



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIR August 15, 2024

This evening's annual meeting of the Community Schools Alliance marks the fifteenth anniversary of the launch of our organization at a meeting in Ottawa in 2009 and the ninth annual meeting since the adoption of a formal constitution in 2015. The current version of the constitution was adopted at the 2023 annual meeting.

It's my honour to again have the opportunity to present a summary of the past year's activities since our 2023 meeting. As has been the case each year since 2021, the meeting is being held virtually to eliminate the travel time and accommodation costs required for in-person meetings and make it as easy as possible for members to attend.

For the second consecutive year there will not be an election for positions on our executive committee. Three members of the committee whose terms will expire on August 31, 2024 chose not to seek re-election and there were no nominations received for the vacant positions. As a result, the executive committee will start the 2024-2025 year with only seven members instead of the eleven who have traditionally filled the positions. It is anticipated that applications for appointments to fill the vacancies will be sought in the fall.

I want to express our appreciation to the members retiring from the executive committee, Meghan Chumut (Shuniah), Dane Nielsen (Grey Highlands) and Stephen Townsend (West Grey). Their contribution in support of schools in rural and northern Ontario has been significant and we will miss their participation in our meetings.

The seven members who will continue to work on the executive committee are Sue Carleton (Georgian Bluffs), Patricia Greig (Northern Bruce Peninsula), Stephen Harvey (Middlesex Centre), Stephanie Jaworski (South Glengarry), Carol Lowery (Temagami), Doug Reyecraft (Middlesex) and Marcus Ryan (Zorra). It is expected that interested members of municipal councils will be sought to fill the remaining positions

The committee met virtually fourteen times during the year between September 8, 2023 and August 9, 2024. The secondment agreement with Southwest Middlesex remains in place. Barbara Pinnell, an administrator for Southwest Middlesex, has continued to provide superb support to the executive committee, recording minutes and maintaining a mailing list of contacts within our municipal members.

Doug Reycraft was re-elected committee chair last September and Stephanie Jaworski was elected vice-chair, replacing former vice-chair Marcus Ryan who has continued as mayor of Zorra Township and Oxford County warden while remaining a member of the committee. Patricia Greig was re-elected secretary-treasurer.

The Community Schools Alliance has continued to join with delegations from municipal councils to meet with the Minister of Education and/or his Parliamentary Assistant at both the annual AMO and ROMA conferences in August and January respectively. The Ministers' Forums at both conferences have provided opportunities to question the Minister on issues such as the Rural and Northern Education Fund, the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and the moratorium on school closures.

The Community Schools Alliance was formed in 2009 to unite the municipal community around the call for a better system to decide when and where we build and close schools and for changes to the education 'funding formula'. At that time, many schools had been closed over the strenuous objections of municipal councils. The Alliance pressed for a moratorium on pupil accommodation reviews and school closures until changes could be made. Despite the call for a moratorium, between 2011 and 2021, 404 more schools were closed in Ontario. It wasn't until June 2017, after eight years of lobbying by the Community Schools Alliance, that the Ministry of Education proclaimed a moratorium on student accommodation reviews and school closures.

Since the imposition of the moratorium, several valuable research articles have been released. We found two of them published in 2023 to be particularly relevant. "Socio-spatial dimensions of school closures and neighbourhood change in Ontario: An environmental injustice?" by Patricia A. Collins, Rachel Barber, Jeff R. Masuda and Gabrielle Snow makes the case that "Public schools are particularly crucial in rural settings, where the presence of a school can literally determine a town's future viability"

The second, "Excessive rightsizing? The interdependence of public school closures and population shrinkage" by Rachel Barber, Maxwell Hartt and Patricia Collins states "We find that public school closures occurred disproportionately in shrinking and smaller municipalities."

The moratorium remains in place to this day but pressure to have it lifted continues to be applied by school boards and their associations. We recognize the likelihood that at some point the moratorium will be lifted or at least modified. When that happens, school boards will move quickly to launch accommodation reviews and attempt to consolidate or simply close schools. Under the province's Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines as currently drafted, municipal councils have a role to fulfill in the review process. It is important that councils react quickly to fulfil that role and work with their communities to protect their schools. One of the goals of the Community Schools Alliance is to inform municipal councils of the process and their opportunity to be involved when a school board begins the process to close a school.

The executive committee has followed closely the evolution of a proposal from the Township of Zorra to partner with the Thames Valley District School Board to construct a new facility that will include both an elementary school and community recreation centre. Mayor Marcus Ryan has reported that an agreement has been reached and the joint project now awaits only an announcement of funding from the province.

In May, 2023, the CSA chair delivered a presentation to the Standing Committee on Social Policy during its public hearings on Bill 98, the Better Schools and Students Outcomes Act. He applauded the proposed amendment of the Education Act to require school boards to collaborate with municipalities to facilitate early and integrated planning for schools to meet current and future needs. The Zorra project will stand as a great example of the value of joint planning by municipalities and school boards to better serve the broader needs of rural communities.

This spring, the province revised the funding of elementary and secondary education. Formerly called the Grant for Student Needs (GSN), the 'funding formula' for 2024-2025 is now the Core Educational Funding. We were pleased to see that the Core Educational Funding includes the Rural and Northern Education Fund, first introduced in 2018, that provides about \$23 million to assist school boards with the costs of operating schools in rural areas.

The financial report provided by AMO staff shows that the Community Schools Alliance has a healthy account balance from annual membership dues from our members. AMO continues to support the Alliance by invoicing our members annually and paying our bills from the account.

The membership report is a concern. The Alliance now has about half as many members as when we were at our peak. No doubt the moratorium on school closures that has been in place since 2017 has resulted in complacency about the risk to schools in rural and northern Ontario if/when the moratorium is lifted. In order to attract more members, rebuild awareness of the process and better prepare communities for the eventuality, the executive committee has engaged Redbrick Communications to prepare a Strategic Communications Plan. A first draft of the plan has been reviewed and we are expecting a second draft after the AMO AGM.

I especially thank our municipal and individual members who support us with their membership fees. Those fees are our only revenue stream and they allow us to fund research and to employ a part-time administrator to keep us organized.

Finally, I thank the other members of our executive committee for their ongoing generosity with time and advice as we work to protect our schools in rural and northern Ontario and give as many students as possible the opportunity to attend elementary and secondary school in their home community.

Respectfully submitted,



Doug Reycraft
Chair, Community Schools Alliance