

Presentation to the Standing Committee on Social Policy

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

Bill 98

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee. Good afternoon. My name is Doug Reycraft and I am appearing before you as the chair of the Executive Committee of the Community Schools Alliance. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Social Policy today.

The Community Schools Alliance was founded in 2009 and has been active since that time. Our goals as stated in our constitution include having students offered the opportunity to be educated in their home community and to have school boards and municipalities work together to build partnerships that allow community resources and services to be delivered with education in joint-use facilities. There is much in the Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act that is consistent with these goals.

We were pleased to hear Minister Lecce's words about joint-use projects in his opening remarks in the debate on Bill 98. We fully agree that there is great benefit to a community, large or small, if a school board and a municipality can collaborate on building and operating a school and a community centre or recreation facility together instead of doing them in silos. We applaud 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. That collaboration is already recommended by the Ministry's Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline announced in 2015. However, compliance with that Guideline has been inconsistent. Inserting the requirement into legislation and regulation will improve consistency.

The catalyst for the creation of the Community Schools Alliance was the widespread closure of schools in rural areas of the province around 2008. From its very beginning, the Alliance advocated strenuously for a moratorium on school closures, for changes to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and for changes to the 'funding formula' to better address the needs of small schools in rural and northern Ontario.

Our Alliance welcomed the moratorium that was announced in June, 2017 and we appreciate that the government has maintained it. It has spared communities and students in rural and northern Ontario the turmoil and stress that results from the announced intention to close their school.

We also welcomed the opportunity to be very involved in the thorough consultation conducted to improve the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline in 2017 and 2018. School boards develop their accommodation review and school closing policies using that provincial Guideline. That consultation concluded with the announcement of a new Guideline in April, 2018. Meanwhile, the moratorium remains in place and we were very pleased to hear Minister Lecce say in his opening remarks of the debate of Bill 98 “that it will stay in place until we have resolved long-standing concerns around the economic impacts of closing a school in a small town of this province”.

We recognize that the per pupil costs of operating a small school are greater than for a large one. There are several factors that make it impossible for certain economies of scale to be realized in small schools, regardless of whether they are full or under-utilized. Because of that, small schools been favourite targets of boards trying to downsize their total number of schools.

That reality will be somewhat mitigated by the Rural and Northern Education Fund. This fund, originally \$20 million and now up to \$21.6 million annually, was introduced at the same time as the announcement of the moratorium in 2017. It provides supplementary funding for school boards according to the number of schools each has that qualify under the formula for the Fund. Boards are required to use the RNEF funding to improve education results for students from rural and northern communities. In my own Board, the Thames Valley District, it has allowed extra staffing for at least three small secondary schools, each of which is the only secondary school in its town. The extra staffing permits those schools to provide a greater range of course options to satisfy the needs of their students. The Community Schools Alliance continues to advocate for a significant increase in the Fund to allow the qualifying schools across the province to enhance their program even more.

Much of the debate on Second Reading of Bill 98 addressed the 2023-24 funding of education recently announced by the Ministry of Education. The CSA shares the concern of the Official Opposition at Queen’s Park, school board associations and teachers’ unions that the increase in education grants will fall well short of the costs of inflation during the next school year. Failure to keep school board funding whole at a time of relatively high inflation will increase the pressure to close schools if and when the moratorium on school closures is ended. History tells us that the future existence of small schools in rural and northern Ontario will once again be at risk. Increasing the Rural and Northern Education Fund will help to mitigate that risk.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Committee today.