



June 6, 2017

Chair David Thompson and Trustees
Near North District School Board
963 Airport Road, PO Box 3110
North Bay, ON P1B 8H1

Dear Chair and Trustees,

The Ministry of Education's Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines serve as the province's minimum standard that school boards must utilize to develop their own policies for accommodation reviews which lead to decisions on school closures. Changes to these guidelines were completed in 2015 which require Boards of Education to consult with municipal and community organizations prior to making any final accommodation decisions, however there is no similar requirement for any analysis on local social and economic impacts. The Ministry of Education has certainly put local school boards and Accommodation Review Committees (ARC) in a difficult position to make decisions on school closures.

Rural and northern Ontario has initiated serious concerns with respect to the local and provincial economic impacts related to the loss of these institutions. Recent estimates indicate that close to 600 schools in rural and northern communities across Ontario are under the threat of imminent closure.

This is not just a local issue but a provincial issue. Recently, on May 6, 2017, the Chamber network passed a resolution directing the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to urge the Government of Ontario to **Implement a Moratorium on School Closures.**

At the end of the day, the Ministry of Education is directing local school boards to engage in accommodation reviews, but then washes their hands of the process rather than supporting our school boards and communities with appropriate funding. We feel that the government of Ontario needs to immediately put a moratorium on school closures and revise the Accommodation Review guidelines to require consideration of the economic and social impact of planned and potential closures. We are certain this would be a great deal easier for ARC reviews to be determined appropriately and efficiently.

We recognize that there is a decrease in student enrollment and that it is expected to remain on the decline in the future; we aren't opposed to amalgamations of schools where appropriate, but if the economic and social case is not investigated, we could be doing more damage to the community than expected. So, it is important for us to ask that the province respect the businesses that could see an economic impact of school closures.

Chambers of Commerce have been strong advocates for any provincial government decisions to ensure economic conditions and social factors be formally evaluated and considered. The same principles should apply to potential school closures to ensure school boards reach conclusions based on wider community economic and social impacts.

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce, with a network of members in rural, northern and urban areas across the province, provides strong credentials for assisting the provincial government and individual school boards on assessing the affects of school closures on their respective communities.

As an example of the relative importance of school closures for the rural business sector, Chapman's Ice Cream in Markdale, Ontario has offered the Bluewater District School Board a donation of \$2 million to build a new school in the Markdale-Flesherton-Dundalk area of Grey County. The firm has also committed to providing 10 acres of company property for a building site north-west of Markdale.

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Ashley Chapman, Vice President of Chapman's, has indicated that closing the current Beavercrest Community School in Markdale would "have such a detriment to my business I can't even tell you." He further added that if the local school closed, it would not only be a problem for the community, it would limit the future growth of his business.

Chapman's plan to expand their workforce by up to 1,000 employees over the next five years and the absence of a local elementary school would limit their capacity to attract those workers. Also, a new school facility could provide training capacity for local employers.

While we recognize that this is not a local example, we could certainly name several businesses in the West Ferris area that may be impacted by closing the high school. These businesses may not have the number of employees as indicated in the example, but the impact on a small community like North Bay could be just as great. While West Ferris is a part of the North Bay area, it has always been deemed a unique neighbourhood, and should be considered as such when ensuring it's economic and social stability.

The Young Professionals of the North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce are categorized as professionals under 30 years of age, some are entrepreneurs, some are professionals in areas such as law, accounting, finance, real estate, and other sectors. From the point of view of the Young Professionals committee there comes two additional concerns:

- As Young Professionals, they are not attracted to an area/neighbourhood where the future of the schools is uncertain; they are at the point in their lives where they are seeking to buy a home and start a family. Removing the school will leave no incentives for families to remain or locate to these areas. Property values will also become a concern for those currently living in areas that may see school closures.
- Secondly, the Young Professionals had big concerns with athletics, opportunities for social inclusion, physical activity, leadership, and commitment, that would all be limited if we go to one super school model. The same also applies for other extra-curriculars such as band and drama. It may be presented as a more 'competitive' team/group but they don't think competitiveness supports the needs of our younger demographic in the same way that leadership and teamwork do.

Due to the urgency of this ARC process, even without the data that we feel is needed to make an appropriate decision, we want to clearly state that we fully support the ARC's recent recommendation to keep West Ferris Secondary School and amalgamate the two high schools in the north end; one super school was not appropriate on many levels. We certainly support the ARC process and appreciate the time and effort the recent ARC members took to ensure community voices were heard; we hope the trustees will adopt the current recommendations of the ARC members.

It is time for the Ministry of Education to support our students and communities by ensuring the economic and social impacts associated to the community are at a minimum. Schools can certainly be viewed as community based hubs and more so in rural and northern communities. The impacts to local businesses and the health of a community are real and measurable.

The North Bay & District Chamber of Commerce certainly understands the need for the school boards to move through the ARC process; our only concern is that the provincial government can't just dictate process. The government needs to provide the tools to measure the social and economic impacts of each potential school closure, to ensure that school boards and ARCs have all the information they need to make the best decision for the communities involved.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the President & CEO and the Board of Directors of the North Bay & District Chamber of Commerce
Patti Carr, VP of Policy and Communications