

The Ontario Alliance Against School Closures (OAASC) has uncovered over 600 schools, with enrollments at or under the Ministry of Education's 65% utilization benchmark, that are threatened with closure this year and in the coming few years.

"Our study examined documents readily available on board websites," said OAASC spokesperson Susan MacKenzie. "Based on available public information from thirty Ontario school boards, a minimum of 611 schools are threatened with closure. In addition, there are 42 school boards that have not made their Long-Term Accommodation Plans readily available to the public, which means that the true number of schools facing closure is really much higher. It is important to know what is planned in all of the school boards in Ontario and which schools will be on the chopping block."

She states, "in the five years leading up to the release of the Ministry's revised pupil accommodation review guideline, 277 schools were closed. The Minister's number of 300 closures for 2016-17 would represent a five-fold increase. They are hoping to close as many schools in one year as they have in the previous five." The OAASC also states that school boards will receive funding supports totaling \$33.2 million to undertake capital planning activities that align with the phase out of top-up funding. MacKenzie contends, "this represents millions of dollars taken away from top-up funding and instead being diverted into closures."

The OAASC believes that the 2015 rewriting of the Pupil Accommodation Review guideline demonstrates the Ministry's intent to further speed up the school closure process and to get it done without municipal and community interference. "Just last week, four boards voted to close 18 schools," MacKenzie stated. "With the situation becoming increasingly urgent; we call on the government to declare an immediate moratorium on school closures."

Many rural, northern and single school communities are approaching or have had their final ARC meetings. We are requesting that you consider a renewed and sincere focus on placing a moratorium on school closures in these vulnerable areas.

We believe the Ministry of Education should look to revisiting the intent of the Good Places to Learn (GPL) report.

The GPL report outlines in detail, the purpose of this grant and emphasizes the need to ensure rural, northern and small community schools are protected. When the Ministry of Education revised its Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) in 2015, it did not embrace the spirit of GPL report's objectives.

The GPL report recognizes these key elements:

- Student program needs to drive facilities planning
- New guidelines for school closing procedures by boards
- Better value for capital grants
- Open decision-making, improved board oversight and public participation in capital planning

Since there is no protection in the PARG for rural, northern and small community schools, school boards are undertaking accelerated reviews to close facilities in these areas.

The GPL report states:

New guidelines for school closing procedures by boards;

“There have been a record number of closures over the past several years but the current guidelines for school closing do not meet all of the obligations that boards and the province have to students, the community and the overall system.”

The Ontario Alliance Against School Closures (OAASC) recognizes that this government desires to balance the budget leading up to the 2018 election. On January 20, 2017, the OAASC delivered education savings suggestions to the Pre-Budget Consultation finance committee. The Ministry of Education continues to throw billions of dollars into capital grants without a concerted examination of how and under what circumstances these monies are being acquired by school boards.

The GPL report also states:  
Better value for capital grants

“There have been “rewards” in capital funding for closing schools which has distorted facility considerations. Some boards felt compelled to close schools in one area to be eligible for new schools in another, even if the sites were far apart. Some boards closed schools prematurely to become eligible for new replacement schools. The ministry will no longer recognize closed schools as creating eligibility for new school grants.”

We ask that you uphold the spirit and intent of the GPL report as it relates to all capital grants. Cease the spending of billions of non-urgent dollars that compel school boards to formulate self-serving plans which place students and communities at risk.

We therefore request, at the very least, you summon school boards to place an immediate moratorium on school closures in rural, northern and small communities before:

- Students are forced to attend schools outside their communities,
- Students are forced to endure lengthy bus rides, that in some areas, are equivalent to the amount of teaching time they receive,
- Students are robbed of extra-curricular activities, after school employment, play, family, homework and sleep time,
- Rural, northern and single school communities which will no longer attract young families and commerce will wither and die.

Many upper and lower tier governments, municipalities and farm federations have also written to you expressing the urgency of a moratorium on school closures.

Once a moratorium is in place, we are confident local governments will work closely with the Ministry of Education to achieve fair and fiscally sound solutions relating to delivery of education in rural, northern and small communities.

The 2015 revised PARG has marginalized the integrity of the GPL report. The 2009 revision to the PARG respected the obligations that boards and the Ministry had to students and their communities.

Felicia Fahey  
Executive OAASC