

## Rural-school advocates get chance to lobby Education Minister

By **DEBORA VAN BRENK, LONDON FREE PRESS**

Rural-school advocates have been assured they'll get the ear of the Education Minister next week in their fight to keep small schools open.

The Community Schools Alliance is calling for a time out — what they call a "smart moratorium" — on closings until municipalities can be allowed involvement in school board's review processes.

"There is a need to see schools as community buildings," and not just educational facilities, said Doug Reycraft, chairperson of the Community Schools Alliance and Mayor of Southwest Middlesex.

The alliance had sought a meeting with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne at next week's Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference in Ottawa.

They've been granted a half-hour audience with her.

The timing is a positive sign, said Reycraft, because other groups have been granted just 15 minutes.

"I think that indicates the importance that she attaches to the concerns that we're bringing to the table," Reycraft said this morning.

He said the alliance, which began only weeks ago, has already won the support of many municipalities, some of them facing the loss of their only school in town.

In Ontario, 146 schools are closing or recommended to be closed.

Some in rural areas are full or nearly so — even as many urban schools that are half empty remain open — but school boards say their small size makes it more difficult and more expensive to offer the needed scope of education there.

Reycraft said many municipalities and groups are jumping on board, and he has received calls from some trustees in Toronto who are also asking that the process for reviewing schools be changed.

In rural areas especially, though, a school serves as a community hub, Reycraft said.

In Grand Bend and Plattsville, for example, new libraries are attached to new schools. In Glencoe, a job-search centre is attached to the high school.

The alliance isn't looking for school boards to pick up the costs of community use, he said, but to sit down with municipal leaders to plan together what's best for the whole community during disputed accommodation reviews.

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