: I hear all the broken promises, and this is what this debate is about. I'll be supporting this motion, and as the member from the NDP said earlier, it's eminently reasonable. I don't know if the people on the other side of the House know about those words, but it is eminently reasonable.

Broken promises: That's what we're hearing from the other side, a continuation of broken promises. Here is another one that the Premier said: "We're going to regret having closed schools prematurely when we could have kept them open." We've heard from the minister about a new envelope of money, we've heard about the declining enrolment work group, but they're proceeding. When I hear about this new envelope of money, it reminds me of the old days with Canada Post, when we used to hear, "The cheque is in the mail." There's another envelope of money; the cheque is in the mail.

Our rural schools are being closed because this Liberal government is managing the demise of rural Ontario. They are not protecting rural Ontario, they are not defending rural Ontario; they are managing the demise of rural Ontario. Those words come out of a report that that government adopted back in 2004-the panel on the role of government report. Right in there, it said that they will manage the demise of rural Ontario.

As this government just yesterday was playing hooky from their responsibilities and duties to the people of Ontario over in Quebec City, other people in rural Ontario were working. People in rural Ontario drafted up a report card on this government. It's by the Ontario Landowners Association. Guess what? Let me just read a little bit from this report card. Rural affairs-

Interjection: An F.

Mr. Randy Hillier: Oh, an F-Mr. McGuinty "has demonstrated a thorough ignorance of all things affecting rural Ontario." Under education: Mr. McGuinty "demonstrates a complete and constant misunderstanding of the educational system"-another F. Under environment: Mr. McGuinty views this subject "as an exercise in wasteful economics.... He has disbursed millions of dollars to his

favourite NGOs" via the greenbelt. Under ethics here, an F: Mr. McGuinty "demonstrates a complete lack of desire to learn the fundamentals. His daily responses are strongly indicative of a deep-seated pathological contempt."

There is a difference between this side and that side: On this side, we say what we do and we do what we say.

Mr. Jim Wilson: I'm happy to rise in support of this motion. It simply calls upon the government "to suspend any and all board-recommended rural school closures until both the funding formula review and a thorough assessment of alternate uses for the schools have been completed." I don't think that's an unreasonable appeal.

We know that the Premier, then-opposition leader, on June 11, 2002, agreed with this very same idea when he was quoted in the Kitchener-Waterloo Record as saying, "While schools 'will open and close in the natural order of things,' McGuinty said the province should avoid forcing closures while the funding formula is under review." He then went on to say, "We're only going to regret having closed schools prematurely when we could have kept them open." That was in 2002.

Fast forward to 2008, and we have 300 schools on the chopping block, affecting over 100,000 students. In my riding of Simcoe-Grey, the story is just as bleak. Currently, there are seven schools undergoing an accommodation review, which is essentially, depending on how you look at it, the first step before a school is allowed to close. Among those are Elmvale District High School, Stayner Collegiate Institute, Alliston Union Public School, Our Lady of Assumption in New Lowell, the Collingwood campus of the adult learning centre, Tecumseth Beeton public school and Tecumseth North Elementary.

I should note that an accommodation review committee is meeting tonight at 7 o'clock at Alliston Union Public School for a working session on the future of Alliston Union, Cookstown Central, Tecumseth Beeton and Tecumseth North Elementary schools. It's co-chaired by Councillor Jamie Smith. They will have a public meeting on June 17 at 7 p.m. at Tecumseth Beeton public school on Patterson Street.

Now, the list does not include facilities like Duntroon Central Public School that always seem to come perilously close to closure. In fact, Duntroon is a school that I fought very hard to keep open back in the mid-1990s, and I'm happy to say that we were successful in doing that. When the board wanted to close Nottawa Elementary School and bus the students to either Duntroon or Collingwood, I joined the fight, and we won a brand new school for Nottawa. The same goes for Admiral Collingwood. It was supposed to close, leaving Collingwood with only three schools, until we fought to have it replaced, which it was. That was the record of our government.

These schools are at the heart of our rural and small-town communities. As Mr. McGuinty said, again in 2002, "If a rural community loses a school, it's not the same as shutting one down in downtown Toronto where there's another one six blocks away. What you're doing is robbing the community of an important component. It's the heart and soul of a community. If you don't have a school, it's really tough to attract and to hold on to young families."

I completely agree, which makes me wonder why, years later, the Liberal government and the Premier are so bent on stealing the heart and soul right out of Stayner, Elmvale, New Lowell, Beeton, Alliston and Collingwood. It's deplorable, particularly when you consider the commitments the Premier has made. In the last election, on September 18, the Premier walked up to the podium at Newburgh Public School, outside of Kingston, and said, "Rural schools help keep communities strong, which is why we're not only committed to keeping them open-but strengthening them."

Keep this in mind, ladies and gentlemen: This is after the Premier had been in government for four years and he had all the data on finances and enrolment. At the end of the day, this is another example of a Liberal broken promise. The Premier said anything to get elected the first time, and as we saw again in the last election, they said anything to the people of Ontario to get re-elected.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: I'm pleased to rise today to speak to the official opposition day motion, and I really wanted to expand a little bit on what my colleague from Simcoe-Grey had mentioned in his comments just a few moments ago.

