



## **Community Schools Alliance**

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

August 19, 2018

The past two years have been the most eventful, and I would humbly suggest, the most successful in the nine-year history of the Community Schools Alliance. The spring 'engagement' process announced by former education minister Mitzie Hunter on March 6, 2017 launched a series of ten facilitated public meetings in May in various centres across the province. Several of those meetings were attended by members of our executive committee. The input from parents, students, communities, school boards and municipalities finally convinced the ministry and minister that the existing Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG), introduced in March, 2015, was adversely affecting rural and northern communities. On June 28 of last year, Minister Hunter announced a moratorium on school closures and released a discussion paper "Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education". She also announced a new Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) of \$20 million "dedicated to school boards to enhance education for students in rural and Northern communities".

During the 2017 AMO conference, Alliance executive members joined an Oxford County delegation in a meeting with Minister Hunter. Following a cordial and constructive meeting, an informal follow-up meeting in a hallway with Alexi White and Chris Martin of the minister's staff established a working relationship that proved productive throughout the PARG review. A conference call in September arranged by vice-chair Marcus Ryan with the two staff members provided the Alliance with some details and a proposed schedule for the two-phase consultation that was being designed by the ministry. We also learned of the ministry's plan to establish a Reference Group of representatives of school boards, municipal organizations and other groups including the Community Schools Alliance. Both the CSA chair and Jim Collard (representing OSUM) were appointed to the Reference Group. It also included Professor William Irwin of Huron College of Western University who has been doing research under a contract with the Alliance focused on the impact of school closures on communities. The Reference Group met twice for full-day discussions in November and February and the Community Schools Alliance participated in both discussions.

The first phase of the ministry's review of the PARG – and the Community Planning and Partnership Guideline – opened on October 12 of last year and closed on December 12. The Executive Committee used a two-hour conference call and follow-up emails to draft a response that consisted of 19 recommendations and was submitted prior to the December deadline. Those recommendations are listed here:

- The current Pupil Accommodation Review (PAR) timeframe should be extended beyond the minimum five months and the minimum number of public meetings should revert to the four that were required by the previous PARG.
- The minimum modified PAR timeline of three months should be eliminated.
- An impacted municipal council should be invited to appoint a representative to be a member of an Accommodation Review Committee (ARC).
- An ARC should have the option of extending the timeframe and the number of meetings if a new closure recommendation is added during the accommodation review process.
- At least three accommodation options (a recommended option, an alternative option and a status quo option) should be included in the initial staff report.
- The initial staff report must include how the options will impact the school board budget, student programming and achievement, student well-being and the impact on the community and the local economy.
- School boards should invite elected municipal representatives and municipal staff to a meeting to discuss the initial staff report with school board trustees and staff.
- A school board's capital plan must list all families of schools planned to be recommended for accommodation reviews during the upcoming five-year period.
- A school board's capital plan must be part of the agenda for meetings with municipalities required by the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPPG).
- Meetings required by the CPPG should permit two-way sharing of capital plans to facilitate integrated community planning.
- Meetings required by the CPPG should permit elected municipal officials to communicate directly with school board trustees.
- The Ministry of Municipal Affairs should be encouraged to require each single and upper tier municipal government to establish a Municipal School Advisory Committee to serve as a liaison between the municipality and the school boards with schools within the municipal boundary.
- Municipalities and school boards should be encouraged to establish community hubs in underutilized schools before the schools are closed.

- The provincial regulation on the disposition of surplus property (Regulation #444) should be amended to permit municipalities to purchase school buildings before they are closed and lease the space needed for education back to the school board.
- The provincial regulation on the disposition of surplus property (Regulation #444) should be amended to permit municipalities to purchase school buildings at a price based on the property's Fair Market Value as an institutional use.
- A model of school ownership that would have a school established in leased space in a building owned by a municipality and subject to a proper asset management plan should be developed by the ministry.
- The Ministry of Education should continue to enhance the annual capital funding in the Joint-Use Seed Funding Program to provide a greater incentive for coterminous school boards to establish joint-use schools, particularly in rural and northern Ontario.
- The Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) should become a permanent component of the Grant for Student Needs and should be enhanced with funds saved through the reduction in top-up funding.
- Lastly, while not part of this review, it is our position that the physical size of school boards in rural Ontario and the North is too large to permit effective democratic governance and should be reduced to create a larger number of boards with each representing a smaller jurisdiction.

