

■ SCHOOLS

Frustration boils over closings

BY KATE DUBINSKI

kate.dubinski@sunmedia.ca

Nine communities, countless meetings and more than a dozen schools axed.

If appealing to the purse strings and heartstrings of the Thames Valley District school board doesn't keep a school open, what's the point of trying, parents and politicians are asking.

A board decision Tuesday to close Norwich District high school in Oxford County was the most recent in a series of school closings that have come despite fierce opposition from parents and community groups.

Fifteen other schools have been closed in London and Elgin, Middlesex and Oxford counties.

Parents are 0-and-9 in their fight to get trustees to vote against administrators' recommendations to close the schools.

Meanwhile, the province has appointed a former MPP to review two of the processes.

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■ FRUSTRATION

Province will review processes used in closing of two schools

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Dave Cooke of Windsor, an education minister from the Bob Rae era, will review two of the nine accommodation review committees after parents complained about the process.

As the committees — made up of community members affected by recommended school closings — wind down

their work, some residents wonder why they bothered.

"We spent hours and hours doing work and we were assured and reassured our recommendations would be taken seriously," said Rob Langford, a Metcalfe Central public school parent who battled unsuccessfully to keep that school open.

"I think (trustees) made up

their minds before the (process) even began."

The committee's numerous proposals fell on deaf ears when it came time for trustees to vote, he said.

"It's unacceptable," said Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reyrcraft, who has fought to keep several small rural schools open. "If they're going to ask citizens to volunteer to

serve on these committees, they should have their ideas debated on by the trustees."

Norwich Township Mayor Donald Doan was angered by Tuesday's decision to close that community's high school, calling the process "frustrating."

"(Trustees) have a government mandate that they have to get public input, but they

just implement everything administration recommends," he said.

That sentiment was echoed by a parent who fought the closing of Prince Andrew public school in Denfield, one of the schools to be reviewed by Cooke.

"(The trustees) have the solutions decided before they ask for public input, and it

should be the other way around," said parent Hadley McLean.

Cooke will also review the committee process that led to a trustee vote to close Northdale public school in London.

He will determine if the school board followed the review process correctly.

Thames Valley's director of education Bill Tucker said yesterday he's confident the board and trustees followed the ministry-directed process.

Trustees have made minor changes based on the community committees' proposals, but nothing so significant as keeping a school open, said board chairperson Peggy Sattler.

Kate Dubinski is The Free Press education reporter.

School closings

Norwich District high is the latest school — and the first high school — in the area to be closed. So far, trustees with the Thames Valley District school board have voted to close:

Elmdale, Myrtle Street, Scott Street and Wellington public schools in Elgin County.

Northdale and M.B. McEachren public schools in London.

Caradoc South, Metcalfe Central, Biddulph Central, Lucan, Prince Andrew, Plover Mills and Leesboro Central public schools in Middlesex County.

Princeton Central public and Norwich District high in Oxford County.

