

Minister won't bend on school closures

EDUCATION: Boards urged to work with communities

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Any chance that Niagara District Secondary School might be spared closure grew slimmer last week after a meeting between Ontario's education minister and dozens of municipal leaders from throughout the province.

The Community Schools Alliance, a start-up organization made up of 48 mayors, councillors and bureaucrats, had half an hour to convince Kathleen Wynne at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference in Ottawa to suspend disputed school closures, including NDSS.

Though she called it a good meeting, Wynne didn't buy in to the group's concept of a "smart moratorium."

"We're not going to invoke a moratorium on school closures or consolidations because we really believe that school boards need to be able to make those decisions community by community," Wynne said.

Instead, Wynne presented the group, which includes Niagara-on-the-Lake Lord Mayor Gary Burroughs and Coun. Jim Collard, with a draft policy calling for partnerships between school boards and their communities to share school facilities, including unoccupied space in schools.

One wing at NDSS has been mothballed and school advocates are calling on the District School Board of Niagara to house a new elementary school, replacing Colonel John Butler and Virgil schools, in the cavernous building.

NDSS, the town's only high school, faces closure if it doesn't hit an enrolment of 350 students by the end of October. It's about 100 short of that.

Wynne said the draft policy "goes a long way to putting in place the expectation that boards will work with municipalities and work with other partners and make their school usage policies more open and transparent so that the decisions can be community based as opposed to simply the board of education."

The Community Schools Alliance has criticized the accommodation review process for not heeding community input. Last week, it praised the draft policy as an important step forward, but falling short of recognizing the urgency of a solution to what it calls a crisis.

There are 146 schools on the chopping block in Ontario this year. Another 100 are undergoing an accommodation review, the group says.

Collard, who was at the meeting with Wynne, said he felt she listened to what the group said, despite not granting its wish for a moratorium on closures.

"It's clear they're not used to getting anything from the municipal sector," Collard said. "Boards are used to going it alone and the Ministry of Education, too."

Collard said he was able to bend Wynne's ear briefly about NDSS.

"Our clock is ticking and we're going to continue to do everything we can to ensure we get Niagara-on-the-Lake listened to," he said.

The group's next step is to send letters to all councils in the province urging them to join the alliance's efforts, he said. Nearly 50 municipalities, including Oakville and Burlington, have become members.