During the first phase of the ministry's consultation, the Community Schools Alliance took advantage of two opportunities to draw attention to the review and the Alliance's response. On November 11, the chair participated on a panel at the annual conference of People for Education in Toronto. On November 25, he was part of a panel at a Rural Education Symposium at Embro in Oxford County. Vice-chair Marcus Ryan was a key organizer of the symposium and it's notable that two members of Minister Hunter's staff attended the symposium and were active participants in roundtable discussions.

On January 17, four days before the annual conference of the Rural Ontario Municipal Conference, a provincial cabinet shuffle saw Indira Naidoo-Harris replace Mitzie Hunter as Minister of Education. The Community School Alliance organized a panel presentation during the conference with Chair Reycraft, Vice-Chair Ryan and Katherine Sedgwick of Queensborough in Hastings County all providing presentations. Zorra Township had again requested a meeting with the Minister of Education and delegates were able to introduce themselves and some CSA executive members to the recently-appointed Minister Naidoo-Harris.

In early February, Minister Naidoo-Harris released a Draft Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) and announced the second phase of the consultation. It included significant amendments to the 2015 version and feedback was invited with a March 23, 2018 deadline. The following are the significant changes in the February draft:

- 1. Initial Staff Report to have at least 3 options including status quo instead of “one or more”
- 2. Initial Staff Report to follow ministry-approved template (under development)
- 3. Each option in Initial Staff Report to address 4 impacts:
  - Student programming
  - Student well-being
  - School board resources
  - Local community
- 4. “Impact on the local community” to include consideration of local economy if at least one school eligible for RNEF
- 5. Minimum number of public meetings increased from 2 to 3
- 6. Final Staff Report must include secondary school student feedback
- 7. Extra public meeting within 20 business days if new school closure introduced in Final Staff Report
- 8. Within 5 days of trustee approval of review, notices sent to Head of affected councils and CAO with invitation to meeting
- 9. Minimum time between first and final of 3 or more public meetings increased from 40 to 60 business days
- 10. Modified review prohibited if one or more schools in review qualify for RNEF
- 11. New section to describe Administrative Review process and conditions

The Executive Committee again used a conference call and follow-up emails to develop a response to the draft. Here is our submission:

“We support the second paragraph of the preamble which reads in part “When a school board identifies a school that is projected to have long-term excess space, a school board would typically look at a number of options such as:

- moving attendance boundaries and programs to balance enrolment between over and underutilized schools;
- offering to lease underutilized space within a school to a coterminous school board;
- finding community partners who can pay the full cost of operating the underutilized space; and/or
- decommissioning or demolishing a section of the school that is not required for student use to reduce operating costs.”

**We recommend that the Initial Staff Report described in Section VI of the draft must include a description of the actions taken on all four options listed above.**

In Memorandum 2018:B02 to Directors of Education and Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities, a section titled Initial Staff Report states that boards will be required to use a ministry-approved template and also states that “impact on extracurriculars, student transportation and school climate surveys could be considered for inclusion”.

**We recommend that the template to be used to prepare the Initial Staff Report shall require that the impact on extracurriculars, student transportation and school climate surveys be included.**

We believe that each municipal council within the attendance area of a school recommended for closure should have the opportunity to appoint a representative to the Accommodation Review Committee.

**We recommend that the first sentence of the second paragraph in the segment of Section VII titled Membership be revised to read “Where established by a school board’s pupil accommodation review policy, representation from students and the broader community, including the municipal council(s) within the school’s attendance area, shall be invited.**

We applaud the requirement of a meeting with municipalities as described in Section IX but are concerned that the draft is silent on the timing of the meeting. We believe it must occur early in the review process.

