

By **STAR EDITORIAL BOARD**

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Parents in rural Ontario are struggling with the new reality that local schools are closing, forcing young children to spend two hours or longer on a daily bus commute. That's no way to get an education. It's also not a healthy way to live. For a government that promotes daily exercise and school hubs as "vibrant centres of community life," the threat of some 600 school closures is oddly counter-intuitive. As the Star's Kristin Rushowy reports, school boards across Ontario are [struggling](#) to deal with a declining student population. Many boards are targeting small rural schools for closure, even though their enrolment is often higher than schools in larger centres.

Some young children trudge up the bus stairs at 7:15 a.m. and don't get back home until after 4 p.m. Andrea Elgar told Rushowy that her daughters' commute will grow longer if plans to close Honey Harbour's only two elementary schools come to fruition.

It's not just the long hours that are detrimental, says Elgar, but the total disconnect from local life. "If you take the kids and put them in a community they have no connection to, they won't have the opportunity to get to know the community," Elgar said. It's a key point that government officials seem to be missing.

#### **Article Continued Below**

Education Minister Mitzie Hunter must show leadership on this issue and ensure that all Ontario children can access education without suffering hardship from rampant school closures.

There are creative ways to achieve school equity. For example, some boards in northern Ontario cap bus commutes to 30 minutes each way for young students, 45 minutes for middle schools and one hour for high schools. Other boards leave small town schools alone and make cuts in larger centres that already have multiple schools. In an imperfect world, these practices make sense. The education ministry should enshrine methods like these in universal guidelines, instead of allowing the current ad hoc approach.

When parents [protested](#) at Queen's Park late last year, they cited problems with the ministry's new funding formula that focuses on enrolment numbers rather than student success or community life. Education Minister Hunter pointed out that the ministry now requires community consultation.

But the closures keep coming. As NDP MPP France Gélinas said, "Kids are longer on the bus than they are in school learning.... It makes it really hard to make kids like going to school." It's hard to argue with that.

For many children, hours spent on a dreary bus ride are hours they can't be in extra-circular sports, clubs or just playing shinny. Ontario must do better, for the sake its children.