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Board offers to talk about possible school closings

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School officials and rural politicians can meet early in the school-review process to advocate for students and their small communities.

That was the message last week from Bill Tucker, head of the Thames Valley District School Board.

But the dialogue won't necessarily keep small or half-empty schools open, said the education director during a Middlesex County meeting.

County politicians have been pushing for a process that would force boards to include them in talks about rural school closings.

Mr. Tucker offered a compromise, saying, "I believe there's an opportunity where we can sit down and work together toward both those goals" of program equity and fewer surplus classroom spaces.

When asked if working together would stave off school closings, Mr. Tucker told councillors more than once they wouldn't make any promises and that ultimately the decision is an educational one.

Southwest Middlesex Mayor Doug Reycraft, who heads up the Community Schools Alliance lobbying the province to mandate municipal inclusion in school closing deliberations, said he hopes the board's commitment translates into action.

Mr. Tucker noted that the board learned from the first round of accommodation reviews it conducted and the next round will be more consultative.

The board's goal is have elementary schools with at least 400 pupils and secondary schools with at least 900 students.

Mr. Tucker said the board is open to making schools the hub of their communities, but the province has to acknowledge school boards can't pick up the cost for the non-education, community uses.

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