

# SCHOOL CLOSINGS AND DECLINING ENROLMENT IN ONTARIO

People for Education 2009



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# SCHOOL CLOSINGS

*“effectively addressing declining enrolment today... [is] an investment that will enhance [students’] opportunities and help them contribute to the social health and economic development of the province.”*

Declining Enrolment Working Group<sup>1</sup>

School closings are on the rise in communities across Ontario. Not since the 1990’s have so many schools been under review or slated for closing.

Across the province, 172 elementary and secondary schools are closing or recommended to close between 2009 and 2012 — up from 145 in May. A further 163 schools are under review.

This represents the largest increase in school closings since the late 1990’s when, between 1999 and 2004, school boards reacted to education funding cuts by closing over 250 schools across the province.<sup>2</sup>

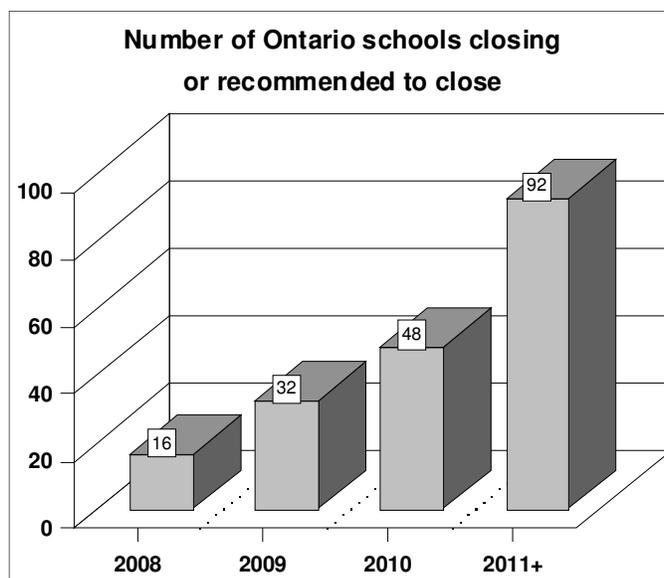
In some boards, such as Thames Valley in the London area, and the Upper Canada District School Board in Eastern Ontario, well over 10% of the boards’ schools are recommended or slated to close over the next three or four years. Other boards, like the Toronto District School Board, are just beginning the process of large-scale Accommodation Reviews. In Toronto, 46 schools are under review.

School closings are caused by a number of factors. In some cases the school buildings are simply too expensive to repair and are being replaced (44 new schools are being built in areas where schools are closing). In most cases, though, schools are closed in response to a combination of declining enrolment and an out-of-date funding formula.

In some cases, closing schools makes economic and educational sense, particularly when there are other

## QUICK FACTS

- Between 2009 and 2012, 172 schools are closing or recommended to close.
- A further 163 schools are undergoing Accommodation Reviews for possible closure.
- Boards will instigate more Accommodation Reviews in the new year.



schools nearby, or when it frees up funding to build one substantially better school to replace two smaller schools in disrepair.

But in other cases, closing schools has an impact beyond the simple loss of the building. In small towns and rural areas, closing the local school can affect the viability of the community as a whole. Even the threat of closure can result in a further loss of students as parents are reluctant to enrol their children in a school that may soon be closed. School closings can also result in very long bus rides for some students.

In urban areas, despite the closer proximity of schools, there are instances where closing a school may mean the loss of a potential hub for the community. There are obviously cases where consolidating two or even three schools is not only the most practical, but also educationally the best choice. But some urban neighbourhoods, particularly those with less access to community programs and resources may be disadvantaged by the loss of their local school.

#### FUNDING FORMULA BASED ON 1997 ENROLMENTS

When the provincial funding formula for education was developed in 1997, it was, for the most part, related to average school sizes at the time. Boards were provided with funding for staff based both on numbers of students and on a set allowance of square footage per student. Those numbers corresponded, at least notionally, to existing school sizes.

#### WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...

As a small school with declining enrolment, it is difficult to maintain staffing to offer the course selection students need. The Ministry should provide extra staffing to small secondary schools particularly in rural areas like ours.

