

The Community Schools Alliance Strategic Communications Plan

Background

Local schools play a vital role in community wellbeing. Taking away an important public asset can impact quality of life for all residents, making a community a less attractive place to live, work and do business. This is especially true for smaller, rural or northern communities. Additionally, students impacted by a community school closure are removed from the familiarity of their community and rerouted to a nearby city or town to attend school. Children as young as four years old endure longer bus rides, and face earlier pick-up times and later drop-offs, limiting time for extracurriculars, socialization or rest.

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. Since 2011, hundreds of schools have closed, inspiring many municipal governments to rally around the Alliance's call to rethink the closure process. In 2017 Ontario's Minister of Education announced a moratorium on new "Pupil Accommodation Reviews", effectively pausing school closures in the province.

Alliance at Crossroads

With the moratorium still in place, school closures have slowly declined in relevancy for many municipalities. The difficulty in attracting potential Board members illustrates this challenge. The Alliance is at a crossroads in terms of determining whether it can create enough awareness to attract new leaders to take over the reins. It has a well-earned relationship with the Province. Now, it must focus on what the future looks like.

Post-COVID, rural municipalities have been struggling with new challenges and priorities – opioids, homelessness and in some cases rapid growth that is making housing unaffordable for young families. These are pressing and urgent. However, the moratorium won't last forever. When it comes time for the province to develop a new Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline, the Community Schools Alliance would benefit from capacity to take part in the process and effectively advocate for changes that will keep small schools open. The Alliance can inform municipal councils and their communities about the accommodation review guidelines so they can be prepared to react to an effort by a school board to close a school. The Alliance could also decide to be a resource with tools to help municipal leaders build bridges with school boards locally.

In the interim, there is also an opportunity to focus, in the short term, on advocacy related to strengthening coordination between municipal governments and school boards around facilities. While legislative requirements exist, they are weak in reality. With enough resources and support, the Alliance may advocate with the Ministry of Education for funding, legislation and regulations that better will better protect schools in rural and northern Ontario.

Strategic communications efforts should be aimed at attracting new municipal members, engaging with current ones, and improving the Alliance's ability to tell its story in a way that inspires the province to listen and make changes to the school process in Ontario.

Communications Objectives

- Increase awareness within the municipal community of the Alliance's work, goals and the benefits of membership.
- Secure the Alliance's future by recruiting more municipal members.
- Inspire the Ontario government to seriously consider the social and economic impact of community schools as it develops long-term guidelines on school reviews and other school facility matters.

Target audiences

Primary

- Ontario's municipal community, especially local elected officials
- Municipalities in rural and northern Ontario
- Ontario's Minister of Education and Ministry staff

Secondary

- Broader municipal associations, including the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), the Ontario Small Urban Municipal Association (OSUM), etc.
- Media

Strengths and Opportunities

- Academic research supports the Alliance's claims around the negative social and economic impact of school closures, including the disproportionate impact on smaller municipalities in rural and northern Ontario. When communicated in plain language, this information will help the Alliance make a compelling case around changes to school review guidelines.
- There is a relatively low barrier for municipalities to join the Alliance. For the majority of rural municipalities, membership fees are between \$250 and \$750.
- With more than 400 school closures in Ontario between 2011 and 2021, there is an opportunity to profile the impact of closures on people and communities.
- The provincial government's strong focus on growth and building more homes provides a strong argument against closing schools. Local schools provide stability, foster a sense of belonging and are vital to community wellbeing.
- Strong relationships with broader municipal associations, including AMO and ROMA, provide an opportunity to leverage these organizations' established communications channels to reach the core audience.
- While there may be less pressure from impending closures, there is an opportunity for the Alliance to advocate for stronger connections between municipal governments and school boards when it comes to facilities and infrastructure.

Weaknesses and Threats

- The moratorium on Pupil Accommodation Review has been in place since 2017. Without the immediate threat of school closures, it's challenging to get this issue back on municipal radar.

- To be effective, building capacity to communicate and advocate must happen before a school is at risk of closure. It is difficult to encourage people to care about something before they need to.
- The Alliance must capture the attention of municipal elected officials in an environment of increasingly complex municipal challenges, including the pressures of growth, rising homelessness, climate change and more.
- Recent media coverage on school reviews is dominated by school boards in large urban centres such as Toronto and Ottawa, bolstered by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. These organizations are calling for the government to lift the moratorium.
- The Community Schools Alliance does not have a designated spokesperson or a champion that can bring this matter to the broader municipal association boards.
- The Community Schools Alliance needs to redefine itself to attract new members.

