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No special status for rural schools

Guelph-Eramosa Township Mayor Chris White is among a group of small town mayors calling on the minister of education to deliver something she can't.

White and his peers on the Community Schools Alliance want Education Minister Kathleen Wynne to declare a "smart moratorium" on closing rural schools.

Their position is simple and quite passionately held. They assert that the closure of local schools strips something greater from a rural community than from an urban one. Schools are community focal points, gathering centres, population retention tools, and powerful cultural influences in all scenarios. But, in rural settings, there are often few alternatives to them once one closes. That's all true.

Wynne has so far passed on the invitation to adopt the proposed policy. Doing so would purchase unending complications. For one, the Community Schools Alliance proposes that an outcry from an affected community would be among the factors that would automatically trigger the policy – at least to see if an alternate funding model for closure-targeted schools might be found. Well, all closure-targeted schools are subject to local outcry. Schools are rather sacred spaces and places. People don't like to see them closed lightly – nor should they. But this proposed moratorium would create a red-tape barrier to doing the right thing in many circumstances – assuming local education and political officials and community leaders work intelligently and co-operatively in seeking all possible and pragmatic options surrounding such cases.

What's more, a rural exemption of this sort would create immense precedent for other special case schools. Inner city ones, suburban ones, special-curriculum ones might all seek this same status because they serve vulnerable and special communities.

Behind this discussion is a larger issue. Ontario and Canada are becoming urbanized. The rural pattern of settlement is fading and, coincidentally, we're observing a growth in cities.

We are losing a way of living and settlement and community in our province and country. The Canadian two solitudes now refer as much to our urban-rural divide as anything else.

If policy makers want to check that trend, that's a discussion that should include special protection for one-school town's educational facilities.

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