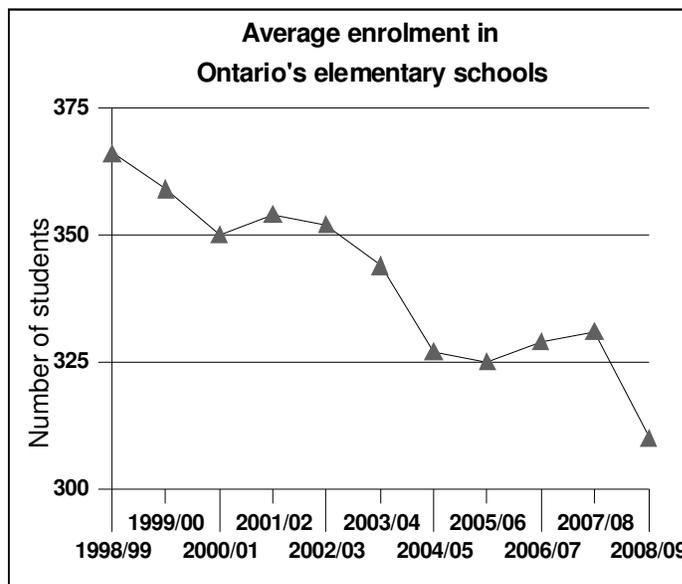
*High School, Kawartha Pine Ridge*

It is extremely difficult to be a school with declining enrolment in the North. The MOE provides less funding as enrolment declines but we have to teach complete curriculums. We can't teach half a science lab because our budget has been reduced or rent half a bus at a cheaper rate to save money. Being in the biggest geographical board we still have the greatest distances to travel with less money. The unique challenges of the North are forgotten.

*High School, Superior-Greenstone DSB*

School closure is a topic that upsets parents and community members. Our enrolment is down this year which makes everyone nervous. Our parent group is fundraising to build a reading garden, but being on the school closure horizon creates its own problems. Moving ahead is hindered by 'what if'. Smaller rural schools need stability to improve. Provincial funding needs to address the stability issue so that there is security and trust.

*Elementary School, Thames Valley DSB*



At the time, funding for principals, vice-principals, secretaries, classroom teachers, teacher-librarians, guidance counsellors and educational assistants was all allotted based on numbers of students. Since then, principals and secretaries have been removed from the per pupil allocation and are now funded mainly on a “per school” basis. But funding for all other staff continues to be based on numbers of students.

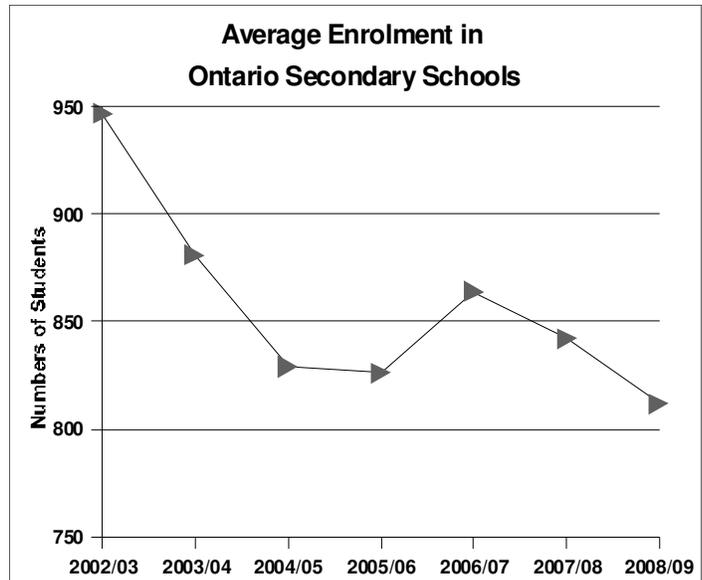
Funding for building maintenance and operations is also connected to enrolment. Boards are funded based on maintenance costs per square foot, but the funding formula lays out a prescribed number of square feet per student. In boards where they have more “square feet” than their prescribed allocation, maintenance of the so-called “empty space” is unfunded. Maintenance of space not recognized as classrooms is also unfunded. Thus a design and technology room, a computer lab, a community kitchen or a parents’ meeting room may also appear as “empty space” on a board’s books—thus exacerbating the funding issue.