Key Messages

- Municipal governments and local school boards serve shared communities and taxpayers.
- Community schools deliver economic and social benefits that go beyond classroom education.
- A school is more than bricks and mortar and a place to learn to read and write. Especially in rural and northern municipalities, local schools are community cornerstones that contribute to wellbeing and livability for all residents.
- Through the Community Schools Alliance, municipalities are calling for a better system to manage where and when we build and close schools. Municipal councils and school boards should work together to make decisions that will impact the entire community.
- Municipalities need to be prepared ahead of time to work with the Province in case the moratorium is lifted.
 - In 2017 Ontario's Minister of Education announced a moratorium on school closures, or "Pupil Accommodation Reviews". It is not clear when the Ministry will release new guidelines on school closures.
 - Municipalities may be given short notice and must be prepared ahead of time.
 - Joining the Community Schools Alliance is the best way to take part in ongoing advocacy and work to prepare for removal of the moratorium.
- The Alliance believes that full school closures aren't the answer, and that there's an opportunity, especially in rural and northern Ontario, to make schools multi-purpose spaces and community hubs.
 - Losing a local school hurts the entire community, making it a less attractive place for families with school-aged children to live, work and do business and reducing the province's ability to build healthy, sustainable communities outside of existing population centres.
 - School closures hit children the hardest. They are uprooted from the familiarity and stability of their school, relocated to a school in another city or town, and often face lengthy bus rides. They spend less time participating in

extracurriculars, connecting with peers, or taking part in other activities within their home community.

- School closures in rural and northern communities have the greatest long-term impact.
 - Closing one of hundreds of schools in a big city will not have the same impact as closing the only school in a small community.
 - New guidelines must reflect that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ensure we have the right schools in the right places.
- Public school closures have been most common in smaller, less affluent communities with less diversity and lower levels of education.
 - This perpetuates a harmful cycle where residents leave due to lack of services, further reducing a municipality's ability to provide those services and exacerbating existing social inequality.

Strategic Approach

Develop a stronger presence for the Alliance. Modernize the Alliance's look and feel to reflect an updated mission and renewed goals to protect schools through stronger municipal-school board connections.

- Increase capacity to communicate so that the Community Schools Alliance is ready and able to capture communications and advocacy opportunities, including creating web and print content for current and prospective members.
- Open a regular communications channel with existing members and update them regularly to maintain awareness of the Alliance's work and goals, and the broader matter of local school closures.
- Arm champions with back-pocket messaging to facilitate conversations that may happen outside of formal channels. Executive Committee members, and others as appropriate, should be prepared to provide a high-level overview of the Alliance's goals when speaking with fellow elected officials, reporters, constituents, etc.
- Leverage relationships with broader municipal associations to attract new members. Through events, conferences and other avenues, AMO, ROMA and OSUM provide opportunities to communicate with their members – the Alliance's core audience group.

Communications Tactics

Phase 1 – Fall 2024

Refresh logo. The current logo is more than 15 years old. A simple, modern logo will provide the Alliance with a new look and feel that can help communicate the organization's renewed focus on communications and building capacity.

Clarify one or two simple calls to action that support a renewed Alliance mission. Working with the Executive Committee, finalize one or two key “asks” or reframing of the Alliance’s overall role. These should be included in all communications content and key messages.

Fact sheets for web and print. Simple fact sheets, for web and print, that include plain language messaging and infographic content to help the Alliance tell its story. One fact sheet can be developed for current and prospective members, and another for the province.

Update website. Current content should be reviewed and refreshed where needed, including using the new logo and updated colour palette.

Phase 2 (Winter 2024-Spring 2025)

Explore opportunities to leverage the broader municipal associations to seek out new members.

- Present to the ROMA Board meeting in late fall when rebrand and content has been updated. The board will be newly constituted after AMO Board Rural Caucus elections.
- Have a booth at the 2024 ROMA Annual Conference to open a dialogue with new municipal leaders. Participating in NOMA and FONOM may also be valuable.
- Request delegation meetings at the AMO or ROMA Conferences

Incorporate Storytelling. School closures impact communities and the people within them. There are good stories to be told about these communities, and communities that weathered the storm and succeeded in keeping their school(s) open.

Identify media spokesperson and capture opportunities for media coverage. The Alliance should be ready to engage with the media when the opportunity arises. For example, a simple statement could be sent to reporters covering annual calls to end the moratorium. Identify an Executive Committee member that is ready to serve as spokesperson and ensure that they are armed with updating messaging. Longer term, the spokesperson should receive media training.

Budget Estimates

Estimated fees for Redbrick support for the fall would be approximately \$10,000 to \$15,000 :

- Refine messaging and mission with executive committee. This may also involve discussions with ROMA board members or other rural elected officials to fine tune messaging that will resonate.
- Develop and design new logo (three options to choose from). Design booth backdrop and or pull up banners
- Create new single page backgrounder/brochure on Alliance.
- Prepare a template PowerPoint presentation for use with different stakeholders re-introducing the Alliance(e.g. ROMA Board, provincial decision makers)
- Update web content (note this may require external web support depending on the content management tools on the existing website)
- Design and implement e-communications to members.

Potential external costs:

- Potential web design costs if required(TBD)

DRAFT for discussion- August 15, 2024

- Banner or backdrop print production (Generally in range of \$500 to\$1500)
- Printing of Alliance one-pager (TBD)
- Booth costs at conferences for ROMA, NOMA and FONOM (TBD)