



Community Schools Alliance

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIR August 15, 2021

Unlike previous Annual Reports, this report will summarize the work of the Executive Committee during the past two years since our last annual meeting in August of 2019. Because of the pandemic and the decision of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) to pivot to a virtual Annual General Meeting in August, 2020, the Executive Committee made the decision to cancel the 2020 CSA annual meeting and to extend the terms of members of the committee by one year.

The committee met 10 times during 2019-2020 and held 14 meetings in 2020-2021. The first seven meetings were done using teleconference calls and the rest were conducted using the Zoom video platform. Initially we accessed the Zoom account of Middlesex County and we are grateful to Middlesex for allowing us to use their account while we gained familiarity with the platform. We also appreciate the support we received from Niagara-on-the-Lake who hosted our conference calls for several years. We now have our own subscription to Zoom and are using it for today's first virtual annual meeting.

We have partnered with municipal delegations at AMO and ROMA conferences to meet with Minister Stephen Lecce and/or Parliamentary Assistant Sam Oosterhoff 4 times. We have used those opportunities to compliment the Ministry of Education for maintaining the moratorium on accommodation reviews and school closures that was originally announced in June, 2017 and for retaining the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) that was announced at the same time as the moratorium. We have consistently recommended that the RNEF, which remains at approximately the same \$20 million annually as when first announced in 2017, be increased. School boards receive RNEF funding for each school that qualifies for the grant under a complicated formula.

Vice Chair Marcus Ryan and I made presentations to the AMO Board of Directors in January of this year and to the Directors of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association in February. We are aware that the Minister is under pressure from school board associations to lift the moratorium and wanted to remind both associations that a decision to do that could come at any time. We also used those opportunities to point out that the ministry's Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) has undergone a significant revision since the moratorium was imposed. The 2018 version provides greater opportunities for the participation of municipal councils and they are strongly advised to become familiar with the updated guideline before school boards begin using it.

As I reported in the 2019 report, The 2018 PARG includes the following requirements:

- The Initial Staff Report submitted to a school board by its administration recommending an Accommodation Review must offer 3 options (called scenarios) for the board.
- That Initial Staff Report is to follow a ministry-approved template (pending).
- Each option (scenario) is to address 4 impacts: student programming, student well-being, school board resources and local community.
- If at least one school recommended for a review qualifies for the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF), the “impact on the local community” must include consideration of the local economy using a ministry-approved template (pending).
- Notices of a board’s decision to conduct a review and an invitation to a meeting must be sent to the Head and CAO of each affected municipal council within 5 days of the trustee approval.
- Notices and invitations to municipal councils related to a review must go to single, lower and upper-tier municipalities.
- Meetings for municipalities to discuss the Initial Staff Report must happen before any required public meetings.
- The minimum number of public meetings required during a review is increased from 2 to 3.
- The minimum time between the trustee approval of a review and the first of the 3 or more public meetings is increased from 30 to 40 days.
- The minimum time between the first and final of the 3 or more public meetings is increased from 40 to 60 business days.
- Council responses to the Initial Staff Report must be included in the Final Staff Report to a school board.

The CSA is funding some new research! One of the challenges faced by any community confronted with a school board’s decision to conduct a pupil accommodation review and close a school is the difficulty in finding solid research that supports the value of a school to a community. While some research has been undertaken in other jurisdictions, we have been unable to locate any done in Ontario and found none done recently. A search for researchers to carry out a project that might produce results that would be helpful to a community working to prevent a school closure led us to the Human Environments Analysis Laboratory (HEAL) and Spacialists Consulting associated with Western University. We have contracted with HEAL and Spacialists to collect and analyze data to draw comparisons between communities with similar population sizes. They hope to assess sociodemographic and socioeconomic differences due to the presence or absence of a school. We expect the research report to available soon.

As you know, since our expenditures have been quite modest for the past few years, the Executive Committee waived the payment of membership fees for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. There are no plans for a similar waiver for 2021-2022 and AMO will be sending invoices for membership fees in September.

During the past two years the Executive Committee has:

- submitted comments on proposed changes to the Provincial Policy Statement stressing that public infrastructure is very important to the agri-food network and schools are a vital element of that infrastructure;
- supported Bill 216, a private member's bill titled the Food Literacy Act that promotes the development of courses of study in food literacy and healthy eating and was sponsored by MPP Daryl Kramp;
- received reports on a pilot project being undertaken in the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry engaging a consultant to identify the barriers to keeping schools in their communities and finding a way to bridge those barriers;
- received resolutions of support for a Zorra School Retention Plan and similar resolutions from other municipalities;
- completed a review of the CSA constitution (adopted in 2015) and is recommending 16 amendments for consideration at this annual meeting.

In the fall of 2018, the Executive Committee contracted with Heather Derks to provide administrative support on a part-time basis. Heather has been an advocate in rural school issues since the 2015 PARG was released and did an excellent job of preparing agendas, keeping minutes and handling correspondence to support the committee. Heather announced in March that she had been accepted into a public policy program with the University of Guelph and would be unable to continue to her work with the CSA. We thank Heather for her support over the past 3 years and wish her success in her job and her studies.

We thank the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake for hosting our conference call meetings before we discovered Zoom, the Middlesex County IT Department who maintain our web site and AMO for acting as our 'banker', sending out those invoices for membership fees and providing financial reports.

Lastly, I offer my gratitude to the members of our Executive Committee who have been generous with their time and advice and cooperative with their schedules. Special thanks are extended to Don Murray, Cameron McWilliam and Alan Barfoot who are leaving the Executive Committee this year.

Respectfully submitted,



Doug Reycraft
Chair, Community Schools Alliance