

ON MARCH 20TH, THE PROVINCE RELEASED THE REPORT FROM THE DECLINING ENROLMENT WORKING GROUP. WHAT FOLLOWS ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS:

Facts about enrolment decline

- Ontario will have 140,000 fewer students in 2012 than it had in 2002.
- Between 2002 and 2012 enrolment will decline in 58 out of the 72 school boards
- 34 boards now have fewer than 12,000 students
- The average elementary school has 318 students (down from
- The average secondary school has 819 students (down from
- Private schools **are not** a factor. The proportion of students in private schools (5.7%) has not change in the last few years.

The funding formula and declining enrolment

- A large portion of the funding formula is linked directly to enrolment, but the School Foundation Grant ensures funding for a minimum level of in-school leadership and administration; and the Supported Schools Allocation provides funding for a minimum level of teaching staff for 287 schools that are located far from other schools in their board.
- The Declining Enrolment Adjustment is a **temporary** grant to support boards as they adjust to the decrease in funding that results from a decline in enrolment. The grant recognizes that some costs are easy to adjust (e.g. fewer students need fewer teachers), and some costs require more time to adjust (e.g. “sticky” costs such as school building maintenance and principals).

- Boards receive funding on a per pupil basis for school operations and renewal, but the province “tops up” the funding for some schools that are under capacity.

What the working group heard

- As schools become smaller the number and variety of programs offered may be reduced
- The number of multi-grade classes may increase
- Schools may face reductions in the following areas:
 - teaching staff who deliver support and programs in areas such as literacy and numeracy
 - library and guidance staff, supervisory staff, vice-principals, and secretarial staff
 - the availability of services provided by professional/paraprofessional staff, such as social workers and speech-language pathologists
- Information technology is an important tool for both education program delivery and efficient administration, two areas where declining enrolment can put pressure on schools and boards. The costs associated with information technology – for example, the initial expenditure to establish a network and the overhead for network maintenance – are considered “sticky” costs, i.e. they do not decline as enrolment declines.
- The funding formula as a whole needs more flexibility to address local needs and circumstances related to declines in enrolment.

What their research showed

- Many school board responses to declining enrolment are short-term and reactive, but focused, long-term planning to address the reduction in revenue caused by declining enrolment can help boards avoid mitigate negative effects such as reductions in classroom resources.
- Improved partnerships, efficiencies, and relationships with community organizations are important ways to address the effects of declining student populations. Partnerships between boards or schools and/or with community organizations can greatly improve efficiency and help to reduce costs during a period of declining enrolment.
- There is a wide range of partnerships and cost-sharing agreements that boards can explore in areas such as programs, services or staff.
- Many school boards have attempted to enhance the viability of their low-enrolment schools by bringing in community organizations. By bringing other resources and partners into the schools, the use of space can be maximized and efficiency can increase.

Factors that guided the working group's recommendations

- All elementary students should have access to the full Ontario curriculum
- All secondary students should have access to a full range of pathways to all them to graduate.
- All students should have access to appropriate special education programs and services.
- Boards should take into account students' travel time to and from school when they

make decisions about programs and facilities.

- When boards do decide to close schools, every effort should be made to ensure that the students are moved to a better facility.

Highlights of the recommendations

In the preamble to the recommendations the authors say, "If closure or consolidation is the only solution considered, we risk losing sight of our primary goal – the continuous improvement of student achievement."

1. Boards should be required to create **multi-year, enrolment-based plans** based on a common template.
2. The Ministry should **provide the planning tools** and eliminate multiple requirements for the same information, integrating the multi-year plan with other planning and reporting requirements as much as possible. With common multi-year planning tools it would be easier for boards to collaborate and develop partnerships.
3. The Ministry should work to develop **public awareness about declining enrolment** and develop something similar to their class-size tracker to help the public understand declining enrolment in each school board.
4. The **Accommodation Review Committee (ARC)** process should be modified – reviewing the school valuation framework, the nature of the advice ARCs should offer, the consultation process, the role of school board personnel on ARCs and the possibility that some processes could be streamlined.

The ARC process seems to create expectations about community involvement and consultation that it is often not able to fulfil. And the

- process lacks the flexibility to address board-wide issues; ARCs usually focus on specific schools or sets of schools, even though the space and enrolment issues may be board-wide.
5. In their multi-year planning process, school boards should have to consider **sharing school facilities with coterminous boards**.
 6. Boards with **excess space** should be required to actively pursue partnerships that would result in **sharing facilities with community partners**. For example, adult education and skills training are areas of great potential for partnerships.
 7. Boards **building new schools** should be required to look for community partners to engage in co-planning, co-financing and co-construction.
 8. All services and **agencies funded by the province** should be required to consider using available school space before they build, purchase or lease any other space. E.g. coterminous school boards, social service agencies, children's and seniors' services, health, recreation, housing and municipalities.
 9. The province should provide templates and flexible funding to support partnerships, including capital funding to support modifications to school buildings.
 10. School boards should cooperate with other boards to streamline the provision of things like curriculum development, e-learning, information technology, student management systems, payroll services etc.
 11. E-learning and other technology-based program delivery should be expanded.
 12. Boards should work cooperatively with each other to expand and improve technologies.
 13. The province should ensure that all students have equitable access to broadband connectivity.
 14. Funding for information technology should be consolidated into a special purpose grant and should be based on the real costs school boards face.
 15. The Declining Enrolment Grant should be adjusted and simplified so that more of the funding comes in the first two years. But it should not be reduced.
 16. All grants to support small, rural, remote and northern school boards should be reviewed as part of the 2010 funding review.
 17. More schools should be identified as "supported schools" under the rural and remote school funding, but there should also be greater accountability for how boards use these funds.
 18. Top-up funding (for school operations) should be reviewed to ensure that provides a stronger incentive to close/consolidate schools where possible, but boards should be allowed to retain unused top-up funds and use them for other things.
 19. Money boards save from closing/consolidating schools should be put into a transition fund to cover the costs of renovating or upgrading other schools.
 20. The Ministry should give priority for capital (building) funding to projects arising out of school closing/consolidations.
 21. Special education funding should be based on the needs of students rather than on enrolment.