



Community
Schools
Alliance

Ministry of Education Delegation - ROMA

Date: Monday January 28, 2019

Time: 11:15-11:30 am

Location: Leaside Room, Fourth Floor Sheraton

Minister Lisa Thompson

Madam Minister, on behalf of the Township of Zorra and the Community Schools Alliance, which includes 38 Ontario municipalities and growing, I thank you and your Staff for offering us this meeting.

The Community Schools Alliance is a non-profit organization committed to working with the Ontario Ministry of Education, municipalities, and school boards. Our goal is to have a collaborative process that results in democratically determined decisions regarding education infrastructure. Such decisions about school consolidations and closures should consider community impacts.

Our aim is to have municipalities become partners with school boards in making decisions about where new schools are built and where schools are closed.

The Community Schools Alliance is asking the Minister of Education to continue to honour your commitment to a moratorium by **extending the current moratorium** on school closures until the 2018 Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline is ready for implementation.

During that time we ask that the Ministry work together with school boards and municipalities to develop policies addressing such issues as planning for declining enrolments, completing the templates required for the implementation of the 2018 PARG, a review of funding to rural and small community schools, and defining the working relationship, transparency and accountability between municipalities and school boards.

Additionally, while the welcome “Provincial Asset Management Survey” is conducted, and potential changes are considered, we believe it is appropriate to continue the moratorium.

We would like to make it clear that **we were very pleased to have been involved in the two-stage review of the PARG in 2017-18** which resulted in the new document; and we look forward to the resumption of the process and the completion of the templates for the Initial Staff Report and the Economic Impact Study required if at least one school in a Review qualifies for the Rural and Northern Education Fund.

We are especially pleased that the revised document calls for the consideration of the impact of a school closure on the local community and, if the school qualifies for the RNEF, on the local economy.

We consider the RNEF to be a very significant policy introduction. The \$20 M is helpful, but not large enough compared to the reduction in the top-up funding that preceded it.

This is a significant and appropriate departure from the one-size-fits-all approach of previous PARGs.

The Community Schools Alliance, and Zorra, pride ourselves on understanding the larger context of the issue we are addressing.

We understand that the Ministry has a budgetary context to work in and a large system to manage.

We do not demand that there be no more school closures.

We do not demand that the Province simply throw money at the problem.

We strive to be the reasonable voice in the room.

The formation of district school boards about 20 years ago followed the creation of county school boards in most of rural Ontario about 20 years before that. A recent decision by the Elgin County Council to separate the county from the Thames Valley DSB and return the governance of schools to Elgin has reignited discussion about the governance of education.

The Community Schools Alliance has for years heard concerns about the challenges presented by the large geographic area of most district boards in rural and northern Ontario. Because of the distances between most trustees and the schools and communities in a district, decisions about both are made by elected trustees who lack familiarity with local communities. Parents and citizens see decisions with profound consequences for their community in the hands of representatives who have very little accountability to them.

Similarly, candidates for election to a district board experience great difficulty familiarizing themselves to municipal voters due to the distances and limited affordable options of communicating with their electorate. The result unfortunately is underinformed voters or a voter participation rate much lower for school boards than municipal councils, or both. Citizens, especially parents, tend to see the governance of education and their schools to be much less democratic than that of their municipality.

Therefore the Community Schools Alliance suggests that a review of the governance of education in rural and northern Ontario is due. We would hope that the outcome of such a review would include a more collaborative relationship between the governors of education and those of our municipalities.

The Community Schools Alliance would like to work with you on improving on the work that has already been done, and implementing your obvious and very real commitment to rural, northern, and single school communities.

Again, Minister, we thank you for being willing to again meet with us today.