#### **FUNDING CHANGES HAVE NOT MITIGATED THE IMPACT OF ENROLMENT DECLINE**

Since 1997, the average enrolment in Ontario’s elementary schools has declined by 15%. In secondary schools, since 2002, the average enrolment has declined by 14%. But the per pupil allocations for staff and for square footage have not changed.

#### **QUICK FACTS**

- Ontario will have 140,000 fewer students in 2012 than it had in 2002.
- Enrolment in the Superior Greenstone District School Board has declined by 39% since 2002.
- The average elementary school now has 310 students, compared to an average of 365 in 1997/98.
- There are 812 students in an average secondary school, compared to a high of 947 students per school in 2002/03.



Over the last few years, the province has made some adjustments to the funding formula to offset some of the difficulty caused by declining enrolment. Grants have been added to support very small and remote schools, and school boards now receive funding for principals, vice-principals and secretaries on a per-school as well as a per-pupil basis.

But most funding is still granted based on numbers of students. Boards with declining enrolment do receive some temporary extra funding from the province to help them adjust to the loss of funding resulting from the loss of students. Both the *Declining Enrolment Grant* and top-ups to per pupil Special Education funding somewhat soften the blow, but they are only temporary solutions.

#### DECLINING ENROLMENT IS A NATIONAL CHALLENGE

Declining enrolment is a phenomena across the country, the result of a decline in the birth rate.<sup>3</sup> Even Canada's substantial immigration rate does not offset the general aging of our population; proportionally, we have more seniors and fewer young people.

According to Statistics Canada, the number of students in Canada's elementary and secondary schools will decline by as much as 500,000 in the next 10 years. The population between the age of 5 and 14 may begin to slowly increase after 2016, but the population aged 15 to 19 will continue to decline until 2021, after which it may increase slightly. Statistics Canada does not predict any school-age population boom in the foreseeable future.

Enrolment decline is, for the most part, a result of declining fertility rates. The more extreme enrolment declines in rural and northern areas are caused by a combination of birth rate declines and migration to urban and suburban areas.

Funding Formula Per Pupil Allocation for Elementary Students		
Staff	Number of students required to generate funding	Percentage of schools with sufficient enrolment to generate staff
1 full-time teacher-librarian	769	3%
1 full-time guidance counsellor	5,000	0%
1 full-time educational assistant	5,000	0%
1 full-time support staff (social worker, psychologist, youth worker)	578	15%
Funding Formula Per Pupil Allocation for Secondary Students		
1 full-time teacher-librarian	909	42%
1 full-time guidance counsellor	384	80%
1 full-time support staff (social worker, psychologist, youth worker)	452	75%

In Ontario, enrolment is declining in all but 17 school boards. While the decline is much more extreme in Northern and rural Ontario, it is also being felt in the core of Ontario's older cities.

In Toronto and Windsor, for example, enrolment has declined by approximately 12% since 2002. Ottawa has seen a 7% enrolment decline over the same period. But in some boards, such as Algoma, Superior Greenstone, Keewatin Patricia and Nipissing-Parry Sound in Northern Ontario, enrolment has declined by well over 20% in the last seven years.

## OPTIMAL SCHOOL SIZE — RESEARCH VS. FUNDING

The funding formula is driving boards to establish larger schools in order to provide appropriate breadth of program. Some boards have, for example, set targets for school sizes of 450 students for elementary schools, and 1200 for secondary schools. These numbers are based primarily on ensuring there are sufficient students in each school to generate funding for a range of staff. In this way boards ensure that schools are “viable.” But these targets for school sizes are often based more on funding than on research.

While it is true that under the current funding formula a larger secondary school can offer more course choices, and a larger elementary school is likely to have more specialty teachers in areas such as music and health and physical education, research does not necessarily back larger schools on educational grounds.

