

Between a rock and a hard place

A new report shows that Ontario school boards continue to be caught between a funding formula rock and a budgeting hard place when it comes to keeping small schools open. It also shows that over 14,000 Ontario students are in schools that will close within the next 2 years. Many thousands more students are waiting for board decisions on schools under review or for new policy from the government that might save their small schools.

People for Education’s annual report on school closings revealed that schools are closing at double the rate they did ten years ago. In the ten years between 1985 and 1995, 236 schools closed in the province. In the six years between 1999, when the group began tracking school closings, and June 2005, 311 schools will have closed.

The parents’ group conducted a phone survey of every school board in the province to determine how many schools had closed since last year, how many schools have opened, and how many schools are slated to close. The report shows that:

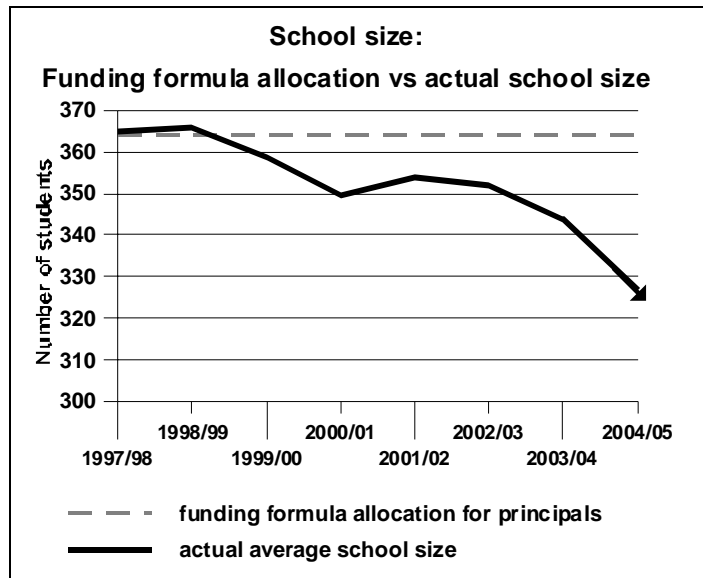
- 275 schools have closed since 1999;
- 36 schools will close at the end of June 2005;
- 14,256 students will be displaced by school closings within the next two years, bringing the total number of students whose schools have closed since 2004 to over 23,000;
- school boards have identified 19 schools that will close in 2006 or the year after;
- 17 new schools will open in 2005, most in growth boards;
- there are at least 40 schools under review for closing, with more to be added at the end of May; and
- the average size of secondary and elementary schools continues to decline at a rate that will make further school closings inevitable, barring changes to the funding formula.

Ontario School Closings – 2004/05			
	Elementary Schools	Secondary Schools	Total
Closed since 1999	243	32	275
Closing June 2005*	33	3	36
Slated to close*	17	2	19
Number of students affected	53,024	16,925**	69,949
Average size of school for 2005	203 students	510 students**	

**does not include schools being replaced
 ** does not include adult students*

“Keeping small schools open is difficult for many school boards,” said Annie Kidder, spokesperson for the group. “There have been announcements of new provincial school closing guidelines and funding to repair and upgrade school buildings. But this didn’t change the fact that school boards continue to receive funding based on school sizes that existed in 1997. Boards are caught in the middle between the Ministry of Education, who has asked boards to delay school closings, and most parents, who want to see their children’s schools saved.”

“Parents and students are also caught in the middle – between boards and the province, each blaming the other for the closings. But without substantial changes to the funding formula, keeping small schools open will result in more cuts to programs and resources in all schools.”



The average school size in Ontario’s elementary schools has declined by 10% since 1997, but the per pupil funding allocation for staff like school principals, teacher-librarians and guidance counsellors is unchanged. It is difficult for school boards to provide these staff to smaller schools.

More school closings to come

In the Lakehead District School Board in the Thunder Bay area, 7 schools are slated to close in June, with a further 7 to close in June 2007. In the Thames Valley District School Board, a report from consultants C.N. Watson will be released on May 31. It will recommend closing nearly one third of the board’s schools over the next few years. Many boards report they have put accommodation reviews and school closings on hold pending further information from the province.

