
Alliance meets with education minister to discuss moratorium on disputed closures

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Politicians meeting with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne couldn't sell the moratorium on disputed school closures—at least not yet—but the minister is onside with the need for school boards to develop working relationships with municipal governments, says Lord Mayor Gary Burroughs.

An opportunity to speak with the minister in Ottawa this week resulted in some good news and some bad news, says Burroughs.

Municipal leaders from communities where school closures are being protested—48 currently, with more expected to sign on in September—have joined the Community School Alliance, and some met with Wynne in Ottawa Tuesday, seeking help from the province.

Burroughs and Councillor Jim Collard were in Ottawa for the meeting, which was timed to co-incide with the annual conference for the Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

The group was hoping to find a sympathetic ear from the minister, as they attempted to convince her accommodation reviews are flawed in that they don't reflect the concerns of their community members, including municipal leaders. They were also asking for an appeal process to remove "absolute power" from local school boards—not just to appeal the process, but to appeal decisions on school closures.

To that request, she was "fairly vague in her response, and she didn't say yes," Burroughs said.

"The good news is we're on the same wavelength with concerns about the relationship between boards and municipalities. Schools are a huge piece of infrastructure, a vital resource for the community as well as the kids involved. She understands that."

Wynne and her ministry have done "some great things" for education, and she has released a paper that encourages school boards to work more closely with municipalities, Burroughs says.

And some school boards across Ontario are already working with their communities with combined infrastructure, he added.

A better provincial system would force school boards to work together on school infrastructure decisions, and provide more accountability for school board decisions, especially regarding school closures, the group says.

But the accommodation review process in place, the municipal politicians argue, does not respect the input of students, parents, the community or the municipality during reviews such as the one recently conducted in Niagara-on-the-Lake that resulted in a board decision to close Niagara District Secondary School.

The 'smart moratorium' the alliance is seeking would allow time to develop the relationship between boards and municipalities, policies and planning for declining enrolments, a mutually agreed-upon accommodation review process and fair funding for rural and small community schools.

While critics of the alliance say small schools don't provide access to the programs and services students need to excel, parents in small communities say closing rural schools will destroy the culture of rural communities. Many would rather see their children attend a smaller local school and receive a basic education in a caring community than a larger urban school with more programming, alliance members said.

The executive of the alliance was meeting by video conference call this morning to analyze Wynne's response and plan their next steps, said Burroughs.

"We haven't given up (on the 'smart moratorium'), not at all," he said. "But we have more work to do. We have to make sure we're clear about what we're asking. It's up to us to make sure the message is clearly stated. We're not talking about stopping every school closure, just those that are disputed in their communities."

There are 100 schools in Ontario currently undergoing accommodation reviews and 146 schools, including Niagara District Secondary School, are being recommended to close.

More than 200 municipal leaders attended the inaugural meeting of the Community Schools Alliance in Ottawa earlier this week, and when municipal councils begin meeting again in September after summer breaks, the alliance is likely to see its membership grow, said Burroughs.

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