Extensive international research shows that students seem to be more successful in smaller high schools. The graduation rates are higher, students are more engaged and more likely to participate in activities, even though smaller high schools have fewer activities.<sup>4</sup>

Research also shows that students in disadvantaged communities are significantly more successful in both smaller elementary *and* secondary schools. The optimal size appears to be under 400 students in elementary schools and between 600 and 900 in secondary.<sup>5</sup>

## QUICK FACTS

- Finland has the smallest average school sizes among OECD countries—and the most successful students.<sup>6</sup>
- Spending on early childhood programs generates at least \$1.7 for every \$1 spent.<sup>7</sup>

## IMPACT OF NEW EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM MAY BE TOO LATE FOR SOME SCHOOLS

If the province fully implements the new early years strategy as envisioned in *With Our Best Futures in Mind*, the report from the Premier’s Advisor on Early Learning, it could have an impact on schools across the province. Ontario’s elementary schools would act not only as education centres, but hubs of other early years programs.

The strategy in the report includes *Best Start Child and Family Centres* which would provide not only child care programs for 0 to 4 year-olds, but also a range of programs and services for their families. The reports’ recommendation is that these centres, operated by school boards and municipal authorities in cooperation, be situated in schools wherever possible.

Currently the province has announced only partial funding and support for the strategy. This year, there will be support for 15% of Ontario’s 4 and 5 year-olds to attend school from 9 to 3. Next year, the Premier has

committed to adding support to cover the costs of full-day learning for an additional 5% of students. The funding, which includes \$200 Million in 2010 and a further \$100 million in 2011, will not cover the costs of either extending the early years program to a year-round service, or the costs of operating Best Start Child and Family Centres, or integrated services in schools.

It is difficult for boards to plan ahead, or to make decisions about which schools could possibly be kept open as centres of integrated services without knowing what the funding and policy will look like in the future.

#### **INTEGRATED SERVICES WOULD SUPPORT MORE SCHOOLS**

Many other provinces have moved to support integrated services in schools. In this way, they have prevented some school closings by providing funding and policy to support a range of services in school buildings.

In New Brunswick, for example, the province's *When Kids Come First* strategy will support 75 community schools by 2012. Each school will receive approximately \$100,000 in funding. This represents nearly a quarter of New Brunswick's schools.

British Columbia is investing \$30 million to extend its community school program. It will provide funding for nine model schools, in six districts, to be built as *Neighbourhoods of Learning*. These schools may include early learning or child-care programs, space for non-profit organizations, health clinics, sports programs, family resource or seniors' centres, industry training, or branch libraries.

The *Whole Child Program* in Whitehorse, YT, recognizes that schools have a pivotal role to play in integrating community services for children and their families. Operating in two elementary schools, the program is overseen by an independent board with representation

## **THE VISION**

Ontario needs a vision of schools that recognizes them as assets to the whole community and places where families can find a range of community and social services to meet their needs.

Moving forward with all aspects of *With Our Best Futures in Mind*, would ensure a foundation for coordinated and integrated services for families, children and youth and coordinated planning strategies for school boards and municipalities.

With the Ministry of Education acting as the "leader among leaders," Ontario should establish an integration framework which includes a funding mechanism and a range of outcome measures for student success, student and community engagement, community health, integration of services and equity of outcomes.

from the Yukon Departments of Education, Health & Social Services and Justice, the RCMP, non-governmental agencies such as the Yukon Family Services Association, Yukon College and the schools' administration.

In the Northwest Territories, the departments of Education, Culture & Employment and Health & Social Services have created the *Healthy Children Initiative*. This initiative provides funding to people, organizations and communities that create programs and services to support "healthy children of healthy parents growing up in strong supporting families in caring communities."

In 2005, Manitoba launched the *Community Schools Partnership Initiative*. So far, 21 schools have qualified as community schools, acting as hubs for "a broad range of services, supports and opportunities that strengthen and support schools, families and communities."

School<sup>PLUS</sup> was launched in Saskatchewan in 2001. Seven government departments cooperate to promote and enhance partnerships between communities, families and schools. School<sup>plus</sup> is supported with funding, research and training. The province's goal is to have the model adopted by all Saskatchewan schools.

