

money in the long run. But the solutions may involve municipalities, other ministries and sectors, and will entail fundamental changes to the way schools are funded.

In 1968, the Hall-Dennis Report recommended that schools include facilities for the use of the community, and in 2002, the Rozanski report recommended that the province inaugurate a cabinet-level committee to oversee the integration of services for families, children and youth.

If Ontario schools are to thrive in the 21st century, integration, community access, and cooperation across sectors and levels of government will be key.

The province is in the process of appointing a panel to examine declining enrolment – it is imperative that its mandate be broad, and that a new vision for schools and the use of school buildings is at the core of its tasks.

what schools told us...

“Our school is part of the Accommodation Review Process. If it closes, the bus ride from the Quebec border to North Bay would be over an hour one way which would be very problematic for young students, 4 to 7 years old. On the other hand, our resources and staff are so stretched that our students are not receiving the best education. A bigger school population would enable our students to have straight classes, special classes in shop, visual arts and music, and extra-curricular activi-

ties including a variety of sports with more teacher coaches and a full-time principal. It is a difficult decision for the Board to make and be responsible for.”

An elementary school in the Near North DSB

“As we experience an enrolment decline, cutbacks to special ed services (special education resource teachers, child and youth workers, social workers, etc.) affect the most needy and vulnerable students.”

An elementary school in Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB

declining enrolment

from The Annual Report on Ontario's Public Schools 2008



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declining enrolment

Across Canada, school-aged populations are on the decline. 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 15 years.

Declining enrolment in Ontario

- ❑ Since 2002, overall enrolment in Ontario elementary and secondary schools has declined by nearly 90,000 students.
- ❑ 31 of Ontario's 72 school boards have seen enrolment declines of more than 10% since 2002.
- ❑ There are currently over 300 schools involved in Accommodation Reviews in the province.³⁰
- ❑ As of May, 2008, closures were recommended for 50 schools in 16 boards.

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

Affect on funding and communities

Much of the funding school boards receive is based on numbers of students. As a result, fewer students equals less funding, fewer programs, and, in many cases, closing schools. But fewer students don't necessarily result in lower costs.

Boards reviewing schools

In 2006, the province introduced a uniform standard for making decisions about school closings, effectively lifting a moratorium on school closings imposed in 2003. The *Accommodation Review Guidelines* lay out a process for consultation, involvement and evaluation to ensure boards take a range of factors and views into account when they are considering closing schools.

This year, half of Ontario's 72 school boards are undertaking accommodation reviews. The reviews involve nearly 300 schools, and affect over 100,000 students. To date, the reviews have resulted in 50 recommendations for closure.

Many parents have expressed disappointment at the results of reviews, because boards, often hamstrung by provincial policy and funding, are unable to implement many review recommendations.

A trend across the country

Ministries of Education across the country are exploring strategies to deal with declining enrolment. In Quebec, the Quebec English School Boards Association appointed an advisory council to look at the issue of declining enrolment and limited resources. The advisory council recommended that Quebec school boards reposition their schools as centres for community-based activity and complementary services. They said that schools from different systems (English and French) must share more of their services, programs and buildings, and that school systems must cooperate with municipalities to ensure the full and effective use of their buildings.

Funding changes do not offset enrolment decline

Over the last few years, the province has added grants 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.

The province also provides boards with a *Declining Enrolment Grant* – a temporary transition grant to allow boards to adjust their staffing and expenses as their enrolment declines. But the province has not changed the number of students required to generate staff in the funding formula, despite steep declines in average school enrolment.

New solutions needed

In both rural and urban areas, schools can act as thriving hubs for their communities. They can include 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.

These solutions do not necessarily cost more money – in many cases, they may save