I think one of the worst things about the lack of appropriate funding or the threat of school closures is the worry that these communities have. There are two schools in particular that are not too far away from where I live that I wanted to mention.

The one school that has been under a threat for the last couple of years at least, and certainly there is a strong school council that is advocating and working and trying to lobby the school board to stop any threat of closure, is Moonstone Elementary School. It's a small community not too far away from what many people know of as the Mount St. Louis Moonstone ski resort area. Really and truly, if that school was ever to close, there would be really no community there. There would be a bunch of houses, but the school is the centre of the community. The Christmas concerts, the Canada Day celebrations, everything is held at the school, so the thought of moving those children away from that school and moving them off to a larger school somewhere else would be devastating. It would actually be the end of that community.

You know, I was encouraged last year even during the election campaign, when the Premier promised that those sorts of things would not happen, that we wouldn't lose rural schools. So it is disappointing when our critic for education comes forward and finds out there are at least 50 schools in the province today under direct threat of closing, and quite frankly-

Interjection: There are 300 under review.

Mr. Garfield Dunlop: And as I've heard here now, there are 300 under review.

1720

The second school-and it's not in my riding but it's in Mr. Wilson's riding: Elmvale secondary school. There's probably not a better rural secondary school than Elmvale secondary school in our province, for a small school. They've got a great spirit. For the community of Elmvale, which is a small community of 1,600 or 1,700 people, the threat of closure for that school would be absolutely devastating.

I was encouraged last year when I thought that there would be a policy put in place and legislation put in place that would have stopped that from occurring. So I hope the government members will take the time today-particularly the rural members-to support this resolution that is before the House. I think it's important for the government to prove they don't have the hatred of rural Ontario that we on this side of the House believe that they have.

Thank you very much, and again, I hope you'll all support this.

Mr. Toby Barrett: In my riding in Haldimand-Norfolk, a number of elementary schools have narrowly escaped closing. However, others have been less fortunate. As for the high schools, we fought the battle for the Delhi, Burford, Valley Heights and Port Dover high schools, and all but Burford remain open. This meant countless meetings and petitions and briefs, not only to the school board but also to the Ministry of Education.

Very recently, my hometown high school of Port Dover is again, for the second time, being eyed for review after trustees learned that enrolment had declined to 287 students. The board has abandoned its plans to review Norfolk high school for now, but the words and the actions of this present government since 2003 do not convince me that they will put their money where their mouth is and help keep these schools open.

Each and every time, I've reiterated my request for either special provincial funding or a moratorium. Last week, this side of the House once again called on this government to put in place a moratorium on these closures until the review of the funding formula has been completed.

In the interests of time, I want to reiterate that I'm personally underwhelmed by this government's-at one time, there was a toothless moratorium request. It was a voluntary moratorium put forward to two ministries. In spite of that, the closures did continue at that time. Prior to the 2007 election, this Premier said, with regard to rural schools, and I'm sure we have heard this already this afternoon, "We're not only committed to keeping them open but to strengthening them as well." Premier, with 50 rural schools closing, and we now see accommodation reviews on another 300, it's an awfully strange way to live up to that kind of statement.

What this government perhaps does not understand is that rural schools keep our smaller communities alive and vibrant. Regrettably, when a school closes, in particular a high school, there's a great deal of collateral damage that occurs. Once that school is closed, we see restaurants close; we see a decline in property values. Families are forced to move out of town, in particular those families with young people coming up to high school age.

I know that rural education in my riding does not have time to wait for action from this government. Smaller communities are already suffering at the hands of this government, and for many of these towns, a school closure would be that final nail in the coffin. As this government continues to delay honouring funding promises, school trustees across the province are left with that unfortunate task of making decisions for this government; essentially, making decisions in a vacuum. Sadly, we remain locked in this battle to convince those who hold the purse strings, those who have their hand on policy—we are seeing no action, and the need for action is presently in need right now.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: I am pleased to be able to join the debate, but I must say that there's a certain amount of gall involved in criticizing Liberal government management of schools when we think back to the official opposition's record.

The Conservatives really mismanaged the education system. They cut \$1 billion out of the education system. There were 15,000 fewer teachers in the school situation when they finished than when they began. How many days do you think were lost because of disruption in the school system? There were 26 million lost days from these people's mismanagement.

Now, as many of you know, I was a school trustee through all of the Mike Harris years and through all of the NDP government years. I'd like to tell you a little bit about my experience in closing a particular school, because one of the schools that I closed, I must say, with the consent of the community, was a small K to 6 school. It was an old, open concept school. There was a neighbouring school next door. We were closing this school in a very high-needs, high-risk area and building an addition at the neighbouring school and turning it into a K to 8.