**We recommend that Section IX be amended to require that the meeting with municipalities be scheduled within 30 days of the Board of Trustees’ approval to undertake a pupil accommodation review, before the accommodation review committee is established and before the first public meeting.**

We believe that the proceedings of any meeting(s) with municipalities should be reported to the Board of Trustees before they make a final decision regarding a pupil accommodation review.

**We recommend that the segment of Section XI titled Final Staff Report be amended to require that the segment includes a report that summarizes the proceedings of any meeting(s) with municipalities.**

We are very concerned with the timeline for the first public meeting. We believe that 30 business days between the Board of Trustees’ approval to conduct a pupil accommodation review and the first public meeting is not sufficient time to provide written notice to municipalities, establish an accommodation review committee and conduct an orientation session for the committee. We also feel, as indicated above, that the meeting with municipalities should occur before the first public meeting,

**We recommend that Section XIII be amended to require that, beginning with the date of the Board of Trustees’ approval to conduct a pupil accommodation review, there must be no fewer than 60 days before the first public meeting is held.**

We are pleased that the draft guideline requires that an economic impact assessment be

completed and considered if a school proposed for closure is eligible to receive support from the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF). We are also pleased that the Modified Pupil Accommodation Review may not be undertaken if one or more of the schools included in the review is RNEF-eligible. We regard these provisions as a departure from the one-size-fit-all approach of previous versions of the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and applaud them.”

On April 27, with very little fanfare, the ministry released the final revised version of the PARG. Here are the additional changes that the ministry made to the February draft:

- 1. “Options” changed to “scenarios”
- 2. Initial Staff Report still requires 3 scenarios but status quo not required
- 3. “Impact on local economy” to follow ministry-approved template (under development)
- 4. Notices and invitations to councils must go to single, lower, and upper-tiers
- 5. Council responses to Initial Staff Report must be included in Final Staff Report if submitted before final of 3 or more public meetings
- 6. Meeting for municipalities to discuss Initial Staff Report must happen before first of 3 or more public meetings
- 7. Minimum time between trustee approval of review and first of 3 or more public meetings increased from 30 to 40 days
- 8. Template for Initial Staff Report ‘likely’ to include impact on extra-curriculars, student transportation and school climate surveys

This year the Community Schools Alliance became a sponsor of the annual OSUM conference in Niagara Falls held May 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>. A panel presentation similar to the one at the ROMA conference in January was made. On this occasion, however, we were able to provide a description of the final PARG.

Although the consultation on the PARG has concluded, the moratorium established on June 28, 2017 continues to be in force. The revised document references templates that school board administrations are required to use for the Initial Staff Report to the board and the Economic Impact Study required if at least one school eligible for the Rural and Northern Education Fund is included in a review. Those templates were to be developed in consultation with the Reference Group (of which both the chair and Jim Collard are members) over the summer and be made available this fall. However, there has been no communication with members of the Reference Group and we are waiting for some announcement from Minister Lisa Thompson. A meeting with Minister Thompson is scheduled for Tuesday morning during this AMO conference and it is

hoped that the delegation may gain some information about the templates and the moratorium at that time.

The Executive Committee is generally pleased with the outcome of the review. We will continue to advocate for increases in the \$20 million Rural and Northern Education Fund. However we see its use to determine which schools in a review make an economic impact study necessary as a major improvement. It represents a clear departure from the one-size-fits-all approach that has damaged the future of many rural and northern communities.

Dr. William Irwin of Huron College and his colleagues continue to conduct research on the impact of school closures in Ontario for the Community Schools Alliance. He is also teamed with Patricia Collins of Queens University to study the impact using the Limestone District School Board and the Thames Valley District School Board as their research sites. The latter project is the result of a \$236,000 SSHRC grant. We look forward to a progress report on both projects.

Our ability to fund research and presentations and to support conferences like OSUM depends of the fees paid by our members. I thank the municipal councils and councillors who have supported us in the past and ask for their continued sponsorship.

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.

Lastly I offer my gratitude to the members of our Executive Committee who have been generous with their time and advice as we worked through the most extensive and comprehension consultation on the accommodation review guideline undertaken in my memory.

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