

# Parents defend rural schools

BY KATE DUBINSKI  
kdubinski@fpress.com

Impassioned speeches, pleas for understanding and standing ovations have become common at public school board meetings recently.

Last night was no exception, when yet another set of parents and community leaders stood up to argue why their rural Middlesex County schools should remain open.

"Our community likes the school just the way it is — a small, rural school," Jeff Denning, who graduated Metcalfe Central public school, told the Thames Valley District school board last night.

Denning wants his kids to go to his old school, too.

Rural schools are at the heart of small communities, Joanne Vanderheyden, deputy mayor of Strathroy-Caradoc told the board.

Public input meetings such as last night's have been held for months, but don't make the trustees' job of deciding school closings — a job that they will have to complete — any easier.

Facing falling enrolment in some parts of the region, but with buildings bursting in others, the school board has identified 10 areas across London and Elgin, Oxford and Middlesex counties where schools should be closed, twinned or new ones built.

So-called school accommodation review committees, which include school and neighbourhood representatives, were selected for each area. Many have met the required minimum four times and administrators have read their recommendations.

Now, trustees have started reviewing the findings and making decisions on closings and other moves.

The process of recommending which schools to close has sometimes pitted parents against parents and rural schools against their urban neighbours.

"Please hear our communities and address the vacant pupil places where they exist (in urban areas)," said Karen Aranha, a parent with the Glencoe District high school

go to his old school, too.

Rural schools are at the heart of small communities, Joanne Vanderheyden, deputy mayor of Strathroy-Caradoc told the board.

Public input meetings such as last night's have been held for months, but don't make the trustees' job of deciding school closings — a job that they will have to complete — any easier.

Facing falling enrolment in some parts of the region, but with buildings bursting in others, the school board has identified 10 areas across London and Elgin, Oxford and Middlesex counties where schools should be closed, twinned or new ones built.

So-called school accommodation review committees, which include school and neighbourhood representatives, were selected for each area. Many have met the required minimum four times and administrators have read their recommendations.

Now, trustees have started reviewing the findings and making decisions on closings and other moves.

The process of recommending which schools to close has sometimes pitted parents against parents and rural schools against their urban neighbours.

"Please hear our communities and address the vacant pupil places where they exist (in urban areas)," said Karen Aranha, a parent with the Glencoe District high school revitalization group.

Closing rural schools is not worth the "chaos, heartbreak and disruption" to pupils and parents, added parent Flora MacKeller Deller.

Across Ontario, hundreds of schools are on the chopping block because of rapidly declining enrolment.

Last night in London, some parents argued against a recommendation to close Metcalfe Central and Caradoc South public schools in Middlesex.

Other parents waited to speak about other schools.

Also last night, administrators recommended closing London's Brick Street and Manor and Highland Park schools.

Trustees have yet to approve administrators' recommendations.

*Kate Dubinski is a Free Press education reporter.*