### ONTARIO COMMUNITY HUB PROGRAMS

Ontario does not have a cohesive community school or community hub policy. The Healthy School Recognition Program, a joint initiative of the Ministries of Education

### QUICK FACTS

- 40% of schools currently have school-based childcare facilities.
- 32% of schools report the building is used by other organizations, including Early Years programs, public health, and YMCA.

and Health Promotion, encourages schools to develop quality programs in health and physical education, as well as a supportive social environment and community partnerships. But there is no funding provided for this program – participating schools receive a pennant and certificate.

The Ministry of Education provides some funding to school boards so they can provide community groups with access to school buildings for little or no cost. This year, some of the funding is specifically for staff to oversee community use and community partnerships.

The province's *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, the provincial report on the *Roots of Youth Violence*, the Ministry of Education's *Report from the Declining Enrolment Working Group* and the recent report from the Premier's Advisor on Early Learning, all call for the establishment of schools as community hubs, but there is no overarching policy or funding to ensure this happens.

## NEW SOLUTIONS NEEDED

There are a number of possible future responses to declining enrolment:

- The Ministry of Education must make changes to the provincial education funding formula so that per pupil allocations for staff are updated to match 2009 school sizes.
- This summer the Ontario Public School Board Association (OPSBA) and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) began exploring a process that would allow municipalities and school boards to work together on planning to ensure that school closings and school openings are always part of broader community plans.
- The Ministry of Education is developing new rules around sharing school buildings. The Ministry is proposing that wherever new schools are built, school boards must work with other local boards, the municipality, public services like libraries and health and community organizations to ensure the buildings are shared. The new rules will also make it easier for boards and schools to share older buildings with other partners.
- In both rural and urban areas, schools have the capacity to act as thriving hubs for their communities. They could include things like community centres, and stay open after hours and on weekends for community use. Parenting centres, child care centres, community kitchens, public meeting spaces, even public libraries and health clinics can all add to the life of a school and strengthen a community's sense of connection to their local school. But all of these things require greater flexibility in education funding and greater cooperation across sectors, Ministries, and levels of government.

## NEXT STEPS

The Ministry of Education has promised to review Ontario's Education Funding Formula in 2010. Declining enrolment provides an opportunity not only to update per pupil allocations in the formula, but also to "re-think" the use of school buildings.

*People for Education recommends:*

Before the review of funding, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with Ministries such as Children and Youth Services, Health, Health Promotion and Municipal Affairs should:

- examine research on optimal school size;
- investigate the impact of a community hub model on things like overall health promotion, neighbourhood viability, youth violence and poverty reduction; and
- develop policy and funding to support and promote integrated planning and schools as community hubs.

# BOARD TOTALS

	2002/03	2009/10	% Increase or Decrease	Total # of schools recommended or slated to close '08 to '12	# of Schools in Active Accommodati on Reviews	Replacements
Algoma	12,624	9,901	-21.57%	4		2
Algonquin & Lakeshore CDSB	12,556	11,089	-11.68%	2		2
Avon Maitland	18,839	16,452	-12.67%	8	13	2
Bluewater DSB	21,573	17,391	-19.39%	3		
Brant Halidmand Norfolk CDSB	10,544	10,361	-1.74%			
Bruce-Grey CDSB	3,701	3,498	-5.49%			
Catholic DSB of Eastern ON	13,942	13,466	-3.41%			
CSD catholique Centre-Sud	10,780	12,006	+11.37%			
CSD catholique del"Est ontarien	12,601	10,358	-17.8%			
CSD catholique des Aurores boreales	566	648	+14.49%			
CSD catholique des Grandes Rivieres	8,457	6,597	-21.99%			
CSD catholique du Centre-Est del'ON	15,288	16,956	+10.91%			
CSD catholique du Nouvel-ON	7,673	6,856	-10.65%			
CSD catholique Franco-Nord	3,435	2,822	-17.85%			
CSD des ecoles catholiques du Sud- Ouest	6,379	7,014	+9.95%			
CSD des ecoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario	9,207	9,962	+8.2%			
CSD du Centre Sud-Ouest	5,761	7,029	+22.01%			
CSD du Grand Nord de l'Ontario	2,301	2,056	-10.65%			
CSD du Nord-Est de l'Ontario	1,078	1,533	+42.21%			
DSB of Niagara	43,198	36,723	-14.99%	3	3	
DSB Ontario North East	9,293	7,264	-21.83%	3		1
Dufferin-Peel CDSB	81,232	82,079	+1.04%	3		
Durham Catholic DSB	24,962	21,997	-11.88%	5		
Durham DSB	65,068	66,173	+1.7%	3	3	1
Grand Erie	29,313	25,638	-12.54%	5		
Greater Essex County DSB	37,327	34,234	-8.29%	1		3
Halton Catholic DSB	24,369	27,290	+11.99%			
Halton DSB	43,662	50,348	+15.31%	3		1
Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic DSB	28,449	27,458	-3.48%	5		
Hamilton- Wentworth DSB	55,076	48,654	-11.66%	4	15	1
Hastings and Prince Edward DSB	19,106	15,953	-16.5%			
Huron-Perth Catholic DSB	4,994	4,375	-12.39%			
Huron-Superior Catholic DSB	6,319	4,913	-22.25%	7	3	3
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB	39,218	33,233	-15.26%	3		1
Keewatin-Patricia DSB	6,380	4,879	-23.53%			
Kenora Catholic DSB	1,103	1,154	+4.62%			
Lakehead DSB	13,241	9,693	-26.8%			