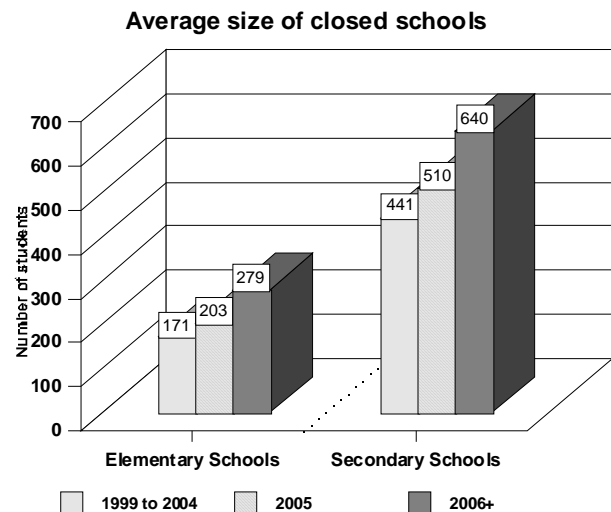
People for Education recommended that the province develop new policy outlining criteria for schools that must remain open, and a funding formula for a basic foundation of programs and services that must be provided to those schools. The group also recommended that the province provide interim funding to school boards while the new provincial funding policy for the province’s small schools.

Annual Review of Ontario Schools Closing and Opening

People for Education's review of school closings asks boards to report how many schools closed at the end of the last school year, the number that will close at the end of this school year, the number of replacement schools and new schools being built, and the number of schools that are under accommodation reviews. Boards identify the schools by name and provide the enrolment so that the parents' research group can track the number of students in closing schools and the average size of schools closed.

The review found:

- 44 schools closed in June 2004
- 36 schools will close in June 2005
- 5 schools were replaced in 2004, 4 were replaced in 2005 and 4 are scheduled to be replaced in 2006
- 17 new schools opened in 2005, 8 of them in the Peel District Board
- the average size of schools closed has increased over each of the last three years



Because the funding formula does not fit the average school size, boards are forced to close larger schools each year

1997 funding formula bears little relation to 2005 reality

Since 1997, when Ontario's education funding formula was developed, elementary school sizes have declined by 10%, and secondary schools have declined by 12% since 2003. Over the same period, costs for things like salaries, utilities, transportation and maintenance increased by over 17%. But benchmarks in the funding formula have changed very little. School boards now report that the funding formula itself bears little relation to reality, and that they must constantly move funding from one "envelope" to another in order to cover basic needs. Over the years, this has resulted in school closings, declines in staff like teacher-librarians, guidance counsellors and vice-principals, and long backlogs in school maintenance.

The moratorium on school closings

In December 2003, the government asked all Ontario school boards to place a moratorium on school closures until after September 2004. At the time, the Minister of Education said "many of the provincial funding policies that influence board decisions on the viability of schools...will be reviewed." The government did not announce any new money for schools at the time. As of May 2005, there is still no new policy for the province's small schools.

Many boards, including the Near North Board in the Sudbury area, the London District Catholic Board, the District School Board of Niagara, the Upper Grand Board in the Guelph area, the

Halton Board, and the Durham Catholic Board, have put accommodation reviews on hold pending more information from the province on funding for small schools, funding for new schools and ongoing operating grants.

In the Lakehead District Board, 14 schools are slated to close. The Minister has appointed former Education Minister Dave Cooke to review the process the Lakehead Board used for selecting the schools. If Mr. Cooke finds that the school closing process did not follow Ministry guidelines, he can recommend that the closings be delayed and a new review process undertaken.

New data on school size demonstrates need for changes in the funding formula

An early look at data in People for Education's 2005 Elementary Tracking Report shows that declining enrolment will have a devastating effect on staff and programs in schools unless changes are made to the funding formula. The recently released Secondary Tracking Report also revealed that, without immediate adjustments to the funding formula, declining school populations will result in substantial cuts in funding. The majority of elementary and secondary schools in the province are now well under the threshold to generate funding for a full-time principal.

People for Education released the data on school size before the release of the full report to give the province the opportunity to make adjustments to the funding formula in the upcoming provincial budget.

Recommendations for adjustments to the funding formula

The parents report indicated that the per-pupil criteria in the funding formula had not been changed since the funding formula was introduced. Despite the decline in school sizes, the numbers in the formula are still set at 1997 levels. The group recommends:

- providing school boards with funding to keep schools open while new small school policy is being developed;
- cooperation among the Ministries of Finance, Municipal Affairs and Housing, Education, Children and Youth Services, Northern Development and Mines, Community and Social Services, Intergovernmental Affairs, Health and Long-Term Care, and Tourism and Recreation, the Federal government, and Ontario's municipalities to develop policy and strategies to ensure the viability of Ontario's rural and northern communities;
- updating the benchmarks in the funding formula to reflect 2005 costs, and 2005 school sizes;
- revising the five different grants for small, rural and remote schools and creating one comprehensive strategy and funding mechanism to ensure all communities have viable schools;
- revising the funding formula so that some staff is allocated on a per-school, rather than a per-student basis; and
- developing standard criteria for schools that cannot close.

- 30 -

for more information please call:
People for Education 416-534-0100
Annie Kidder, cell 416-508-1484