



Community Schools Alliance

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIR August 18, 2019

The Community Schools Alliance has remained very active throughout its 2018-2019-year monitoring changes and proposed changes in education that have the potential to impact schools in rural and northern Ontario.

The first “goal” stated in our constitution is “Students should have the opportunity to attend elementary and secondary school in their home community.” That goal continues to be reflected in our communication with the Ministry of Education.

Last year’s report contained detailed descriptions of the announcement of a moratorium on school closures in June of 2017 and the evolution of a new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG). The old Guideline implemented in 2015 had resulted in the closure or recommendations for closure of hundreds of schools across the province. We were generally encouraged by the outcome of the consultations that occurred in 2017-18 and the final version of a new PARG released in April, 2018.

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.
- 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) (currently \$20 million), the “impact on the local community” must include consideration of the local economy using a ministry-approved template.
- 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.

These changes result in a Guideline that gives municipalities a greater role in the review process and communities a better opportunity for input. However, there has been no consultation on the two required “ministry-approved templates” and hence the moratorium still remains in place. We have received neither an assurance nor a timetable for the consultation on these templates.

We were very pleased to see that the 2019-2020 Grant for Student Needs (GSN) includes the \$20 million Rural and Northern Infrastructure Fund (RNEF). Introduced by the previous provincial government for the 2017-2018 school year and “dedicated to school boards to enhance education for students in rural and northern communities”, the funding has been a welcome addition to the GSN.

To illustrate its value, we would share an example. The Thames Valley District School Board has used its RNEF allocation of about \$700,000 to provide over \$1 million in additional staff supports in four small secondary schools in 2018-2019. This support has allowed the schools to offer program options to students that would not otherwise have been available. Without those options, the continued viability of the secondary schools would have been in doubt.

The RNEF offers a vehicle that can be expanded to better enable boards with smaller secondary schools in rural and northern Ontario to meet the challenges accompanying the change in secondary school funding from an average class size of 22 students to 28. It represents a means of improving the education funding formula without a wholesale revamping of the GSN.

The municipal elections last fall had a major impact of our Executive Committee. We left last year’s Annual Meeting with a committee consisting of nine elected municipal officials and two non-elected citizens (Stephanie Jaworski and myself). On October 22, seven of the nine elected officials either chose not to seek re-election or were unsuccessful. Six of the seven have become non-elected members of the Alliance (which qualifies them to remain on our committee) and Stephanie’s status changed from non-elected citizen to elected official. Therefore, at today’s meeting our committee has only three elected officials. However, all eleven have municipal experience.

The Executive Committee has recognized the need to communicate more often and more fully with our members. Information about proposed funding and policy changes that have potential impact on schools in rural and northern communities need to be shared with our members in a timelier manner. To facilitate that, we have contracted a part-time administrative assistant. Heather Derks lives near Sparta in Elgin County and

has been an activist in rural school issues since the 2015 PARG was announced. We are pleased to have Heather recording the proceedings of our meetings and performing other administrative functions.

Our Executive Committee met via conference call for ten meetings since last year's Annual Meeting. Also, we were able to meet with the Minister of Education during last year's AMO conference and again during the ROMA conference in Toronto in January. We are scheduled to meet with Minister Lecce tomorrow afternoon as part of a Zorra Township delegation. Stephen Lecce was appointed Minister on July 20 replacing Lisa Thompson.

The Alliance prepared and submitted formal submissions to the Ontario Education Consultation in December, 2018 and to the Class Size Consultation in May of this year.

As you will see in the report from Secretary-Treasurer Jim Collard, our financial position remains healthy. We hope to use some of the funds to commission current research on the benefits of schools in rural and northern Ontario. We will be able to do that because of the membership dues we receive annually from our individual and municipal members. On behalf of the other members of the Executive Committee I thank them for their support.

We appreciate the continued support of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake who host our conference call meetings and the Middlesex County IT Department who maintain our web site. AMO acts as our banker and provides us with regular financial reports. AMO staff will soon be sending out renewal invoices for the 2019-2020 year.

Lastly, I offer my gratitude to the members of our Executive Committee who have been generous with their time and advice as we developed submissions to the consultations offered by the Ministry of Education.

Respectfully submitted,



Doug Reycraft
Chair, Community Schools Alliance