

Group readies e-mail flood

SCHOOL CLOSINGS: The Middlesex-founded Community Schools Alliance wants to get the attention of MPPs to change the review process

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Last Updated: 6th October 2009, 2:38am

City and township councillors -- by the thousands -- are being asked to flood provincial politicians with requests to change the way schools are closed in Ontario.

"Some MPPs take the temperature of issues according to the number of phone calls and letters they receive," said Doug Reycraft, chairperson of the Community Schools Alliance, founded in Middlesex County to battle the province's school closing processes.

"I want to make sure that the individual members of the legislature understand our concerns," said Reycraft, who is also mayor of Southwest Middlesex and a former MPP.

The alliance formed this year to lobby Education Minister Kathleen Wynne to impose what it calls a "smart moratorium" on disputed school closings until municipalities can be included in school boards' decision-making on the issue.

The alliance sent e-mails yesterday morning to all elected municipal officials.

The "Dear MPP" letter template says in part that, "the current system for determining which schools stay open and which schools are closed is a flawed process and school boards are closing schools, amalgamating schools, transporting students out of their community, and building new schools without reviewing the impact of these decisions on our communities."

It goes on to say that a joint process among school boards and municipalities is needed to address issues of declining enrolment and funding to schools in rural and small communities.

But school boards maintain the communities already have plenty of input into decision-making in the accommodation review committee process set out by the province.

School boards also say smaller schools can be more expensive to operate and offer fewer programs for students than larger schools.

Reycraft says he's still getting e-mails and phone calls daily from people who say their threatened small schools are a hub of community life. And it's not just in rural areas, Reycraft said.

One recent example is in Aurora, where parents fought a battle to keep a small downtown school that has been open for 117 years. York Region district school board voted last month to close the school permanently -- acknowledging in its written decision that it was "regrettable" the debate had pitted school board staff against residents.

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