

## Community partnerships with schools needs funding

### pointof view

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Time will tell whether a new Ministry of Education policy marks a new era for the future of rural schools, or if it hastens the demise of schools already in serious jeopardy.

The policy, announced by the ministry in August after the Community Schools Alliance requested a moratorium on school closures, requires school boards to hold a community meeting annually to discuss potential facility partnerships and hear the needs of community partners. The policy deals with existing surplus space in schools and new construction projects.

The idea makes sense. It is based on the simple concept that cash-strapped school boards and municipalities can share limited resources to develop shared facilities rather than separate ones.

Michael Schmitt, director of the Algonquin and Lakeshore Catholic District School Board, said examples of partnerships could include a board partnering with a municipality that is looking to build a community centre, as well as facilities like pools and libraries.

This benefits all schools and all communities, but is especially beneficial to smaller communities that face serious limitations in their ability to raise funds for such facilities.

It also helps further cement rural schools as more than just centres of education, but also central fixtures in these communities. Already schools in some communities serve as community hubs and are literally used for community services such as job-search centres, child care centres and public libraries. To encourage this simply makes sense.

But without a commitment from the provincial government to step in financially to protect these centres once they are formed, this becomes nothing more than a cost-saving measure and does nothing to ensure these schools stay open.

In fact, in some ways, it could have the opposite effect because cash-strapped school boards could be more likely to close shared facilities knowing they won't be stuck with an empty building to get rid of since the community will have a vested interest in taking over the facility.

The plus side is the community will have a vested interest in keeping the school open as well, but that means nothing unless the province is willing to back up its proposal with cold hard cash.

The Ministry of Education has taken a good first step; we urge it to take the next step and pledge to support these facilities to the fullest.

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