



Safeguarding Rural Schools

A strong advocate for protecting Ontario's rural schools for more than a decade

The Community Schools Alliance was formed in 2009 to unite the municipal community around the call for a better system to decide when and where we build and close schools.

Between 2011 and 2017, hundreds of schools in rural communities closed. The Community Schools Alliance helped bring about a provincial moratorium on school closures, which was first announced in 2017, and still stands. However, rural communities cannot be complacent. Municipalities need to be prepared ahead of time to work with their local school boards and the Province in case the moratorium is lifted.

Local schools are key to building healthy, sustainable rural communities across Ontario. When a community loses its school, it's harder to attract and retain residents and businesses, and to sustain services that people depend on.

Through the Community Schools Alliance, municipalities are calling for a better, more holistic approach to manage decisions to close schools:



1 Community-focused

A school is more than bricks and mortar. In rural and northern municipalities, local schools are cornerstones of the community that promote livability for all residents.

Decisions should be based on principles that consider the broad impact, including social and financial impacts of changes to school infrastructure on students and their community.



2 Collaborative

Municipal governments and local school boards serve shared communities and taxpayers. School buildings offer facilities for learning and community events.

The Alliance advocates for municipal councils and school boards to work together more closely to make democratically based decisions that will have the best outcomes for the entire community.



3 Creative

New guidelines must reflect that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to ensuring we have the right schools in the right places. Working together, schools and municipalities can find creative local solutions. Rural schools can become multi-purpose spaces and community hubs, for example.

Impacts: What the research says

The impact of school closures is real and measurable. Recent research on Ontario school closures, published in 2023, confirms school closures impact families, communities and the province.

School closures hit children the hardest. They are uprooted from the familiarity and stability of their school, relocated to a school in another city or town, and often face lengthy bus rides. They spend less time participating in extracurriculars, connecting with peers, or taking part in other activities within their home community.¹

Closures perpetuate inequities. Public school closures have been most common in smaller, less affluent communities with less diversity and lower levels of education. This perpetuates a harmful cycle where residents leave due to lack of services, further reducing a municipality's ability to provide those services and worsening existing social inequality.²

School closures perpetuate population decline. Research conducted for the Alliance at Western University showed that communities with schools have more private amenities and public services, regardless of population.³ Having a school is tied to public and private investment in a community and key to its economic vitality. If a school closes because population is declining or expected to decline, it makes it even more difficult to spur population growth.

¹ Patricia A. Collins, Rachel Barber, Jeff R. Masuda, Gabrielle Snow, Socio-spatial dimensions of school closures and neighbourhood change in Ontario: An environmental injustice?, *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, Volume 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2023.100138>.

² Barber, R., Hartt, M., & Collins, P. (2023). Excessive rightsizing? The interdependence of public school closures and population shrinkage. *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes*, 68(1), 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12870>

³ Wray, A., Dyce, B., & Gilliland, J. (2023). Exploring the social and economic impact of schools on rural communities in Ontario, Canada. *Spatial Knowledge and Information Canada 2023*, Short Paper 17. SKI2023 Volume DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/N6DU5. Retrieved from <https://skiconference.ca>.

Support your community, help protect rural schools

Joining the Community Schools Alliance is the best way to take part in ongoing advocacy and work to ensure that rural needs are addressed if a moratorium is lifted. The Ministry, school boards, and municipalities need to work together to:

- Improve transparency and accountability in capital infrastructure decision-making by school boards,
- Review funding to rural and small community schools,
- Create a predictable Accommodation Review Committee process,
- Improve policies that address planning for declining enrolments.

A better system is needed to address the educational facility needs of Ontario's smaller communities.