



Community Schools Alliance

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Press Release

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Schools have social and economic impact for small communities in Ontario

Schools serve important functions within smaller communities by supporting overall vitality and attractiveness. 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.

The past two decades of educational policy in Ontario 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 also not be immediately apparent, with potentially longer-term impacts being experienced decades later that affect economic competitiveness and socioeconomic outcomes.

The Community Schools Alliance retained the Human Environments Analysis Lab at Western University to undertake an objective analysis of the connections between a community's vitality and the presence of a school within the community. This analysis revealed that of the 733 communities in Ontario with more than 300 and less than 10,000 people, 303 (41%) had no schools, 232 (32%) only have one school, and 198 (27%) have two or more schools.

Communities with schools, independent of overall population, tended to have more services in the community like banks, grocery stores, emergency services, libraries, and community centres. These communities also tended to have more residents that 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. The analysis also found schools in Central Ontario communities to be closer to each other than schools in Northern and Western Ontario

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.

The Community Schools Alliance is a non-profit organization committed to working with the Ontario Ministry of Education, municipalities, and school boards to achieve a collaborative process that results in democratically determined decisions regarding education infrastructure. Such decisions should be based on principles that consider the broad impact, including but not limited to both social and fiscal effects of any changes to school infrastructure on students and their community.

The Community Schools Alliance believes that a better system is needed to address the educational facility needs of Ontario's smaller communities. The Ministry, school boards, and municipalities need to work together to develop policies that address planning for declining enrolments, a predictable Accommodation Review Committee process, a review of funding to rural and small community schools, and improved transparency and accountability in capital infrastructure decision-making by school boards.

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