	2002/03	2009/10	% Increase or Decrease	Total # of schools recommended or slated to close '08 to '12	# of Schools in Active Accommodation Reviews	Replacements
Lambton Kent DSB	27,206	22,692	-16.59%	1		
Limestone DSB	22,647	19,873	-12.25%	8	11	2
London District Catholic School Board	21,279	20,871	-1.92%			
Near North DSB	13,010	10,239	-21.3%	2		
Niagara Catholic DSB	23,474	22,533	-4.01%	3		1
Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic DSB	3,554	2,840	-20.09%			
Northeastern Catholic DSB	2,763	2,277	-17.59%			
Northwest Catholic DSB	1,301	1,148	-11.76%			
Ottawa Catholic DSB	39,120	36,602	-6.44%	3		1
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	72,335	66,183	-8.5%	2	18	2
Peel DSB	122,716	139,560	+13.73%	8		1
Peterborough V N C Catholic DSB	14,103	13,725	-2.68%			
Rainbow DSB	15,529	13,666	-12%	3		
Rainy River DSB	2,874	2,400	-16.49%	2		1
Renfrew County Catholic DSB	5,013	4,235	-15.52%			
Renfrew County DSB	11,358	9,548	-15.94%	4		1
Simcoe County DSB	52,553	50,341	-4.21%	4	5	1
Simcoe Muskoka Catholic DSB	20,945	19,964	-4.68%	3	5	1
St. Clair Catholic DSB	11,875	9,310	-21.6%	6		2
Sudbury Catholic DSB	7,142	6,220	-12.91%	4	9	1
Superior North Catholic DSB	839	663	-20.98%			
Superior-Greenstone DSB	2,681	1,643	-38.72%			
Thames Valley DSB	79,529	70,625	-11.2%	25		4
Thunder Bay Catholic DSB	7,828	7,659	+2.16%			
Toronto Catholic DSB	91,947	85,673	-6.82%	5	12	2
Toronto DSB	270,602	237,102	-12.38%	2	56	
Trillium Lakelands DSB	20,163	17,248	-14.46%			
Upper Canada DSB	34,724	28,107	-19.06%	14	3	1
Upper Grand DSB	32,750	32,222	-1.61%	5		1
Waterloo Catholic DSB	22,549	21,562	-4.38%	7	7	2
Waterloo Region DSB	56,992	56,648	-0.6%	2		
Wellington Catholic DSB	7,788	8,035	+3.17%			1
Windsor Essex Catholic DSB	26,361	23,120	-12.29%	4		1
York Catholic DSB	47,683	52,178	+9.43%	2		1
York Region DSB	94,634	106,812	+12.87%	1		10
<b>Totals</b>				<b>182</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>55</b>

# NOTES

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