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Creative thinking on school closings

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People don't like to see a school close in their community. But to ensure high quality education for students in this era of declining enrolment, some schools must.

Over the last seven years, 90,000 fewer children have enrolled in Ontario public schools, and the trend is continuing with 56,000 fewer students expected over the next four years. That is the equivalent of hundreds of empty schools across the province.

The decline, however, is spread around unevenly, so what we have are a lot of half empty schools – 110 of them under the Toronto public board alone. These schools are financially unsustainable, and they aren't much good for kids, either, because they can't offer a full range of programs. It makes no sense to spend scarce tax dollars maintaining underutilized buildings when we can't afford to hire librarians or upgrade science labs.

The trick, then, is deciding which schools to close. School trustees across the province are looking at the issue, but some municipal politicians also want a say in the matter.

The "community schools alliance," recently started by a handful of rural Ontario politicians, wants school boards and municipal councils to work together and take into account the broader community's interests in determining the fate of underutilized schools.

This type of collaboration ought to be encouraged.

It's time we engage communities in early, positive ways about how to best handle declining enrolment. We should not wait until parents are protesting outside the building with "save our school" placards.

We should also be thinking more seriously about what role school buildings can play in our communities after 4 p.m.

Why can't neighbourhood kids play basketball in the school gym in the evening or a seniors group use classroom space on the weekend?

The reason often given is that the school funding formula doesn't stretch to pay for someone to open the building or even the cost of keeping the lights on.

The money for schools and municipalities comes from different pots. But there is only one taxpayer, and schools are vital parts of community infrastructure. We need to find ways, then, around the funding silos we have created. With an estimated 150 schools across Ontario slated to close and another 100 under review, now is the time for creative thinking about the use of schools and funding solutions.

There are already examples of trustees and councillors working together for the good of students and the community.

Toronto's public schools, for example, house numerous city-run daycares. But to gauge how far we

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still have to go, we need look no further than the annual funding fight over Toronto's school pools, with the board and city each claiming the other should pay.

The community schools alliance ought not to become a vehicle to delay school closings, which are inevitable. Rather, the alliance should lead the way in innovative thinking for the good of both students and communities.