

Sent via e-mail: premier@ontario.ca
mitzie.hunter@ontario.ca

March 16, 2017

The Honourable Kathleen Wynne
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building
Queen's Park
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1A1

The Honourable Mitzie Hunter
Minister of Education
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

Dear Premier Wynne and Minister Hunter:

On behalf of AMO members, I am writing to express our continuing concern with the growing number of school closures across the province. This issue has risen to the forefront among our members, with many municipal governments passing Council resolutions calling for a moratorium on school closures.

As you know, in communities where school closures are taking place, residents feel a negative impact on student wellbeing and the loss of the community connection a school provides. In rural areas with only one school, school closures can lead to families considering relocation and eventual disinvestment in the area. There are also negative impacts on student wellbeing as they are often bused away from their communities to the next nearest school. In communities of all sizes, while larger schools may offer specialized programs, activities, and facilities, local schools allow for students to develop a sense of community, and better connect with other students and teachers. A further concern is that the Province's plan to add 100,000 new child care spaces in school facilities may be thwarted by school closures.

While AMO acknowledges the recent response from the Ministries of Education and Infrastructure to the growing concerns around school closures, the provincial response does not, in our view, go so far as to address the issue. The new funding for planning for joint-use opportunities between school boards is welcome, as are initiatives to explore how developing community hubs could support schools. However, we caution that the development of community hubs should not be seen as a panacea solution. In some cases, having community organizations or other entities share school resources may assist in allowing a school to remain open, but this presumes that these organizations have resources to contribute, which is not the case in all communities.

Effectively addressing the concerns around school closures, will require changes to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines, funding allocation, and school board planning. Our colleagues at the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) recently sent a letter focusing on the rural impact of school closures, and urging changes in these three areas. I would like to add AMO's support for ROMA's recommendations, given that the issue affects communities across the province. In particular, I would like to emphasize the following:

Reverse the changes to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines to allow for greater community input. Allowing the Accommodation Review Committee to develop options and vote on decisions, requiring students, community members and municipal government representation on the Committee, and requiring additional opportunities for consultation through a longer review process would help achieve this.

Ensure the value of a school to its students' wellbeing, community and local economy, are formally considered in the review process. This should be done by requiring this information to be included in the school profile, in addition to school and school board data.

Financially support low-enrolment schools with high community value, and support long-term school board planning and partnership development. AMO would encourage the Province to streamline and enhance funding for schools operating at below capacity, "supported" schools, and rural and remote schools. Considering that population and demographics are changing in communities across the province, supporting long-term planning and the identification of school board-wide issues would help proactive problem solving. A focus on developing partnerships before new schools develop and throughout the lifespan of a school would also facilitate innovative solutions. Services and agencies funded by the Province could also be required to consider using available school space before they build, purchase, or lease any other space.

AMO looks forward to further engagement with you and your staff on this issue. Community vitality and the education for our children and youth is an issue of particular interest to Ontario municipalities, as it is to the Province of Ontario. I look forward to working together towards a positive outcome.

Yours sincerely,



Lynn Dollin
AMO President

cc: The Honourable Bob Chiarelli, Minister of Infrastructure
The Honourable Bill Mauro, Minister of Municipal Affairs
Ron Holman, Chair, ROMA