



## **Community Schools Alliance**

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### **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIR**

August 13, 2017

Eight years ago, on August 17, 2009, in this same hotel, a meeting to introduce the Community Schools Alliance to municipal leaders across the province drew a standing-room-only audience. The Alliance was a product of growing concern with a perceived undemocratic process being followed by school boards to close schools. Generally those schools were judged by boards to be too small to provide a quality programme or had too much unused space because of enrolment decline. The following day at the Ministers' Forum of the annual AMO conference, several delegates went to the microphone to ask then Education Minister Kathleen Wynne to implement a moratorium on closures until the ministry's accommodation review guideline could be reviewed and modified so that communities and municipal councils could have a meaningful role in the process.

Since that 2009 meeting, representatives of the Alliance have met with successive education ministers to plead the case that the one-size-fits-all guideline being used across Ontario to close schools was a disaster for rural and northern communities. At each meeting, we asked that a moratorium be declared to allow time for a better system to be developed.

So you will understand that it is a particular pleasure, as chair of the Alliance's executive committee since its formation, to have the opportunity to present this annual report with the moratorium finally in place.

And today I want to acknowledge the efforts of executive committee members who, over the past eight years, have contributed their time and expertise to help convince the provincial government that "our publicly funded education system must do more to engage communities when making decisions about the future of schools". I have taken that quote from Minister Mitzi Hunter in her June 28 Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education.

I extend my thanks to those who have served on the Community Schools Alliance executive over the past eight years and to the municipal councils and citizens who have supported them.

At last year's Annual General Meeting in Windsor, eight of us were elected by acclamation to the CSA Executive Committee under a constitution adopted in 2015. Three available positions were left vacant. As provided in our constitution, the Executive Committee determined who among the eight would be deemed to be elected for three-year terms, for two-year terms and for a one-year term. That is in place to ensure a degree of continuity while still opening the committee up to annual elections.

As a result, Deputy Mayor Patricia Greig of Northern Bruce Peninsula, Councillor Carol Lowery of Temagami, and Councillor Marcus Ryan of Zorra Township have now served the first year of a three-year term. Warden Alan Barfoot of Grey County, Councillor Jim Collard of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Councillor Michael McCooye of Neebing and Mayor Denis Doyle of Frontenac Islands have one year remaining on their two-year terms. My own one-year term is ending but Councillor Stephen Harvey of Middlesex Centre and I have been elected, again by acclamation, to three-year terms. Two available positions on the executive committee remain vacant. I expect that we will soon be sending an email to members asking for nominations that the executive can consider for appointments to fill the vacancies.

The June 28 announcement of a moratorium by Minister Hunter was the culmination of eight years of advocacy by the Alliance and followed our busiest year ever. That was unfortunately the consequence of a tsunami of accommodation reviews and recommendations for school closures that followed the release of the revised Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline by then Minister of Education Liz Sandals in March, 2015. We will be urging Minister Hunter to implement a much more open and wider consultation as part of the new review of the Guideline that has been promised during the moratorium.

The Executive Committee met a total of eight times since last year's AGM. Seven of those were by conference call and the other was a face-to-face meeting in Toronto during the ROMA conference.

Earlier this year a new organization, The Ontario Alliance Against School Closures, was formed using social media, primarily Facebook, to facilitate communication between advocates in communities where closures were being strenuously resisted. Its Facebook page continues to receive frequent posts from others who remain frustrated by the actions or inactions of school boards. Both vice-chair Marcus Ryan and I were in frequent contact with the leaders of this related group and I participated in their April rally at Queen's Park.

In addition to responding to numerous requests for interviews with print, radio and television reporters, I took advantage of an invitation to talk about school closures in rural and Northern Ontario on a mid-January segment of Steve Paikin's The Agenda along with Annie Kidder of People for Education and the presidents of both the public and Catholic school board associations.

During the past year Executive Committee members have met with Education Minister Mitzie Hunter, Official Opposition Leader and PC Education critic Patrick Brown and NDP Education Critic Peggy Sattler. Both opposition parties voted unanimously in support following an afternoon debate on March 7 of Mr. Brown's motion to establish an immediate moratorium on school closures. As CSA chair, I attended the debate and vote at Queen's Park.

The Executive Committee found it interesting that on March 6, the day prior to the debate on Mr. Brown's motion, Minister Hunter announced an 'engagement' process. Its purpose was to seek input from parents, students, communities, school boards and municipalities on how to strengthen education in rural and Northern Ontario. She released a discussion paper at the same time. It's the kind of consultation that should have been used as part of the review that ended with the release of the current Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline in 2015. The 'engagement' announcement was followed by the release in late April of the schedule of ten public meetings that were conducted between May 5<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. Executive Committee members participated in some of those sessions.

While many recommended closures around the province received much media attention, perhaps none received a higher profile than Beavercrest Community School in Markdale. The closure recommendation to the Bluewater District School Board attracted offers of private sector funding that were widely publicized. The CSA chair accepted an invitation from the Municipality of Grey Highlands to add the Alliance's voice to those of the many students, parents, municipal leaders and citizens in the mandatory final public meeting for presentations to the Board. The Board agreed at a later meeting to defer a decision on the closure to the spring of 2018.

As important as the moratorium is, it is a tragedy that it applies only to new reviews and recommendations for closure. The documents released by the Ministry of Education announcing the moratorium and another revision of the guideline represent a clear acknowledgement by the Minister that she now agrees that the guideline and the funding formula do not meet the needs of rural and Northern Ontario. The fact that the recent accommodation reviews and the closure recommendations approved this spring followed a guideline that the Minister now recognizes as inadequate and therefore flawed should lead to a conclusion that any closures not yet implemented should be stayed. We will be presenting that position to the Minister during a meeting on Tuesday.

We are waiting for more information on the promised review of the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline. Very few details were included in the June 28 announcement. We are encouraged by the commitment to work with key stakeholders including municipalities, to require longer timelines and an enhanced role for municipal councils, and the exploration of "potential criteria or circumstances that could inform which communities should be served by at least one school". We believe that 'exploration' is a response to the plight of single-school communities threatened with closure that has been a particular focus of our advocacy during the past year.

In 2016 the Executive Committee contracted with a group led by Dr. William Irwin of Huron College at Western University to undertake research on the full costs of school consolidation. Because the cost of operating small schools and schools with surplus space is very often used by school board administrations to support recommendations for consolidations and closures, it is important that we know their full costs, not just the cost-savings to school boards. Because there has been very little research on this in Ontario, we are hopeful that the work of Dr. Irwin and his colleagues will lead to better-informed decisions. Their research will be the subject of their presentation later in this meeting.

In closing, I want to express the appreciation of all of us on the Executive Committee to the municipal councils and councilors who have supported our work with their membership fees over the past two years. Those fees have enabled us to fund some much-needed research.

I also want to acknowledge the continuing support of the Middlesex County council and its IT department who look after our web site. We also owe our gratitude to AMO who will be sending out renewal invoices on our behalf very soon and who look after our finances and to the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake for hosting our teleconferences.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Reycraft". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Doug Reycraft  
Chair, Community Schools Alliance