

Media Conference – May 26, 2016

People for Education

Good morning. My name is Doug Reycraft and I'm chair of an organization called the Community Schools Alliance whose primary goal is to have school boards and municipal councils collaborate in a genuine way on decisions about student accommodation.

I'm a retired teacher whose first three schools were in Southwestern Ontario and were the only schools for which their respective school boards were responsible.

As a teacher for thirty years, I've experienced the transitions of school governance and funding from single boards to county boards in rural Ontario in 1969 and then to district boards as part of the Common Sense Revolution in 1998.

I have also spent about thirty-five years as an elected municipal councillor and mayor including a term as president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

That thirty-five year municipal experience was in two segments sandwiched around five years in the provincial legislature as the MPP for Middlesex, two of which I spent as the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education.

I applaud People for Education for this 2016 Annual Report which clearly highlights the disparities in staffing, resources and learning opportunities between urban/suburban schools and those in small town, rural and northern Ontario.

The results of the survey used to develop the report prove beyond any reasonable doubt that students in small town, rural and northern Ontario are not provided the same supports and opportunities offered to their peers in suburban/urban communities.

I want to acknowledge at the outset that these disparities are not new. They existed before the common funding formula was introduced in 1998 and in fact were at least part of the justification for replacing the pre-1998 system that combined provincial grants with property taxes levied by school boards. And to be fair, I also acknowledge that the Ministry of Education has been tweaking the funding formula in attempts to make it fairer ever since its introduction, beginning in 2003 after Mordechai Rozanski completed his Report of the Education Equality Task Force in 2002.

What is new and is causing great alarm in small town, rural and Northern Ontario is what appears to be an unintended consequence of the funding formula. Because the formula is essentially based on the number of students, boards now receive most of their funding from the province according the size of their student population. That makes it challenging for a board with many small schools spread over a large geographic area to offer the same opportunities as a board with its student population concentrated in larger schools.

So what we are seeing is many of those small schools being closed and their students consolidated into larger ones. And for small towns with only a single school, the consequence for the community – and for its students – is dramatic. It means that children are required to spend hours of every week on a bus travelling to a school in another community instead of short walks or rides to a school in which they study and learn with their neighbours. If the school is a secondary school, it reduces the student's opportunities for after-school extracurricular activities and an after-school job. It really changes students' lives. So an education funding formula intended to improve the school experience for students actually has a negative effect on the lives of many of our youth.

And all of a municipality's investment in economic development can go down the drain with a decision to close its only school.

Also, when there is only one school in a community, that school has often evolved into a centre for other activities of the community. If that school is closed and sold, the community has lost its centre.

I very much doubt that accelerating school closures and undermining economic development in small towns were part of the rationale for the 1998 funding formula. And while there have been modifications to the formula by the Ministry since 1998, those outcomes appear to be consequences of the formula. Perhaps it's time to abandon the current funding formula in favour of a better system that comes closer to providing a fair and equitable level of funding for all students, wherever they live in Ontario. The formula may work for cities; it doesn't for small town and rural Ontario.

I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks that I chair the executive of the Community Schools Alliance, an organization that seeks greater collaboration between school boards and municipal councils. Two recent initiatives of the provincial government will, I believe, see councils and school boards coming together to look at options that may counteract some of the 'unintended consequences' of the funding formula.

First, in March of last year, the Ministry of Education released a document titled the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPP). The policy encourages "school boards to reach out to community organizations to share planning information on a regular basis." It goes on to say: "This information sharing will allow school boards and other entities to work together to the benefit of boards, students and the community, and to optimize the use of public assets owned by school boards."

For far too long, municipal councils and school boards have worked in silos. School boards plan for the needs of their students. Municipalities plan for the future needs of their communities. In most cases both do their planning in near-isolation of the other. The Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline says they should work together to optimize the use of public assets owned by school boards. No one is going to argue with that but the reality is it's not happening nearly to the extent that it should. Hopefully the 2015 policy will change that.

The second initiative is the appointment of Karen Pitre last April as the Special Advisor to the Premier on Community Hubs and a nine-member advisory group to support her. Both Annie Kidder and I are part of that Advisory Group.

There are many fine examples across the province of locations from which (or in which) a variety of public services are offered and delivered. All of these hubs demonstrate that great economic and social benefits are realized when a public asset is used for multiple purposes. The province, therefore, wants to see the number of community hubs increased, primarily by making better use of existing publicly-owned facilities that have surplus space. Because of declining enrolment, there are many under-utilized schools whose surplus space could be used for other services. There are also some regulatory barriers that make the conversion of a school to a community hub difficult and the Advisory Group has been successful in having some of those barriers modified.

It is to be hoped that a combination of the results of the work of the Advisory Group on Community Hubs and the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline will see positive changes in the delivery of public services, including education, by all orders of government.

Thanks to People for Education for inviting me to be part of today's event.