



Community
Schools
Alliance

Ministry of Education Delegation - ROMA

Date: Monday, January 23, 2023

Time: 10:40 a.m.

Location: 4th Floor, Rosedale

Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education Matthew Rae, MPP

On behalf of the Township of Zorra and the Community Schools Alliance, I thank you and your staff for offering us this meeting.

The Community Schools Alliance is a non-profit organization; our executive includes current and former elected members with extensive experience in both municipal government and working successfully with school boards.

Our goal is to work with the Ontario Ministry of Education, municipalities, and school boards to develop a collaborative process that results in democratically determined decisions regarding education infrastructure. We believe such decisions about school consolidations and closures should focus, not only on the effects on current and future students, but must also consider community impacts as well.

Our mission is to have greater collaboration between school boards and municipalities in making decisions about where new schools are built and where schools are closed. ***All students should have the opportunity to attend elementary and secondary school in their home community.***

The CSA and its members have not been passive on this issue and are doing our part to advance it.

As you may remember from previous delegations the CSA has funded specific research of our own on the importance of schools to rural, northern, and single-school communities.

Schools serve important functions within smaller communities by supporting overall vitality and sustainability. Research shows that small rural and northern communities with schools tend to have more private amenities and more public services than those without schools. Closing a school in a single-school community threatens the future existence of those amenities and services and the quality of life of the families living there. It also reduces the ability to attract new growth and economic development to the community.

Further, at a time when education administrators and educators are already struggling to address a recent rise in violence and mental health issues in our schools, proposing the closure of a school in a small rural or northern community risks exacerbating those issues.

Educational policy in Ontario over the past two decades has resulted in the amalgamation of smaller local schools into larger buildings, and often the closure of schools in smaller communities. Instead of attending school within their local community, many students are forced to attend schools in communities further away from home. This trend towards bussing rural and smaller community students into other communities can have wide-ranging impacts on the health, wellbeing, and stability of students, parents, and affected communities. The impacts of these closures may not be immediately apparent, with potentially longer-term impacts that affect economic competitiveness and socioeconomic outcomes being experienced decades later.

Our research clearly shows that communities with schools, independent of overall population, tend to have more services in the community like banks, grocery stores, emergency services, libraries, and community centres. These communities also tend to have more residents who have moved into the community within the last five years, more affordable and recently constructed housing options, and more school age children compared to the general population.

All these factors contribute to a comparative advantage for communities with schools. Given Ontario's population growth patterns, it would appear young families are seeking out communities that have schools, and in turn, better services.

Moreover, communities that can gain approval for the construction of a new subdivision may be more attractive given cheaper housing and, most importantly, being able to secure funds and land for the construction of a new school. However, this trend of new construction often results in the closure of an older school somewhere else in the same school board, potentially impacting the economic growth potential of another smaller community.

Unfortunately, under the current governance model, local area municipalities have no influence over school board capital infrastructure decisions. Many smaller municipalities may even be forecasting growth that would support a school with declining enrolment. However, they have no way to prevent a school closure and disposition of land should the school board choose to do so in the short-term to meet new growth elsewhere in the board.

With the current housing crisis in Ontario many of these communities are, or will be, experiencing growth pressure. For example, according to the latest census data Zorra and Oxford are growing faster than the provincial average. These small community schools can be a key support mechanism and/or catalyst for these growing communities and can then alleviate growth pressure on some communities with higher housing costs.

As stated in previous delegations, we believe the Rural and Northern Education Fund is a key policy tool in achieving the goals of rural and northern communities in keeping, replacing, and adding schools appropriately. We consider the RNEF to be a very significant policy introduction. It represents a significant and appropriate departure from the generally one-size-fits-all, cookie cutter approach of previous provincial grant formulas. It helps school boards with the costs of maintaining rural schools that too often have surplus pupil places. The RNEF has served rural and northern Ontario well. We believe it has the potential to do even more. We have two suggestions.

The \$21.6 M offered to boards through the RNEF is a relatively small part of the Grant for Student Needs. **We recommend maintaining the formula used to determine the schools that qualify for the RNEF while enhancing the allocation to \$50 M.**

Boards that can offer the extra funding to their qualifying schools will be enabled do even more to increase staffing and provide a more effective program for their students.

If these small schools in small communities that have the capacity to house more students are to play a role in accommodating the anticipated growth in Ontario, the RNEF could be a key tool in keeping them open until that growth materializes. Until then, we encourage the ministry to encourage schools boards to collaborate with municipalities to identify community uses of the surplus space.

We are well aware that the Minister is under pressure from school board associations to lift the moratorium on closures and understand that at some point it will be lifted. **We recommend that when the moratorium is lifted, it remain in place for schools that qualify for the RNEF until a thorough review of the education funding formula can be completed.**

We are also aware that the 2018 Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline requires templates which, if completed, have not been made public. One will be used by an administration to prepare a submission recommending a review for the board's consideration. Another will be used for the Economic Impact Study to be completed in connection with the Initial Staff Report. **We would welcome an invitation to participate in any consultation to be undertaken as part of the development of these two templates.**

When the 2018 PARG was released, it was also announced that the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline would be updated "to enhance planning and reporting practices". **We are interested to know if the update is still being planned by the Ministry and would also be pleased to part of any consultation on this important Guideline introduced in 2015.**



Community
Schools
Alliance

We appreciated your response to Councillor Jaworsky during the Ministers' Forum at the AMO conference last August, especially your commitment to "maintain a moratorium on school closures until we have better reviewed the formula and understand the true economic and community impact of closures". **Are you able to share any information on a review of the funding model with us today?**

The Community Schools Alliance, and Zorra, understand both the importance of addressing problems in a larger context and the budgetary challenges of governing a large and complex system.

However, we bring an experienced rural and northern voice to these discussions and would welcome an opportunity continue to work with you to ensure all students have access to education in their home community.

We would like a meeting to further discuss the CSA research, the RNEF, and the PARG at a future date.

Thank you.

Marcus Ryan
Mayor, Township of Zorra
Warden, Oxford County
Vice Chair, Community Schools Alliance
mryan@zorra.on.ca
1.519.301.1634

Doug Reycraft
Chair, Community Schools Alliance
reycraft@sympatico.ca
1.519.494.2508

Township of Zorra
1.519.485.2490