



Community  
Schools  
Alliance

Ministry of Education Delegation - ROMA

Date: Monday, January 24, 2022

Time: 10:50 pm

Location: Zoom

**Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education, Sam Oosterhoff**

On behalf of the Township of Zorra and the Community Schools Alliance, I thank you and your staff for offering us this meeting.

The Community Schools Alliance is a non-profit organization; our executive includes current and former elected members with extensive experience in both municipal government and working successfully with school boards.

Our goal is to work with the Ontario Ministry of Education, municipalities, and school boards to develop a collaborative process that results in democratically determined decisions regarding education infrastructure. We believe such decisions about school consolidations and closures should focus, not only on the effects on current and future students, but must also consider community impacts as well.

Our mission is to have greater collaboration between school boards and municipalities in making decisions about where new schools are built and where schools are closed. ***All students should have the opportunity to attend elementary and secondary school in their home community.***

The CSA and its members have not been passive on this issue and are doing our part to advance it.

The Township of Zorra has passed a School Retention Plan that includes:

- formal support for the Rural and Northern Education Fund
- a recommendation that the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) review its policies for capacity planning and pupil accommodation reviews to formally recognize the importance and value to the community of rural and single school community schools
- a request for communication and notification on an ongoing basis from all relevant school boards of any areas of study considering possible consolidation, closure, additions, or new builds.
- a request for annual planning reports from all relevant School Boards for all Zorra schools and possibly related/affected/affecting schools and compare municipal growth forecasts and school board(s) growth forecasts identifying any discrepancies; and

The Counties of Oxford, Middlesex, and Elgin have now passed the same resolution and we are anticipating the same from the City of London in the near future.

The TVDSB, at the recommendation of its Rural Education Task Force, has passed a resolution that supports all of this.

This would then include all coterminous municipalities in the TVDSB, AND the board itself.

The CSA has now funded some new research of our own. We contracted with Human Environments Analysis Laboratory (HEAL) of Western University, and Spacialists Consulting,

Rural and northern communities have long claimed that schools have social and economic impact for small communities in Ontario and now we have the data to back that up.

The study area included 733 communities with more than 300 and less than 10,000 people in areas outside of medium to large population centres.

Schools serve important functions within smaller communities by supporting overall vitality and attractiveness. Research shows that small rural and northern communities with schools tend to have more private amenities and more public services than those without schools. Closing a school in a single-school community threatens the future existence of those amenities and services and the quality of life of the families living there. It also reduces the ability to attract new growth and economic development to the community.

The past two decades of educational policy in Ontario has resulted in the amalgamation of smaller local schools into larger buildings, and often the closure of schools in smaller communities. Instead of attending school within their local community, many students are forced to attend schools in communities further away from home. This trend towards bussing rural and smaller community students into other communities can have wide-ranging impacts on the health, wellbeing, and stability of students, parents, and affected communities. The impacts of these closures may not be immediately apparent, with potentially longer-term impacts that affect economic competitiveness and socioeconomic outcomes being experienced decades later.

Communities with schools, independent of overall population, tended to have more services in the community like banks, grocery stores, emergency services, libraries, and community centres. These communities also tended to have more residents who have moved into the community within the last five years, more affordable and recently constructed housing options, and more school age children compared to the general population. The analysis also found schools in Central Ontario communities to be closer to each other than schools in Northern and Western Ontario

All these factors contribute to a comparative advantage for communities with schools. Given Ontario's population growth patterns, it would appear young families are seeking out communities that have schools, and in turn, better services.

Moreover, communities that can gain approval for the construction of a new subdivision may be more attractive given cheaper housing and, most importantly, being able to secure funds and land for the construction of a new school. However, this trend of new construction often results in the closure of an older school somewhere else in the same school board, potentially impacting the economic growth potential of another smaller community.

Unfortunately, under the current governance model, local area municipalities have no influence over school board capital infrastructure decisions. Many smaller municipalities may even be forecasting growth that would support a school with declining enrolment. However, they have no way to prevent a school closure and disposition of land should the school board choose to do so in the short-term to meet new growth elsewhere in the board.

As stated in previous delegations, we believe the Rural and Northern Education Fund is a key policy tool in achieving the goals of rural and northern communities in keeping, replacing, and adding schools appropriately. We consider the RNEF to be a very significant policy introduction. It represents a significant and appropriate departure from the generally one-size-fits-all, cookie cutter approach of previous provincial grant formulas. It helps school boards with the costs of maintaining rural schools that too often have surplus pupil places. The RNEF has served rural and northern Ontario well. We believe it has the potential to do even more. We have two suggestions.

The \$21.6 M offered to boards through the RNEF is a relatively small part of the Grant for Student Needs. We recommend maintaining the formula used to determine the schools that qualify for the RNEF while enhancing the allocation to \$50 M.

Boards that can offer the extra funding to their qualifying schools will enable them to do even more to increase staffing and provide a more effective program for their students.

We are well aware that the Minister is under pressure from school board associations to lift the moratorium on closures understanding that at some point it will be lifted. We recommend that when the moratorium is lifted, it remain in place for schools that qualify for the RNEF until a thorough review of the education funding formula can be completed.

We are also aware that the 2018 Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline requires two templates which, if completed, have not been made public. The first will be used by an administration to prepare a submission recommending a review for the board's consideration. The second will be used for the Economic Impact Study to be completed in connection with the Initial Staff Report. We would welcome an invitation to participate in any consultation to be undertaken as part of the development of these two templates.

When the 2018 PARG was released, it was also announced that the Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline would be updated "to enhance planning and reporting practices". We are interested to know if the update is still being planned by the Ministry and would also be pleased to part of any consultation on this important Guideline introduced in 2015.

The Community Schools Alliance, and Zorra, understand both the importance of addressing problems in a larger context and the budgetary challenges of governing a large and complex system. We recognize that not all school closures can be avoided.

However, we believe we bring an experienced rural and northern voice to these discussions and would welcome an opportunity continue to work with you to ensure all students have access to education in their home community.

We would like to request a meeting to further discuss the CSA research, the RNEF, and the PARG at a future date.

Thank you.



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