

# County to wade into fight for schools

Middlesex County officials want to band together with leaders from other counties to lobby the provincial government to stop the closure of small rural schools.

County council members last week decided to put together a strategy and launch a lobbying effort with other counties aimed at getting education policy changed to protect rural schools.

The move came at the request of South-west Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft, who said the experience of local communities is being repeated across Ontario.

"I have a frustration that in different locations in Ontario, schools are being closed just because they are small," Mr. Reycraft told council. "Metcalf Central School is the best example. It has a 90 percent enrollment rate. It was subjected to an accommodation review, which met with consistent opposition from students, parents, and the local council. Yet as has been the case without exception, the administration recommendation to close it was adopted over the accommodation review committee (ARC) recommendation."

Both Metcalf Central and Caradoc South schools are slated to be closed by the Thames Valley Board of Education. But Mr. Reycraft noted the local board is not unique in the province.

"It appears that across Ontario, board administrative recommendations carry the day, while the opinions of students, parents, and communities are being ignored," he commented.

He said rural municipalities that share these concerns need to be brought together "to tell provincial officials how unacceptable we find this".

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## Province to be target of effort

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To that end, he suggested enlisting Middlesex CAO Bill Rayburn to formulate a strategy to achieve a change in education policy "to allow good schools like Metcalf Central to stay open". Council supported his suggestion.

Adelaide-Metcalf Mayor John Milligan said his council has the same concern. "They will put in four portables at Caradoc North to accommodate students from Metcalf Central," he said. "Premier Dalton McGuinty said recently his government is working to reduce the number of portables in use, but it seems the board of education has more authority than the Ministry."

In a letter to be sent to education minister Kathleen Wynne, Middlesex Centre Deputy-Mayor Albert Bannister called the rationale for that decision "fundamentally flawed", and said the same kind of thing has gone on with Prince Andrew School in the north end of his township. That school is slated to be closed despite the fact that two other schools within six miles of it are overcrowded.

Mr. Bannister told council members board officials when the ARC tried to discuss these overcrowding problems, it was told that wasn't part of the study.

Strathroy-Caradoc Mayor Mel Veale, who sat on the ARC for Caradoc South, said there has to be a better process, suggesting board

officials' minds were already made up.

"These ARCs do not work in the best interests of education in rural communities," he said.

Mr. Reycraft cautioned council that it's not the local school board that should be targeted.

"Municipalities across Ontario share the same frustration and need to build a coalition to focus on overall policy change," he said. "We live in a democracy, but it appears board administrations have become absolute powers in dealing with these kinds of decisions. The views of citizens have no bearing on the decision-making process, and that's unacceptable."

Middlesex CAO Bill Rayburn said the goal of the strategy is to "get as many people inside the tent as possible". He plans the establishment of a website and an e-mail campaign to encourage local politicians to become involved. An executive committee will then be formed to develop an action plan.

He said there won't be a problem getting support for the strategy.

"These are common experiences across the province, where good rural schools are being closed and students moved to portables. They are not anomalies," he commented. "Collectively we can do more than we can individually."