

Remarks for “Community Schools, Community Hubs”

AMO Session August 18, 2015

Thank you Bob and good morning everyone. I am pleased to be back at yet another AMO conference and pleased to be part of this concurrent session. And happy to be speaking about schools again. When I retired from teaching 17 years ago, I thought I was leaving education behind. Now I'm not sure when, if ever, that's going to happen.

I was also very pleased to have been invited to be part of the Premier's Advisory Group on Community Hubs and to work with Karen, Annie and the other members to produce the report that was released last Monday, August 10. The Community Schools Alliance, whose executive I chair, has for several years been a supporter of expanding the function of schools to make them true hubs in their communities. Now I have understood from the launch of the Advisory Group that its mandate is much broader than schools. And while schools were frequently a topic of the Group's discussion, there are many issues (such as the number of students necessary to keep a school viable or the nature of the accommodation review process) in which the Community Schools Alliance has great interest that were not tackled by this Advisory Group. The evolution of community hubs to provide greater access to public services and make our communities better is about much more than education.

That having been said, there are fine examples of schools that serve as community hubs in which a range of public services are delivered along with education. I expect that Laurie will be speaking about those.

We also learned of many community hubs around the province without any direct connection to schools. In fact the report in Appendix D lists over 50 hubs in urban and rural communities and I believe only 2 of those involve schools. What is consistent in every example, whether in a school or not, is that the hubs were developed by community leaders to respond to specific identified needs and assets in their area. And each hub that is identified is unique, just as each community it serves is unique. While there are lessons to be learned from the development of every hub, there is no template that others can use as a model to copy. For a hub to be successful and valuable, it must be designed by the community for the community.

I appreciated the opportunity to be part of the Advisory Group but I'm on this panel as chair of the Community Schools Alliance. And AMO has advertised this session as "Community Schools, Community Hubs" so I want to use some of my time to talk about the Alliance whose objectives include community hubs but go well beyond that.

The Community Schools Alliance was founded in 2009 by municipalities to seek change in the process or processes used in Ontario make decisions related to student accommodation. We want a process that has municipalities and school boards become partners in making those decisions. And we still don't have that!

Following last fall's municipal elections, the Alliance has undergone considerable change. A constitution has been adopted, a new executive has been put in place and a membership fee schedule has been established. Membership is open to municipalities, other organizations and individuals. We have very recently emailed every municipal council in the province inviting them to become members and are pleased with the results to date. We hope to be able to use the revenue from those membership fees to commission some much-needed research. I want to make it clear that all of our executive members serve as volunteers. If you believe your municipality has not received our correspondence or wish a membership application for yourself, please see me after the session.

The Community Schools Alliance recognizes that the Education Act makes the boards responsible for student achievement and well-being and that, with only a few exceptions, the schools belong to the boards. They may be the boards' schools, but they are our children. And both citizens and municipal councils feel powerless in the accommodation review process which can significantly change the future of our kids and our communities. Making children spend hours 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 really does change their lives. And all of a municipality's investment in economic development can go down the drain with a decision to close its only school. It is a process that grants school boards absolute power and is regarded in most communities as a token consultation with an outcome that is predetermined by a school board and its administration.

In 2009 and since, the Alliance has called for major changes in the accommodation review process and a moratorium on disputed closures until a better process is in place. Well, 6 years since our founding we have no moratorium but we do have a much different process. But the changes took us in exactly the opposite direction we want to go.

I expect most of you will know that the Ministry of Education released a new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) in March of this year. We were very disappointed with the narrow consultation used in 2014 by the Ministry in developing the draft guideline that became public last December. Only school boards and Ministry of Education officials were involved in preparing the draft. No attempt was made to consult school councils, municipalities or the general public. And the deadline for commenting on the draft was December 18, just two weeks after it was made public, exactly a week before Christmas and in the first month of the mandate of newly elected municipal councils.

The Alliance used the two week period in December to express its strong concern with the draft Guideline, particularly with the reduction in the required minimum number of public meetings from four to two and the elimination of the requirement that an Accommodation Review Committee consider the value of a school to the community and the local economy. Neither of those concerns was reflected in the final document released in March.

