



Politician take school closure fight to province

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Supporters of Wells Street Public School may have found a new ally in their fight to save the school.

The Community Schools Alliance is a group of municipal politicians from across Ontario who have banded together to try to convince the Education Ministry to declare a moratorium on school closures until concerns with the accommodation review process are addressed.

More needs to be done to prevent unnecessary school closures, said alliance chairperson Doug Reycraft, who is also the mayor of Southwest Middlesex and a Middlesex County councillor.

School boards should make more of an effort to work with community partners, he added.

Some school boards are doing a good job of co-operating with their community and municipal partners, Mr. Reycraft said.

"Unfortunately, those (boards) that co-operate and collaborate are in the minority," he added.

"I think some are using the absolute power they have over school closings to do only what they think is best and ignore the wishes of the municipality; there have been too many unwanted and unnecessary closures."

It's because of this the alliance thinks the moratorium is in order and it wants the ministry to order a halt to all school closures, save for those that are not disputed.

"We feel (the accommodation review process) isn't sufficient," Mr. Reycraft said. "Most people who have sat on an accommodation review committee will tell you they feel the outcome was predetermined by the administration. It's a complete sham."

The alliance only really got moving in late July, but has already made some considerable progress. The roster of mayors and politicians on board has expanded to include Simcoe County Warden Tony Guergis, Guelph/Eramosa Mayor Chris White and Burlington Mayor Cam Jackson. The group also met with Education Minister Kathleen Wynne last month about some of its concerns.

Sixteen schools were closed in 2008 and, by year-end, another 146 could face the same fate, Mr. Reycraft said, noting there are about 100 accommodation reviews under way, he said.

In need of costly repairs after structural problems were found at the school, an accommodation review committee was established for Wells Street last year and recommended the school be restored and reopened. However a York Region District School Board staff report recommends the school be closed permanently.

Trustees are to vote on the matter this month.

The release of the recent Encouraging Facility Partnerships draft policy is definitely a step forward, Mr. Reycraft said, but it doesn't go nearly far enough as it doesn't force the boards to do anything.

It encourages school boards to look for ways in which they could share their space or otherwise partner with municipalities or community groups to keep some schools open, he said, adding he fully understands such agreements might necessitate some cost-sharing.

"If a municipality is going to lease space (in a school) for its own purposes, then it should pay for it," Mr. Reycraft said, adding, in some schools, it's not uncommon to see an employment resource centre or even a shared library.

"It just seems the board's reflex is often to close the school and (that) may be required in some cases. But in others, they could lease space to a municipality or even the private sector."

Taking such a step could help reduce a school's on-the-ground capacity and combat low enrolment, Mr. Reycraft said.

For her part, Ms Wynne hasn't been especially receptive to the moratorium concept, but referred to the partnership policy document as being a potential blueprint for saving some schools.

"We've actually put out a policy document that encourages boards to work with community groups as well as the local municipality (and) this comes directly from our declining enrolment work group," Ms Wynne told the Banner. "We're going to work with the school boards to set up those kind of partnerships and encourage them to let their partners know what kind of space is available (at their sites) and what is out there."

Aurora Mayor Phyllis Morris said she and Councillor John Gallo, who was a member of the Wells Street review committee, have taken great interest in the alliance's aims.

"We believe the town might be supportive of (joining the alliance), but we need to ask council officially," Mrs. Morris said, adding the matter will be addressed when council meets again next week.

Mrs. Morris said she is also hoping to speak to York Region District School Board chairperson Diane Giangrande and Aurora and King Trustee Gord Kerr prior to the Sept. 14 board meeting, the last meeting before the board is to vote on the school's fate.

Apart from that, a letter from the town will also go to the board to correct an error in the growth numbers it is using with respect to the Wells Street catchment area, Mrs. Morris said.

As for the possibility of partnering with the school board, Mrs. Morris said she's all for it if it saves the school.

"If Kathleen Wynne would like us to step up to the plate, then we'd be happy to provide any assistance to keep (the school) open," she said. "We're stepping up to the plate by revitalizing downtown and looking for community spaces."

Community Action for Wells Street member Heidi Franken said the group is also keeping a close watch on the alliance's efforts, adding it's reassuring to know Aurora isn't the only community with such concerns.

"We hope that this will lead to productive dialogue with the provincial government so a creative solution can be found to keep schools from closing, including Wells Street Public School."

A lot has happened since the accommodation review process wrapped up earlier this year, Ms Franken said, pointing out events such as the release of the Pascal report, the formation of the Community Schools Alliance and introduction of new guidelines for the accommodation review process.

The school board may do well to take another look at the process and the importance of Wells St. to the broader community, she said, adding the one thing that does remain consistent, however, is just how committed the public is to having the local school resurrected and re-opened.

"We want to remind Aurora the fight is not over; no decisions have been made," she said.

"We have always maintained that Wells is a unique school that deserves a unique solution to keep it open (and) encourage the community to keep up the fight, join us on Sept. 14 at the board meeting and continue to ensure both politicians and trustees hear your views right up until the vote on Sept. 24."

But despite the new information on the table, it's difficult to say if Wells St. would be a good candidate for a shared use agreement between the board and the municipality or

community groups, school board spokesperson Ross Virgo said. The board maintains such partnerships, such as Westmount Collegiate Institute and the Vaughan City Play House and Richmond Green Secondary School and Richmond Green Public Library, Mr. Virgo said, but it's tough to say if Wells St. would prove a good candidate for such an arrangement given the declining enrollment and number of costly repairs required.

"I don't want to predict the outcome of the trustees' decision (on Wells St.), but we are dealing with a building facing a future of declining enrollment as an elementary school and with some severe structural problems," he said.

The Community Schools Alliance, meanwhile, will keep lobbying the province for change on the school closings issue.

What began as an attempt to protect rural schools has truly grown into something much larger.

"There are 444 municipalities in this province and we'd like to have as many of them in on this as possible," Mr. Reycraft said. "This whole issue dealing with school closures is not one that's restricted to just the rural areas."