

# DECLINING ENROLMENT/ SCHOOL CLOSINGS

Enrolment continues to decline at a dramatic rate in Ontario, and the effects of the decline are felt in school budgets, school closings and students' access to rich educational choices.

There are nearly 120,000 fewer students in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario than there were ten years ago, largely as a result of the decline in birth rate.<sup>1</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF DECLINING ENROLMENT

As schools become smaller, it becomes more difficult and more expensive to keep them open.

Two-thirds of a school board's revenue is based on enrolment, and, because economies of scale don't apply, providing education to smaller numbers of students is more expensive.<sup>2</sup>

As enrolment declines, boards lose revenue. As a result:

- the number of specialized programs and extracurricular activities may be reduced;
- the number of specialist teachers, library and guidance staff, vice-principals and secretarial staff may be reduced;
- the number of multi-grade classes may increase;
- the costs of maintaining underutilized school space can divert significant resources from programs and services for students; and
- it is more difficult to provide special education supports, because the majority of special education funding is based on numbers of students, rather than level of need.

## SCHOOL SIZE

This year, the average elementary school in Ontario has 318 students, a decline from 365 students in 1998. This average varies considerably by region: Northern Ontario has the lowest average elementary school size with an average of 177 students, and the Greater Toronto Area has the largest with an average size of 405 students. Ten percent of Ontario elementary schools have fewer than 120 students.

## QUICK FACTS FOR 2011/12

- Average enrolment in Ontario elementary schools has declined from 365 students in 1998, to 318 students this year.
- Average secondary school enrolment has declined from 879 students in 2001, to 794 this year.
- There are over 125 schools slated or recommended to close between June of 2012 and June of 2015.
- There are a further 142 schools undergoing reviews for possible closure.

The average secondary school has 794 students, down from 879 in 2001. Fifteen percent of secondary schools have fewer than 250 students.

## REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN DECLINING ENROLMENT

The rate and effects of enrolment change vary widely across the province. Over the past five years, enrolment has declined more rapidly at the elementary level, but projections suggest that as elementary cohorts progress to secondary school over the next few years, a decline in secondary school enrolment will follow.<sup>3</sup>

While overall population decline is expected to slow down sometime between 2012 and 2020, the only area in Ontario where population is projected to grow is suburban GTA. Northern Ontario will continue to experience sharp declines, and central, eastern and Southwestern Ontario will decline at more modest rates of 2% to 3%.

## CUTBACKS & CLOSURES IN SMALL SCHOOLS

School boards receive funding to operate schools based on a set number of square feet per pupil. When the number of students in a school matches the provincial formula, the school is considered at 100% capacity or full utilization.

Currently in Ontario, there are ten boards with utilization rates of less than 50%, while some others—in the 905 region—are at over 100%.

Across the province, 95 schools are closing, and 30 have been recommended to close without a final board decision. A further 142 are undergoing review by Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs) to decide whether they should stay open.<sup>4</sup>

The ARC process is provincially mandated, with adjustments made to meet local board needs. The role of the ARCs is strictly advisory. The process can be extremely time-consuming for participants, many of whom are parents, and it can be divisive – pitting school communities against each other. ARC participants have raised a number of concerns about the process – they often feel they don’t have all the information they need; they are surprised when the school board doesn’t accept their recommendations and, in some cases, they feel that the decision was made before the process began. Many participants have called for a full review of the ARC process.

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**We are a small rural school. Last year, the local schools were involved in the ARC process. It was a very hard year of uncertainty. Parents fought hard to keep our little school open, and they were successful! The process was long—more than a school year! Almost a year and a half of discussions, voting and nastiness! A horrible process, it pitted people against one another and hurt the community. We are now in a year of healing and transition. Glad I’ll never go through that process again in my career.**

*Elementary school, Grand Erie DSB*

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## **FUNDING CHANGES WILL RESULT IN MORE SCHOOL CLOSINGS**

This year, the province is adjusting the funding formula to “encourage” boards to close more of their underutilized or small schools.

The changes are meant to affect mainly urban boards, which may have several schools in the same neighbourhood operating below capacity. The proposed cut is \$44 million in 2013, plus \$72 million in 2014 for a total of \$116 million.

The Toronto District School Board, unlike the rest of the GTA, is an example of one of the urban boards with a number of schools that are under capacity. It has over 70,000 so-called “empty” spaces and an average utilization rate of 76% for elementary schools and 78% for secondary schools. To get its utilization rate closer to 100% would mean closing as many as 140 schools.

The province is also reducing the Declining Enrolment Grant and phasing out the Supported Schools Allocation, which covered the higher costs of schools spread far apart. This will result in a \$6.6 million cut this year.

## **SHARING SPACE HELPS**

The Declining Enrolment Working Group recommended that the provincial government require services and agencies it funds to consider space in local schools before building or renting in communities. It also recommended the province provide funding and support to promote these partnerships. Under this model, a local school might be home to a family health practice, settlement agency, or recreation programs. The government is “encouraging” this practice but has not required it.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

There are 120,000 fewer students in Ontario schools than there were ten years ago. Some schools must close as a result. But if schools were supported to be more than just classrooms, many school buildings could be used more effectively.

People for Education recommends:

- the province conduct a public review of the Accommodation Review Committee (ARC) process and develop a more effective, less divisive and less taxing method for making decisions on school closings.
- the province follow through on the recommendations from the Declining Enrolment Working Group, including mandating that all new provincially funded services and programs (not just those that are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education), must be housed in schools, unless they are able to prove there is a compelling reason why they should not be.

# METHODOLOGY

## PEOPLE FOR EDUCATION ANNUAL SURVEY OF ONTARIO'S PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

This is People for Education's fifteenth annual survey of resources in Ontario elementary schools, and twelfth in secondary schools.

The survey acts as an information tool for parents and Ontario citizens. It focuses on quantifiable resources available in schools across the province, tracking any changes which occur. The resulting data provides an annual picture of the effects of education policy and funding shifts.

Surveys were mailed to every Ontario elementary and secondary school principal in October 2011, with an explanatory letter requesting that they complete it. Translated surveys were sent to French-language schools. Reminders were faxed and emailed in December and January. Surveys could be completed online.

Confidentiality of all individual school responses is guaranteed. Where direct quotes are used that might identify a school, permission has been obtained. Only aggregated data is released.

This year's sample of 1108 elementary and secondary schools equals 22% of the province's schools and 23% of its 1,890,698 students. Schools in the province's 72 school boards participated. 57% per cent of the elementary schools in the sample also participated in 2010/11.

From time to time we follow up with respondents by email to get more information on particular issues.

# NOTES

- 1 Ontario Ministry of Education (2012). School Board Funding Projections for the 2012-13 School Year. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1213/funding12.pdf>
- 2 Government of Ontario (2009). Planning and Possibilities: Report of the Declining Enrolment Working Group.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 People for Education spreadsheet <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/People-for-Education-Accomodation-Reviews-and-School-Closings-May-2012.pdf>



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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