The community was actually very supportive of the move, so with the support of the community, we closed the school because we could provide better programming and a better facility. But their rules said that if we closed a school, the provincial government got to scoop it back, and that's what they did. They took back this little K to 6 school in a high-needs community. Do you know what we found

out they were going to do with it? What they were going to do with it was sell it to a private school operator, which tells you how it came to be that there were 200 private schools open when these people were in government, a 50% increase in private school enrolment.

Do you know what we did? We found out-

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Will the member please take her seat. I ask the House to come to order, on both sides, and I return to the member for Guelph.

Mrs. Liz Sandals: So when we found out they were going to sell it to a private school, we actually unclosed the school, because we weren't letting it go to a private school. Do you know what we did? We then started the process all over again, and this time we managed to do what we had wanted to do in the first place. We quite legally, with the co-operation of the municipality, transferred the school to the municipality, which, in turn, transferred it to the children's aid and turned this school into a wonderful social service community support hub for a community which was very high risk and very high need. That is how you want to assess community need-the way we did it, not the way they do it, which is just selling it to a private school.

I do want to tell you what we have done since we came into office. Despite the fact that there are 90,000 fewer students in the system, we have actually added \$4 billion to the school system. But, in particular, when we talk about rural schools-in fact, about all schools-we have funded a principal and a secretary for each and every school. They didn't do that. There wasn't enough money to go around for principals in schools.

We've put \$3.4 billion into rural schools this year. That's an increase of 23% since we came in. In fact, the most rural schools have something called the supported school grant. I'd like to tell you about the supported school grant, because we recognize that there are some very small schools in very small communities that must stay open. We've created the supported school grant so that can happen.

So for very small, very remote elementary schools, we are ensuring that those very small schools get-they have to have at least 50 students and be remote-at least 7.5 teachers. That's almost one teacher for every seven students. The reason we're doing that is to ensure that we don't get into the situation where you've got three or four grades in one class. It ensures that the elementary program can be delivered properly.

At secondary, if it's a very remote school, the funding is even more generous. For just 50 students, we ensure that there are 14 teachers in that school, so that a full range of proper secondary programming can be delivered.

So we have no need to take any lessons from these folks on how to manage rural schools. In fact, Emily Noble, the past president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, said, "The supported schools allocation recognizes that small elementary schools in remote areas have a number of challenges. No matter their size, these schools must provide a full range of services for their students."

It is true that some schools continue to close, but we

actually have something called the prohibitive-to-repair grant, which allows us to provide better programming in better schools. In fact, all over this province, we are replacing schools that are old,

that are worn out, and making sure that the kids have a better program, a better opportunity to achieve, a better opportunity to graduate.

That's what we believe in: a better experience for students, not necessarily a school building on every corner. Thank you very much. I will be opposing this motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): Mr. Runciman has moved opposition day number 4. Is it the pleasure of the House that the motion carry?

All those in favour of the motion will please say "aye."

All those opposed will please say "nay."

In my opinion, the nays have it.

Call in the members. This will be a 10-minute bell.

The division bells rang from 1732 to 1742.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): All those in favour of the motion will please rise one at a time and be counted by the table.

Ayes

Bailey, Robert

Barrett, Toby

Gélinas, France

Hardeman, Ernie

Hillier, Randy

Jones, Sylvia

Klees, Frank

Marchese, Rosario

Miller, Norm

Ouellette, Jerry J.

Runciman, Robert W.

Savoline, Joyce

Sterling, Norman W.

Wilson, Jim

Witmer, Elizabeth

Yakabuski, John

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): All those opposed to the motion, please rise one at a time.

Nays

Aggelonitis, Sophia

Albanese, Laura

Arthurs, Wayne

Best, Margaret

Brown, Michael A.

Brownell, Jim

Bryant, Michael

Cansfield, Donna H.

Caplan, David

Carroll, Aileen

Colle, Mike

Crozier, Bruce

Delaney, Bob

Dickson, Joe

Dombrowsky, Leona

Duguid, Brad

Duncan, Dwight

Flynn, Kevin Daniel

Gerretsen, John

Hoy, Pat

Jaczek, Helena

Jeffrey, Linda

Kular, Kuldip  
Kwinter, Monte  
Lalonde, Jean-Marc  
Leal, Jeff  
Mangat, Amrit  
Mauro, Bill  
McMeekin, Ted  
McNeely, Phil  
Meilleur, Madeleine  
Mitchell, Carol  
    Naqvi, Yasir  
Oraziotti, David  
Phillips, Gerry  
Pupatello, Sandra  
Qaadri, Shafiq  
Ramal, Khalil  
Ramsay, David  
Rinaldi, Lou  
Ruprecht, Tony  
Sandals, Liz  
Sorbara, Greg  
Sousa, Charles  
Watson, Jim  
Wilkinson, John  
Wynne, Kathleen O.  
Zimmer, David

The Clerk of the Assembly (Ms. Deborah Deller): The ayes are 16; the nays are 48.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): The ayes being 16 and the nays being 48, I declare the motion lost.

Negatived.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Ted Arnott): It being 5:45 p.m., this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1745.