

## Outdated formula in need of updating

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**Critics charge the funding policy in place is short-circuiting the future of many small and rural schools**  
By **KELLY PEDRO**

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It's being blamed for the demise of small and rural schools.

And an outdated funding formula that's been around for 12 years, tying the hands of school boards, doesn't look like it's going anywhere.

When they swept to power in 2003, the Liberals vowed to change the education funding formula and have promised to review it next year.

But one politician holds out little hope anything will change.

"It comes at a great time for them because next year they'll be able to say, 'My God we're mired in deficit. We would have loved to change the formula, but the current conditions prevent us from doing what we really would love to do' and then do nothing," said Trinity-Spadina MPP Rosario Marchese, the NDP's education critic.

"It's a deliberate strategy of this government to stand by while school boards take the heat for school closures."

The problem is that schools are funded based on an outdated formula and a shrinking school-age population.

A report on school closings released this week by People for Education, found the population of the Thames Valley District school board has dropped 11.2% -- from 79,500 students in 2002 to 70,600 students in 2009. The public board has 25 schools that are recommended or slated to close between 2008 and 2012, the report found.

Across the province, 172 elementary and secondary schools are closing or are recommended to close in the next three years. Another 163 are under review.

The last time so many schools were on the chopping block was in the late 1990s, when more than 250 schools closed.

The province needs to rethink how schools are used and funded, said Annie Kidder, executive director of People for Education.

"Schools should be sort of one-stop shops that offer a range of programs and services for kids and families," she said, adding that means a fundamental shift in the funding formula.

And while the province has said it will review the funding formula and is putting new policies in place to encourage partnerships, the leader of one group battling the province's school closing processes wants a moratorium.

"The longer we wait to introduce a new policy, the more closures are going to occur and the more potential community hubs are going to be lost," said Doug Reycraft, chairperson of the Community Schools Alliance and also mayor of Southwest Middlesex.

Education Minister Kathleen Wynne said there won't be another moratorium.

"(School boards) need to be able to make those local decisions," she said.

The province has developed a draft partnership policy it wants to introduce next September, Wynne said.

The policy requires boards to meet with municipalities and community groups about what space they have free to maximize the use of schools.

"One of the things that's been missing from my perspective is a standing conversation about how to use schools so that the only time the discussion comes up is when there's a threat of a closure," said Wynne, adding the policy will require that conversation take place annually.

"School boards know we're going to be looking for joint ventures when we look at funding new projects."

Wynne said the government has reviewed the funding formula every year since taking power and has made some changes.

Principals and secretaries are now funded per school, rather than based on the number of students. Grants have also been added to support small and rural schools.

Next year, the government will evaluate the changes made and look at what's worked, what hasn't and what more is needed.

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## **EDUCATION FUNDING FORMULA**

- Developed in 1997, it reflected enrolment at the time.
- Boards are given money for some staff based on the number of students and on a set allowance of square footage per student.
- In boards where they have more square feet than allowed per student, that extra space is unfunded.
- Space not considered a classroom, such as a computer lab, a design and technology room, a community kitchen or parents' meeting room, isn't funded.