We also heard Minister of Education Liz Sandals' announcement that she wanted a huge cut in the top-up grants being flowed to schools boards to help with the maintenance of under-utilized schools that are not "isolated". To say that those two actions have generated fear for the future of schools and communities is a

significant understatement. And although we were aware of last year's Throne Speech reference to community hubs and the mandate letters to several ministers, it seemed in early spring that nothing was really happening on a policy change the CSA supported. So when we learned of Karen's appointment as Special Advisor on Community Hubs in March and the Advisory Group in April, we welcomed this as a major milestone.

And we believe it does present municipalities and communities with significant opportunities. I'll come back to that in a minute.

I've mentioned the new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) a couple of times. Another document that was released at the same time has not received as much attention. Titled the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPP), it 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." Keep in mind that both the PARG and the CPP were issued by the Ministry of Education and apply to school boards.

I am unaware of any parallel document from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing that gives similar direction to municipal councils and staff. Those of you who were present at the Ministers' Forum at last year's AMO conference in London heard Minister Ted McMeekin say that his observation was that municipalities only starting talking about schools becoming community hubs when those schools were threatened with closure. And frankly that's too late.

For far too long, municipal councils and school boards have worked in silos. Six years ago at the AMO conference in 2009, I was on a similar panel with Annie Kidder and Catharine Fife. Catharine was then chair of the Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA) and is now a member of the legislature for Kitchener-Waterloo. When preparing for today I looked back at all three of our presentations. All of us were talking about the need for local boards and municipalities to work together. And here we are talking about it again!

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.

Municipalities in planning for their communities consult with their public to figure out what services and amenities are wanted and needed (as they should) and develop a roadmap that takes them to that vision. In developing that roadmap, they have to look at the assets and resources available to them and the assets and resources are going to be needed. Sometimes schools are included in the assets studied but too often they are not. That's because municipalities tend to look only at the assets they own or control and schools are owned by the school boards. Perhaps it's time we had a discussion about Ontario's model for ownership of schools. There are jurisdictions where schools are owned by communities and leased to the body that delivers education. We know of agreements under which space in schools is rented or leased to municipalities or community organizations by school boards. Maybe we should look at having the asset owned by the municipality and the space needed for education leased to a board. Municipalities build and own recreation centres, public libraries, community centres and other facilities where public services are delivered. They operate and manage those centres as they do their other capital assets. I'm told that nothing in the Education Act stops a school board from leasing property for a school instead of owning it. No one is suggesting that this model would be a better situation for every neighbourhood or every community but it's a concept that merits some serious discussion. Because the current situation just isn't working! It wouldn't prevent the board from closing a school but it wouldn't be closing it because it is under-utilized and has surplus space. And extra space in the building could be used by the municipality as a community hub without the concern that the property would be sold.

We've been building schools and using parts of them for community hubs. Perhaps it's time we built community hubs and used parts of them for schools!

The submissions to the Working Group tell us that the hubs we already have generate great economic and social benefits and that there is a great for expanding the number of community hubs in the province. Common sense tells us that the most fiscally responsible way to achieve that expansion is to utilize existing surplus public assets. We also know that there is a considerable area of surplus space in the publicly funded schools of this province. Every under-utilized school that is closed and sold to a non-public entity represents a lost opportunity to consider converting that space to a community hub. The Advisory Group's report does recommend some changes to O. Reg. 444/98 (the regulation that sets the conditions for declaring a school surplus and requires a board to sell it for Full Market Value). That may help some municipalities and community groups acquire surplus schools but those changes are modest. It can take years of local planning, consultation and collaboration to develop the business case for a community hub. The necessary agreements can be difficult to negotiate and take much time to complete. That's why that planning has to occur long before a school board starts the process to close a school.

The 'foundational recommendation' in the report of the Community Hubs Working Group is that the provincial government establish a Provincial Lead who would work across ministries to implement the Action Plan, further develop the recommendations and become an enabler and a partner in achieving the community hub vision. There is in the report a very detailed sort of job description for the office of this Provincial Lead. Part of it addresses supporting integrated and longer-term local planning. The province's initiative in following up on the promise in the Throne Speech and the lines in the mandate letters by appointing a Special Advisor on Community Hubs and the Working Group can lead us to the change we need. It's imperative that communities seize this opportunity to realize that change. If we don't, we'll be back here again in six years still just talking about change. Real action is what we need!