

Three Point Action Plan in Support of Rural and Northern Education

Background Information

Schools Have Social and Economic Impact for Small Communities in Ontario

The Community Schools Alliance, with the support of its many municipal members, has made changing provincial education and infrastructure policy in the delivery and maintenance of school properties a priority.

- The educational policy of past two decades in Ontario has resulted in the amalgamation of smaller local schools into larger buildings, and often the closure of schools in smaller communities. Instead of attending school within their local community, many students are forced to attend schools in communities further away from home.
- This trend towards bussing rural and smaller community students into other communities can have wide-ranging impacts on the health, wellbeing, and stability of students, parents, and affected communities. The impacts of these closures may also not be immediately apparent, with potentially longer-term impacts being experienced decades later with negative economic competitiveness and socioeconomic outcomes.
- The Community Schools Alliance retained the Human Environments Analysis Lab at Western University to undertake an objective analysis of the connections between a community's vitality and the presence of a school within the community.

This study, [Schools Have Social and Economic Impact for Small Communities in Ontario](#) was released in January of this year.

The research shows that

- small rural and northern communities with schools tend to have more private amenities and more public services than those without schools.
- closing a school in a single-school community threatens the future existence of those amenities and services and the quality of life of the families living there.
- closing a school also reduces the ability to attract new growth and economic development to the community.
- This analysis revealed that of the 733 communities in Ontario with more than 300 and less than 10,000 population that were included in the study, 303 (41%) had no schools, 232 (32%) only have one school, and 198 (27%) have two or more schools.

Governance Model

- Unfortunately, under the current education governance model, local area municipalities have little influence over school board capital infrastructure

decisions. Many smaller municipalities may even be forecasting growth that would support a school with declining enrolment.

- However municipalities have no way to prevent a school closure and disposition of the land should the school board choose to do so in the short-term to meet new growth elsewhere in the board.

What Can Be Done

The Community Schools Alliance believes that a better system is needed to address the educational facility needs of Ontario's smaller communities. The Ministry, school boards, and municipalities need to work together to develop policies that address planning for declining enrolments, a predictable Accommodation Review Committee process, a review of funding to rural and small community schools, and improved transparency and accountability in capital infrastructure decision-making.

A Three Point Action Plan for Rural and Northern Education

During the past few months, the Community Schools Alliance has met with the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education and representatives of the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party to share the results of this recent research and to ask for support for the following:

- 1. The province increase the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) to \$50 million;**

The Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) was introduced in 2017 as a \$20 million addition to provincial funding for school boards to address the unique needs of schools in rural and northern Ontario. It will be increased in 2022 to \$21.8 million. At \$20 million, the grant was targeted to provide an average of \$55 to the estimated 368,000 rural students who comprise close to 20% of the total student population in the province. By increasing the grant to \$50 million, it would slightly more than double the grant per student, better serve 70 of the 72 district school boards, and still be a very small percent of the 2022 projected 26 billion Grant for Student Needs

- 2. Should the current moratorium on accommodation reviews and school closures be lifted, we ask that the moratorium remain in place for [schools that qualify for the RNEF](#) until a thorough review of the education funding formula is completed**

The RNEF has been a welcome supplement to the education funding formula. However, a thorough review is required to prevent the closure of schools in rural and northern communities where limited economies of scale make small and underutilized schools tempting targets for closures and consolidations. These force many students to attend schools in communities further away from home and threaten the quality of their school experience and the quality of life in their communities.

3. Before templates required by the 2018 Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) are developed, there be consultation with school boards and community groups including the Community Schools Alliance.

A new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline was released in April, 2018. It establishes the minimum standards that school boards must follow when each board adopts its own Pupil Accommodation Review Policy. Improvements in the 2018 PARG are the requirements that a school board must consider the impact of a proposed closure on the local community and, if one of the schools in a proposed review qualifies for the Rural and Northern Education Fund, the impact on the local economy. Each of these impact studies must follow a template provided by the Ministry of Education. Those impacts have not yet been developed.

