

community use of schools

The community's access to schools continues to be an issue in many parts of the province.

While all of Ontario's 72 school boards have signed formal community use agreements with the government to reduce fees and increase access to schools for not-for-profit community groups, the percentage of elementary schools reporting that the community uses their facilities is 9% lower than in 1999.

2007 survey results:

- ❑ There has been no change from last year in the percentage of schools charging fees for community use.
- ❑ 8% of elementary schools and 15% of secondary schools report their fees are down from last year.
- ❑ The areas of the province with the lowest percentage of schools charging fees, have the highest percentage of schools reporting community use.
- ❑ Schools that report the highest amounts of fundraising are also more likely to report they charge fees for community use.

Schools as community hubs

Community use of schools goes well beyond simply renting out space to the local basketball team. Schools in some Ontario school boards are used during the week and on weekends for community meetings, as space for public libraries and as daycares. There are schools that include community kitchens and space for seniors.

As enrolment declines, it may be more and more useful for boards and schools to promote their school buildings as community assets to be used by everyone. This may prevent some schools from closing and build the public's sense of ownership in our publicly-funded education system.

No consistency in boards' policies for community use

Despite a provincial Community use of Schools policy, according to the SPACE Coalition there is little consistency across the province in terms of access to schools at nominal rates. Because the policy was implemented through 72 separate agreements with individual boards, it has entrenched a patchwork of widely varying fee rates and policies.

In some cases, there are even differences within the same geographic jurisdiction. As a result, community groups may find themselves negotiating with different boards at vastly different rates.

While some boards have very low fee rates, others have maintained high rates, particularly for weekend or summer access, or for certain types of facilities.

The permit process itself also varies across the province. In some jurisdictions, the principal and caretaker must approve permits; in other areas, the permit office approves permits within approved criteria.

Using schools to foster community engagement

There is evidence that increasing public access to school buildings increases public engagement in the school system. For example, in Finland, where there is wide-spread public support for public education, school buildings are viewed as integral parts of their communities. Schools are open at night and on weekends for the community to use. Senior secondary students even have keys to the school so they can use computer labs after hours.

Q. How can we ensure that our schools can act as community hubs?

what schools told us...

“Our Catholic elementary school is a partner in a shared facility that also includes a public school, a public library, a community centre and a daycare.”

An elementary school in Toronto CDSB

“Our school gym is very small. The community has long expressed concern & an interest in securing funding for a community gymnasium.”

A secondary school in Limestone DSB

“Our high school continues to be the hub of the community. On any given night a variety of activities ranging from child/adult sports leagues to a rehearsal for a community production are at the school.”

A secondary school in Near North DSB

“We have a great school community - dedicated teachers who go beyond what is expected from their job - willingly volunteering for extra-curricular sports and activities and always assisting with all the fundraising efforts put on by the parent community.

We have a great parent community who volunteer in different aspects. We also are able to hold social functions - dances and social gatherings for the families of the school.”

An elementary school in London CDSB